

Alaska Criminal Justice Commission Summary of Justice Reinvestment Report

Challenges facing Alaska

Alaska's prison population grew 27 percent in the last decade, nearly three times faster than the resident population. This rapid growth significantly increased Department of Corrections operating costs to \$327 million in FY 2014, and spurred the 2012 construction of the Goose Creek Correctional Center, costing the state an additional \$240 million. Alaskans are not getting a good public safety return on these expenditures: nearly two out of every three inmates who leave Alaska's prisons return to prison or jail within three years.

At this rate of growth, the Department of Corrections projects the need to house an additional 1,416 inmates by 2024, surpassing the state's current prison bed capacity in 2017. Accommodating this increase is estimated to cost the state at least \$169 million in new corrections spending.

State leaders seek solutions

The 2014 Alaska Legislature established the bi-partisan, inter-branch Alaska Criminal Justice Commission to review the state's sentencing and corrections systems. In April of the following year, Governor Bill Walker, former Chief Justice Dana Fabe, Senate President Kevin Meyer, House Speaker Mike Chenault, and Attorney General Craig Richards tasked the Commission with "develop[ing] recommendations aimed at safely controlling prison and jail growth and recalibrating our correctional investments to ensure that we are achieving the best possible public safety return on our State dollars."

The following September, legislative leaders renewed their charge to the Commission, stating that "[i]n this budget climate, the ability to invest in treatment and services only becomes possible with a reform package that results in substantial net savings to the State." They requested that the Commission develop policy options that would not only avert future prison growth, but also reduce the prison population below current levels by between 15 and 25 percent.

To help with its work, the Commission engaged the Public Safety Performance Project of The Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew and its partners have provided intensive technical assistance to more than two dozen states as part of the Justice Reinvestment Initiative, a collaboration between Pew and the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance.

The Commission's key findings

Over a seven-month period, the Commission conducted an exhaustive analysis of the state's sentencing, corrections, and community supervision data and systems. Key findings include:

- Alaska's pretrial population has grown by 81 percent over the past decade, driven primarily by longer lengths of pretrial stay.
- Lengths of stay also rose for sentenced felony offenders – up 31 percent over the past decade.
- Three-quarters of sentenced offenders entering prison in 2014 were convicted of a nonviolent offense.

- On July 1, 2014, 22 percent were in prison for technical violations of probation or parole conditions.

Impact of the Commission's recommendations

The Commission developed a package of policy recommendations designed to protect public safety, hold offenders accountable, and control prison spending. If adopted, the reforms would reduce the state's average daily prison population by 21 percent over the next 10 years and would save the state, \$424 million.

The Commission's recommendations for criminal justice reform

- **Implement evidence-based pretrial practices** by expanding the use of citations in lieu of arrest for lower-level nonviolent offenses; and making changes to bail practices to focus pretrial release decisions more on risk than on ability to pay.
- **Focus prison beds on serious and violent offenders** by diverting nonviolent misdemeanor offenders to alternatives; revising drug crime penalties to focus the most severe punishments on higher-level drug dealers; adjusting dollar amounts for felony property crimes to account for inflation; realigning sentence ranges in statute; expanding the use of discretionary parole; implementing a specialty parole option for the oldest cohort of prisoners; and incentivizing sex offenders to complete treatment programming.
- **Strengthen probation and parole supervision** by standardizing sanctions for violations of probation and parole conditions to ensure they are swift, certain, and proportional; establishing incentives to comply with supervision conditions; focusing treatment resources on high-needs offenders; and extending good time eligibility to offenders serving sentences on electronic monitoring.
- **Ensure oversight and accountability** by requiring collection of key performance measures and establishing an oversight council; and ensuring policymakers know the fiscal impact of legislative proposals that could affect prison populations.
- **Advance crime victim priorities** by enacting administrative reforms to increase the number of crime victims receiving court notifications; reduce unwanted contact of victims by offenders in prison; increase attention to crime victim needs during offender transition and reentry planning; improve victim-focused training for criminal justice professionals, provide trauma-informed services for child victims; and make communications and documents more accessible for non-English speakers and those with low literacy levels.
- **Reinvest** a portion of the state general fund savings from these reforms into evidence-based practices designed to improve public safety, control corrections populations, and reduce recidivism, including supervision services, victims' services in remote and bush communities, violence prevention, treatment services, and reentry and support services.