

Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (NJ-12)
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies
Members Day Testimony

Thank you Chairman Culberson and Ranking Member Serrano for allowing me to speak on this important and bipartisan topic--reducing the prison population and offering effective reintegration programs to all people in BOP custody.

The United States has seen a steady decrease in the federal inmate population. In 2013 there were 220,000 people in BOP custody. Today there are 183,937. However, this positive trend has also highlighted a problem: roughly 40% of federal inmates released are rearrested within 3 years. But there are already established methods for changing this. Studies show that former inmates who are employed in high quality jobs and have close ties with family members are less likely to become part of this statistic and recidivate. Federal inmates nearing the end of their release are eligible for reintegration courses in residential re-entry centers. It is here that inmates can receive employment counseling, job placement and financial management assistance to prepare them for productive lives after their sentences.

Unfortunately in 2017, the Department of Justice announced that it would cut funding for 16 residential re-entry centers. These cuts mean that instead of participating in programs designed to help ease a person's transition into post-prison life, they are instead kept in a prison routine, away from the social support of family and friends and left with zero training or assistance when they walk out on day one. Depriving people of the opportunity to obtain job and life skills not only further punish and hamstring the individual, it also threatens public safety by increasing the likelihood that the individual will reoffend.

In 2016 the Department of Justice reviewed the Federal Bureau of Prison's Release Preparation Program (RPP). The department concluded that more must be done to ensure that the RPP meets the needs of inmates. The review also showed a low RPP completion rate across the board, and it highlighted the poor coordination between BOP and other federal agencies. Mr. Chairman, more must be done ensure that there is a standardized RPP curriculum, and that RPP courses target specific risk factors for each inmate.

The federal government cannot afford to take a step back in the important progress we have been making to improve outcomes in reentry. In addition to making the investments in effective programs both the Administration and Congress alike would benefit from a better understanding of our prison population to maximize effectiveness, target services, and limit waste. An important way for the Bureau of Prisons to measure its effectiveness in reducing recidivism is to have an accurate accounting of the prison population. With this information, we can better provide people who are re-entering society with effective programs that give them the confidence and tools to succeed once they have served their time.

That is why I am requesting that this subcommittee include report language in its fiscal year 2019 Appropriations Bill that would require the Department of Justice to evaluate the prison population, disaggregated by race, gender, age, and nationality, as well as the location of the person's custody. With this information, we can better assess our continued effectiveness at reducing the federal prison population. In addition, I request the inclusion of language that would require the DOJ to produce guidelines and policies on effective reintegration programs in all residential re-entry centers.

This type of investment in people will help to further the committee's efforts to support programs that not only reduce the ballooning costs of keeping so many people behind bars, but also improve public safety.

Thank you again Chairman Culberson and Ranking Member Serrano for allowing this testimony.