

Justice Reinvestment: Mississippi

Strengthening Public Safety While Curbing Corrections Growth

Mississippi's Challenge

Between 1983 and 2013, Mississippi's prison population grew by 300% to more than 22,400 inmates. In 2012, Mississippi had the second-highest imprisonment rate in the country. Absent reform, the incarcerated population was projected to grow by 1,951 inmates at a cost of \$266 million over 10 years.

Faced with a growing prison population, dramatically increased corrections costs and poor public safety outcomes, Mississippi's leadership sought a new approach. In 2013, the Legislature, with gubernatorial support, established the bipartisan, inter-branch Corrections and Criminal Justice Task Force (the Task Force), and directed the group to identify data-driven, evidence-based policies that would improve public safety while controlling corrections costs.

The Crime and Justice Institute (CJI), in partnership with the Pew Charitable Trusts, provided technical assistance, bringing expertise in data and systems analysis and evidence-based correctional practices to support the Task Force in reaching its goals.

Data-Driven Analysis

In the summer of 2013, the Task Force undertook a detailed analysis of Mississippi's sentencing and corrections data to identify factors contributing to prison population growth. The Task Force identified the following factors driving Mississippi's prison growth:

1. Two-thirds of the increase in prison admissions in the past 10 years was driven by nonviolent offenses, while lengths of stay for nonviolent offenders increased over that period as well.
2. Insufficient resources for effective community supervision resulted in an increase in the number of offenders coming into prison for parole and probation revocations, and a majority of those revocations were driven by technical violations.
3. Uncertainty in release practices led judges to impose longer sentences to compensate for earlier-than-expected releases from prison, resulting in more time served in prison.

Legislative Reform Package

In response to these findings, the Task Force issued its policy recommendations to state leadership. These policies were codified in House Bill 585, which passed with large bipartisan majorities in both legislative chambers and was signed into law by Governor Phil Bryant on March 31, 2014. The legislation had five primary objectives:

Reserve prison beds for serious offenders by enacting changes to property and drug possession laws designed to ensure that serious misconduct is punished more harshly than less serious conduct, and streamlining the parole process for offenders in compliance with their case plans.

Increase access to effective prison alternatives by expanding judicial discretion in imposing alternatives to incarceration while diversifying and strengthening specialty courts.

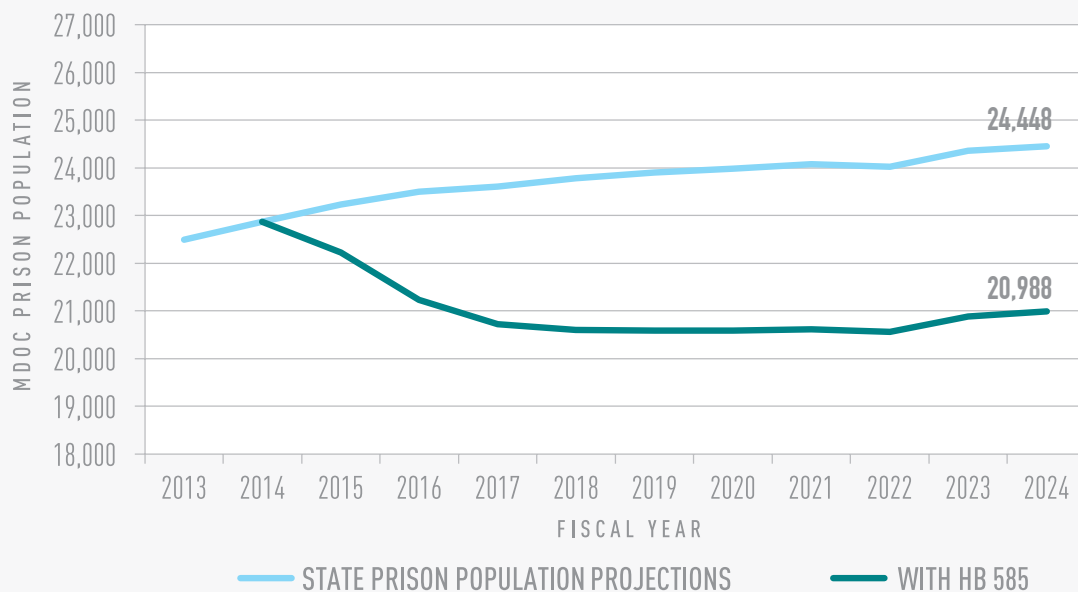
Strengthen the transition from prison to the community by establishing a reentry planning process for all offenders leaving prison regardless of whether the offender was released to supervision.

Strengthen community supervision by requiring the use of a risk and needs assessment to identify and focus resources on offenders at the highest risk to reoffend; developing a system of swift, certain, and proportionate sanctions for technical violations of probation and parole to change offender behavior and thus reduce revocations; and establishing earned discharge credits to reduce caseloads and incentivize compliance with the conditions of supervision.

Projected Results

HB 585 is expected to avert all of Mississippi’s projected prison growth over the coming decade, saving taxpayers at least \$266 million through 2024, while safely reducing the inmate population below current levels.

PRISON POPULATION FORECAST AND FORECAST INCLUDING HB585 POLICY CHANGES



FOR MORE INFORMATION,
CONTACT:

Len Engel
 Managing Associate
 Crime and Justice
 Institute at CRJ
 Boston, MA
 LEngel@crj.org
 617) 482-2520
 www.crj.org/cji

