

# Justice In Review: New Trends in State Sentencing and Corrections 2014-2015

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REPORT SUMMARY

## 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.

This report highlights trends in criminal justice legislation passed in the previous two years and promising practices in the states. Like previous reports in the series, this shares not only specific reforms enacted about issues such as mandatory sentencing or collateral consequences of criminal conviction, but also distills lessons based on the legislation itself and interviews with relevant stakeholders and experts.

These reports aim to guide policymakers and others interested in pursuing criminal justice reform in their jurisdictions but do not provide an exhaustive listing or analysis of every state criminal justice-related bill, ballot initiative, or executive order. To read about past trends, visit [www.vera.org/project/sentencing-and-corrections-trends-reports](http://www.vera.org/project/sentencing-and-corrections-trends-reports).

Read the full report on 2014 and 2015 state sentencing trends at [www.vera.org/pubs/state-sentencing-and-corrections-trends-2014-2015](http://www.vera.org/pubs/state-sentencing-and-corrections-trends-2014-2015).

## INTRODUCTION

Prompted by dissatisfaction with stubbornly high rates of return among those released from prison, and encouraged by public opinion polls that show a majority of the electorate believes that prison growth has yielded insufficient public safety gains, there is an emerging consensus across the political divide that America's over-reliance on prison has been too costly and ineffective. Driven by the need to find better solutions, policymakers over the past several years have embraced decades of research and analysis examining what works in corrections to reduce recidivism and improve public safety.

Informed by this research and analysis, 46 states in 2014 and 2015 enacted at least 201 bills, executive orders, and ballot initiatives to reform at least one aspect of their sentencing and corrections systems. These included laws to

- > **create or expand opportunities to divert people away from the criminal justice system:** States increased the use of alternative case dispositions, such as deferred adjudication programs, which allow people with first-time or low-level charges to avoid entering a guilty plea or ending up with a record of conviction if they serve a crime-free probationary period. States also expanded or strengthened the use of problem-solving courts that channel people with specific treatment needs, such as mental illness or substance abuse issues, into alternative judicial settings that provide intensive supervision in the community and treatment in lieu of prosecution or sentencing. Still other states passed laws that empower arresting officers to divert certain defendants—especially those with an identified mental health need—into treatment instead of detention;
- > **reduce prison populations:** States enacted laws to reduce or contain prison populations by 1) making certain offenses eligible for community-based sentences; 2) reducing the length and severity of custodial sentences by redefining or reclassifying crimes or repealing mandatory penalties; 3) shortening lengths of stay in prison by expanding opportunities to earn sentence credits, which shave off time in custody and advance parole eligibility; and 4) reducing the influx of people into prison for violations of community supervision by implementing evidence-based practices such as graduated responses to violations; and
- > **support people's successful reentry into the community:** To reduce recidivism, states changed their reentry systems to provide better coordination between prisons and community supervision agencies and to increase programming and treatment. In addition, states are supporting family relationships by facilitating family visitation, supporting relationships between incarcerated parents and their children, and ensuring that children of incarcerated people receive care and support. States are also helping people who are justice-involved obtain benefits, state identification, and exercise their voting rights; improving employment prospects by limiting bars on professional licenses and providing certificates of rehabilitation and employability; waiving fines and fees that often create economic obstacles to reintegration; and making it easier for people to expunge prior convictions and more difficult for private entities to disseminate criminal-records data.

# MAPPING SENTENCING AND CORRECTIONS TRENDS 2014-2015

