

The New York Times

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY

GOLDEN
GLOBE®
NOMINATIONS

January 4, 2010

EDITORIAL

Prisons and Budgets

The United States, which has less than 5 percent of the world's population, has about one-quarter of its prisoners. But the relentless rise in the nation's prison population has suddenly slowed as many states discover that it is simply too expensive to overincarcerate.

Between 1987 and 2007 the prison population nearly tripled, from 585,000 to almost 1.6 million. Much of that increase occurred in states — many with falling crime rates — that had adopted overly harsh punishment policies, such as the “three strikes and you're out” rule and drug laws requiring that nonviolent drug offenders be locked away.

These policies have been hugely costly. According to the Pew Center on the States, state spending from general funds on corrections increased from \$10.6 billion in 1987 to more than \$44 billion in 2007, a 127 percent increase in inflation-adjusted dollars. In the same period, adjusted spending on higher education increased only 21 percent.

In 2008, the explosion of the prison population ground to a near halt, according to [data](#) released last month by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. About 739,000 inmates were admitted to federal and state facilities, only about 3,500 more than were released.

One factor seems to be tight budgets as states decide to release nonviolent offenders early. This can not only save money. If done correctly, it can also be very sound social policy. Many nonviolent offenders can be dealt with more effectively and more cheaply through treatment and jobs programs.

Michigan, which has been hard hit by the recession, has done a particularly good job of releasing people who do not need to be in prison. As the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project details in a [new report](#), Michigan reduced its prison population by about 8 percent between March 2007 and November 2009 by taking smart steps, notably doing more to get nonviolent drug offenders out, while helping in their transition to a productive, and crime-free, life.

Not every state has gotten the message. Florida, for example, has a state law mandating that all prisoners serve a high percentage of their sentence, which is both dubious corrections policy and terrible fiscal policy.

For many years, driving up prison populations has been an easy thing for elected officials to do, popular with voters and powerful corrections officer unions. The new incarceration figures suggest, however, that in the current hard economic times, strapped states are beginning to realize that they do not have the money to keep people in prison who do not need to be there.

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Ma](#)