

Corrections costs under scrutiny

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A new audit says that the state's prison inmate population fell 1 percent in the past three years – and prison costs jumped 32 percent.

Part of the problem is correctional officer wages, according to the report that state Auditor Elaine Howle released Tuesday. It also criticizes the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, with its \$10 billion annual budget, for lacking "the data necessary" to figure out how overtime and other factors heap on costs.

But, as Corrections Deputy Director Dave Lewis said, "The problems we face are more complex than data." The department accounts for 10 percent of the general fund, so "it's a lightning rod for criticism," he said, whenever there's money trouble.

Like now. Howle's report comes as the Legislature struggles to come up with \$1.2 billion in corrections cuts. Meanwhile, the state is fighting a court order to release inmates to relieve overcrowded prisons.

The audit takes a close look at correctional officer wages. In 2004, the maximum base pay for the job was \$58,600. By 2007, it was \$73,700, a 26 percent increase. (It's stuck there because labor talks with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger reached an impasse, so he imposed terms.)

During those years, officer overtime went from \$152 million to \$431 million. The base wage increases alone added \$88 million to overtime costs in 2007-08.

Much of the OT covered vacancies. Mandates by a federal official in charge of prison health care added more. But this year, officer overtime is down, according 2009 corrections statistics not included in the audit.

In June, a peak overtime month, officers earned \$24 million for about 500,000 hours of extra work, roughly half of what they earned for the same month last year.

New state work rules excluding sick leave and other time off from counting toward the overtime threshold explain part of it.

"And until this year, we were hot and heavy filling vacancies," Lewis said.

Cutting overtime reduces officer fatigue and probably improves safety for everyone. But

new hires are a fiscal wash, the audit says, because retirement benefits add substantial costs.

Prison officers and a few other state safety workers can retire at 50 with 3 percent of their highest annual income multiplied by years on the job. With benefits, new hires cost the state \$53 an hour, compared with an hour of overtime for the highest paid correctional officers at \$52 an hour.

Those are some of the numbers. The solution to California's prison costs, however, are more about politics and less about math.