

After decades of continuous and unified growth across all states from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the landscape of U.S. incarceration fragmented into distinct trends. The last decade has been characterized as an era of reform, and nationwide prison data does show a 24 percent drop in prison admissions. But if the 10 states with the largest declines in prison admissions are pulled out, data from the remaining 40 states reveals a small but significant overall increase in admissions. Moreover, incarceration rates and incarcerated populations can be vastly different depending on both the locale and the lens through which they are viewed. In this complex landscape, the traditional approach of using state-level prison population as a proxy for all incarceration is now too broad a brush with which to paint the new dynamics of incarceration. In this report, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) proposes a new way to consider incarceration that will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of its current state and how changes to one facet can affect the entire system.

Vera proposes analyzing incarceration using a comprehensive set of metrics and, in so doing, identifies four distinct trends: decarceration, stagnation, jurisdictional shifts, and continued growth. To aggregate and analyze these metrics, Vera researchers merged two federally collected prison datasets—the National Corrections Reporting Program and the National Prisoner Statistics Program—with the jail data in Vera's *Incarceration Trends* data tool, sourced from the federal Annual Survey of Jails and Census of Jails. In addition, Vera researchers collected data on incarceration directly from states.

Overview

By observing the following four additional metrics in combination with prison population, researchers and reformers will be better able to craft systemic solutions that can lead to true reform.

- > **Jail admissions.** The number of times people are sent to local jails annually is the best, albeit rough,

estimate of how many people are directly impacted by local incarceration.

- > **Pretrial jail population.** The number of people held in jail awaiting the resolution of their charges provides a metric that is relatively easy to compare across counties and states.
- > **Sentenced jail population.** The number of people serving time in local jails helps represent the entirety of the sentenced population, particularly as states shift incarcerated populations between prisons and jails.
- > **Prison admissions.** The number of people admitted to state prison in a given year presents a timely indicator of changing prison usage.

Findings

Using these metrics, Vera researchers uncovered four trends that show America is not in a period of universal decline in incarceration, but that the nature of incarceration varies from place to place in meaningful ways:

- > **Decarceration.** Large urban areas are decarcerating at historic rates, driving overall statistics for states as diverse as California, New York, and Missouri. These urban shifts, however, have the potential to statistically overwhelm concurrent incarceration growth in adjacent rural areas and create a false perception of overall decarceration in the state.
- > **Stagnation.** In some states, like Louisiana and Virginia, each metric shows a relatively flat trend. But although prison and jail incarceration rates have stopped growing in these areas, they are still at or near all-time highs.
- > **Jurisdictional shifts.** In other states, jails are growing while prisons shrink—or vice versa. For example, while Indiana reported a 21.4 percent drop in prison

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For more information

To read the full report, visit www.vera.org/the-new-dynamics-of-mass-incarceration. For more information about this report or the Incarceration Trends project, contact Jacob Kang-Brown, senior research associate, at jkangbrown@vera.org. For more information about Vera's work to reduce the use of jails, contact Nancy Fishman, project director at Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, at nfishman@vera.org.

The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice,

and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve America's increasingly diverse communities. For more information, visit www.vera.org.

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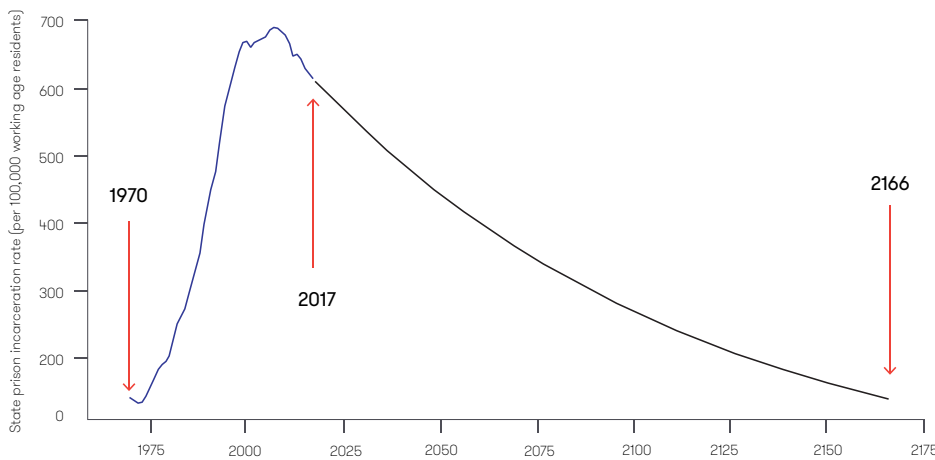
admissions in 2016, its jail admissions increased by 32 percent between 2015 and 2017. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, in contrast, Hennepin County has experienced a 20 percent jail incarceration rate drop since 2007, while prison admissions grew by 50 percent over the same period. This trend suggests that reform tactics may be merely driving populations between different forms of incarceration rather than leading to overall decarceration.

> **Growth.** While growth has slowed in many parts of the country, it is still the dominant dynamic in states like Arkansas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and West Virginia, which continue to incarcerate people in both prisons and jails at all-time high rates that keep increasing year after year.

Using these proposed more granular and comprehensive metrics, researchers and reformers can better track the interplay between jails and prisons in this new era, and craft solutions that will truly unwind mass incarceration.

Figure 1
How many years until incarceration in the United States falls to 1970 rates?

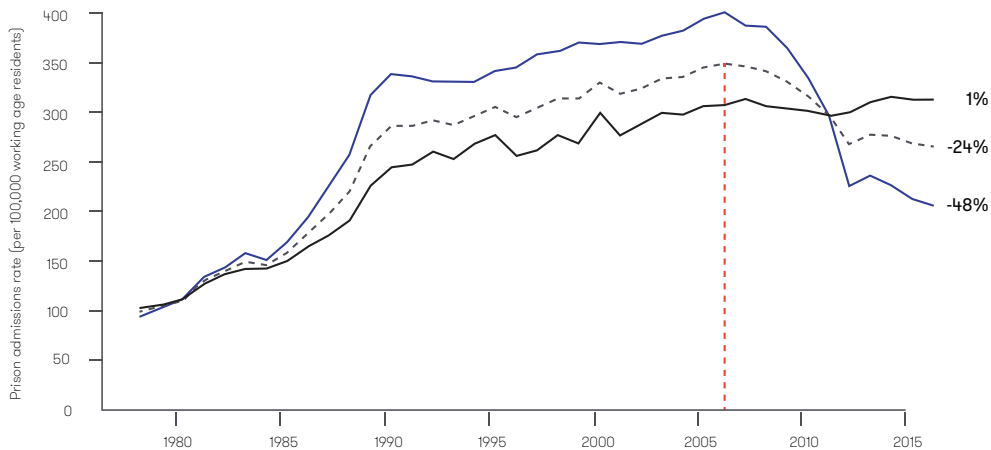
■ Measured ■ Extrapolated



Note: This projection is based on the average annual rate of decline in the state prison incarceration rate since its peak in 2007.

Figure 2
Diverging trends in prison admissions

— 10 states with the largest decline — Other states - - Total



The 24 percent drop in the national prison admissions rate since 2006 is due entirely to a 48 percent drop in 10 states.