

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/people-in-prison-in-2017>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

See our updated report, "*People in Jail and Prison in 2020*," [here](#).

Assessing and targeting criminal justice reforms requires an up-to-date view of the number of people in state and federal prisons. The Bureau of Justice Statistics collects this data, but their reports lag prison populations by a year or more.

In order to get an earlier glimpse at these numbers, Vera researchers collected information directly from states and the federal Bureau of Prisons to estimate the number of people in prison at the end of 2017. The data revealed that the recent trend of decreasing prison incarceration continued in 2017, with the total U.S. prison population dropping below 1.5 million for the first time since 2004. Despite the overall declines, 20 states increased their prison population, leaving 10 states with all-time-high numbers of people in prison.

Despite the national reduction in the prison population, more work is required to unwind mass incarceration.

Adjust arrows to view the four different combinations of population trends and incarceration rate. Select any state to see detailed data.

Prison populations decreased in 18 of the 25 states in the bottom half of incarceration rates.

Prison populations grew in 7 of the 25 states in the bottom half of incarceration rates.

Prison populations decreased in 16 of the 25 states in the top half of incarceration rates.

Prison populations grew in 9 of the 25 states in the top half of incarceration rates.

The number of people in U.S. prisons dropped by 1 percent in 2017, continuing an 8-year trend of similar declines. These declines are not universal, however, and some state prison populations are continuing to increase.

More up-to-date data about prison populations allows more timely feedback about the success of criminal justice reforms, and insight into the places to target future reform efforts.

The number of people in U.S. prisons continues to decline, but at a much slower rate than it grew during the rise of mass incarceration.

The number of people in federal prison continues to drop sharply (more than 3 percent in 2017). This is in spite of new guidelines for federal prosecutors, who are now instructed to seek sentences that are as harsh as possible.

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