Over the five-year period from 2010 to 2015, the nation’s imprisonment rate fell 8.4 percent while the combined violent and property crime rate declined 14.6 percent, according to statistics released by the U.S. Department of Justice. Thirty-one states cut both rates simultaneously.

The rates of violent and property crime reported to law enforcement both have declined by more than half since their 1991 peaks, returning to levels not seen since the late 1960s. National, state, and local crime rates shift for complex and poorly understood reasons, but experts believe that the long-term decline is the result of a combination of factors, including more effective policing, the waning of the crack cocaine epidemic, the spread of car theft-prevention devices and other anticrime technologies, reduced use of cash in favor of electronic payments, and increased incarceration of high-risk offenders.

States show tandem reductions in crime, prisons

Table 1 below ranks states by their imprisonment-rate trends over the past five years and shows that 35 states reduced their imprisonment rates, led by California. The table also documents crime-rate changes for each state, showing that almost every state experienced a reduction in crime, with no apparent correlation to its trend in imprisonment:

- Across the 44 states with crime declines, imprisonment-rate changes ranged from a 25.2 percent decrease to a 13.5 percent increase.
- Crime trends were consistent across both the 35 states where imprisonment dropped and the 15 states where it increased.
- In the 10 states with the largest imprisonment declines, the crime rate fell an average of 14.4 percent, compared with 8.1 percent in the 10 states with the biggest growth in imprisonment.

The lack of a consistent relationship between the crime and imprisonment trends reinforces the findings of the National Research Council and others that the imprisonment rate in many states and the nation as a whole has long since passed the point of diminishing public safety returns.
States Cut Imprisonment and Crime Over 5 Years

Latest data reveal little relationship between recent changes in rates

Notes: Imprisonment and crime rates are per 100,000 residents of all ages. Imprisonment rates count inmates sentenced to more than a year in prison and do not reflect jail populations. The U.S. imprisonment rate includes federal prisoners and excludes those held in local jails. Crime rates reflect Part I offenses as defined by the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report and combine violent and property crimes; 2015 violent crime rates use the legacy (not revised) definition of rape.

Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners series, 2010-15; FBI, Crime in the United States series, 2010-15

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 Crime rate percent change, 2010-15

Crime rate decrease

Crime rate increase

10 largest imprisonment rate decreases

10 largest imprisonment rate increases

Crime rate percent change, 2010-15

Crime rate decrease (average)

Crime rate increase (average)

10 largest crime rate decreases

10 largest crime rate increases

Crime rate per 100,000 residents of all ages

Notes: Imprisonment and crime rates are per 100,000 residents of all ages. Imprisonment rates count inmates sentenced to more than a year in prison and do not reflect jail populations. The U.S. imprisonment rate includes federal prisoners and excludes those held in local jails. Crime rates reflect Part I offenses as defined by the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report and combine violent and property crimes; 2015 violent crime rates use the legacy (not revised) definition of rape.

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Police Reports, Victim Surveys Capture Complementary Crime Trends
Both measures find decades-long drops in violent, property crimes


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Endnotes


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