



Safe Inside

Executive Summary

Workforce Trends in State Departments of Corrections

A 50-State Analysis



In partnership with
Correctional Leaders Association



Safe Inside is a national initiative focused on making prisons safer and healthier places to work and live, which depends in large part on improving staff recruitment and retention.

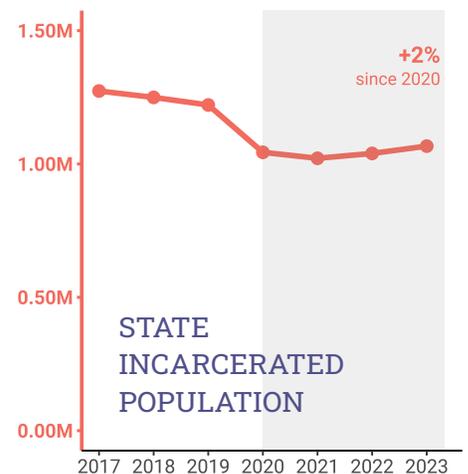
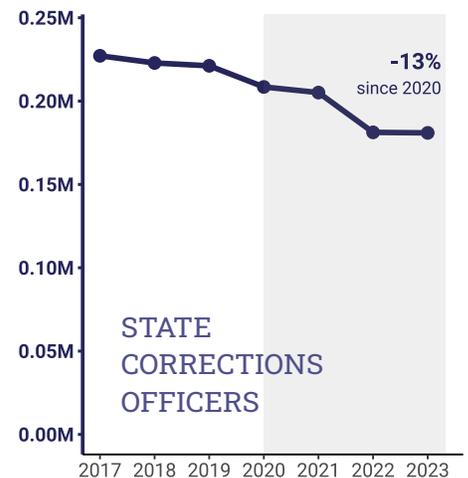
This report provides an unprecedented examination of workforce trends in state corrections departments.

What distinguishes this report from other analyses of the corrections workforce is its exhaustive review of publicly available data from all 50 states. It also integrates this 50-state analysis with federal data and insights from hundreds of interviews with corrections administrators, frontline staff, and incarcerated people. The findings show that while each state department of corrections (and even each prison) faces unique challenges, many share common trends – regardless of geographic region, prison population size, incarceration rate, or the role of unions.

The corrections workforce in the U.S. is under considerable stress.

State corrections leaders routinely cite workforce challenges – including understaffing, excessive overtime, and low morale – as their number one challenge.

Nationally, the number of state corrections officers has declined significantly, while the number of incarcerated people has recently begun increasing.



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Meanwhile, the demands on officers have multiplied. Unlike 30 years ago, when there were far more officers per incarcerated person, corrections officers today are expected to support reentry programs, comply with growing reporting requirements, serve an incarcerated population that is aging and has complex health and behavioral health needs, and reduce reliance on restrictive housing such as administrative segregation and solitary confinement. These combined pressures are creating unsustainable workloads.

Filling vacant positions and providing relief to overburdened staff are difficulties familiar to state leaders everywhere, who are competing with the private sector for a shrinking labor pool. But the combination of pressures on the corrections workforce is uniquely challenging:

Prisons are often located where few people (especially young people) are looking for jobs.

The majority of prisons in the U.S. are in rural areas.

The job can be dangerous.

Corrections officers experience the highest rate of nonfatal workplace violence – more than 18 times the national average and nearly double that of police officers.

Hours are long and unpredictable.

The overtime required of corrections officers can include double shifts and extended stretches without days off – leading to fatigue, safety risks, and burnout.

Corrections department salaries lag salaries of other public safety agencies.

In all but two states, corrections officers earn considerably less than police – on average, \$21,000 less per year nationwide.

Turnover is high.

In most states, the rates at which corrections officers leave their jobs exceed turnover rates of sister agencies.

One in five state employees work for the department of corrections.

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The workforce challenges state departments of corrections are navigating have high stakes.

When hospitals, schools, or air traffic control centers are significantly understaffed, the public is likely to feel the impact. Prison staffing shortages, however, often go unnoticed. This report highlights new findings that underscore why workforce challenges in corrections have such far-reaching consequences:

Among all state government job categories, corrections officers are the largest group of employees.

New analyses conducted for this report found that, on average, approximately one in five state employees work for the department of corrections.

Corrections agencies drive overtime spending.

State corrections departments spend billions annually on overtime; these agencies are responsible for 40 percent of state governments' total overtime costs. Across a diverse group of states, department of corrections overtime spending doubled on average over the past five years, with some states spending more than four times what they did five years ago.

The health and safety of staff and incarcerated people are at risk.

Departments of corrections employ more than 200,000 officers, and there are more than one million incarcerated people in state prisons on a given day. An analysis of data across a diverse cross-section of states with publicly available data found that the rate of deaths in custody was 47 percent higher in 2024 than it was in 2019. Violence in prisons has also risen sharply: assaults on staff surged 77 percent, and assaults on incarcerated people increased 54 percent over the same time period.

The ripple effects of prison understaffing reach families and communities.

Millions of people have a loved one working or incarcerated in a state prison. How they return home, whether from a shift or a sentence, affects everyone's well-being.

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Across the U.S., states are taking steps to improve recruitment and retention.

To improve recruitment and retention, corrections leaders are pursuing various approaches, including the following:

Raising compensation.

Most states have increased officer pay, resulting in a 33 percent rise in average salaries from 2017 to 2024.

Launching strategic recruitment efforts.

Departments are moving beyond traditional job ads, using social media, targeted media campaigns, and dedicated recruitment teams to increase interest.

Adjusting hiring standards.

Some states are lowering minimum age and education requirements or modifying pre-employment tests to broaden the applicant pool.

Offering new perks and wellness support.

Incentives like tuition reimbursement, mental health services, and enhanced employee assistance programs aim to boost retention and staff morale.

Some states have made significant improvements to their vacancy rates, but progress is fragile.

Several states have cut their vacancy rates in half in recent years. However, other cases serve as cautionary examples: initial gains were followed by setbacks, with vacancy rates rising again within a year or two.

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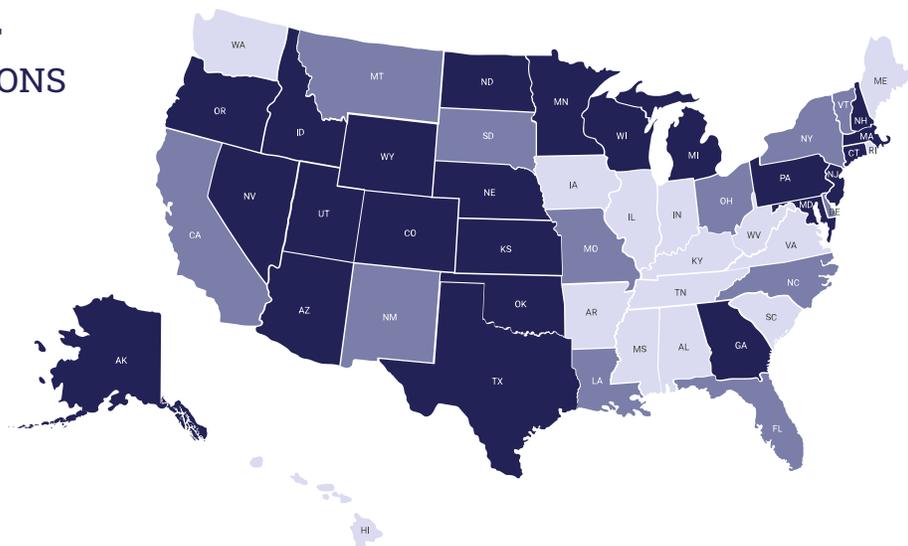
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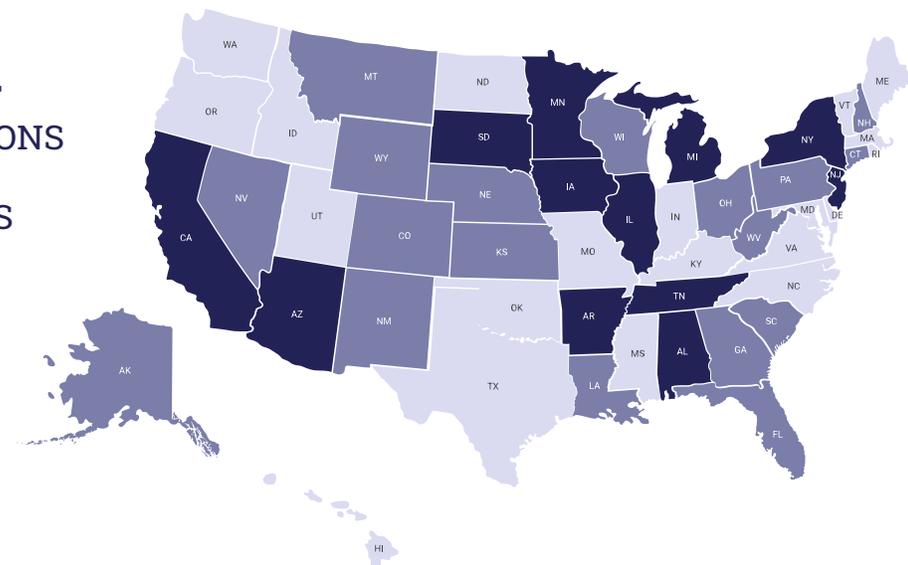
Gaps in publicly available data make it difficult to measure important trends in many state corrections departments.

Federal data on the state corrections workforce are often outdated, incomplete, and inconsistent across states. The maps below show which states make data publicly available across the six workforce metrics and 14 health and safety metrics analyzed for this report.

AVAILABILITY OF STATE CORRECTIONS WORKFORCE METRICS



AVAILABILITY OF STATE CORRECTIONS HEALTH AND SAFETY METRICS



Metric Availability

- Comprehensive (5-6 metrics)
- Moderate (3-4 metrics)
- Limited (0-2 metrics)

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When departments of corrections invested significantly in collecting and analyzing data to guide recruitment and retention, the path forward came into sharper focus.

Several states have shown through extensive analyses that, while they have succeeded in hiring large numbers of staff, most new hires left shortly after starting. This insight has helped focus leadership attention on improving retention rates. For example, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice found that extending average officer tenure by just four months would have the same impact as hiring hundreds of new officers.

Durable improvements in retention will depend on whether people feel healthy and safe on the job – and whether frontline staff find purpose in their work, sense empathetic leadership, and have work-life balance. Increased retention also requires recruitment strategies that attract people aligned with these values, rather than reinforcing outdated norms that drive many away.

Even with better recruitment and retention, most corrections systems are unlikely to return to staffing levels seen 20 years ago. State leaders, alongside advocates for incarcerated people and frontline staff, must find ways to manage facilities with current staffing levels while still creating safe, supportive environments for both staff and incarcerated people. Doing so may require revisiting who is incarcerated, rethinking how facilities have traditionally operated, and piloting innovative uses of technology.

Conclusion

Workforce challenges have taken a toll on corrections officers, who take immense pride in protecting the public, supporting their colleagues, and helping incarcerated people prepare to return to their communities. Incarcerated people are acutely aware of how understaffed facilities create unsafe, unhealthy living conditions and undermine access to programs and contact with loved ones. Advocates for frontline staff and incarcerated people, as well as corrections leaders, are working hard to draw attention to these issues and advance efforts that improve the health and safety of people working and living behind the walls. This report equips these constituencies with new data points demonstrating the urgency of their cause and with insights that help illuminate their path forward.

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Cover image provided courtesy of Florida Department of Corrections.