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## POLITICS

# Thousands of Maryland inmates work in prison. A new law shows us how much they're paid.

By ALISON KNEZEVICH  
BALTIMORE SUN | JAN 02, 2020





Natasha Fowlkes, an inmate at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women, is a line supervisor in the Maryland Correctional Enterprises sew plant, where they produce United States, Maryland and War of 1812 flags. (Baltimore Sun photo by Amy Davis)

Thousands of prisoners in Maryland work inside their institutions, washing clothes, cutting hair and preparing meals. Others make products used on the outside daily, from license plates and state letterhead to dorm furniture and flags.

#### FEEDBACK

Now some Maryland lawmakers say they want to shine more light on prison labor. The pay scales affecting thousands of state inmates were recently published in annual state reports, the result of a new law that required the wages to be disclosed yearly.

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“It’s really about transparency,” said Del. Jheanelle Wilkins, a Montgomery County Democrat who sponsored the legislation. “I think it’s worth a discussion in our state.”

The law required inmate wage information to be published for both the state Division of Correction, which runs 17 prisons and prerelease centers, and Maryland Correctional Enterprises, [a program of the prison system that makes products for state agencies](#).

The data shows pay for jobs within the correction division last year ranged from 90 cents a day to \$2.75 a day, depending on skill level. [Participants in MCE](#), meanwhile, made

between 17 cents an hour for an unskilled worker to \$1.16 an hour for a warehouse team leader.

About 11,700 inmates were assigned to work positions within DOC, while another roughly 1,500 work for MCE, the data shows.

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Division of Correction inmate wages will increase 20% this month, said Assistant Secretary Carolyn J. Scruggs of the state's Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. The MCE wages remain the same but reflect a 5% raise that went into effect in 2018.

The state currently spends more than \$5 million annually on DOC inmate wages and \$2.68 million for the MCE inmate payroll, officials said.

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Lawmakers said they sought the data not only to reveal wages, but also because they want to understand what job skills people are learning in prison that could help them when they get out.

"This is just a small little sliver of that," said Sen. Will Smith, a Montgomery County Democrat who will chair the Senate's judicial committee this year.

Wilkins said she is concerned about "fair compensation" for inmates, but also inflated costs for items inmates buy in prisons. In 2018, she introduced a previous version of the bill that would have required the state to also publish the costs of expenses paid by inmates — such as telephone calls and items in the commissary — but that legislation did not pass.

She added that it was "disappointing" that the state did not publish the wage information by an Oct. 31 deadline required by the law.

Corrections officials said work programs are voluntary and that they are about more than monetary compensation.

"MCE provides inmates with much-needed work skills and work ethic," said Stephen Sanders, acting CEO of Maryland Correctional Enterprises, adding that research suggests that participation helps lower recidivism. "There's a lot more than the money."

These work programs are different from work release, in which inmates work for private businesses in the community, including fast food restaurants and construction, and are paid minimum wage, which is \$11 per hour in Maryland.

William Freeman, the lead researcher for the Baltimore-based group Out for Justice, which advocates for formerly incarcerated people, said he would like to see a more detailed analysis of inmate wages that includes demographic information on pay and assignments.

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Freeman said he worked for 12 years for MCE, where his assignments included sewing uniforms, working as a payroll clerk and being a lead pressman in a shop that printed magazines and brochures for state agencies. He said he witnessed racial disparities in who got the best jobs and who got raises.

**Jobs vary widely in terms of skills gained**, he said. For instance, some people sweep and mop while other people use computers and interact with outside customers. Freeman said he spent more than 20 years in prison after being convicted of murder.

“There are some positions in prison that easily transfer out here in society to a decent wage,” said Freeman, who was released in 2018 and is now a Goucher College senior studying sociology and anthropology.

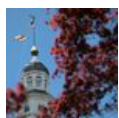
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Around the country, average inmate wages range from 14 cents to 63 cents per hour for jobs within institutions and between 33 cents and \$1.41 an hour for jobs in state-owned companies like MCE, according to research from the Prison Policy Initiative, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that aims to “expose the broader harm of mass criminalization.”

"In general, prisons rely on the work of incarcerated people to function," said Wanda Bertram, a spokeswoman for the organization.

A nationwide prisoner strike in 2018 brought attention to labor conditions and wages for incarcerated people. Last month, Democratic presidential candidate Michael Bloomberg came under fire when The Intercept [reported](#) that his campaign contracted with a vendor that used prisoners to make phone calls. Bloomberg cut ties with the vendor, [saying](#) the campaign was unaware of the practice until contacted by a reporter.

In New York, some lawmakers last year unsuccessfully sought to establish a \$3-per-hour prison minimum wage, saying incarcerated people's labor generates more than \$50 million in state revenue annually.



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Opponents said giving raises to people in prison shouldn't be a priority with the state facing a budget deficit. One legislator called it "offensive" to New York state taxpayers.

The bill stalled in a committee. Jonathan Timm, a spokesman for a sponsor of the New York bill, Democratic Sen. Zellnor Y. Myrie, said the legislation still "sparked a lot of momentum" and Myrie is working on improvements to the bill.

In recent years, student protesters at Maryland universities have called for the state's higher education system to stop doing business with MCE, with some calling it "slave labor" and "modern slavery." The students pointed to racial disparities within the prison system — roughly 70% percent of Maryland prisoners are black, while the state population is only about 30% black.

MCE generated more than \$52 million in sales in 2019, according to its annual report. Under state law, Maryland agencies must give it preferred procurement status when purchasing goods and services.

Freeman, of Out for Justice, said he worries that if schools stopped doing business with MCE, it would result in job losses for incarcerated people. Freeman said he was able to save thousands of dollars in prison, which helped him focus on his studies when he got out. Inmates use their earnings at the commissary and some send money to their loved ones, he said.

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“If too many institutions pull out, then there’s no work,” Freeman said.



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Alison Knezevich covers local issues in Baltimore County and the region. Since joining The Sun in 2011, she has reported on government and politics, courts and criminal justice. She previously covered state politics at The Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette. A native of Pittsburgh, she now lives in Baltimore County with her husband and son.

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