

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-709](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The federal inmate population has increased over the last two decades, and as of July 2014, BOP was responsible for the custody and care of more than 216,000 inmates. To handle the projected growth of between 2,500 and 3,000 or more inmates per year from 2015 through 2020, BOP has spent about \$1.3 billion constructing five new institutions and acquiring one in Thomson, Illinois. BOP is activating these institutions by staffing and equipping them and populating them with inmates.

GAO was requested to review BOP's activation process of newly constructed and acquired institutions. GAO reviewed, among other things, (1) the extent to which BOP is activating institutions within estimated timeframes and has an activation policy or schedules that meet best practices, and (2) why DOJ purchased Thomson and how the purchase affected system wide costs. GAO reviewed BOP budget documents from fiscal years 2008 to 2015 and assessed schedules against GAO's *Schedule Assessment Guide*. GAO conducted site visits to the six institutions, interviewed BOP officials, and reviewed staffing data from fiscal years 2010 through 2013.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOJ use its annual budget justification to communicate to Congress factors that might delay prison activation, and that BOP analyze institution-level staffing data and develop and implement a comprehensive activation policy and a schedule that reflects best practices. DOJ concurred with all of GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-14-709](#). For more information, contact Dave Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or [maurerd@gao.gov](mailto:maurerd@gao.gov).

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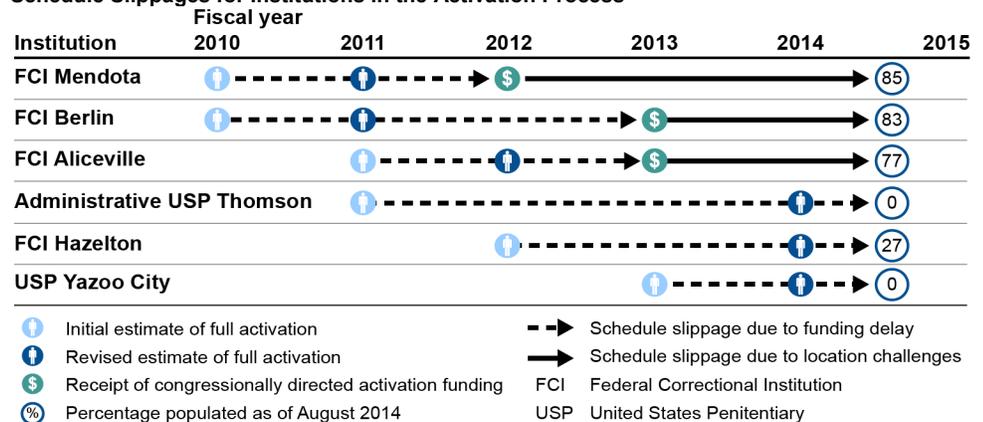
## BUREAU OF PRISONS

### Management of New Prison Activations Can Be Improved

## What GAO Found

The Department of Justice's (DOJ) Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is behind schedule activating all six new institutions—the process by which it prepares them for inmates—and does not have a policy to guide activation or an activation schedule that reflects best practices. BOP is behind schedule, in part, because of challenges, such as staffing, posed by the locations of the activating institutions. According to BOP officials, delays in receiving congressionally directed activation funding can exacerbate these challenges (see fig.). None of the six institutions is fully activated, or at rated capacity, as they do not house the number of inmates they are designed to safely and securely house.

**Schedule Slippages for Institutions in the Activation Process**



Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Prisons budget documents. | GAO-14-709

BOP does not effectively communicate to Congress how the locations of new institutions may affect activation schedules. BOP officials said that when directed by Congress to investigate a location, they consider this as direction to focus on construction at that site. DOJ and BOP could more effectively manage activation timelines and costs by using the BOP annual budget justification to communicate to Congress the factors associated with certain locations that can delay activations, such as challenges hiring staff and placing inmates in institutions. Also, BOP officials said they review staffing data system-wide, but they have not prioritized an analysis of such data at the institution level. Analyzing staffing data on institutions in the activation process could help BOP assess its progress in staffing and tailoring effective mitigating strategies. Finally, BOP lacks a comprehensive activation policy to guide activations, as well as an activation schedule that reflects best practices, and it has largely relied on staff's past experience to complete ongoing activations. Developing and implementing a comprehensive policy and a schedule that reflects best practices, could better position BOP to meet its estimated timeframes and activation costs.

DOJ purchased Thomson to help reduce crowding among inmates requiring high levels of security. Once it is fully populated, it will reduce BOP-wide crowding by 16 percent at the high-security level. Thomson will cost about \$160 million annually to operate once fully activated, adding to BOP's system-wide costs. BOP officials said Thomson will provide benefits, such as high-security bed space, which outweigh the costs associated with the institution.