

Federal prison population drops by nearly 5,000

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WASHINGTON — The federal prison population has dropped in the last year by roughly 4,800, the first time in several decades that the inmate count has gone down, according to the Justice Department.

In a speech scheduled Tuesday in New York City, Attorney General Eric Holder planned to say that the Justice Department expects to end the current budget year next week with a prison population of roughly 215,000 inmates.

That figure would represent a drop of nearly 5,000 from the inmate count one year ago. It would also be the first time since 1980 that the federal prison population has declined during the course of a fiscal year.

In addition, internal figures from the Bureau of Prisons show a projected drop of more than 2,000 inmates in the next year, and nearly 10,000 in the year after, according to excerpts of his remarks.

The crime rate has dropped along with the prison population, Holder said, proving that "longer-than-necessary prison terms" don't improve public safety.

"In fact, the opposite is often true," he said, according to the remarks, which were being delivered at a conference at the New York University law school organized by the Brennan Center for Justice.

With policies that have at times unsettled prosecutors and others in law enforcement, Holder has worked in the last year to reduce a prison population he says is costly and bloated.

In August 2013, for instance, he announced a major shift in sentencing policy, instructing federal prosecutors to stop charging many nonviolent drug defendants with offenses that carry mandatory minimum sentences. More recently, the Justice Department has encouraged a broader swath of the prison population to apply for clemency, and has supported reductions in sentencing guidelines for drug offenders that could apply to tens of thousands of inmates.

Holder was also expected to say that there should be new ways for the government to measure success of its criminal justice policies beyond how many people are prosecuted and sent to prison.

In this era, he said, "It's no longer adequate — or appropriate — to rely on outdated models that prize only enforcement, as quantified by numbers of prosecutions, convictions, and lengthy sentences, rather than taking a holistic view."

The Brennan Center, a public policy and law institute, issued a report Tuesday urging new success measures for U.S. attorney offices, including comparing the change in the violent crime rate and the percentage of violent crimes on the docket compared to the previous year.