

# Report: Prison cuts could cause bed shortage in 2 years

*Lawmakers react with surprise to new study on corrections trends.*

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Published: 8:41 p.m. Tuesday, March 1, 2011

In the latest sign that Texas' budget woes could prove even tougher than expected, a new study warned Tuesday that the state could face a shortage of as many as 12,000 prison beds within two years if it whacks corrections programs as planned.

Cuts of up to \$600 million over the next two years would hobble rehabilitation, probation and treatment programs that have saved taxpayers almost that much in the past four years, the report said, and the resulting flood of Texans that would be sent to prison would quickly overwhelm the current capacity of state-run lockups.

"The new costs, the big costs, that Texas is looking at will be for new prisons, more capacity," said Tony Fabelo, a national criminal justice consultant who authored an updated projection of Texas' prison needs that was presented to the Senate Criminal Justice Committee on Tuesday.

"That's the headache that we avoided four years ago \u2026 with a system that's working well, so far. But the projected cuts and growth are going to change that."

Senate and House leaders reacted with surprise at the whopping numbers, which come after they asked prison officials to begin cutting treatment and rehabilitation programs to help the state meet a projected budget shortfall of as much as \$27 billion in 2012-13.

Escalating costs for social services, health care and education — also facing severe cuts that are drawing howls statewide — are driving much of the debate about proposed Senate and House versions of the budget. Budget writers had ordered corrections agencies to make significant reductions to help spare more popular spending on children and elderly and disabled Texans.

Tuesday's report — the first to use updated statistics to predict prison growth, instead of numbers from last summer that were used in preparing the draft legislative budgets — cautioned those cuts could trigger even bigger problems.

Thousands of additional prisoners would carry a price far higher than just the cost of new prisons, legislative leaders said, as operational and medical costs would mushroom.

"These are big numbers that we can't afford," said Committee Chairman John Whitmire, D-Houston. "But I think it's achievable that we can avoid the breakdown that (the report) highlights \u2026 We have a system that is working now and can't afford to upset the balance we have."

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, who said he had been briefed on the report, said the projections alarm him.

"At the end of the day \u2026 we're going to fund public safety, including the (Texas Department of Public Safety) and prisons, by scrubbing the budget and then funding priorities," he said. "That would not include new taxes."

The report by the Justice Center, a research affiliate of the Council of State Governments, predicts that if the House's draft budget is approved, Texas could be more than 12,000 prison beds short by 2013 — 8,657 from expected growth in the number of prisoners and another 4,200 from beds that are to be closed.

The Senate's draft budget, which cuts less from the prison budget, could leave Texas more than 9,600 beds short, according to the report — 6,774 for predicted growth and 2,860 from beds that are to be closed.

Both the Senate and House drafts propose closing the century-old Central Unit near Sugar Land, and various numbers of treatment and pre-parole beds.

The study warns that although corrections reforms enacted by the Legislature in 2007 are working as envisioned in keeping the prison population down, at reduced costs and with increased public safety, proposed changes to the system through proposed budget cuts could throw the system out of whack and trigger a crisis in the next two years.

According to the report, Texas' success rate with parolees has improved in the past few years, its recidivism rate has dropped and its commitments to prisons have dropped. The state's crime rate has dropped 1 percent since 2007 to the lowest point since 2004 even as the state's population grew by 2 percent.

"The options are either to reduce the cuts or to make policy changes that will result in fewer people going to prison," Fabelo said. "You're going to run out of prison capacity if (the draft House and Senate budget bills) are adopted as they are now written."

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