

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/corrections-reform-a-viable-option-for-budget-savings>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The [State Budget Crisis Task Force](#), co-chaired by former New York Lieutenant Governor Richard Ravitch and former Federal Reserve Board Chair Paul Volcker, recently released [a report](#) that identifies the leading structural problems that undermine the long-term fiscal sustainability of the states. These issues include the rising cost of Medicaid, the prospect of less revenue from the federal government, as well as one that Vera's [Cost-Benefit Analysis Unit](#) and [Center on Sentencing and Corrections](#) also examined in our [Price of Prisons](#) study: the cost of underfunded retirement benefits.

When Vera examined prison costs, we found the annual amount of these underfunded contributions in the prison system in the 40 states we reviewed was \$2.2 billion, or 5 percent of the total cost of prison. These are costs you won't find in budget documents because they are expenses that have not yet been paid. They are among the several prison-related costs we identified that are sometimes outside the corrections budget and not included in some of the official tallies of prisons costs. As the task force makes plain in its report, transparent financial reports are essential so that the public can have an informed dialogue about budget priorities. But knowing the true cost is only the first step in addressing these priorities.

The task force does not make any recommendations on budget priorities (instead, it makes several important recommendations to improve government accountability and fiscal planning). And while lately it seems there are few areas of agreement when it comes to government spending, there is at least one area where there is an emerging consensus in some states: prisons and prison budgets should be downsized.

Decades of policies that [increased the rate of imprisonment and lengthened sentences](#) have led to a state prison population of 1.4 million at a cost of more than \$40 billion. The [research](#), however, shows that an overreliance on prison leads to declining public safety benefits and that other options yield better public safety outcomes at lower cost.

In recent years, the states that have looked to the [research](#) to determine which sentencing and release policies are most effective have managed to cut costs and maintain safety by spending less on prison and more on programs that have been proven to reduce recidivism. Consequently, the [prison population is now on the decline](#), and there is a real opportunity to achieve budget savings while maintaining public safety. That's something everyone can agree on.

Editors note: Last week Vera updated statistics for Maine in [the Price of Prisons report and state fact sheet](#).

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