

# Mississippi's Ongoing Incarceration Crisis

*Despite reforms, Mississippi's prison population is on the rise again*

In recent years, Mississippi has taken important steps to safely reduce the number of people in state prison. Since the adoption of much-needed reforms in 2014 (House Bill 585), the state has experienced declines in both crime and imprisonment. Additional policy changes adopted in subsequent years will further increase fairness and opportunity in the criminal justice system.

As a result of these changes, Mississippi's imprisonment rate declined 11 percent from 2013 to 2016, and the state dropped from the second highest incarcerating state in the nation to the third highest. Despite these gains, Mississippi's imprisonment rate is still 57 percent higher than the national average, and the need for criminal justice reform is as urgent as it has ever been.

In fact, the impact of the previous reforms has likely been felt—the most recent data from the Mississippi Department of Corrections show that the prison population has increased each of the past three years and is higher today than at any point since 2013. State taxpayers still spend more than \$300 million on the corrections system every year, and corrections spending continues to grow faster than other critical budget priorities such as higher education.

Mississippi's jail population, left largely untouched by recent reform efforts, is also near an all-time high. The precipitous growth in jail and prison populations continues in part because thousands of new felony convictions are handed down in local courts each year, each one creating lifetime barriers to employment and economic security.

Crime remains at historic lows, yet the criminal justice system continues to grow and impose large costs on Mississippi's economy, communities, and families. Fortunately, there are common-sense changes with broad bipartisan support that policymakers can adopt to reduce Mississippi's high incarceration rate, invest in proven safety strategies, and expand opportunities for people impacted by the criminal justice system.

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**FIGURE 1: MISSISSIPPI'S PRISON POPULATION IS ON THE RISE AGAIN**

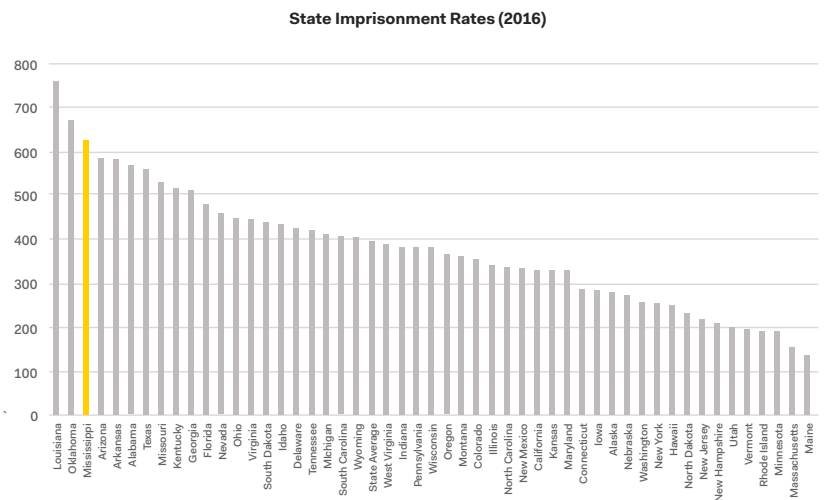
Mississippi's prison population fell to a 15-year low of 17,876 in 2014. Since that time, the prison population has grown each year and is back above 2014 levels. With the national prison population continuing to decline, Mississippi stands out for its continued reliance on incarceration and long prison sentences which have been shown to be ineffective as a crime control measure.



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoner Series; Mississippi Department of Corrections, Monthly Fact Sheets

**FIGURE 2: MISSISSIPPI HAS THE THIRD HIGHEST IMPRISONMENT RATE IN THE COUNTRY**

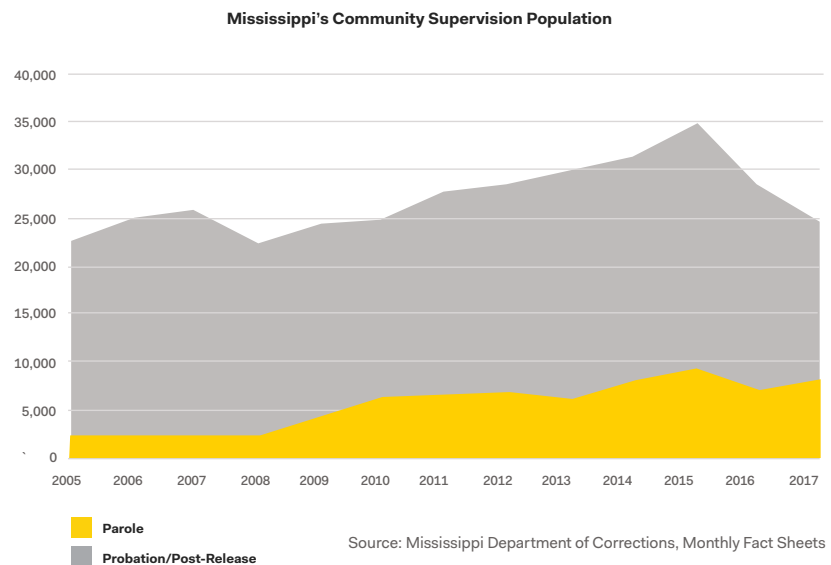
Mississippi's imprisonment rate of 624 people in prison per 100,000 state residents trails only Louisiana and Oklahoma for the highest in the country. The corrections system costs state taxpayers over \$300 million every year<sup>1</sup>, despite research showing that reduced imprisonment and reduced crime can go hand-in-hand. Mississippi's imprisonment rate is 57 percent higher than the national average, yet crime has fallen four times as fast in other states than in Mississippi over the last decade.<sup>2</sup>



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoner Series

**FIGURE 3: DESPITE RECENT DECREASES, THERE ARE MORE THAN 33,000 PEOPLE ON COMMUNITY SUPERVISION IN MISSISSIPPI**

In 2017, there were more than 33,000 people on community supervision in Mississippi. The parole population has increased 240 percent since 2005, but three quarters of the supervision population (24,691 people) are serving probation sentences, often for low-level crimes, that stretch on for years.



Source: Mississippi Department of Corrections, Monthly Fact Sheets

<sup>1</sup> National Association of State Budget Offices. 2016 State Expenditure Report.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Public Safety Performance Project. National Prison Rate Continues to Decline Amid Sentencing, Re-Entry Reforms (January 2018).

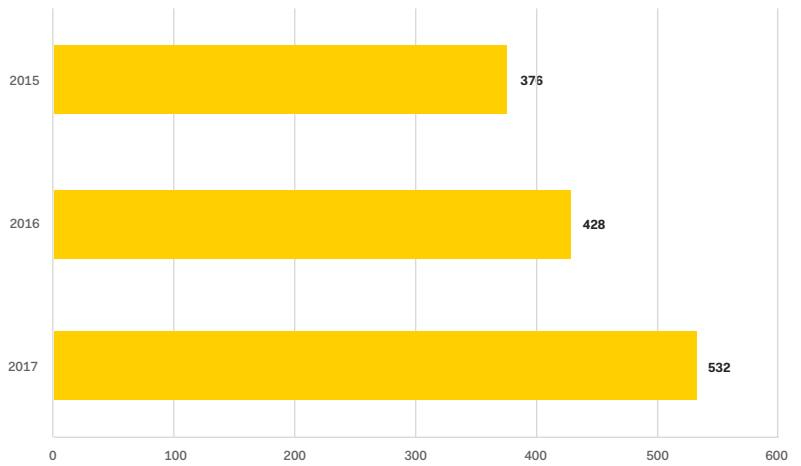
<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2018/01/16/national-prison-rate-continues-to-decline-amid-sentencing-re-entry-reforms>

**FIGURE 4: DRUG OFFENSES ARE A MAJOR DRIVER OF THE PRISON AND COMMUNITY SUPERVISION POPULATIONS**

In November 2018, one in five people (20 percent) in Mississippi prisons had been convicted of a drug offense. The share of the probation and parole population that were convicted of drug offenses is 38 percent and 48 percent.<sup>3</sup> In all three populations, Mississippi has significantly more people under correctional control for drug offenses than other states.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, the share of prison admissions for the least serious drug offenses has risen sharply. While admissions for other nonviolent crimes have decreased, admissions for drug possession have grown 41 percent over the past two years. According to the most recent available data, the number of people sent to prison for drug possession has grown to more than 500 per year.

Annual Admissions to Prison for Drug Possession

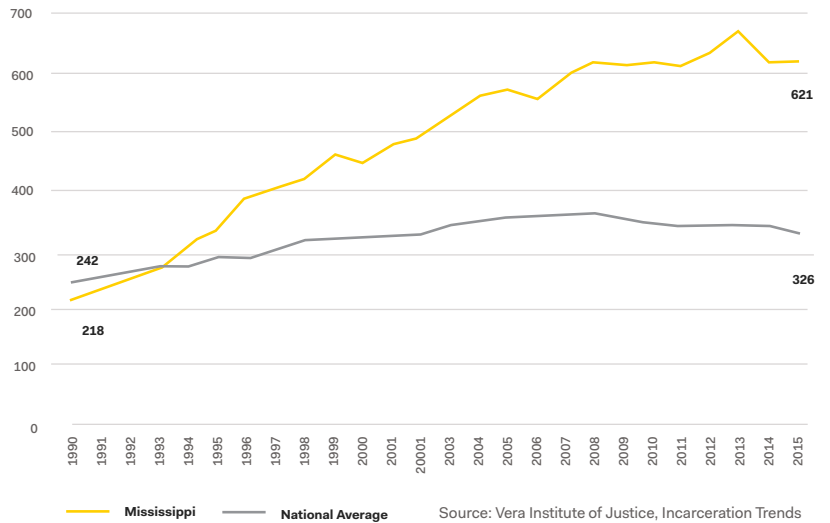


Source: The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Crime and Justice Institute, Protecting Public Safety and Reducing Incarceration: Successes and Challenges (2017).  
 Note: Drug possession admissions annualized from quarterly figures.

**FIGURE 5: MISSISSIPPI'S JAIL INCARCERATION RATE IS NEARLY DOUBLE THE NATIONAL AVERAGE**

In 1990, Mississippi incarcerated fewer people in local jails than the rest of the country. Since that time, Mississippi's jail incarceration rate has nearly tripled and is now close to twice the national average. In fact, Mississippi's jail population has grown by an astonishing 238 percent during a period of declining crime.

Jail Incarceration Rate

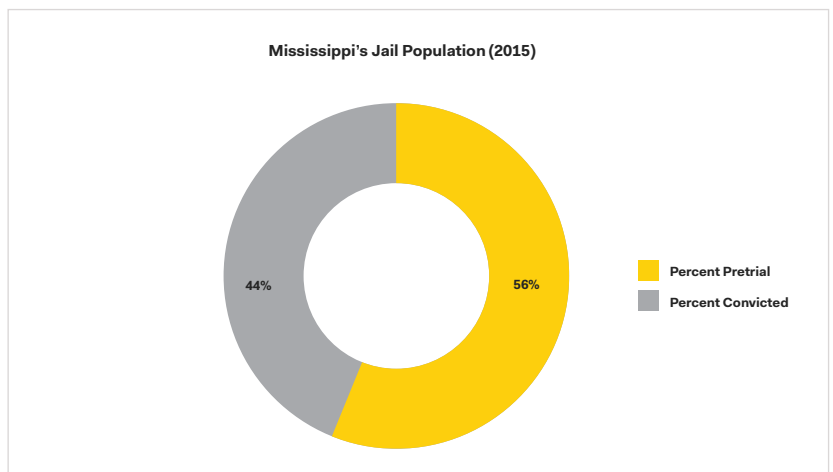


Source: Vera Institute of Justice, Incarceration Trends

**FIGURE 6: MORE THAN HALF OF THE PEOPLE IN MISSISSIPPI'S JAILS HAVE NOT BEEN CONVICTED OF A CRIME**

Since 1985, the share of people in Mississippi jails who are awaiting trial rose from 43 percent to 56 percent. At the end of 2015, there were 6,847 people in local jails who have not been convicted of any crime.<sup>5</sup> While the data are not available in Mississippi, in most states the vast majority of people jailed pre-trial have been charged with low-level misdemeanors and non-violent felonies, and they are incarcerated because they cannot afford cash bail.<sup>6</sup>

Mississippi's Jail Population (2015)



Source: Vera Institute of Justice, Incarceration Trends

<sup>3</sup> Mississippi Department of Corrections, Monthly Fact Sheets.  
<sup>4</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoner Series and Probation and Parole Series.  
<sup>5</sup> Vera Institute of Justice, Incarceration Trends.  
<sup>6</sup> Peter Wagner and Wendy Sawyer. Mass Incarceration 2018: The Whole Pie. Prison Policy Initiative March 14, 2018. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pic2018.html>

**FIGURE 7: 1 IN 13 PEOPLE IN MISSISSIPPI HAS A FELONY CONVICTION ON THEIR RECORD**

Thousands of new felony convictions are handed down in Mississippi each year, each with hundreds of hidden consequences such as excessive fines and fees, bans on employment, and the loss of voting rights. According to one estimate, approximately 175,000 state residents (1 in 13) have a current or old felony conviction. Felony convictions disproportionately affect African Americans — 1 in 7 black Mississippians has a felony conviction.

1 in 13 people in Mississippi has a felony conviction



1 in 7 black people in Mississippi has a felony conviction

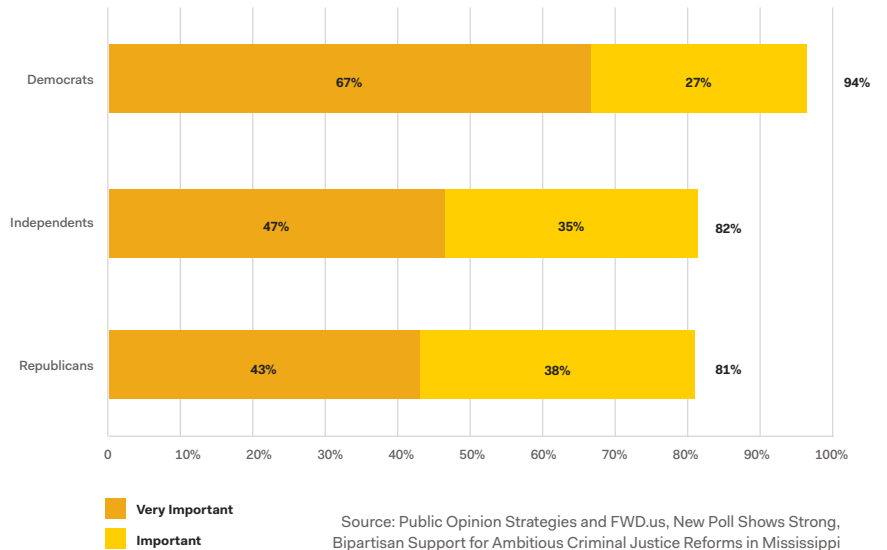


Source: Sarah S. K. Shannon, Christopher Uggen, et al., The Growth, Scope, and Spatial Distribution of People With Felony Records in the United States, 1948–2010

**FIGURE 8: LARGE BIPARTISAN MAJORITIES OF MISSISSIPPI VOTERS BELIEVE IT IS IMPORTANT TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO ARE IN JAIL OR PRISON**

Mississippi voters believe the criminal justice system needs significant improvements, and strong bipartisan majorities believe it is important to reduce Mississippi's high incarceration rate. In fact, when presented with some of the data above, eight in 10 Mississippi voters from each political party responded that it was either very important or important to reduce the number of people in jail or prison.

How important is it to reduce the number of people who are in jail or prison in Mississippi?



Source: Public Opinion Strategies and FWD.us, New Poll Shows Strong, Bipartisan Support for Ambitious Criminal Justice Reforms in Mississippi