

Arkansas: Improving Public Safety and Containing Corrections Costs

Over the past 20 years, the prison population in Arkansas has more than doubled to 15,171 inmates.¹ In 2009 alone, the number of inmates grew 3.1 percent, the eighth largest percentage increase in the country,² and state spending on corrections reached an all-time high.³

Twenty years ago, corrections cost the state of Arkansas just \$45 million, less than 3 percent of all general fund dollars.⁴ Today the bill is nearly eight times higher: \$349 million per year, or 8 percent of the general fund.⁵

With the state prison system already at full capacity and local jails currently holding more than 1,600 state inmates,⁶ Arkansas policy makers are considering data-driven alternatives that will contain prison growth and corrections spending while protecting public safety.

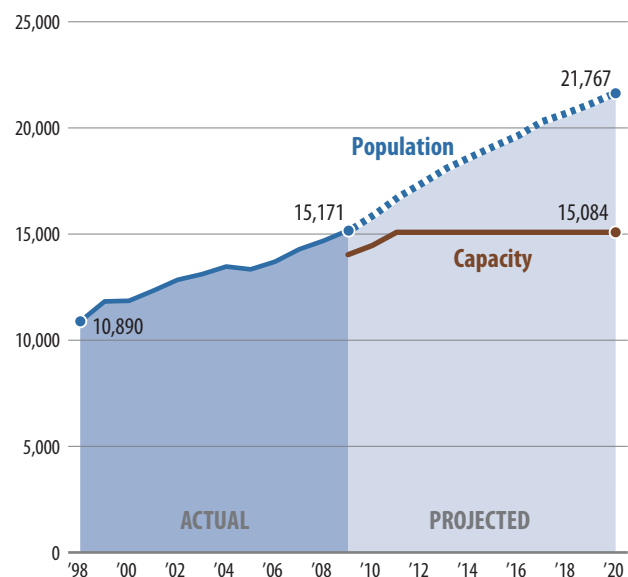
What is Driving the Prison Growth?

Although deeper analyses must be conducted, a preliminary inquiry indicates two major reasons for Arkansas's prison growth:

- More convicted offenders are being sentenced to prison, rather than to probation or other mandatory supervision options. Admissions to

PRISON POPULATION GROWTH

Arkansas's prison population is projected to grow by more than 6,500 inmates over the next 10 years at an estimated cost of \$1.1 billion in operations and construction.



SOURCE: Projections were calculated by JFA Institute, 2010.

prison in Arkansas have increased more than 23 percent over the last decade,⁷ while admissions to probation have decreased significantly. Arkansas's probation rate (the number of people on probation per capita) is now 42 percent lower than the national average.⁸ Admissions to prison have continued to increase even though Arkansas's crime rate has fallen each of the past three years and stabilized well below the highs of the 1990s.⁹

- Many non-violent inmates are serving longer prison terms.¹⁰ Last year alone, more than 2,000 inmates were held beyond their transfer (parole) eligibility date and the average length of stay for released offenders increased by 3.5 months.¹¹

The Cost of Doing Nothing

Left unchecked, Arkansas’s prison population will rise by as much as 43 percent, or more than 6,500 inmates, over the next 10 years.¹² Growing at a rate of more than 3 percent per year, the population is expected to reach 21,767 by 2020.¹³

If the state does not act to contain this growth, policy makers will have to significantly increase Arkansas’s current spending on corrections. Building and operating new prisons to accommodate this growth will cost approximately \$1.1 billion between 2010 and 2020.¹⁴ Construction costs alone—an estimated \$355 million—will exceed the amount of general fund dollars currently spent each year on corrections.¹⁵ By the end of the 10-year projection period, state budget makers will need to find an additional \$128 million annually for expanded prison operations.¹⁶

Gearing Up for Action

Seeking new ways to protect public safety while controlling the growth of the prison system, Governor Mike Beebe, Chief Justice Jim Hannah and leaders from the Arkansas Senate and House of Representatives have requested technical assistance from the Public Safety

Performance Project of the Pew Center on the States. Pew and its partners have provided assistance to a dozen states, analyzing state data to identify what is driving prison growth and developing research-based, fiscally sound policy options to protect public safety and offender accountability while containing the growth of corrections costs. Pew is partnering in Arkansas with two well-respected criminal justice consulting organizations, the Crime and Justice Institute (CJI) and the JFA Institute (JFA), and will provide assistance to the state through the 2011 legislative session.

“The leaders of our State know that we must develop and implement policies that will safely and effectively manage the growth of our prison population.”

—Governor Mike Beebe, Chief Justice Jim Hannah and other state leaders*

In March 2010, the state established a bipartisan, inter-branch working group to guide an analysis of Arkansas’s sentencing and corrections data. This group will consider and advance policy reforms, including options that would reinvest a portion of the savings from averted prison construction and operations into alternative, evidence-based strategies to reduce recidivism. The working group consists of state leaders from both chambers of the legislature

and both political parties as well as experts from law enforcement and community corrections.

Experts from Pew, CJJ and JFA will assist the working group by analyzing the state's sentencing and corrections data and providing a detailed statistical analysis of what is fueling the growth in the prison population; soliciting additional input from a wide range of stakeholders, including prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, law enforcement officials and crime victims; developing a set of policy options that will reduce recidivism and future corrections costs; examining potential changes to existing policy and practice, including

modeling the effects of recommended policy changes; and facilitating the construction of a package of legislative and administrative reforms.

Launched in 2006, the Public Safety Performance Project seeks to help states advance fiscally sound, data-driven policies and practices in sentencing and corrections that protect public safety, hold offenders accountable and control corrections costs.

For more information, please visit www.pewcenteronthestates.org

Endnotes

¹ Based on analysis of the Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics' Prisoners Series; Public Safety Performance Project, *Prison Count 2010*, Pew Center on the States, The Pew Charitable Trusts (2010), http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Prison_Count_2010.pdf?n=880.

² Public Safety Performance Project, *Prison Count 2010*.

³ Based on analysis of the National Association of State Budget Officers' State Expenditure Reports, <http://www.nasbo.org/Publications/StateExpenditureReport/StateExpenditureReportArchives/tabid/107/Default.aspx>.

⁴ National Association of State Budget Officers, *1990 State Expenditure Report* (1991).

⁵ National Association of State Budget Officers, *2008 State Expenditure Report* (2009).

⁶ Arkansas Department of Correction, *Statewide Population Report*, May 27, 2010. Email from Sheila Sharp, deputy director, Administrative Services Division, Arkansas Department of Correction, May 27, 2010.

⁷ Wendy Naro and Roger Ocker, "Ten-Year Adult Secure Population Projection 2009–2019," JFA Associates, June 2009.

⁸ 1,086 Arkansans are on probation per 100,000 inhabitants compared to a national average of 1,873; Wendy Naro-Ware and Roger Ocker, "Ten Year Population Projections for the Arkansas Parole and Probation Populations Briefing Book," JFA Associates, September 2009.

⁹ Based on analysis of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm#cius>.

¹⁰ Naro and Ocker, "Ten-Year Adult Secure Population Projection 2009–2019."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Projections calculated by JFA Institute, 2010.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

* Quote taken from letter signed by Governor Mike Beebe, Chief Justice Jim Hannah and other state leaders requesting technical assistance from the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Center on the States, November 20, 2009.



The Pew Center on the States is a division of The Pew Charitable Trusts that identifies and advances effective solutions to critical issues facing states. Pew is a nonprofit organization that applies a rigorous, analytical approach to improve public policy, inform the public and stimulate civic life.

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