

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/the-new-dynamics-of-mass-incarceration>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

The rise of mass incarceration, spanning the 1970s to the early 2000s, was characterized by continuous, unified growth in both prison and jail populations across states and counties. In contrast, the past decade has given rise to what is widely recognized as an era of reform, with prison admission rates declining by 24 percent since 2006 and jail admissions rates down 25 percent since 2008. The national declines, however, mask the new dynamics of mass incarceration.

The growth that characterized mass incarcerations rise has fractured into four dynamics that vary from state to state and county to county. Contemporary decarceration exists alongside continuous growth, stagnation, and jurisdictional shifts between prisons and jails, akin to a shell game. This report provides a first-in-kind look at the state of incarceration by moving beyond the convention of using state prison populations, illuminating both where meaningful change has happened and where true reform has remained elusive.

Although we are in a widely recognized era of criminal justice reform, the overall decline in incarceration masks distinct trends that vary from state to state and county to county. Some states have meaningfully reduced incarceration, but others are stuck near all-time highs, continuing to incarcerate more and more people, or are shifting populations between prisons and jails.

As reforms have taken root across the country, state incarceration rates have fractured into four separate trends: decarceration, stagnation, jurisdictional shifts between prisons and jails, and continued growth.

In some jurisdictions, reductions in prison populations have been offset by increases in the jail population, and vice versa.

In some states that have shown significant progress in reducing overall incarceration, these declines have been driven almost exclusively by larger cities; small cities and towns continue to see incarceration rates grow.

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