



# Missouri Needs Criminal Justice Reform—and Fast

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*By: Emily Stahly*

Incarceration rates are on the rise in Missouri, and with a larger prison population come growing costs for the state. According to the [Missouri State Justice Reinvestment Task Force](#), if current incarceration trends continue, Missouri will have to build two brand new prisons in the next few years. The price tag to build and operate two new facilities will be \$485 million over the next five years. To put that amount in perspective, the entire budget for the Department of Corrections was \$725 million for 2018.

If Missouri can reduce growth in the cost of our criminal justice system through responsible reform, shouldn't we do it? Governor Greitens's proposed [budget for FY2019](#) includes some of the recommendations from the task force, such as treatment courts and community-based treatment programs, but much was left out. With Missouri taxpayers staring at such a large bill, additional reforms deserve serious consideration.

Reform objectives fall within three broader categories: reducing violent crime, reducing treatment-related admissions, and reducing recidivism. Addressing each of these areas could help slow the growth of our prison population.

Let's take a closer look at what the task force has proposed:

- **Reducing Violent Crime in Our Communities** by giving more state support to local police departments, providing more support for victims, updating technology systems, and providing incentives for county jails to reserve limited jail space for dangerous offenders
- **Reducing Mental Health and Substance Abuse Treatment-Related Admissions** by improving current treatment programs in prison, improving community-based treatment options, strengthening community supervision centers, and expanding behavioral health services
- **Reducing Recidivism and Readmission to Prison** by amending supervision practices to reduce revocations, better preparing people leaving prison, providing proper training on risk assessment and correctional practices for staff, and supporting treatment courts

The total cost of these reforms is estimated at \$189 million over the next five years—about \$300 million less than the cost of building two more prisons.

With our prisons already over capacity, we need to begin thinking about reform immediately. Lawmakers have introduced criminal justice reform bills that include “Raise the Age” (requiring 17-year-olds to be tried as juveniles), mandatory minimum sentencing reform, and changes to state reimbursements to county jails. Nevertheless, additional reforms will likely be needed in order to control, let alone reduce, our prison population in the coming years.

When faced with [similar circumstances](#) in Texas—spend \$2 billion on new prisons or curb incarceration rates—the legislature decided to invest \$241 million in reforms instead. Now Texas is closing facilities that are no longer needed, and crime rates fell 26 percent between 2007 and 2014. With a bit more urgency, perhaps Missouri can also protect taxpayers while at the same time making our communities safer.

## Tags:

- [Criminal Justice](#)
- [Raise the Age](#)

## About the Author



*Emily Stahly*  
*Analyst*

*Emily Stahly is an analyst at the Show-Me Institute. She earned her B.A. in politics from Hillsdale College in Michigan and is researching education with the Show-Me Institute.*

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5297 Washington Place	3645 Troost Avenue
Saint Louis, MO 63108	Kansas City, MO 64109
Phone: (314) 454-0647	Phone: (816) 287-0370
Fax: (314) 454-0667	

Email: [info@showmeinstitute.org](mailto:info@showmeinstitute.org)

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