

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/fiscal-constraints-spur-new-corrections-policies>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[Julie James, Ram Subramanian](#), and [Lauren-Brooke Eisen](#) of Vera's [Center on Sentencing and Corrections](#) recently published [an article](#) in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* that examines the challenges state corrections agencies have faced during the current budget crisis and the solutions that many states have adopted to trim correctional budgets without endangering public safety. In examining how the fiscal crisis has affected U.S. sentencing and corrections trends, the article discusses how states have accelerated efforts at large-scale reforms with the aim of overhauling expensive, ineffective sanctioning policies and incorporating data-driven policies and programs. It highlights policymakers increasing attention to several decades of research demonstrating the efficacy of evidence-based, community programs for many offenders—measures that are not only less expensive than incarceration, but increase public safety.

The result is legislation that aims to make more targeted use of incarceration and to reinvest the cost savings into community programs geared toward reducing recidivism and victimization. As the article demonstrates, recent policies fall into four broad categories: (1) reducing the prison population safely; (2) requiring the use of evidence-based practices; (3) reinvesting cost savings in evidence-based practices and other criminal justice resources such as community corrections; and (4) evaluating the policies' impact on the prison population, costs, and public safety.

The article also documents the emergence of a new approach to criminal justice reform that is both bipartisan and multidisciplinary. An outgrowth of the budget crisis, this tack uses research and data to harness the political will of key stakeholders and constituencies. Distilling important lessons learned through recent reform processes in the states, the article found common threads:

Despite this recent movement toward reform, states have not seen a concomitant shift of population and dollars away from prison and into community corrections. As the article explains, plotting a line between enacted policies and their intended outcomes is rarely simple or straightforward: there are many stakeholders whose decisions affect the criminal justice system and numerous external factors over which policymakers have little or no control.

There is some reason for optimism however; several states have achieved the desired outcomes of their policy reform efforts. Perhaps, as the article suggests, it is too soon to see clear outcomes from policies enacted recently and in the midst of strained budgets and spending. As more states embark on reform efforts that aim to reduce their prison populations and expenditures and strengthen their community corrections systems, what is needed is continued observation of these policies' impact on state corrections systems.

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