

Prison and Crime: A Complex Link

Crime drop since 1994 has been bigger in states that cut imprisonment rates

Two decades after Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994—with lawmakers focused on locking up more offenders for longer periods—the nation’s imprisonment rate has climbed 24 percent and crime has declined 40 percent. But research shows that many other factors have been at work in the nation’s crime drop and several states have demonstrated that it is possible to reduce imprisonment and crime at the same time.

State	Imprisonment rate change between 1994 and 2012	Crime rate change between 1994 and 2012
New York	-24%	-54%
New Jersey	-15%	-50%
California	-9%	-48%
Maryland	-9%	-47%
South Carolina	-7%	-27%
Texas	-6%	-36%
Nevada	-3%	-49%
Rhode Island	4%	-31%
Michigan	4%	-45%
Connecticut	5%	-47%
Virginia	11%	-42%
North Carolina	11%	-34%
Delaware	13%	-20%
Massachusetts	17%	-42%
Ohio	17%	-23%
Georgia	19%	-37%
New Hampshire	19%	-8%
United States	24%	-40%
Illinois	24%	-47%
Alaska	25%	-41%
Washington	25%	-34%
Oklahoma	28%	-31%
Maine	29%	-20%
Arizona	30%	-50%
Florida	31%	-54%
Kansas	31%	-28%
Hawaii	36%	-50%
Colorado	36%	-44%
Arkansas	40%	-14%
Vermont	44%	-22%
Alabama	45%	-19%
Iowa	48%	-31%
Wyoming	50%	-42%
New Mexico	50%	-33%
Nebraska	52%	-32%
Missouri	54%	-29%
Utah	57%	-40%
Tennessee	59%	-22%
Louisiana	61%	-39%
Kentucky	70%	-17%
Indiana	71%	-27%
Pennsylvania	71%	-23%
Montana	75%	-43%
Mississippi	82%	-36%
Minnesota	86%	-36%
South Dakota	86%	-23%
Wisconsin	92%	-31%
Oregon	99%	-45%
Idaho	103%	-46%
North Dakota	175%	-18%
West Virginia	195%	6%

5 largest decreases in imprisonment rate

Crime
-45%
(average)

5 largest increases in imprisonment rate

Crime
-27%
(average)

Note: Imprisonment rates do not include local jail populations. The national imprisonment rate includes federal prison population.

Different Paths, Same Result

New York and Florida had divergent imprisonment rates, but both cut crime rates by the same amount



Prison Increases Don’t Predict Crime Decreases

Connecticut’s imprisonment rate rose modestly, and Idaho’s rose sharply, but both cut crime rates by a similar amount



Sources: Imprisonment rates from Bureau of Justice Statistics’ annual *Prisoners* series; crime rates from FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program
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