

Justice Reinvestment: Georgia

Strengthening Public Safety While Curbing Corrections Growth

Georgia's Challenge

From 1990 to 2011, Georgia's prison population more than doubled, peaking at 56,000 offenders and costing taxpayers \$1 billion annually by 2011. Yet this massive increase in spending was not accompanied by improved public safety outcomes: one in three offenders released from incarceration returned within three years. Absent reform, the state's prison population was expected to continue to grow 8% over the following five years at a projected cost of \$264 million.

Confronted with a growing prison population and ballooning corrections costs, state leaders sought a new approach. In 2011, the General Assembly established the bipartisan Special Council on Criminal Justice Reform for Georgians (Council), and tasked the group with identifying 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 Council in reaching its goals.

Data-Driven Analysis

In the summer of 2011, the Council embarked on an intensive process of investigation and analysis to identify the key factors leading to prison growth and increased spending. The group found:

1. Sixty-six percent of Georgia's prison admissions were for nonviolent offenses, and the average length of stay for these offenders had more than tripled over the last 20 years.
2. A lack of effective supervision and evidence-based treatment programs in the community left judges with few viable alternatives to incarceration.
3. Backlogs in offenders awaiting transfer to Probation Detention Centers and treatment programs drove up costs for local governments while delaying opportunities for rehabilitation.

Legislative Reform Package

In November 2011, the Council codified its policy recommendations in a report that was submitted to state leadership for legislative consideration. These policies were translated into House Bill 1176, which passed unanimously in both chambers of the General Assembly and was signed into law by Governor Nathan Deal in May 2012. The legislation had four major objectives:

Reserve prison beds for serious offenders by enacting changes to property and drug possession laws designed to ensure that more serious conduct is punished more harshly than less serious conduct, and developing an evidence-based risk assessment tool to help guide custody and supervision decisions.

Strengthen alternative sentencing options by allowing courts to order electronic monitoring instead of incarceration; improving the effectiveness of community supervision through the use of swift, certain, and proportionate sanctions; and investing \$17 million into recidivism reduction programs such as specialty courts and treatment programs.

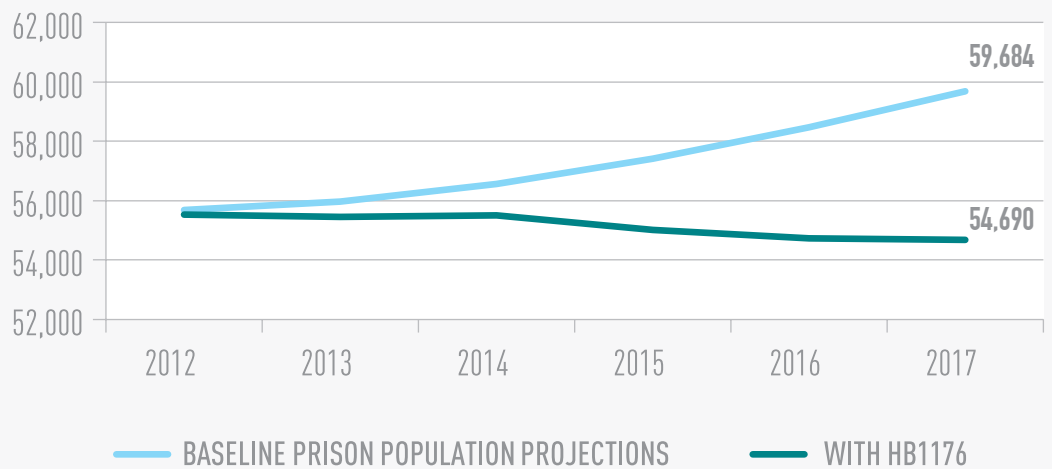
Reduce crowding in local jails by streamlining transfers to the Department of Corrections and capping lengths of stay in Probation Detention Centers.

Measure and improve system performance by requiring the Department of Corrections to collect additional performance data, evaluate programs, and report on outcomes.

Projected Results

As a result of the reforms enacted in HB1177, Georgia has succeeded in protecting public safety while cutting prison costs. The bill is expected to save Georgia \$264 million in corrections spending by 2018 and prevent the projected growth in the prison population.

PRISON POPULATION FORECAST AND FORECAST INCLUDING HB1176 POLICY CHANGES



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