

Newsday: NYS drug-law reforms working

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With dramatically fewer inmates locked up in costly cells, New York State is reaping a timely benefit from largely scrapping mandatory prison sentences for nonviolent drug offenders.

The lesson from the success of the long-sought reform of the state's inflexible, 1973 Rockefeller drug laws is: Beware of policy enacted in a fog of fear and tough-on-crime political posturing.

The mandatory sentences were Albany's fevered response to the public's demand to do something about a heroin-fueled crime wave in the 1970s. Harsh punishments helped push the state's prison population to a peak of 71,535 in 1999. Last week that number had fallen to 55,599 people, each imprisoned at an average cost of \$55,000 a year.

The drop followed sentencing reforms in 2004, 2005 and 2009 that eliminated the strictest mandatory sentences of 15 years to life, and gave judges wider discretion to impose penalties that fit individual offenses and offenders. As a result, the number of people serving time for drug offenses has dropped 62 percent since 2000, according to a Poughkeepsie Journal analysis.

Fewer people behind bars hasn't led to an uptick in crime, as many opponents of reform feared. Major crime rates have plunged since 1990, both in years when the inmate count increased and in years when it declined.

Saving money and salvaging lives through treatment, while keeping the public safe, is a slam dunk for the smart-on-crime reforms.