

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Billions of dollars are spent in the U.S. every year to incarcerate the largest prison population in the world, and with corrections costs soaring, more and more states are embracing justice reinvestment, an approach to criminal justice intended to lower costs, reduce prison populations, and reinvest savings into policies and programs that provide a better return on public safety.

The Vera Institute of Justice's Center on Sentencing and Corrections participates in the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI), a program funded jointly by the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Participating states receive two to four years of technical assistance and funding to assess the drivers of increasing prison populations and costs; to devise policy options to combat these troubling trends; and to implement new policies and laws designed to reverse them.

A newly-released report by the Urban Institute, [Justice Reinvestment Initiative State Assessment Report](#), reviews and evaluates what JRI has thus far accomplished in 17 participating states from 2010 to 2013. The report is an excellent guide for those interested in what states are doing to reverse what once seemed to be an unstoppable increase in prison building and prison populations. Although each JRI state has tailored policy responses to suit its particular criminal justice and correctional landscape, there is common ground.

Every JRI state identified parole and probation revocations as a driver of prison populations and each adopted policies intended to reduce these types of prison admissions, from allowing officers to use graduated sanctions to respond to parole and probation violations to providing positive incentives for compliance and programming completion.

Most JRI states also found that long sentence lengths, which in some states had been established decades ago and not reexamined since, were another key element in increased prison populations and costs. These lengthy sentences were often applied to nonviolent and low-risk offenders, many of whom could have been safely and more successfully penalized and supervised in the community. Fourteen states revised the length of sentences for some crime categories or their sentencing structures, including establishing presumptive probation for certain classes or type of offenses (South Dakota and Kentucky), eliminating mandatory minimums for first-time drug possession (South Carolina), and increasing the felony threshold level for certain crimes, like theft or shoplifting (Arkansas and Georgia).

Some of the reforms enacted as part of the JRI process have borne immediate results in dealing with criminal justice system issues while some may take years to demonstrate a resulting downward shift in prison populations. But one result of the JRI process, whereby states had the opportunity and the assistance to collect and review their own correctional data, is a culture change. States know that bigger is not better or more effective when it comes to prison populations and sentence lengths; that tougher is not always safer. Though a cultural shift in criminal justice agencies may not be quantifiable, it is indeed perceptible. And policymakers and officials all over the country, no less than the [Attorney General](#) himself, who has called disproportional and lengthy federal drug sentences ineffective and unsustainable, are recognizing and engaging with it.

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