

Is There a Corrections Bubble?

By Christopher A. Innes

Author's Note: *The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the policies of the National Institute of Corrections. The author wishes to thank Donna Ledbetter for her editorial assistance on this article.*

The latest Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) figures on correctional populations, released in December 2009, give fresh evidence that the field may be undergoing a historic transformation. The figures show that the growth of correctional populations has stalled. Given that these figures are more than a year old, it is likely that these populations are already shrinking. After decades of coping with ever-rising population pressures, corrections may be faced with a new challenge: managing rapidly decreasing populations while preserving public safety in times of dwindling resources.

The two BJS population reports, *Prisoners in 2008* and *Probation and Parole in the United States, 2008*, showed that from year-end 2007 to year-end 2008 national correctional populations grew by less than 1 percent.¹ The U.S. prison population grew by 0.8 percent, less than one-half the average growth rate since 2000 and only one-third of the average annual growth rate during the 1990s. These figures at the national level mask an even greater fundamental change occurring in many states; 20 states reported decreases in their inmate populations. Twenty-eight states reported decreases in the incarceration rate, with 11 states reporting decreases of more than 10 percent. In terms of statistical trends, this is a startling change. In 2007, the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Charitable Trusts published a report with states' own projections of their prison population.² At that time, no states projected a decline in their population through 2011, and only four states expected a decline in their incarceration rate by that year.

This trend is not limited to prisons only; it is affecting the entire U.S. correctional population. Both probation and parole populations grew by only 0.9 percent in 2008. The available information on jail populations shows a similar pattern, a 0.7 percent increase in 2008. Twenty states and the federal system had decreases in their probation population and 15 states had decreases in their parole population.

BJS collected its 2008 prison population figures shortly after the national fiscal crisis reached its climax. During the last year, that crisis has had a dramatic effect on government revenues and budgets, and it will continue to affect these sectors for several years to come. William Spelman, an economist at the University of Texas, showed that one important factor driving the "prison boom" was states' access to money to expand prison systems.³ Now that funding has tightened, instead of building prisons, many states are closing them. As the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) said in a recent state budget update, "The state revenue nightmare continues."

NCSL provides up-to-date information on state revenues and has continuously been monitoring and documenting state trends and their effects.⁴ In its *State Budget Update: November 2009*, NCSL stated that 36 states had reported new budget gaps totalling \$28.2 billion for fiscal year (FY) 2010, in addition to the \$149.9 billion gap that states already closed in their original 2010 budgets. Many states reported that revenues were even lower than their already dismal projections and that some reported they were experiencing cost overruns. In some of those states, the corrections budget is a problem.

Historically, the worst budget gaps come after a national recovery has begun. NCSL analysts report that 31 states already anticipate shortfalls totaling more than \$55 billion in FY

2011, and 20 states expect gaps of more than \$69 billion in FY 2012. More than a dozen states said they expect gaps of more than 10 percent of their budgets for these years. These early estimates may well go much higher, just as recent state budget estimates have proved too optimistic.

Admissions Down, Releases Up

Especially significant in the BJS reports are early indications that the dynamic that has been driving the growth of correctional populations is shifting. The reports indicate that admissions to U.S. prisons were down 0.5 percent and releases were up 2 percent nationally. Again, the important story is at the state level. Thirty states reported a decrease in admissions and 29 states and the federal system reported increases in releases. Community corrections populations have shown a similar pattern in recent years. From 2006 to 2008, admissions to probation grew at an average rate of 1.5 percent while releases grew at an average rate of 2.4 percent. In 2008, releases from parole grew by 5.6 percent while admission to parole grew by only 2.1 percent. Expirations of incarceration sentences and increasing completion rates for those on probation or parole appear to be driving the growth in releases. The shift toward fewer people entering the system and more leaving it may indicate that modern sentencing practices, many of them enacted 30 years ago, have run their course, and as those sentences expire, releases will continue to outpace admissions.

None of this implies that corrections problems are going to "solve themselves" through the combination of reversing historical trends and modern economic pressures. If anything, they will become far more challenging and will require the field to develop the insight needed to meet those challenges.

Budget gaps alone do not drive down correctional populations. Of the 20 states whose incarceration rates rose, 15 reported budget gaps. The political challenges in many states are as daunting as the economic ones, and elected officials must address the many demands and often conflicting concerns of the public. An October 2009 Gallup Poll reports that even though crime rates have been falling for nearly 15 years, about three-quarters of the public believe they are rising.⁵

The corrections field must also be ready for its own transformation. As admission and release rates change, perceptions about current inmate populations will also have to change. There is no guarantee that correctional populations will decline, but if they do, the nation will face an aftermath in the form of the millions of people who face significant, long-term barriers to community reintegration. With the advent of new research highlighting changes in admission and release, it behooves the nation to notice and anticipate the avenues of new growth that it will open for the field.

ENDNOTES

¹ Sabol, W., H. West, and M. Cooper. 2009. *Prisoners in 2008*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington, D.C.; L. Glaze and T. Bonczar. 2009. *Probation and Parole in the United States, 2008*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington, D.C.

² Pew Public Safety Performance Project. 2007. *Public Safety, Public Spending: Forecasting America's Prison Population 2007-2011*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Charitable Trusts.

³ Spellman, W. 2009. Crime, cash, and limited options: Explaining the prison boom, *Criminology and Public Policy*, 8:29-77.

⁴ National Conference of State Legislatures. 2009. *State Budget Update: November 2009*.

⁵ See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/123644/Americans-Perceive-Increased-Crime.aspx>.

Christopher A. Innes, Ph.D., is chief of the National Institute of Corrections' Research and Evaluation Division.