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Correctional Officer Staffing in Federal Prisons: Background and Issues

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Correctional Officer Staffing in Federal Prisons: Background and Issues

The federal prison system, operated by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP), is the largest correctional system in the United States, both in terms of the number of prisoners under its jurisdiction and the number of facilities it operates. In recent years, BOP has faced issues with recruiting and retaining correctional officers (COs). Staffing issues at BOP have become acute and contributed to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) adding *Strengthening Management of the Federal Prison System* to its high-risk list in 2023, noting that BOP “faces significant, longstanding management challenges—including staffing—which represent a serious threat to inmate and staff safety.”

BOP has attempted to address staffing issues by offering recruitment and retention incentives for COs. BOP offered 25% of the base salary for COs or \$10,000, whichever is greater, as a recruitment incentive for all eligible CO new hires. BOP also received authorization from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to offer group recruitment incentives of varying amounts for COs at individual facilities that have experienced chronic staffing issues. However, BOP indicated that they have paused offering new recruitment incentives and have ended some retention incentives due to budgetary constraints. BOP was also granted *direct hire authority* to fill some positions, which allows it to hire applicants without having to take into consideration some statutory and regulatory requirements related to civil service hiring.

The decreasing number of BOP COs might reflect a larger trend in fewer people wanting to work in a prison setting. There have been reports about the difficulties that state correctional agencies are also having with recruiting and retaining COs to staff their facilities. There are several factors facing BOP and state correctional agencies that might make it harder for them to recruit and retain COs. Prisons can be stressful and dangerous places to work. Corrections positions tend to offer less compensation compared to other professions in the criminal justice field, and, depending on the job market, potential applicants might find non-correctional work options more appealing. Prisons tend to be located in rural areas that have smaller CO candidate pools than more populous areas. It can also be difficult to recruit candidates from outside the rural areas in which many prisons are located because they might face longer commutes or the prospect of having to relocate. In addition, the nature of work in a prison—hierarchical organizational structure, shift work, requirements to work mandatory overtime—might not appeal to a significant number of potential employees.

Understaffing in CO positions can have several implications for the operations of the federal prison system. When there are not enough COs to staff all required posts at a correctional facility, BOP has to pay overtime to COs to staff those shifts. Staffing shortages can also lead to BOP using *augmentation* to fill shifts. This is when BOP assigns non-CO staff members to a custody role (i.e., one where the staff member’s primary task becomes supervising prisoners). Augmentation can affect opportunities for prisoners to participate in rehabilitative programs—including, in some instances, all programming being cancelled for a day—because employees who operated those programs were covering CO shifts.

If policymakers decide to consider legislation regarding CO staffing in federal prisons, there are several issues they might consider addressing, including (1) CO pay, (2) the hiring process for COs, (3) new working arrangements or schedules for COs, (4) increasing access to mental health services for COs, (5) evaluating the mission of the federal prison system, (6) expanding student loan repayment and forgiveness for COs, and (7) improving working conditions in prisons.

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The federal prison system, operated by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP), is the largest correctional system in the United States, both in terms of the number of prisoners under its jurisdiction and the number of facilities it operates.¹ The size of the federal prison system makes BOP one of the U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ) largest agencies based on the size of its staff and the amount of funding it receives. The number of authorized correctional officer (CO) positions at BOP exceeds the number of authorized special agent positions for any of DOJ's law enforcement agencies and the total number of authorized attorney positions at DOJ.² The FY2025 appropriation for BOP (\$8.393 billion) was exceeded only by the appropriation for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (\$10.644 billion).³

Proper staffing can help ensure the safety and security of a correctional facility, allow prisoners to participate in rehabilitative programs, and reduce stress on the facility's employees, especially COs. In recent years, staffing issues have been identified by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and DOJ's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) as becoming acute enough to affect BOP's facility operations. In 2023, GAO added *Strengthening Management of the Federal Prison System* to its high-risk list,⁴ noting that BOP "faces significant, longstanding management challenges—including staffing—which represent a serious threat to inmate and staff safety."⁵ GAO continued to list management of the federal prison system as a high-risk area in the 2025 edition of its high-risk list.⁶ DOJ's OIG listed "the ongoing crisis facing the federal correctional system" as one of the top management and performance challenges facing DOJ for 2024.⁷ The OIG noted, "as we have consistently seen through our oversight work, understaffed prisons with overburdened employees create security and safety issues."⁸

Policymakers have recently demonstrated an interest in staffing issues at BOP. In the report to accompany the FY2025 Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies (CJS) Appropriations bill, the Senate Committee on Appropriations stated, "the Committee continues to be displeased with BOP's staffing shortages, which were only exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee remains concerned about the lack of locality pay and wage increases for Bureau employees, which has negatively impacted the retention rate of correctional officers and other staff working at BOP institutions."⁹ Likewise, in the report to accompany the House's FY2025

¹ E. Ann Carson and Rich Kluckow, *Prisoners in 2022—Statistical Tables*, U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Justice Programs (OJP), Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), NCJ 301149, Washington, DC, November 2023.

² DOJ, "Fiscal Year 2026 Budget and Performance Summary," June 13, 2025, pp. 185-186, <https://www.justice.gov/media/1403736/dl>.

³ These amounts only reflect funding for each agency's salaries and expenses and not funding for capital projects provided through FBI's Construction account or BOP's Buildings and Facilities account. For more information, see CRS Report R48134, *Overview of FY2025 Appropriations for Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies (CJS)*.

⁴ GAO publishes a biennial high-risk list that "identifies government operations with vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement, or in need of transformation." For further information, see U.S. Government Accountability Office, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to Be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, GAO-23-106203, April 2023, pp. 118-122.

⁵ GAO, "Our Latest High Risk List Update—GAO Sees Progress in 16 Areas, But Lingering Serious Issues in Others," *WatchBlog: Following the Federal Dollar*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.gao.gov/blog/our-latest-high-risk-list-update-gao-sees-progress-16-areas-lingering-serious-issues-others>.

⁶ GAO, *High-Risk Series: Heightened Attention Could Save Billions More and Improve Government Efficiency and Effectiveness*, GAO-25-107743, February 2025, pp. 60-64.

⁷ DOJ, Office of the Inspector General, *Top Management and Performance Challenges Facing the Department of Justice—2024*, Washington, DC.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate Appropriations Committee, *Departments of Commerce and Justice, Science, and Related* (continued...)

CJS appropriations bill, the Committee on Appropriations noted the need for BOP to continue to increase staffing beyond mission-critical levels and to utilize retention bonuses as a means of increasing the ranks of COs.¹⁰ In February 2024, the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Criminal Justice and Counterterrorism held a hearing on "the nation's correctional staffing crisis."¹¹ The issue of staffing levels was also raised in House and Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on oversight of BOP.¹² In addition, legislation has been introduced in the 119th Congress that would require BOP to conduct a study of understaffing in federal prisons (H.R. 2879), grant BOP direct hire authority (H.R. 3342), and increase pay for COs working in prisons in nonmetropolitan areas (H.R. 4008 and S. 2083).

This report discusses the issues BOP faces with hiring and retaining COs and the effects CO shortages can have on the operations of the federal prison system. The report starts with an overview of trends in CO employment at BOP. It then turns to discussion of the hiring process for COs and how BOP quantifies CO staffing levels, the steps BOP has taken to address CO shortages, and factors that might affect BOP's ability to hire and retain COs. Next, the report examines how entry-level pay for COs compares to law enforcement officers in the federal government. This is followed by discussion of what effects staffing shortages can have on the operations of the federal prison system. The report concludes with discussion of select issues policymakers might consider if they choose to take actions to address CO staffing shortages at BOP.

Trends in Correctional Officer Employment

Table 1 presents data on the number of COs employed by BOP at the end of a fiscal year and the number of authorized CO positions for that fiscal year. Comparing the number of authorized positions to the number of on-staff COs is one method BOP has utilized to assess their progress with adequately staffing federal prisons.¹³ During the 15 fiscal years from FY2010 to FY2024 (the most recent fiscal year for which these data are available), the number of COs employed by BOP peaked at 18,972 in FY2016, and then decreased to 15,576 by FY2024. (FY2024 data are the most recent available.)

The number of authorized CO positions generally increased from FY2010 to FY2016, before BOP eliminated over 1,000 authorized but vacant CO positions in FY2017 (see text box below). About half of those positions were restored in FY2018, and the number of authorized CO positions has not changed since. The decreasing number of COs relative to the static number of

Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2025, Report to accompany S. 4795, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., July 25, 2024, S.Rept. 118-198, p. 113.

¹⁰ U.S. Congress, House Appropriations Committee, *Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2025, Report to accompany H.R. 9026, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., July 11, 2024, H.Rept. 118-582*, p. 70.9.2

¹¹ U.S. Congress, Senate Judiciary Committee, Criminal Justice and Counterterrorism, *The Nation's Correctional Staffing Crisis: Assessing the Toll on Correctional Officers and Incarcerated Persons*, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., February 28, 2024.

¹² U.S. Congress, Senate Judiciary Committee, *Oversight of the Federal Bureau of Prisons*, 118th Cong., 1st sess., September 13, 2023; U.S. Congress, House Judiciary Committee, *Oversight of the Federal Bureau of Prisons*, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., July 23, 2024.

¹³ For example, former BOP Director Colette Peters, in testimony before the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance, noted that "as of September 2023, around 88% of our funded positions are filled" when discussing issues related to hiring and retention of BOP staff. U.S. Congress, House Judiciary Committee, *Oversight of the Federal Bureau of Prisons*, 118th Cong., 1st sess., November 7, 2023.

authorized CO positions has led to a generally increasing vacancy rate for CO positions in the federal prison system since FY2017.

Table 1 also presents information on the prisoner-to-CO ratio, which indicates how the number of prisoners incarcerated in federal prisons compares to the number of COs employed by BOP. The number of federal prisoners decreased from FY2013 to FY2020, leading to a prisoner-to-CO ratio in FY2020 that was lower than it was in FY2013 even though there were fewer COs working in BOP facilities.¹⁴ The prisoner-to-CO ratio increased in FY2022 and FY2023, due to both a decrease in the number of COs in those years and an increase in the number of prisoners in FY2022 (the number of prisoners decreased slightly in FY2023, but as noted this was accompanied by a decrease in COs).

Table 1. Number of On-Board and Authorized Correctional Officers for BOP, Correctional Officer Vacancy Rate, Number of Federal Prisoners, and Prisoner-to-Correctional Officer Ratio, FY2010-FY2024

Fiscal Year	Number of COs	Authorized COs	Vacancy Rate	Federal Prison Population	Prisoner-to-CO Ratio
2010	17,730	19,408	9%	210,227	11.9
2011	17,585	19,408	9%	217,768	12.4
2012	17,975	19,756	9%	218,687	12.2
2013	18,087	20,162	10%	219,298	12.1
2014	18,375	20,911	12%	214,149	11.7
2015	18,533	20,911	11%	205,723	11.1
2016	18,972	20,921	9%	192,170	10.1
2017	17,989	19,863	9%	185,617	10.3
2018	16,898	20,446	17%	181,698	10.8
2019	16,706	20,446	18%	177,214	10.6
2020	16,852	20,446	18%	155,562	9.2
2021	16,953	20,446	17%	155,826	9.2
2022	15,939	20,446	22%	159,090	10.0
2023	15,345	20,446	25%	158,424	10.3
2024	15,576	20,446	24%	158,864	10.2

Source: The number of on-board COs was taken from the Office of Personnel Management's FedScope database. The number of authorized COs was taken from BOP's annual congressional budget submission. The number of federal prisoners was taken from BOP's webpage on prison population statistics (https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/population_statistics.jsp).

Notes: COs include those employees who are in the GS-007 position classification. The vacancy rate represents the proportion of authorized positions that are unfilled.

¹⁴ Data on the annual federal prison population going back to 1980 can be found on BOP's website at https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/population_statistics.jsp,

Eliminated Authorized Positions

BOP eliminated nearly 5,200 authorized positions in FY2017 relative to the number of authorized positions in FY2016. Authorized positions reflect the number of employees BOP believes it needs to safely staff its institutions.¹⁵ BOP did this at the recommendation of DOJ budget officials in order to bring authorized positions in line with the number of on-board staff.¹⁶ BOP eliminated positions that were vacant at the time; it did not conduct an analysis to determine which positions should be eliminated or retained based on workforce needs.¹⁷ Of the approximately 5,200 eliminated authorized positions, BOP eliminated 1,058 CO positions, a reduction of 5%. There were greater proportional reductions in other BOP job categories: education (-41%); ungraded positions (i.e., “blue collar” workers who provide maintenance services) (-27%); medical, dental, and public health (-25%); personnel management (-22%); correctional institution administration (-18%); clerical and office services (-16%); and social science, psychology, and welfare (-13%). BOP added back some authorized positions in FY2018 in the CO; social science, psychology, and welfare; and education job categories, but they remained below the FY2016 levels.

The decreasing number of BOP COs since FY2017 might reflect a larger trend in fewer people wanting to work in prison settings. There have been reports about the difficulties that state correctional agencies are having with recruiting and retaining COs to staff their facilities.¹⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic likely exacerbated the issue due to concerns about the ability of respiratory illness to spread easily in confined spaces and because the pandemic increased wages in other fields due to labor market shortages.¹⁹

Hiring Process for BOP Correctional Officers

The process of hiring COs for BOP facilities is dictated by federal government-wide personnel management laws. Correctional officers are part of the competitive service, and people hired for these positions must go through a competitive hiring process (i.e., *competitive examining*) that is open to all applicants.²⁰ Under this process, BOP posts a public application for open positions; screens applicants against minimum qualifications for the position; applies selection priorities, such as veterans’ preferences; and assesses applicants’ relative competencies or knowledge, skills, and abilities in order to identify the most qualified applicants.²¹

¹⁵ DOJ, Office of the Inspector General, *Limited-Scope Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Strategies to Identify, Communicate, and Remedy Operational Issues*, 23-065, May 2023, p. 20 (hereinafter “DOJ OIG’s review of BOP’s operational issues”).

¹⁶ GAO, *Bureau of Prisons: Opportunities Exist to Better Analyze Staffing Data and Improve Employee Wellness Programs*, GAO-21-123, February 2021, p. 13 (hereinafter, “GAO 2021 BOP report”).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See, for example, Shannon Heffernan and Weihua Li, “New Data Shows How Dire the Prison Staffing Shortage Really Is,” *The Marshall Project*, January 10, 2024; Isiah Holmes, “Prison Struggle with High Attrition and Burnout Among Staff,” *Wisconsin Examiner*, May 12, 2022; TaLisa J. Carter, “Why Does No One Want to be a Correctional Officer?!,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, June 3, 2022, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/why-does-no-one-want-be-correctional-officer>; and Lindsey Toomer, “Low Staffing at Prisons in Colorado Leads to Unsustainable Working Conditions,” *Colorado Newsline*, January 3, 2023.

¹⁹ See, for example, Michael R. Sisak and Michael Balsamo, “US Prisons are Facing Staff Shortages as Officers Quit During Pandemic,” *Associated Press*, November 1, 2021; Danielle Kaeding, “Jails and Prisons Have Always Struggled to Find and Keep Workers. COVID-19 and a Nationwide Labor Shortage Made It Worse,” *Wisconsin Public Radio*, December 21, 2021; and Mona Dougani et al., “In 2020, Many NC Correctional Officers Left Their Jobs as COVID Hit Prisons Hard,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 17, 2021.

²⁰ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Competitive Hiring*, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-information/competitive-hiring/>.

²¹ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 9.

Federal statutes allow federal agencies in some situations to utilize other hiring authorities to expedite the hiring process, one of which is called *direct hire authority* (DHA). The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) can grant DHA to federal agencies to help them fill vacancies more quickly when there is a critical hiring need or a severe shortage of candidates exists.²² DHA grants federal agencies the authority to hire, after public notice is given, any qualified applicant without regard to competitive rating and ranking requirements, veterans' preference, and "rule of three" procedures.²³

BOP applied for nationwide DHA for all BOP positions in 2019 and for only CO positions in 2020. OPM denied both requests. OPM denied the first request because BOP did not provide enough evidence of a critical hiring need.²⁴ It denied the second request because BOP did not provide enough evidence of a severe shortage of candidates.²⁵ However, in subsequent years OPM approved BOP's request for DHA for a certain number of COs. In 2021, OPM authorized DHA for 65 CO positions.²⁶ In 2022, OPM authorized DHA for another 71 CO positions.²⁷ Also in 2022, OPM authorized DHA for a number of CO positions in specific BOP facilities, including 20 CO positions for the facility in Berlin, NH; 64 positions for the facility in Beaumont, TX; 62 positions for the facility in Florence, CO; 17 positions for the facility in Herlong, CA; 7 positions for the facility in Mendota, CA; and 143 positions for the facility in Yazoo City, MS.²⁸ In 2023, OPM authorized BOP's request for DHA for 28 additional CO positions for the facility in Berlin, NH; 54 additional positions for the facility in Florence, CO; 39 additional positions for the facility in Herlong, CA; and 15 additional positions for the facility in Mendota, CA.²⁹ In 2024, OPM granted BOP DHA for 2,501 CO positions nationwide.³⁰

Calculating and Monitoring Correctional Officer Staffing Levels

Both GAO and the DOJ OIG have raised concerns about how BOP determines how many COs it needs to fully staff its facilities. In a review of BOP's efforts to address operational issues, the OIG found the number of authorized positions for BOP may not accurately reflect BOP's staffing needs.³¹ The OIG noted that "during the course of our fieldwork, several members of the BOP Executive Staff told us they did not know whether the authorized target it was trying to reach was the appropriate number of positions necessary for the BOP to operate effectively or whether that number was too high or too low." The OIG found that understanding appropriate staffing levels is "vitally important for the BOP to ensure the safe and effective operation of its institutions. Further, it is necessary for the BOP to communicate reliable information to executive and

²² OPM, *Direct Hire Authority*, fact sheet, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-information/direct-hire-authority/#url=Fact-Sheet>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 10.

²⁵ GAO 2021 BOP report.

²⁶ DOJ, BOP, Office of Public Affairs, *Federal Bureau of Prisons Staffing Overview*, May 30, 2024 (hereinafter, "BOP staffing overview").

²⁷ BOP staffing overview.

²⁸ BOP staffing overview.

²⁹ BOP staffing overview.

³⁰ BOP staffing overview.

³¹ DOJ OIG's review of BOP's operational issues, p. 20.

legislative branch stakeholders who ultimately determine how much funding the BOP should receive.”³²

The OIG assessed that the process by which BOP eliminated authorized positions in FY2017 indicated that BOP might not have a firm grasp on appropriate staffing levels. BOP eliminated positions in a “nonstrategic, ad hoc way,” according to the OIG.³³ Positions were eliminated because they were unfilled, not because a workforce analysis indicated that they were unnecessary for the successful operation of the federal prison system.³⁴ The OIG also noted that the number of authorized positions at BOP increased slightly from FY2017 to FY2022, even though the number of prisoners under BOP’s jurisdiction decreased, which indicates that “authorized position totals may not be calibrated to inmate population totals.”³⁵

GAO reviewed three methods BOP officials described as being used to measure staffing levels, including shortfalls: (1) comparing data on the number of authorized and filled positions, (2) utilizing staffing guidelines to compute adequate staffing levels, and (3) utilizing data on prisoner-to-staff ratios. GAO found that “each method contains inconsistencies in either terminology or methodology and we found reliability concerns with the methods and data used.”³⁶

- **The number of authorized positions that are filled:** BOP told GAO that it considers any difference in the number of authorized and filled positions to be a staffing shortfall, and that ideally all authorized positions would be filled.³⁷ GAO noted some shortcomings with this approach when utilizing it as a means of assessing whether facilities are properly staffed. GAO found that BOP could not document the process it uses to determine the proper number of authorized positions for a facility or within a job series.³⁸ BOP calculates the number of authorized positions for a facility when it is activated (i.e., opened and starting to house prisoners), but it generally does not revisit or revise this figure in later years.³⁹ Also, as previously discussed, BOP utilized this approach to eliminate several thousand authorized positions to bring the figure more in-line with on-board staff, rather than considering which positions should be eliminated based on staffing requirements.
- **Utilizing staffing guidelines:** BOP officials told GAO that they determine adequate staffing levels using BOP-developed staffing guidelines.⁴⁰ The guidelines provide information on essential posts and factors to consider when making decisions about assignments, but they are not binding.⁴¹ GAO’s review of these guidelines found that they contain formulas that are used to compute the number of employees needed to adequately staff an institution. GAO notes that the position titles used in the staffing guidelines do not always correspond to position titles in data BOP collects on authorized and filled positions, meaning

³² DOJ OIG’s review of BOP’s operational issues.

³³ DOJ OIG’s review of BOP’s operational issues, p. 22.

³⁴ DOJ OIG’s review of BOP’s operational issues.

³⁵ DOJ OIG’s review of BOP’s operational issues.

³⁶ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 11.

³⁷ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 12.

³⁸ GAO 2021 BOP report.

³⁹ GAO 2021 BOP report.

⁴⁰ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 13.

⁴¹ GAO 2021 BOP report.

that it can be difficult for BOP to determine whether authorized and/or filled positions correspond to positions that the staffing guidelines determine are needed to adequately staff facilities.⁴² In addition, BOP officials were not able to describe or provide documentation regarding how the guidelines are applied at each BOP facility.⁴³

- **Prisoner-to-staff ratios:** BOP officials told GAO that they use prisoner-to-staff ratios at each facility to monitor staffing levels.⁴⁴ However, an official in BOP's Correctional Programs Division⁴⁵ indicated that prisoner-to-staff ratios could not be used to assess appropriate staffing levels.⁴⁶ The official noted that "each institution is unique with regards to its age, layout, infrastructure, and security level and the inmate-to-staff ratio does not account for these variations."⁴⁷

In September 2024, BOP announced that starting in FY2025, the bureau would use a new Automated Staffing Tool (AST).⁴⁸ The press release announcing AST did not provide many details about how the tool works, such as what factors would be taken into consideration to aid BOP in making staffing decisions or how BOP would utilize AST to assess proper staffing at its facilities. BOP stated that the tool was "developed to help the agency understand how many employees are needed inside the institutions in order to run safe and secure prisons to better accomplish the mission of [BOP]."⁴⁹ BOP noted that AST will be used to "inform future budget requests" and to "better educate Congress and all of our external stakeholders on what [BOP needs] to accomplish [its] mission."⁵⁰ BOP has not released any subsequent information regarding AST or its implementation.

BOP Efforts to Address Staffing Shortages

BOP has offered individual and group recruitment incentives to COs newly hired to work in certain locations. Individual recruitment incentives may be paid to a new hire when it is likely that the position they are filling would have been difficult to fill absent the incentive.⁵¹ In 2019, BOP started to offer a 10% of base pay recruitment incentive at locations where CO staffing was under 85% of authorized positions.⁵² In 2023, BOP increased the incentive to 25% of a COs annual rate of pay or \$10,000, whichever is greater, for eligible COs at all BOP facilities.⁵³ BOP requires COs that accept a recruitment incentive to sign a 24-month service agreement, meaning that the employee agrees to work for BOP for at least two years.⁵⁴ In addition to individual

⁴² GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 14.

⁴³ GAO 2021 BOP report.

⁴⁴ GAO 2021 BOP report.

⁴⁵ The Correctional Programs Division oversees the implementation of correctional services and programs at BOP facilities.

⁴⁶ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 14.

⁴⁷ GAO 2021 BOP report.

⁴⁸ DOJ, BOP, "New Automated Staffing Tool," press release, September 27, 2024, <https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/20240927-new-automated-staffing-tool.jsp>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ BOP staffing overview.

⁵² BOP staffing overview.

⁵³ BOP staffing overview.

⁵⁴ At the discretion of the BOP Director, service agreements can be shorter, but they must be at least six months. BOP staffing overview.

recruitment incentives, BOP offered a 15% group recruitment incentive for those hired to work in facilities in Atwater, Herlong, and Mendota, CA; a 17% incentive for facilities in Dublin and Victorville, CA; and a 25% incentive for facilities in Brooklyn, NY, and Yazoo City, MS.⁵⁵ Correctional officers who accept a group recruitment incentive are required to sign a 12-month service agreement.

BOP has also offered relocation incentives for COs who agreed to take a hard-to-fill position at a hard-to-fill location. In 2019, BOP started offering a 10% relocation incentive for COs who transferred to facilities where CO staffing was under 85% of authorized positions.⁵⁶ Such facilities were authorized to offer a relocation incentive to COs willing to transfer on or before December 29, 2023.⁵⁷

BOP also received approval from OPM to offer retention incentives to COs who would be likely to leave federal service absent the incentive. BOP reported that the facility in Thompson, IL, received OPM approval for a 25% group retention incentive for certain COs in September 2021.⁵⁸ In May 2022, OPM approved 25% group incentives for certain COs working in facilities in Beaumont, TX; Florence, CO; Mendota CA; Herlong, CA; and Yazoo City, MS.⁵⁹ During FY2023, BOP also received approval for 25% group incentives for certain COs and lieutenants working at facilities in Littleton, CO; Pollock, LA; and Waseca, MN.⁶⁰ Further, BOP received approval for 25% group incentives for all staff working at facilities in Oxford, WI; Atwater, CA; Berlin, NH; San Diego, CA; Dublin, CA; Florence, CO; Los Angeles, CA; Seattle, WA; and Sheridan, OR.⁶¹

In February 2025 testimony before the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations, BOP Associate Deputy Director Kathleen Toomey testified that BOP paused awarding any new hiring incentives and eliminated some existing retention incentives.⁶² A statement from BOP indicated that the pause and elimination of these benefits was due to budget constraints.⁶³ Associate Deputy Director Toomey noted in her testimony that in addition to paying hiring and retention incentives, BOP has experienced increasing costs related to overtime and mandatory pay raises for currently employed personnel.⁶⁴ Subsequent to the deputy director's testimony, H.R. 1, the FY2025 budget reconciliation law, was signed into law on July 4, 2025 (P.L. 119-21). The act provides \$3 billion for BOP "for hiring and training of new employees, including correctional officers, medical professionals, and facilities and maintenance employees, the necessary support staff, and for additional funding for salaries and benefits for the

⁵⁵ Group incentives mean that all COs at the facility are eligible for the incentive. BOP staffing overview.

⁵⁶ BOP staffing overview.

⁵⁷ BOP staffing overview.

⁵⁸ BOP ended the retention incentive for COs at this facility at the end of 2023. BOP stated that the incentive was ended because staffing numbers improved and the facility transitioned from a higher security Special Management Unit to a low-security prison. Erich Wagner, "Union Decries End to Retention Pay at Embattled Illinois Prison," *Government Executive*, January 5, 2024.

⁵⁹ DOJ, BOP, *Federal Prison System, Salaries and Expenses, FY2025 Performance Budget, Congressional Submission*, p. 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² U.S. Congress, House Appropriations Committee, Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, *Oversight Hearing on the Bureau of Prisons*, Statement of BOP Associate Deputy Director Kathleen Toomey, 119th Cong., 1st sess., February 26, 2025, p. 3 (hereinafter, "Statement of Associate Deputy Director Toomey").

⁶³ Erich Wagner, "23,000 Federal Prison Workers are Set to Take Pay Cuts Up to 25% Next Month," *Government Executive*, February 26, 2025.

⁶⁴ Statement of Associate Deputy Director Toomey, p. 3.

current workforce of the Bureau of Prisons.”⁶⁵ It has been reported that BOP plans to start offering retention incentives again, though the amount of the incentive would be based on the level of staffing shortages at a particular facility, with COs working at facilities with more unfilled positions receiving higher bonuses.⁶⁶

BOP also offers student loan repayment incentives to new employees. The employee must be recruited or hired for a position with *positive education requirements* and where separation rates are higher than the national average for BOP positions.⁶⁷ Exceptions can be made for positions that have local recruitment and retention problems even if separation rates for that position are below the national BOP separation rate.⁶⁸ Exceptions for a candidate who does not meet the education requirement can be made if the individual possesses unique experience, qualifications, and expertise that would make him or her a benefit to BOP.⁶⁹ Exceptions to the educational and separation rate requirements are considered on a case-by-case basis.⁷⁰

In its 2021 report, GAO found that BOP spent approximately \$29 million on recruitment, retention, relocation, and student loan repayment incentives in 2019, but did not evaluate whether providing these incentives increased staffing levels.⁷¹ GAO recommended that BOP “should assess the outcomes of the staffing incentives it utilizes by developing performance measures and goals, measuring outcomes against them, and adjusting incentives, as appropriate.”⁷² BOP worked with a contractor to analyze its staffing incentives and to develop performance metrics and goals for its use of staffing incentives.⁷³ These performance metrics were included in an *Incentives Playbook*, which is intended to standardize how staffing incentives are used across BOP.⁷⁴ In March 2024, BOP reported that it will have sufficient data to evaluate the effectiveness of its staffing incentives in 2025.⁷⁵

GAO noted that BOP conducted a study in 2019 on the effectiveness of retention incentives in response to recommendations in a 2017 GAO report on the topic.⁷⁶ BOP’s study found that most employees who would be likely to leave federal service absent the incentive were not less likely to resign if they received a retention incentive.⁷⁷ Retention incentives appear to have had a modest effect on reducing resignations among medical personnel (chances of quitting were reduced by 1.4% for every 1% increase in extra salary).⁷⁸ Despite these findings, BOP reported to GAO that it planned to continue to use retention incentives “because summary statistics from

⁶⁵ The \$3 billion provided to BOP under P.L. 119-21 is for FY2025 and is available for obligation until the end of FY2029.

⁶⁶ Drew Friedman, “Bureau of Prisons Seeks to Address Low Retention with Federal Pay Incentives,” *Federal News Network*, January 9, 2026.

⁶⁷ “Positive education requirements” means that OPM has determined that someone cannot fulfill the duties of the positions without meeting the requisite educational requirements.

⁶⁸ BOP staffing overview.

⁶⁹ BOP staffing overview.

⁷⁰ BOP staffing overview.

⁷¹ GAO 2021 BOP report, pp. 26-27.

⁷² GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 41.

⁷³ GAO outlined BOP’s actions related to its recommendations in the 2021 report on its website: <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-123>.

⁷⁴ GAO 2021 BOP report.

⁷⁵ GAO 2021 BOP report.

⁷⁶ GAO, *Bureau of Prisons: Better Planning and Evaluation Could Help Ensure Effective Use of Retention Incentives*, GAO-18-147, December 2017.

⁷⁷ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 27.

⁷⁸ GAO 2021 BOP report.

BOP's annual exit surveys indicated that most staff departing BOP reported that low pay in relation to job responsibilities was key factor in their departures.⁷⁹

Factors Affecting Correctional Officer Recruitment and Retention

A report from the Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative⁸⁰ identified several factors that might make it difficult for correctional agencies to recruit and retain COs.⁸¹ One factor is that working as a CO can be stressful and sometimes dangerous. Correctional officers are “required to interact with and supervise potentially dangerous offenders in relatively unsafe and secluded surroundings. Collectively, these observations have prompted correctional scholars and practitioners to characterize prisons as dangerous environments that carry increased risk of harm to the people working in them.”⁸² A Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) report published in 2022 found that corrections workers had the highest rate of nonfatal workplace violence of any occupation in the study. There were, on average, 149 instances of nonfatal workplace violence per 1,000 corrections workers from 2015 to 2019.⁸³ In comparison, law enforcement officers experienced an average of 83 instances of nonfatal workplace violence and security guards experienced 95 instances.⁸⁴ In addition to physical threats, COs experience high levels of “stress, burnout, and a variety of other mental health-related consequences as a result of their employment.”⁸⁵ Safety and wellness-related risks for COs include the following:

- *Work-related dangers*, such as having to work with prisoners who have infectious and communicable diseases, dealing with prison gangs, being subjected to disruptive prisoner behavior (e.g., physical and sexual assault), potential harm related to trade in prison contraband, an increasing number of prisoners with serious mental health problems, and the potential for prison riots.⁸⁶
- *Institution-related dangers*, such as the conflict and/or ambiguity that can arise from a CO’s role in enforcing prison rules while also needing to provide some latitude to prisoners to keep institutional peace, or the need for prisons to confine and control prisoners while also trying to rehabilitate them; demanding workloads, a lack of CO input in institutional decision-making, and operational issues related to understaffing and poor recruiting, selection, and training of new COs (e.g., COs who are not prepared to handle the rigors of the job).⁸⁷

⁷⁹ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 28.

⁸⁰ The Criminal Justice Needs Initiative is managed by the RAND Corporation with funding from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) at DOJ. NIJ is DOJ’s research, development and evaluation agency.

⁸¹ Joe Russo et al., *Building and High-Quality Correctional Workforce: Identifying Challenges and Needs*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2018 (hereinafter, “RAND correctional workforce report”).

⁸² Frank Valentino et al., *Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness: Literature Synthesis*, DOJ, Office of Justice Programs (OJP), NIJ, NCJ 250484, Washington, DC, July 2017, p. 2 (hereinafter, “Ferdik and Smith, *CO Safety and Wellness*”).

⁸³ Erika Harrell et al., *Indicators of Workplace Violence, 2019*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, NCJ 250748, NIOSH 2022-124, Washington, DC, July 2022, p. 22.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ferdik and Smith, *CO Safety and Wellness*, p. 2.

⁸⁶ Ferdik and Smith, *CO Safety and Wellness*, pp. 4-8.

⁸⁷ Ferdik and Smith, *CO Safety and Wellness*, pp. 8-10.

- *Psycho-social dangers*, such as COs not being able to open up to family and friends about job-related stresses and the lack of public and political support for COs resulting from misperceptions about the nature of their work (e.g., the belief that many COs are corrupt or behave in abusive ways toward prisoners).⁸⁸

Correctional officers also experience disproportionately higher rates of physical ailments—such chronic neck, back, and knee injuries; heart disease; diabetes; high cholesterol; and hypertension—compared to other high-stress professions such as crisis counselors, teachers, and law enforcement officers.⁸⁹

Corrections positions tend to receive less compensation compared to other professions in the criminal justice field, and correctional agencies compete with law enforcement and probation and parole agencies for qualified candidates. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) indicates that the median salary for COs and jailers was \$57,970 in May 2024.⁹⁰ In comparison, the median salary for police and detectives was \$77,270,⁹¹ and the median salary for probation officers and correctional treatment specialists was \$64,520.⁹² There is also the opportunity to earn higher salaries during the course of their careers in other criminal justice-related professions with similar qualifications to COs. The top decile salary for probation officers and correctional treatment specialists was \$106,290 and for police and sheriff patrol officers it was \$120,460; for COs and jailers, it was \$93,000. In addition, post-pandemic increases in wages resulting from a tighter job market, especially for workers in the bottom quartile of wage earners, has made non-correctional jobs more attractive for people who might consider working as a CO.⁹³ An official with the Florida Department of Corrections noted that the agency is competing with retailers, such as Walmart, for employees.⁹⁴ Then-BOP Director Colette Peters noted in testimony before the House Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance in 2024 that a CO left a position at a federal prison in Massachusetts to work at the local grocery because it paid better.⁹⁵

Many prisons are located in rural areas, which can present a barrier to recruiting new officers. Prisons might not be able to recruit an adequate number of candidates from the small towns in the immediate area and potential candidates from outside the area might not want to make a long round-trip commute to work at the facility.⁹⁶ Potential employees from outside the area also might not want to relocate to a rural area because of concerns about available housing, fewer amenities, employment opportunities for spouses, and educational opportunities for children.⁹⁷ At the same time, prisons nearer to large cities experience their own challenges with recruiting candidates for

⁸⁸ Ferdik and Smith, *CO Safety and Wellness*, pp. 10-11.

⁸⁹ Ferdik and Smith, *CO Safety and Wellness*, p. 13.

⁹⁰ “Jailers” are deputy sheriff’s officers who work in a jail. In many counties, the jail is operated by the sheriff’s department. U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), BLS, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Correctional Officers and Bailiffs, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/correctional-officers.htm>.

⁹¹ DOL, BLS, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, “Police and Detectives,” <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/police-and-detectives.htm>.

⁹² DOL, BLS, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, “Probation Officers and Correctional Treatment Specialists,” <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/probation-officers-and-correctional-treatment-specialists.htm>.

⁹³ For a discussion of increases in post-pandemic wages for workers, see Liv Wang and Nela Richardson, “Low-Wage Workers Saw Big Pay Jumps After the Pandemic. High Earners Did Even Better,” *Data Lab* (blog), ADP Research, May 2, 2024, <https://www.adpresearch.com/pay-change-by-income-level-2024/>.

⁹⁴ RAND correctional workforce report, p. 11.

⁹⁵ U.S. Congress, House Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance, *Oversight of the Federal Bureau of Prisons*, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., July 23, 2024.

⁹⁶ RAND correctional workforce report, p. 11.

⁹⁷ RAND correctional workforce report.

open positions. While there might be a more plentiful pool of potential candidates, they may expect higher compensation to offset the higher cost of living in metropolitan areas.⁹⁸

The nature of work in a prison—hierarchical organizational structure, shift work, and mandatory overtime—might not appeal to a significant number of potential employees, especially millennials and members of Gen Z who bring different values to the workplace than their older co-workers. Younger workers indicate they want flexible work schedules, which can include in-person and at-home hybrid work schedules, four-day work weeks, or the option to set their own work hours,⁹⁹ and are interested in part-time opportunities or those where they can engage in job-sharing.¹⁰⁰ These workers also want to work for organizations that reflect their values and are concerned about organizations’ “ethics, practices, and social impact,”¹⁰¹ and they value management consulting with workers about major decisions that would affect their work and taking their feedback seriously.¹⁰² In addition, younger workers value environments where they have more autonomy to decide how to accomplish their assignments,¹⁰³ and they want opportunities to develop and master new skills that allow them to grow in their professions.¹⁰⁴

There is also concern that the public’s perception of prisons and COs affects correctional agencies’ ability to recruit. Research has documented the public’s view of correctional work as undesirable.¹⁰⁵ The public’s perception of the occupational prestige of correctional work is lower than that of other public safety professions, such as law enforcement officers and firefighters.¹⁰⁶ Some research also indicates that most media coverage of correctional work is negative, with stories focusing on “some form of staff misconduct, including sexual assaults, inappropriate relationships, introduction of contraband, use of excessive force, incompetence, or arrest for a non-job-related crime,” which in turn can shape public perceptions of the profession.¹⁰⁷ In addition, portrayals in movies and television shows can provide a distorted view of the prison environment.¹⁰⁸ A panel of correctional experts assembled by the RAND Corporation also noted that correctional agencies might contribute to the public’s low perception of correctional work because they operate in a low-information environment (i.e., they believe that “no news is good news,” and they are reluctant to share information, even good information, with the media).¹⁰⁹ A review of the literature on CO safety and wellness noted that “the lack of appreciation from the

⁹⁸ RAND correctional workforce report.

⁹⁹ Hanju Lee, “Gen Z in the Workplace? How Should Companies Adapt?” Imagine Center blog, Johns Hopkins University, April 18, 2023, <https://imagine.jhu.edu/blog/2023/04/18/gen-z-in-the-workplace-how-should-companies-adapt/> (hereinafter, “Gen Z in the Workplace”).

¹⁰⁰ Michele Parmelee, “Making Waves: How Gen Zs and Millennials are Prioritizing—and Driving—Change in the Workplace,” *Deloitte Insights*, May 17, 2023, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/recruiting-gen-z-and-millennials.html>, (hereinafter, “Making Waves”).

¹⁰¹ Gen Z in the Workplace.

¹⁰² Making Waves.

¹⁰³ Judy Oh, “3 Rules for Engaging Millennial and Gen Z Talent in the Workplace,” *World Economic Forum*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/01/millennial-gen-z-talent-workplace-leadership/>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Samuel G. Vickovic et al., “Depictions of Correctional Officers in Newspaper Media: An Ethnographic Content Analysis,” *Criminal Justice Studies*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2013), p. 466-469.

¹⁰⁶ RAND correctional workforce report, p.7.

¹⁰⁷ RAND correctional workforce report.

¹⁰⁸ Jaime Brower, *Correctional Officer Wellness and Safety Literature Review*, DOJ, OJP, NIJ, Washington, DC, July 2013, p. 8 (hereinafter, “Correctional Officer Wellness and Safety Literature Review”).

¹⁰⁹ RAND correctional workforce report. p. 7.

community, as well as negative depictions in the media, can affect self-esteem, and consequently reduce CO job satisfaction and morale and can produce stress.”¹¹⁰

Issues Related to Correctional Officer Understaffing

Understaffing in CO positions can have several implications for the operations of the federal prison system. For example, the lack of a full complement of COs can require BOP to pay overtime to cover unfilled shifts. DOJ’s OIG notes that

A safe and secure correctional setting requires a minimum staff count, meaning BOP has limited flexibility when it comes to staffing levels and assignments. Therefore, a staffing shortage at a BOP facility presents a significant challenge. BOP uses overtime as a mechanism to supplement staffing, as well as for escorting inmates for outside medical trips and emergencies.¹¹¹

As shown in **Table 2**, BOP’s overtime costs generally increased from FY2016 to FY2024. Overtime expenditures decreased somewhat for FY2025, but they remained higher than they were from FY2016 to FY2023. BOP overtime costs in **Table 2** are for all BOP employees, though DOJ’s OIG found that CO positions accounted for 69% of all overtime costs in FY2019.¹¹² Increasing overtime costs has financial implications for the operations of the federal prison system. BOP must pay overtime out of appropriations for BOP’s Salaries and Expenses account, which funds all non-capital expenses of the federal prison system. Therefore, funding dedicated to paying overtime is money that cannot be used to hire other personnel or to pay other expenses related to the confinement and care of prisoners.¹¹³ DOJ’s OIG calculated that BOP employees worked approximately 6.7 million overtime hours in FY2019, which was equivalent to the number of hours 3,107 additional full time BOP employees would have worked in that year.¹¹⁴

Table 2. Bureau of Prisons’ Expenditures on Overtime, FY2015-FY2024

(amount in millions of dollars)	
Fiscal Year	Overtime Costs
2016	135.0
2017	125.9
2018	181.2
2019	255.5
2020	288.6
2021	225.4
2022	274.8

¹¹⁰ Correctional Officer Wellness and Safety Literature Review, p. 9.

¹¹¹ DOJ, OIG, *Analysis of the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Fiscal Year 2019 Overtime Hours and Costs*, Management Advisory Memorandum 21-011, December 2020, p. 2 (hereinafter, “DOJ OIG BOP overtime memorandum”).

¹¹² DOJ OIG BOP overtime memorandum, p. 6.

¹¹³ GAO reported that wardens have to justify the need for using overtime to BOP regional offices. BOP’s central office usually sets a threshold of 2% of a regional office’s annual salaries and expenses funding for overtime expenses. Regional offices use this threshold to determine the amount of authorized overtime for each prison in their region. However, wardens can petition the regional office for reallocating funds if the facility exceeds its overtime threshold. GAO reported that BOP’s central office does not usually take corrective action against facilities regarding high overtime expenses as long as the region stays within its overtime budget. GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 24.

¹¹⁴ DOJ OIG BOP overtime memorandum, p. 3.

Fiscal Year	Overtime Costs
2023	386.0
2024	436.9
2025	387.2

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons.

Notes: Amounts are in nominal dollars.

In addition to the fiscal implications of increasing overtime expenses on BOP, covering additional shifts can have physical and psychological effects on COs. GAO reported that “a researcher [GAO] spoke with, who has studied the mental health effects of working in corrections, told [GAO] that working overtime often causes officer sleep deprivation, making the officer more irritable and aloof, and may even cause physical health problems as well.”¹¹⁵ Officials in the union representing BOP COs told GAO that observational skills are important when working in a prison, and these can fade if COs are tired from working extra shifts.¹¹⁶

Staffing shortages can also lead to BOP using *augmentation* to fill shifts. Augmentation is when BOP assigns non-CO staff members to a custody role (i.e., one where the staff member’s primary task becomes supervising prisoners).¹¹⁷ GAO noted in its review of BOP staffing that BOP officials reported that augmentation can negatively affect opportunities for prisoners to participate in rehabilitative programs—including, in some instances, all programming being cancelled for a day—because employees who operate those programs are covering CO shifts.¹¹⁸ DOJ’s OIG reported that the use of augmentation “reduced morale and staff attentiveness thus decreasing the overall safety of the institution.”¹¹⁹ Data show that BOP has had to rely increasingly on using augmentation to staff its facilities (**Table 3**). Augmentation hours increased each year from FY2016 to FY2020 except for a small decrease from FY2018 to FY2019 before increasing again. DOJ’s OIG noted that BOP used augmentation during the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to address staffing shortages that resulted from measures BOP undertook to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in federal prisons.¹²⁰ Augmentation hours decreased in FY2021 and FY2022 after the peak of the pandemic, but they remained higher than any year from FY2016 to FY2019. Augmentation hours increased from FY2023 to FY2025; the number of augmentation hours in FY2025 was the highest it has been in the 10-year period starting with FY2016, and the number of augmentation hours exceed that of the pandemic.

¹¹⁵ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 26.

¹¹⁶ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 26.

¹¹⁷ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 4. All staff assigned to a facility are required to complete an introductory correctional techniques course within 60 days of starting at BOP and an annual refresher training course.

¹¹⁸ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 19.

¹¹⁹ DOJ, OIG, *Top Management and Performance Challenges Facing the Department of Justice—2023*, Washington, DC, p. 10.

¹²⁰ OIG noted that BOP employees needed to take on additional responsibilities during the pandemic, including regularly screening prisoners and staff for COVID-19 symptoms; managing quarantine and medical isolation units; and taking on tasks, such as food service, cleaning, and laundry, normally done by prisoners work crews. DOJ, OIG, *Capstone Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Response to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic*, 23-054, Washington, DC, March 2023, pp. 48-50.

Table 3. Augmentation Hours at the Bureau of Prisons, FY2016-FY2025

Fiscal Year	Augmentation Hours
2016	309,657
2017	319,836
2018	435,425
2019	418,690
2020	630,041
2021	564,929
2022	543,478
2023	605,361
2024	631,746
2025	718,174

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons.

Beyond the issues specific to BOP that can be caused by understaffing, the research literature on prison staffing discusses issues it can cause for any correctional agency. Chronic understaffing can contribute to issues with retaining staff, which can in turn make it more difficult for correctional authorities to fully staff their facilities. When positions are not filled, correctional agencies can require existing staff to fill shifts.¹²¹ While some overtime can provide COs with an opportunity to supplement their income, required and extensive overtime can be viewed as a burden.¹²² Mandatory overtime can mean that COs have to “work long hours in a closed environment and sometimes in old, overcrowded, hot, noisy correctional facilities.”¹²³ Higher prisoner-to-staff ratios caused by understaffing can require prisons to reduce or eliminate programming for prisoners (e.g., recreation, educational, work opportunities) because there are fewer COs to supervise prisoners, and prisoners’ frustration with the lack of opportunities for something to occupy their time can contribute to more prisoner-on-prisoner or prisoner-on-CO violence.¹²⁴ Inadequate staffing can also hamper the ability of prisons to deter, prevent, and respond to threats to institutional security, such as bringing contraband into the prison or plotting attacks against COs or other prisoners.¹²⁵ COs who are regularly exposed to traumatic events, such as being the victim of an attack or witnessing someone in the prison being attacked, are more likely to have issues with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts, and anxiety disorders.¹²⁶ These stressors can contribute to burnout among COs, who then might leave the agency. Frequent turnover of employees can contribute to the perception that correctional

¹²¹ RAND correctional workforce report, p. 19.

¹²² Tama Celi et al., “Recruitment and Retention of Correctional Staff: A National Survey of Challenges and Strategies,” *Corrections Today*, January/February 2024, p. 54 (hereinafter, “Recruitment and Retention of Correctional Staff”).

¹²³ American Correctional Association, Office of Correctional Health, “Staff Recruitment and Retention in Corrections: The Challenge and Ways Forward,” *Corrections Today*, January/February 2023, p. 41 (hereinafter, “Staff Recruitment and Retention in Corrections”).

¹²⁴ Staff Recruitment and Retention in Corrections, p. 44.

¹²⁵ Joe Russo et al., *Countering Threats to Correction Institution Safety*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2019, p. 7 (hereinafter “RAND countering correctional threats report”).

¹²⁶ Staff Recruitment and Retention in Corrections, p. 41.

agencies are not good employers, which can also make it harder to recruit new staff to replace the COs who have departed.

Understaffing can also have effects beyond those on recruiting and retaining COs. As discussed above, understaffed facilities can incur overtime costs but they also incur increased costs associated with recruiting, hiring, and training new staff.¹²⁷ A need to hire numerous COs in a short amount of time might also lead correctional agencies to consider lowering hiring standards in order to widen the applicant pool.¹²⁸ Correctional agencies might also abbreviate the length of academy training, which might help more quickly increase the number of COs working in a facility, but it might also mean that new recruits are less prepared for the challenges of the job.¹²⁹

Considerations for Policymakers

This section of the report discusses select considerations for policymakers if Congress decides to take actions to address CO staffing shortages in federal prisons. Considerations might include the following:

- examining CO pay,
- evaluating the hiring process for COs,
- improving working conditions at prisons,
- considering new working arrangements or schedules for COs,
- increasing access to mental health services for COs,
- evaluating the mission of the federal prison system, and
- expanding student loan repayment and forgiveness for COs.

Correctional Officer Pay

There are questions about whether pay for federal COs is competitive with other federal law enforcement agencies and the private sector. Candidates for CO positions who have college degrees might also consider seeking entry-level law enforcement officer positions for which they qualify with other federal agencies, which might pay more. In testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Criminal Justice and Counterterrorism, the president of the union representing federal COs stated that the union "believes that the staffing crisis can only be resolved by addressing the insufficient pay band issue. The current pay structure within the Bureau is significantly lower than that of other Federal Law Enforcement Agencies, including the US Marshals, Immigration and Customs (ICE), and Border Patrol. Additionally, the Bureau's pay scale is non-competitive with state and local law enforcement positions and even the private sector market."¹³⁰ Senator Cotton noted in a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on shortages in correctional personnel that border patrol agents make more than COs starting out and that their earnings potential is higher.¹³¹ There have been reports of ICE recruiting COs as part of its effort to increase its ranks, noting that ICE can offer \$50,000 hiring bonuses and higher pay relative to

¹²⁷ RAND correctional workforce report, p. 19.

¹²⁸ RAND countering correctional threats report, p. 7.

¹²⁹ RAND countering correctional threats report.

¹³⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate Judiciary Committee, Criminal Justice and Counterterrorism Subcommittee, *The Nation's Correctional Staffing Crisis: Assessing the Toll on Correctional Officers and Incarcerated Persons*, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., February 28, 2024.

¹³¹ Rayan Tarinelli, "Federal Prison Director Tells Senator About Staffing 'Crisis,'" *Roll Call*, February 28, 2024.

BOP.¹³² Congress might consider legislation to allow BOP to raise pay rates to make CO positions more attractive to potential applicants.

Congress increased pay rates for COs in 1990; there have not been any subsequent adjustments. Considering a potential need for more comparable pay between federal and state and local law enforcement, Congress passed the Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-509).¹³³ The act authorized special rates of pay for law enforcement officers at grades 3 through 10 of the GS scale.¹³⁴ The special law enforcement officer pay rates (i.e., the GL scale) replace the GS rates with rates that are 3% to 23% higher, with higher rates at the lower ends of the scale.¹³⁵ COs are deemed “law enforcement officers” for the purpose of the special pay rates.

A 2004 report from OPM examined issues in pay for federal law enforcement officers. Despite being over two decades old, the way that federal law enforcement is paid has not changed significantly since the report was released and the insights provided by OPM may still be relevant for consideration. Also, while the report did not focus specifically on COs, it discussed shortcomings with the GS pay system as it relates to hiring and retaining law enforcement officers.¹³⁶ COs are paid using the GS system, so the critiques of it offered by OPM directly apply to issues faced by BOP.

OPM noted several general issues with the GS pay system: “(1) lack of occupation-specific market sensitivity, (2) lack of emphasis on individual performance, (3) excessive reliance on rigid, one-size-fits-all rules, and (4) insufficient flexibility to make strategic decisions that support mission accomplishment.”¹³⁷ OPM also noted that the GS pay system provides the same locality pay adjustment to all grades for all professions, which does not address the issue of pay disparities between professions in a particular location.¹³⁸ For example, pay disparities between CO positions and other positions that might interest potential applicants might be starker when BOP is recruiting from high cost of living areas compared to areas where the cost of living is lower.

OPM found that quit rates for law enforcement officers at lower levels of pay (i.e., GS-4 through GS-6) were generally higher than quit rates at those grades for all other GS occupations.¹³⁹ The quit rates decrease with higher levels of pay.¹⁴⁰ OPM noted that the higher quit rates at lower levels of pay, which usually represent entry-level positions, might be the result of non-pay factors such as failure to meet training requirements or employees’ reevaluation of their career choices after being exposed to the nature of the work.¹⁴¹ OPM also noted several other factors that might

¹³² Keri Blakinger, “‘We’re Broken’: As Federal Prisons Run Low on Food and Toilet Paper, Corrections Officers Are Leaving in Doves for ICE,” *ProPublica*, November 21, 2025. In addition to the \$50,000 hiring bonus, ICE offers other incentives for new recruits, such as student loan repayment. For more information, see U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement, “ICE Announces Most Successful Federal Law Enforcement Agency Recruitment Campaign in American History,” press release, December 18, 2025, <https://www.ice.dhs.gov/news/releases/ice-announces-most-successful-federal-law-enforcement-agency-recruitment-campaign>.

¹³³ OPM, *Federal Law Enforcement Pay and Benefits: Report to Congress*, July 2004, p. 32 (hereinafter, “OPM report on law enforcement officer pay”).

¹³⁴ OPM report on law enforcement officer pay.

¹³⁵ OPM report on law enforcement officer pay.

¹³⁶ It should be noted that in many cases, the definition of “law enforcement officer” used in OPM’s report when discussing law enforcement pay included BOP COs.

¹³⁷ OPM report on law enforcement officer pay, p. 31.

¹³⁸ OPM report on law enforcement officer pay.

¹³⁹ OPM report on law enforcement officer pay, p. 37.

¹⁴⁰ OPM report on law enforcement officer pay.

¹⁴¹ OPM report on law enforcement officer pay.

contribute to federal agencies' issues with recruiting and retaining law enforcement officers, including "the mission of the agency, nature of the work itself, working conditions, location of the worksite, availability of training and growth opportunities, the existence of family-friendly policies (e.g., flexible work schedules), employee morale, general labor market conditions, agency recruitment programs, [and] early retirement provisions."¹⁴²

Congress could consider establishing a special pay schedule that would provide BOP more flexibility in setting salaries for COs like those that have been established for the U.S. Capitol Police, the Uniformed Division of the U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. Park Police, and law enforcement officers at the Transportation Security Administration and in the Judicial Branch.¹⁴³ While there are differences in how these pay systems operate, in general, these agencies can pay law enforcement officers higher salaries than what they would receive under the GS system and there are greater ranges in salaries for entry-level officers. In addition to these examples, current law (28 U.S.C. §548) allows the Attorney General to establish administrative pay scales for assistant U.S. attorneys.¹⁴⁴

Examining the Hiring Process

As discussed above, COs positions generally have to be filled using competitive hiring procedures. A frequent critique of the federal hiring process is that it takes too long to fill a position.¹⁴⁵ Federal agencies might lose job candidates who decide to take positions with other organizations that use a faster hiring process.¹⁴⁶ The length of time it takes for applicants to navigate the hiring process is also an issue for state prisons and local jails when filling CO positions, so BOP might not lose applicants to other correctional agencies.¹⁴⁷ However, BOP and other correctional agencies frequently compete with the private sector for workers for non-correctional jobs. Private sector employers might be able to make job offers in a shorter period of time because they do not require extensive background checks or testing.

There might be an argument that for positions like COs, where employees have a certain amount of power over prisoners and there is a need to prevent abuse of that power, a more intensive hiring process is required. For example, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board has offered a perspective, stating:

A somewhat lengthy hiring process is not always a bad thing. Using quality recruitment strategies and assessments to identify the best candidate for a job may take more time than using less effective means. However, the longer the process takes, the more applicant attrition is likely to increase as candidates accept positions with other employers. So, agencies must determine the proper balance between quality hiring methods and complex processes that deter applicants.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² OPM report on law enforcement officer pay, p. 34.

¹⁴³ OPM report on law enforcement officer pay, pp. 28-29.

¹⁴⁴ Pay plan charts for assistant U.S. attorneys can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/usao/career-center/salary-information/administratively-determined-pay-plan-charts>.

¹⁴⁵ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Reforming Federal Hiring: Beyond Faster and Cheaper*, Washington, DC, p. 7 (hereinafter, "Reforming Federal Hiring").

¹⁴⁶ Reforming Federal Hiring.

¹⁴⁷ RAND correctional workforce report, p. 15.

¹⁴⁸ Reforming Federal Hiring, p. 9.

There is also an argument that rigorous screening of candidates can help reduce employee turnover by making sure that candidates are qualified for the position, they are a good fit with the agency, and they are placed in the right positions.¹⁴⁹

A panel of correctional experts convened by the RAND Corporation to provide recommendations on improving hiring and retention for correctional personnel offered another view, arguing that the hiring process can be unduly cumbersome and that the criteria used by correctional agencies to screen candidates is not always evidence based.¹⁵⁰

Psychological testing, personality profiling, physical fitness assessments, financial stability investigations, age restrictions (minimum and maximum), and social media activity review were among the screens that were specifically identified as commonly used, yet have questionable efficacy. Although the panelists acknowledged the importance of properly vetting candidates, they also reported that many current processes seem arbitrary or perhaps are simply perpetuated by custom. The panelists therefore called for research to identify the factors most aligned with or predictive of success on the job. The panelists also noted that objective analyses are required to determine the return on investment for each screen, considering predictive value, the cost of administration, and the impact on the length of the hiring process. The resulting data could lead to evidence-based selection criteria that would support better hiring decisions.¹⁵¹

BOP has acknowledged the need to hire people for CO positions more quickly because it requested DHA from OPM to do so (as discussed previously). BOP applied in 2019 and 2020 for authority to hire COs using direct hiring procedures; OPM denied both requests. Subsequently, OPM granted BOP DHA for a limited number of CO positions at certain facilities. OPM eventually granted BOP DHA for approximately 2,500 CO positions nationwide.

Policymakers might consider whether there is a need to grant BOP authorities to allow it to hire candidates for CO positions in a shorter period of time. For example, legislation in the 119th Congress (H.R. 3342) would grant BOP DHA for any position in the federal prison system and BOP would retain the authority until 96% of any given position is filled. Policymakers might also consider whether to require OPM and BOP to evaluate whether the hiring process for COs could be streamlined and to report their findings to Congress.

New Working Arrangements

Prisons are staffed 24 hours a day and the work of COs cannot be done remotely, even part of the time. Prison staffing requirements mean that COs are typically assigned to a post in the prison for a particular shift including evenings or overnight. These requirements can make it more difficult for prisons to recruit new employees, especially those who are looking for flexibilities in their working hours or who have other responsibilities that might prevent them from working evenings or overnight. One review of strategies to improve CO retention suggested that COs often leave correctional agencies because of demanding hours and shift work.¹⁵² Additionally, in response to an American Correctional Association survey of correctional agencies, 16 of the 23 agencies that responded identified “work/life balance issues” as one of the three top reasons employees left the agency and another 11 reported scheduling issues as one of the other three top reasons.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ MTC Institute, *Correctional Officers: Strategies to Improve Retention*, Centerville, UT, January 2010, p. 8 (hereinafter, “Strategies to Improve Retention of Correctional Officers”).

¹⁵⁰ RAND correctional workforce report, p. 14.

¹⁵¹ RAND correctional workforce report, pp. 14-15.

¹⁵² Strategies to Improve Retention of Correctional Officers, p. 10.

¹⁵³ Recruitment and Retention of Correctional Staff, p. 54.

The review of strategies to improve CO retention asserted:

A prison work setting must operate 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, and typically involves shifts and posts. However, there are a number of potential employees who are very capable of working, but who choose not to apply for full time work. Managers of today need to embrace the opportunity to use part-time employees and alternative shifts that permit a better balance between work and personal life.¹⁵⁴

Policymakers could consider requiring BOP to study and make recommendations to Congress about whether there are any opportunities to open some CO posts or shifts to part-time or alternative work arrangements, such as allowing COs to work fewer days a week but requiring them to work longer shifts when they do (e.g., working four 10-hour shifts).

Access to Mental Health Services

As discussed previously, COs face occupational stressors that can affect their mental health.¹⁵⁵ BOP has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that provides employees access to voluntary and confidential services, such as counseling and referrals for personal and work-related concerns.¹⁵⁶ Employees can receive referrals for issues including substance abuse, stress, grief, family problems, and psychological disorders.¹⁵⁷ Employees can choose whether to receive EAP services through an in-house BOP psychologist or through a contracted provider.¹⁵⁸ BOP also provides mental health support through Crisis Support Teams, which consist of BOP employees who provide support to other employees in response to critical incidents, such as staff injuries or suicides.¹⁵⁹ Crisis Support Teams can provide staff with information about EAP and accessing those resources, and they can make referrals to BOP psychologists.¹⁶⁰

GAO noted that BOP employees might prefer to access mental health services through a provider that contracts with BOP rather than through an in-house psychologist because it provides more privacy.¹⁶¹ However, COs working at facilities in rural areas might have to utilize in-house providers because there are a limited number of community providers who can deliver the needed services.¹⁶²

Given the effects that employees' mental health problems can have on prison operations, Congress might conduct oversight of BOP's ability to provide access to mental health services at an adequate level. As a part of any oversight, policymakers might consider inquiring whether BOP has the resources needed to provide adequate mental health services for employees. BOP is responsible for covering all costs related to operating the federal prison system with the funding provided through its Salaries and Expenses account in the annual Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies appropriations act. Increased costs with operating the federal prison system might mean that BOP might not have the ability to invest in mental health services or might face decisions to shift resources away from programs such as EAP to meet their core mission.

¹⁵⁴ Strategies to Improve Retention of Correctional Officers, p. 10.

¹⁵⁵ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 30.

¹⁵⁶ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 10.

¹⁵⁷ GAO 2021 BOP report.

¹⁵⁸ GAO 2021 BOP report.

¹⁵⁹ GAO 2021 BOP report, pp. 31-32.

¹⁶⁰ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 32.

¹⁶¹ GAO 2021 BOP report, p. 10.

¹⁶² GAO 2021 BOP report.

The Mission of Federal Prisons

The focus of the prison system in the United States underwent several changes over the course of the 20th century. The Progressive era of the early 20th century saw states adopt laws to allow people to be sentenced to probation rather than being incarcerated.¹⁶³ However, in the early 20th century people who were incarcerated were sent to facilities that focused on “total control, punishment, and hard labor.”¹⁶⁴ In prison reform efforts that took shape in the 1920s and 1930s, the focus of incarceration switched from control and punishment to promoting good behavior in return for an opportunity at parole.¹⁶⁵ This period was marked by a movement towards a “new penology” with a focus on diagnosing and classifying prisoners and introducing psychologists and psychiatrists to prisons.¹⁶⁶ By midcentury, the focus of correctional systems had switched more toward providing treatment to prisoners.¹⁶⁷ In the 1960s, prison architecture started to change, with a focus on less strict control-based designs and providing space for treatment programs.¹⁶⁸ The civil rights era also saw courts get more involved in facilitating prison reforms as prisoners filed cases to challenge their conditions of confinement.¹⁶⁹ The last two decades of the 20th century were marked by increasing recidivism rates of people released from prison, which contributed to a movement away from rehabilitation and treatment.¹⁷⁰ As one criminologist described it, “a new policy of warehousing serious offenders to protect society gained increasing popularity as deinstitutionalization initiatives soon fell by the wayside.”¹⁷¹

The prison population in the United States increased for most of the 20th century, with the exception of the period around World War II and the early 1960s.¹⁷² Policy changes in the late 1970s and 1980s resulted in the explosive growth of the number of prisoners (e.g., increased drug crime enforcement, wider adoption of mandatory minimum sentences, and the movement away from granting prisoners parole). There were approximately 330,000 prisoners in the country in 1980.¹⁷³ The prison population peaked at just over 1.6 million in 2009.¹⁷⁴ The prison population decreased every year from 2010 to 2021, followed by small increases in both 2022 and 2023. Even with the decrease in the population since its peak in 2009, there were almost 1.3 million prisoners in the United States in 2023.¹⁷⁵

Arguably, over the past 15 years the nation’s correctional system has started to refocus on rehabilitation. Decreases in the prison population since 2009 coincided with concerns about how much governments were spending on incarcerating a growing number of prisoners.¹⁷⁶ There were

¹⁶³ Mitchel P. Roth, *A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 285 (hereinafter, “A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System”).

¹⁶⁴ A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System, p. 285.

¹⁶⁵ A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System, p. 285.

¹⁶⁶ A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System, pp. 320-321.

¹⁶⁷ A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System, p. 361.

¹⁶⁸ A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System, p. 397.

¹⁶⁹ A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System, p. 398.

¹⁷⁰ A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System, p. 442.

¹⁷¹ A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System, p. 442.

¹⁷² A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System, pp. 285, 320, 360, 398, and 441.

¹⁷³ DOJ, OJP, BJS, Corrections Statistical Analysis Tool, Frequently Requested Figures, Jurisdiction Population, 1978-2021, <https://csat.bjs.ojp.gov/freq-requested-charts>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Derek Mueller, *Prison Report Series, Preliminary Data Release, 2023*, DOJ, OJP, BJS, NCJ 309396, Washington, DC, December 2024.

¹⁷⁶ A History of Crime and the American Criminal Justice System, p. 499.

efforts to reduce prison populations by diverting some low-level, nonviolent offenders to non-carceral programs, release some low-risk prisoners early if they completed rehabilitative programs, and improve prisoner reentry programs to reduce the likelihood that prisoners would be reincarcerated after being released.¹⁷⁷ The federal government took a step toward these goals when President Trump signed the First Step Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-391) into law.¹⁷⁸

A focus on rehabilitation in federal prisons might provide an opportunity for BOP to recruit more candidates, especially among younger cohorts that place a greater emphasis on working for employers who promote social change. The panel of correctional experts assembled by RAND wrote:

There is, however, a gradually increasing understanding that corrections officers, much like their counterparts in community supervision, can simultaneously provide security or public safety and serve as change agents and positive role models. The panelists noted that, until this approach becomes the norm and public perception subsequently change, the pool of talent attracted to the corrections officer position will be inevitably limited. Positions in agencies that emphasize evidence-based programming and recognized and leverage the potential of corrections officers as key components of the behavioral change process could be more attractive to a wider group of candidates.¹⁷⁹

Research has also found that job stress for COs can stem from ambiguity or contradictions in their roles between confining prisoners and enforcing prison rules but also promoting rehabilitation and serving as informal counselors.¹⁸⁰ A clearer focus on promoting rehabilitation among prisoners might help decrease job-related stress in COs and promote retention.

BOP is in the process of expanding rehabilitative programming as required under the First Step Act. In June 2024, DOJ reported that:

During 2023, [BOP] recovered from lower programming rates due to COVID-19 and has reached a consistent programing capacity for participation in Evidence-Based Recidivism Reduction (EBRR) programs and Productive Activities (PAs) with those in custody participating in an average of 103,600 programs on any given day (some participate in multiple programs). FBOP continues to explore ways to shift resources to continue to expand program capacity in addition to ongoing efforts to hire additional employees.¹⁸¹

Congress might consider ensuring that BOP has the resources it needs to continue to provide adequate levels of rehabilitative programming for federal prisoners. Congress might hold hearings to examine whether BOP's policies and culture promote a focus on rehabilitating prisoners and what role COs play in aiding in it. Policymakers might also consider examining whether BOP provides training to COs that could help them promote prisoner rehabilitation, and if not, whether such training would be beneficial and what Congress could do to aid in those efforts.

Expanding Student Loan Repayment and Forgiveness

BOP requires candidates for entry-level CO positions to have a college degree from an accredited college or university or three years of prior experience.¹⁸² The starting salary for a GL-5, step 1

¹⁷⁷ For examples of reforms states have implemented to reduce the number of people incarcerated in their prisons, see the database of state justice reinvestment policies at <https://justicereinvest.wppengine.com/jri-policies/>.

¹⁷⁸ For more information on the First Step Act, see CRS Report R45558, *The First Step Act of 2018: An Overview*.

¹⁷⁹ RAND correctional workforce report, p. 9.

¹⁸⁰ Correctional Officer Wellness and Safety Literature Review, p. 6.

¹⁸¹ DOJ, *First Step Act Annual Report*, June 2024, p. 5.

¹⁸² DOJ, BOP, *Correctional Officers*, <https://careers.bop.gov/s/correctional-officers>.

CO position in 2026 is \$50,241, though it could be higher if the CO works at a prison in an area with a higher locality pay adjustment.¹⁸³ Depending on the amount of student loan debt a candidate accumulated while completing his or her degree, the starting salary for a CO might be an insufficient incentive to joining BOP.

Policymakers might consider making it easier for BOP to provide aid to new COs to help them cover the cost of student loan payments. BOP currently has the authority to offer student loan repayment assistance to COs, but there are conditions on when this assistance can be provided. BOP offers student loan repayment assistance to employees in positions with separation rates that are higher than the overall separation rate for BOP.¹⁸⁴ Exceptions can be considered for candidates or employees who are in positions for which the separation rate is not above the BOP average but where prisons are having difficulty recruiting candidates or retaining employees for the position locally.¹⁸⁵ The ability for BOP to offer student loan repayment assistance is subject to the availability of funding. Congress could aid in BOP's efforts to offer student loan repayment by ensuring that BOP has the funding to cover these costs in addition to the other costs of operating the federal prison system.

COs are also eligible for student loan forgiveness under the Public Service Student Loan Forgiveness program. Under this program, borrowers have to be employed by federal, state, local, or tribal government agencies or other qualifying organizations or entities.¹⁸⁶ Borrowers have to make 120 qualifying monthly payments toward their student loans while employed by a governmental agency, organization, or entity.¹⁸⁷ Only Direct Loan program Subsidized Loans, Unsubsidized Loans, Graduate PLUS Loans, and Consolidation Loans are forgivable under the program.¹⁸⁸ Policymakers could consider providing additional student loan repayment or forgiveness incentives to individuals who work as COs for a given period of time.

Improving Working Conditions at Prisons

As discussed previously, COs can be required to work long hours in correctional facilities that are old, overcrowded, hot in the summer and cold in the winter, and noisy; and where even their movements and actions are restricted and they have limited access to a natural environment, such as natural lighting.¹⁸⁹ COs also report concerns over their physical safety.¹⁹⁰ In addition, many prisons are located in rural areas to which employees either have to make long commutes or

¹⁸³ For more information on locality pay adjustments, see CRS In Focus IF11998, *Federal Locality-Based Comparability Payments for General Schedule Employees*.

¹⁸⁴ BOP staffing overview.

¹⁸⁵ BOP staffing overview.

¹⁸⁶ For more information, see CRS Report R43571, *Federal Student Loan Forgiveness and Loan Repayment Programs*, p. 38.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. "Payments must be made according to one of the income-driven repayment plans or another Direct Loan program repayment plan if the payment amounts are equal to or greater than the amount that would be required according to a standard repayment plan with a 10-year repayment period. Borrowers must be employed (or serving) full-time in qualifying employment (or service) at the time each of the required 120 payments are made and at the time the application for forgiveness is made."

¹⁸⁸ For more information on these types of student loans, see *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁸⁹ Staff Recruitment and Retention in Corrections, p. 41; Recruitment and Retention of Correctional Staff, p. 54; RAND correctional workforce report, p. 21.

¹⁹⁰ RAND correctional workforce report, p. 20.

relocate.¹⁹¹ These circumstances can lead to challenges with recruiting and retaining COs to work in a prison environment.

Improving the physical infrastructure of prisons to make them better places to work might present an opportunity to attract more people to jobs as COs. A review of research on prison architecture found that changes to the design features of prisons could improve both the working environment for COs and interactions between COs and prisoners.¹⁹² Improvements in access to natural lighting, air quality, noise reduction, and temperature control can improve the physical and mental health of both employees and prisoners.¹⁹³ Improvements to the built space of prisons that improves prisoner wellbeing and promotes better interactions between prisoners and COs could decrease tense interactions and potential violence towards COs, and as discussed previously, concern about physical safety is an issue correctional systems face with hiring and retaining COs. Limited prison capacity, which contributes to overcrowding, can have both an effect on in-prison assault rates and increased use of sick leave by COs.¹⁹⁴ The layout of prisons can also affect the wellbeing of prisoners and staff. The authors of a 2022 report write:

Prison layouts that increasingly separate officers from incarcerated persons with bars or bulletproof glass have been found to create a sense of depersonalization, disengagement, and increase the risk of in-prison suicides. A review of studies on crowding suggests that building layouts that encourage interaction with others in designated spaces can offset the adverse effects of residential crowding on mental health. Floor plans that foster greater interpersonal contact may also increase a shared sense of safety.¹⁹⁵

The federal prison system is expansive, with 122 facilities in 35 states.¹⁹⁶ Many of BOP's facilities are old; half were built before 1991 and another 45% were built from 1992 to 2007.¹⁹⁷ DOJ's OIG reported that BOP has a backlog of modernization and repair projects that is contributing to a deterioration of physical structures so acute that they are "literally crumbling."¹⁹⁸ Examples include leaking roofs or prisoners who have to sleep next to exposed pipes that sometimes leak into their beds.¹⁹⁹ Leaks have contributed to damaged medical equipment and food sanitation issues.²⁰⁰

¹⁹¹ RAND correctional workforce report, p. 11.

¹⁹² Kelsey V. Engstrom and Ester F.J.C. van Ginneken, "Ethical Prison Architecture: A Systematic Literature Review of Prison Design Features Related to Wellbeing," *Space and Culture*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2022), pp. 479-503.

¹⁹³ Ibid., pp. 489-491.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 493.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 494.

¹⁹⁶ While BOP reports that it currently operates 122 facilities, federal prisons in Dublin, CA, and New York, NY, are not currently holding any prisoners. In addition to the 122 prisons, BOP also has 6 regional offices, a headquarters, 2 staff training centers, and 22 residential reentry management offices.

¹⁹⁷ DOJ, OIG, *Audit of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Efforts to Maintain and Construct Institutions*, 23-064, Washington, DC, May 2023, p. 2.

¹⁹⁸ DOJ, OIG, *Top Management and Performance Challenges Facing the Department of Justice—2023*, Washington, DC, p. 14.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

Given the age and needed repairs for many BOP facilities, Congress might consider working with BOP to determine whether to shutter some existing facilities and replace them with more modern facilities that incorporate elements that research suggests might improve working conditions for COs and improve prisoners' living conditions. In addition to evaluating the need to replace some facilities, policymakers might think about directing BOP to consider building any new facilities closer to population centers rather than in rural areas to expand the potential pool of applicants for CO positions. If policymakers were to provide funding for new facilities to replace older ones, Congress might also consider how these decisions would affect the capacity of the federal prison system. Even with a recent decline in the federal prison population,²⁰¹ BOP was operating at approximately 7% over its operating capacity at the end of 2022 (the most recent data available).²⁰²

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²⁰¹ The number of prisoners under BOP's jurisdiction increased each year from FY1980 to FY2013, when the federal prison population peaked at approximately 219,000. The number decreased each year from FY2013 to FY2020, when there were approximately 156,000 prisoners under BOP's jurisdiction; increased slightly in FY2022 to approximately 159,000 prisoners; and has been fairly steady since. DOJ, BOP, *Statistics*, https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/population_statistics.jsp (accessed August 27, 2025).

²⁰² E. Ann Carson and Rich Kluckow, *Prisoners in 2022—Statistical Tables*, DOJ, OJP, BJS, NCJ 3017149, Washington, DC, November 2023, p. 35.