

# Podcast: U.S. Prison Population, Crime Rates Declining

Criminal justice reforms in 33 U.S. states have reduced the overall prison population, Pew Charitable Trust reported on its podcast, "After the Facts." Crime rates also have declined.

The U.S. prison population began expanding rapidly in the 1970s, peaking around 2007 with 1 in 100 persons being imprisoned, podcast host Dan LeDuc noted in his opening remarks.

Since then, a 13-percent reduction in the number of incarcerated persons in the U.S. has taken place as a result of various reform initiatives.

LeDuc interviewed three individuals, including Adam Gelb, director of Pew's public safety performance project, who emphasized that more money and longer sentences have not reduced either the crime rate or the recidivism rate.

"Here is the key point," Gelb emphasized, "for all this huge increase in spending on corrections (from \$10 billion to over \$50 billion over the past 25 years or so), there has not been a detectable change in the national recidivism rate" - the rate at which folks released from incarceration return to prison within three years.

"The system has been geared toward catching people when they mess up, rather than helping them succeed, and that's a dynamic that's got to change," he continued. "There is very little connection between the time you spend in prison and the likelihood that you'll commit a crime on the back end."

This growing awareness that length of sentencing is less important in deterring crime than the swiftness and certainty of punishment is a key driver of these reforms, Gelb explained, for which there is widespread, bipartisan support.

Sen. Gerald Mallory of the South Carolina legislature told LeDuc that South Carolina had long been tough on crime but not smart on crime, which led to an ever-increasing correction budget and population.

To correct this, "we brought all of the stakeholders and put them in the same room," Mallory explained, so that facts and evidence-based practices could inform

policy reforms.

As a result of these collaborative conversations, legislation focused on alternatives to incarceration for lower-level offenders was passed. After these reforms were enacted, the prison population has declined by 14 percent.

This enabled the state to close six prisons and to reduce significantly the annual costs, explained Bryan Stirling, state corrections director for the South Carolina Department of Corrections.

The full podcast conversation is available [here](#).

*Editor's note: To learn how Christian congregations and organizations are making a positive impact in the criminal justice system, visit [ThroughTheDoor.info](http://ThroughTheDoor.info).*