

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/data-raises-questions-about-alabama-parole-board/>

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Alabama has long had one of the [most overcrowded prison systems](#) in the country. Reform aimed at reducing the prison population initially brought the population down, but these modest benefits have unraveled in the past year as the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles has retreated from its obligation to consider prisoners who are eligible for parole.

Alabama sentences its prisoners to some of the [longest prison terms](#) in the country, with approximately half of its prison population serving sentences of 20 years or more. Keeping people in prison is costly on average it costs the state \$64.01 per day per person. In contrast, the cost of supervising offenders on parole and probation is just \$2.43 per person per day.

Experts emphasize that a healthy parole system protects the public by holding hearings to review and transfer eligible prisoners to parole supervision. But under new leadership, Alabama's parole board held fewer hearings last year than it has in any year in the past three decades driving up costs and exacerbating overcrowding.

From 1987 through 2018, the parole board held on average 6,566 hearings each year. But in 2019, the board held just 4,270 parole hearings the fewest since 1987, when the prison system was less than half its current size. 2019 was the first year since 1990 in which the board held less than 5,000 hearings. In the past fiscal year which ended on September 30, the board held only 2,668 hearings.

The board has created an enormous backlog of prisoners eligible for parole. Nearly 2,000 people in Alabama prisons who are eligible for parole have been waiting for a hearing for at least four months. Almost 500 have been eligible for a year or more.

Over half of those waiting for a hearing for at least four months have been classified as minimum custody, meaning that they pose the least risk to the public. Nearly half of the prisoners who have been eligible for a year or more are minimum custody.

The sharp reduction in parole hearings and grants cannot be blamed on a change in the makeup of the state's prison population. The rate of people in Alabama prisons convicted of serious offenses is consistent with [national averages](#). Alabama uses a broader definition of violent offender to additionally include people convicted of minor offenses. Over 1,100 people in Alabama prisons are serving time for minor property offenses like shoplifting.

The parole board is sending parolees back to prison for technical violations like missing the \$40 monthly parole payment, missing an appointment with a parole officer, failing to find or keep a job, or other rules violations that do not constitute new crimes.

When parole is revoked due to a technical violation, parolees are often imprisoned for years even if the infraction is minor.

It is 26 times more expensive to keep someone in prison in Alabama than it is to monitor them on parole.

In 2015, the Alabama Legislature passed reform legislation aimed at reducing the number of revocations for technical violations, and in the programs first year the number of revocations dropped by nearly 60%, from 192 to 78 total technical revocations in 2016.

But under the new board, revocations of technical violators has risen sharply. There have been 77 technical revocations in the four months since May, nearly as many as were revoked in all of 2016. Incarcerating the 77 prisoners revoked in the past four months for one year will cost the state over \$1.7 million, with the state on track to incur millions more in expenses if the trend continues.

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