

OPM - Criminal Justice Policy & Planning Division

Prison Population Projection

Highlights

- OPM estimates that the prison population will decline at a moderate pace over the coming year. By January 2018, the prison population could fall to 14,139. The last time the January figure was that low was in 1995, a different era entirely. Our forecast predicts a decline of just over 3%, a conservative estimate considering the 6.8% decline seen in 2016.
- The forecast does not factor in possible legislative changes that could further reduce the prison population such as the Governor's proposals on bail and young offenders.
- On a February-to-February basis, the total prison population declined by 6.8% last year. The sentenced population fell by 928 offenders, or 7.8%. The pretrial population shrank by only 79, or 2.4%.
- In late March 2015, the DOC centralized the review and decision-making process governing most discretionary prison releases. We believe that this reform, and the efficiencies it unleashed in the system, was the single most significant factor behind the rapid contraction of the sentenced prison population in 2016.
- OPM estimates that through changes to the offender review/release process, the CT DOC was able to improve the quality of decision-making vis-à-vis risk and realize gross savings of approximately 141,000 prisoner bed-days during 2016. This raises questions about what other possible types of efficiencies can be realized through genuine internal reforms.

Forecasting the size of the prison population

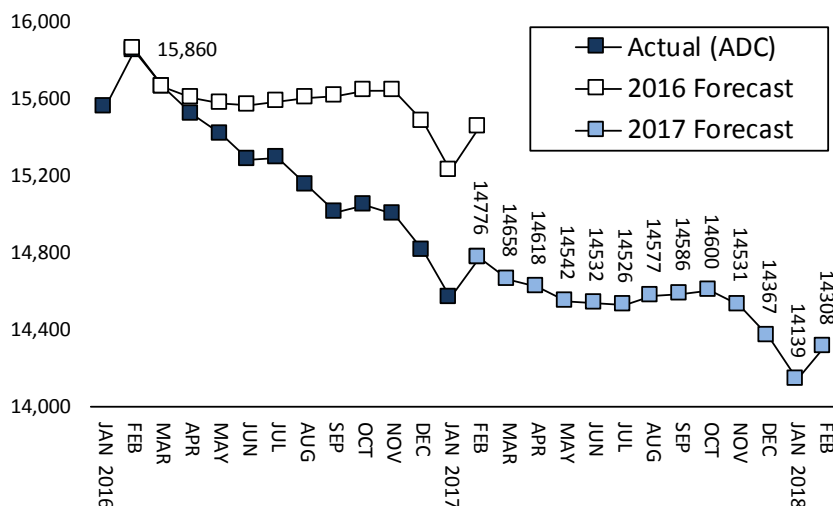
Each February, the Criminal Justice Policy & Planning Division at OPM produces a forecast of the state's prison population for the coming year. In recent years, the forecast has relied on 1) an analysis of prison-population trend data 2) the use of an input-output model to track operational flows and rates of change in the size and composition of the prison population, and 3) assessments of the impact of proposed legislative and policy changes. This information is used to project how the prison population would trend under normal operating conditions.

In 2016, OPM predicted that the prison population would decline moderately over the course of the year. Within a few short months of its publication, however, OPM realized that new forces were at play in the prison system, pushing down the inmate population much quicker than had been anticipated. By May 2016, the forecast was off by 181 prisoners. By September, OPM's estimate was 600 prisoners above the actual count.

OPM believes that by streamlining its review and release process for sentenced offenders in 2015, the DOC was able to assure that thousands of eligible and appropriate offenders were able to leave prison closer to their earliest possible release date. The cumulative impact of this change drove down the sentenced prison population at a much quicker rate than anticipated.

If OPM's 2017 projection is accurate, the prison population will drop, on a February-to-February basis, by 466 prisoners or -3.2%.

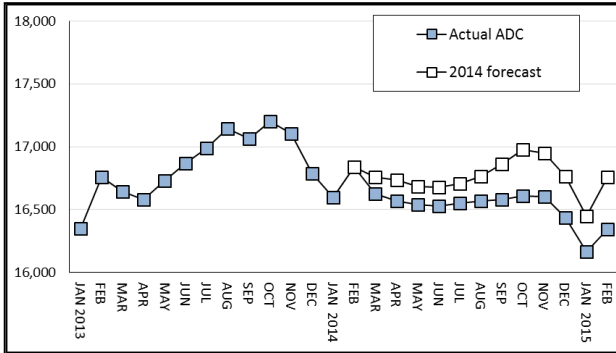
Connecticut's prison population, actual and projected



Recent OPM forecasts

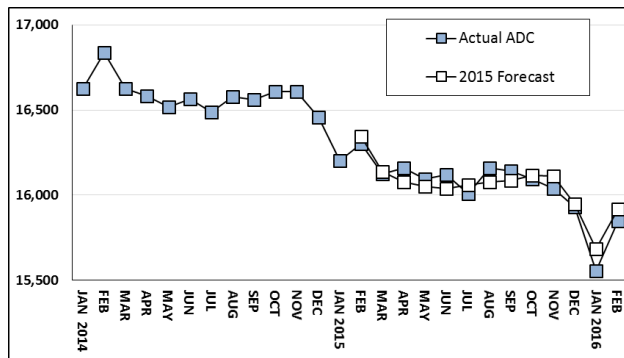
OPM projections are intended to provide administrators with benchmark estimates of the size of the state's prison population under standard operating parameters. In recent years, when the actual prison population has veered off OPM's forecast, the forecast has provided an early indication that some component of the system was performing out of its typical range.

CT prison population and the 2014 projection



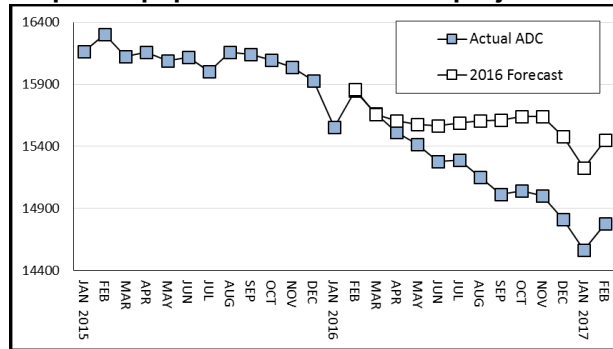
During 2013, the number of cases reviewed by the Board of Pardons and Paroles slowed dramatically. As a consequence, the prison population surged unexpectedly during the second half of the year. After adjustments, the population returned to a more typical pattern during 2014. Between February 2014 and February 2015, the prison population declined by 3.2%, or 532 inmates.

CT prison population and the 2015 projection



No significant upheavals impacted the state criminal justice system during 2015. As a result, the actual prison population tracked along in close alignment with OPM's estimates throughout the year. Between February 2015 and February 2016, the prison population declined by 2.8%, or 452 inmates. During March 2015, the DOC established a single unit to review the cases of offenders who were eligible for discretionary release. The efficiencies this unit unleashed were to have a significant impact on the sentenced population in the following year.

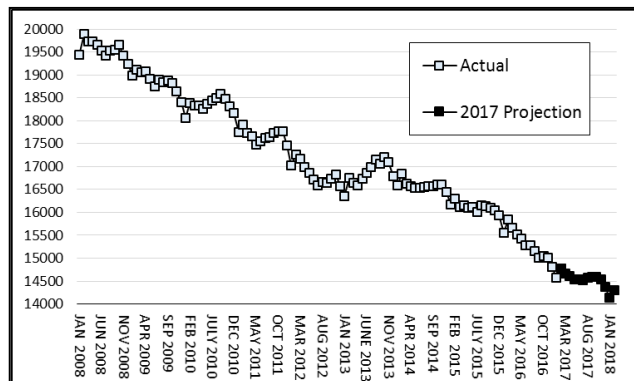
CT prison population and the 2016 projection



During 2016, the DOC reaped the benefits of a Community Release Unit (CRU), which was created in 2015. With the CRU, decision-making authority was moved away from wardens at each prison facility, and vested in a specialized group that reviewed the case of every release-eligible offender. Using data and reports generated with case management software, CRU introduced accountability into the process.

In any given month, over 800 cases were reviewed by CRU. Release-package backlogs were reduced by up to 75%. As a result, thousands of sentenced offenders who were deemed appropriate for community supervision were released closer to their eligibility dates than in years past. Saving several days, a week, or even a month of prison time for thousands of prisoners had a cumulative impact that became the single, largest contributor to the substantial reduction in the number of sentenced prisoners witnessed in 2016. In the chart, shown above, the difference between the predicted prison population and the actual prison count can be viewed as some of the actual savings, in prison-bed-days, realized from the creation of CRU.

Prison population, 2008 to 2018



There is a practical limit to the savings that can be realized from the CRU unit. Once most of the inefficiency is wrung from the system, the rate of decline in the prison count will inevitably be attenuated. We believe there was some evidence of this happening towards the end of 2016.