

Viewing Justice Reinvestment from a Correctional Officer's Perspective

Benjamin Forman and Anusha Rahman¹

For many years, Massachusetts' correctional population defied gravity, remaining extremely high despite steadily falling crime. However, more recently the numbers have finally started to drop, aided by concerted efforts to keep those with behavioral health conditions out of prisons and jails, changes to mandatory-minimum sentencing statutes, and thousands of dismissals due to problems at the state's crime labs. Releases to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and the temporary cessation of legal proceedings during the first phase of the pandemic have pushed prisoner counts down even further. Massachusetts now has an unprecedented opportunity to make better use of limited public safety resources by keeping the incarcerated population low and reinventing correctional practices.

As policymakers contemplate such a strategy, they must place correctional officers front and center. "Tough on crime"-era laws caused enormous injury to these public servants. While circumstances have undoubtedly improved since the days when facilities were extremely overcrowded and understaffed, there is no doubt that conditions just before the pandemic continued to take a heavy toll on officers. Facing the elevated threat of COVID-19 in institutional facilities has imposed further harm on an already overstressed labor force with lasting consequences.

Key Themes

- > With falling crime, changes in sentencing, and COVID-19 releases, incarceration rates in Massachusetts are returning to pre-"tough on crime"-era levels. This presents an opportunity to rethink corrections and operate facilities focused on rehabilitation and recidivism reduction.
- > Achieving this policy goal is conditional on correctional officers. As frontline workers, they perform a vital function identifying prisoner needs and supporting therapeutic intervention.
- > Despite ample evidence that correctional officers support reform goals and stand to benefit directly from a greater operational focus on rehabilitation, most reform efforts in Massachusetts have left correctional officers on the sideline.
- > As Massachusetts examines correctional budgets and develops capital plans to refurbish aging facilities, it is critical to bring correctional officer perspective and professional judgment into the justice reinvestment policy discussion.

It is within this context that we must now consider how reforms aimed at making rehabilitation the primary goal of incarceration can improve safety inside of facilities, offer more rewarding professional experiences, and increase job satisfaction for correctional officers. Criminal justice reform efforts have largely overlooked these frontline workers. This is unfortunate because not only are correctional officers major potential beneficiaries, they are central to the ultimate success of reform. Moreover, many of these frontline workers are inclined to support change. Studies consistently find that officers believe rehabilitation is an important goal and that they see themselves as playing the most important role in their agencies helping incarcerated individuals desist from crime.²

To better position correctional officers as champions of reform, they must be meaningfully engaged in policy development. Policy is always better when it is shaped by the end user, particularly when the aim of policy is to increase organizational performance. While this is true for any organization, it is especially so for corrections. The nature of the job forges a strong internal culture, which gives employees greater ability to resist external forces when they are not in favor of the strategy.³

As policymakers work to engage the field in conversations about the future, it is important to recognize that the professional views of correctional officers were not considered when flawed tough on crime-era policies were developed. Surveys

from the 1970s suggest these officers were strongly in favor of rehabilitative models. When researchers could not find evidence that correctional programming had an impact on the likelihood of repeat offending and prematurely concluded that “nothing works,” politically motivated leaders quickly responded with calls to make prison life as punitive as possible. Governor Weld’s famous 1990 campaign trail quip that he would seek to reintroduce prisoners to the “joys of busting rocks” epitomizes this political framing.

Tough on crime sentencing laws and practices sent the state’s incarcerated population spiraling upward, leading to overcrowding so severe that many facilities struggled to comply with the basic constitutional prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment.⁴ As recently revealed by Senator Warren’s investigation into the American Correctional Association, lax accreditation standards and minimal accountability have allowed conditions to persist that are harmful to correctional workers, prisoners, and the cause of public safety.⁵

Massachusetts is finally in a position to turn the page on this difficult chapter. The state’s landmark 2018 criminal justice reform law provides the framework for rebuilding the corrections system with a heavy focus on rehabilitation and recidivism reduction.

Growing attention to racial justice and the need to provide greater support and second chances to those who face disadvantage and discrimination should strengthen our resolve

to create truly therapeutic environments that improve the well-being of both staff and prisoners.

The legislature’s correctional expenditure commission, which has been charged with examining spending on prisons and jails in the Commonwealth and advancing recommendations to achieve basic standards for rehabilitation, treatment, and efficiency, provides a powerful platform for charting this new course.

At this critical juncture, we seek to further this conversation by examining the role of correctional officers in justice reinvestment. This policy brief charts decarceration trends in Massachusetts, examines criminal justice reform from the correctional officer perspective, and lays out strategies to guide future investments. The paper concludes by offering high-impact policy proposals. As with all MassINC research, we present this information to frame the problem and further the public debate. We hope these ideas will help bring correctional officers, civic leaders, and elected officials together to mount a timely response.

I. Decarceration Trends in Massachusetts

To provide important context for a richer discussion about the challenges and opportunities of justice reinvestment in Massachusetts at this crossroads, we begin by examining how correctional populations are moving in relation to crime, changes in crowding levels at correctional facilities, and the physical state of our prisons and jails.

A. Changes in Incarceration Relative to Crime

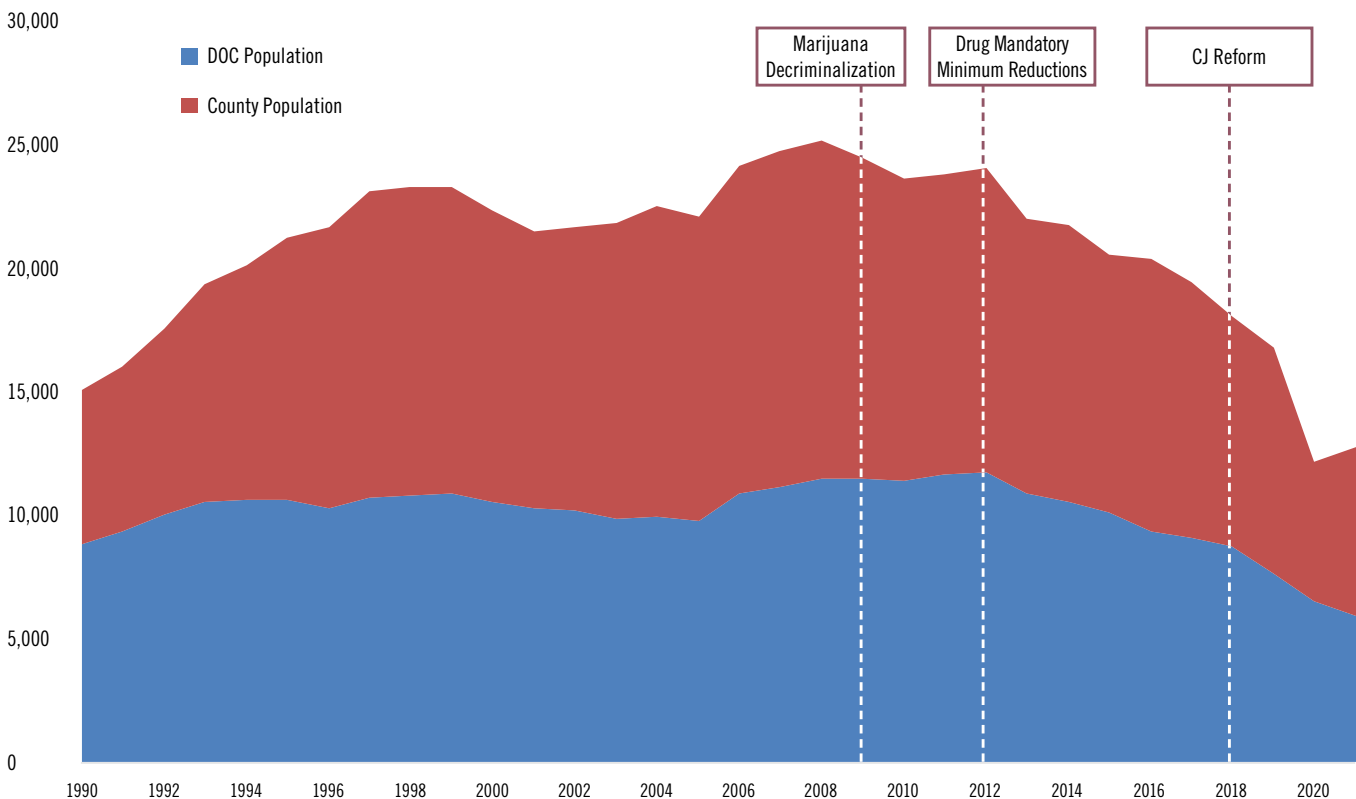
In 2008, the Massachusetts correctional population peaked at over 25,000 prisoners at Department of Correction (DOC) prisons and

county houses of correction and jails. Since that time falling crime rates and a series of sentencing reforms have led to significant reductions in the state's correctional population. In 2019, the population dropped to 17,000 or about one-third below 2008 levels. COVID-19 releases and court closures led to an even sharper reduction. In July 2020, state and county facilities held just 12,000 prisoners. County populations rose slightly toward the end of last year; the DOC continued to see more releases than admissions in the second half of 2020 (**Figure 1**).

To provide additional perspective on how these patterns relate to

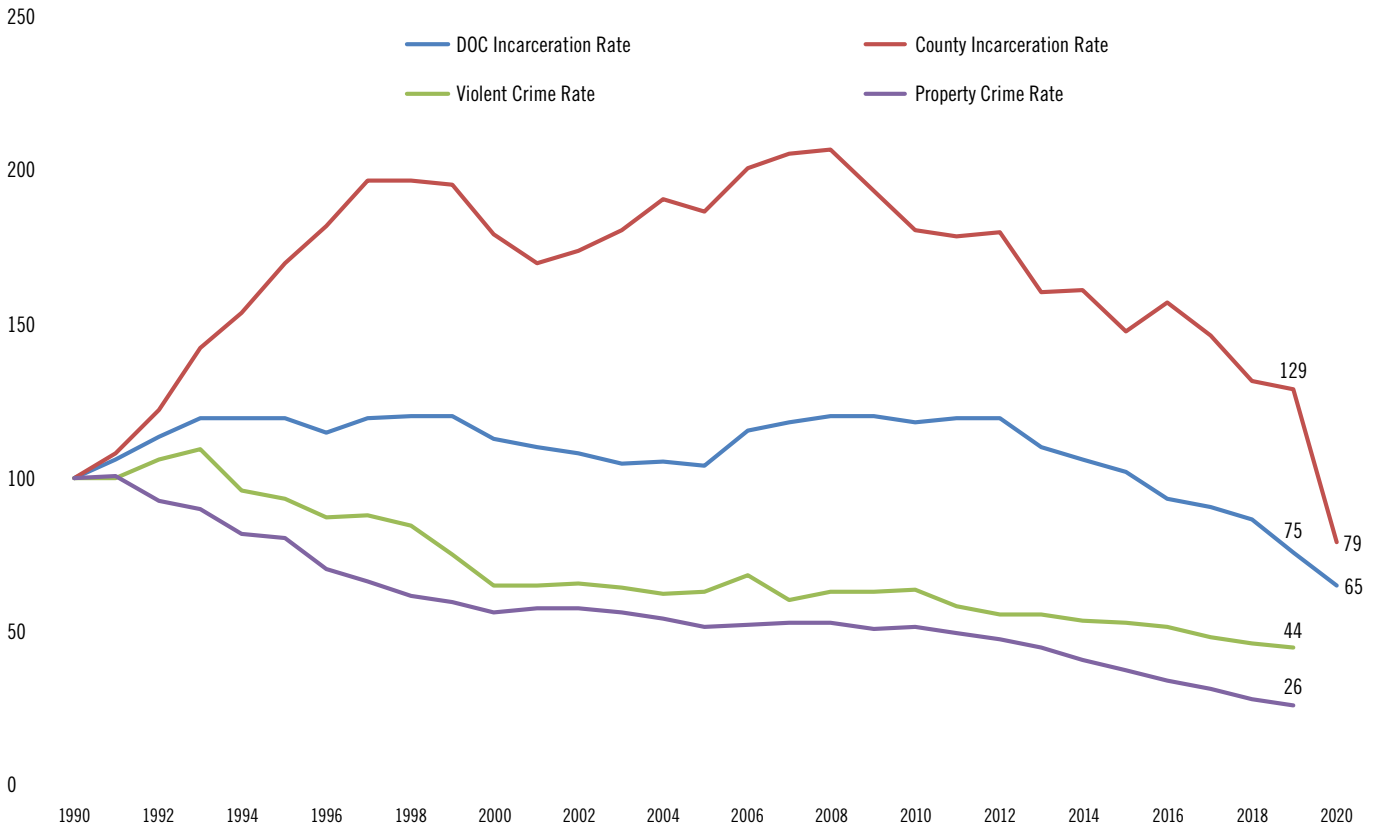
crime and the general growth of the Massachusetts population over the past three decades, we present change relative to 1990 rates in **Figure 2**. Roughly two decades after crime peaked in the early 1990s, county incarceration rates were still double 1990 levels and DOC rates were roughly 20 percent higher. In 2019, violent crime was down by more than half and property crime was at just 26 percent of 1990 rates; in comparison, DOC incarceration rates were still at 75 percent of 1990 levels and county incarceration rates remained close to 30 percent above 1990 rates. After the COVID releases, incarceration rates are much closer to falling back into

Figure 1: DOC and County Correctional Populations, 1990 – 2021



Source: Massachusetts Department of Correction, Quarterly Overcrowding Reports and Weekly Count Sheets

Figure 2: Relative Change in Incarceration Rate and Crime Rates, 1990 – 2019



Source: Massachusetts Department of Correction and FBI Uniform Crime Reports

line with crime levels.

While there is considerable debate about how much the rise in incarceration rates contributed to the steep drop in crime that we experienced over the past two decades, studies generally find the increased use of incarceration played a limited role. Substantial evidence suggests sending thousands of residents to crowded, understaffed facilities and returning them to the community with little support has actually led to increases in crime in Boston and many other urban communities.⁶

B. The End of Overcrowding and Understaffing

Without question, the dramatic reduction in incarceration presents opportunities to think anew about correctional practices. For the first time in decades, space is no longer a heavy constraint for most correctional facilities in Massachusetts. At the moment, just one facility is operating above its design capacity. In the first quarter of 2020, immediately prior to COVID’s impact on admissions and releases, only three (11 percent) DOC facilities and just one county facility (5 percent) held significantly more prisoners than they

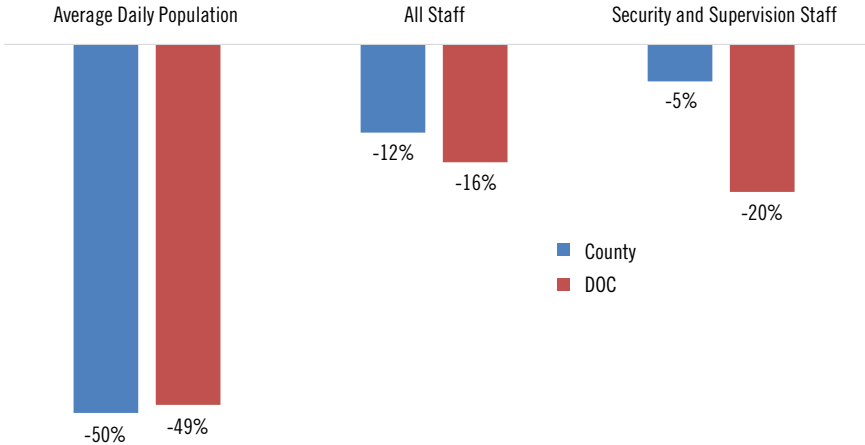
were originally designed to serve. A decade ago, more than one-third of DOC facilities and nearly half of county facilities had at least 50 percent more prisoners than they were built to house.

In addition to freeing up space, falling prison populations have significantly reduced pressure on corrections workers. While staff headcount has fallen at both the DOC and county correctional facilities, staffing reductions have not been nearly as steep as the decline in the prisoner population. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of individuals incarcerated fell by about half in

both systems; in contrast, the DOC and county facilities have reduced staffing by approximately 12 percent and 16 percent, respectively. The counties retained more security and supervision staff, whereas the DOC reduced security and supervision positions at a slightly faster rate than overall employment (Figure 3).

Despite these reductions, security and supervision prisoner-to-staff ratios are much lower than in the past. As of January 2021, the counties held 1.5 prisoners per security and supervision staff member, down from 2.9 in 2011. DOC facilities housed 1.8 prisoners per security and supervision staff, compared to 2.8 a decade ago (Figure 4). While aggregating the sheriffs does obscure significant variation across agencies, the decline in populations has brought them all down to relatively low ratios. In 2011, Plymouth had more than five prisoners for every security and supervision staff person. Worcester, the

Figure 3: Change in Average Daily Population vs. Change in Staff, 2011 – 2021



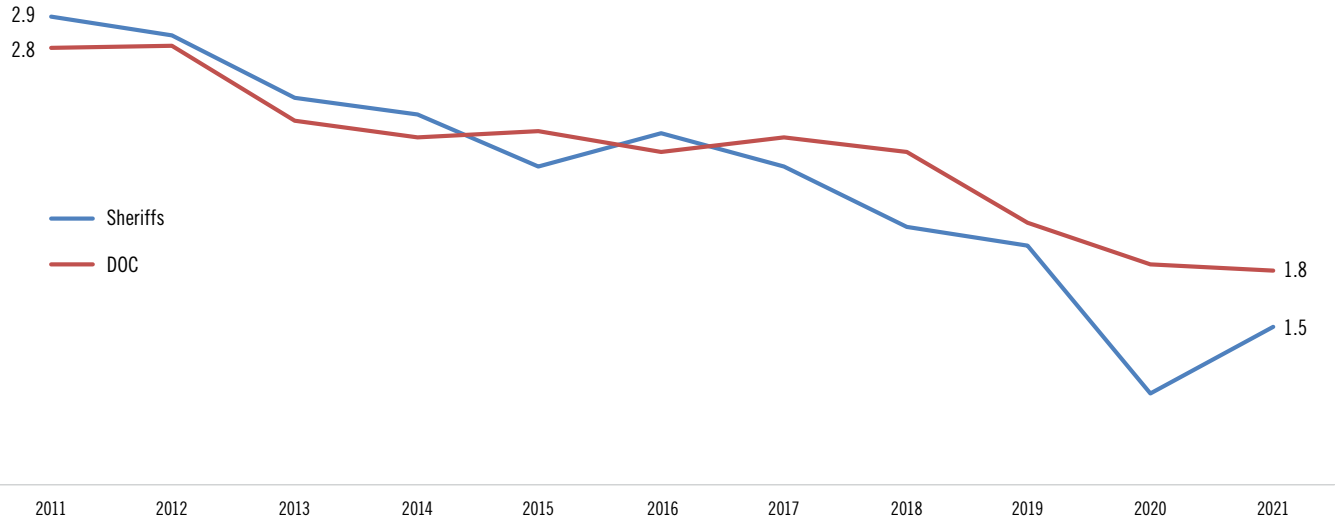
Source: Massachusetts Department of Correction, Weekly Count Sheets and Massachusetts Office of the Comptroller, CTHRU Payroll

agency with the highest ratio today, has half that number (Figure 5).

In addition to lowering ratios to a safer and more effective range, the declining populations have also afforded opportunities to increase pay for correctional staff. Full-time employees working in security and supervision roles in county sheriffs

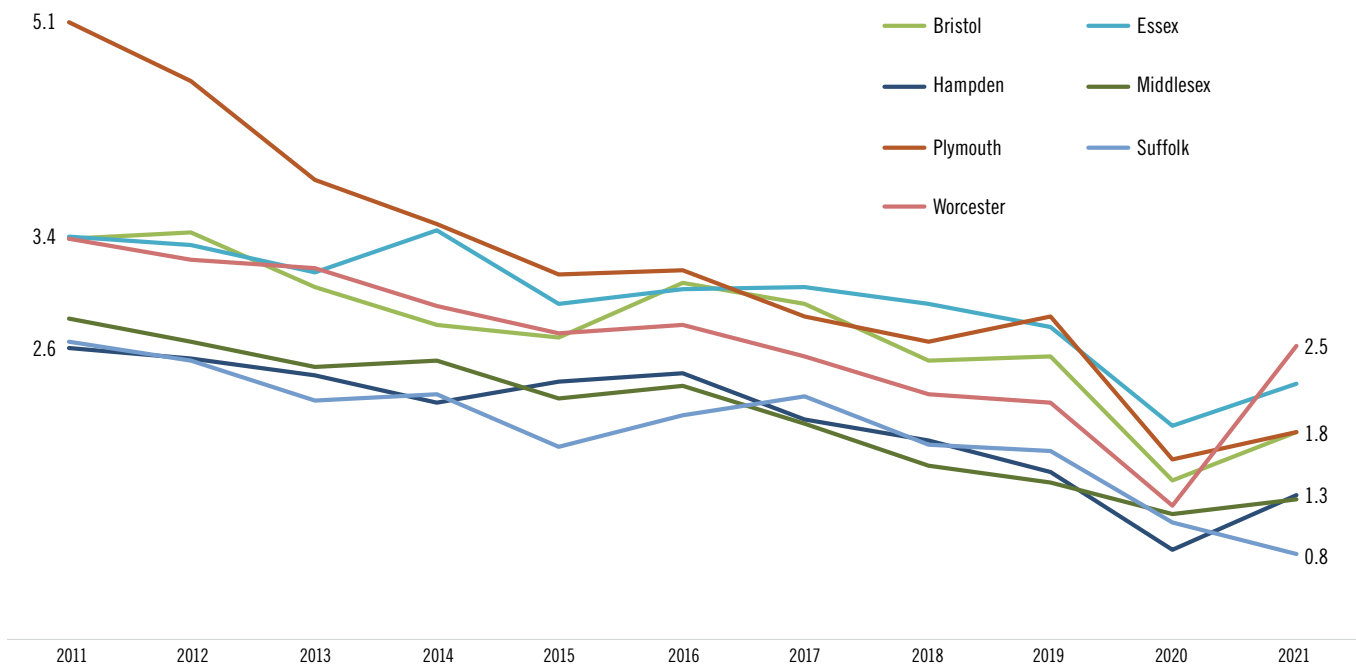
departments now earn, on average, just over \$78,000 annually including overtime pay. Security and supervision staff at the DOC earn almost \$100,000 annually inclusive of overtime. Adjusting for inflation, this is a 20 and 32 percent increase from 2011 salary levels for county and DOC staff, respectively.

Figure 4: Security and Supervision Population-to-Staff Ratios, Sheriffs and DOC, 2011 – 2021



Source: Massachusetts Department of Correction, Weekly Count Sheets and Massachusetts Office of the Comptroller, CTHRU Payroll

Figure 5: Security and Supervision Population-to-Staff Ratios, Large Sheriffs, 2011 – 2021



Source: Massachusetts Department of Correction, Weekly Count Sheets and Massachusetts Office of the Comptroller, CTHRU Payroll

C. Deteriorating Facility Conditions

The sprawling system that once housed over 25,000 individuals on any given day still covers the landscape. All told, it includes nearly 500 buildings with nearly 10 million square feet of space between them. A recent review by the state's Division of Capital Asset Management (DCAM) found these facilities require substantial maintenance. More than one-third of facilities require total renovations or a complete replacement. Another 20 percent require a major renovation. The assessment found repairs required over the next 10 years will cost the state more than \$700 million.⁷

DOC facilities with these significant capital needs include MCI Cedar Junction, MCI Norfolk, MCI Framing, Old Colony, Bridgewater State Hospital, and MASAC-Plymouth. In the county system, the most deteriorated structures are those of Barnstable, Norfolk, and Dukes.

These metrics on population trends, crowding, staff ratios, compensation, and capital needs are critical considerations as Massachusetts contemplates the role of incarceration in an era focused on public safety strategies grounded in public health, racial justice, and depoliticized evidence-based decision making.

II. Approaching Criminal Justice Reform from the Correctional Officer Perspective

A large body of research dating back to the 1980s documents the impact of tough on crime-era policies on correctional staff. These studies demonstrate how the status quo fails correctional officers, prisoners, and the public. They also point to how correctional institutions are likely to respond to calls for change and innovation. Below we describe the challenges and opportunities this literature reveals.

A. Correctional Officer Stress

Current correctional practices place officers responsible for providing care and custody to prisoners under a variety of forms of intense stress. The inherent danger of the work is the most widely recognized. Correctional officers are significantly more likely to be injured on the job than those serving in other public safety occupations, including police officers and firefighters. Even when correctional officers are not the target or victim of an attack, they are constantly exposed to elevated risk and frequently observe violent events.⁸

The presence of pathogens is another persistent source of danger. Long before COVID-19, research on the stressors that make correctional work so difficult regularly pointed to fear of contracting HIV, hepatitis, and other infectious diseases.⁹ A study conducted just before the pandemic found fentanyl and other synthetic opiates had become the highest exposure concern among correctional officers; the emergence

of this new hazard has even led many to exit the field.¹⁰

“Role strain” from balancing the competing demands to provide both security and rehabilitation also creates significant stress for many officers. Institutions often strictly prohibit correctional officers from fraternizing with prisoners. Training emphasizes preventing relationships and avoiding friendships with prisoners as a matter of safety. When correctional officers see their coworkers cross these boundaries, it leads to higher levels of stress and concern.¹¹

The nature of the job also leads to significant work-family conflict. Prisons must operate continuously with appropriate staffing levels at all times. Correctional officers are often called upon to cover additional shifts without advance notice, which disrupts personal lives and relationships and becomes its own source of stress. Beyond scheduling, research suggests it can be difficult for officers to constantly adjust between home life and life in the facility. For example, officer training emphasizes communicating with an authoritative

manner; when this style is reflexively brought home to difficult family conversations, it can aggregate conflict.¹²

Unlike members of the military or those in other public safety professions, correctional officers generally do not receive goodwill from the community for their service. Because they are behind the walls, the public rarely sees correctional officers. People form impressions about the profession largely through media accounts, which are almost always negative. Studies suggest this image contributes to stress, dissatisfaction, and burnout. By bringing attention to heavily punitive conditions of confinement, criminal justice reformers may have inadvertently reinforced these negative stereotypes.¹³

The combination of these various sources of stress takes a heavy toll on officer well-being. Chronic illnesses induced by stress, including heart disease and hypertension, are alarmingly elevated in correctional officers.¹⁴ Estimates suggest that between 20 and 50 percent of officers experience PTSD.¹⁵ Controlling for demographic and other related vari-

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ables, correctional officers are 40 percent more at risk of death from suicide than non-correctional officers.¹⁶ On average, studies find the stress of the job reduces the life span of officers by 16 years.

Particularly disturbing, a study of correctional officers in Connecticut found that these negative health impacts take hold rapidly. While new officers began their careers in good physical condition, after three years on the job, they exhibit rates of high blood pressure, obesity, and depression comparable to officers with 15 years of experience on the job.¹⁷

From an operational perspective, the high level of stress among officers is also costly. It leads to lower job satisfaction, less organizational commitment, increased absenteeism, higher turnover, and unsafe working conditions.¹⁸

B. The Lingering Impact of Tough on Crime-Era Policies

Regardless of whether correctional agencies and their workers endorsed the tough on crime-era shift away from rehabilitative practices and toward a more punitive environment, they were forced to go along because of the intense crowding that resulted. Overcrowding was so extreme that judges found the unsafe and unsanitary conditions violated the constitutional rights of prisoners in several Massachusetts counties, including Barnstable, Bristol, Middlesex, and Worcester. Prisoner rights groups were still filing lawsuits well into the 2010s.¹⁹

To address overcrowding, facil-

ities converted classrooms, recreational facilities, and even medical spaces to housing units. This left prisoners with far fewer opportunities to participate in rehabilitative programming and earn time off their sentences, which led to longer stays and elevated rates of recidivism, exacerbating the crowding problem. Understaffing made it more difficult for correctional officers to recognize mental health crises and other prisoner needs, increasing violence and drug use inside the facilities.²⁰

One response to increasing disorder was a move to higher-security facilities. In 1990, less than 8 percent of DOC prisoners were confined in maximum-security facilities. By 2010, the share of prisoners held in these harsh conditions had more than doubled to 17 percent or nearly 2,000 prisoners. Research suggests moving prisoners to these highly restrictive environments increases problematic behavior.²¹ To maintain control under these conditions, prisons turned to the use of long-term isolation, a practice abandoned in the 19th century due to its severe consequences on both the physical and mental health of prisoners.²²

Even though the crowding that led to these total control facilities is no longer an issue, Massachusetts continues to operate two maximum-security facilities. The extreme behaviors and sense of hopelessness that these facilities breed has an extremely detrimental impact on correctional officers. This is clearly reflected in the US Department of Justice's recent findings regarding the DOCs lack of attention to pris-

oner mental health issues.²³ Similarly, the severity of the problem is evident in a recent study of correctional officer suicide in the Massachusetts Department of Correction.

Over a five-year period between 2010 and 2015, the DOC lost at least 20 current and former officers to suicide. The study found the incidence of suicide among DOC officers was roughly four times higher than the rate in this high-risk group nationally. Two-thirds of the DOC officers lost to suicide had worked at one of the state's two maximum-security facilities or Bridgewater State Hospital. Together, these institutions represented over 90 percent of reported assaults on staff. Through interviews with close contacts and reviews of personnel files, the researchers found these officers had been subject to extremely high levels of exposure to violence and prisoner suicide while working within these facilities.²⁴

Continued use of maximum-security facilities also has troubling consequences for public safety. The most recent data, for 2019, show 313 prisoners were released from maximum-security DOC facilities directly to the community. Moving prisoners from a total-control setting to independent living is a recipe for failure. Studies show how these conditions have debilitating effects on independent decision-making and social interaction. In numerous instances, releases from these facilities have led to violent re-offending with tragic consequences for innocent members of the public.²⁵

C. The Pro-Reform Orientation in the Profession

The above concerns are in no way indicative of the field overall. In state and county facilities throughout Massachusetts, correctional officers currently play an intensive role supporting rehabilitation. Skilled officers increase the psychiatric stability of prisoners, appropriately tailoring their responses to prisoner behavior. Working with clinicians, who have only brief contact with prisoners, officers support treatment teams by determining what works and encouraging prisoners to comply with treatment protocols. Many facilities train correctional officers to recognize criminal thinking and help correct thought distortions. Officers also aid in the transition to the community by serving as liaisons to partner organizations working behind the walls.²⁶

Studies repeatedly find that correctional officers who approach the job with this human service orientation find the work more rewarding and less stressful. This translates to less turnover, which largely explains why research consistently shows officers with more years of experience have a stronger orientation toward rehabilitation. Conversely, in facilities where organizational culture does not embrace rehabilitative approaches, officers who believe in a strong rehabilitative role exhibit greater stress levels.²⁷

The extensive body of research on the philosophy of officers suggests they will embrace reform models that create working environments that enable them to safely and successfully support rehabilitation. This

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conclusion is backed by one study that looked explicitly at how officers respond to innovation and found that those working in institutions that are actively working to improve their performance report higher levels of job satisfaction. However, research also suggests this support is likely contingent on engaging officers in the change process.²⁸

In most workplaces, job stress and satisfaction are tied to a collaborative environment and the ability of employees to influence change. This is especially true in correctional settings, where new policies and practices have serious implications for employee safety and well-being. A large body of research shows correctional input into decision-making lowers job stress and increases job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Officers who believe that their agency values and encourages innovation also report greater job satisfaction.²⁹

Throughout the tough on crime era, external forces often drove working conditions with changes

in law and regulation and frequent court intervention increasing the populations and prescriptively setting terms for serving these prisoners. The post-tough on crime era is an opportunity to establish new precedents and elevate the professionalism of the field's knowledgeable frontline workers.

III. Reinvesting in Corrections

The thrust of the justice reinvestment reform agenda has been driving down the correctional population to free up resources for community-based services, particularly in urban areas with high rates of incarceration. While this must remain a central focus, thinking about how we resource and operate correctional facilities more effectively in the future merits an equivalent amount of attention. The scan below frames three key considerations as we contemplate reinvestment in corrections: institutional culture and operations, facility design and maintenance, and hiring, training, and officer wellness.

A. Institutional Culture and Operations

Efforts to reduce violence within correctional facilities are most successful when the approach is embedded in the culture of the institution as opposed to operating as a stand-alone program.³⁰ The Vera Institute of Justice's Reimagining Prison Initiative has examined opportunities to create healthier environments through visits to European facilities, which were not set back several decades by the misguided policies burdening their US counterparts. Early efforts to replicate what they found overseas have centered around specialized units for young adults.

In these units, officers are encouraged to develop relationships with both the young adults and their family members. Together, officers and prisoners build a therapeutic

environment based on kindness, compassion, mutual respect, and trust. Officers working in these units report significantly lower levels of stress and higher job satisfaction. With support from Vera and others, several correctional facilities in Massachusetts have developed young adult units. These pilots can inform the development of more transformative efforts to reinvent the culture and operation of facilities throughout the state.

Fundamentally, this change must involve a move away from a culture of "us versus them." For this to occur, facilities can no longer operate in a manner that forces prisoners to be idle while officers primarily perform guard duty. Education and vocational programming, which reduce violence within facilities and establish the healthy patterns that prisoners must develop to successfully return to the community, are the basis for forming such a culture.

While these opportunities remain limited, Massachusetts has underappreciated strengths that should be recognized and built upon. For instance, the DOC partners with NEADS, a nonprofit that trains service dogs, to operate animal-training programs in several facilities. Caretaking of dogs has been shown to increase self-esteem and self-worth, leading to fewer problems in the facility and lower recidivism upon release.³¹ Similarly, the DOC's correctional industries program provides prisoners with opportunities to develop meaningful vocational skills, fabricating a range of products that

provide benefit to cities, towns, hospitals, police and fire departments, and social service agencies. Many sheriffs also have substantial correctional industries or vocational skills programs. Plymouth and Worcester offer agricultural opportunities. As with animal caretaking, the direct sensory contact with plants these programs provide has been shown to produce especially large benefits for prisoners suffering from trauma and depression.³²

Partnering with the Educational Justice Institute at MIT and Vera in the Massachusetts Prison Education Consortium (MPEC), the DOC, Probation Department, and Parole Board has spent several years laying the groundwork for a post-secondary education continuum for currently and formerly incarcerated people. MPEC hopes to provide more access to college coursework during incarceration along with support to sustain connections in the community so students can complete a post-secondary degree. Congress' recent reversal of the 1994 crime bill's ban on eligibility for federal Pell grants puts the state in a significantly better position to provide these learning opportunities at greater scale.

Efforts to improve the culture and operation of facilities have focused largely on conditions of prisoners. However, it is also important to consider operational changes that will directly reduce the stress on staff. For instance, agencies can rotate employees to other functions such as electronic monitoring

and work release. Studies shows increasing job variety significantly improves job satisfaction and retention.³³ Declining populations creates additional opportunity to rotate officers into the community to increase job variety. In addition to helping workers de-stress, establishing posts in the community could aid reentry efforts, create more opportunities for leadership and professional development, and increase visibility and appreciation for the positive contribution officers make as public safety professionals.

Correctional facilities are also developing new models to protect officers from injurious prisoner behavior, particularly female correctional officers who face an added set of stressors when working in primarily male facilities. One example is the Dignity Assaults Initiative developed in Michigan. This program increases awareness of sexually deviant behavior directed at staff and ensures that correctional officers consistently respond to these serious incidents in an appropriate manner.³⁴

B. Facility Design and Maintenance

Achieving conditions centered around rehabilitation will require considerable attention to facility layouts. Challenges moving prisoners to lower-security levels perpetually hinder efforts to provide appropriate programming and services. Declining populations present more flexibility to move prisoners to different security levels within the campus. Coupled with correctional reforms strengthening parole and earned

good-time incentives for program participation, this will help reduce prisoner misconduct.

A large body of literature draws a direct relationship between other aspects of prison design and health and safety. Prison designs have improved over the years, providing staff with more control over the facility and prisoners with a greater degree of privacy and independence. These changes have reduced stress on prisoners and improved their relationships with correctional officers. However, considerable room for improvements remains, especially as evidence from neuroscience provides a much better understanding of how light, noise, and air quality influence the health of the people who live and work in correctional facilities.³⁵

Studies suggest access to natural light and a view of the outdoors are particularly important to reducing stress among both prisoners and workers.³⁶ This finding is consistent with a large body of research in other fields. For instance, having a view of the outdoors compared to

an interior wall improves a patient's recovery from surgery.³⁷ Residents randomly assigned to relatively barren public housing developments report more aggression and violence among residents than those living in developments with trees and grass.³⁸ Providing natural views is often challenging in a prison setting because each exterior opening introduces a security risk. This can be managed creatively in a new design. However, in existing buildings, simply installing murals depicting nature scenes can produce a measurable reduction in stress among correctional staff.³⁹

Noise is another major concern for both architects designing prisons and correctional staff managing them. Exposure to annoying or startling sounds forces alertness, elevating stress. Inability to control exposure to noise can also produce high levels of stress and contribute to poor health outcomes.⁴⁰ With many buildings in poor condition, indoor air quality is another major concern. Problems with heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning or leaking roofs can create significant

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exposure risk to prisoners and correctional officers.⁴¹

Research shows that correctional staff are particularly attuned to how facility design impacts the operation of the facility. As Massachusetts works to address the long maintenance backlog and develops plans to achieve building efficiencies with declining populations, correctional officers can play a very important role informing future investments.⁴² There are also increasing opportunities to develop partnerships with the state's considerable talent in architecture and building technology. For decades, the Academy of Architecture for Justice, a subcommittee of the American Institute of Architects, has worked with correctional staff and researchers to plan and design correctional campuses that improve well-being. With growing public attention to criminal justice reform, leaders in design industries are increasingly interested in engaging on these issues.

C. Hiring, Training, and Officer Wellness

Corrections work is often more difficult than other public safety professions, and it almost always offers less compensation and prestige. This combination makes it very difficult for agencies to attract and retain employees. Declining correctional populations have made it possible to improve pay, but to capitalize on this development agencies must improve the hiring process. An expert task force assembled by RAND on behalf of the National Institute of Justice

in 2019 to examine this challenge emphasized the need for agencies to communicate their commitment to professionalism, rehabilitation, and evidence-based programming to widen the potential pool of candidates. The task force also called for improved hiring processes, including reducing the time to hire and using evidence-based selection criteria and screening tools.⁴³

Experts on reinventing corrections for the post-tough on crime era also point to a need to improve training with a focus on instilling a sense of professionalism and ethics. To provide appropriate training in the most effective modes, correctional officers should have a major role identifying training needs and best practices and developing and delivering training. Systematizing these processes helps ensure that the institutional culture supports labor-management collaboration and continuous improvement. It also serves as a retention tool for a millennial workforce more accustomed to greater voice and agency in decision-making.⁴⁴

In addition to a heavy emphasis on rehabilitation, training on supporting individuals suffering from trauma and mental illness is critically important, particularly as steadily improving science in these areas provides correctional officers with more effective methods. Correctional institutions must also address cultural competency, particularly as correctional officers play a larger role in providing counseling support.⁴⁵

Above all, training helps officers manage the considerable psychological demands of the job with evi-

dence-based coping strategies. These training efforts are most effective as part of a broader employee wellness program that begins at the academy and continues through retirement. These programs destigmatize occupationally induced stress and protect the confidentiality of those who seek support. They also provide listening and educational sessions with staffs' family members to alert them to signs of stress and depression, and direct them on how to get help. When traumatic incidents do occur, a response team debriefs the employees involved within 48 hours of the event and connects them with a range of voluntary and confidential supports.

UMass-Lowell's Center for the Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace (CPH-NEW) is a national leader, collaborating with correctional officers throughout the country to develop employee wellness programs and evaluate their impact. DOC and county correctional agencies have been striving to develop training and employee assistance programs. However, much work remains to standardize best practices and adequately resource these programs across the field.

IV. Moving Forward Together

Massachusetts leaders seeking to take advantage of declines in incarceration to enhance the performance of the state's criminal justice system must focus greater attention on the role of correctional officers. This includes appropriately staffing facilities to meet the needs of correctional facilities tasked with achieving substantial reductions in recidivism, maintaining a healthy and highly qualified professional workforce, and aligning capital investment in facilities with the operational needs of agencies in the future. As presented below, Massachusetts can take a range of steps to advance this important work:

› **Utilize the NIC process to develop minimum staffing levels for all facilities.** Adequate staffing is central to both achieving reform and preventing staff burnout. Through the state's correctional expenditure commission, correctional agencies will be implementing a protocol developed by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) to analyze facilities to determine how to efficiently staff them in a manner that ensures safety and enables appropriate levels of programming. Once established, correctional budgets must ensure that facilities are able to meet these minimum ratios without the use of forced overtime.

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- › **Develop post rotations in the community.** Research shows that programs delivered in the community have the greatest ability to reduce recidivism.⁴⁶ In addition to providing opportunities for officers to destress, establishing posts in the community will help correctional agencies build bridges and continuity between programs and across systems. Efforts to build post assignments that support community-based diversion and reentry efforts could prove particularly timely if they lend support to organizations funded through the state's new justice reinvestment grant.
- › **Increase educational incentives and benefits.** Correctional contracts currently offer very little additional pay for officers with two- or four-year college degrees. While this is consistent with the existing body of research, which does not find a strong relationship between officer performance and post-secondary training, most of these studies

are dated and relate to operational practices during the tough on crime era. There is good reason to believe that as the field asks officers to perform higher-level human service functions in addition to providing security, the returns from post-secondary education will increase.

In addition to increasing pay for officers with college degrees, agencies should also increase tuition reimbursements. Correctional officers currently receive the same limited tuition discount at public colleges as other state employees. Increasing this benefit would help attract a professional workforce. It would also ensure that officers have the same access to a free college education as prisoners in their custody, increasing support for college in prison programs. As these programs grow, agencies could ask the providers to offer opportunities for officers to complete courses at their facilities as well.

› **Develop clear budgets for training and employee wellness programs.** Just as reformers have long sought to ensure that prisoners in facilities across the state have more even access to high-quality evidence-based programs, it is important to ensure that correctional officers receive high-quality training and employee support in all agencies. While it is not directly in the correctional expenditure commission's charge, it is well within the body's preview to examine these needs and provide recommendations to help ensure that budget makers fully account for the costs associated with meeting them.

› **Update the corrections master plan with heavy involvement of officers.** The state's master plan for correctional facilities is more than a decade old, and it was built on operational practices and assumptions for growth that no longer hold. The recent DCAM facility conditions report uncovers an urgent need to revisit space requirements before the state makes significant investments in the upkeep of facilities.

Correctional officers can provide a valuable contribution to this process, helping planners envision the most efficient ways to improve upon the current building stock and meet operational needs, consistent with a focus on health, rehabilitation, and maintaining ties to family and community.

› **Survey correctional officers to understand changing needs and perceptions in the field.** In education, statewide teacher surveys have provided critical information about whether positive teaching and learning conditions are present in schools across the Commonwealth. These also give policymakers a firm sense of what teachers view as most necessary to improve the performance of their students and organizations. This type of information would be especially helpful as policymakers seek to learn more about what is occurring behind the walls and how the field is responding to change.⁴⁷

Endnotes

- ¹ Ben Forman is the Research Director at MassINC. Anusha Rahman is a Senior at Tulane University double majoring in neuroscience and psychology. She contributed to this research project as a MassINC Summer Intern.
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ABOUT MASSINC

The Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (MassINC) is a rigorously non-partisan think tank and civic organization. We focus on putting the American Dream within the reach of everyone in Massachusetts using three distinct tools—research, journalism, and civic engagement. Our work is characterized by accurate data, careful analysis, and unbiased conclusions.

ABOUT THE MASSACHUSETTS CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM COALITION

Established in 2013, the Massachusetts Criminal Justice Reform Coalition is a diverse group of prosecutors and corrections practitioners, defense lawyers, community organizers, and businessmen and women who find common ground in the need for corrections reform in Massachusetts. The coalition sponsors research, convenes civic leaders, and promotes public dialogue to move the Commonwealth toward data-driven criminal justice policymaking and practice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MassINC would like to express gratitude to the Shaw Foundation, Al Kaneb, Citizens' Circle members, and other individual donors who generously support the work of the Massachusetts Criminal Justice Reform Coalition.



11 Beacon Street, Suite 500
Boston, MA 02108
www.massinc.org