

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-821](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

BOP is responsible for the custody and care of 216,000 federal inmates—an almost 9-fold increase since 1980. At the same time, BOP appropriations increased more than 20-fold. DOJ states that the costs of the growing population are BOP's greatest challenge. BOP's population size is driven by several factors, such as law enforcement policies and sentencing laws.

GAO was asked to review BOP's opportunities to save costs. This report (1) describes BOP's major costs and actions to achieve savings, (2) assesses the extent to which BOP has mechanisms to identify additional efficiencies, and (3) describes potential changes within and outside of BOP's authority that might reduce costs.

GAO analyzed BOP financial data for fiscal years 2009 through 2013, reviewed but did not test its internal control system and processes for achieving efficiencies, and interviewed BOP officials. On the basis of sentencing reform options identified by experts and actions by the Attorney General, GAO developed a list of policy options that could reduce BOP's population. GAO gathered views on their potential effects from entities and 4 states selected for their criminal justice expertise. The views are not generalizable, but provide insights.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that BOP establish a mechanism to consistently monitor if bureau-wide corrective actions address repeated deficiencies and findings. DOJ concurred.

View [GAO-14-821](#). For more information, contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

BUREAU OF PRISONS

Information on Efforts and Potential Options to Save Costs

What GAO Found

Correctional services—which includes salaries and benefits for correctional officers—is the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Bureau of Prisons' (BOP) largest operational cost, and BOP has undertaken a number of initiatives to reduce costs. Specifically, on the basis of GAO's analysis of BOP's fiscal year 2013 obligations of approximately \$6.6 billion, BOP obligated the largest share—about \$3.9 billion, or 59 percent—for personnel compensation and benefits. Further, BOP has undertaken a number of initiatives, such as renegotiated contracts, to achieve cost savings of about \$61 million over the last 3 years.

BOP has designed internal processes to identify opportunities for additional cost efficiencies, but could improve the monitoring of corrective actions to achieve them. For example, BOP focuses on cost efficiency and innovation in its strategic plan and has developed mechanisms for staff to share information on best practices and cost savings efforts. BOP also employs an internal control system with processes, such as program reviews, that allows it to identify opportunities for cost efficiencies. However, when program reviews repeatedly cited frequent deficiencies or significant findings that could increase costs—such as insufficient contract monitoring—responsible BOP Central Office divisions did not provide specifics or documentation for how they always monitor the effectiveness of corrective actions to prevent the same deficiency or issue from reoccurring. Establishing a mechanism for relevant Central Office divisions to consistently monitor the progress of bureau-wide corrective actions in the presence of repeated frequent deficiencies or significant findings could help BOP better ensure that it is resolving such deficiencies or issues promptly and, ultimately, operating more efficiently.

BOP's current authorities to reduce inmate sentence length result in limited cost savings, but potential actions outside of its authority could have a greater impact on costs. GAO has reported previously on BOP authorities to reduce inmate sentences, and thus its costs, in detail, and found that inmate eligibility for certain programs and lack of capacity affect BOP's use of them. For example, greater use of programs such as Compassionate Release for terminally ill inmates could reduce sentences, but cost savings relative to BOP's budget would be small—about \$651,000 in 2013. Additional opportunities outside of BOP's authority, including those requiring legislative or executive action, such as options to reduce sentence length, could reduce BOP's population, and thus potentially significantly reduce its costs. For example, an option to reduce sentences of incarcerated drug offenders by an average of 44 percent could save about \$4.1 billion. Potential savings could be even higher if the changes sufficiently reduced the inmate population to allow BOP to reduce its staff or close facilities. Expert entities GAO consulted reported that all of the options GAO reviewed also have advantages and disadvantages unrelated to costs that should be taken into consideration, such as potential effects on public safety if released inmates reoffend. GAO is not taking a position on any of these options, but presents information on estimated cost savings and experts' views of advantages and disadvantages for such options to inform policymakers as they weigh whether and how to address rising costs at BOP.