

Prison Staffing Crisis By the Numbers

INTRODUCTION

The headlines are clear: across the country, our nation's prisons are dangerously understaffed and overcrowded. This crisis is playing out in real time with **dire consequences for correctional officers and incarcerated people, as well as their families and our communities.**

Yet beyond the stories of violence, disorder, and rapidly deteriorating conditions, very little is known about total correctional officer employment and how challenges in recruitment and retention have impacted the day-to-day operation of state prisons. Publicly available measures such as staffing ratios tell an incomplete story and fail to account for well-documented problems associated with chronic understaffing and high vacancy rates such as long shifts, mandatory excessive overtime, and frequent turnover.

Understanding understaffing isn't an academic question. Corrections officers have stressful and often dangerous jobs and, as a result, they have significantly higher rates of [mental health challenges](#) such as depression, substance use disorder, and suicide than the general public. [According to one study](#), health problems associated with occupational stress are even higher among corrections officers than police officers and lead to a decline in life expectancy of 16 years compared to the average American. Chronic understaffing only makes this worse.

The understaffing crisis is also making it nearly impossible for corrections agencies to deliver on their rehabilitation mandate. So-called solutions such as augmentation force teachers, social workers, and counselors who normally provide education, job training, and drug and mental health treatment to perform the traditional duties of corrections officers. This places staff in situations for which they may lack training or skills which can severely impact the safety and security of the facility.

The effects of this crisis are not limited to correctional staff. Short staffing and stopgap solutions such as augmentation not only diminish security in the facility, they prevent incarcerated people from getting the rehabilitation programming they need to earn their way home and succeed in the community, as well as necessary services such as mental and physical healthcare.

The understaffing crisis also reverberates beyond the prison walls. When there are not enough staff at a prison, visitation is usually one of the first services cut and extreme understaffing leads to lockdowns that prevent families from having any contact with their loved ones. Maintaining family ties is crucial to reentry success and has been shown to reduce recidivism rates. The families of correctional staff similarly face challenges at home when their loved ones are required to work long hours and endure stressful conditions at work.

To shed light on this urgent problem, the [Safer Prisons, Safer Communities campaign](#) has collected and analyzed more than a decade of data on employment of correctional officers in state government from the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS) and state prison populations from the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#) in the U.S. Department

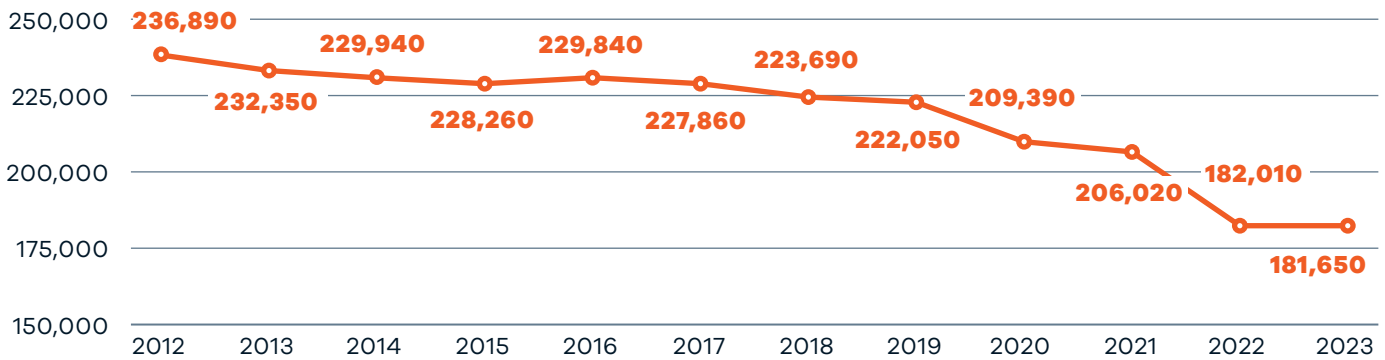
of Justice (BJS). The findings reflect a disturbing and worsening trend—the number of correctional officers employed by state prison systems has fallen sharply, declined faster than state prison populations, and continues to fall even as prison populations have started rising again.

We all deserve to be safe, and policymakers must prioritize the safety of corrections officers and incarcerated people through reforms that prioritize hiring, training, and retaining staff, while also safely reducing demand on the prison system and fixing crumbling infrastructure.

KEY DATA ON THE UNDERSTAFFING CRISIS

The number of corrections officers has been falling for more than a decade and dropped sharply during the Covid epidemic. According to data collected by BLS, the number of corrections officers employed by state governments has fallen 23 percent, from 236,890 in 2012 to 181,650 in 2023.

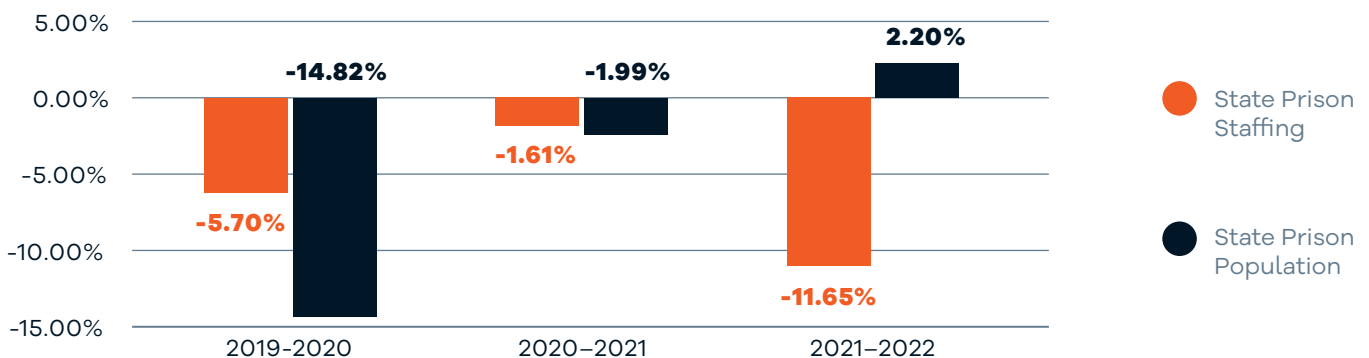
Figure 1: Number of correctional officers and jailers employed by state governments (2012-2023)



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

While prison populations have bounced back since Covid, the number of corrections officers remains far below pre-Covid levels. In 2022, the last year with comparable data, the state prison population rose 2.2 percent while the number of corrections officers continued to fall sharply (-12%). With prison populations rising for the first time in more than a decade, the understaffing crisis is worsening when most states can least afford it.

Figure 2: Annual percentage change in the number of correctional officers and jailers employed by state governments and state prison populations (2019-2022)



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics

The number of correctional officers has been falling faster than state prison populations in recent years, exacerbating long standing challenges and poor prison conditions. In addition to moving in the opposite direction of state prison populations in 2022, the number of corrections officers has fallen by more than the number of incarcerated people over the past decade.

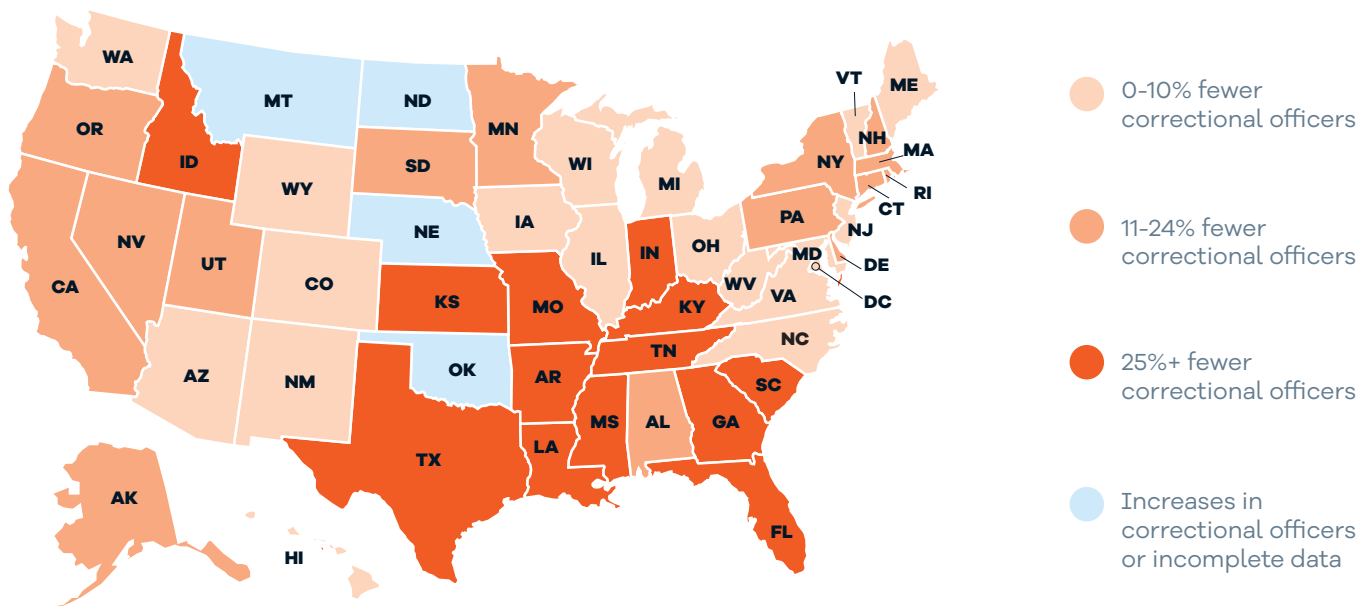
Table 1: Percentage change in the number of correctional officers and jailers employed by state governments and state prison populations, 1-, 3-, 5- and 10-year changes (2012-2022)

	1-YEAR CHANGE 2021-2022	3-YEAR CHANGE 2019-2022	5-YEAR CHANGE 2017-2022	10-YEAR CHANGE 2012-2022
State Prison Staffing	-11.7%	-18.0%	-20.1%	-23.2%
State Prison Populations	+2.2%	-14.7%	-18.0%	-20.8%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics

At least 13 states have experienced staffing declines of more than 25% since 2017. The staffing crisis is particularly acute in many of the states with the highest imprisonment rates. Ten of the 13 states that have seen reductions in corrections officers of at least 25 percent have imprisonment rates higher than the national average.

Figure 3: Reductions in state correctional officers (2017-2022)

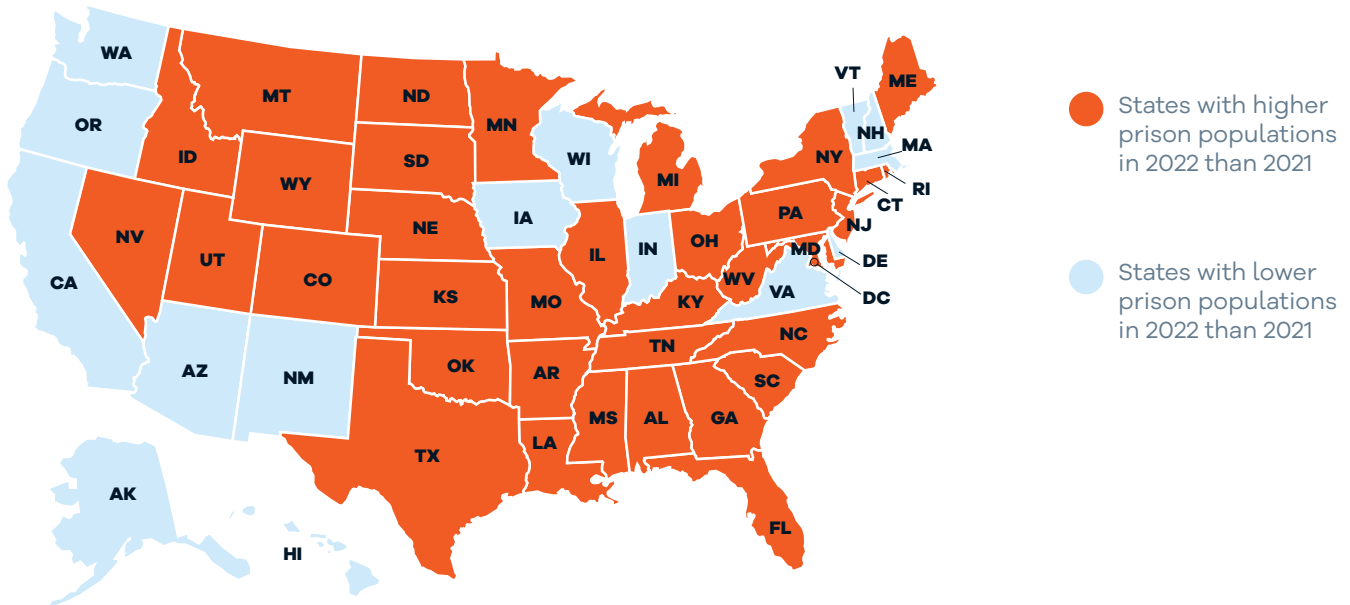


Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Note: Nebraska, North Dakota, and Montana reported increases in the number of correctional officers. Oklahoma did not report full data in 2017 and therefore couldn't be calculated.

The vast majority of states have rising prison populations. According to BJS, 35 states increased their prison populations from 2021 to 2022, with nine states experiencing increases of at least 1,000 incarcerated people. Overall, 2022 was the first year since 2013 in which the state prison population increased.

Figure 4: States with a rising prison population (2021-2022)



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

CONCLUSION

Despite growing attention on the prison understaffing crisis, lawmakers, media, and the public have had very little data and analysis about the extent of the problem until now. The findings in this brief should serve as a wake-up call to a growing problem that is undermining the health and safety of correctional officers, incarcerated people, and the public at large. Unless policymakers act now, it will be nearly impossible for corrections agencies to deliver on their rehabilitation mandate and prepare people to successfully return home to our communities after serving their sentence.

Safer Prisons, Safer Communities was founded in 2024 by One Voice United and FAMM. Driven by the dire conditions inside our nation’s prisons, the campaign brings together seemingly unlikely allies to advocate for reforms that will improve the lives of corrections officers and incarcerated people alike, enhance rehabilitation and reintegration opportunities, and strengthen community safety.

One Voice United is dedicated to elevating the voices of correctional officers and staff in national conversations about corrections and the criminal justice system. By building bridges and bringing together a broad range of stakeholders, we are cultivating a unified approach to the policies, programs, and narratives that define criminal justice reform. We are working to shift the conversation from one that perpetuates tension between incarcerated individuals, corrections staff, and budget constraints to one that is centered on protecting the safety and interests of all who are impacted by the corrections system.

FAMM's mission is to create a more fair and effective justice system that respects our American values of individual accountability and dignity while keeping our communities safe. We do this by making sure people are treated equally and sentenced proportional to their offense; eliminating disparities based on race and ethnicity; ensuring people are incarcerated close to their homes in order to maintain important family bonds; and advocating for correctional facilities that are safe and humane, provide appropriate medical care, and offer educational, vocational, and rehabilitative programming.