

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/study-finds-no-universal-decline-mass-incarceration/>

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While prison admission rates have declined by 24 percent since 2006, a new [study](#) from the Vera Institute of Justice finds that focusing on aggregated national prison population data misses important trends at the state and local levels.

In addition to national prison data, Vera researchers analyzed the number of times people are sent to local jails annually; the number of people held in jail awaiting the resolution of their charges; the number of people serving time in local jails; and the number of people admitted to state prison in a given year.

This richer data set revealed four trends that illustrate the complexity of mass incarceration in the United States. Some states have seen significant overall declines in both prison and jail populations, while others have stagnated at or near all-time highs. Some jurisdictions are engaged in a shell game, moving people between prisons and jails rather than actually reducing incarceration. And some states continue to increase incarceration, untouched by reforms that have stemmed the rising national incarceration rate since the early 2000s.

The report points out that the drop in the national prison admissions rate has been driven by just 10 states (California, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, South Carolina, and Vermont) that have drastically reduced prison admissions, with California accounting for 37 percent of the decline by itself. Data from the other 40 states reveals a small but significant overall increase in admissions.

The same dynamic can be seen at the county level. Within states that have reduced their imprisoned populations, the decreases can be traced to large urban areas, which are decarcerating at historic rates, while incarceration in adjacent rural areas continues to grow. In the 35 states for which researchers had reliable county-level data, they found an almost universal urban-to-rural shift in prison admissions, regardless of whether admissions are declining in the state overall.

In New York, for example, prison populations declined 31 percent and jail populations dropped by 27 percent between 1999 and 2015. Vera found that those statewide declines have been driven entirely by decarceration in the three largest cities (New York City, Buffalo, and Rochester), while small- and mid-sized cities and rural counties show a continued increase in prison admissions.

In some states, where the cities are not large enough to offset the rural rise in incarceration, this urban-rural dynamic explains why statewide incarceration rates are stuck at all-time highs. Virginia has seen a 4 percent rise in prison admissions since 2000, but admission from rural areas and small cities have increased 56 percent and 34 percent, respectively, while admissions in urban areas have fallen. The stagnation trend is also evident in Louisiana, where incarceration rates across all metrics remain some of the nation's highest, despite numerous reform efforts.

Vera cautions that reforms that reclassify felonies as misdemeanors or permit people with low-level felony convictions to serve their time in jail rather than state prison have merely created the appearance of decarceration. Between 2010 and 2015, 11 states reduced their prison populations while simultaneously increasing the number of people held in local jails. Conversely, some counties, in both high- and low-incarceration states, are reducing their jail populations by sending more people to state prison, possibly to reduce costs for cash-strapped counties.

Looking exclusively at the national prison data also obscures disturbing growth in incarceration in states like Arkansas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and West Virginia, which continue to incarcerate people in jails and prisons at all-time high rates that increase each year. [Oklahoma](#) now has the highest incarceration rate in the United States, overtaking Louisiana.

The authors conclude that, even in states that have actually reduced the number of incarcerated people, the specter of mass incarceration is alive and well. California and New York send as many people to prison today as they did in the 1990s, when California had the nation's highest prison admissions rate and New York was in the top half.

Ultimately, the United States cannot unwind mass incarceration if reformers remain fixated on state-level trends and solutions, Vera

research director Christian Henrichson wrote in the report. Instead, policymakers and advocates need to use other measures of incarceration trends to develop strategic, targeted reforms that reduce prison and jail populations from big cities to small towns across the country.

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