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January 31, 2014

HUFF
POST **POLITICS**



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The World's Largest Prison System May Finally Be Starting To Shrink: Report

Posted: 01/30/2014 11:47 am EST | Updated: 01/30/2014 2:59 pm EST

The U.S. prison system, long criticized as the most bloated in the world, may be slimming down.

After decades of growth, the nation's prison population has gradually declined over the last three years, prompting states to begin shutting down their prisons, according to [a report released Thursday by the Sentencing Project](#), a group that advocates for prison reform.

Between 2011 and 2013, 17 states either closed or agreed to close more than 60 prisons, according to the report. New York led the way, announcing the closure of six prisons in 2011 and six more in 2013. Florida also agreed to shut down 12 prisons, mostly in 2012, and Texas set out to close seven. Illinois, Oregon and Georgia have either closed or agreed to close four apiece.

The closures and expected closures allowed state governments to save \$337,380,141 in 2012, and \$97,302,782 in 2013.

Nicole Porter, one of the report's authors, traced the shift in part to the start of the financial crisis in 2008, when state lawmakers on both sides of the political divide began looking for ways to cut down on the expense of keeping so many people locked up.

Since then, at least 31 states have adopted criminal justice policies that may have helped reduce the prison population, or lower the social and economic barriers faced by people with prior convictions, according to a [companion report released Thursday](#), also by the Sentencing Project.

Contrary to what some skeptics feared, these changes haven't caused the crime rate to rise, Porter noted.

"I think lawmakers and the public should take comfort in that fact," she said, "and also continue to ask questions of their elected officials and communities about whether the high rate of incarceration is reflective of good social policy."

In New York, the decline in the prison population began after the state revised its Rockefeller Drug Laws, adopted in the early 1970s just as the national war on drugs was getting underway. Under the original statutes, someone convicted of selling just two ounces of heroin or cocaine, or possessing twice as much of the same drug, was subject to a mandatory sentence of at least 15 years in prison. But in 2009, judges in New York were given the authority to sentence drug defendants to treatment programs or shorter sentences instead.

Last year, Georgia followed suit, authorizing judges to depart from mandatory minimum sentences in certain drug cases. And Idaho passed a bill that allows the court to reduce sentences for certain assault and property crimes.

Even as state prison systems shrink, the federal prison population [continues to climb](#). In an attempt to alleviate overcrowding in federal prisons, the Obama administration agreed in 2012 to pay \$165 million for an empty state prison in Illinois. Congress is now considering several [bipartisan bills](#) that would result in nonviolent drug offenders spending less time behind bars.

Conservatives and progressives alike are among those who have [pushed for these reforms](#) and welcome the opportunity to close down prisons. "From a social conservative standpoint, one of the major concerns is the devastating impact that lengthy incarceration has had on American families," said Vikrant Reddy, an analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a group that makes conservative cases for reducing the prison population. "It is increasingly clear that for several reasons -- including both the fiscal impact and the social impact -- it makes sense to find alternative ways to hold certain offenders accountable."

It's still too soon to know what will become of most of the abandoned prison structures. But in some states, the transformations already have begun. Last May, a corporate researcher named Shekhar Patel put down a [\\$241,000 payment on Camp Georgetown](#), a minimum-security prison near Syracuse, N.Y. He told a Syracuse website that he plans to turn it into a science camp for kids from abroad.

"It would be a good turnaround story," he said.