

Snapshot

Legislative Approaches to Prison Oversight

Updated April 15, 2024

With 1,155 [state-operated](#) adult correctional facilities housing [more than 1 million people](#), there are a variety of approaches to oversight of state prisons.

Correctional oversight bodies generally fall into eight categories, according to a [2010 law review article](#) by Michele Deitch, director of the [Prison and Jail Innovation Lab](#) at the University of Texas at Austin. They are governmental agencies or commissions, ombudspersons, inspectors general, legislative committees with inspection responsibilities, advocacy groups with formal right of access, citizens' boards or advisory committees, general government auditing bodies, and protection and advocacy organizations with focus on prison issues.

Related Topic: [Civil and Criminal Justice](#)

5 Things to Know about Prison Oversight

- 1** **At least 19 states** were [identified for inclusion](#) on [this map](#) by the National Resource Center for Correctional Oversight because they have a prison oversight body that meets eight requirements, including full independence from the correctional agency they oversee, having the formal or informal right to access correctional facilities and are a permanent body.
- 2** **Legislative committees with an active prison oversight role** exist in a few states, focusing on conditions in correctional facilities and the treatment of incarcerated people. They often have regular access to prison facilities and specific responsibilities for facility inspections.
- 3** **Governmental agencies or commissions** are external to the department of corrections. They have statutory authority to report on prison conditions and some can sanction institutions who are not in compliance with established standards.
- 4** **Inspectors general, ombudspersons or general government auditing bodies** are used in a number of states. Inspectors general investigate criminal wrongdoing and other serious misconduct in an agency, often tasked with identifying systemic areas of concern. An ombudsperson is responsible for investigating complaints about misconduct or conditions in corrections departments. Auditing bodies conduct audits of a variety of state agencies, including corrections departments.
- 5** **Advocacy groups with formal rights of access** are in a handful of states around the country. These groups are non-governmental but have a mandate, legislative authorization or routine agency permission to provide some form of oversight.

5 State Examples of Prison Oversight

1

Ohio's [Correctional Institution Inspection Committee](#) is a joint committee with bipartisan membership that provides oversight of adult and juvenile correctional facilities. The committee's duties include conducting biennial inspections and evaluations of each prison and evaluating and assisting in the development of programs to improve institutional operations. Statute requires that the committee and its members have access to all state, local and private correctional institutions. The committee does not have to provide advance notice of an inspection.

2

Michigan's [Legislative Corrections Ombudsman](#) is a nonpartisan legislative agency. It investigates complaints alleging violations of state law or department of corrections policy, significant health or safety issues, and other issues. These complaints can be filed by legislators, incarcerated people and their family members, and corrections staff. The office has access to all state prisons, along with records and documents possessed by the department to attempt to resolve complaints and "keep the Legislature informed of relevant issues regarding Michigan's corrections system."

3

Nebraska created an [Office of Inspector General \(OIG\) of the Nebraska Correctional System](#) in 2015 to provide increased accountability and oversight. It "identifies and examines systemic issues of the [department of corrections] and also investigates incidents resulting in death or serious injury" within the correctional system. Nebraska's office is affiliated with the Legislature's Office of Public Counsel, also known as the Ombudsman's office.

4

Connecticut enacted legislation in 2022 ([SB 459](#)) [establishing](#) a Corrections Advisory Committee and expanding the correction ombuds program to include everyone in the custody of the department of correction rather than only those under age 18. The committee is tasked with submitting a list of candidates for correction ombuds, reviewing the actions of the correction ombuds' and meeting with the ombuds at least quarterly.

5

Members of the [Pennsylvania Prison Society](#) are considered "official visitors" in [state statute](#), allowing them to visit facilities any day between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. to interview incarcerated people. Following the interviews, they discuss potential issues with correctional staff or others who may be able to help.

Related Resources

Updated March 30, 2026

Statutory Framework of Pretrial Release

This report provides an overview of the current statutory framework for pretrial policy in the states.

[Civil and Criminal Justice](#)

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Worth Noting

The following entities are worth noting but did not meet our [criteria](#) for independent external oversight.

[Arizona](#)

[Nevada](#)

[Texas](#)

[Florida](#)

[Ohio](#)



The National Resource Center for Correctional Oversight is a project of the [Prison and Jail Innovation Lab](#) at The University of Texas at Austin.



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