

Lifer's Group Fast Facts: MEDICAL COSTS IN THE MASSACHUSETTS DOC

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BACKGROUND

Total and per prisoner medical costs for Massachusetts (MA) state prisoners increased 3% in FY2023 (TABLE), ending prior double digit surges. Quality indicies, however, were so deficient as to require Wellpath's firing in 2024. Major reasons for high costs are expenses for older prisoners. The large number of aging prisoners is fueled by the state's sentence structure, especially the large number of Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentences, resulting in MA prisoners being the oldest in the U.S. since at least 2016 (1).

The total number of MA state prisoners peaked in 2012 with 19% aged 50 or older and 9% serving LWOP sentences. The number of prisoners aged 50+ has increased even as total numbers decreased, largely due to progressive aging of the resident population. Increased deaths and medical paroles during the pandemic slightly decreased numbers of aging prisoners but their percentage has continued to increase. In 2024, 33% of prisoners are aged 50+, 15% are aged 60+ and 19% are serving LWOP, by far the highest percentage of LWOP prisoners in the U.S. (2). Overall, since 2012, the total custody population has decreased by 47.6% while during the same interval the number of prisoners aged 50+ has decreased by only 3.7%, a 13-fold difference.

FACTS

AVERAGE ANNUAL MEDICAL COSTS PER MA-DOC PRISONER, 2016-2023

	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023
Medical Costs (In Millions)	\$ 94.45	\$ 115.31	\$ 135.30	\$ 169.09	\$ 174.32	\$ 184.54	\$ 195.17	\$ 198.05 ^a
Custody Pop. (January 1) ^b	9,479	9,015	8,835	8,425	7,900	6,553	5,962	5,863
Avg Annual Cost/Prisoner	\$ 9,964	\$ 12,791	\$ 15,315	\$ 20,070	\$ 22,066	\$ 28,161	\$ 32,736	\$ 33,780
% Increase from								
Prior year	---	+28%	+20%	+31%	+10%	+28%	+16%	+ 3%
FY2016	---	+28%	+54%	+101%	+121%	+183%	+229%	+239%

^a Source: G. Haas, "MA-DOC Expenditures and Staffing Levels for FY2023" (Dec 2023).

^b Custody population on January 1 of each Fiscal Year (halfway through FY).

- >> Prisoner costs do not include additional costs for security staff coverage for transportation or during hospitalization (3).
- >> As of January 1, 2024, 1055 prisoners are serving LWOP. More than half (58%) are aged 50+ and 29% are aged 60+. 63% and 40%, respectively, already have served 15+ and 25+ years (4).
- >> Average annual costs of incarceration per prisoner have more than doubled between FY2016 and FY2024, from \$60,317 to \$136,752 (5).

CONCLUSION

The increased cost of medical care, amounting to 25.6% of annual DOC expenses (6), contributes to the high cost of incarceration, much of which is due to the aging prisoner population. It is necessary to consider reforms for release of elderly prisoner, including the large number serving LWOP. Evidence supports that this group has the lowest risk of re-offending (7) and is the least likely to decrease public safety if released (8).

[ENDNOTES and sources listed on reverse side]

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ENDNOTES

Sources: Data for the Table and text are based on information acquired from serial public records requests from the MA-DOC, 2016-2024, and/or published by the MA-DOC in "Fact Cards" and "Population Trends" reports, aggregated and, when necessary, with calculations by the author.

1. McKillop M & Boucher A. "Aging Prisoner Populations Drive Up Costs" (Pew Charitable Trusts, Washington, DC, Feb 2018).
2. Nellis A. "No End In Sight: America's Enduring Reliance on Life Imprisonment" (The Sentencing Project, Washington, DC, 2021).
3. Greineder D. Personal knowledge.
4. Massachusetts Department of Correction. Public records response, February 2024.
5. Greineder D. "Lifer's Group Fast Facts: Continuing Increases of Incarceration Costs in the Massachusetts Department of Correction (MA-DOC)", (Lifer's Group Inc.** , Norfolk, MA, April 2024).
6. Haas G. "MA-DOC Expenditures and Staffing Levels for FY2023" (Lifer's Group Inc.** , Norfolk, MA 02056).
7. Nellis A. "No End In Sight" (see note 2); Nellis A & Bishop B. "New Lease on Life" (The Sentencing Project, Washington, DC, 2021); Greineder D. "The Cruel Aging of Massachusetts Life-Sentenced Prisoners" ppl6-19 (Lifers' Group Inc.** , Norfolk, MA, 2022); Durose MR, Cooper AD, Snyder HN. "Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014); Langan PA & Levin DJ. "Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002).
8. See all references in note 7. See also Greineder D. "Lifers' Group Fast Facts: Massachusetts Juveniles Convicted of First-Degree Murder Have Not Re-Offended When Paroled", (Lifers' Group Inc.** , Norfolk, MA, March 2023), which documents that all 33 juvenile first-degree life-sentenced prisoners, who were released after becoming eligible for parole after a 2013 decision of the SJC, have remained at liberty in the community without re-offending. See also Greineder, "Cruel Aging..." (note 7), ppl3-19, for a discussion about why mass incarceration, including those sentenced to LWOP, does little to improve public safety since it neither deters nor prevents crime; rather the destabilizing social effect of excessive incarceration has been shown to increase crime and decrease public safety.



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