

# Realigning Justice Resources

## A Review of Population and Spending Shifts in Prison and Community Corrections

SEPTEMBER 2012

Fact Sheet

### BACKGROUND

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.

In this study, the Vera Institute of Justice, in partnership with the Pew Center on the States' Public Safety Performance Project, set 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 between 2006 and 2010 by examining changes in (1) prison populations; (2) prison spending; (3) community corrections populations; and (4) community corrections spending.

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### Key Findings

#### PRISON

##### From 2006 through 2010:

- > one-third of states that responded to Vera's survey reported that their prison populations generally decreased or remained steady;
- > two-thirds reported increases in their prison population; and
- > 83 percent reported increases in prison expenditures, with an average increase of 6.9 percent.

##### However, examining only the shorter period from 2009 to 2010:

- > nearly two-thirds of responding states saw a decline in prison expenditures;
- > nearly half witnessed a decline in prison populations; and
- > one-third witnessed a decline in both prison population and expenditures.

#### COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS

##### From 2006 through 2010:

- > nearly half of states that responded to Vera's survey (46 percent) reported increases in their community corrections populations; and
- > three-quarters saw overall increases in spending on community corrections.

##### However, examining only the shorter period from 2009 to 2010:

- > a little more than half of responding states witnessed a decrease in their community corrections populations; and
- > nearly two-thirds of states reported decreases in community corrections spending.

## METHODOLOGY

With support from the Pew Center on the States, Vera researchers examined changes in correctional populations and expenditures from 2006 through 2010, a period encompassing the most recent recession. Three sources of data inform this report: (1) results from a survey developed by Vera and follow-up interviews on reported data; (2) review of recent relevant legislation; (3) an analysis of population counts from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) at the United States Department of Justice.

## CONCLUSION

Vera's analysis found no discernible relationship between population and spending shifts from one part of the system to another. Policy changes that aim to cut spending on prisons do not necessarily have the expected impact on community corrections populations or spending. Larger fiscal realities, other legislative changes, and factors outside of policymakers' control can upset predictions of a policy's impact.

Several states—such as, Michigan, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Wisconsin, and Virginia—have successfully implemented policies that curb both prison populations and spending. These states demonstrate that cost-savings can be realized through sentencing reform that addresses the number of people entering prison or placed on community supervision and the dedication of appropriate resources to support research-driven community supervision practices and programs.

The next several years are critical for criminal justice systems in this country. Increasingly, states are embarking on efforts that aim to reduce their prison populations and expenditures, strengthen their community corrections systems, and improve public safety. It may be too soon to see the true impact of these policies. A longitudinal study may be necessary to observe more accurately whether these policy changes shift correctional populations and spending in the ways intended.

Read the complete report at [www.vera.org/realigning-justice-resources](http://www.vera.org/realigning-justice-resources)

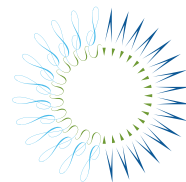


## For More Information

The Vera Institute of Justice is an independent nonprofit organization that combines research, demonstration projects, and technical assistance to help leaders in government and civil society improve the systems people rely on for justice and safety.

Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections works with government leaders to advance criminal justice policies that promote fairness, protect public safety, and ensure that resources are used efficiently. The center draws on the skills and expertise of its staff, as well as the practical knowledge of working criminal justice professionals who face similar justice challenges.

For more information about the Center on Sentencing and Corrections, please contact Peggy McGarry at (212) 376-3131 or [pmcgarry@vera.org](mailto:pmcgarry@vera.org).



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