



ANALYSIS

National Prison Rate Continues to Decline Amid Sentencing, Re-Entry Reforms

More than two-thirds of states cut crime and imprisonment from 2008-16

January 16, 2018 Public Safety Performance Project

By Adam Gelb and Jacob Denney

After peaking in 2008, the nation's imprisonment rate fell 11 percent over eight years, reaching its lowest level since 1997, according to an analysis of new federal statistics by The Pew Charitable Trusts. The decline from 2015-16 was 2 percent, much of which was due to a drop in the number of federal prisoners. The rate at which black adults are imprisoned fell 4 percent from 2015-16 and has declined 29 percent over the past decade. The ongoing decrease in imprisonment has occurred alongside long-term reductions in crime. Since 2008, the combined national violent and property crime rate dropped 23 percent, Pew's analysis shows.

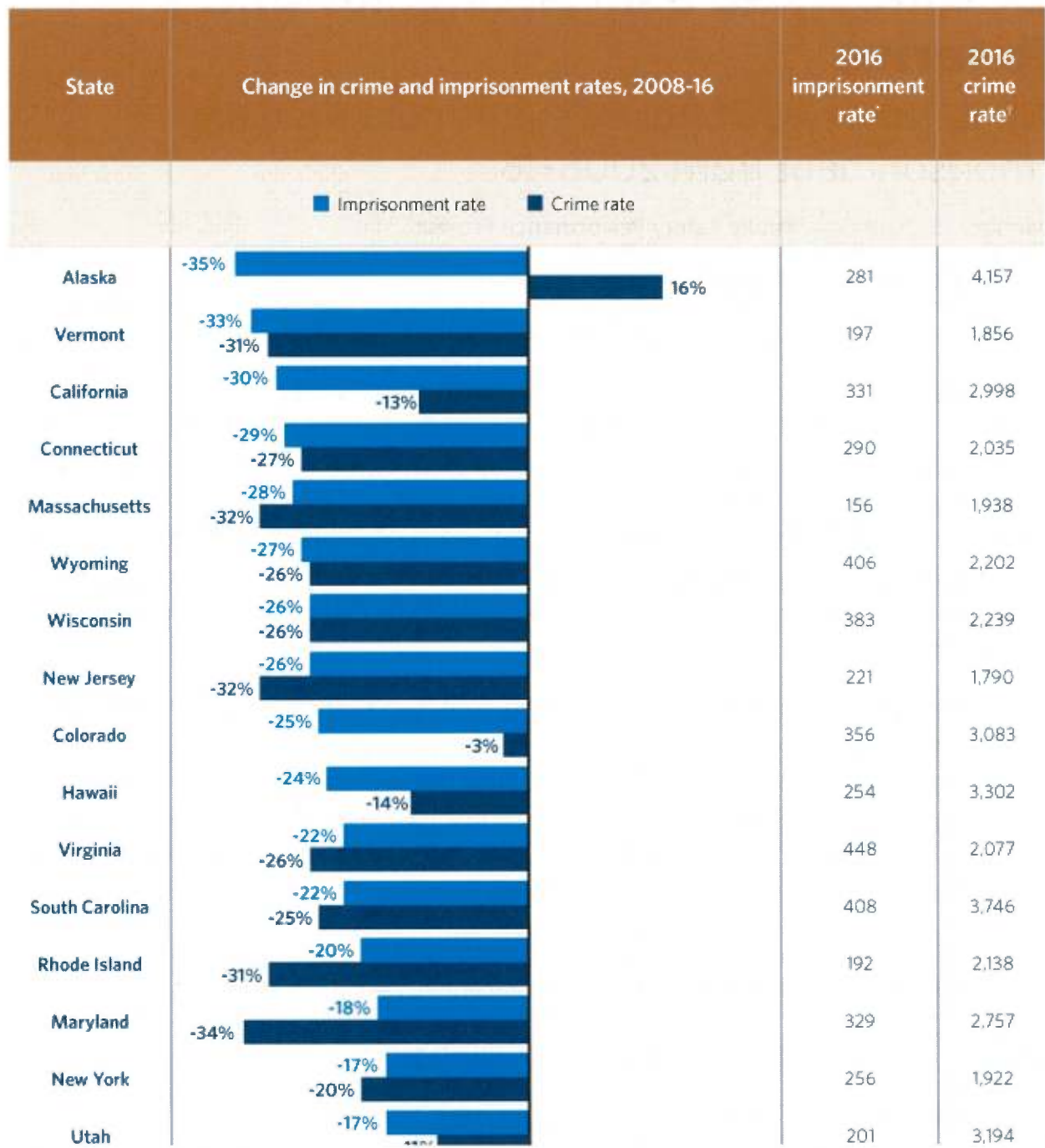
Also since that 2008 peak, 36 states reduced their imprisonment rates, including declines of 15 percent or more in 20 states from diverse regions of the country, such as Alaska, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Connecticut. During the same period, almost every state recorded a decrease in crime with no apparent correlation to imprisonment (see Figure 1). The latest data, released Jan. 9 by the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, show that trends in crime and imprisonment continue to be unrelated:

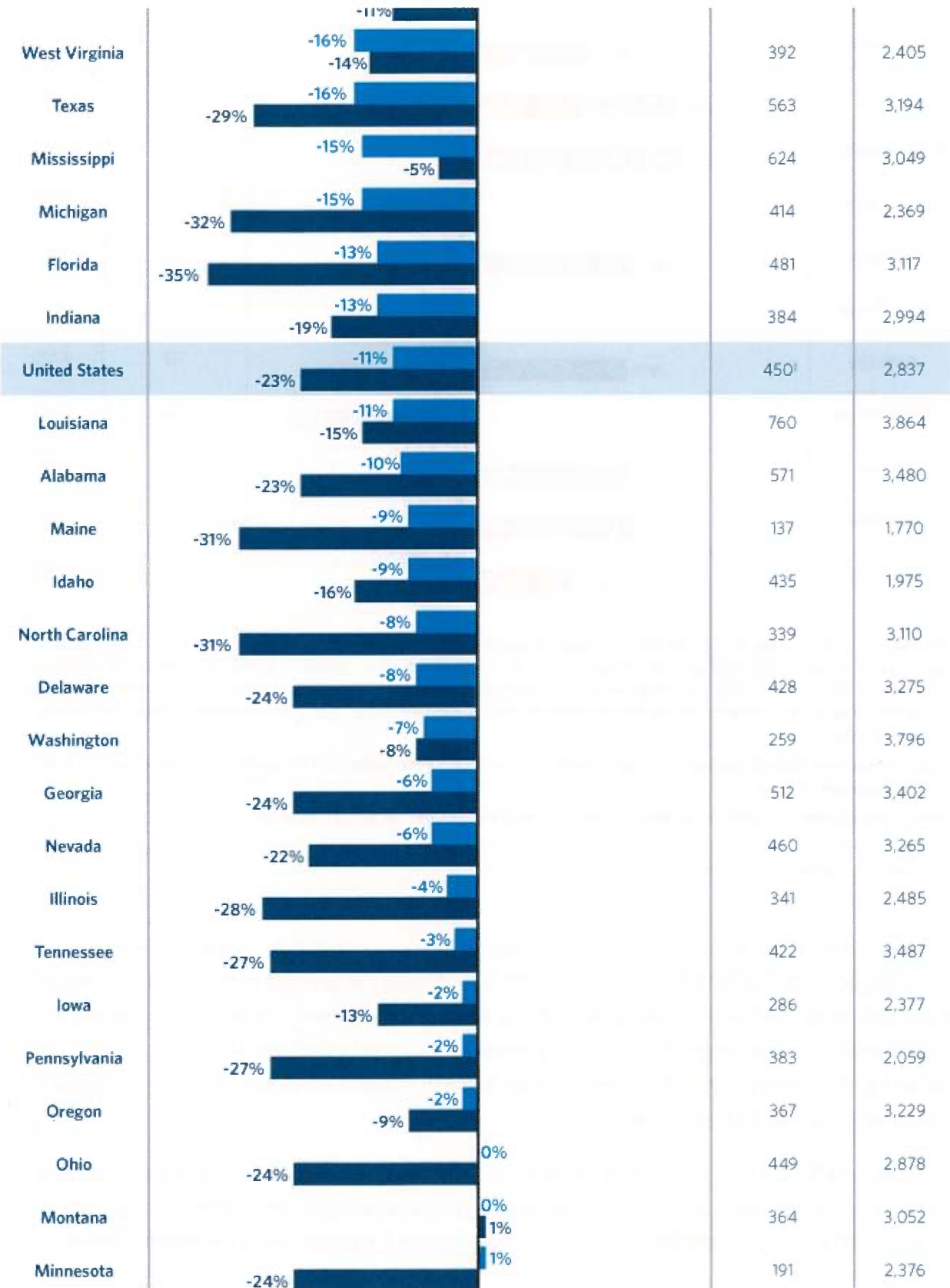
- Across the 45 states with crime declines from 2008-16, imprisonment rate changes ranged from a 35 percent decrease to a 14 percent increase.
- 35 states cut crime and imprisonment rates simultaneously.
- 21 states posted double-digit declines in both rates.

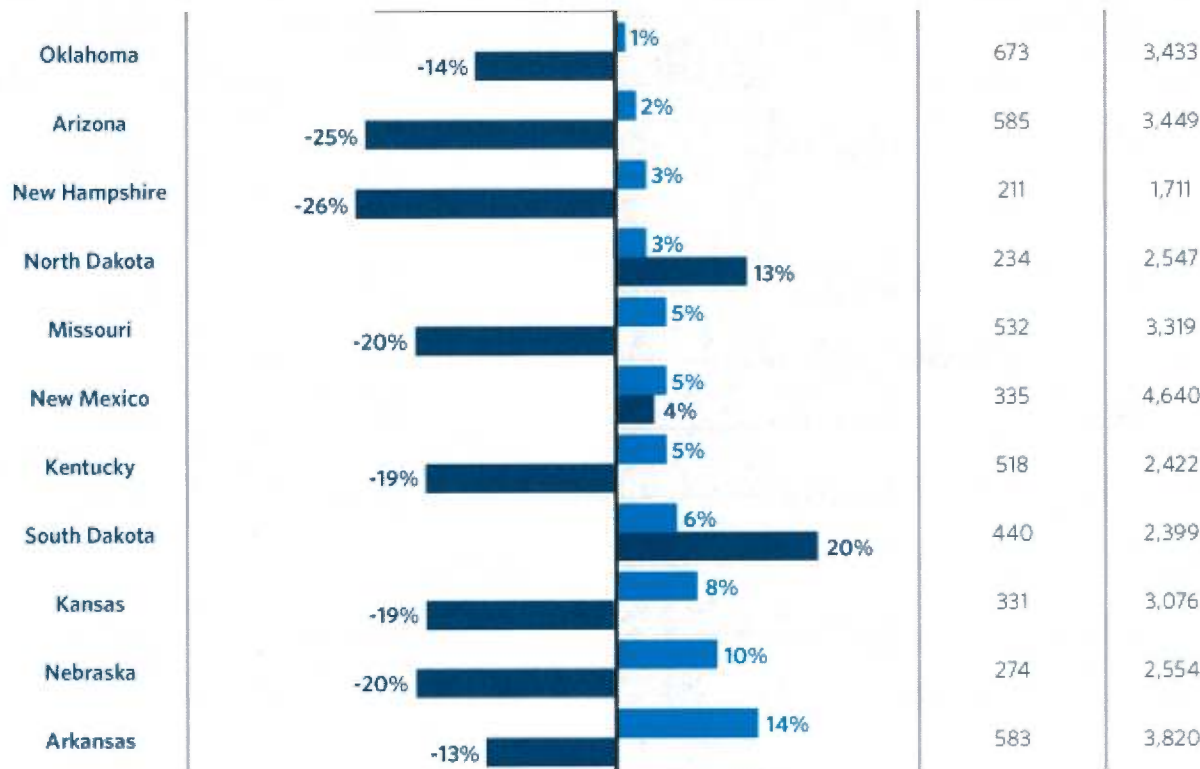
- The average crime decline across the 10 states with the greatest declines in imprisonment was 19 percent, and across the 10 states with the largest imprisonment growth it was 11 percent.

35 States Cut Crime and Imprisonment Simultaneously

State rankings by imprisonment rate declines, 2008-16







¹ The imprisonment rate is per 100,000 residents of all ages. It counts people sentenced to more than a year in prison and does not reflect people housed in jails or other facilities under the jurisdiction of correctional authorities, except for Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Rhode Island, and Vermont, which have integrated prison and jail systems so data for those states include total jail and prison populations. Total and individual state estimates include imputed counts for North Dakota and Oregon, which did not submit 2016 data to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

[†] The crime rate is per 100,000 residents of all ages. It reflects Part I offenses as defined by the FBI's Uniform Crime Report and combines violent and property crimes.

[‡] The U.S. imprisonment rate includes people held in federal prisons and excludes those held in local jails.

Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners series, 2008-16, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p16.pdf>; Pew analysis of FBI, Crime in the United States series, 2008-16, <https://ucr.fbi.gov>

© 2018 The Pew Charitable Trusts

The annual national violent crime rate increased in 2015 and 2016, but many cities are reporting reductions for 2017, and both violent and total crime rates remain near record lows. National, state, and local crime rates shift for complex and poorly understood reasons, and experts offer a wide range of possible explanations; overall, however, the rates of reported violent and property crime have declined by more than half since their 1991 peaks, falling to levels not seen since the late 1960s.

Starting with Texas in 2007, more than 30 states have adopted sentencing and corrections reforms designed to improve public safety and control taxpayer costs. The reforms vary from state to state, but typically they prioritize prison space for people who have committed

serious offenses and invest some of the savings in effective alternatives to incarceration. Research shows that investment in evidence-based re-entry programs reduces recidivism, contributing to declines in crime and imprisonment. Several states have cut return-to-prison rates significantly, including Georgia (35 percent) and Michigan (43 percent) over the past decade.

The lack of a consistent relationship between the crime and imprisonment trends reinforces a growing body of research and expert consensus that imprisonment in many states and the nation as a whole has long since passed the point of diminishing returns. This indicates that local, state, and federal policymakers can adopt additional reforms to reduce imprisonment without jeopardizing public safety.

Adam Gelb is director and Jacob Denney is senior associate of research for The Pew Charitable Trusts' public safety performance project.

Related Expert



Adam Gelb
Director
The Pew Charitable Trusts

MEDIA CONTACT

Ken Willis
Officer, Communications
202-540-6933
kwillis@pewtrusts.org

TOPICS

Federal Policy, Public Safety, State Policy, Governing

PROJECTS

Public Safety Performance Project

