

Lifers' Group Fast Facts: MEDICAL COSTS IN THE MASSACHUSETTS DOC

* * * * *

ENDLESS DOUBLE DIGIT INCREASES

BACKGROUND

Total and per prisoner medical costs for Massachusetts (MA) state prisoners continue with double digit increases even as the prison population falls (see TABLE). The major reasons are the high cost of older prisoners and large number of aging prisoners, fueled by long sentences, especially the many endless Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentences. Because of the latter, MA prisoners have been the oldest in the U.S. since at least 2016 (1).

By 2019, the number of total prisoners had fallen by 22% from the peak number in 2012, but the number of those aged 50 and older had increased by 16% (from 1959 to 2280), largely due to progressive aging. With the onset of the pandemic the number of aging prisoners has slowly decreased. Even so, by January 1, 2023, 34% of all prisoners were aged 50+, 15% were aged 60+, and the percentage of LWOP prisoners had risen to 19% (almost 1 in 5), by far the highest percentage in the U.S.. Overall, by 2023, the number of prisoners aged 50+, compared to 2012, has decreased by only 4.2%, while since 2012 the total prisoner population has decreased 46.3%, an 11-fold difference.

THE FACTS

AVERAGE ANNUAL MEDICAL COSTS PER MA-DOC PRISONER

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

^a Source: G. Haas, "MA-DOC Expenditures and Staffing Levels for FY2022" (Dec 2022).

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

- >> Prisoner costs do not include security staff coverage for transportation or during hospitalization (2).
- >> As of January 1, 2023, 1038 prisoners are serving LWOP. More than half (57%) are aged 50+ and 28% are aged 60+. 62% and 38%, respectively, have served 15+ and 25+ years (3).
- >> Average annual costs of incarceration per prisoner have more than doubled from \$60,317 in FY2016 to \$133,000 for FY2023 (4).

CONCLUSION

A significant element contributing to the more than tripling of annual medical costs/prisoner is the rapid aging of the population. It is time to seriously consider reforms promoting release of elderly prisoners and, necessarily, the many inexorably aging LWOP prisoners whose risks of re-offending are among the lowest (5) and least likely to decrease public safety (6).

[ENDNOTES and sources cited on the reverse side]

D. Greineder for Lifers' Group Inc. POB 43, Norfolk, MA 02056 (May 2023)

Lifers' Group Fast Facts:
MEDICAL COSTS IN THE MASSACHUSETTS DOC

ENDNOTES

Sources: Data for the Table and text are based on information acquired from serial public records requests from the MA-DOC, 2016-2023, 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. Greineder D. Personal knowledge.
3. Massachusetts Department of Correction. Public records response, January, 2023.
4. Greineder D. "Lifers' Group Fast Facts: Stunning Escalation of Incarceration Costs in the Massachusetts Department of Correction (MA-DOC)", (Lifers' Group Inc.**), Norfolk, MA, April 2023).
5. Nellis A. "No End In Sight: America's Enduring Reliance on Life Imprisonment" (The Sentencing Project, Washington, DC, 2021); 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).
6. See all references in note 5. 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 2022), 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 5), 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.



** All Lifers' Group reports are available at www.realcostofprisons.org/writing and may be freely quoted or copied provided their source is appropriately cited.