

State Prison Populations Drop in NY & Nation: Trust Grows For Alternatives

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NEW YORK - State prison populations rose steadily for decades, but in 2009 they dropped nationwide for the first time in 40 years, the *Pew Center on the States* reports. New York is one of the states leading that trend.

Ten years ago, 73,000 people were incarcerated in New York state prisons; now the number is below 60,000, according to Elizabeth Gaynes, executive director of the *Osborne Association*, New York.

Gaynes says the prison population is on track to keep dropping by 1,000 inmates a year for the foreseeable future, as lawmakers and the public are turning to safe and more economical alternatives to imprisonment.

"The science of behavior change, and supervision technology and risk assessment, means there's more willingness to divert people from going into prison in the first place."

The report comes as New York is considering closing four upstate prisons against the wishes of local communities that don't want to lose the jobs they provide. Gaynes urges that the prisons be closed because the state has excess beds and inmates should be confined closer to home.

The size of state prison populations is not just based on crime rates, according to Adam Gelb, director of the *Pew Center on the States* Public Safety Performance Project. He says it is largely determined by decisions made by legislators, governors, parole boards and the courts about who they send to prison - and for how long.

"This is a small drop, but what it says is that states are starting to recognize that they don't have to sink so much of their budgets into prisons in order to protect public safety. There are better, more cost-efficient ways."

One rationale for the proposed closing of the upstate prisons is that they are located far from where the inmates lived. Gaynes says the *Pew* studies back up the state's thinking.

"Strong family ties are probably the most significant predictor of reduced recidivism. That means we should be focused on keeping people as close to home as possible, so their families and children can stay connected to them."

The full report is available at www.pewtrusts.org.