

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/changes-in-correctional-populations-and-spending-between-2006-and-2010-focus-of-new-vera-report>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Ongoing state budget deficits have placed the centerpiece of U.S. penal policy—incarceration—under intense scrutiny. Although crime rates have been on the decline since 1992, prison populations and spending have continued to grow, spurring state policymakers to question whether resources can be better used to enhance public safety. Taking heed of research which has shown that many offenders are dealt with more effectively in the community, many states have recently adopted policies to lower prison populations by moving people who are incarcerated to less-expensive supervision in the community. The goal is not only to reduce correctional costs but also improve public safety outcomes. On September 19, 2012, Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, in partnership with the Pew Center on the States' Public Safety Performance Project, published a new report, *Realigning Justice Resources: A Review of Population and Spending Shifts in Prison and Community Corrections 2006-2010*, which sets out to determine whether in light of recent state-level policy changes and the economic recession there have been observable shifts from prisons to community corrections by examining changes in (1) prison populations, (2) prison spending, (3) community corrections populations and (4) community corrections spending between 2006 and 2010. Vera found that there was no easy movement of either people or dollars that many policymakers were hoping to see and point to the difficulty of viewing any proposed change in a vacuum. Larger fiscal realities, other legislative changes, and factors outside of policymakers' control can upset predictions of a policy's impact. As a result, plotting a line between enacted policies and their intended outcomes is rarely simple or straightforward. There is some reason for optimism; the report found that several states have seen the desired outcomes of their policy reform efforts. Perhaps, as the report suggests, it is simply too soon to see clear outcomes from policies enacted recently and in the midst of strained budgets and spending. What is needed is continuing observation of these trends into the future.

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