

The Sentencing Project

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/u-s-prison-population-trends-1999-2015-modest-reductions-significant-variation/>

Policy Issue Resources

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Six states have reduced their prison populations by over 20% since reaching their peak levels:

Southern states including Mississippi, South Carolina, and Louisiana, which have exceptionally high rates of incarceration, have also begun to significantly downsize their prison populations. These reductions have come about through a mix of changes in policy and practice designed to reduce admissions to prison and lengths of stay. Moreover, the [states with the most substantial prison population reductions have often outpaced the nationwide crime drop](#).

The pace of decarceration has been very modest in most states, especially given that nationwide violent and property crime rates have fallen by half since 1991. Despite often sharing in these crime trends, 15 states had less than a 5% prison population decline since their peak year. Moreover, 12 states have continued to expand their prison populations, with four producing double-digit increases since 2010: North Dakota, Wyoming, Oklahoma, and Minnesota.

Just as mass incarceration has developed primarily as a result of changes in policy, not crime rates, so too have declines reflected changes in both policy and practice. These have included such measures as drug sentencing reforms, reduced admissions to prison for technical parole violations, and diversion options for persons convicted of lower-level property and drug crimes.

People in prison is serving a life sentence

Incarceration

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