



# Managing Corrections Capacity

October 2019

## Background

In 2009 the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee asked us to evaluate operations and capacity planning in Idaho's prisons. Given forecast projections and budget limitations, legislators had expressed concern that managing inmate population growth would become increasingly more difficult.

In that evaluation, we found that many of Idaho's prisons were operating inefficiently. This inefficiency had been caused by poor staffing practices, inadequate facility design, and poor facility conditions. Idaho's state-operated prison infrastructure was aging, increasingly expensive to maintain, and in many cases, inefficient because its design was outdated. At the time, the backlog of maintenance was more than \$35 million. All but one of Idaho's prisons were unable to accommodate their population in compliance with nationally accepted standards for space and physical features.

We also found that Idaho's prisons were operating at or near capacity. With prisons so full, the Department of Correction was limited in its ability to place inmates in the most appropriate setting or safely manage population increases. In 2009 the prison population was about 7,300 and was projected to reach 8,600 by 2013. Based on cost estimates and the projected mix of inmate custody levels from the department's system master plan, accommodating population growth would have required estimated construction and project costs of \$213 million and additional ongoing operating costs of more than \$37 million.

We projected that without increasing the state's capacity, population growth would force the department to resort to other means of managing

prison overflow, such as placing inmates in county jails or housing them out of state.

The department acknowledged the need to pursue ways to manage future growth through the construction of new prison bed space. However, state correctional officials decided that the most immediate way to control correctional spending was to reduce the number of offenders entering the system and the length of time they remained in prison.

Since the release of our 2010 report, *Operational Efficiencies in Idaho's Prison System*, the department has taken some steps toward addressing our findings and recommendations. It began identifying mandatory posts and was planning on conducting a gap analysis to determine how frequently the mandatory posts were vacant. It was developing a staffing model but had no concrete model in place at the time of our 2012 follow-up report.

As of the 2012 follow-up report, none of the prison units that we recommended for replacement had been replaced. Although no new prison has been built, the department has recently approved a few enhancements to facilities, such as expanding the capacity of the St. Anthony Work Camp by 100 beds, an increase of about 38 percent.

The Idaho Justice Reinvestment Act, signed into law in 2014, established requirements for analyzing the causes and costs of an increasing prison population and high recidivism rates. The act asked the department to reduce correction spending by adopting a data-driven approach to make the best use of prison space. Savings on correctional spending was then to be reinvested into programs to reduce recidivism rates.

Despite its efforts since 2009, Idaho continues to struggle with managing the capacity of Idaho's corrections system. As of October 2018, the incarcerated population had increased to nearly 8,900. Prisons were short 1,226 beds for male inmates but had 15 extra beds for female inmates. More than 700 inmates have been housed out of state. In addition, the increase in inmate population has led to a rise in the number of state inmates housed in county jails. The department projected that by 2021, the prison population will increase to about 9,500.

A decade after the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee first asked us to conduct an evaluation of operations and capacity planning in Idaho's prisons, the department still has ongoing capacity challenges. In 2019 the committee determined that we should assess what has been done and what else can be done to address the long-standing issues of capacity and operations.

## Scope

At a minimum, we will evaluate the progress the department has made since our 2012 follow-up. We will specifically look at the following:

How has the department addressed our recommendations to improve operational practices such as the use of a statewide standardized staffing model and the effective use of a shift relief factor tool?

How has the department addressed our recommendation to begin planning for the replacement of inefficient prisons or housing units?

To the degree that time and information permit, we will also help policymakers answer three questions:

How is the department planning to accommodate the projected growth within its incarcerated and supervised populations and move toward returning Idaho prisoners from out-of-state and county placements?

What is known about drivers of recidivism, options for reducing recidivism, and the effect that recidivism reduction efforts are likely to have on the prison population growth?

What is the department doing to understand and reduce recidivism?

**Projected completion date: 2020 legislative session**