

Diminishing Returns: Crime and Incarceration in the 1990s

From 1991 to 1998 the rate of crime in the United States fell by 22%. This decline occurred during a period when the number of state and federal prisoners rose substantially, from 789,610 to 1,252,830. These two developments have led some observers to conclude that the massive increase in incarceration caused the dramatic decline in crime. *Diminishing Returns: Crime and Incarceration in the 1990s* examines this contention by comparing state-level changes in the use of imprisonment. Major findings of the report include:

- *Incarceration and Crime, 1991-98* – Crime rates declined nationally during this period, but the states that increased their use of incarceration greater than the national average achieved smaller reductions in crime than the states with below average increases. “Above average” states increased their rate of incarceration by 72% and experienced a 13% decline in crime. “Below average” states increased imprisonment by 30% and crime rates declined by 17%.
- *Large-State Changes* - Texas led the nation with a 144% increase in the use of incarceration from 1991 to 1998 and experienced one of the most substantial declines in crime, 35%. But three other large states – California, Massachusetts, and New York – experienced similar or larger reductions in crime with far less increase in imprisonment – 52%, 21%, and 24% respectively.
- *Incarceration and Crime, 1984-91* – Crime rates increased nationally during this period. The states that increased their use of incarceration greater than the national average achieved a crime rate increase only 2% less than in the states with below average increases. “Above average” states increased their use of incarceration by 89% and experienced a 15% rise in crime; “below average” states increased imprisonment by 37% and crime rates rose by 17%.
- *Cost Benefit of Increasing Incarceration* – The states that increased their use of imprisonment above the national average for 1984-91 added 136,100 more prisoners than they would have at the below average rate of increase. This came at an estimated cost of \$9.5 billion for a 2% difference in crime.
- *Multiple Factors Relate to Declining Crime* - A complex set of factors that changed significantly in the 1990s contributed to the reductions in crime. These included an improved economy, changes in the drug trade, new methods of policing, and demographics.
- *Implications for Public Policy* – Policymakers can take advantage of a declining crime rate and a strong economy to reconsider sentencing and incarceration policies. This would include a moratorium on the construction of new prisons, repeal of mandatory sentencing laws, strengthening probation and parole systems, and investing in programs that aid families and communities.

The full report, *Diminishing Returns: Crime and Incarceration in the 1990s*, by Jenni Gainsborough and Marc Mauer, is available at www.sentencingproject.org or can be ordered for \$5.00 from The Sentencing Project at (202) 628-0871.