

Fewer Americans Going to Prison, Highlighting a Shift in U.S. Policy

Alissa Fleck



Statistics released in 2012 by the Justice Department revealed the prison population in the United States was the lowest it had been in years. The prison population declined for the third year in a row, following a 40-year trend of mass imprisonment in the U.S., according to the *New York Times*. Between 2011 and 2012, the prison population decreased by 1.7 percent, which, when considered alongside the decline of the two previous years, amounts to a significant figure.

In the early 1970s, imprisonment rates in the U.S. began to climb annually, reaching an all-time high in 2009. According to *MSN Money*, state prison populations jumped 700 percent between 1970 and 2009. In 2009, there were 1,615,487 inmates in state and federal prisons combined.

Experts say there is no way these numbers were random—a three-year fall in the numbers points to an emerging trend, rather than a natural fluctuation. These figures indicate, above all, a major change in the ways Americans decide whom to incarcerate in the country, and for what offenses.

One explanation is the associated costs of maintaining prisons and the recession in the U.S. from December 2007 to June 2009. Between 2011 and 2012, prisons in a number of states had to shut their doors, and many prison building projects were abandoned due to rising costs, notes the *Times*. A report released by the Sentencing Project, a research and advocacy group that pushes for prison reform, says that the number of shut prisons and abandoned prison building projects equates to nearly 30,000 beds disappearing in prisons throughout the country.

Relatedly, the decline in prison populations also resulted, in part, from a response to prison overcrowding. California was ordered by the Supreme Court in 2012 to reduce its prison populations, and other states followed suit for fear of similar orders, including Hawaii, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Alaska, and New York, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts. Ultimately, however, neither of these explanations amounts to the greatest cause for the declining numbers.

Instead, it seems that there had been a shift in the American mindset and actual reduction in crime at play behind the changing numbers. Many would argue Americans—politicians and lawmakers as well as the general public—had begun to understand that locking people up does not necessarily result in a reduction in crime.

In addition to budgetary and overcrowding concerns, crime rates actually decreased leading up to 2012, and sentencing laws and public opinion had changed notably. Crime rates were down in states that continued with prison growth and those that had halted it.

Research-based support from the American public had also been a major factor in prison reform, at a time when one in 100 adults in the country was imprisoned. Dropping crime rates meant less general fear among the public, which amounted to fewer politicians running campaigns that attack crime, noted the *Times*. Instead, Americans were more interested in spending money on education and healthcare than in locking people up.

According to a statement released by the Pew Charitable Trusts as a part of their public safety performance project, “Often with overwhelming bipartisan votes, leaders in [states with drops in prison populations] have shortened terms behind bars for lower-level offenders or diverted them from prison altogether. Several states...reinvested large sums of the resulting savings into probation and parole in an effort to...improve public safety.”

Indeed, individuals on both conservative and liberal ends of the spectrum had agreed that prison reform was needed, and more conservative states, like Texas, had led the charge in changing how offenders are treated. Conservative leaders who had been formerly tough on crime were now some of those calling loudest for prison reform, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Adam Gelb, director of the Pew Charitable Trusts’ public safety performance project, noted in an interview with the *Times*: “The states that are showing drops are the states who are thinking about how they can apply research-based alternatives that work better [than prison] and cost less.”

There was an overwhelming attitude that nonviolent offenders did not necessarily deserve to be in jail, and that rather than merely being watched, offenders should have an opportunity to also succeed, according to Right on Crime, a prison reform project of the Texas Public Policy Foundation. And these policies had proven not only successful, but cost-effective.

According to *MSN Money*, “One Georgia drug court, for example, found its sentencing program of mandatory employment or schooling, group counseling and frequent drug tests costs the state \$13 a day, per person—compared with the \$50 a day needed to feed and house a state prisoner.” Overall, these programs had equated to lower costs for taxpayers.

Still, the rate of people imprisoned in the U.S. was significantly higher than other countries. According to California Prison Focus and the Department of Justice in 2012, the U.S. had more prisons and prisoners than any other country. In 2012, the U.S. imprisoned more than four times as many people as Russia, the country that found itself in second place in terms of prison populations.

While the number of people incarcerated in the U.S. continued to fall, and crime with it, the country still would have a long way to go with regard to prison reform.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

1. What happened to the United States prison population in 2012?

- A) It went down for the third year in a row.
- B) It went up for the third year in a row.
- C) It went up for the first time since 1970.
- D) It stayed the same from 2011.

2. The decline in prison population in the United States was an effect. What was one cause?

- A) having more prisons than any other country
- B) the release of statistics by the Justice Department
- C) a 700% increase in state prison populations between 1970 and 2009
- D) the cost of maintaining prisons

3. Americans are less interested in putting people in prison than they used to be.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

- A) Imprisonment rates in the U.S. began to climb annually in the early 1970s and continued to climb until 2009, when they reached an all-time high.
- B) Often with overwhelming bipartisan votes, leaders in some states have shortened terms behind bars for lower-level offenders or diverted them from prison altogether.
- C) According to experts, the three-year fall in the U.S. prison population was not random. It points to an emerging trend, rather than a natural fluctuation.
- D) In 2012, the U.S. imprisoned more than four times as many people as Russia, the country that ranked second in the world for prison population.

4. What could be a reason that Americans became less interested in putting people in prison than they used to be?

- A) Between 2011 and 2012, the U.S. prison population decreased by 1.7 percent.
- B) Americans had come to believe that putting people in prison does not necessarily result in less crime.
- C) The Sentencing Project is a research and advocacy group that works toward prison reform.
- D) Some conservative political leaders used to be tough on crime.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A) a report that found prison alternatives cost the state of Georgia less than sending someone to prison
- B) where the U.S. prison population ranks compared to other countries around the world
- C) a Supreme Court order requiring the state of California to reduce its prison populations
- D) a decrease in U.S. prison population and the causes of that decrease

6. Read the following sentence: "Indeed, individuals on both conservative and liberal ends of the spectrum had agreed that prison **reform** was needed, and more conservative states, like Texas, had led the charge in changing how offenders are treated."

What does the word "**reform**" mean in the sentence above?

- A) a change made to improve something
- B) a statistic about prison population
- C) a conservative leader who is tough on crime
- D) a crime rate that has fallen

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The U.S. prison population declined for several reasons, _____ cost and a change in public opinion.

- A) instead
- B) although
- C) such as
- D) never

8. According to the article, what do experts say about the three-year fall in the U.S. prison population?

9. The passage discusses several possible causes of the decrease in U.S. prison population from 2010-2012. Identify two of them.

10. Based on the text, explain what factors influence the U.S. government’s policies for imprisonment.
