



Justice Reinvestment: Alaska Strengthening Public Safety While Curbing Corrections Growth

“SB 91 is an enormous achievement that will reduce recidivism, hold offenders accountable, and safely reduce the size of Alaska’s prison population. By following a data-driven process and relying on years of research and best practices from other states to develop these reforms, Alaska is on the path to get the most public safety out of each dollar spent on our criminal justice system.”

**-State Senator John
Coghill, SB 91 Sponsor**

Alaska’s Challenge

By 2014, Alaska’s prison population had grown 27 percent over the previous decade, almost three times faster than the resident population. On July 1, 2014, Alaska’s correctional facilities housed 5,267 inmates, and the Department of Corrections (DOC) had an operating budget of \$327 million. An analysis of the growth trends and existing policy and practice projected significant growth in the prison population. Absent reform, the state would need an additional 1,416 prison beds by 2024 to house people detained pretrial or convicted and sentenced to prison, costing an estimated \$169 million in new corrections spending over the next 10 years.

Confronted with a growing prison population and high recidivism rate – almost two-thirds of individuals released from state facilities returned within three years – Alaska’s leaders sought a new approach. In 2014, the Alaska State Legislature established the Alaska Criminal Justice Commission (Commission) and directed it to develop data-driven and research-based policy recommendations that would control corrections costs while keeping public safety paramount.

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 Commission in reaching its goals.

“As a former prosecutor, I knew from experience that Alaska's justice system needed reform. The Justice Reinvestment process helped us achieve that by bringing together a wide range of stakeholders and challenging us to look carefully at our system's data, think critically about our current practices, and enact bold reforms to shift our focus to rehabilitation and fundamentally change the way we use incarceration in this state.”

**-Greg Razo, Chair,
Alaska Criminal Justice
Commission**

Data-Driven Analysis

Over a seven-month period, the Commission analyzed the state's criminal justice system, including a comprehensive review of sentencing, corrections, and community supervision data. Key findings include:

- Alaska's pretrial population had grown by 81 percent over the past decade, driven primarily by longer lengths of stay for both felony and misdemeanor defendants.
- Three-quarters of the people admitted to prison following conviction in 2014 were convicted of a nonviolent offense.
- Length of stay for those convicted of a felony was up 31 percent over the past decade.
- In 2014, 47 percent of people revoked to prison for supervision violations – primarily for non-criminal violations of probation and parole conditions – stayed more than 30 days, and 28 percent stayed longer than three months behind bars.

Legislative Reform Package

In December 2015, the Commission issued 21 recommendations designed to reduce recidivism and corrections spending in Alaska. Legislation advancing these recommendations – Senate Bill (SB) 91 – passed with overwhelming bipartisan support and was signed into law by Governor Bill Walker on June 11, 2016. SB 91 aims to:

Implement evidence-based pretrial practices, using an objective, validated pretrial risk assessment to focus pretrial release decisions on risk rather than on ability to pay, and establish a pretrial services program.

Focus prison beds on serious and violent offenses by diverting those convicted of nonviolent misdemeanors to alternatives to prison, revising drug crime penalties to focus the most severe punishments on higher-level drug dealers, raising the felony theft threshold and indexing it to inflation, reducing presumptive sentence ranges for non-sex offenses, extending good time eligibility to individuals serving sentences on electronic monitoring, expanding and streamlining the use of discretionary parole, and implementing a specialty parole option for the older prisoners.

Strengthen probation and parole supervision by standardizing sanctions for violations of probation and parole conditions to ensure they are swift, certain, and proportional; capping sentence lengths for technical probation and parole revocations; and establishing incentives for complying with conditions including earned time off the period of supervision.

Improve reentry programming by ensuring that individuals exiting prison have the resources they need to remain crime-free and become contributing members of society.

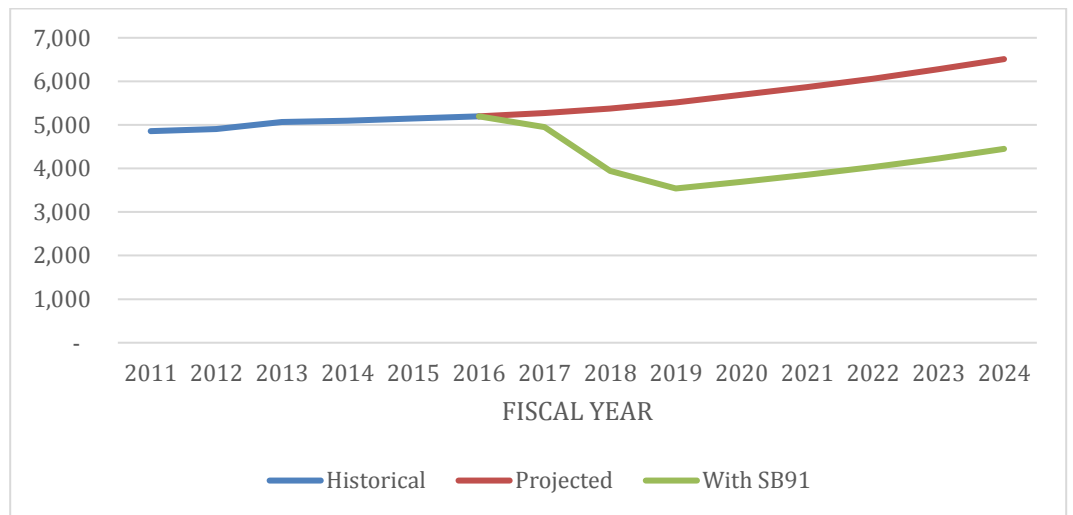
Ensure oversight and accountability by requiring the collection of key performance measures and establishing an oversight council to track SB 91 implementation and outcomes.

Reinvest in practices proven to reduce recidivism and protect public safety by directing nearly \$99 million over the next six years into evidence-based pretrial supervision, prison and community-based alcohol and substance abuse treatment, transitional support for those returning to the community, and victims’ services and violence prevention programming.

Projected Results

SB 91 is expected to avert all of the anticipated prison growth and safely reduce the average daily prison population by 13 percent over the next 10 years. The reforms are estimated to save a total of \$380 million and enable nearly \$99 million to be reinvested into programs designed to improve public safety, reduce recidivism, and support crime victims.

ALASKA'S HISTORICAL AND PROJECTED PRISON POPULATION



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This project was supported by Grant No. 2015-ZB-BX-K002 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.