



HOMEPAGE

Idaho's overcrowded prisons cannot be fixed simply by building more of them

BY LEO MORALES

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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](#) ✉

As the executive director of the ACLU of Idaho, which is spearheading a number of criminal justice reform bills this legislative session, I'm heartened that Democratic and Republican lawmakers seem to agree that we must take action to fix our state's prison crisis. But it remains to be seen whether or not the political will exists to seriously invest in expanding treatment options, fully funding public defense, and tackling sentencing and prosecutorial reform. Idaho's legislators also need to examine decriminalizing some non-violent crimes, which have largely contributed to the state's 849% growth in prison population from 1980 to 2017.

Leo Morales

The number of imprisoned people in Idaho as of January 2020 was over 9,400. That's more than the entire population of many Idaho towns, including Fruitland, Rupert and Genesee. Many who are incarcerated — 71%, in fact — are there for violations of probation or parole, and 58% are in our state's prisons for nonviolent offenses.



[Idaho Statesman reporter Ruth Brown reported that Idaho has 651 prisoners housed in Texas and another 867 prisoners housed in county jails.](#) In response to this overcrowding, the Idaho Department of Corrections has shipped people to private, out-of-state prisons such as the Eagle Pass Correctional Facility in Texas, where they report unsafe conditions and inadequate access to medical care and healthy food. On top of that, IDOC announced this week it will send several hundred more prisoners to a now-shuttered CoreCivic prison in Colorado, [the same private prison company that was kicked out of Idaho for running a “gladiator school” at the Idaho Correctional Center.](#) When moved out of state, it's also much harder for people to

maintain connections to their families, which is key to helping them heal and return to productive life once their sentence is complete.

The human cost of Idaho's current policies is significant, but the state's legislature may be more motivated by the cost in taxpayer dollars. It's significant. In 2017, Idaho spent \$252 million of its general fund on corrections, and between 1985 and 2017, general fund spending on corrections grew 754 percent. Yet, Gov. Brad Little's budget calls for a 12% increase to IDOC's budget for building more prisons with private contractors.

A recent Office of Performance Evaluations report found that building a new prison would be cheaper than sending prisoners out of state, but building more prisons is not the answer, especially when inmate growth shows no sign of slowing. We've all felt the impact of Idaho's overall population growth, yet few residents are aware that our inmate population has grown nearly 18 percent since December 2016. This problem is much more complex than building more prisons. It requires investing in multi-tiered policies will dramatically reduce Idaho's prison and jail populations through sensible reforms. The [ACLU of Idaho's Smart Justice Reform Blueprint](#) suggests:

- Expand investment in alternatives to incarceration like those piloted in Ada County.
- Reaffirm the commitment to the Justice Reinvestment Initiative bill by further strengthening community supervision programs to reduce recidivism.
- Invest in public defense systems to ensure they receive constitutionally sufficient representation.
- Eliminate mandatory sentencing minimums.

We don't need a new prison in Idaho if we get serious about enacting effective policies that will reduce our prison population. Please take a moment to read Idaho's profile in the 50 State Blueprint for Smart Justice at acluidaho.org. Then contact Gov. Brad Little at 208-334-2100 or by email governor@gov.idaho.gov to voice your support for effective criminal justice reform.

Leo Morales has served as the executive director of the ACLU of Idaho since 2015.