

[Link to Source >>](#)**Bert Useem****New York's Prison Turnaround***The population behind bars is falling, even as crime stays low.*

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The news about American prisons is typically gloom and doom. Facilities are expensive, overcrowded, and unsuccessful at rehabilitation; inmates learn, if they learn anything, only how to be better criminals next time around; prison-violence rates are unacceptably high; gangs dominate inmate life. But that characterization, while it might describe many prisons elsewhere in the country, is no longer remotely accurate in New York. Thanks to steps taken by the state's Department of Correctional Services (DOCS), New York shows improvement in three bottom-line prison measures simultaneously—declining prison population, declining violence in prison, and declining crime statewide.

Like other correctional agencies around the country, the DOCS saw rapid growth in its inmate population beginning in the late 1970s. In 1977, New York prisons housed 20,000 offenders; by 1999, there were 73,000. After 2000, however, New York began a year-by-year drop in its prisoner population, bucking the national trend of continued (though moderate) growth. By 2008, the DOCS housed 60,000 inmates—a 16 percent fall from a decade earlier.

New York prison violence has come down dramatically, too. In 1983, there were 26 assaults against staff per 1,000 inmates; in 2008, the rate was nine per 1,000. During the same period, the rate of inmate-on-inmate assaults declined from 26 to ten per 1,000 inmates. Long defined in the public mind by the 1971 Attica uprising, New York's prison system has not seen a major incident of collective violence in over a decade. New York has also reduced the threat of inmate escapes almost completely: after a peak of 31 in 1994, the number of escapes has plummeted to zero in 2008 and one last year.

This downward trend in the inmate-violence rate actually understates the state's progress in reducing violence behind bars. From 1999 to 2008, the number of inmates held in maximum security increased by 1.5 percent, while the number of medium-security inmates declined by 21 percent and of minimum-security inmates by 51 percent. In general, higher-security inmates commit more assaults than lower-security inmates do, which makes the decline in the rate of inmate violence all the more impressive.

One way that the DOCS keeps violence down is monitoring gang activity. As former DOCS commissioner Glenn Goord explained, "Our policy is that since each inmate comes to prison alone, they will do their time alone. We will not allow gangs to flourish." Current commissioner Brian Fischer has continued this zero-tolerance approach. Gangs are not permitted to recruit, hold meetings, or display their colors. Defiance of these rules all but eliminates an inmate's chance for early release for meritorious behavior. And most prisoners want, above all else, to go home.

Finally, the crime rate in New York State compares favorably with the national rate. From 1965 through 1991, property crime in the United States and New York tracked closely together, each about doubling. After 1991, the property-crime rate fell both statewide and nationally, but more rapidly in New York. In 2008, the property-crime rate in New York (2,000 crimes per 100,000 residents) was 1.6 times lower than in America as a whole (3,200 per 100,000 residents). The same pattern holds for violent crime. By 2008, the violent-crime rate was considerably lower in New York State (400 per 100,000) than in the United States (450 per 100,000).

It's admittedly difficult to untangle the causal relationships among crime rates, imprisonment rates, and order behind bars. Each may influence the other; causation may run in both directions. For example, increases in the crime rate may push up the number of offenders in prison; more prisoners may then pull down the crime rate. But New York's recent experience is surely a promising anomaly to national trends.

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