PRISON POPULATION PROJECTIONS: FISCAL YEAR 2026 TO FISCAL YEAR 2035

INTRODUCTION

North Carolina General Statute §164-40 sets forth the North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission's mandate to develop a simulation model to be used to prepare prison population projections. The projections are prepared on an annual basis in conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction (DAC). In addition to assisting in the determination of long-term resource needs, the projections allow for the consideration of correctional policies within the context of available resources and consideration of prison population management (e.g., staffing levels, custody classification, etc.).

The prison population projections contained herein were completed in two parts. The Sentencing Commission prepared prison population projections for all offenders sentenced on or after July 1, 2025 (new population). The Administrative Analysis Unit of the DAC prepared projections for all offenders in prison as of June 30, 2025 (resident prison population). The final combined projections account for the decline of the resident prison population and the buildup of the new population (new prison admissions that occur through the imposition of active sentences or as the result of violations of probation or post-release supervision [PRS]). The ten-year prison population projections include all offenders considered part of the state prison system.[1]

PRISON POPULATION PROJECTIONS AND CAPACITY

The prison population projections were developed using SAS® Simulation Studio. The simulation model uses empirical information about how offenders are processed through the criminal justice system to produce the projections. The composition of the current and projected prison populations is primarily determined by the distribution of offenders convicted and sentenced under the Structured Sentencing Act (SSA). Data on convictions and sentences imposed in FY 2025 (July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025) provide the foundation for the projections. By using the most recent data available, the projections account for changes in criminal justice trends (arrests, court filings, dispositions, and convictions) that occur from year to year.

Table 1 and Figure 1 present the projected prison population and capacity for FY 2026 through FY 2035. As shown in the Current Projection column, the prison population is projected to increase 16% from June 2026 to June 2035. The current projection is higher than the previous projection primarily because the resident prison population (the starting point for projections) was over 1,000 offenders higher on June 30, 2025 than it was on June 30, 2024.

Prison capacity figures were provided by the DAC. Standard Operating Capacity (SOC) is projected to be 31,721 and Expanded Operating Capacity (EOC) is projected to be 36,680 in the first year of the projection. Beginning in FY 2027, and for each of the remaining years of the projection, SOC is projected to be 31,272 and EOC is projected to be 36,093.

[1] The prison population projections and related historical data included in this document include jail backlog as part of the prison population (when applicable). On December 31, 2025, there were 611 offenders backlogged in county jails.

Table 1
Prison Population Projections and Capacity

Fiscal Year End	Prison Population[2]		Prison Capacity		Difference between Current Projection and EOC[c,d]
	Previous Projection	Current Projection	Standard Operating Capacity[a]	Expanded Operating Capacity[b]	
2026	32,132	33,183	31,721	36,680	3,497
2027	32,437	33,764	31,272	36,093	2,329
2028	33,065	34,370	31,272	36,093	1,723
2029	33,540	34,998	31,272	36,093	1,095
2030	34,074	35,122	31,272	36,093	971
2031	34,616	35,719	31,272	36,093	374
2032	35,216	36,317	31,272	36,093	-224
2033	35,905	37,018	31,272	36,093	-925
2034	36,597	37,695	31,272	36,093	-1,602
2035	N/A	38,354	31,272	36,093	-2,261

Prepared in conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction (DAC). Prison capacity estimates were provided by the DAC.

Notes:
[a] SOC is the number of single cells with one offender per cell plus the number of offenders who can be housed in dormitories by dividing the gross square feet of each dormitory by 50 square feet and rounding to the closest double bunk configuration. SOC includes all beds except for specialty beds that are reserved for certain uses such as acute mental health, acute medical, and restrictive housing. SOC supports a safer and more stable environment for both staff and the prison population.
[b] EOC is the number of offenders housed in dormitories that operate at varying percentages (not to exceed 130%) beyond their SOC, plus the number of single cells with one offender per cell, plus the number of single cells that house two offenders per cell. Operating at EOC requires additional staffing than what is required for operating at SOC.
[c] Positive numbers indicate that the current projected population is lower than capacity, while negative numbers indicate that the current projected population is higher than capacity.
[d] Differences between the projected population and estimated capacity may not reflect available bed space due to staffing shortages and facility maintenance. As of May 28, 2026, 5,227 beds across 21 correctional facilities were suspended due to long-term staffing shortages. Craggy Correctional Center is scheduled for closure in 2026.

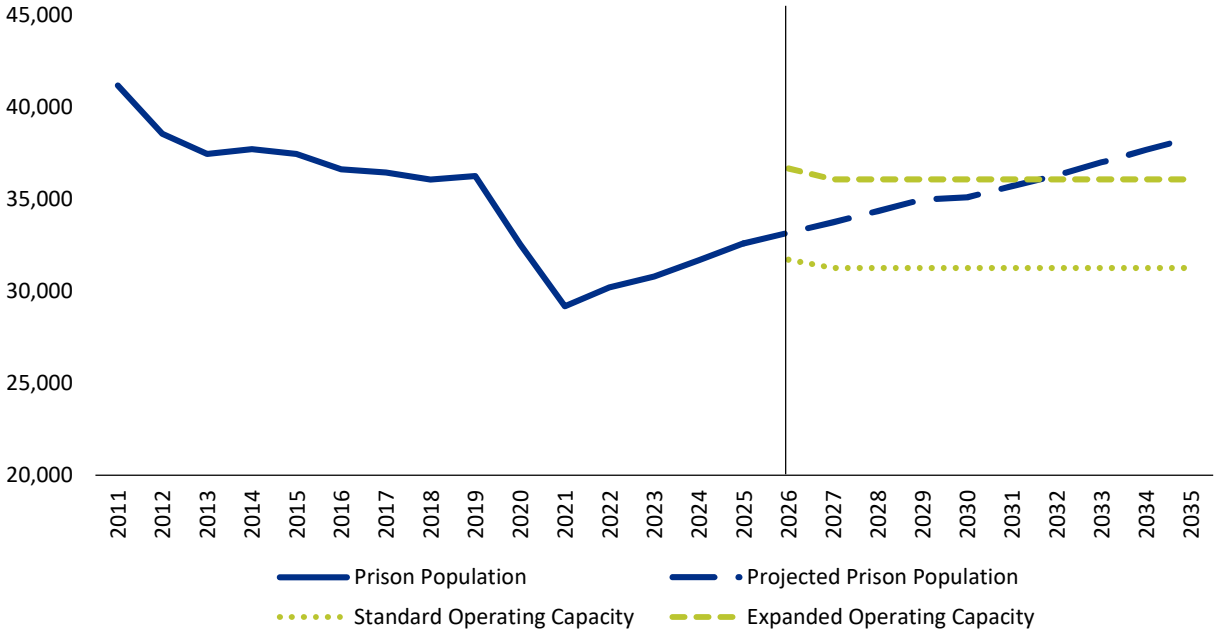
[2] See https://www.nccourts.gov/documents/publications/adult-correctional-population-projections for previous projections.

The prison population is projected to be above SOC for all ten years of the projection period. The projected prison population is below EOC for the first six years of the projection period but above EOC for the remaining four years.

While the state's prisons have operated near EOC for many years, the DAC bases its facility staffing levels on SOC. Some prison units are unable to operate at SOC due to factors such as facility age, location, and infrastructure. Temporary reductions in prison capacity are also necessary at various times throughout the year to address operational needs or staffing shortages.

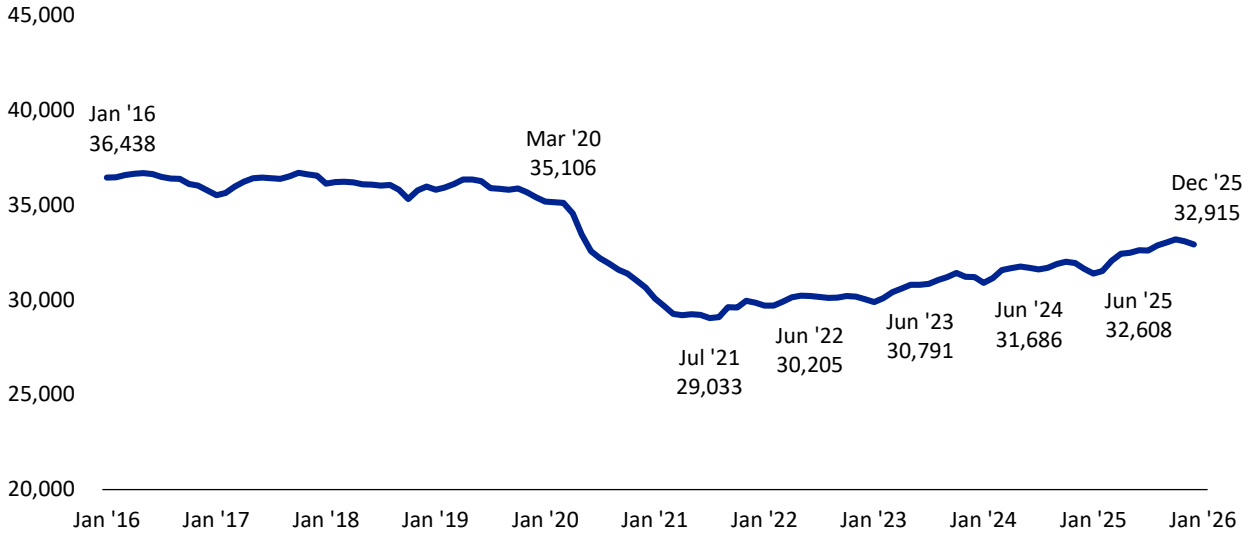
Figure 1 and Figure 2 provide a historical examination of the prison population; Figure 1 also shows the ten-year prison population projections within the context of prison capacity. As a result of downward shifts in criminal justice trends and several key policy changes, including the passage of the Justice Reinvestment Act (JRA) in 2011, the prison population averaged a 2% decrease each year between FY 2011 and FY 2016. Over the next few years, the prison population stabilized until declining substantially following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The prison population decreased 10% in both FY 2020 and FY 2021. As disruptions to court and correctional operations eased, the prison population has increased an average of 3% each year since FY 2021. The June 2026 projected prison population (33,183) is 2% higher than the average population for June 2025 (32,608).

Figure 1
NC Prison Population and Projections at Fiscal Year End:
FY 2011 – FY 2035



SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission and NC Department of Adult Correction

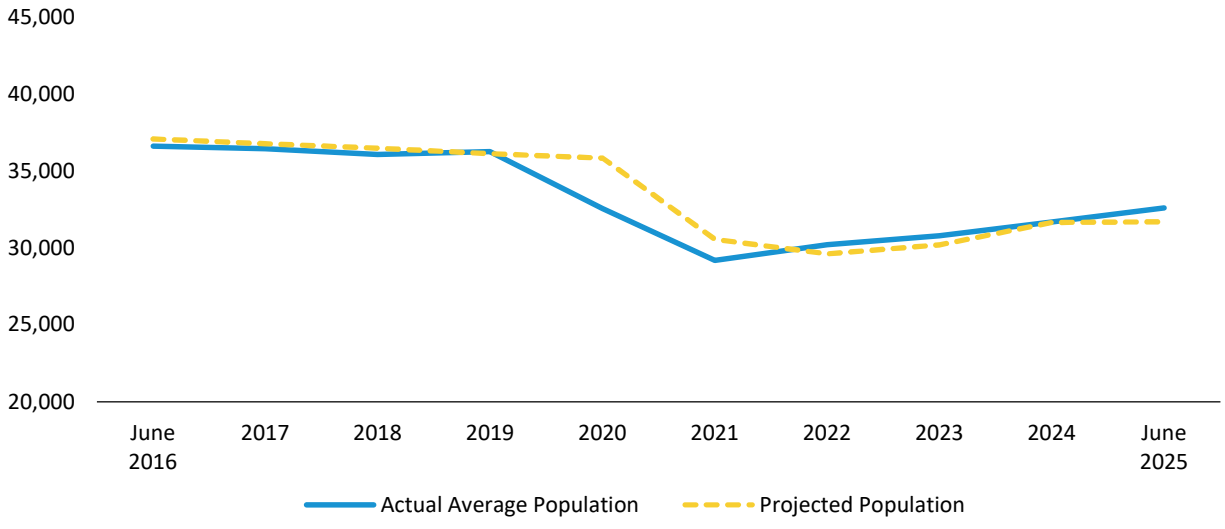
Figure 2
NC Prison Population
Monthly Average: CY 2016 – CY 2025



SOURCE: NC Department of Adult Correction, Daily Unit Population Reports and Inmates on Backlog Reports

For the majority of the past decade, the accuracy of the prison population projections has been within 2% of the actual population at the end of the fiscal year (*see* Figure 3). The accuracy of the projections for FY 2020 and FY 2021 was affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the court and correctional systems. The projection for June 2025 was within 900 beds, with a projected prison population of 31,708 compared to the actual average population of 32,608.

Figure 3
A Comparison of the Actual and Projected Population at Fiscal Year End:
FY 2016 – FY 2025 Projections



SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission and NC Department of Adult Correction

ASSUMPTIONS

This section details the assumptions that were used to develop the prison population projections for FY 2026 through FY 2035. The assumptions were primarily determined using data from the most recent fiscal year (FY 2025) and assume there will be no significant changes in demographics, crime rates, or criminal justice laws and policies in North Carolina over the projection period.

Growth

- *Growth Rates:* As adopted by the *Forecasting Technical Advisory Group*,[3] the projections assume a growth rate of 1% for FY 2026 and FY 2027, 0% for FY 2028, and 1% for the remaining projection years.

Convictions and Sentences Imposed

- *Punishment Chart*: The projections assume all new felony convictions will be sentenced under the current felony punishment chart (effective for offenses committed on or after October 1, 2013).

- *Court Practices*: The projections assume no change in judicial or prosecutorial behavior relating to convictions and sentencing.

- *Composition of Felony Convictions*: The projections assume there will be no changes in the composition of felony convictions. In FY 2025, 8% of convictions were for Class A – D felonies, 32% were for Class E – G felonies, and 60% were for Class H – I felonies.

- *Active Rates and Time Served*: In FY 2025, 40% of felons received an active sentence, with an average estimated time served of 39 months. Overall, it is assumed that the rates of active sentences and average estimated time served will match the rates for FY 2025.

- *Percent of Active Sentence Served*: The projections assume that, on average, all SSA felons will serve 104% of their minimum active sentences (the average percentage served by SSA felons released from prison in FY 2025).[4] The percentage of sentence served varies by offense class (e.g., 101% for Class C, 107% for Class I). Offenders in the more serious offense classes serve closer to their minimum sentence since they have the potential to accrue more earned time due to their longer sentence lengths.

- *Legislative Changes*: The projections take into account, where possible, legislative changes affecting criminal penalties. The projections include impact from the reclassification of crimes related to fentanyl, soliciting children by computer, and assaults/threats against certain public officials. Impact from other legislative changes, including new offenses and the elimination of the presumption of concurrent sentencing, could not be determined because of a lack of historical data or because penalties were amended for existing offenses with elements that could not be modeled.

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[3] The *Forecasting Technical Advisory Group*, convened by Sentencing Commission staff, adopts growth rates for felony convictions on an annual basis. In addition to Sentencing Commission staff, the group consists of representatives from the Administrative Office of the Courts, Department of Adult Correction, Department of Public Safety's Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Conference of District Attorneys, Conference of Clerks of Superior Court, Office of Indigent Defense Services, State Bureau of Investigation, Office of State Budget and Management, Department of Commerce, Governor's Crime Commission, UNC School of Government, and Fiscal Research Division of the General Assembly. The group adopts growth rates after reviewing population, juvenile justice, and criminal justice trends.

[4] The maximum sentence length is 120% of the minimum sentence length (rounded up) plus the period of PRS.

Prison Admissions

- *Prison Admissions*: The distribution of prison admissions is expected to match the distribution from FY 2025. In FY 2025, 50% of all felony admissions to prison resulted from active sentences for a new conviction, 25% resulted from probation violations other than conviction for a new crime, and 25% resulted from PRS violations other than conviction for a new crime.

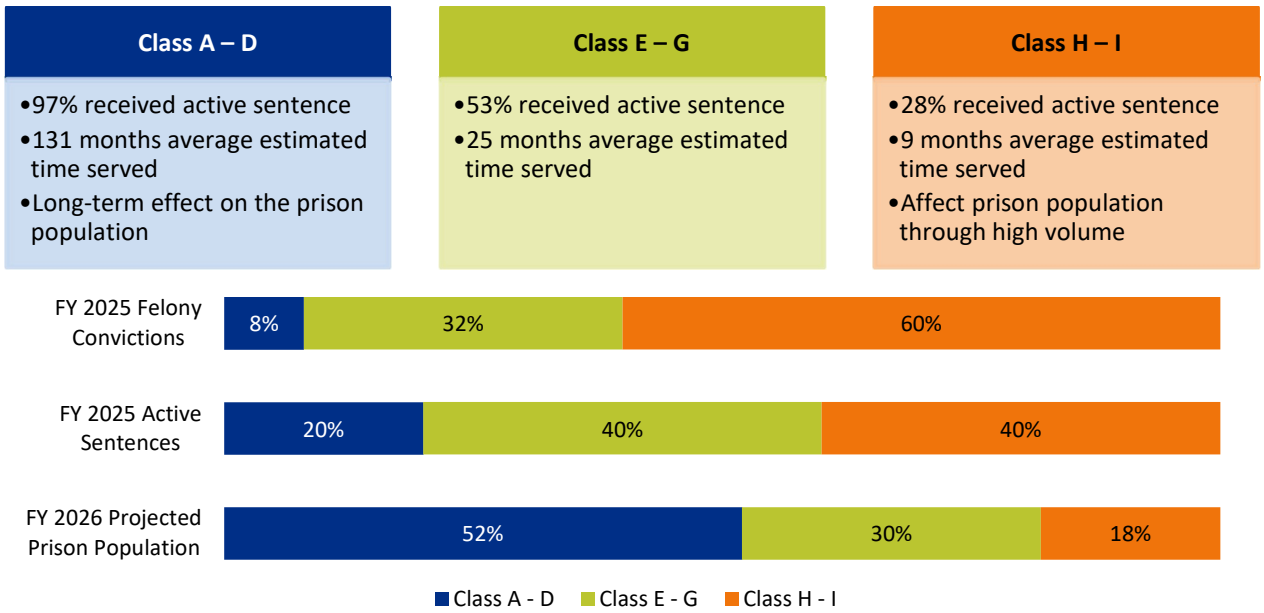
- *Probation:* In FY 2025, 21% of exits from probation for felons resulted from revocation. It is assumed that probation revocation rates, lag-time from placement on probation to revocation, and time served will match FY 2025 figures.

- *PRS*: In FY 2025, 23% of exits from PRS resulted from revocation. It is assumed that PRS revocation rates, lag-time from placement on PRS to revocation, and time served will match FY 2025 figures.

DYNAMICS OF SENTENCES IMPOSED AND THE PRISON POPULATION

Figure 4 examines the composition of the projected prison population, which is primarily determined by the empirical distribution of offenders convicted and sentenced under the SSA. This distribution reflects the prioritization of resources for violent and repeat offenders. Class A – D felonies (the most serious felony offenses) have a long-term effect on the prison population due to the requirement to receive an active sentence (with some limited exceptions) and the long sentences imposed in these classes. Class A – D felonies account for 52% of the projected prison population but represent only 8% of felony convictions and 20% of active sentences overall. Class H – I felonies (the least serious felony offenses), which account for 60% of felony convictions and 40% of active sentences, comprise 18% of the projected prison population due to their lower rate of active sentences (28%) and shorter time served (an average of 9 months).

Figure 4
FY 2025 Felony Convictions and FY 2026 Projected Prison Population



Note: Mandatory active sentence required with limited exceptions for Class A through D felonies.
SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission and NC Department of Adult Correction