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American prison population too high, but New York is finding better ways

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Over the years, old Rust Belt New York may have lost some of its luster as a trend-setter to such places as California and the Sun Belt. But in one very important area, New York is blazing a trail that other states, if they are smart, will want to follow.

We don't lock up as many people. Not as many as we used to and, as a percentage of the adult population, not as many as all but one other state.

This is very good news indeed, coming as part of a new report on how the United States as a whole has set a record, for its own history and for the world, in the percentage of its adult population that is behind bars.

New data gathered by the Pew Center for the States figures some 2.3 million souls are now being held in local jails and in state and federal penitentiaries. That's just a touch more than 1 percent of the adult population. And it is way too many.

The fact is that, if you go to prison, it may well be your own sorry fault. But if, once there, you find that one out of 100 of your friends and neighbors are there, too, it gives new life to the old bleeding-heart cliché that "society is to blame."

Evidence for that is that in New York, as well as in other states where prison populations have been declining, change has come from conscious decisions by policy makers that holding so many people in prison is just not worth the cost.

The state's adult incarceration rate is about half the nation's, and the raw numbers have been falling steadily since a high of some 71,000 inmates in 1999.

It isn't because New Yorkers quit committing crimes — though the crime rate is down an astonishing 58 percent since 1990 — or because we couldn't catch them. It's because the Legislature and other worthies went in search of, and found, alternatives to expensive prison stays for all but the most violent offenders.

There are fewer prisons to fill. There is more treatment available for those who wouldn't be criminals if they didn't already have substance abuse problems. There are boot camps for first-time offenders and shorter sentences for those who not only behave themselves, but better themselves in prison with education and counseling.

A direct result of having a low incarceration rate is that New York also spends a much smaller percentage of its state budget on prisons than other large states such as Texas and California. Texas is now beginning to trim its prison population, and its prison costs, through similar policies that shorten sentences and offer alternatives to nonviolent criminals. Kansas, similarly, has delayed what it had thought would be a \$500 million tab for new prisons by pursuing alternative approaches.

Spending some of those savings on early childhood education, drug and alcohol education and treatment and basic police presence should do even more to keep our friends and neighbors out of those really expensive, not to mention soul-robbing, prisons, far into the future.