NJ had one of largest prison population drops in the U.S., study finds

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New Jersey's prison population fell by one-third last year, making it among the leaders of decarceration efforts during the pandemic, according to a new report by the [Vera Institute of Justice](#).

The study by the national nonprofit criminal justice reform group looked at the number of incarcerated people at the end of 2019 through 2021, finding an overall 16% decline in population, nationally. But while states like New Jersey and New York continued to decrease their inmate counts throughout the pandemic (33% and 29%, respectively), other states added to their numbers after an initial drop.

"The data in this report show an unmistakable backslide by many states and the U.S. federal government in terms of just increasing the number of people who are incarcerated in the last year," said Jacob Kang-Brown, a senior research associate at the Vera Institute. He said 19 states and the federal government increased their prison population numbers last year.

New Jersey had the second largest prison population drop in the country, second to West Virginia. Kang-Brown said that's largely due to New Jersey's landmark law that allowed eligible inmates to shave up to eight months off their sentence during the state's public health emergency. Under the measure, people within a year of their release dates who were not convicted of murder, first-degree sexual assault or repeat sexual offenses, could accrue "public health credits," similar to the concept of earned time off for good behavior.

More than 5,500 adults and juveniles were released under the program, with more than 200 freed early last month when the program resumed under Governor Phil Murphy's re-declaration of a public health emergency. Murphy ended the public health emergency this week, which means the last releases are expected to happen this summer.

Liz Velez, a spokeswoman for the Department of Corrections said another 852 people would be released early on March 13th. Velez has previously said the early releases are meant to balance public health with public safety.

An [analysis by Gothamist](#) earlier this year found that only about 9% of the first 2,500 people released early were re-incarcerated within a year. That's lower than the state's overall pre-pandemic, one-year recidivism rate of 16%, according to the [Vera Institute](#).

"The best evidence demonstrates that releasing more people from prison can help mitigate the public health harms of incarceration without jeopardizing public safety," Kang Brown said.

The latest Vera Institute report shows New Jersey had the biggest drop in its prison population between 2019 to 2020 — of 31%. During the height of the first wave in spring 2020, New Jersey also temporarily released inmates who were medically vulnerable to home confinement. From 2020 to 2021, the inmate count dropped by a much smaller number — 2.4%.