



Safety in State Correctional Facilities

Project Description

June 2019

BACKGROUND

The Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC) manages ten state prisons that house approximately 10,000 prisoners. Prisoners are held at four security levels: minimum, medium, “close,” and maximum. At one end of this range, minimum security housing units use mostly limited and nonintrusive mechanisms to manage offenders’ behavior. At the other end, maximum security units use extensive physical infrastructure and constant monitoring to tightly control all spaces where prisoners are present.

Broadly speaking, state prisons house the state’s most serious, chronic offenders. Most individuals in Minnesota’s correctional systems are serving their time in county jails or in the community under supervised release, probation, or parole. Compared to other states, Minnesota has a relatively low incarceration rate.

Recent events have focused the interest of legislators and the public on safety and security within Minnesota’s prisons. In July 2018, a corrections officer at the Stillwater prison was killed in an assault by a prisoner. Later that year, another officer suffered a medical emergency and died at the Oak Park Heights prison in the aftermath of responding to an assault there. Several other violent incidents at state prisons have been widely reported in the media.

POSSIBLE EVALUATION ISSUES

1. How safe are Minnesota’s prisons, both for the staff who work there and the offenders who live there?
2. To what extent has DOC taken reasonable steps to maintain and improve safety in state prisons?

DISCUSSION

Prisons, by their nature, house many people that courts have convicted of using violence against others. As a result, ensuring the personal safety of both staff and offenders in a correctional setting is an ongoing challenge.

We will focus our evaluation on DOC’s efforts to protect individuals’ safety when interpersonal conflicts occur. In other words, we will review threats to safety from assaults, abuse, threats, and harassment, but not from industrial safety hazards such as the unsafe operation of vehicles or equipment.

To make the best use of our limited resources, we will most closely examine the higher security level prisons at Oak Park Heights, Rush City, St. Cloud, and Stillwater. We will conduct in-depth site visits at these facilities during which we will speak to leadership, corrections officers, and offenders. We will conduct briefer visits to lower security level prisons.

In addition to our visits and interviews, we also plan to survey DOC staff and offenders. However, surveying prison inmates presents unique logistical challenges that may limit the number of responses we can obtain.

We will also gather and analyze data from several databases that contain information on offenders and DOC staff. Further, we will review several existing assessments of DOC prisons, including the results of accreditation reviews by the American Correctional Association and the audits required under the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act.

The evaluation is scheduled to be completed in early 2020. For additional information, contact David Kirchner, evaluation manager, at 651-296-3322 or david.kirchner@state.mn.us.