

September 2024

A Shrinking System with Similar Spending:

A Decade of Jail Trends (2014–2023)

Executive Summary

New York City’s criminal legal system has been the subject of numerous reforms, lawsuits, and other developments over the last decade. This report focuses on staffing and spending patterns at the Department of Correction (DOC, or the Department)—one of the nation’s [costliest jail systems](#)—from 2014 through 2023. IBO found that although both jail population and staff headcount have declined over the course of the last decade, DOC’s level of spending has been consistent.¹ “A Shrinking System with Similar Spending” builds on two recent IBO publications. The first, “[In Custody](#),” explored the dramatic reduction in the City’s jail population over this same period and changes in the average length of stay by demographic group or charge. Most people incarcerated in City jails are held pretrial—before being found guilty of a crime—with a small share serving sentences less than a year. IBO’s second recent report on DOC, “[Capital Projects on Rikers Island](#),” analyzed infrastructure and maintenance spending in DOC’s Capital and Expense Budgets in the context of the statutory requirement to close facilities on Rikers Island by August 31, 2027. This report includes only spending from the Expense Budget. All figures are adjusted for inflation.

Over the 10 years covered by this report:

- Total DOC staffing declined by 24%, while the jail population fell by 45%.
- The Department’s Expense spending was \$1.4 billion in both 2014 and 2023 in real terms. Across the decade, DOC spending rose to a peak of \$1.6 billion in 2018 before declining. Increases in uniformed overtime and non-personnel costs together fully offset uniformed base salary spending declines, maintaining DOC’s overall spending level.
- Uniformed staff base salaries and overtime costs combined were responsible for the vast majority of DOC’s personnel costs. Uniformed base salary spending in 2023 was \$181 million less than in 2014, with savings partially offset by uniformed overtime, which increased by \$116 million.²
- Conventional wisdom is that headcount and overtime are inversely related, and that adding personnel leads to lower reliance on overtime, and vice versa. However, IBO did not find this to hold true during this period. Uniformed overtime spending increased during years of rapid hiring early in the decade, as well as amid declining headcount in more recent years.
- Non-personnel spending, while only one-fifth of DOC’s budget, also increased during this period. Non-personnel costs were \$69 million higher (42%) in 2023 compared with 2014, largely driven by increased contractual services spending. Contractual services costs grew from \$13 million in 2014 to around \$60 million from 2017 through 2021, then increased again to \$82 million and \$91 million in 2022 and 2023, respectively.



Ultimately, there have not been cost savings from DOC’s lower jail population and headcount. It should not be assumed that further decarceration or even lower staffing levels will lead to future savings without better management. If DOC’s spending levels more accurately reflected its headcount, more funding could be available for community-based programs to support people involved with the criminal legal system, an area that received [funding cuts](#) during the last budget cycle. Although not covered by this report, the budgetary impact of bringing City jails in line with correctional best practices is an area of interest and possible future research by IBO.



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Introduction

New York City's jail system has seen seismic changes since 2014 that have impacted the number of people working and in custody at City jails. To begin, in response to the *Nunez v. City of New York* consent judgment filed in July 2015, the Department [revamped its recruitment strategy](#) in an effort to hire up to its authorized headcount, which grew as [new units for specialized populations](#) with lower staffing ratios were implemented.³ [State](#) and [local](#) efforts to limit or ban punitive segregation (also known as solitary confinement) increased staffing and programmatic requirements, putting additional pressure on DOC to adequately staff its facilities.

However, the Department has faced challenges in meeting its target headcount. A hiring freeze was announced in May 2019, but once lifted in June 2021, DOC saw other recruitment challenges, including [lower civil service exam registrations](#) and [large classes of officers](#) reaching retirement age. Unlimited sick leave—a benefit provided to uniformed City employees including those at DOC—[increased dramatically](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic, with some officers charged with fraud for misusing the policy, exacerbating the Department's dearth of available staff. The pandemic put jail employees and incarcerated people at [higher risk of contracting COVID-19](#), leading to [decarceration responses](#) at the City and State levels in 2020 that reduced the City's jail population to fewer than 4,000 for the first time in [nearly 80 years](#). The jail population has grown since, to more than 6,000 at the end of 2023. Meanwhile, though DOC absenteeism [moderated](#), headcount continued to decline. Five different commissioners have led the Department during this period of turbulence.

IBO's March 2024 publication, "[In Custody](#)," examined changes in the jail population and length of stay during this period—from 2014 through 2023—and found that the jail population changed considerably amid the declining number of jail admissions. Compared with 2014, 2023 saw larger shares of jail stays by people accused of violent felonies and people with mental illnesses, as well as increased average time in custody.

For this report, IBO analyzed DOC staffing and expenditures across the same period. This report focuses on the largest areas of expenditures for DOC—uniformed staff salaries and overtime (work compensated at a rate one-and-a-half times higher than a worker's regular hourly rate), and Other than Personal Services (OTPS) costs—recognizing there are also DOC expenditures on areas such as civilian salaries, uniform allowances, holiday pay, differentials, and others. After adjusting for inflation, IBO found that the Department spent a similar amount in 2023 as in 2014 (all years refer to City fiscal years)—although there were fluctuations during this time—despite sizable drops in jail population and headcount. DOC spending on uniformed staff salaries, the agency's largest expense, was lower in 2023 compared with ten years prior; however, increased uniformed overtime costs and Other than Personal Services (OTPS) spending offset the reduction.

"A Shrinking System with Similar Spending" begins with a high-level description of how DOC's jail population, staffing, and spending changed from 2014 through 2023. The second section examines potential explanations for personnel and expenditure changes. All spending reported is from the Expense Budget, including intracity and interfund agreements and excluding centrally administered costs such as pensions.^{4,5} IBO also examined civilian salary and overtime costs, but the report does not focus on changes among civilian staff during this period, as they represent a relatively small share (about 20%) of DOC's staffing, with associated salary costs lower than the total OTPS amount. DOC's Capital Budget is not included in this analysis but was explored in [another recent publication](#).

Jail Population

The jail population dropped 45%, from about 11,000 in 2014 to approximately 6,000 in 2023, as measured on the last day of each fiscal year. Figure 1 shows a relatively steady decrease from 2014 through 2019, a large drop in 2020, and then a return to somewhat below pre-pandemic levels. In 2023, 73 people were incarcerated

per every 100,000 New Yorkers, compared to the national rate of 198.⁶ Though the population has declined substantially since the beginning of the decade, the length of a typical jail stay has nearly doubled, from [55 days to 105 days](#). Figure 6 in the “Staffing and Expenditures in the Context of Jail Population Declines” section shows the estimated daily cost per person in custody for each year, illustrating the relationship between a decreasing jail population and persistent DOC spending.

Staffing

Uniformed employees at the Department—correction officers, correction captains, assistant deputy wardens, deputy wardens, and wardens—account for about 80% of DOC staff. Like the jail population, the total active headcount at DOC also fell substantially during this period, declining 24% from 2014 to 2023, as shown in Figure 2.⁷ Active headcount is the number of individuals on payroll, including for paid leave such as sick leave, and does not necessarily reflect the number of staff present in the facilities. DOC’s active uniformed headcount also differs from its authorized, or budgeted headcount; in 2023, the Department was authorized to hire up to 7,060 uniformed staff, but only about 6,300 were on payroll at the end of that year.

The headcount decline was larger among uniformed staff (a 30% decline, from 8,900 to 6,300), offset somewhat by a small increase in civilian staff (a 12% increase, from 1,400 to 1,600). However, staffing did not decline consistently across the decade. From 2014 through 2017, DOC’s headcount grew by 23%, from 10,355 to 12,715. After remaining relatively constant from 2017 through 2019, DOC headcount has since declined rapidly (a 35% decrease, from 12,129 in 2019 to 7,879 in 2023).

Expenditures

An agency’s total costs can be separated into two categories: Personal Services (PS) costs and Other than Personal Services (OTPS) costs. PS includes all costs related to staff, from salaries and overtime to holiday pay and uniform allowances; OTPS includes all non-personnel spending, including facility maintenance and

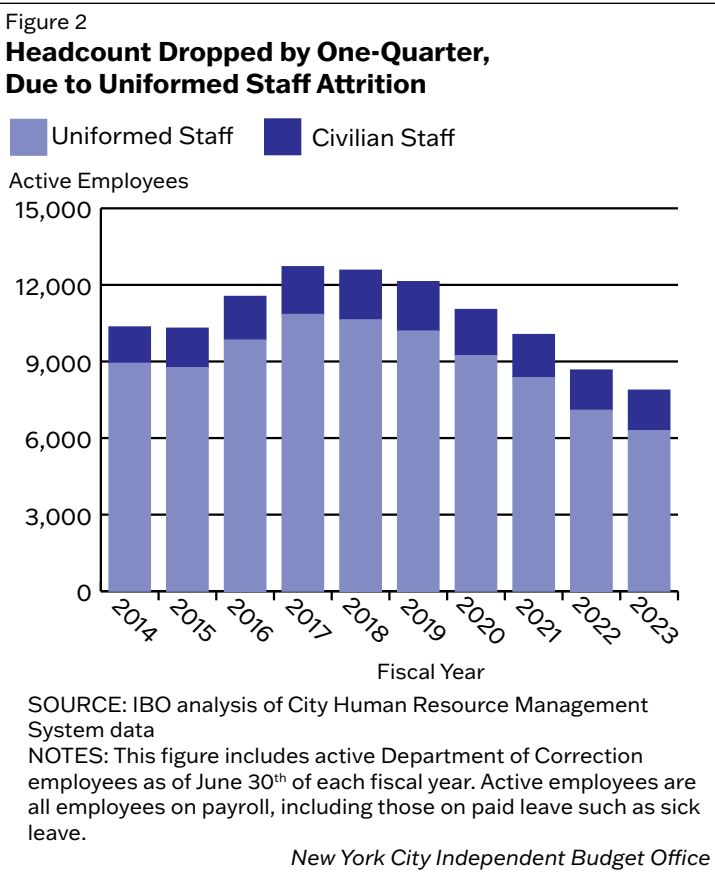
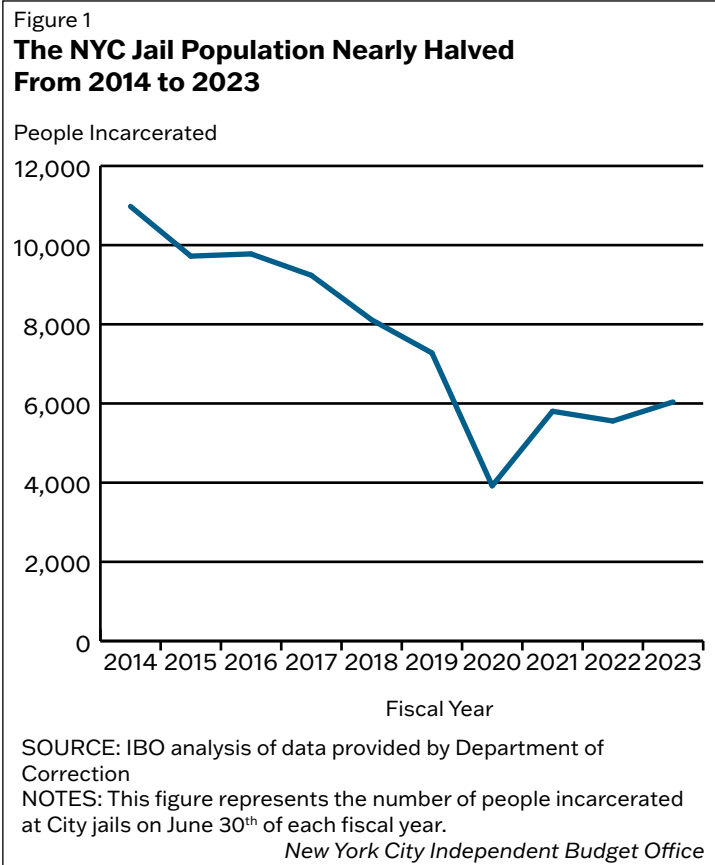
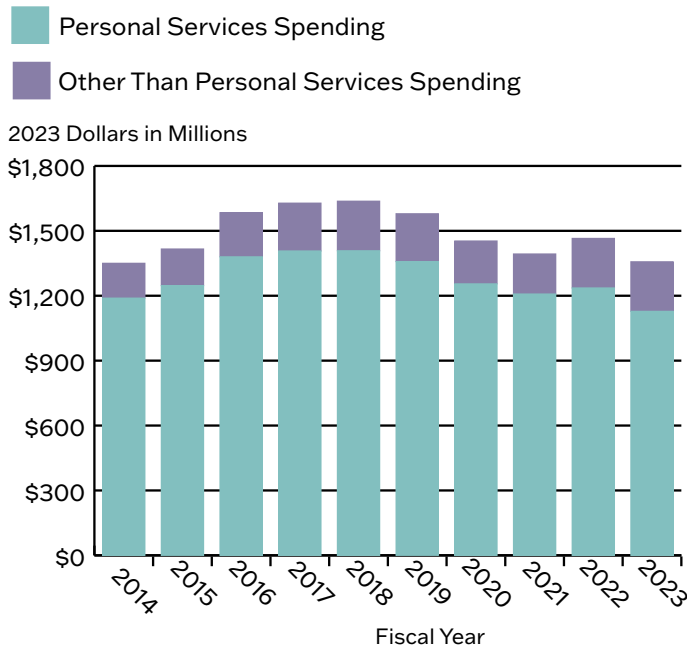


Figure 3
DOC Spent \$1.4 Billion in 2023, Similar to 2014 After Adjusting for Inflation



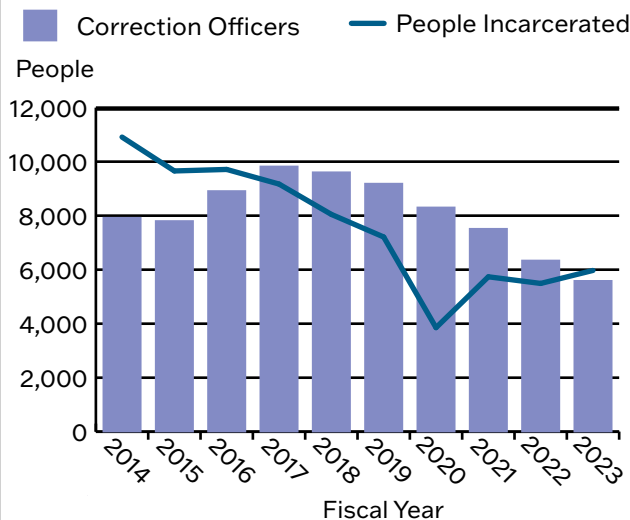
SOURCE: IBO analysis of Financial Management System data
 NOTES: All spending and salary figures were adjusted to fiscal year 2023 dollars using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).
 New York City Independent Budget Office

repair, telecommunications, and supplies. OTPS also includes contracts with external vendors, from consultants to specialized maintenance to programming provided by nonprofits (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, financial literacy, workforce development).

As shown in Figure 3, DOC spending (excluding centrally administered pension and fringe costs which IBO cannot independently calculate due to data limitations) was relatively flat at the beginning and end of this decade after adjusting for inflation: spending was \$1.4 billion in 2023, about 1% higher than the total spent in 2014. PS costs make up the vast majority of DOC’s spending. For example, in 2023, staffing costs accounted for 83% of Department expenditures, totaling \$1.1 billion. After adjusting for inflation, this was \$61 million (5%) less than in 2014, even though the agency staff had decreased by 24% (2,500 employees) over that timeframe. OTPS costs, meanwhile, were \$69 million higher in 2023 compared with 2014.

Staffing and Expenditures in the Context of Jail Population Declines

Figure 4
Correction Officers Have Outnumbered People in Custody Since 2017

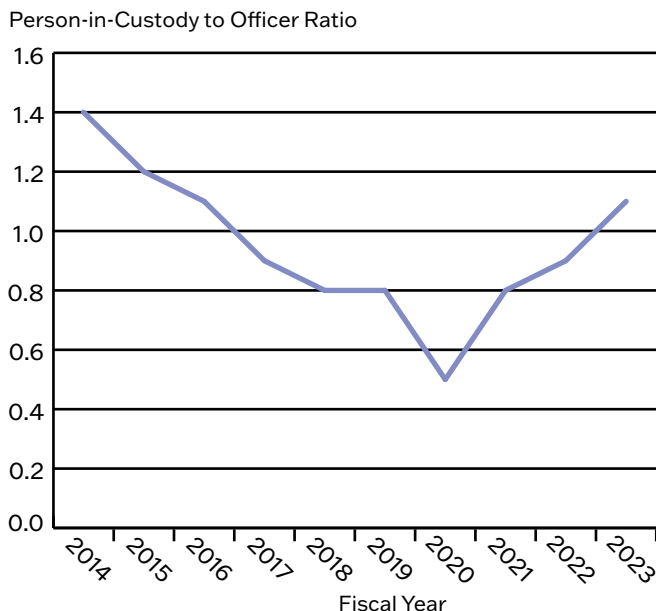


SOURCES: IBO analysis of Department of Correction and City Human Resource Management System data
 NOTE: This figure includes active Department of Correction employees in the correction officer title as of June 30th of each fiscal year and the number of people incarcerated at City jails on June 30th of the corresponding year. Active employees are all employees on payroll, including those on paid leave such as sick leave.
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Ratio of Staff to People Incarcerated. Correction officers, who account for nearly 90% of uniformed staff at DOC, outnumbered people in custody each year from 2017 through 2022. On average, the ratio of correction officers to people in custody during the decade reviewed was fewer than one person in custody per correction officer, peaking in 2014 at 1.4 persons incarcerated per correction officer and dipping to 0.5 persons in custody per officer—that is, twice as many officers as people in custody—in 2020 (Figures 4 and 5). Note that this reflects staff on payroll, including those on paid leave for any reason, so it may not reflect staffing ratios physically present in jails. For purposes of comparison, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the average staffing ratio for U.S. jails was [four people in custody per one correction officer](#) in 2022.

Daily Cost Per Person in Custody. To determine the daily cost per person in custody, IBO calculated the cumulative number of days that all individuals in custody spent in DOC jails and compared that with total DOC spending for the year. Figure 6 shows

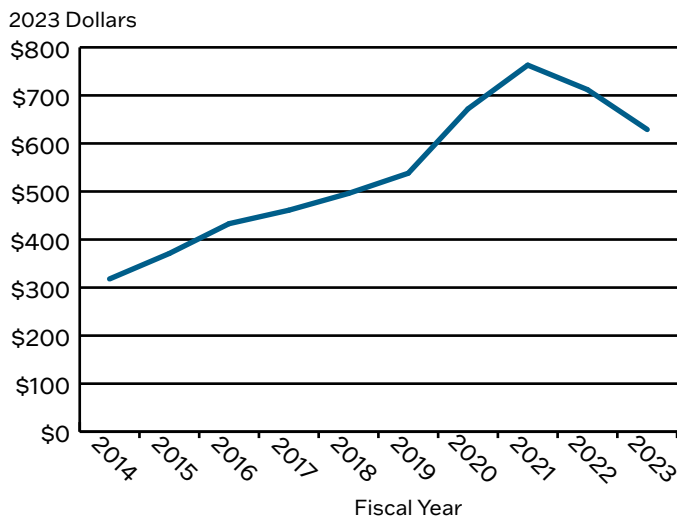
Figure 5
DOC Has Just About One Correction Officer Per Person in Custody, An Unusually High Number for The U.S.



SOURCES: IBO analysis of Department of Correction and City Human Resource Management System data
 NOTES: Only correction officers active on June 30th of each year are included in the ratio above. Other uniformed staff—captains, assistant deputy wardens, deputy wardens, and wardens—are excluded to allow for direct comparison with national figures. Active employees are all employees on payroll, including those on paid leave such as sick leave.

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Figure 6
The Average Daily Cost Per Person in Custody Has Nearly Doubled Since 2014



SOURCES: IBO analysis of Department of Correction and City Human Resource Management System data
 NOTES: Only correction officers active on June 30th of each year are included in the ratio above. Other uniformed staff—captains, assistant deputy wardens, deputy wardens, and wardens—are excluded to allow for direct comparison with national figures. Active employees are all employees on payroll, including those on paid leave such as sick leave.

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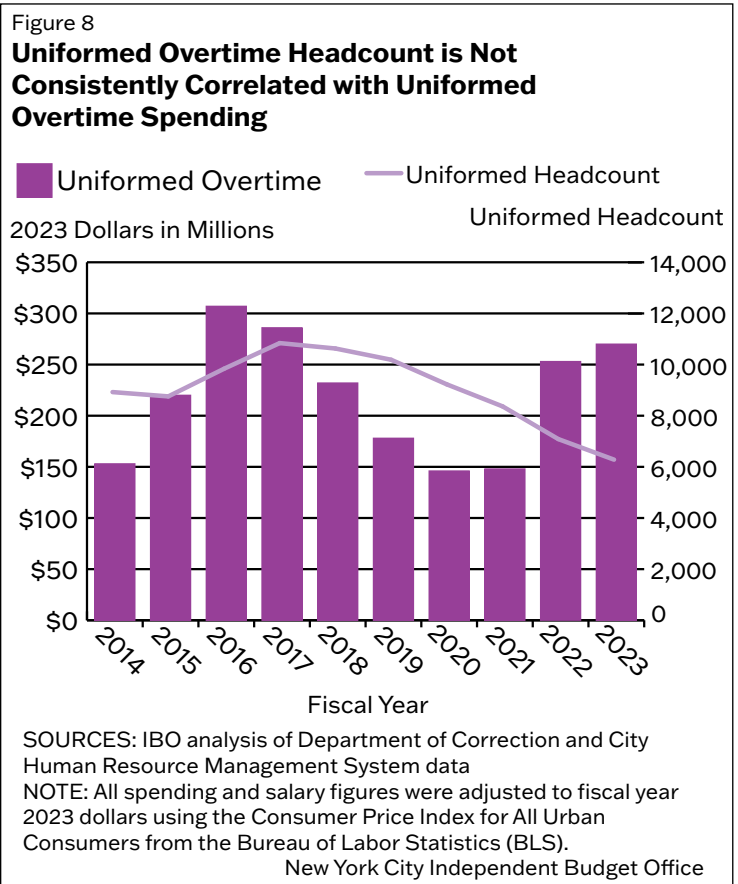
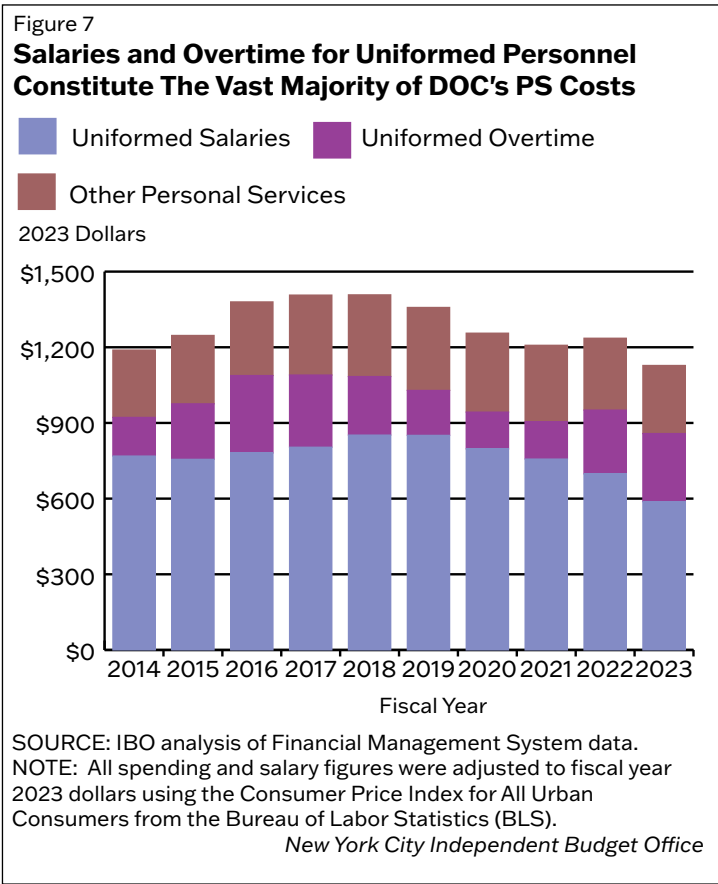
this average daily cost per person in custody. The trend in average cost per day is approximately the inverse of the jail population trend, as expected given the stability of DOC spending. The average cost in 2023 was \$629 per person, per day, essentially double the average daily cost of \$318 in 2014. This excludes costs outside of DOC’s budget (e.g., centrally administered pension and fringe costs, medical services provided through Health + Hospitals) which are often included in [similar estimates](#). Including the Administration’s estimated [\\$1.6 billion in pension and fringe costs](#) for DOC in 2023, for example, would increase the average daily cost per person in custody to \$1,366.

Potential Factors Impacting DOC Spending

In this section, IBO explores why overall DOC spending remained the same in the face of large reductions in jail population and headcount over the same period. IBO analyzed four components that could have impacted these trends: 1) uniformed base salary spending, 2) uniformed overtime spending, 3) average uniformed staff salary and tenure, and 4) OTPS spending.

After examining these four factors, IBO found that over the 10-year period from 2014 through 2023, the largest spending changes for DOC were decreases in costs for uniformed base salary pay and increases in uniformed overtime and OTPS costs. IBO also found small differences in average employee salaries and tenure over this decade.

Uniformed Base Salary and Overtime Spending. Uniformed salaries and overtime together make up the bulk of DOC’s PS spending (Figure 7). The large share of the Department’s budget dedicated to uniformed employees suggests changes in this area would have a disproportionate impact on DOC’s

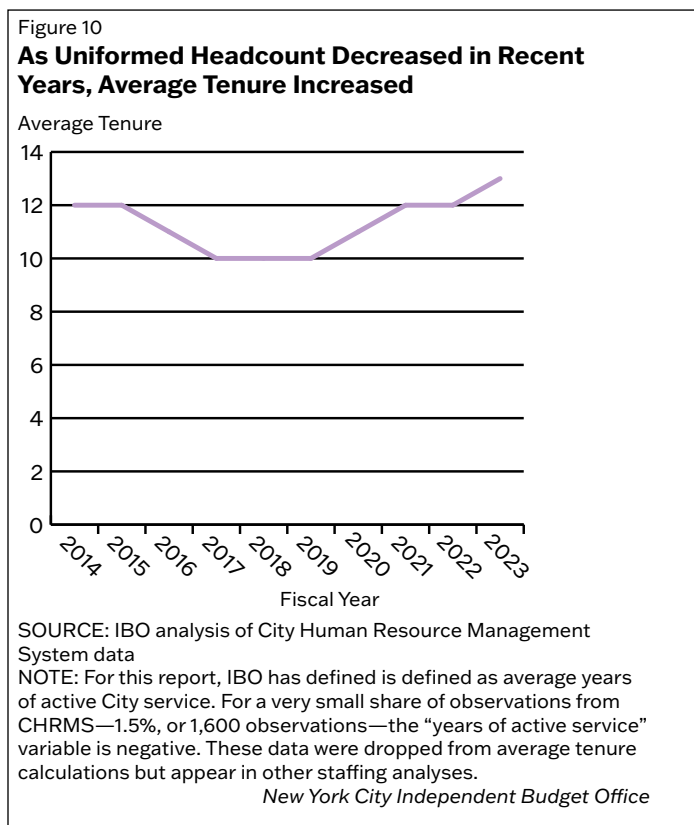
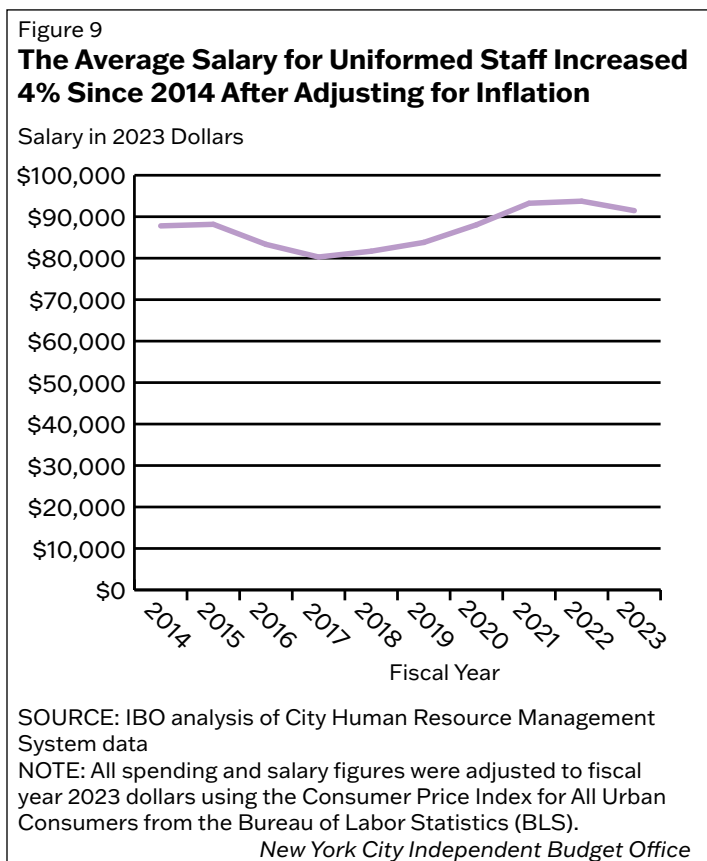


total expenditures, and therefore trends in uniformed staff costs would be especially revealing of overall spending trends. IBO found this to be the case. Comparing 2023 with 2014, salary expenditures shrank \$181 million (a decline of 24%) after adjusting for inflation—roughly in line with reductions in uniformed headcount (a decline of 30%)—while uniformed overtime spending increased by \$116 million.⁸ The share of PS costs attributable to uniformed overtime climbed from 13% (\$153 million) in 2014 to 24% (\$270 million) in 2023. Meanwhile, DOC's other PS costs (e.g., civilian salaries and overtime, differentials, holiday pay, terminal leave) were similar at each end of the decade.

Conventional wisdom is that headcount and overtime are inversely related, and that adding personnel leads to lower reliance on overtime, and vice versa. IBO did not find a clear and consistent relationship between uniformed staffing levels and overtime spending over this period, shown in Figure 8.⁹ After adding uniformed staff from 2014 through 2017, DOC spending on uniformed overtime almost doubled from \$153 million to \$286 million. Then, as uniformed headcount began to fall in 2018, overtime spending contracted for several years, before increasing substantially in 2022 and 2023 while staffing levels continued to drop. This indicates that staffing levels alone are insufficient to explain overtime spending.

Average Uniformed Employee Salary and Tenure. IBO also analyzed whether overall DOC spending was flat due to higher uniformed base salaries, which would affect spending on direct salaries as well overtime. Figure 9 shows that the average uniformed employee salary increased only slightly after adjusting for inflation.¹⁰ Uniformed employees saw an increase of 4% in real terms over this decade, suggesting that changes in salaries are an unlikely primary driver of higher overtime spending. Adjusting for inflation should account for collective bargaining increases during this period, to the extent that salary adjustments keep pace with inflation.

There was a modest decline in the average salary of uniformed personnel from 2015 through 2017, corresponding to additional hiring in that period, as new recruits start at the bottom of the pay scale. Since



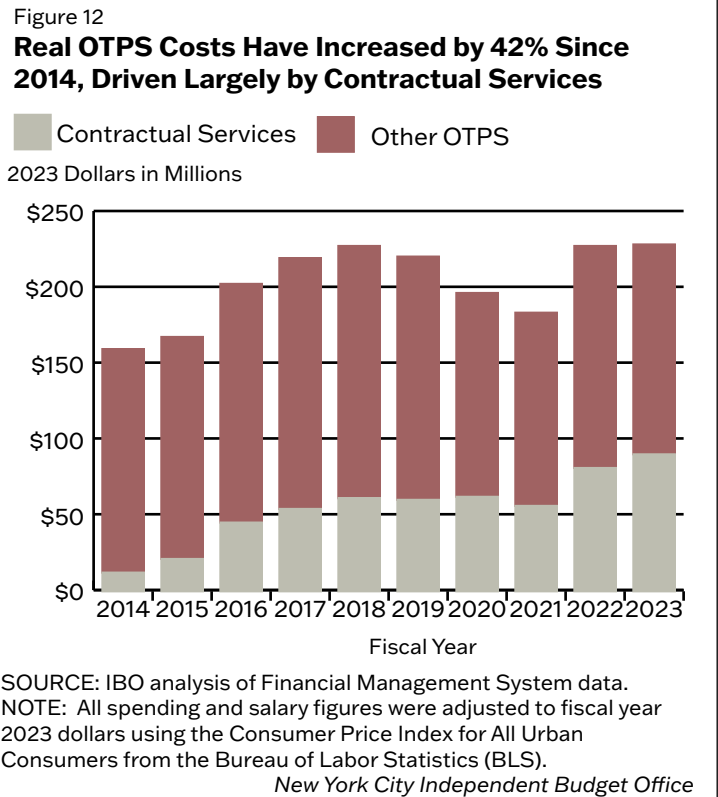
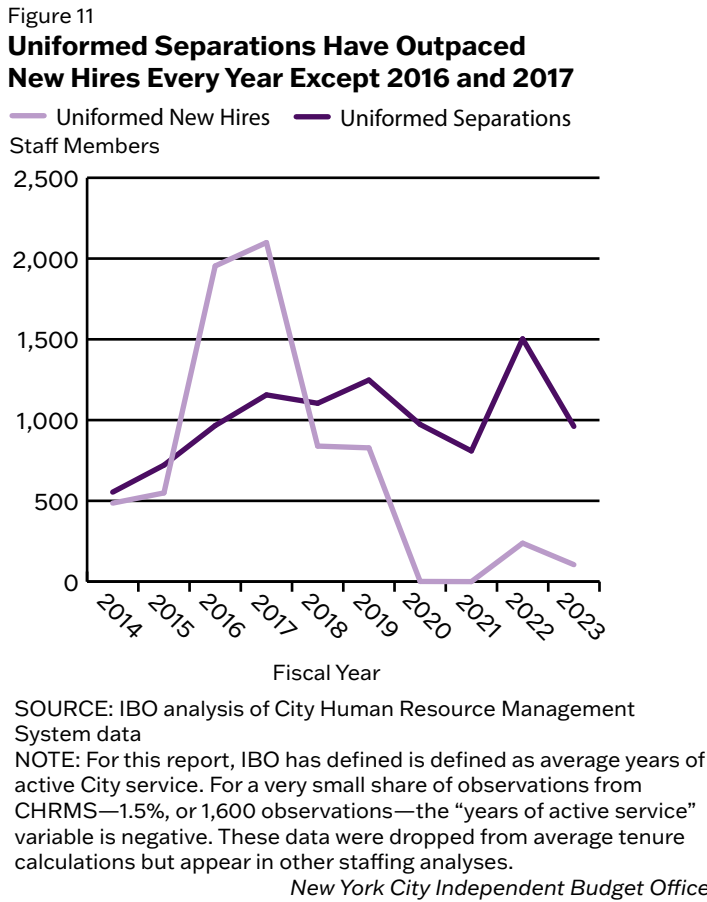
2018, salaries have largely trended up in concert with lower uniformed headcount and longer average tenure.

Average years of tenure—defined by IBO in this report as years of active City service—among uniformed staff increased by one year, from 12 years in 2014 to 13 years in 2023, which may account for the uptick in average base salary (Figure 10). Across the decade, changes in tenure and headcount have been inversely related: earlier in the decade, as the Department hired more correction officers, tenure decreased.¹¹ In more recent years of high uniformed attrition, tenure has steadily increased.

With the exception of 2016 and 2017, uniformed staff separations—individuals leaving the Department, whether through retirement, resignation, or termination—have outpaced new uniformed hires. This trend, shown in Figure 11, contributes to higher average tenure among uniformed employees. From 2016 through 2020, the annual number of separations was relatively consistent, averaging just under 1,100 employees per year. The decline to 809 separations in 2021, followed by an increase to 1,503 in 2022, mirrors separation trends IBO has observed citywide during that period. (That is, City employees tended to delay separations amid pandemic uncertainty.)

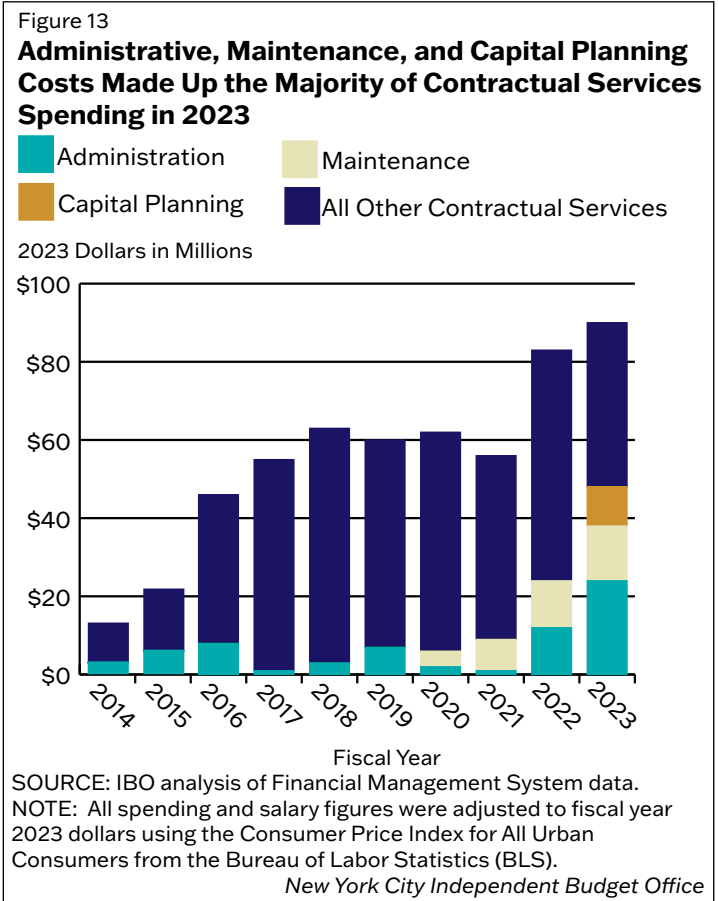
Hiring trends, on the other hand, were more erratic during this period. DOC’s hiring efforts at the beginning of the decade are apparent, with an average of about 2,000 new uniformed officers entering the Department each year in 2016 and 2017. From 2018 through 2019, hiring slowed to about 800 employees annually. Essentially no new uniformed staff members joined in 2020 and 2021 due to the hiring freeze previously discussed, and 2022 and 2023 saw only 238 and 105 new hires, respectively.

Other than Personal Services Spending. Alongside uniformed overtime costs, OTPS costs were another area of increased spending during this decade. These non-personnel costs, while accounting for only about one-fifth of DOC’s budget, grew by 42% (\$69 million) in this period (Figure 12). The largest change was in contractual services spending, which increased nearly seven-fold, from \$13 million in 2014 to \$90 million in



2023, after adjusting for inflation.

Contractual services include services provided by entities other than the Department itself, whether an external vendor (for-profit or nonprofit) or another City agency (in the case of intracity agreements). Within contractual services spending, the largest increases compared with 2014 were for administration, maintenance, and capital planning services (Figure 13). For example, DOC paid the Department of Design and Construction \$33 million in 2023 for work relating to Americans with Disabilities Act compliance, cell door replacement, and emergency repairs at City jails. IBO anticipates similar types of work may be required in the future to maintain the safety of jails on Rikers Island without using funds from the Capital Budget, which are restricted due to the jails’ 2027 closure deadline. (For more on capital and expense spending for maintenance on Rikers Island, see [“Capital Projects on Rikers Island.”](#)) The Department also saw a bump in OTPS spending mid-decade, at which time major sources of additional spending were addiction treatment services and programming.¹² Jail-based programs range from counseling and re-entry planning to parenting classes and vocational training.



Conclusion

DOC's total spending in 2023 did not demonstrably change after a decade of declining numbers of people working and incarcerated in City jails. The Department's spending is among the [highest in the country](#). It is clear that having a smaller jail population and fewer DOC employees has not decreased costs. It therefore cannot be assumed that further decarceration or an even lower headcount will lead to savings moving forward without better management to reduce reliance on overtime, a major driver of recent personnel costs.¹³

Even though DOC spending did not decrease, decarceration efforts have benefited people diverted from City jails. The risks to the physical and mental health of people incarcerated have been well-documented by the Nunez federal monitor, and there is considerable evidence that [pretrial detention negatively impacts](#) the personal lives and case outcomes of people detained compared with those released pretrial. If DOC's spending levels more accurately reflected its headcount—to bring the Department in line with [citywide trends](#)—more funding could be available for community-based programs to support people involved with the criminal legal system. Although not covered by this report, the budgetary impact of aligning City jails with correctional best practices is an area of interest and possible future research by IBO.

Endnotes

¹ This report does not include 2024 because actual spending, as reported in the [Annual Comprehensive Financial Report](#), has not yet been finalized.

² Because civilian staff represent only one-fifth of DOC's overall headcount—amounting to less than the total spent on non-personnel costs—details for those staff members are not included in this report.

³ DOC also attributed changes to its 14-Point Anti-Violence Reform Agenda, also known as the [14-Point Plan](#), which was initiated in 2015 by Commissioner Ponte and was intended to reduce both violence and use of force directly by addressing their root causes.

⁴ Intracity payments occur when a City agency pays another agency for services, rather than paying an external vendor. An interfund agreement is a type of intracity contract which allows an agency to pay the salaries of City employees working on capital projects with Expense funds, then be reimbursed by through the Capital Budget.

⁵ OMB's public data on fringe, published with each budget update in the Expense Revenue Contract, is an estimate of the centrally administered fringe and pension budget (not actual spending) for the entire agency. From the public data, it is not possible to untangle what share of these costs are for uniformed employees, the focus on this report, versus civilian employees. When asked for a fringe rate for DOC, the Administration did not provide one and instead detailed how fringe is budgeted. IBO cannot estimate DOC's fringe rate based on other agencies due to the unique collective bargaining contract of the Department.

⁶ New York City rate determined by dividing the number of people incarcerated at the end of 2023 by the total NYC population in 2023 per the Census Bureau (8,258,035). National rate determined by dividing the [Bureau of Justice Statistics's](#) total confined U.S. jail population for 2023 of 664,200 by the total U.S. population (334,914,895).

⁷ Includes all staff on payroll as of June 30 of each fiscal year, including part-time positions.

⁸ Includes pay for sick leave, which due to data limitations, IBO is not able to disaggregate from salary pay. Does not include other personnel pay, such as holiday pay or differential pay. Uniformed staff at the Department are eligible for [unlimited paid sick leave](#). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the average number of DOC staff members out sick [more than doubled](#). By the end of 2023, [total sick leave usage had dropped below pre-pandemic levels](#).

⁹ Headcount in this report is defined as active employees on June 30, the end of the fiscal year, and overtime expenditures represent the total spent over the course of a fiscal year. Because headcount is point-in-time and overtime spending is cumulative, these data are not easily directly comparable. To discern a relationship, IBO ran Pearson correlations the full decade of spending and headcount data. Three different overtime spending estimates were used: spending for the same fiscal year as the headcount data, for the following year (in the event that overtime the following year is better explained by headcount at the end of the prior year), and for an average of the two years. Coefficients for these estimates were 0, -0.44, and -0.10, respectively. IBO also conducted Pearson correlations for 2014 through 2018 and 2019 through 2022, as to the eye, the relationship appears to have changed across the decade. Pearson coefficients confirm that hypothesis. The average overtime estimate yielded a coefficient of 0.1 for 2014 through 2018, and -0.9 for 2019 through 2022. That is, in the first half of the decade, there was little relationship between headcount and overtime pay, whereas in the latter half, the two were strongly negatively correlated. Therefore, IBO has concluded that no clear and consistent relationship exists.

¹⁰ Analysis refers to base salary, not total take-home pay, and therefore excludes differentials, overtime, or other supplemental pay.

¹¹ A December 2022 [court order](#) allowed the City to hire supervisors into a civilianized Warden role with the title Facility Supervisor. Aside from correction officers, all other uniformed positions must be hired from within uniformed ranks, per [Section 9-117 of the City's Administrative Code](#).

¹² As part of the 14-Point Plan enacted during his period, DOC set a goal to offer [five hours of programming per day](#) to reduce "idleness" and therefore violence. [Local Law 170 of 2017](#) made this programming goal a requirement, although the Department [recently testified](#) that it was not meeting this mandate after [ending \\$17 million in contracts with nonprofit providers](#). In the same testimony, DOC conveyed that \$14 million of this funding will be restored in future budget cycles, when the Department issues new requests for proposals for these funds.

¹³ From an [April 2024 report](#) by the Nunez federal monitor: "An important indicator of efficient workforce management is the level of an agency's use of overtime. Given the Department's problems with inefficient staff scheduling and deployment and abuse of leave benefits, overtime has become a routine strategy to increase staff availability on any given shift...[U]sing overtime to address chronic staffing issues, as this Department does, has significant fiscal consequences and an obvious negative impact on staff wellness and morale."