



Inspection Report

New Jersey State Prison, West Compound, General Population

Executive Summary

In October 2024, the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson inspected the West Compound of New Jersey State Prison, and conducted follow-up meetings and re-inspections in the six months that followed. The West Compound is the oldest operating prison facility in America. More than 600 people, most of whom have very long sentences, live in its General Population housing units. Many of them spend decades housed at this maximum-security facility even with good behavior in prison.

The West Compound is nearly 200 years old, and for at least the last 100 years, correctional leaders, policymakers, and subject-matter experts have called for it to be demolished and replaced. Prison cells in the compound have no hot water and, with the exception of 4-wing, all of the cells are very small. The cells in 7-Wing are shockingly small, measuring just four feet by seven feet. Housing units in the West Compound have no air conditioning, no day room, and no recreation space, and toilets and showers leave people exposed without adequate privacy.

Most people in the General Population of the West Compound have a job assignment and are enrolled in religious services and activities. Records show people getting out of their cells for showers, meals, and access to the JPay kiosks. Small groups of people from each housing unit go out to the yard every other day and to the indoor gym once or twice a week. The facility also maintains a large and active law library and provides education and programming to a small number of participants. The housing units are not designed to accommodate indoor recreation, and current record-keeping does not contain sufficient information to determine how much time people in the General Population are confined to their cells.

The staff and leadership of the facility were professional and clearly had developed a strong rapport with the incarcerated population. The facility met inspection standards for mattresses, pillows, bedding, clothing, and laundry services. It met standards for food preparation, fire extinguishers, and fire inspections. The population had access to the telephone, paper forms, health care staff, and social services. The facility's Administration was responsive to concerns surfaced at the initial inspection. For example, storage containers for personal property that were previously available only for purchase will now be provided free at intake in accordance with policy.

The Ombudsperson Office concludes this report with five recommendations, including:

- Prioritizing and funding the demolition and replacement of the West Compound,
- Adopting state standards for the size of prison cells,
- Taking steps to increase shower privacy,
- Moving some people out of the West Compound who can safely be housed elsewhere, and
- Building the capacity to track out-of-cell time for individuals housed in General Population.

Inspection Overview

The Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson inspected the General Population housing units in the West Compound of New Jersey State Prison. The initial inspection took place over three days in October with four follow-up meetings and re-inspections over the following six months.¹ At the end of October, there were 610 people housed in the General Population, mostly in single-occupancy cells. The inspection included interviews with 116 of them, as well as record reviews and conversations with custody officers, staff members, and facility leadership. The Office observed prison cells, housing units, the facility's kitchen, and spaces for recreation, education, and religious observance.

New Jersey State Prison consists of three compounds—North, South, and West—with a total population of 1,318.² The inspection focused on the West Compound which is the oldest operating prison facility in America, parts of which were built nearly 200 years ago. It did not focus on the North and South Compounds, which were built in the 1980s with temperature control and a modern housing unit design. It also did not focus on the Restorative Housing Unit (RHU) in the West Compound, which is a close-custody unit for people sanctioned for disciplinary violations. The report does, however, note the dimensions of the cells in the RHU on what is known as 7-Wing, because they are extraordinarily small.

The Office developed inspection standards based largely on state regulations and policies, with some measures grounded in other standards and best practices. The standards focus on sanitation, living conditions, fire safety, and food preparation. The initial inspection score was 78% and its score upon re-inspection was 82%. Points were deducted for inadequate shower privacy, small bath towels, storage containers for personal property, the ratio of JPay kiosks to users, and some architectural issues that are not easily addressed like cell size and hot water in cells. The scored inspection tool is posted as an Addendum to this report on the Corrections Ombudsperson website.

The inspection report includes additional un-scored information gleaned from record reviews on the daily activities, work assignments, and disciplinary infractions of the people housed in General Population. It also contains historical citations related to the building design, cost, and more than a century of calls for the West Compound to be demolished and replaced with a modern correctional facility.

¹ The Ombudsperson Office inspected the West Compound on October 28th, 29th, and 30th, 2024, with follow-up meetings and re-inspections on December 11th, 2024, and January 22nd, March 12th, and May 8th, 2025.

² Population number reflects the number of people in custody at New Jersey State Prison on October 28, 2024.

A Population Held in Maximum Security Custody Because of Long Sentences

More than a third (35%) of the people living in the General Population of the West Compound have a life sentence or a “virtual life” sentence with a projected release at age 90 or older.³ Another third (32%) of the population would be 70 years old or older when they are first eligible for release.⁴

New Jersey State Prison is a maximum security prison. The Department of Corrections generally places people with long sentences there based on the serious nature of their crimes, regardless of their score on the Department’s objective classification instrument. In February 2025, for example, nearly 500 people in the West Compound General Population (71.5%) had classification scores of four points or less. However, because of the length of time they have to serve before becoming eligible for release, or for other reasons related to their convictions or detainers, they had received classification “overrides” preventing their placement in minimum custody housing.⁵ Most of the overrides were required by policy, meaning the person had to be placed in either medium or maximum-security custody. About 18% of the overrides were discretionary decisions by the classification committee.

Many individuals spend decades housed at New Jersey State Prison despite lower-risk classification scores. On February 27, 2025, for example, 19% of the General Population in the West Compound had lived at New Jersey State Prison for 20 years or longer.⁶ People in the West Compound represent half of the prison’s total population, but less than 13% of all 2024 disciplinary incidents in the facility, and only 8% of fights and assaults.⁷

³ As of February 27, 2025, 240 of 678 people living in the West Compound General Population had a life or virtual life sentence. Dates of birth and release eligibility gathered from the New Jersey Department of Corrections iTAG database. Note that the number of people in General Population increased from 610 during the initial inspection in October 2024 to 678 at the time of this sentence length analysis.

⁴ As of February 27, 2025, 220 of 678 people would be eligible for release between ages 70-89. Dates of birth and release eligibility gathered from the New Jersey Department of Corrections iTAG database.

⁵ As of February 27, 2025, 485 of 678 people living in the West Compound General Population had received an objective classification score equivalent to minimum custody, but had an “override” into medium or maximum custody. Overrides based on the length of a prison term are authorized by N.J.A.C. §10A:9-2.14.

⁶ As of February 27, 2025, 114 of 604 people in the West Compound General Population had resided at New Jersey State Prison for 20 years or longer. Housing information and admission dates gathered from the New Jersey Department of Corrections iTAG database.

⁷ 2024 disciplinary data provided by New Jersey Department of Corrections. New Jersey State Prison disciplinary data categorized by incident, most serious charge, and housing unit of the involved persons.

A Very Old Prison Designed for Solitary Confinement

The West Compound is made up of seven extremely old housing units. 4-Wing was built in 1836, nearly 200 years ago.⁸ The remaining wings were constructed between 1861 and 1905.⁹ (See Table 1.)

The New Jersey Administrative Code regulates the size of county jail cells, but has no minimum standard for the size of state prison cells. The county jail standard requires 35 square feet of unencumbered floor space in a single-occupancy cell.¹⁰ The only cells in the West Compound that would meet this standard are those in 4-Wing. (See Table 1.) The others range in size from 35 square feet (6-Wing) to 45 square feet (1-Wing), with beds that take up 13.5 square feet of floor space. The smallest cells, currently used for RHU (disciplinary housing) confinement, are in 7-Wing and measure just 28 square feet—four feet wide by seven feet deep. People housed on 7-Wing can touch the ceiling and can extend their arms to touch both side-walls of the cell. The same is true for much of the population in 1-wing, 2-wing and 6-wing, though these cells are larger than the ones in 7-wing.

Table 1. Cell sizes in New Jersey State Prison, West Compound housing units, observed Oct. 28-30, 2024

Housing unit	Year built	Cell Size	Number of cells in use	People on the unit
4-Right	1836	106 sq. ft.	41	59
4-Left	1836	106 sq. ft.	44	59
1-Right	1871	45 sq. ft.	86	81
2-Right	1887	40 sq. ft.	134	130
2-Left	1887	40 sq. ft.	134	97
6-Right	1896	35 sq. ft.	99	91
6-Left	1896	35 sq. ft.	99	93
7-wing (RHU)	1905	28 sq. ft.	(not inspected)	(not inspected)

⁸ Historic American Building Survey No. NJ-874, *New Jersey State Prison, Second & Federal Streets, Trenton, NJ*.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ N.J.A.C. §10A:31-3.6.



Vacant cells, West Compound housing units 6-Right and 2-Right. Photographs by Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson, October 28, 2024.

The earliest constructed housing units in the West Compound were designed for solitary confinement.¹¹ The Historic American Building Survey describes the design as an intentional departure from previous prisons where incarcerated people were allowed to congregate and interact.¹² Those built between 1871-1905 were smaller and designed for a population who would be in communal workshops during the day and confined to the cells only at night.¹³

Correctional leaders, policymakers, and advisors called for the demolition and replacement of the West Compound as early as 1918. A five-member Commission created by the New Jersey legislature in 1917 to investigate prison conditions called the prison “antiquated and inadequate... much too small for decent living.”¹⁴ The Commission found the buildings “wholly unsuited for the present needs either of the inmates or of the officers,” and recommended replacing it with a new prison with suitable living conditions and space for work and recreation.¹⁵

¹¹ Historic American Building Survey No. NJ-874, *New Jersey State Prison, Second & Federal Streets, Trenton, NJ*, pp. 17, 39.

¹² *Id.* at p. 39.

¹³ *Id.* at pp. 16, 79.

¹⁴ Morrow et al. (1918), *Report of the Prison Inquiry Commission to Governor Walter Edge and the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey*, pp. 32-33, available at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001135324>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

In 1952, following a series of public hearings and an inquiry into a riot at New Jersey State Prison, a Committee of officials and experts issued a report to then-Governor Driscoll that called the prison, “one of the most archaic in the United States.”¹⁶ The Committee recommended building a new prison according to “standards of modern penology” rather than attempting “piecemeal and temporary measures to stave off the ravages of old age.”¹⁷

The Historic American Building Survey took photographs and recorded extensive documentary evidence about the building in the 1980s because it was slated for demolition,¹⁸ and the Department of Corrections itself requested capital funds to demolish and reconstruct the West Compound and rebuild it according to modern standards as recently as 2011.¹⁹ In that funding request, the Department cited “antiquated housing units,” as well as class action litigation over living conditions.²⁰

Maintaining the West Compound of the prison has required immense effort on the part of the facility’s staff and leadership over the last century-plus, and has cost New Jersey taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars.²¹ Capital construction estimates for demolition and replacement of the West Compound buildings have ranged from \$200 - \$400 million (not adjusted for inflation).²²

Prison Cell Conditions

Individual prison cells have sinks, but no hot water. Toilets are narrow steel seats on the back wall of the cell. Unlike toilets in more modern prison cells which are positioned to provide some level of privacy, those in the West Compound face forward, directly exposed to the open bars of the cell door. The facility’s maintenance team is proactive in addressing plumbing needs, and less than 10% of incarcerated people interviewed during the inspection reported issues with leaking sinks or toilets. Facility leadership report that each cell gets a new coat of paint at least every three years.

Windows in the West Compound provide fresh air, but the housing units have no air conditioning and temperatures get quite hot in the summer.²³ Officers reported large portions of the population folding their beds against the wall and sleeping on the floor to stay cool at night.

¹⁶ Report of the Committee to Examine and Investigate the Prison and Parole Systems of New Jersey (Nov. 21, 1952), p.13, available at <https://dspace.njstatelib.org/items/7e468009-eadc-4962-85ea-05011e12361d>.

¹⁷ *Id.* at pp. 19-20.

¹⁸ Historic American Building Survey No. NJ-874, *New Jersey State Prison, Second & Federal Streets, Trenton, NJ*, p. 5. A 1982 correctional facilities bond provided funds for new construction at New Jersey State Prison and replacement of the West Compound, but the demolition of the West Compound was not ultimately carried out. See New Jersey Department of Corrections Annual Report FY1983, available at <https://dspace.njstatelib.org/items/5ad0b5b8-35e9-435e-9776-64e07996a4a7>; Public Hearing before the NJ Senate Institutions, Health, and Welfare Committee on Overcrowding in State Prisons and County Jails (Feb. 18, 1982), transcript available at <https://dspace.njstatelib.org/items/62011755-934c-4801-8190-45d0d7609fc5>.

¹⁹ New Jersey Department of Corrections, Seven-Year Capital Improvement Plan, Fiscal Years 2012-2018, p. 25, available at <https://nj.gov/treasury/omb/publications/12capital/pdf/Section3a.pdf>.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ See New Jersey State Library collection, New Jersey Commission on Capital Budgeting and Planning, *limited records* available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10929/23309>.

²² New Jersey Department of Corrections, Seven-Year Capital Improvement Plans, FY 2008, 2011, and 2012.

²³ On July 7, 2025, for example, the Ombudsperson Office measured temperatures in West Compound prison cells ranging from 82° to 88°F with humidity ranging from 68-70%.

Shower Privacy

Every housing unit except 6-Wing met the inspection standard for ratio of showers to people.²⁴ Notably, however, the West Compound does not have enclosed shower stalls that offer any modesty or privacy while bathing. Showerheads are positioned along the wall on the first floor of the housing unit, separated with makeshift dividers. People in the stalls are directly visible to those on higher floors of the housing unit. Staff reported that people shower in their underwear for privacy. Additionally, the towels provided to incarcerated people are also slightly smaller than standard bath towels, and are not large enough for anyone with a waist size larger than 38 inches.²⁵ Standard-size bath towels are available for purchase through the commissary, but are not provided with other basic clothing and necessities at intake.



View of showers from second floor walkway, West Compound housing unit 1-Right. Photograph by Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson, October 28, 2024.

²⁴ The Ombudsperson inspection tool uses an agreed-upon standard of one shower for every 16 people out of cell during recreation periods. On 6-Right and 6-Left, the ratio of showers to people was 1:18. On all other West Compound General Population units, the standard ratio was met.

²⁵ Standard bath towels range in size from 20" x 40" to 30" x 58". The towel provided to incarcerated people at New Jersey State Prison is smaller than the low-end of the standard range, 20.5" x 38.5".

Purposeful Out-of-Cell Activity

The Ombudsperson Office reviewed education and programming data, work assignments, the facility's schedule, and 14 days of handwritten housing unit logs. Because the General Population housing unit logs do not record the movement of individuals, they provide no definitive data to track how much time people in these units are confined to their cells each day.

The logs show people in the West Compound getting out of their cells to take a shower and to use the JPay kiosk on most days. They also show about 15-20 people per housing unit going out to the yard for recreation every other day for 2-3 hours, and 20-30 people per housing unit going to the indoor gym for roughly the same amount of time once or twice a week. (See Table 2.) The outdoor yard space is all concrete with metal weights and an open-air toilet. The indoor gym is large and brightly lit, and includes a basketball court and weight room. Its floor is in need of repair. There is no day room or indoor recreation space on the housing units in the West Compound.

Table 2. Yard and gym participation, NJSP West Compound, October 20 – November 2, 2024

<i>Housing unit</i>	1-Right	2-Right	2-Left	4-Right	4-Left	6-Right	6-Left
<i>Days yard provided</i>	7 of 14 days (50%)	8 of 14 days (57%)	7 of 14 days (50%)	7 of 14 days (50%)	7 of 14 days (50%)	12 of 14 days (86%)	11 of 14 days (79%)
<i>Avg. yard duration</i>	2 hours, 46 mins	2 hours, 45 mins	2 hours, 22 mins	2 hours, 42 mins	2 hours, 27 mins	2 hours, 19 mins	2 hours, 26 mins
<i>Avg. # yard participants*</i>	19 of 81 (23%)	Unknown	22 of 97 (23%)	14 of 59 (24%)	15 of 59 (25%)	16 of 91 (18%)	20 of 93 (22%)
<i>Days gym provided</i>	2 of 14 days (14%)	2 of 14 days (14%)	2 of 14 days (14%)	2 of 14 days (14%)	2 of 14 days (14%)	3 of 14 days (21%)	3 of 14 days (21%)
<i>Avg. gym duration</i>	2 hours, 32 mins	2 hours, 18 mins	2 hours, 20 mins	2 hours, 9 mins	1 hour, 20 mins	2 hours, 28 mins	2 hours, 19 mins
<i>Avg. # gym participants*</i>	Unknown	29 of 130 (22%)	Unknown	19 of 59 (32%)	21 of 59 (36%)	19 of 91 (21%)	19 of 93 (20%)

*Average number of people who attended yard or gym movements each day between October 20, 2024 and November 2, 2024. Housing unit population as of October 28, 2024.

Two-thirds of the people in the West Compound General Population have job assignments other than cell sanitation that generate additional out-of-cell time and activity.²⁶ Most are 7-day job details, meaning they could be called out for work every day of the week. Data were not available to show how often individuals were called out to work, or for how long. Sixty-one percent of the population earn between \$1.60 per day and \$3.00 per day. The remaining 39% make more than \$3.00 per day, up to \$7.50 per day.²⁷

²⁶ "Cell sanitation" is a placeholder job title that provides a small daily wage to people without a work assignment for maintaining their living space. The cell sanitation assignment does not come with specific job duties and does not translate to increased out-of-cell time.

²⁷ Job assignment and pay rates based on facility roster from February 27, 2025, New Jersey Department of Corrections iTAG database.



Outdoor recreation yard, New Jersey State Prison West Compound. Photograph by Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson, October 30, 2024.

A small number of people were engaged in education or rehabilitative programming. At the end of October 2024, a total of 49 people facility-wide were enrolled in adult basic education or high school equivalency courses, and 45 people in the West Compound were enrolled in rehabilitative programs.²⁸ Programs can run multiple times a year with different cohorts of participants.

Each week, New Jersey State Prison holds 28 sessions of religious programming and 70% of the West Compound population—more than 400 people—were enrolled in worship services, religious studies, and related set-up crews, band, or choir.²⁹ Religious programs included 14 Christian-based services and activities including three in Spanish, seven Muslim-based sessions, three Jewish services, one Aztec service, and one Odinist service. A sample of attendance records showed about 41% of those enrolled attending the sessions.³⁰

²⁸ During a snapshot period of October 21st through November 1st, 2024, 49 unique individuals were enrolled in 9 classes. The education enrollment data reflected the full population of New Jersey State Prison, not just those housed in the West Compound. During the same snapshot period, programming data for the West Compound show 17 people enrolled in Alternatives to Violence, 18 enrolled in Cage Your Rage, and 19 enrolled in Thinking for a Change.

²⁹ 424 people from the West Compound were enrolled in religious programming during the month of October 2024. The West Compound population on October 28, 2024 was 610.

³⁰ Attendance documentation was available for 21 of the 28 religious sessions held between October 28, 2024 and November 2, 2024. The records showed 509 attendees among the 1,249 enrollments (41%).



New Jersey State Prison law library. Photograph by Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson, March 12, 2025.

People in the West Compound also have access to a large law library. A rotating schedule provides access for three to four sessions each day, seven days a week, and logs reflect frequent law library activity among the population in the West Compound.³¹

³¹ A sample of law library logs between October 21 and November 1, 2024 recorded people from West Compound housing units coming to the law library nearly every day. This included people from 1-Right on 7 of 12 days, people from 2-Right on 10 of 12 days, people from 2-Left on 8 of 12 days, people from 4-Right on 9 of 12 days, and people from 6-Right on 9 of 12 days.

Access to Telephone, Paper Forms, Kiosk, and Health Care Services

People in the West Compound have opportunities every day to make phone calls. Telephones are passed cell to cell so phone access is not restricted to recreation periods. Paper forms were accessible on the housing units for sick call, inquiries and grievances, property claims, telephone issues, requests for social services, and requests for Ombudsperson assistance.

There do not appear to be an adequate number of JPay kiosks for the population—a problem that will be resolved with the implementation of new ViaPath tablets in the coming year. In housing unit 4-Left, for example, there is one kiosk for every 59 people. The ratio in other West Compound units ranges from one kiosk for every 27 people (housing unit 1-Right) to one kiosk for every 46 people (housing unit 6-Right).

Social workers and health care staff make regular rounds on all West Compound General Population units. This is reflected in housing unit logs.

Clothing, Laundry, Linens, and Storage

Most incarcerated people interviewed during the inspection reported having sufficient clothing, bedding, linens, and access to laundry services. Each housing unit also met inspection standards for mattresses and pillows.

Department of Corrections policy requires incarcerated people to be provided with secure containers to store clothing.³² Footlockers that used to be in each cell in the West Compound had been removed for security reasons, and at the time of the inspection, people who wanted plastic storage containers were required to purchase them. The facility Administration quickly addressed the issue, approving plastic storage bins to be provided at intake at no cost to the incarcerated person.

Fire Safety

All but one housing unit had fire extinguishers. The one exception was replaced on the spot during the inspection. The facility was able to produce a fire emergency plan, and is up to date with fire inspections. The Department has also offered to confidentially brief the Ombudsperson Office on evacuation protocols for the West Compound in the event of an emergency.

Kitchen, Dining Hall, and Food Service

People in the West Compound go to a dining hall for meals unless short-staffing or emergency codes require food to be delivered to the housing units. Meals were provided at regular meal times. Upon inspection, the kitchen was clean, organized, and efficiently run. Food temperatures are documented before serving and food service areas and equipment are regularly inspected.

³² N.J.A.C. §10A:14-5.10 mandates that each person in custody be provided with a bureau, locker, or closet that can be secured for the storage of clothing, except in unusual circumstances.

Discussion and Recommendations

New Jersey State Prison is well-run by professional staff who have gone to great lengths to make the West Compound safe and livable. The Ombudsperson Office appreciates the facility's staff and leadership and recognizes their extraordinary efforts.

Still, hundreds of people are living in the prison's West Compound in cells small enough that they can extend their arms and touch both side-walls and the ceiling. The buildings in the West Compound were constructed nearly 200 years ago, and have been called antiquated and inhumane by New Jersey correctional leaders, policymakers, and subject matter experts for at least the last 100 years. Indeed, historical preservation steps were taken in the 1980s to memorialize records and photographs of the West Compound with the understanding that the buildings were to be demolished.

Summer temperatures are very hot inside the housing units, and people have inadequate privacy on toilets and in the showers. People live in this maximum-security facility, often for decades, with restricted movement and few programming options, even when they have low classification scores and clean disciplinary records. The Office is not able to report on how much time the average person is confined to their cell, because that data is not captured at the individual level in housing unit logs or other records.

Some of the Ombudsperson Office's recommendations will require long-term planning and legislative action. Others would be actionable in the short-term. With respect and deference to the Department's expertise, the Ombudsperson Office recommends the following:

- Lawmakers and the Department of Corrections should prioritize and fund the demolition and replacement of the West Compound with modern correctional housing units that better meet the needs of the Department and the incarcerated population.
- Lawmakers should adopt standards for humane prison conditions, including standards for the size of single- and double-occupancy cells.
- The Department should explore options for creating more shower privacy in the West Compound housing units, obscuring views into the first floor showers from the second and third floors. Standard size bath towels should also be provided to the population free of charge.
- The Department should consider moving people out of the West Compound who can safely be housed in other settings. Some of the population's resistance to transferring appears to be based in having a single-occupancy room and not wanting to be placed elsewhere with a cellmate. The Department should explore options for creating more single-occupancy cells for individuals who have already spent many years with their own room, and who don't present a suicide risk.
- The Department should build the capacity to calculate and track out-of-cell time for individuals housed in the General Population. This is particularly useful information for tracking impacts on quality of life both when movement is restricted due to periods of short-staffing and when movement is increased due to expansion of programming, recreation, and jobs.