

Highlights of [GAO-12-743](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

BOP operates 117 federal prisons to house approximately 178,000 federal offenders, and contracts with private companies and some state governments to house about another 40,000 inmates. BOP calculates the number of prisoners that each BOP-run institution can house safely and securely (i.e., rated capacity). GAO was asked to address (1) the growth in BOP's population from fiscal years 2006 through 2011 and BOP's projections for inmate population and capacity; (2) the effects of a growing federal prison population on operations within BOP facilities, and the extent to which BOP has taken actions to mitigate these effects; and (3) actions selected states have taken to reduce their prison populations, and the extent to which BOP has implemented similar initiatives.

GAO analyzed BOP's inmate population data from fiscal years 2006 through 2011, BOP's 2020 long-range capacity plan, and BOP policies and statutory authority. GAO visited five federal prisons chosen on the basis of geographic dispersion and varying security levels. The results are not generalizable, but provide information on the effects of a growing prison population. GAO selected five states based on actions they took to mitigate the effects of their growing prison populations—and assessed the extent to which their actions would be possible for BOP. GAO makes no recommendations in this report. BOP provided technical clarifications, which GAO incorporated where appropriate.

View [GAO-12-743](#). For more information, contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

BUREAU OF PRISONS

Growing Inmate Crowding Negatively Affects Inmates, Staff, and Infrastructure

What GAO Found

The Department of Justice's Bureau of Prisons' (BOP) 9.5 percent population growth from fiscal years 2006 through 2011 exceeded the 7 percent increase in its rated capacity, and BOP projects continued population growth. Growth was most concentrated among male inmates, and in 2011, 48 percent of the inmates BOP housed were sentenced for drugs. From fiscal years 2006 through 2011, BOP increased its rated capacity by about 8,300 beds as a result of opening 5 new facilities and closing 4 minimum security camps, but because of the population expansion, crowding (or population in excess of rated capacity) increased from 36 to 39 percent. In 2011 crowding was most severe (55 percent) in highest security facilities. BOP's 2020 long-range capacity plan projects continued growth in the federal prison population from fiscal years 2012 through 2020, with systemwide crowding exceeding 45 percent through 2018.

According to BOP, the growth in the federal inmate population has negatively affected inmates, staff, and infrastructure, but BOP has acted within its authority to help mitigate the effects of this growth. BOP officials reported increased use of double and triple bunking, waiting lists for education and drug treatment programs, limited meaningful work opportunities, and increased inmate-to-staff ratios. These factors, taken together, contribute to increased inmate misconduct, which negatively affects the safety and security of inmates and staff. BOP officials and union representatives voiced concerns about a serious incident occurring. To manage its growing population, BOP staggers meal times and segregates inmates involved in disciplinary infractions, among other things.

The five states in GAO's review have taken more actions than BOP to reduce their prison populations, because these states have legislative authority that BOP does not have. These states have modified criminal statutes and sentencing, relocated inmates to local facilities, and provided inmates with additional opportunities for early release. BOP generally does not have similar authority. For example, BOP cannot shorten an inmate's sentence or transfer inmates to local prisons. Efforts to address the crowding issue could include (1) reducing the inmate population by actions such as reforming sentencing laws, (2) increasing capacity by actions such as constructing new prisons, or (3) some combination of both.

A Triple-Bunked Cell in a BOP Facility



Source: BOP.