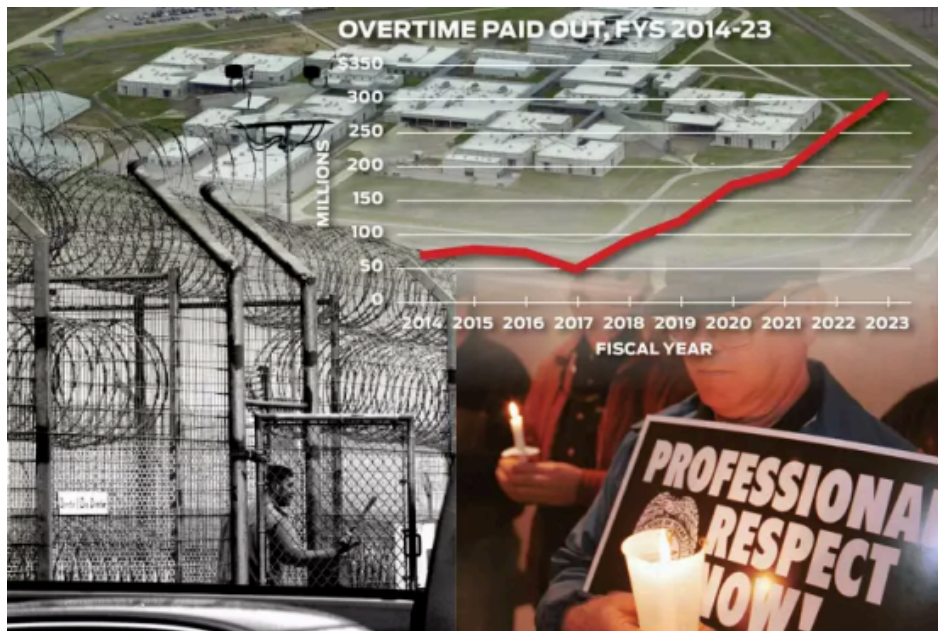


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How Texas prisons are spending millions on a 'dangerous' staffing crisis as population soars

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Texas prisons are filling up quickly, but the state is struggling to find enough workers, putting everyone at risk.

Illustration by Susan Barber

Texas prisons were so short staffed in 2023 the state spent more than \$111,000 on rental cars for correctional officers to drive to far-flung rural facilities to cover temporary shifts that couldn't be filled locally.

Once there, the guards needed a place to stay. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice's bill for hotels and travel meals that year came to nearly \$14 million – double what it was the year before.

The corrections agency even had names for the tactic of shuttling employees around just to keep the lock-ups operational: The Uber model, named after the ride-share program, for daily fill-ins; and the hotel model, for longer-term, but still temporary shifts.

“(They’re not) models we love or embrace for the future, but models that let us keep the capacity and the operation going,” the correction’s agency executive director, Bryan Collier, told legislators in a hearing late last year.

“It’s getting out of hand,” added Jeff Ormsby, executive director of the corrections worker union, AFSCME Council 907.

The travel and lodgings expenses, obtained by the Houston Chronicle through an open records request, highlight the creative contortions the state prison agency has had to perform to keep watch over a suddenly surging inmate population.

Thanks to a string of [legal reforms followed by the COVID-19 pandemic](#), by 2021 the number of Texas prisoners dropped from more than 150,000 to about 120,000, [the lowest census since the mid-1990s](#). In response, [the prison system idled](#) 14,000 beds, shuttering entire units in the process.

But the number of inmates has bounced back with a vengeance. This year it is projected to approach 140,000 – and to keep climbing.

At the same time, the corrections agency has struggled to find corrections and parole officers. At the end of 2023, nearly 30% of positions remained unfilled – three times the vacancy rate experts say is needed to ensure safety for employees and inmates. Some more isolated facilities have struggled to fill half their jobs.

The shortage has rippled across the prison agency’s operations.

Department policy prohibits staff from working more than 16 hours a day or 10 days in a row. But workers regularly exceed those limits. “Since fiscal year 2019, documented violations of the 10-day rule doubled and violations of the 16-hour rule increased more than tenfold to 9,000 violations per month on average,” [an audit conducted by the state’s Sunset Advisory Commission](#) found last year.

“If you work ten 16-hour days in a row, you’re useless,” said Ormsby.

Inmates feel the inadequate staffing as well, said Christie Hutchison, family liaison for the Texas Incarcerated Families Association. Over the holidays, Hutchison said family members trying to visit relatives at a Huntsville unit complained they had to wait hours because there were too few corrections officers to supervise visits.

Families also worry their incarcerated relatives also have been unable to get timely medical attention or protection because of short-staffing, she added, saying she had received reports of inmates calling for help having to wait 45 minutes for an officer to appear. Too few guards “just affects everything,” she said. “It’s terrible for the staff who show up, as well as for the inmates.”

There are indications Texas prisons are becoming more perilous, according to the September 2023 examination of TDCJ's operations by the state's sunset commission. The review found the number of so-called adverse events – assaults, homicides and suicides – has steadily increased in recent years.

“Even while the inmate population decreased, the amount of contraband such as drugs, weapons, and cellphones found in TDCJ facilities has increased significantly,” the September 2023 examination of TDCJ's operations by the report noted. Texas prisons, it said, “are more dangerous now than a decade ago.”

'The uncomfortable reality'

In his testimony to lawmakers, Collier noted many employers across the country are struggling to hire. That has made it difficult for the prison agency to find qualified recruits, especially in areas with low unemployment rates.

In Amarillo, for example, site of the maximum-security Clements Unit, he noted only 3% of eligible workers are unemployed. With a reported staff vacancy rate of more than 50%, officials have had to idle several buildings within the complex. Correctional officers must be shuttled from the Montford Unit, in Lubbock, just to fill shifts.

But Collier added the Texas corrections system also had created its own hiring obstacles.

In the 1990s, when the state's prison population was climbing rapidly, the agency went on a building spree. New facilities often were sited in isolated communities where land was cheap and a new prison promised jobs. But nearly 30 years on, the populations of some are smaller than when the prisons were constructed, and open positions outnumber available workers.

Located amid empty fields in the farthest northwest corner of the Panhandle, the Dalhart Unit was opened in 1995. Today, in order to keep it operational, the prison agency says it must ship temporary correctional staff from the Dominguez State Jail in San Antonio, 600 miles away.

“The uncomfortable reality,” the sunset commission report concluded, “is some of Texas' prisons are located in places where hiring sufficient correctional staff is nearly impossible.”

Yet Collier conceded economic factors weren't totally responsible for the worker shortage. The Texas prison system also has internal problems that have made it difficult to attract workers. “Culture is a big factor within our business,” he told lawmakers.

Many employees reported Texas prisons haven't been great places to work. In staff interviews, auditors found the agency was beset by an “unfair” and “punitive” culture “where

many supervisors insufficiently support staff or even misuse their power” through “rampant favoritism” and “retaliatory discipline.” Fully half of Texas corrections officers had received at least one disciplinary action, according to the audit.

In his testimony, Collier acknowledged the agency tended to be “too rigid” in the way it treated employees. He said the department recently adjusted its disciplinary policies to stress employee development more – and punishment less.

A retention problem

In the meantime, the prison agency’s hiring struggles have created a sort of doom cycle, in which low staffing makes working so stressful that many workers – new recruits especially – quickly bail, creating even more shift gaps.

“TDCJ does not have a hiring problem – it has a retention problem,” Ormsby said.

Over the past decade, the agency has hired about 74,000 corrections officers – and lost 72,000.

“Employees are often tasked with more than they can reasonably perform within normal working hours,” the sunset commission report found. “For example, a correctional housing rover responsible for 300 inmates across multiple housing areas would have just six seconds to perform a security check on each inmate, which TDCJ policy requires every 30 minutes.”

Making such unreasonable demands has created no-win situations: Corrections officers could either admit to failing to meet standards and get punished for it – or lie and get punished if found out.

Last year, three-quarters of the agency’s correctional staff reported working overtime shifts. In addition to the Uber and hotel model costs, the agency in 2023 paid out more than \$300 million in overtime – six times more than a decade ago. Corrections department employees ineligible for overtime pay earn compensatory time off.

But state policy requires they must use it within two years. Thanks to the chronic staffing gaps, in 2023, staff forfeited the equivalent of 95 years of earned time off to expiration.