

Prison Population in the U.S. Shrinks to Smallest in a Decade

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The U.S. prison population in 2015 fell to the lowest level since 2005, fueled in part by the federal push to reduce the number of nonviolent drug offenders behind bars and state policies aimed at shorter sentences, according to a report set to be released Thursday.

State and federal correctional institutions held an estimated 1.5 million prisoners at the end of 2015, a more than 2% decline from a year earlier, according to the report by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Nationally, incarceration rates began rising in the 1970s, peaked at about 1.6 million in 2009 and have mostly ticked down since, although not in many states.

Some Democrats and Republicans have been united behind the idea that the U.S. locks up too many people and for too long. Democrats often view sentencing policies, particularly at the federal level, as hurting minority communities, while fiscal conservatives have questioned whether prison costs translate into better public safety.

Overall, about 1 in 37 adults in the U.S. was under some form of correctional supervision—including incarceration, probation or parole—at the end of 2015, the lowest rate since 1994, according to the report.

A large part—40%—of the total drop in the U.S. prison population in 2015 was due to a decline in people incarcerated in federal prisons. The Federal Bureau of Prisons began releasing more nonviolent drug offenders in 2015, as part of the Department of Justice's commitment to cut the ranks of these inmates, the report said.

The Obama administration has made a push to lower prison costs and reduce some of the most severe sentences imposed during the war on drugs. A [change in federal sentencing guidelines](#) in 2014, for instance, resulted in about 5,000 inmates—about 2% of the federal prison population—getting released early over the space of a weekend in late 2015.

States have also adopted laws and policies to trim prison populations, the report noted. In California, for instance, a ballot initiative approved in 2014 gave certain nonviolent offenders an opportunity to reduce their felony convictions to misdemeanors. Other states and local prosecutors have launched strategies to divert certain offenders—including those with opioid addictions or mental illness—into treatment instead of jail.

“You have governments realizing the price tag of locking people up, so they are finding ways to reduce that number,” said Jonathan Blanks, a research associate on the Project on Criminal Justice at the Cato Institute, a public-policy organization that supports limited government. Mr. Blanks called the declining prison population a positive development.

Some police groups, however, have expressed concerns about broad actions to free inmates, and urge any releases to be done on an individual basis.

“You can’t just assume that people who have been put in jail under existing laws all of the sudden don’t belong there because it’s too expensive to keep them there,” said James Pasco, the executive director of the national Fraternal Order of Police.