

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/state-sentencing-and-corrections-trends-2013>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

In 2013, 35 states passed at least 85 bills to change some aspect of how their criminal justice systems address sentencing and corrections. These bills largely eschew the tough-on-crime policies of the past, and reflect the gathering momentum for criminal justice reform in the United States. In reviewing this legislative activity, the Vera Institute of Justice found that policy changes have focused mainly on the following five areas:

By providing concise summaries of representative legislation in each area, this report aims to be a practical guide for policymakers in other states and the federal government looking to enact similar changes in criminal justice policy.

After four decades of enacting tough-on-crime policies, states are now shifting toward reforms that reduce incarceration and provide additional support for reducing recidivism. Increasing the effectiveness of correctional systems in terms of cost and outcome has now taken precedence over retribution and punishment.

A growing body of research shows that carefully implemented and well-targeted community-based programs can produce better outcomes for lower costs than incarceration.

From appalling incarceration numbers, budgetary crises, and greater public knowledge, momentum for reform is shifting the discussion on crime from punishment to rehabilitation and long-term public safety.

The tide seems to be turning: From 2006-2012, 19 states reduced their prison population; six states by double digits. Since 2000, at least 29 states modified or repealed mandatory sentencing policies.

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