



Fiscal Services Division

December 19, 2022

Inside This Fiscal Research Brief

Summary

This *Fiscal Research Brief* provides an analysis of Iowa’s prison capacity and population over the last decade. Included is information on the costs of Iowa’s prison system, changes in Iowa’s prison capacity and population, information on the COVID-19 pandemic’s effect on the prison population, and a comparison to the prison population in other states.

Affected Agencies

Department of Corrections
Board of Parole

Iowa Code Authority

Iowa Code chapters [901B](#), [904](#), [904A](#), [905](#), [906](#), [907](#), [908](#)

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Prison Population and Capacity

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Background

Iowa has nine adult correctional institutions (also referred to as State prisons), which are responsible for incarcerating offenders sentenced to the custody and control of the Department of Corrections (DOC). These institutions include: the Anamosa State Penitentiary (ASP), the Clarinda Correctional Facility (CCF), the Fort Dodge Correctional Facility (FDCF), the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women (ICIW) at Mitchellville, the Iowa Medical and Classification Center (IMCC) at Oakdale, the Iowa State Penitentiary (ISP) at Fort Madison, the Mount Pleasant Correctional Facility (MPCF), the Newton Correctional Facility (NCF), and the North Central Correctional Facility (NCCF) at Rockwell City. These institutions house male and female offenders across the State in various security levels, with the IMCC being the intake facility for males and the ICIW being the intake facility for females.

Costs of the Iowa Prison System

The operating costs of the State institutions are 99.90% funded from the State General Fund. **Figure 1** provides information on State appropriations to the Iowa prison system, full-time equivalent (FTE) positions, total prison population, prison capacity, and prison population as a percentage of capacity from FY 2012 to FY 2022.

Figure 1 — Iowa Prison System Data

	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022
Prison System Appropriations*	\$263.3 million	\$268.6 million	\$273.1 million	\$276.9 million	\$279.0 million	\$274.3 million	\$272.2 million	\$277.6 million	\$281.4 million	\$281.4 million	\$289.5 million
FTE Positions**	2,579.80	2,556.69	2,576.01	2,573.82	2,539.41	2,442.98	2,305.77	2,370.71	2,421.81	2,363.82	2,589.58
Fiscal Year End Prison Population	8,333	8,074	8,117	8,217	8,207	8,372	8,419	8,473	7,569	7,744	8,434
Capacity	7,209	7,209	7,428	7,276	7,322	7,288	7,305	6,933	6,933	6,933	6,990
Population as a Percent of Capacity	115.59%	112.00%	109.28%	112.93%	112.09%	114.87%	115.25%	122.21%	109.17%	111.70%	120.66%

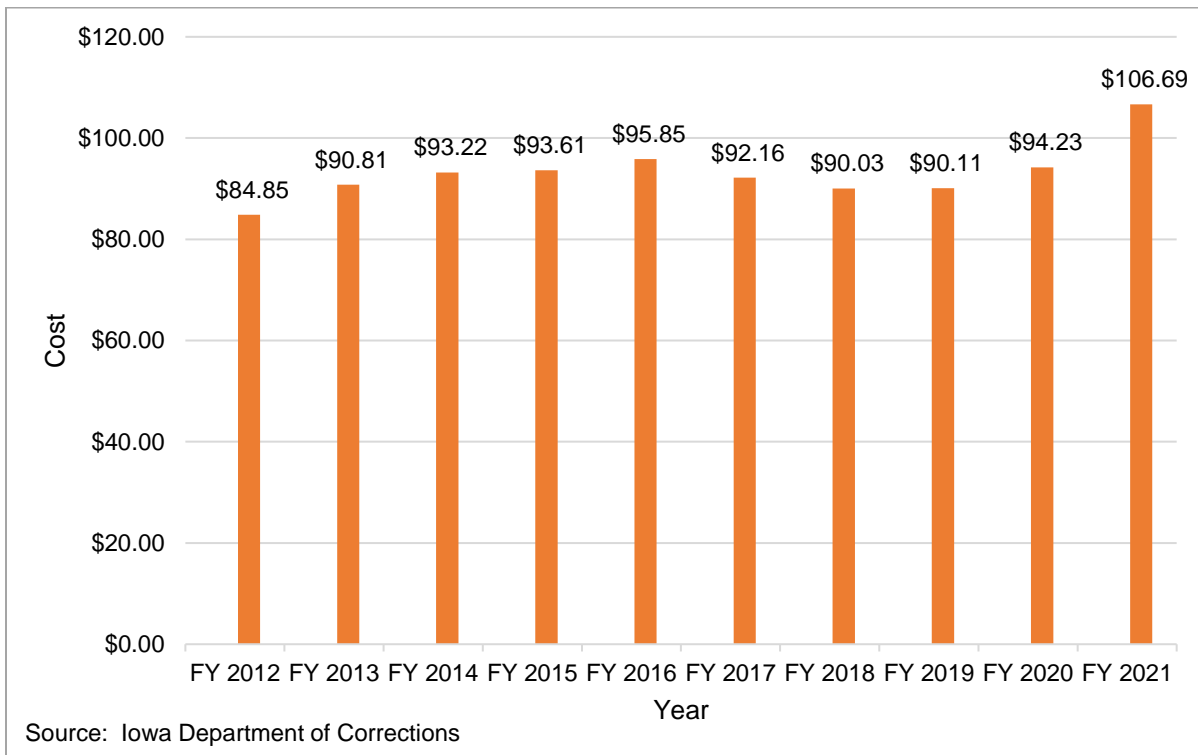
* Includes only General Fund appropriations to the DOC for the State prisons.
 ** Includes only FTE positions for the State prisons.
 Source: Iowa Department of Corrections

As shown in **Figure 1**, State appropriations to the DOC for the prisons increased by \$26,191,640 from FY 2012 to FY 2022, which is a 9.95% increase. During this time period, appropriations for the prisons increased seven of the years, decreased two of the years, and remained the same for one year. The biggest increase occurred from FY 2021 to FY 2022, when appropriations for the prisons increased by \$8,075,310. Additionally, from FY 2012 to FY 2022, the number of FTE positions for the State prisons increased by 9.78 FTE positions.

A significant factor in the cost of the prison system is the cost to the DOC for each individual who is incarcerated. **Figure 2** shows the average daily cost per inmate from FY 2012 to FY 2021. Fiscal year 2022 cost information is not yet available. During this time period, the lowest average daily cost per inmate occurred in FY 2012 at \$84.85. The highest average daily cost was \$106.69 and occurred in FY 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the DOC, this FY 2021 increase in average

cost per inmate was partially due to the decreased prison population at the time. The budgets of the institutions include various fixed costs, such as the costs of maintaining the physical buildings. As prison population decreases, these fixed costs are spread out amongst a smaller number of individuals, which increases the average cost per inmate. The increase in average cost per inmate during the pandemic was also due to additional expenses incurred as a result of the pandemic, including food, medical supplies, and overtime.

Figure 2 — Average Daily Cost Per Inmate, FY 2012 to FY 2021



Current Issue

Each State institution has a capacity, which is the intended population based on security type and planning designs when the institution was built. An institution’s capacity also factors in physical modifications since the institution was built as well as staffing availability. Iowa’s institutions regularly operate above capacity. Operating at high levels of overcapacity creates issues both with housing individuals and with directly supervising individuals in the institutions. Further, according to a [report](#) by CGL Companies, with which the DOC contracted in 2021, operating over capacity “...exacerbates existing operational challenges in security, offender management, and service delivery, while placing significant additional pressure on custody staff. The additional workload and heightened tension created by crowding is a major factor in the Department’s current staff recruitment and retention issues.”

Figure 3 provides information on each of the nine institutions, including security level, capacity, population, and population as a percentage of capacity.

Figure 3 — State Institutions

Institution	Security Level	Capacity	FY 2022 Population*	Population as a Percent of Capacity
Anamosa (ASP)	Medium/Maximum	908	945	104.07%
Clarinda (CCF)	Medium	750	1,050	140.00%
Fort Dodge (FDCF)	Medium	1,162	1,237	106.45%
Mitchellville (ICIW)	Minimum/Medium	774	691	89.28%
Oakdale (IMCC)	Medium	585	901	154.02%
Fort Madison (ISP)	Maximum	612	735	120.10%
Mount Pleasant (MPCF)	Minimum	940	1,143	121.60%
Newton (NCF)	Minimum/Medium	1,014	1,238	122.09%
Rockwell City (NCCF)	Minimum	245	494	201.63%

* Population on June 30, 2022
 Source: Iowa Department of Corrections

The institution with the lowest capacity is the NCCF, with a capacity of 245, and the institution with the highest capacity is the FDCF, with a capacity of 1,162. As displayed in **Figure 3**, eight of the nine institutions were over capacity at the end of FY 2022. The only institution operating below capacity was the ICIW. Six of the institutions were over capacity by more than 20.00%, and one institution was over capacity by more than 100.00%. The NCCF was operating at 201.63% of capacity at the end of FY 2022.

Changes in Prison Population and Capacity

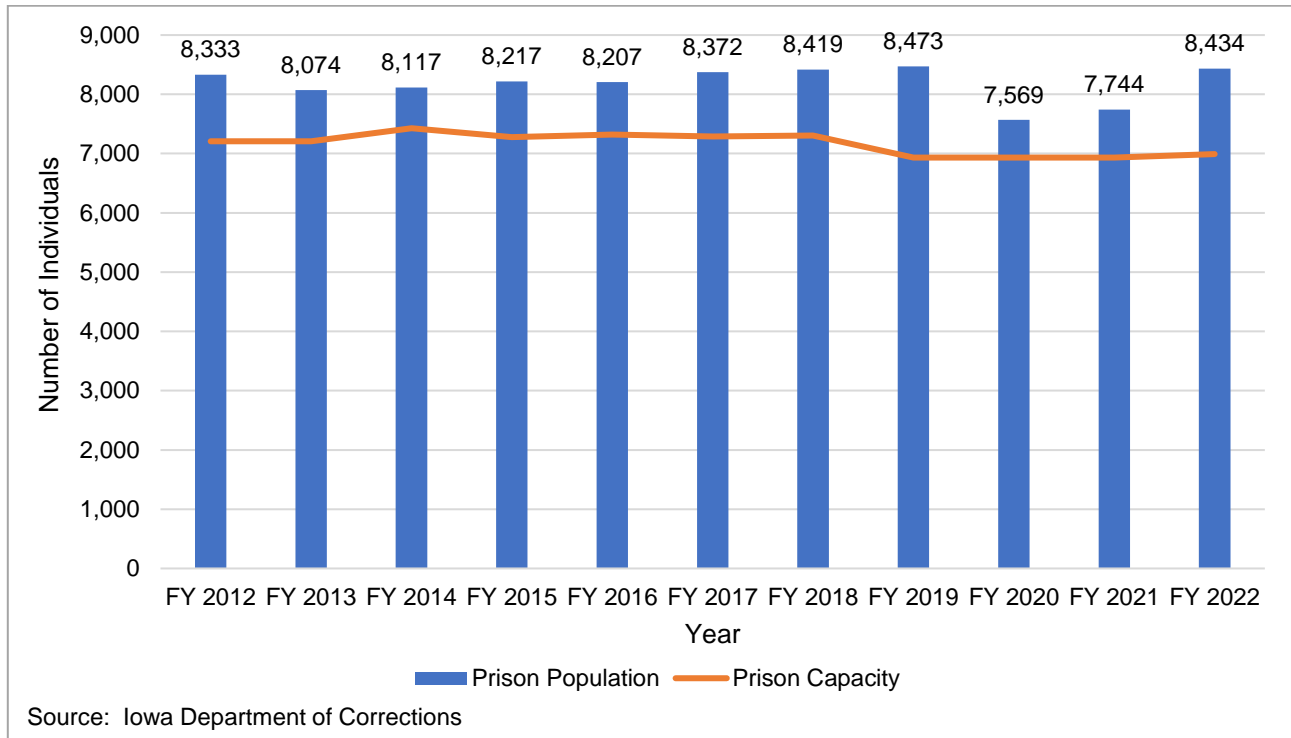
Iowa’s prison population varies over time due to a variety of factors. The three primary factors that affect prison population are:

- The number of prison admissions.
- The length of stay of those who are incarcerated.
- The number of prison releases.

These three factors are the basis of change in prison population over time. However, many other factors can contribute to these primary factors, including legislative changes to the criminal code and criminal procedures, Board of Parole (BOP) decisions and policies, actions of the Judicial Branch, judicial sentencing, parole and probation revocation policies, and individual behavior.

Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the prison population compared to prison capacity across all nine State institutions from FY 2012 to FY 2022.

Figure 4 — Prison Population and Capacity, FY 2012 to FY 2022



The prison population increased from 8,333 at the end of FY 2012 to 8,434 at the end of FY 2022, which is an increase of 101 incarcerated individuals. During this same time, total capacity decreased by 219 individuals. Total prison population largely trended upward from FY 2013 to FY 2019, with FY 2019 having the highest prison population in this analysis. Fiscal Year 2020 had the lowest prison population at the end of the fiscal year during this time, but the prison population dropped below this number in FY 2021. Prison population stayed at a lower level in FY 2021, but in FY 2022, it increased by 690 individuals and was at a similar level as the prison population in FY 2019.

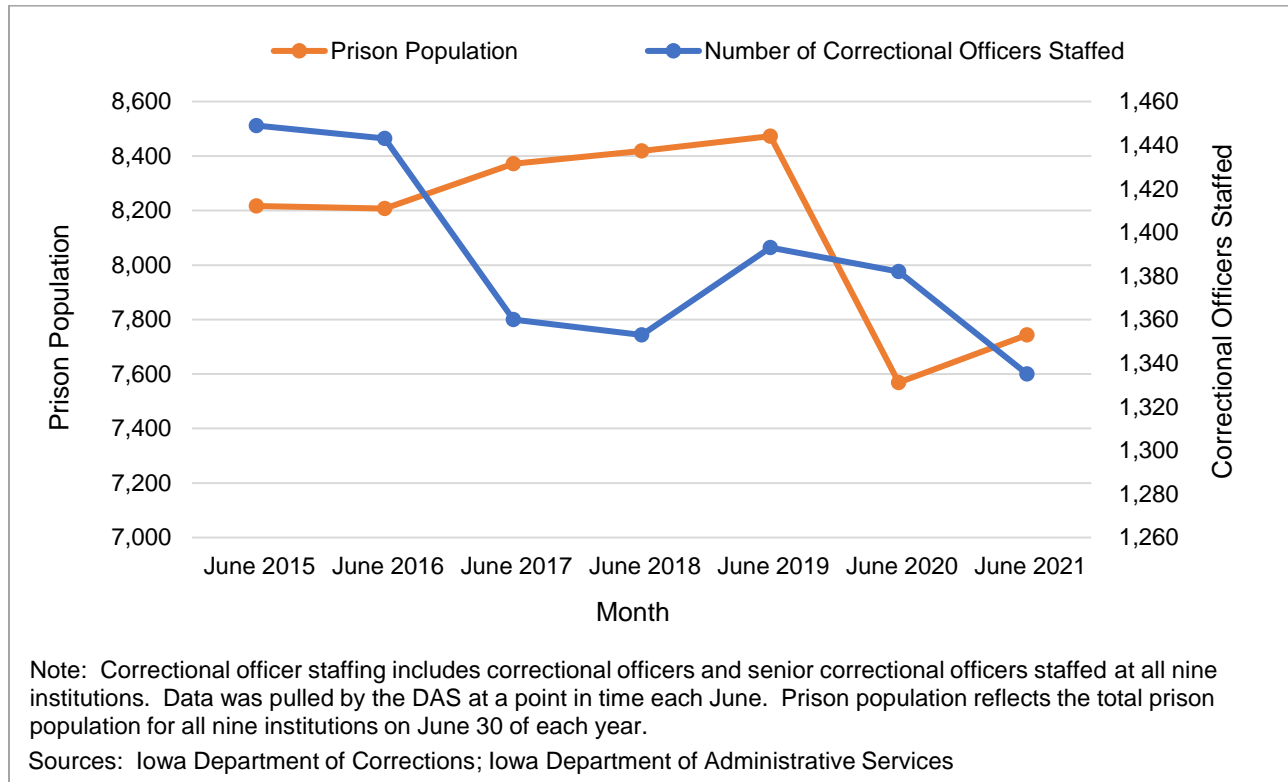
The changes in capacity from FY 2012 to FY 2022 are largely to due to the openings, closings, and renovations of various facilities and units. The ICIW underwent a complete renovation, which led to an increase in capacity at that facility starting in CY 2014. In FY 2014, the women’s unit at the MPCF closed. In August 2015, the old ISP facility closed and the new ISP facility opened. Around this time, Farm 3 with minimum live-out at the ISP closed. In response to FY 2017 deappropriations, the DOC closed the John Bennett Unit at the ISP, the Luster Heights Camp, and the Clarinda Lodge.

Iowa prisons were consistently operating above capacity from FY 2012 to FY 2022, including during the COVID-19 pandemic when the population was significantly reduced. During every year represented on **Figure 4** above, the DOC institutions operated above capacity. For nine of these years, the institutions were more than 10.00% over capacity, and for two of those years, the institutions were more than 20.00% over capacity. The institutions operated the highest over capacity in FY 2019, at which time they were 22.21% over capacity. Fiscal Year 2020 had the lowest year-end overcapacity rate, at which time the institutions were 9.17% over capacity.

One factor related to prison population and capacity is the correctional officer staffing level of the institutions. **Figure 5** shows the correctional officer staffing levels from 2015 to 2021, along with

prison population during this time.¹ The level to which the prisons are over capacity can have a stronger effect on the DOC when the staffing level of correctional officers is lower. Additionally, a lower correctional officer-to-offender ratio adds strain to the institutions in a similar way to high overcapacity rates. If the DOC’s overcapacity rate is at levels previously reported but staffing levels are lower, this overcapacity rate affects the DOC more. As shown in **Figure 5**, from June 2016 to June 2018, staffing levels trended downward while prison population trended upward. This also occurred from June 2020 to June 2021.

Figure 5 — Correctional Officer Staffing Levels vs. Prison Population, 2015 to 2021



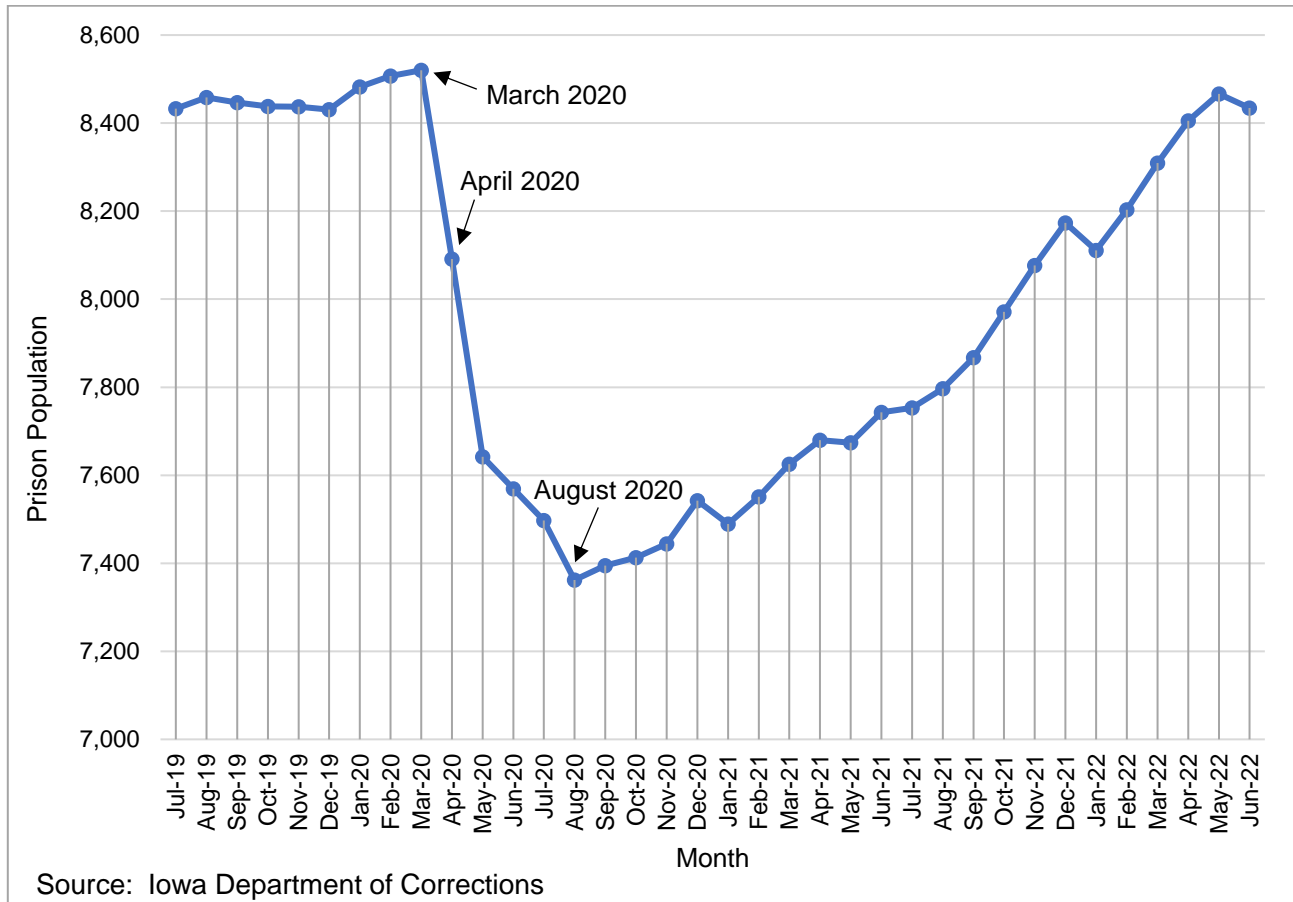
Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected prison population, with the number of individuals incarcerated dropping to the lowest levels reported during the period of FY 2012 to FY 2022. In general, there are not usually large differences in prison population from year to year, so the large decrease that occurred in FY 2020 and FY 2021 during the pandemic is notable.

Figure 6 shows Iowa’s total prison population monthly from July 2019 to June 2022. The population for each month reflects the prison population on the last day of the month.

¹ The Department of Administrative Services (DAS) was able to provide data for correctional officer staffing only for the 2015 to 2021 time period.

Figure 6 — Monthly Prison Population, FY 2020 to FY 2022



According to **Figure 6**, the Iowa prison population dropped significantly beginning in April 2020 due to various factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the responsive measures by the DOC and the BOP. The lowest year-end prison population in two decades occurred in FY 2020 with a total of 7,569 incarcerated individuals. The trend of lower prison populations continued throughout the pandemic.

The first factor that contributed to lower prison populations during the COVID-19 pandemic was the collaboration between the DOC, the BOP, and the eight Community-Based Corrections (CBC) districts at the beginning of the pandemic to transition as many incarcerated individuals as possible to community supervision. These efforts at reducing the prison population were largely due to health and safety concerns, especially around the ability to socially distance and to quarantine sick individuals. The goal was for the BOP to process individuals recommended for release by the DOC as quickly as possible to parole or work release while also balancing this process with the need for public safety. Many inmates were released during this time due to this strategy. The strategy employed by the DOC and the BOP included the following:

- The DOC utilized data-based strategies to assist staff in the institutions to identify individuals to recommend to the BOP for release.
- The BOP held double panels to review parole applicants. Each panel consisted of at least three BOP members. The BOP generally has a single panel meet to review individuals, but during this

time, an additional panel met as well. Holding double panels served the purpose of enabling the BOP to review more individuals while also sustaining the quality with which the BOP operates.

- The BOP reviewed all individuals who were due for their annual review as well as all individuals who the DOC recommended to review.
- On multiple occasions, the BOP invited each institution to send the BOP a list of individuals to whom the BOP had previously denied release but whom the DOC believed should be reconsidered.
- The BOP's policy throughout the process was that the BOP would only release individuals whom the BOP would have chosen to release if the pandemic was not happening.

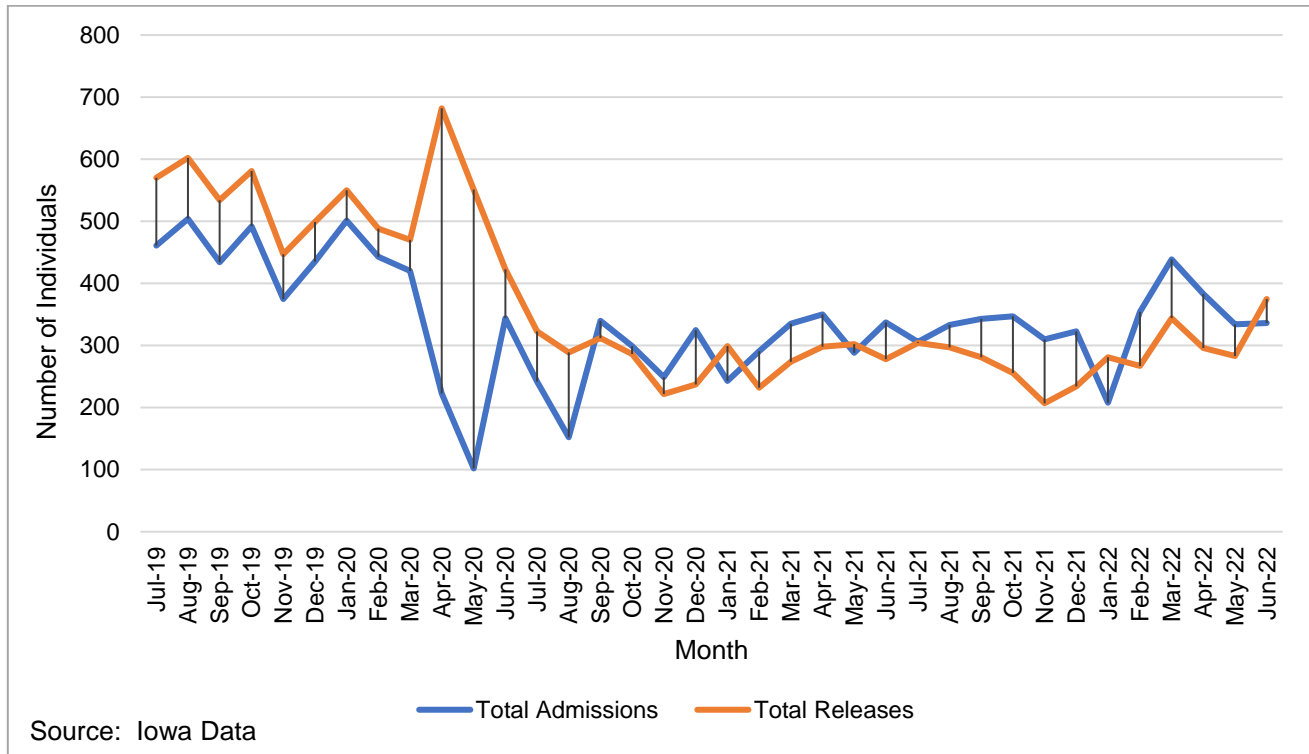
Further, during the pandemic, the DOC altered its revocation guidance to the CBC district departments as part of its strategy to decrease prison admissions. The DOC encouraged the CBC district departments to make the revocation review process more structured and require more layers to revoke parole or probation. The DOC worked with the CBC district departments to reduce technical revocations and returns to prisons while also balancing this effort with public safety.

Another factor in lower prison populations was an increase in the time frame in which inmates were processed into prison from county jails. This increase resulted in higher county jail populations and lower prison populations. The main reason for this increase in processing time is that the Judicial Branch postponed trials for portions of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in more individuals awaiting trial in the county jails. Jury trials were postponed starting in March 2020 until September 2020, and again from November 2020 until February 2021.

This increase in processing time also occurred because the DOC temporarily paused admissions into the institutions from county jails at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was done to limit the impact of the significant amount of COVID-19 cases in the county jails at that time. The DOC requested an intake hold from the counties on April 29, 2020, and intakes resumed at the ICIW on May 13, 2020, and at the IMCC on May 26, 2020. During this intake hold, the DOC admitted some individuals who were difficult for county jails to house, but admissions were largely paused. The pause in admissions contributed to higher populations in the county jails and lower populations in the institutions.

The trends in prison population during this time period can be seen through the number of prison admissions and releases, as these two data points directly determine the changes in prison population. **Figure 7** shows prison admissions and releases each month from FY 2020 to FY 2022.

Figure 7 — Prison Admissions and Releases, FY 2020 to FY 2022



The highest number of releases occurred in April 2020 with 682 releases, and the lowest number of admissions occurred in May 2020 with 102 admissions. The biggest difference between releases and admissions occurred in April 2020, when 459 more individuals were released from the institutions than were admitted. Following closely behind is May 2020, when 449 more individuals were released from the institutions than were admitted. These scenarios contributed greatly to the reduced prison population during this time.

Release numbers were lower after the first few months of the pandemic and continued at this lower level. This is largely due to a smaller pool of individuals still in the institutions who were likely to be deemed appropriate for release by the BOP, as a significant number of those individuals were released in the initial months of the pandemic.

There were more releases than admissions through August 2020, when the prison population dropped to its lowest point, as displayed in **Figure 6** on page 7. Since September 2020, most months had more prison admissions than releases, which explains the growing prison population since then. However, prison admissions have mostly stayed at lower levels than were reported in the months before the COVID-19 pandemic mitigation measures started.

Current Situation and Future

Prison population numbers decreased monthly from April 2020 to August 2020. However, as the strategies used to reduce prison population during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic lessened and other pandemic-related factors subsided, prison population numbers increased. The BOP is only holding double panels as necessary, the DOC is no longer implementing special release initiatives, jury trials have resumed since February 2021, and the Judicial Branch has started to clear its backlog of cases.

At the end of FY 2021, the prison population had only increased by 175 individuals compared to FY 2020, with pandemic-related factors still having an effect. However, total prison population has now almost returned to pre-pandemic levels. On June 30, 2022, the total prison population was 8,434, which is 20.66% above capacity. This number is consistent with the levels reported in FY 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic, and only 86 fewer than the high reported in March 2020 (**Figure 6** on page 7). Further, the FY 2022 prison population is greater than the prison populations reported from FY 2012 to FY 2018.

The Division of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning (CJJP) of the Department of Human Rights publishes an Iowa Prison Population Forecast each year. The [2021 Iowa Prison Population Forecast](#) projected Iowa’s prison population to be approximately 8,051 on June 30, 2022. The actual total prison population on June 30, 2022, exceeded this projection by 383 individuals, returning to pre-pandemic levels more quickly than expected by the CJJP. In the forecast, the CJJP also projects that the prison population will increase to 9,310 by FY 2031, which is an increase of 1,566 from the population in FY 2021. At this level, the institutions would be 33.19% above capacity if the DOC’s capacity remains at 6,990 individuals.

It is important to note that this projection is based on current prison trends, policies, and practices. The purpose of the CJJP’s projections is to indicate what will likely happen to prison population numbers based on these factors. According to the 2021 Iowa Prison Population Forecast, “...the forecast is a guide for programmatic and policy changes to improve outcomes for incarcerated individuals. To date, there have been several efforts by state government officials, [the DOC], and policy makers to help ensure that prison populations do not reach their forecasted growth figures.” According to the DOC, the actual prison population does not usually reach the CJJP’s projections because efforts are made to prevent this.

There are multiple possible methods of preventing prison population growth. One strategy is to increase the agreement rate between the BOP and the DOC. This strategy involves the DOC and the BOP working together to ensure the BOP understands the DOC’s recommendations. Another strategy is to lower the revocation rate so that fewer individuals return to prison from parole. Reducing the recidivism rate would also play a role in lowering the prison population because it would reduce returns to prison. The recidivism rate is the percentage of offenders released from prison or work release who return to prison within three years. There are many factors that influence the recidivism rate, and the DOC has been working to lower it. **Figure 8** displays Iowa’s recidivism rate from FY 2012 to FY 2022. The recidivism rate for FY 2022 was 37.00%, which is a 1.70% decrease from FY 2021. The recidivism rate has now decreased for two years in a row after increasing for six years.

Figure 8 — Recidivism Rates, FY 2012 to FY 2022

FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022
30.70%	30.30%	29.80%	31.90%	34.20%	35.40%	37.80%	38.90%	39.60%	38.70%	37.00%

Source: Iowa Department of Corrections

Beyond these strategies, many methods to prevent prison population growth are outside the DOC’s sphere of influence. This includes legislative changes, which can affect prison population in different ways and through different methods.

In regard to specific recommendations, the CJJP noted in the 2021 Iowa Prison Population Forecast that special sentences, mandatory minimums, and drug offense sentencing play a role in Iowa’s prisons operating over capacity. The CJJP also recommended studying the temporary changes

made within the correctional system during the COVID-19 pandemic to determine what worked well and how specific policies could be implemented on a more permanent basis, especially in regard to policies that help to minimize prison admissions and revocations and that utilize the CBC district departments more.

Other States

The trends in Iowa’s prison population can be better understood in the context of the changes in the prison population of other states. For the purpose of this analysis, Iowa is compared to the six states that border Iowa, which include Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. A comparison to national trends is also included in this section.

Figure 9 shows the prison population each year from CY 2011 to CY 2020 for Iowa and surrounding states.² The prison population figures are the number of sentenced prisoners under the jurisdiction of each state. Sentenced prisoners include prisoners with sentences of more than one year. Figures are as of December 31 of each year. Although the prison population of each state cannot be directly compared due to the different total populations of each state, the change in prison population over time for each state is a valuable comparison. As shown in the line chart for each state, each state’s prison population changed in different ways over the 10-year period. Although each state’s prison population dropped in CY 2020 in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic, different states experienced different trends up until that point.

Figure 9 — Prison Population of Iowa and Surrounding States, CY 2011 to CY 2020

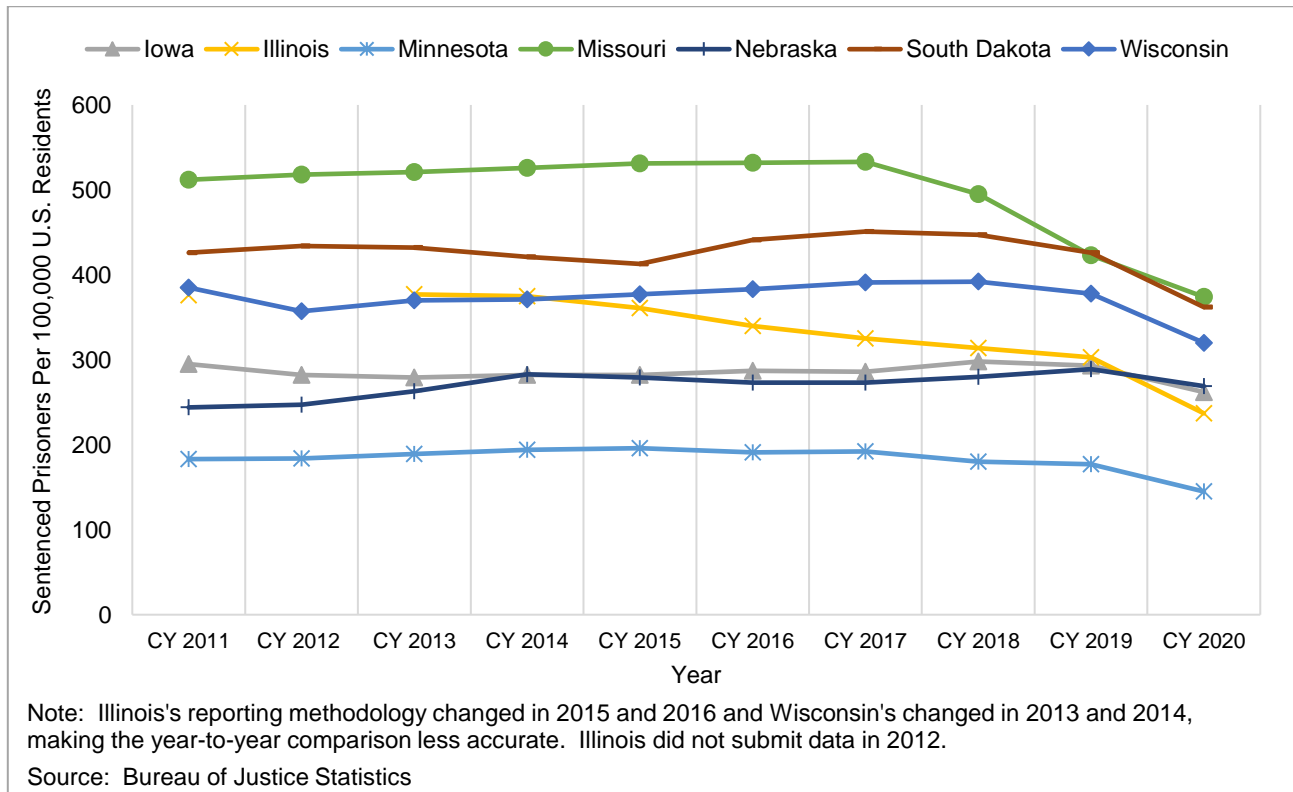
	CY 2011	CY 2012	CY 2013	CY 2014	CY 2015	CY 2016	CY 2017	CY 2018	CY 2019	CY 2020	
Iowa	9,057	8,686	8,654	8,798	8,816	8,998	8,999	9,399	9,260	8,280	
Illinois	48,427	49,348	48,653	48,278	46,240	43,657	41,427	39,915	38,259	29,729	
Minnesota	9,800	9,938	10,289	10,637	10,798	10,592	10,708	10,101	9,982	8,236	
Missouri	30,829	31,244	31,537	31,938	32,328	32,461	32,592	30,366	26,038	23,059	
Nebraska	4,511	4,594	4,929	5,347	5,312	5,235	5,257	5,413	5,596	5,220	
South Dakota	3,530	3,644	3,672	3,605	3,558	3,820	3,959	3,942	3,797	3,242	
Wisconsin	21,998	20,474	21,285	21,404	21,763	22,144	22,682	22,794	22,039	18,674	

Note: Illinois’s reporting methodology changed in 2015 and 2016 and Wisconsin’s changed in 2013 and 2014, making the year-to-year comparison less accurate.
 Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

² CY 2020 figures are the most recent data available from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Another method of comparison is imprisonment rates. A state’s imprisonment rate is the number of sentenced prisoners under state or federal jurisdiction per 100,000 U.S. residents. Sentenced prisoners include prisoners with sentences of more than one year. **Figure 10** shows the imprisonment rates of Iowa and surrounding states from CY 2011 to CY 2020.³ Imprisonment rates are as of December 31 of each year. Looking at imprisonment rates allows a much more direct comparison between states than prison population totals because it takes the population of each state into account.

Figure 10 — Imprisonment Rates of Iowa and Surrounding States, CY 2011 to CY 2020



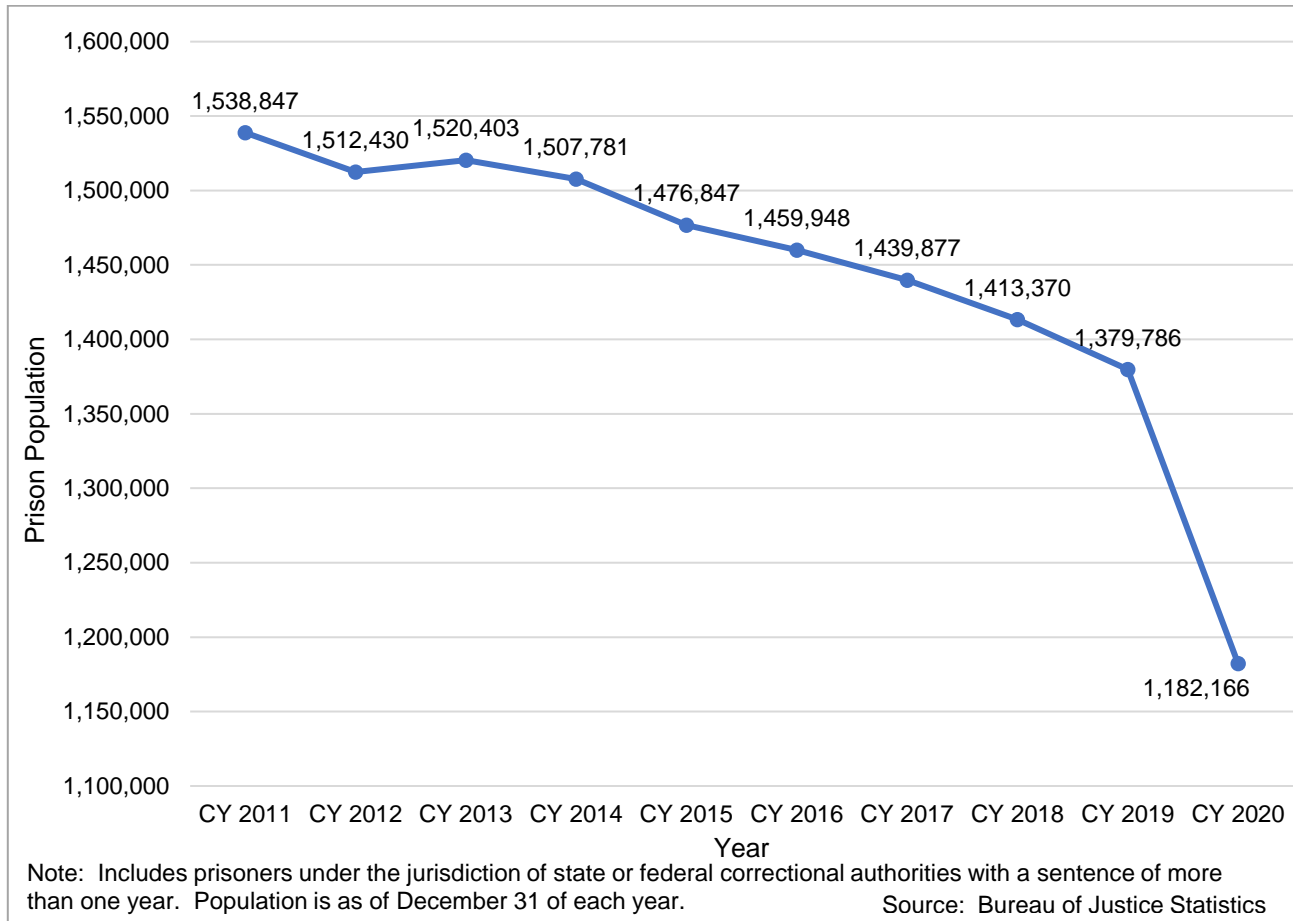
As shown in **Figure 10**, Iowa ranked third out of seven for lowest imprisonment rate for much of the time period shown. Missouri, South Dakota, and Wisconsin had a higher imprisonment rate than Iowa at all points. Minnesota had a lower imprisonment rate than Iowa at all points. Iowa went from an imprisonment rate of 295 sentenced prisoners per 100,000 U.S. residents in 2011 to an imprisonment rate of 262 sentenced prisoners per 100,000 U.S. residents in 2020. Each state experienced a decrease in imprisonment rates from 2019 to 2020, which coincides with the reduction of prison population during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 11 shows the total U.S. prison population from CY 2011 to CY 2020.⁴ It includes prisoners under the jurisdiction of state or federal correctional authorities with a sentence of more than one year. Figures are as of December 31 of each year.

³ CY 2020 figures are the most recent data available from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

⁴ CY 2020 figures are the most recent data available from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Figure 11 — U.S. Prison Population, CY 2011 to CY 2020



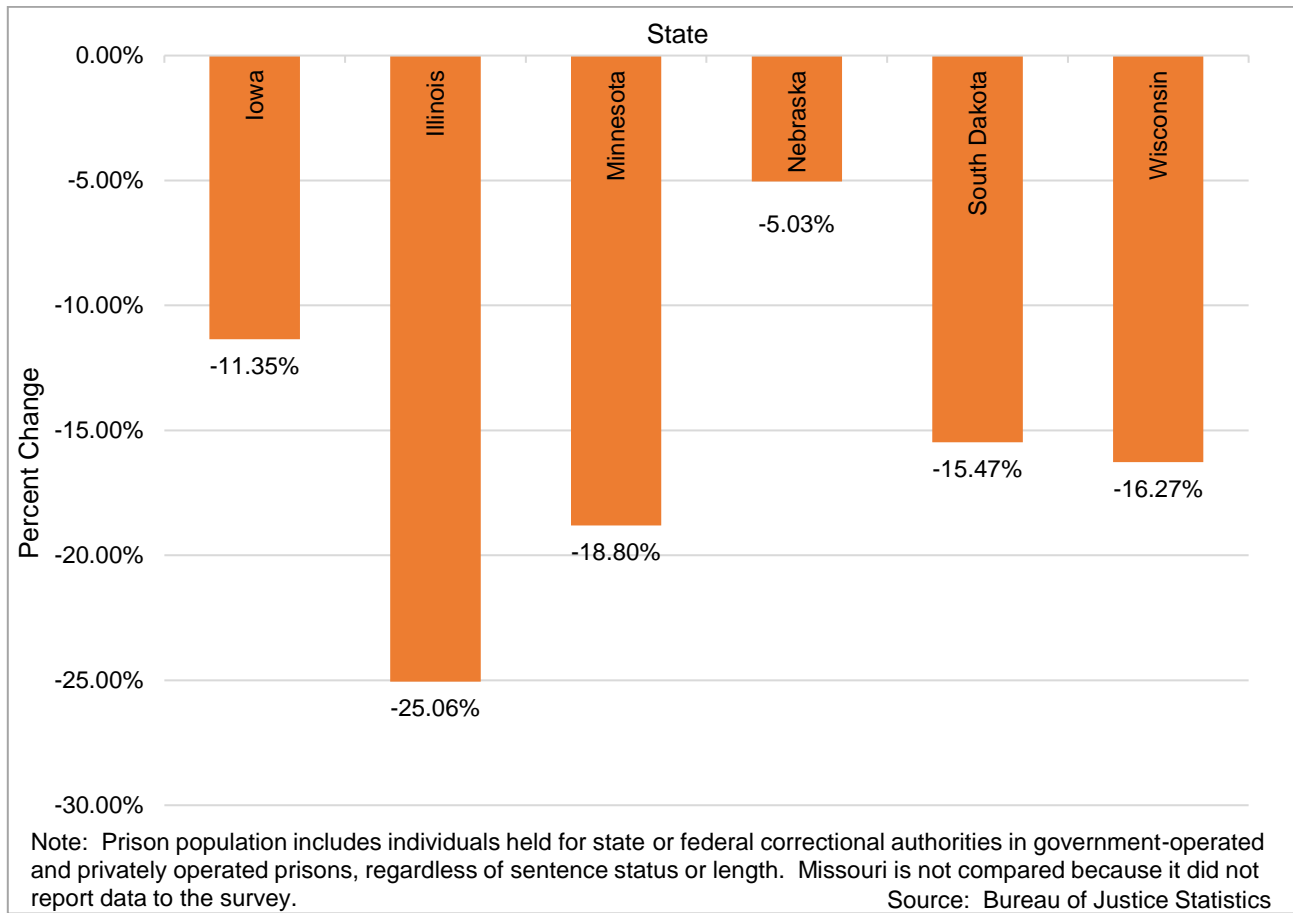
As displayed in the graph, U.S. prison population trended downward over this 10-year span. The most significant drop occurred from CY 2019 to CY 2020, which coincides with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. From CY 2011 to CY 2020, the national prison population decreased by 356,681 individuals, which is a decrease of 23.18%. When removing CY 2020 from the comparison, the national prison population decreased by 159,061 individuals from CY 2011 to CY 2019, which is a decrease of 10.34%. On the whole, the national prison population followed different trends during this time period than Iowa and most of Iowa’s border states compared above.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the correctional systems of other states in similar ways to Iowa. Across the country, prison admissions decreased drastically in 2020 because of delays in court proceedings and other pandemic-related factors. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) released a [special report](#), “Impact of COVID-19 on State and Federal Prisons, March 2020-February 2021,” which, in part, discusses the national decrease in prison population during the pandemic. According to the report, there was a 17.10% decrease in the number of individuals in state prisons nationwide from February 2020 to February 2021, and most of this decrease happened between February and August 2020.

Figure 12 shows the change in prison population in Iowa and surrounding states from February 2020 to February 2021. Iowa ranks fifth out of six for largest percent change compared to the surrounding states that are shown in the figure. Of the states in the figure, Illinois experienced the largest percent change, with its prison population decreasing by 25.06% during this time period. Nebraska experienced the smallest percent change, with its prison population only decreasing by 5.03% during this same time period.

Figure 12 — Change in Prison Population, February 2020 to February 2021



Summary

Iowa’s prison population has largely trended upward over the last decade. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this trend, and of the years analyzed, the State institutions were the least over capacity in FY 2020 and FY 2021. Iowa’s surrounding states similarly experienced large decreases in prison population in 2020. The significant decrease in Iowa’s prison population in these years was largely due to efforts by the DOC and the BOP to release individuals and an increase in the processing time from county jails to the institutions.

However, FY 2022 has shown a return to the prison population levels reported before the pandemic. The State prisons were 20.66% over capacity at the end of FY 2022, which is the second-highest overcapacity level in the years analyzed. At the end of FY 2022, all institutions except the ICIW were over capacity, and six institutions were over capacity by more than 20.00%.

Prison population is affected by three main factors, which include prison admissions, prison releases, and length of stay. Any efforts or policy changes aimed at addressing the number of individuals incarcerated in Iowa prisons ultimately must affect at least one of these factors. There are various possible methods of preventing prison population growth, some of which can be undertaken by the DOC and others which would require legislative action.

Sources

[Department of Corrections](#)

[Board of Parole](#)

[Division of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning, Department of Human Rights](#)

[Department of Administrative Services](#)

[Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice](#)

[CGL Companies](#)

[Iowa Data](#)

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