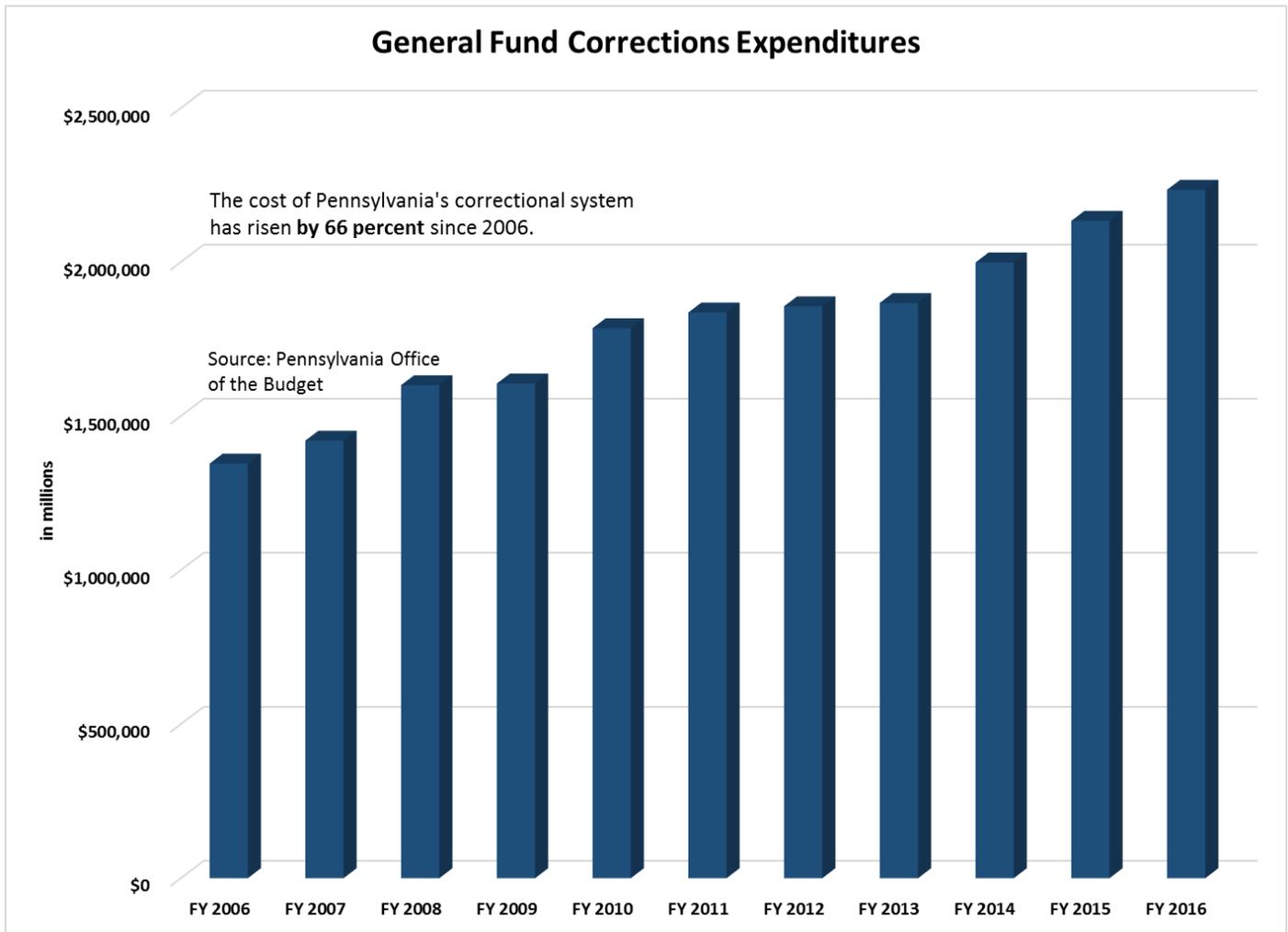


**MODERNIZING PENNSYLVANIA'S CORRECTIONAL SYSTEM**  
**Submitted Testimony of the Commonwealth Foundation**  
**PENNSYLVANIA SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE**  
 January 23, 2017

The Commonwealth Foundation would like to thank Chairman Greenleaf, Chairman Leach, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony on the state's planned prison closures. We hope to work alongside committee members as well as the entire General Assembly to right-size Pennsylvania's correctional system for the benefit of both prisoners and taxpayers.

The success of the 2012 Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI) has paved the way for the redesign of Pennsylvania's correctional system. Since the passage of JRI reforms, the state's prison population has declined by more than 1,880, according to data collected by the Department of Corrections (DOC). Yet, costs have continued to rise, albeit more slowly than they otherwise would have in the absence of these reforms.



The Independent Fiscal Office (IFO) predicts corrections costs [will continue to rise in the next five fiscal years](#), even as DOC projects a *decline* of 1,000 inmates over the next four. The conspicuous disconnect between the system's population and its costs demonstrates the need to continue implementing best practices to control costs while still protecting public safety.

We believe Pennsylvania must continue to pursue reforms that reduce correction costs and reduce crime by directing offenders toward more effective and less expensive criminal justice programs. As part of phase two of Justice Reinvestment Initiative, the Council of State Governments Justice Center has offered a list of recommendations that would reduce the prison population.

These recommendations would [save approximately \\$108 million](#). Under the plan, half of the savings would be used to further reduce recidivism. Our summary of the Justice Center's recommendations are below:

- **Ensure individuals are released when they're eligible for parole.** Too often prisoners are kept beyond their minimum sentence without good reason. This additional time in prison costs taxpayers an estimated \$69 million a year.
- **Base sentences on cost-effective recidivism-reducing sanctions.** Judges don't have access to the pertinent information needed to impose sentences most likely to reduce recidivism. If lawmakers give judges the tools needed to hand down effective sentences, they will be in a better position to move less dangerous offenders out of prison.
- **Avoid lengthy prison terms for minor probation and parole violations.** The IFO puts the cost of housing an inmate at \$48,200. In contrast, supervising the average parolee costs about \$4,000. Ensuring "swift and predictable" sanctions for probation and parole violators can help avoid the more expensive alternative of a needlessly long prison sentence.
- **Properly utilize community correction facilities.** DOC is already pursuing this course of action. Community correction facilities (also known as halfway houses) have not been ["yielding satisfactory outcomes."](#) This is why DOC is cutting facility capacity. Under the department's plan, people who would normally be sent to these facilities would be supervised by a parole agent at home.

Together, these reforms could reduce the costs of incarceration, address concerns about prison overcrowding, and reduce recidivism—making Pennsylvania safer for those inside and outside of the correctional system.

Pennsylvania's move to reduce its prison population is part of a nationwide trend. [According to Pew Research Center](#), 35 states have seen a decline in their imprisonment rate. Of those thirty-five states, only four experienced an increase in crime. Pennsylvania was not among those states. From 2010-2015, the commonwealth reduced its imprisonment rate by 3.5 percent while experiencing a **16.6 percent decrease** in the crime rate. Lawmakers should seek to build on this success by embracing the reforms offered by the Justice Center and [adopted by the JRI Working Group](#).

As the state reduces its prison population, along with its correctional expenditures, this may result in the need to close some prisons. We believe that these prison closures should only be considered in terms of their impact on public safety. That is to say, prisons should not be considered an economic stimulus. Prisons serve to keep violent offenders out of society. They should not function as an economic development tool.

In a 2010 [report published by the Congressional Research Service](#), Suzanne Kirchhoff finds little evidence linking prison facilities to improved economic growth. She writes, “There are relatively sparse data on the long-term economic impact of prison development. Some studies indicate slight economic gains for prison towns, while others suggest that rural areas that have become prison anchors may have grown less rapidly than similar counties without prisons.”

The available empirical evidence and key economic insights indicate local economies should not rely on prison facilities as a viable long-term economic strategy.

Every dollar used to fund prisons is first extracted from the private sector in the form of taxes on working families. Pennsylvanians’ economic opportunities are based on private sector growth, not on the state’s incarceration rate. Indeed, by keeping prisons open unnecessarily, the state drains valuable resources from the private economy via higher taxes, which [reduces overall economic growth](#).

To reiterate, any decision to close state prisons should be based first and foremost on public safety. We believe DOC’s proposal to close two prisons and cut the community corrections facility population—coupled with the latest JRI reforms—will lead to better corrections practices, which may reduce the overall crime rate.

Several members have expressed concerns that closing prisons could result in prison overcrowding. This is a valid issue, and should be examined thoroughly. According to Secretary of Corrections John Wetzel, the remaining prisons can absorb new prisoners without compromising the security of the people who live and work in the facilities every day. We at the Commonwealth Foundation lack expertise in prison management, and would thus defer to those better equipped to speak to the question of proper prison capacity.

We would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to submit our testimony for the record. If members have any questions or concerns, please don’t hesitate to reach out to us at your convenience.