



CRIME

You asked: Who does Idaho send to prison? And what if we sent fewer people?

BY NICOLE BLANCHARD

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It's no secret that Idaho's prisons and jails are overcrowded. The Idaho Department of Correction has 7,840 total beds at its facilities statewide — but it has about 8,600 inmates. Here are the latest statistics on inmates in Idaho's prison system. BY KELSEY GREY ✉ | DARIN OSWALD ✉ | NICOLE BLANCHARD ✉

This story is part of [our Curious Idaho series](#), an initiative where you vote on questions submitted by readers, and we then investigate the winner. This question, “Who makes up our prison population — violent versus non-violent offenders, 1st time drug users? Do we need more prisons or better sentencing?” won the [second voting round](#) in September. Reporter Nicole Blanchard did several public records requests and several interviews to get the story.

It's no secret that [Idaho's prisons](#) and [jails](#) are [overcrowded](#). The Idaho Department of Correction has 7,840 total beds at its facilities statewide — but it has about 8,600 inmates. By November, 700 of them will be at facilities in Eagle Pass and Karnes County, Texas.

About 75 percent of inmates are in on nonviolent charges, IDOC data shows. And only 23 percent of inmates coming into prison are “new court commitments,” spokesman Jeff Ray said. That means the rest are incarcerated because they've violated terms of their parole or probation, or failed a retained jurisdiction program, meant to offer counseling and education to lower-risk inmates.

Our Curious Idaho questioner, who asked to remain anonymous, said he wanted to know whether changes in sentencing could help address the overcrowding — particularly for drug offenders.

Roughly 1,650 inmates are in Idaho prisons on “possession of a controlled substance” convictions, according to IDOC data. That’s one-fifth of the prison population. About 400 of those inmates have additional convictions, including burglary, delivery of a controlled substance or intent to deliver. Most of those inmates were released earlier on parole, or given probation sentences that would’ve allowed them to avoid incarceration, Ray said.

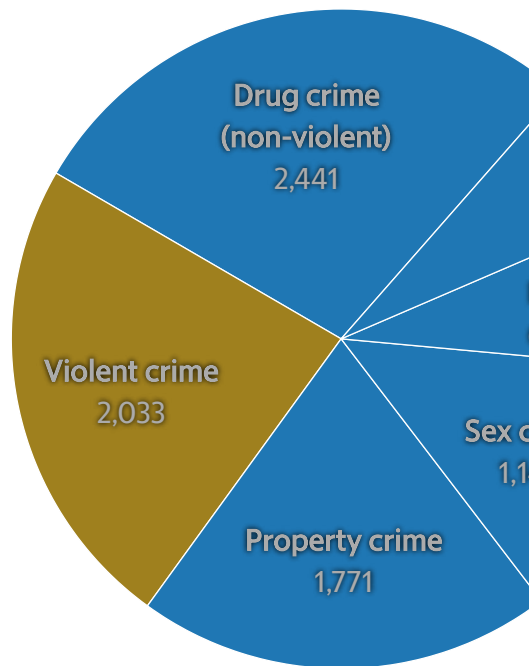
“The vast majority of individuals serving time on drug possession charges are violators of probation or parole prior to coming to prison,” he explained.

Roughly half of those violations are new felonies; an additional 25 percent of offenders “abscond,” meaning their supervisor isn’t aware of their whereabouts.

Would it make sense to keep some of those drug offenders out of prison? That’s a complicated question.

ABOUT 23% ARE VIOLENT OFFENDERS

Most of Idaho's prison inmates were convicted on a primary charge of drug, property or sex crimes, DUI or another non-violent crime.



"Sex crime" in this chart includes 132 rape charges, which the FBI defines as a

WHO IS IN PRISON — AND WHY

Ray said the department plans to address the tight quarters through [a \\$500 million proposal](#) that would expand existing facilities and fund a new 1,510-bed prison. Decision-making on sentencing and prisoner releases doesn't fall to the department, Ray said.

"Our business is carrying out policy. We don't control front door — the courts do. And we don't control the back door — the parole boards do," Ray said.

Idaho officials tried to address overcrowding in 2014 through the Justice Reinvestment Initiative, or JRI, which released more people on early parole and re-evaluated correctional programming and supervising tactics, among other tactics.

For a time, the prison population dropped as a record number of parolees were released. Then the population spiked. The total number of people IDOC supervises (that's incarcerated people and those on parole and probation) is now growing at a record pace that outstrips Idaho's population growth, said Janeena White, IDOC evaluation and compliance supervisor.



This story is the result of Curious Idaho, a reader driven initiative that lets you ask the questions that we investigate and answer. Go to IdahoStatesman.com/CuriousIdaho to ask your question.

White said she's not sure what's causing the spike, though it has coincided with a couple of other trends.

In particular, the arrest rate for drug crimes has increased, while the rates of violent crimes, DUIs and property crimes have remained stable or decreased, White said. Drug crimes also make up an increasing share of prison sentences.

Kevin Kempf worked at IDOC for 22 years, including as the department's director. Now, he's executive director of the Association of State Correctional Administrators.

"The state of Idaho needs to look at who is being sent to prison. People that are selling, manufacturing drugs, in my opinion, those people do need to spend time in prison," he said.

But drug users are often doing time "for being addicts," he said. "Prison doesn't make them better. It makes them worse."

CRITICISMS AND ALTERNATIVES

In an [opinion column published earlier this month](#), Idaho police officials argued that JRI releases also made things worse — particularly for officers whose encounters with certain released inmates ended in fatal shootings.

“JRI is responsible for 45 percent of the officer-involved fatal incidents in Ada County since 2016,” the officials wrote, calling for a repeal of the legislation.

Local prison reform advocates said they’re not convinced that’s the best course of action.

“We certainly want to maintain safety for law enforcement ... but I think (that allegation) is a bit of a red herring,” said Kathy Griesmyer, policy director for the Idaho ACLU. “Nobody is getting an automatic release from prison.”

She pointed to another side of JRI: support systems (or the lack thereof) for released inmates.

“What JRI has not done is implement the resources that make people really successful,” such as an adequate number of parole and probation officers, drug courts and treatment centers, Griesmyer said. “We’re missing some of the pieces.”

Education, rehabilitation and mentorship programs may help prevent people from reoffending, agreed Sen. Patti Anne Lodge, a Canyon County legislator who co-chairs the Criminal Justice Reinvestment Oversight Committee.

“We need at least 30 more probation officers, but it takes about two years to get them up to speed. I’m a real advocate for community resource centers,” Lodge said.

She also wants to see better mental health care, more classes and apprenticeship opportunities in prison, and additional job training for inmates in IDOC facilities.

“(The inmates) are going to be our neighbors, and we have to make sure they’re productive, accountable citizens. And we are not able to do that without spending a lot more money,” Lodge said.

Kempf, who oversaw IDOC when JRI was first implemented, said the legislation missed the mark.

“Ninety-nine percent of JRI fell to (IDOC). To think corrections could address all this is wrong,” Kempf said.

“We had changes that led to new releases, but no changes to treatment,” agreed Rep. Lynn Luker, Lodge’s committee co-chair.

Luker said the committee plans to look at several new options in the near future — treatment for addiction, increased supervision and mental health care.

“There are some things we can look at (related to sentencing), but it doesn’t solve the total problem,” he said.

The committee will also look at IDOC’s proposal. Luker said the Legislature could accept parts of the proposal, but may be hesitant to OK other elements.

“Most people would like to look at other options first (before building a new prison),” Luker said. “I think the best dollars right now are going to be spent on additional probation and parole and treatment.”

Will changes to sentencing play a role in easing Idaho’s prison overcrowding? In short, officials aren’t sure. One thing they can agree on is the need for a conversation involving everyone from legislators to the parole board to IDOC.

“I’m looking for everybody to come to the table. I want them to forget about their jobs — whether they’re arresting (the offenders), defending them, prosecuting them — (and focus on) how we can make productive, accountable, taxpaying people,” Lodge said.

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