

California's Growing Prison Population— The Current Situation

The California Department of Corrections (CDC) is one of the largest and fastest-growing departments in state government. The department spends about 90 percent of its budget—\$2.5 billion in 1992-93—on the operation of the state's prison system. As of December 1992, there were 109,141 inmates in state prison (almost double the system's design capacity). In this report, we assess the CDC's recent projections of the prison inmate population and discuss their fiscal implications.

Projections Foresee Steady Growth In Prison Population

Every fall the CDC projects the prison inmate and parolee populations for the current year, the budget year, and the four following years. The recently released fall 1992 population projections show the inmate population reaching about 113,000 inmates by June 30, 1993, and increasing to about 119,000 by June 30, 1994—an increase of 8.4 percent in the current year and 5.4 percent in the budget year. The department also projects that the number of inmates in state prison will grow at an average annual rate of 5.2 percent through 1997-98, reaching a total of 141,000 inmates by the end of that period. Although a substantial increase, this is less than half of the annual growth rate of about 11 percent observed over the last six years.

Projections Show Significant Increase Over Previous Estimate

The fall 1992 inmate population projections show a significant increase over the spring 1992 projections. Figure 1 compares the two most recent projections. In the spring 1992 projection, the CDC

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estimated that the prison population would total approximately 111,000 inmates by June 30, 1994. The fall projection now shows 119,000 inmates by the same date, an increase of 7 percent over the earlier projection.

Why Have the Projections Changed? The CDC attributes this increase in its projections primarily to two recent changes in the inmate population that occurred during the first half of 1992-93:

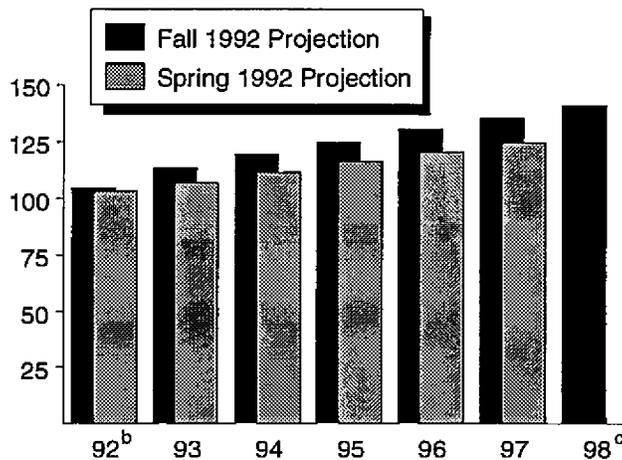
■ **New Admissions to Prison Are Up.** The number of felons admitted to prison is primarily determined by actions of local law enforcement and pros-

ecution agencies and the courts. There has been a significant increase recently in the number of felons committed to prison. In fact, the number of felons admitted during just the first three months of 1992-93 was equivalent to about half of the felons admitted during all of 1991-92. The recent increase in felon admissions has come from the Bay Area and southern California counties (excluding Los Angeles County). The specific reasons for the increase are currently unclear.

■ **Time Served by Parolees Returned to Custody Is Up.** Recently the CDC has

Figure 1
Prison Inmate Projections Revised Upward
1992 Through 1998^a

(Inmates in Thousands)



^a As of June 30 of each year.
^b Actual population for fall 1992.
^c No spring 1992 estimate.

seen a decline in the number of parolees returned to custody for violating their parole. However, the amount of time served by parole violators has increased. As a result, the fall projection assumes that these inmates will serve an average of 4.2 months, instead of 3.6 months as assumed in the spring projection.

Potential Risks to Accuracy of Projections. The projections are based on *current law*. Thus, to the extent that the Legislature and Governor enact policy changes that affect the inmate population (such as lengthening sentences), the projections would change.

Several other factors could affect the accuracy of the department's fall projections. For example, budget reductions resulting from the state's poor fiscal condition could reduce the number of work or educational opportunities for inmates, thereby increasing the prison population above the department's current projections. (Inmates who work or participate in work or education programs earn credits, thereby reducing the time that they spend in prison.)

In addition, the poor fiscal condition of local governments could result in a shift of persons from probation or county jail to state prison. On the other hand, reductions in funding for street-level law enforce-

ment in cities and counties could result in fewer felony arrests, leading to a leveling off or a drop in new admissions to state prison.

Finally, we note that the CDC has developed a new methodology to improve the accuracy of its long-term projections. This methodology shows the prison population reaching 148,000 inmates by 1997-98, or 7,000 more than the official projection. Based on our review, we believe that the new methodology should be adopted.

Implications of the Projections

The new projections carry with them significant implications for the current year and beyond. First, they mean that prison overcrowding will continue. Given the current estimate of prison population growth and the scheduled completion of new prison beds, the level of prison overcrowding will remain essentially the same in 1997-98 as it is currently, as shown in Figure 2 (next page).

The projections also have the following fiscal implications:

I Current-Year General Fund Deficiency. Because the CDC current-year budget is based on the lower spring 1992 inmate population estimate, it is likely that the department will incur a General Fund deficiency in the current year of at least \$50 million to accommodate

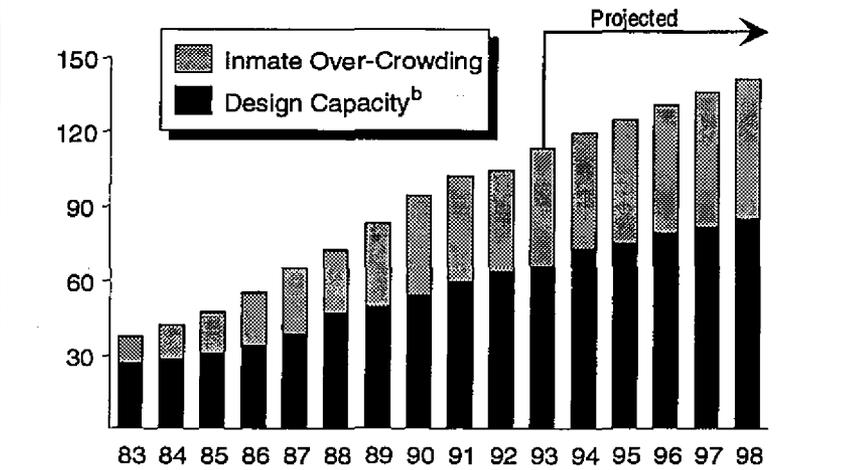
“ . . . the poor fiscal condition of local governments could result in a shift of persons from probation or county jail to state prison.”

“The new (prison inmate) projections suggest that the CDC’s General Fund costs in the budget year and beyond will be significantly higher than earlier estimates.”

Figure 2

Prison Population Exceeds Design Capacity 1983 Through 1998^a

(Inmates in Thousands)



^a Data as of June 30 for each year.
^b Includes community-based beds.

the greater number of inmates in state prisons.

Significant Increase in General Fund Costs in Budget Year and Beyond.

The new projections suggest that the CDC’s General Fund costs will continue to increase significantly in the budget year and beyond. Given current policies, these additional costs would likely be in the tens to hundreds of millions of dollars in 1993-94 and annually thereafter.

Significant Future Capital Outlay Costs. Given the current level of inmate over-crowding of approximately

180 percent and the projected growth of the inmate population, the state should assess whether to authorize additional prison construction, expand alternative inmate housing programs, or reduce prison population.

Controlling the Costs of Corrections

Without action to control inmate population growth, it will not be possible to significantly reduce expenditures for the CDC. We will discuss options for controlling population growth and expenditures in our *Analysis of the 1993-94 Budget Bill*, which will be published in late February 1993.

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