

The Sentencing Project

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/downscaling-prisons-lessons-from-four-states/>

Policy Issue Resources

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Even prior to the onset of the latest fiscal crisis, though, legislators in many states had become increasingly interested in adopting evidence-based policies directed at producing more effective public safety outcomes. In contrast to the get tough climate that had dominated criminal justice policy development for many years, this new political environment has focused on issues such as diversion of people charged with lower-level drug offenses, developing graduated sanctions for people on probation and parole who break the rules, and enhancing reentry strategies.

Despite these developments, prison populations have continued to rise in the past decade, albeit not as dramatically as in the preceding decades. From 2000-2008 the number of people incarcerated in state prisons rose by 12 percent from 1,176,269 to 1,320,145, although with a broad variation around the nation. At the high end, six states expanded their prison populations by more than 40 percent West Virginia (57 percent), Minnesota (51 percent), Arizona (49 percent), Kentucky (45 percent), Florida (44 percent), and Indiana (41 percent).

By the end of this period, growth in state prisons appeared to have largely stabilized. In 2008, the national total remained steady, and 20 states experienced a modest reduction in their populations that year.

While a growing trend towards stability may be emerging, this development needs to be assessed in context. Even if there should be a leveling of population growth, that would still leave prison populations at historic highs that are unprecedented in American history or that of any other democratic nation. The consequences of such a situation for fiscal spending, public safety prospects, and impact on communities is very troubling.

In this regard it is particularly instructive to examine the four states that are the focus of this report Kansas, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York. In contrast to the 12% growth in state prison populations since 2000, these states have actually achieved significant declines in their prison populations in recent years, and therefore offer lessons to policymakers in other states about how this can be accomplished. These declines have spanned the following periods:

This report contains a description of the many pragmatic reforms and policies that have helped to produce these prison population reductions. What is clear in each of these cases is that the reductions only came about through conscious efforts to change policies and practices, that these states relied on many different types of reform initiatives to improve their criminal justice systems, and that these initiatives had the twin goals of reducing the prison population and promoting cost-effective approaches to public safety.

To read the report, download the PDF below.

People in prison is serving a life sentence

Sentencing Policy

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