

Lifer's Group Fast Facts: MEDICAL COSTS SKYROCKET WITHOUT BRINGING QUALITY HEALTHCARE TO MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION

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FACTS

Total (\$257.04 million) and per prisoner (\$43,012) medical care costs for MA state prisoners continued to skyrocket in FY2025 (Table). VitalCore, the new for-profit medical company, however, remained 35% understaffed for the entire year, denying prisoners any semblance of either accessible, timely or quality healthcare (1). Inexplicably, medical expenditures nevertheless surged 22% over FY2024. Per prisoner annual healthcare costs are now 3 to 4 times higher than either national or MA community costs per patient (2), even though prisoners on average are younger and should be significantly less costly than free world patients (3).

AVERAGE ANNUAL MEDICAL COSTS PER MA-DOC PRISONER, FY 2016-2025

	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	FY 2025
Medical Costs (in Millions)	\$ 94.45	\$115.31	\$135.30	\$169.09	\$174.32	\$184.54	\$195.17	\$198.05	\$212.26	\$257.04
Custody Pop (January 1) ^a	9,479	9,015	8,835	8,425	7,900	6,553	5,962	5,863	6,011	5,976
Avg Annual Cost/Prisoner	\$ 9,964	\$12,791	\$15,315	\$20,070	\$22,066	\$28,161	\$32,736	\$33,780	\$35,312	\$43,012
% Increase from										
Prior year	---	+28%	+20%	+31%	+10%	+28%	+16%	+ 3%	+ 5%	+22%
FY2016	---	+28%	+54%	+101%	+121%	+183%	+229%	+239%	+254%	+332%

^a Custody population January 1 of each Fiscal Year, halfway through FY (DOC Fact Cards).

DISCUSSION

These data emphasize that the Governor's and DOC's choice, more than 15 years ago, to privatize MA prisoner healthcare, using corporate for-profit companies, was grossly misguided. Neither lower costs nor higher quality have resulted. Alarming and predictably, the exorbitant costs were never accompanied by quality healthcare because profit incentives perversely act to maximize cost while minimizing rather than optimizing accessible and quality care.

Outdated and mandatory MA sentencing laws have led to excessively long sentences that, among other factors, have given MA the highest percent of Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentenced prisoners in the USA. These unnecessary and ineffective long sentences (4) have also produced the oldest prisoner population in the nation. Notably, MA houses more LWOP prisoners than all 5 other New England states combined, and over 3-times the number in New York State (5). As they age, LWOP prisoners end up costing 2-5 times more than average age prisoners because of special needs (6).

CONCLUSIONS

1. It is time to revise outdated MA sentencing laws which neither deter crime nor increase public safety (7).
2. Use of privatized healthcare for-profit, out-of-state companies inevitably increases medical costs while decreasing quality of care and must be ended. Transitioning to use of the high quality not-for-profit medical care resources available in MA should be an urgent priority.

[See over for ENDNOTES and Sources]

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ENDNOTES

Sources: Data for Table and Text are based on serial public records requests from the MA-DOC, 2016-2026 and MA-DOC "Fact Cards", 2016-2026. Calculations by author.

1. Greineder D. Personal knowledge, as well as multiple public records responses from MA-DOC throughout 2025.
2. In 2022 MA annual healthcare costs were \$32,736/prisoner, while MA free-world patients averaged only \$10,264 and national costs were \$12,555 (see also Greineder D. "Lifer's Group Fast Facts: Unconscionably High Medical Costs But Inadequate Medical Outcomes in Massachusetts Dept. of Correction" (Lifer's Group, Norfolk, MA, Feb 2025) for sources and details). Note that MA prisoner costs have risen an additional 31% since 2022.
3. MA Dept. of Public Health. "Covid-19 Dashboard", accessed August 2, 2020; Greineder D. "MA-DOC Criminally Sentenced Jurisdiction Population by Sentence and Age Group" (Lifer's Group, Norfolk, April 2025).
4. Nellis A. "No End In Sight: America's Enduring Reliance on Life Imprisonment" (2021); Nellis A & Bishop B. "New Lease on Life" (2021); Ghandnoosh N. "Incarceration & Crime: A Weak Relationship" (2024) (All 3 refs. from Sentencing Project, Washington, DC); Greineder D. "An End in Sight: A Confluence of Practical, Financial and Beneficent Strategies for Massachusetts Life Without Parole" (Lifer's Group, Norfolk, July 2025).
5. Greineder D. "Persistent Over-Incarceration of Massachusetts Life Without Parole Prisoners" (Lifer's Group, Norfolk, June 2025).
6. ACLU. "At America's Expense: The Mass Incarceration of the Elderly" (ACLU, New York, 2012); Greineder D. "The Cruel Aging of Massachusetts Life-Sentenced Prisoners: Practical, Economic and Moral Consequences" (Lifer's Group, Norfolk Jan 2022); McKillop M & Boucher A. "Aging Prisoner Populations Drive Up Costs" (Pew Charitable Trusts, Washington DC, Feb 2018).
7. See all references in note 4.



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