

Safety in State Correctional Facilities

Update to 2020 Evaluation Report

January 2021

Problems Identified

- **Chronic Staffing Shortages.** Even though the Department of Corrections (DOC) nearly quadrupled its use of overtime during the 2010s, many prisons struggled to meet daily staffing needs. Limited staffing reduced DOC's ability both to monitor prisoners and to provide them with recreation, therapy, and employment—activities associated with lower violence levels.
- **Lack of Systematic Oversight.** DOC has not formally assessed how safe its prisons are, nor has it collected the data that would be needed to make such an evaluation. An internal DOC peer review process was helpful, but occurred infrequently and stalled in recent years. Unlike county jails, DOC prisons do not undergo statutorily mandated inspections.
- **Hostile Workplace Environments.** One in three DOC staff we surveyed told us that bullying and harassment among staff was a problem in the prisons where they worked. Some told us disturbing stories of retaliation by staff against other staff. Female officers reported that they received little support from peers or supervisors after being sexually harassed by prisoners.
- **Inadequate Communication.** Both front-line staff and prisoners felt that administrators made many safety-related decisions arbitrarily. Lack of transparency has fed distrust and lowered morale among front-line staff.
- **Outdated Infrastructure.** The antiquated living units in the state's oldest prisons do not meet current standards and present physical security challenges, such as the danger of falling or being pushed over railings from several stories in the air.

Changes Implemented

- **New Strategic Plan Adopted.** DOC adopted a new strategic plan in 2020 and has reorganized its internal structure. A few changes, such as creating a new research division, relate broadly to the report's recommendations. However, DOC has primarily focused on handling the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on prison operations.

Action Needed

- **Address Report Recommendations.** As the pandemic's effects become more manageable, DOC administrators have told us they plan to return to our recommendations. DOC should increase staffing ratios in areas where violence has occurred repeatedly, address workplace environment issues, improve the transparency of administrative decision-making, and transform its data collection and analysis practices.
- **Require Oversight.** The Legislature should require regular assessments of security practices at state prisons, through either an internal or external process.
- **Plan for Facility Renewal.** DOC should prepare and present to the Legislature a long-term plan for rehabilitating or replacing the living units at its oldest facilities.