

U.S. Prison Population Trends 1999-2014:

Broad Variation Among States in Recent Years

The number of people in prison in the United States has stabilized in recent years, but incarceration trends among the states have varied significantly. While 39 states have experienced a decline since reaching their peak prison populations within the past 15 years, in most states this reduction has been relatively modest. In addition, 11 states have had continuing rises in imprisonment.

Twelve states have produced double-digit declines within this period. Four states have reduced their prison populations by over 20%: New Jersey (31% since 1999), New York (28% since 1999), Rhode Island (25% since 2008), and California (22% since 2006, though partly offset by increasing jail use). Southern states including Mississippi and South Carolina, which have historically had high rates of incarceration, have also significantly downsized their prison populations. These reductions have come about through a mix of **changes in policy and practice** designed to reduce admissions to prison and lengths of stay. Moreover, the states with the most substantial reductions have had **no adverse effect on public safety**.

The overall pace of change, though, is **quite modest** given the scale of incarceration. The total U.S. prison population declined by 2.9% since its peak in 2009. Of those states with declining prison populations, 20 have had less than a 5% decline since their peak years. The reduction in the federal prison population has been of this magnitude as well, 2.9% since 2011. And of the states with rising prison populations, four have experienced double-digit increases in the last five years, led by Nebraska (22%) and Arkansas (18%). While sharing in the national crime drop, these states have resisted the trend toward decarceration.

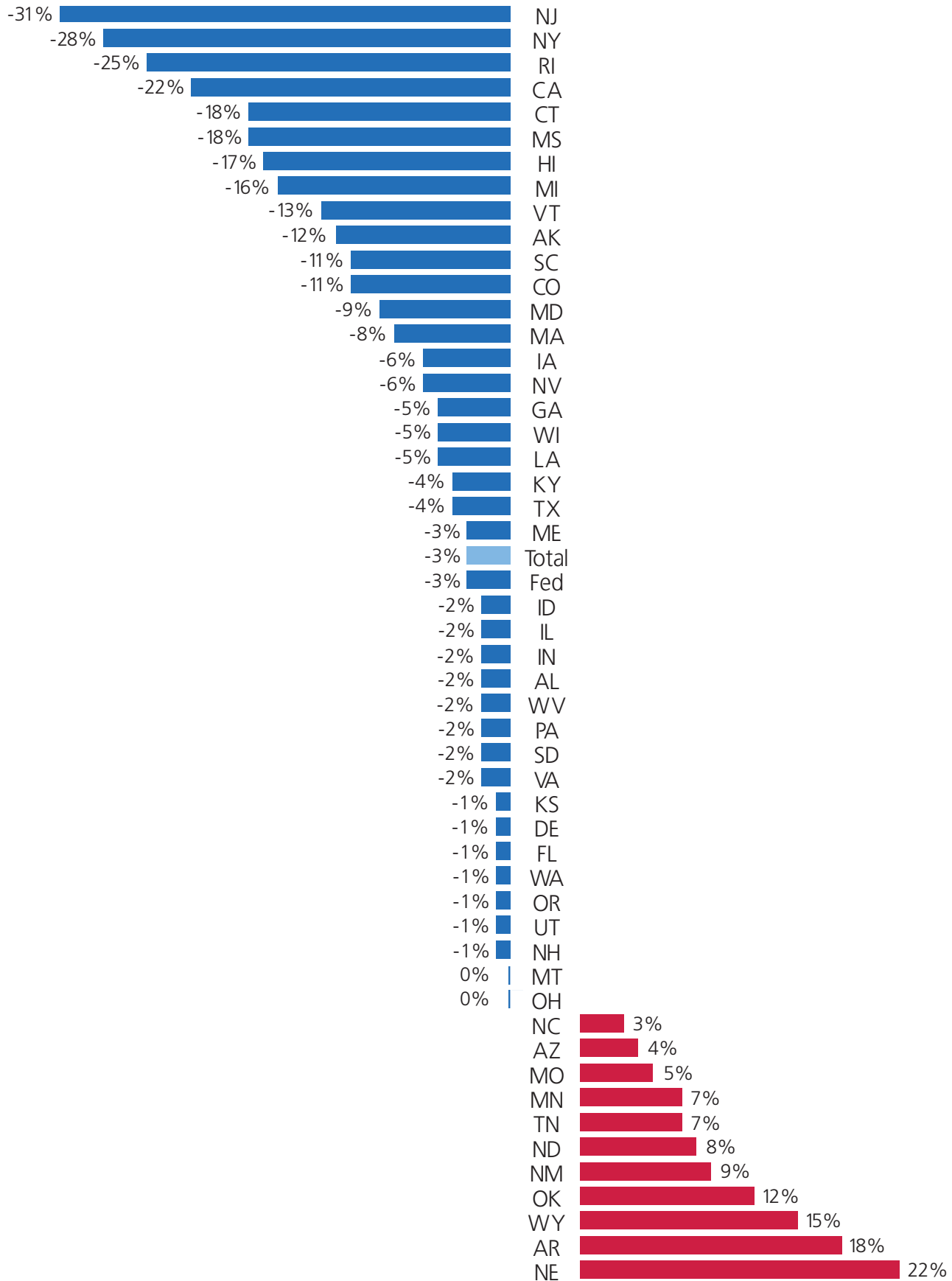
Just as mass incarceration has developed primarily as a result of changes in policy, not crime rates, so too have declines reflected changes in both policy and practice. These have included such measures as drug policy sentencing reforms, reduced admissions of technical parole violators to prison, and diversion options for persons convicted of lower-level property and drug crimes.

Change in state and federal prison populations

Jurisdiction	Peak Year to 2014	Peak Year
New Jersey	-31.4%	1999
New York	-28.1%	1999
Rhode Island	-25.5%	2008
California	-21.8%	2006
Connecticut	-18.5%	2007
Mississippi	-17.6%	2008
Hawaii	-17.2%	2005
Michigan	-15.9%	2006
Vermont	-12.5%	2009
Alaska	-11.6%	2006
South Carolina	-11.3%	2009
Colorado	-11.3%	2008
Maryland	-9.0%	2007
Massachusetts	-8.0%	2011
Iowa	-6.3%	2010
Nevada	-6.3%	2007
Georgia	-5.5%	2009
Wisconsin	-5.4%	2006
Louisiana	-5.3%	2012
Kentucky	-3.9%	2007
Texas	-3.7%	2010
Maine	-3.0%	2007
U.S. Total	-2.9%	2009
Federal	-2.9%	2011
Idaho	-2.5%	2012
Illinois	-2.2%	2012
Indiana	-2.2%	2013
Alabama	-2.1%	2012
West Virginia	-2.1%	2012
Pennsylvania	-1.9%	2011
South Dakota	-1.8%	2013
Virginia	-1.8%	2008
Kansas	-1.5%	2013
Delaware	-1.4%	2007
Florida	-1.4%	2010
Washington	-0.9%	2010
Oregon	-0.8%	2013
Utah	-0.7%	2013
New Hampshire	-0.5%	2007
Montana	-0.5%	2010
Ohio	-0.4%	2013
Jurisdiction	2009 to 2014	Peak Year
North Carolina	2.6%	2014
Arizona	4.3%	2014
Missouri	4.5%	2014
Minnesota	6.5%	2014
Tennessee	6.7%	2014
North Dakota	7.9%	2014
New Mexico	8.5%	2014
Oklahoma	11.7%	2014
Wyoming	14.8%	2014
Arkansas	17.7%	2014
Nebraska	21.7%	2014

Source: *Prisoners Series* (1999-2014), Bureau of Justice Statistics.

U.S. prison population trends through 2014: decreases from peak year, increases from 2009



Source: *Prisoners Series* (1999-2014), Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Note: Connecticut, Kansas, and Wisconsin data may not be fully comparable across years. Published February 2016.