

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Justice's (DOJ) Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) manages more than 209,000 inmates, up 45 percent between fiscal years 2000 and 2010. As the prison population grows, so do concerns about correctional officer safety. As requested, GAO examined the (1) equipment that BOP and selected state departments of corrections (DOC) provide to protect officers, and the officers' and other correctional practitioners' opinions of this equipment; (2) extent to which BOP has evaluated the effectiveness of this equipment, and factors correctional equipment experts consider important to the acquisition of new equipment; and (3) institutional factors correctional accrediting experts reported as impacting officer safety, and the extent to which BOP has evaluated the effectiveness of the steps it has taken in response. GAO reviewed BOP policies and procedures; interviewed BOP officials and officers within BOP's six regions, selected based on such factors as the level of facility overcrowding; interviewed officials at 14 of the 15 largest state DOCs; and surveyed 21 individuals selected for their expertise in corrections. The results of the interviews cannot be generalized, but provide insight into issues affecting officer safety.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that BOP's Director assess whether the equipment intended to improve officer safety has been effective. BOP concurred with this recommendation.

View [GAO-11-410](#) or key components. For more information, contact David Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

BUREAU OF PRISONS

Evaluating the Impact of Protective Equipment Could Help Enhance Officer Safety

What GAO Found

BOP and 14 state DOCs included in GAO's review provide a variety of protective equipment to officers, but BOP officers and management have different views on equipment. BOP generally provides officers with radios, body alarms, keys, flashlights, handcuffs, gloves, and stab-resistant vests while on duty, but prohibits them from storing personal firearms on BOP property, with limited exceptions. DOC officials in 14 states GAO interviewed provided examples of equipment they allow officers to carry while on duty that BOP does not—such as pepper spray—and officials in 9 of the 14 states reported allowing officers to store personal firearms on state DOC property. BOP and states provide similar equipment to protect officers in an emergency, such as an inmate riot or attack. Most BOP officers with whom GAO spoke reported that carrying additional equipment while on duty and commuting would better protect officers, while BOP management largely reported that officers did not need to carry additional equipment to better protect them.

BOP has not evaluated the effectiveness of equipment it provides in ensuring officer safety, and correctional equipment experts report that BOP needs to consider a variety of factors in acquisition decisions. Neither the officials nor the experts with whom GAO spoke reported that they were aware of or had conducted evaluations of the effectiveness of equipment in ensuring officer safety, although BOP tracks information necessary to do so in its data systems. By using information in these existing systems, BOP could analyze the effectiveness of the equipment it distributes in ensuring officer safety, thus helping it determine additional actions, if any, to further officer safety and better target limited resources. All of the correctional equipment experts GAO spoke with reported that BOP would need to consider factors such as training, replacement, maintenance, and liability, as well as whether the equipment met performance standards, if it acquired new equipment. These experts suggested that any decision must first be based upon a close examination of the benefits and risk of using certain types of equipment. For example, while state officials reported that pepper spray is inexpensive and effective, a majority of the BOP management officials we spoke with stated that it could be taken by inmates and used against officers.

Correctional accrediting experts most frequently cited control over the inmate population, officer training, inmate gangs, correctional staffing and inmate overcrowding as the institutional factors—beyond equipment—most impacting officer safety. These experts suggested various strategies to address these factors, and BOP reported taking steps to do so, such as conducting annual training on BOP policies, identifying and separating gang members, and converting community space into inmate cells. BOP has assessed the effectiveness of steps it has taken in improving officer safety. For instance, a 2001 BOP study found that inmates who participated in BOP's substance abuse treatment program were less likely than a comparison group to engage in misconduct for the remainder of their sentence following program completion. BOP utilizes such studies to inform its decisions, such as eliminating programs found to be ineffective.