

In Alaska, advocates say reducing prison population is a key climate strategy

Ageing correctional centers and the people within are threatened by floods, extreme heat, and building collapses due to snowfall and thawing permafrost

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Over millions of years, glaciers slid across what is now northern Juneau, forming the craggy valleys and alluvial plains of south-east [Alaska](#). Then about 200 years ago, when these glaciers shrank amid rising global temperatures, meltwater flowed downstream, depositing loose, silty soil along bodies of water like Lemon Creek.

In 1969, the state chose to build a prison on this flat land – despite an assessment that the glacial deposits would be “[poor ... material](#)” for the building’s foundation.

For decades, this choice did not present major structural challenges. Then, one day in August 2022 following heavy rainfall, the land

underneath the Lemon Creek correctional center buckled under the pressure.

Sections of the prison's foundation sank into the ground, tilting the floors sideways. Yawning cracks opened up in the walls. "The whole thing gave at one time," said Clif Reagle, the facilities director of the Alaska department of corrections (DOC), who characterized the land that the prison sits on as a "big gravel bed".

The DOC responded to the damage with a \$9.5m plan to repair the prison; the project will also reinforce and expand certain areas – such as the medical and solitary confinement units – to accommodate an above-capacity prison population. This project is just one of many in a state prison system that's embarking on a long-range expansion plan.

For environmental advocates in Alaska, these construction projects are deeply misguided. They view climate impacts to the state's prisons as an opportunity to re-evaluate the very foundations of the carceral system in Alaska. And they are pushing for a more transformative approach to climate mitigation: decarceration.

"We have to stop incarcerating so many people because it's an unmanageable amount of people for the infrastructure, for staffing and for Alaska," said Megan Edge, the director of the ACLU of Alaska's Prison Project.

Alaska's prison system is one of the most punitive in the country. Although the state has a low overall prison population relative to more populated states like Texas and California, its per capita incarceration rate [exceeds the national average](#), at 718 per 100,000 people, according to the Prison Policy Initiative.

And with the escalating climate crisis, the upkeep of carceral infrastructure will probably only grow more challenging. The [Fifth National Climate Assessment](#), released in 2023 by the Biden administration, projected that climate-related damage to state-owned infrastructure will present one of the [biggest threats to Alaska](#) in coming years. According to the report, much of Alaska's infrastructure was built for stable climate conditions. Rapidly rising temperatures have set off cascading environmental impacts – permafrost degradation, flooding, melting sea ice and extreme precipitation patterns – that place this infrastructure at risk. Glacial melting alone – which can trigger landslides, avalanches and sudden flooding – is estimated to cause over \$93m of damages to Alaska's DOC facilities, according to the state's 2023 Hazard Mitigation Plan.

Advocates in Alaska who see decarceration as a key part of climate mitigation argue that the state is at a crucial moment. Instead of expanding and refortifying ageing prison infrastructure against climate threats, they say

it should work to reduce the prison population and invest in growing climate resiliency.

“As the climate changes, we will be spending more and more money on ageing infrastructure,” said Edge. “Which takes us full circle back to: ‘What if we had fewer people in prison, so that then we had less prisons to continually update and maintain?’”

Decarceration activists like Edge argue that incarceration limits people’s mobility, negatively affects their health and cuts them off from community support – all of which compromise the resilience needed to adapt to environmental disaster.

In Alaska, temperatures are rising at twice the rate of the global average, making it the fastest-warming US state. In recent years, the climate in south-east Alaska, where the Lemon Creek prison is located, has grown increasingly unpredictable. In 2019, the region recorded its [first extreme drought in history](#). Several years of [heavy precipitation](#) followed – culminating in 2022, when Juneau broke the annual rainfall record it had set three decades prior.

The state’s correctional department says these polarizing weather patterns probably pushed the Lemon Creek prison’s unstable foundation past its breaking point. “There were big [weather] events where the water tables were raising and lowering, and that’s what we believe

added to the problem,” Reagle from the DOC said.

According to a 2022 DOC-commissioned [engineering assessment](#), rapid changes from wet to dry weather led to dramatic dips and rises in groundwater levels, shifting the gravelly soil underneath the facility and collapsing portions of its foundation. To illustrate this soil liquefaction process, Reagle described a familiar scenario: “You’re standing on a beach, the water’s washing in and out, you know how your foot sinks into the sand?”

The plan to rebuild and expand the Lemon Creek prison demonstrates the costly maintenance required to adapt facilities to severe weather conditions. “They’re just putting Band-Aids on an issue with the repairs and really they should be looking at [...] ways to lower the [prison] population,” said Angela Hall, an activist who founded a support group for directly affected people after her husband’s incarceration.

Alaska is home to some of the most extreme and diverse environments on earth. Its prisons are located amid glacial fields and mountain ranges – breathtaking reminders of the state’s large swaths of untouched wilderness. “Every one of the [Alaska prisons] is in a location with a harsh climate,” said Edge.

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Many decarceration advocates say that, by locking large numbers of people in place during dangerous environmental events, jails and prisons are creating conditions ripe for catastrophe. In 2016, Alaska officials [rushed to expedite the closure](#) of the Palmer correctional center after a wildfire advanced within 200 yards of the prison. In 2018, when a [7.0-magnitude earthquake](#) prompted a tsunami warning in south-central Alaska, the DOC found itself without an evacuation plan for the hundreds of people held within the Spring Creek correctional center. A few months later, people incarcerated in southern parts of the state were forced to endure a historic heatwave – which brought temperatures above 90 degrees – without air conditioning.

These scenarios demonstrate how carceral systems are often unequipped to protect people from environmental hazards. “The damage of climate change in Alaska is very obvious and it does not exclude our prisons,” Edge said.

The majority of Alaska’s incarcerated people are held in prisons along its southern coast – places like Anchorage, where unprecedented snowfall this year collapsed several commercial rooftops, and Seward, where heavy rains regularly flood prison grounds. Farther north,

the prison in Fairbanks sits amid some of the Arctic's most at-risk land for discontinuous [permafrost thaw](#): as warming temperatures melt sediments and ice that have remained frozen underground for thousands of years, the land collapses, warping building foundations and swallowing entire homes.

Alaska has historically spent an outsized portion of its state budget on incarceration. In 2021, the state's [spending on its prison system](#) surpassed that of its public university system for the first time. The proposed DOC budget for the current fiscal year is [over \\$450m](#).

Decarceration advocates say that this burgeoning budget has not resulted in meaningful improvements to living conditions for incarcerated people.

“They’re really willing to spend money to lock more and more people up, but they’re really unwilling to spend money to actually provide any kind of rehabilitative services,” said Colette Cook, whose son is currently incarcerated in Alaska’s Spring Creek correctional center.

Hall and Edge also argue that continuing to pour millions of public dollars into maintenance, renovation and expansion of prisons is unsustainable – and depletes funding for social services that would address root causes of harm and violence. “The state [was] already in a pretty big financial deficit so to keep throwing

money at prisons [...] Instead of focusing on more important things like education and healthcare is a real problem,” said Hall.

Like [other corrections agencies](#) across the country, the Alaska DOC has engaged in little planning around environmental threats. When asked about whether his agency had a climate mitigation plan, Reagle responded, “How do you mitigate natural disasters? There’s not much you can do.” He continued, “It’s the weather. We can’t predict it.”

Calls for reduced prison populations in the face of climate crisis build upon previous attempts at decarceration in the state. In 2016, Alaska, under the leadership of then-governor Bill Walker, closed the 476-bed Palmer correctional center and passed a series of reforms to cut its prison population by at least 13%, with a projected savings of \$380m over the next decade. “The goal was to close prisons. We were spending a ridiculous and unsustainable amount of money on prisons,” Edge explained.

However, the state seems to have reversed course since then. In 2019, the newly elected governor, Mike Dunleavy, [rolled back](#) many of those reforms. Two years later, he spent \$17m to reopen Palmer, adding roughly 300 beds to the state’s total carceral capacity.