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Sentencing Reform Reduces Prison Population without Increasing Crime Tuesday, March 09, 2010

It is possible to get criminals out of prison and keep them from returning to a life of crime, argue reformers calling for changes in prison sentencing. A new report from The Sentencing Project cites statistics from four states where lawmakers and corrections officials have reduced prison populations and at the same time lowered crime rates.

According to Downscaling Prisons: Lessons from Four States, Kansas, Michigan, New Jersey and New York figured out ways to help convicts instead of just throwing them behind bars. New York lowered its prison population by 20%, Michigan 12%, New Jersey 19% and Kansas 5%.

Leaders in these four states successfully moved thousands of prisoners into drug rehab programs and/or improved parole systems that kept felons from resorting to old ways and landing back in jail. The most common strategy was to reduce mandatory sentencing for drug offenses.

This accomplishment came while other states using the same old incarceration methods saw their inmate totals grow by 40% or more between 2001 and 2008. Those states were West Virginia (57%), Minnesota (51%), Arizona (49%), Kentucky (45%), Florida (44%) and Indiana (41%).

-Noel Brinkerhoff