



Senate Bill 54: Locking Up More People, Costing Our Communities More

By Tamarine Cornelius

Wisconsin lawmakers are considering a bill that will lock up more people and borrow money to build a new prison, both moves that would further drive up Wisconsin's already-high corrections costs and harm communities. At a time when many other legislatures in red and blue states are exploring and implementing corrections system reforms that reduce prison spending, Republican lawmakers in Wisconsin are on the verge of taking our state in the opposite direction.

The Wisconsin Senate is working on a bill that will send more people to prison rather than allowing them to serve their sentence or part of their sentence on probation or under supervision in the community. [Senate Bill 54](#) (SB 54) will create a new requirement for the Department of Corrections to recommend that a person's probation, extended supervision, or parole be revoked if that person is charged with certain misdemeanors or a new felony, including low-level offenses like second-time possession of marijuana. The bill has already been approved by the State Assembly.

Increasing the number of revocations will harm children who are torn from their parents when they are sent back to prison, cause formerly incarcerated people to lose their jobs and housing, and separate those who have mental health issues from their treatment providers.

Increase In Prison Population

Changing the way that the state handles revocations will significantly increase the state's prison population, which is already on the rise. Wisconsin's prison population more than tripled between 1990 and 2005, before slightly declining for a few years. Since about 2013, the number of people in prison in Wisconsin is rising again, although not as steeply as it did in the 1990s.

This proposal to increase the number of people in Wisconsin's prisons should raise a red flag given that the state is already on track to lock up a record number of people even without the potential changes included in Senate Bill 54. With no change in revocation policy, Wisconsin's prison population is projected to rise 3% between 2017 and 2022, from 23,140 to 23,897 people. If lawmakers pass SB 54, Wisconsin's prison population is projected to surge even higher, increasing by 11% to 25,655 people by 2022.

What Are Revocations?

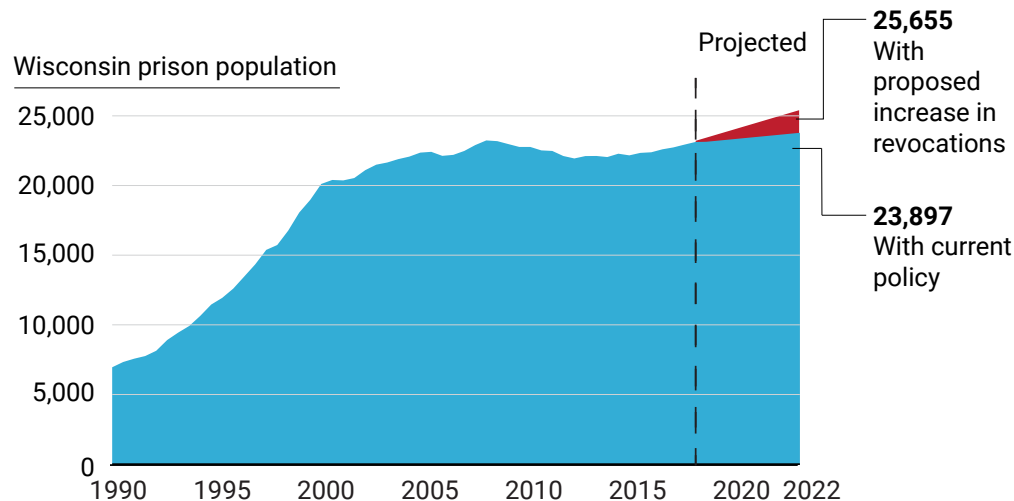
A revocation occurs when Department of Corrections (DOC) officials re-incarcerate an individual who is on probation, parole, or extended supervision for...

- committing a new crime OR
- violating a rule of supervision that does NOT involve a new crime.

Source: [ROC Wisconsin](#)

Wisconsin's Prison Population, Already Projected to Rise to a Record Level, Would Surge under Proposal

Wisconsin prison population. Senate Bill 54 would increase the number of people who are sent to prison for a previous offense ("revoked") when they are charged with a new crime.



Source: Wisconsin Department of Corrections, Council of State Governments

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Increase In Costs

The increase in prison population means an increase in costs as well—about \$57 million a year to lock up the additional people. But that's not all: because Wisconsin's prisons are already filled past capacity, there will be nowhere to put the additional prisoners. Senate Bill 54 also allows the state to take on an additional \$350 million in debt to build a new prison. There will also be additional costs to counties for jailing additional people who are awaiting their revocation hearings, although that figure is unknown at this point.

The increase in costs will raise Wisconsin's already-high corrections costs even further. Wisconsin state and local governments spent \$1.5 billion on corrections in 2015. That's 12% more per resident than the national average, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures. Nationally, only nine states spent more public money on corrections per state resident than Wisconsin. (Making useful comparisons of spending levels among states requires combining both state and local government spending, since various duties are performed at different levels of government in different states.)

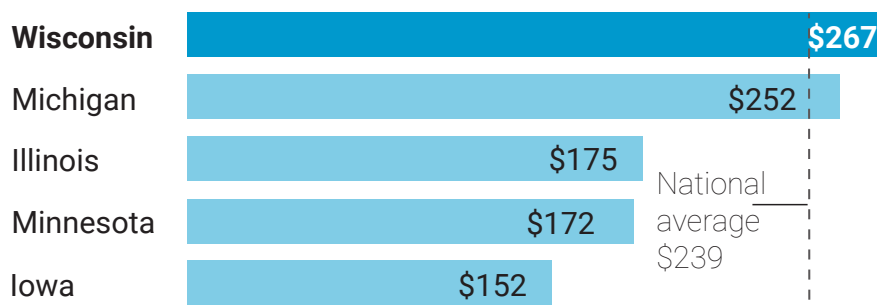
Wisconsin Already Spends More Than Neighbors

Wisconsin state and local governments spend more on corrections than in the neighboring states of Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, and Iowa. Wisconsin spends 6% more per state resident on corrections than Michigan, the neighboring state with the highest corrections costs, and 90% more on corrections per state resident than Iowa—an enormous cost difference. If Wisconsin spent the same amount as Iowa on corrections per state resident, our state and local governments would spend \$728 million less on corrections each year.

The state of Wisconsin spends more tax dollars on corrections than on the University of Wisconsin System. In fact, the state spends more tax dollars on the corrections system than any other purpose except K-12 education and health care for people with low incomes.

Wisconsin Spends More on Corrections than Neighboring States, and the National Average

Spending on corrections by state and local governments per state resident in fiscal year 2015.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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One of the reasons Wisconsin spends more per state resident than our neighboring states is that Wisconsin incarcerates a larger share of our population than our neighboring states. The cost of incarcerating an inmate in Wisconsin is about \$32,000 a year—similar to the costs of incarcerating an inmate in other states.

Wisconsin has more people in prison or jail for its size than the neighboring states of Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota. In fact, Wisconsin incarcerates twice as many people for its population size as Minnesota.

Increase In Human Cost

The dollar amounts that the state pays for corrections shine a light on the out-of-pocket costs that Wisconsin taxpayers pay for locking up a large number of people. But there is another cost that Wisconsin residents pay as well, one that is harder to quantify in financial terms, and is largely paid by communities of color, especially the African-American community.

There is enormous racial disparities in African-American/White incarceration rates in every state, but Wisconsin's disparities stand out as especially egregious. Wisconsin has the second-highest African-American incarceration rate of any state, and African-Americans in Wisconsin are 80% more likely to be incarcerated than the

Wisconsin's Incarceration Rate Higher than Neighboring States

Number of people in prison or local jail as of December 31, 2015, per 100,000 adults.

STATE	INCARCERATION RATE
WISCONSIN	780
Michigan	750
Illinois	640
Iowa	540
Minnesota	390

Source: Bureau of Justice Assistance

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national average, according to [The Sentencing Project](#). Nationally, African-Americans are five times more likely than Whites to be incarcerated, but in Wisconsin, African-Americans are eleven times more likely than Whites to be incarcerated.

These disparities translate into enormous costs that are paid in lost opportunity and human potential. Individuals who have been incarcerated often have a hard time finding work after they have been released, and have difficulty supporting their families and making contributions to their communities. The damage done by high rates of incarceration extends beyond the incarcerated individual, as children struggle with the effects of growing up with a missing parent, and neighborhoods grapple with the absence of community members, especially men.

These enormous racial disparities have their roots in discriminatory policies pursued by Wisconsin lawmakers, policies that prioritized spending money to lock up people rather than investing in families and communities. Senate Bill 54 will reinforce those damaging policies, leaving little doubt that African-American communities and other communities of color will pay an even higher price for Wisconsin's misguided corrections policies.

Conclusion

Addressing the high costs—financial and otherwise—that Wisconsin residents pay for our prison system ought to be a top priority for lawmakers from both parties. But during a time when many states are reforming their broken criminal justice systems and closing down unneeded or unsafe prisons, the Wisconsin legislature seems intent on locking up more people and building a new facility. The past choices by political leaders to invest in prisons rather than putting those resources to better use has done a great deal of harm to Wisconsin's families and communities. Lawmakers should take this opportunity to choose a different way forward.

The Wisconsin Budget Project is an initiative of Kids Forward that engages in analysis and education on state budget and tax issues, particularly those relating to low- and moderate-income families. The Budget Project seeks to broaden the debate on budget and tax policy through public education and by encouraging civic engagement on these issue.

Kids Forward advocates for effective, long-lasting solutions that break down barriers to success for children and families in Wisconsin. Using research and a community-informed approach, Kids Forward works to help every kid, every family, and every community thrive.