

Recalibrating Justice: A Review of 2013 State Sentencing and Corrections Trends

JULY 2014

REPORT SUMMARY

For More Information

The Vera Institute of Justice is an independent nonprofit organization that combines research, demonstration projects, and technical assistance to help leaders in government and civil society improve the systems people rely on for justice and safety. For more information about Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, please contact Peggy McGarry at (212) 376-3131 or pmcgarry@vera.org.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the 1994 Crime Bill. To examine the legacy of this landmark legislation, the lessons learned, and the path ahead, Vera is convening a series of conversations with experts and policymakers in Washington, DC, as well as issuing a series of reports on sentencing trends—where the states stand on mandatory minimums and other sentencing practices and the resulting collateral consequences.

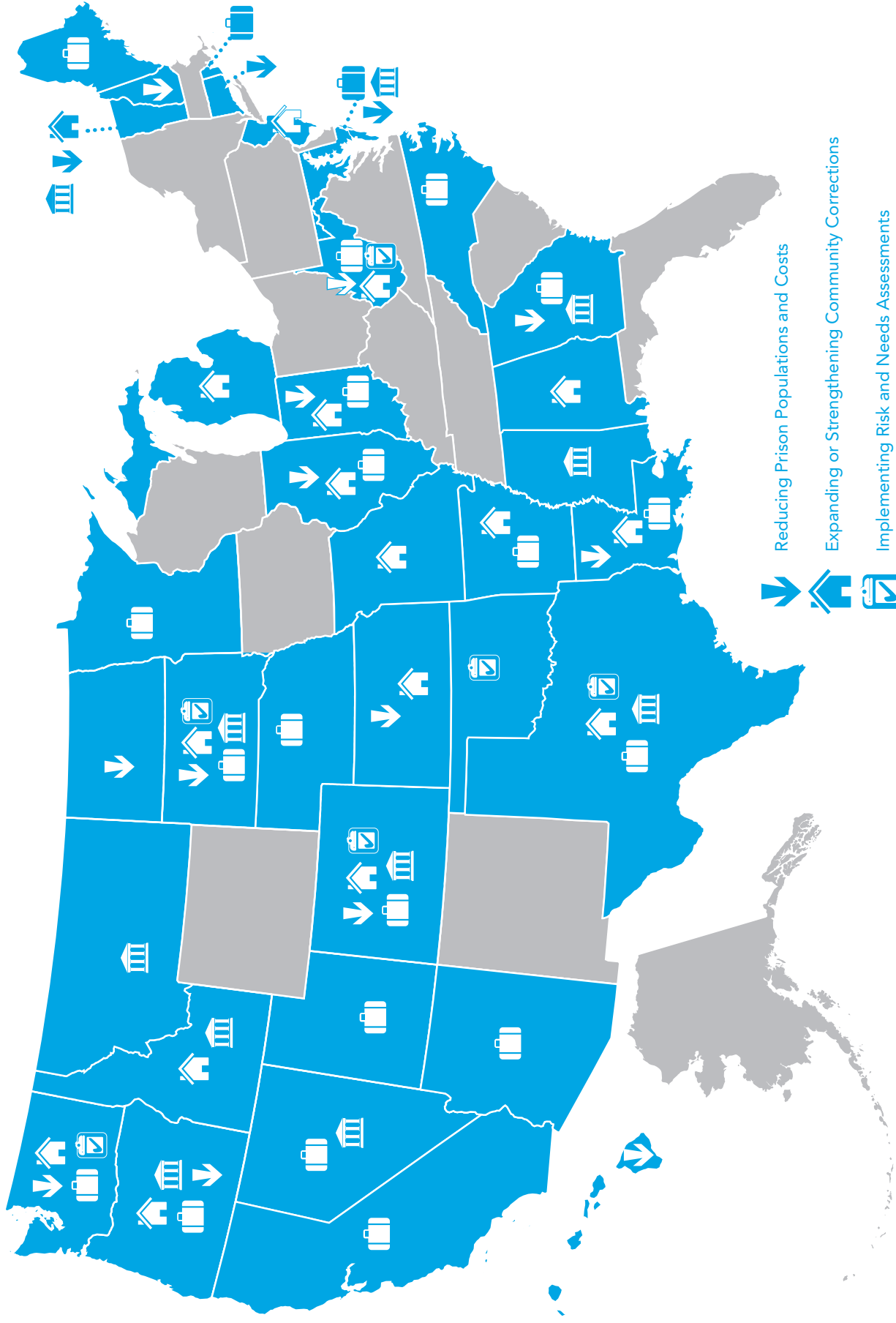
This report is the third in that series. Look for updates on our website at <http://www.vera.org/federal-crime-bill-20>






To read the complete report, visit <http://www.vera.org/state-sentencing-and-corrections-trends-2013>

In 2013, 35 states passed at least 85 bills that largely eschew the tough-on-crime policies of the past. Lawmakers exhibited a willingness to pursue change consistent with the growing body of research that demonstrates carefully implemented and well-targeted community-based programs and practices can produce better outcomes at less cost than incarceration. In particular, states enacted legislation to:

- > **Reduce prison populations and costs.** States repealed or narrowed mandatory sentencing schemes, reclassified offenses, or altered sentencing presumptions. States also sought to expand access to early release mechanisms—such as good time credits—designed to accelerate sentence completion.
- > **Expand or strengthen community-based sanctions.** States introduced or strengthened community corrections programs proven to reduce recidivism. Some states expanded eligibility for diversion programs—a sentencing alternative through which charges will be dismissed or expunged if a defendant completes a community-based program or stays out of trouble for a specified period. States also expanded community-based sentencing options, including the use of problem-solving courts.
- > **Implement risk and needs assessments.** Several states focused on the use of validated risk and needs assessments as the basis for implementing individualized offender case plans. These states passed laws requiring assessments of an offender's risk of recidivism as well as his or her criminogenic needs—characteristics, such as drug addiction and mental illness—that when addressed can reduce that risk. States incorporated these assessments at different points in the criminal justice process—at the pre-trial stage, at the pre-sentencing stage, or to inform supervision and programming, whether in prison or in the community.
- > **Support the reentry of offenders into the community.** States passed laws to mitigate the “collateral consequences” of criminal convictions—such as restrictions on housing and social benefits and exclusion from employment. In some states, legislators sought to clarify, expand, or create ways to seal or expunge criminal records from the public record. Others focused on helping offenders transition from prison or jail back into the community by increasing in-prison and post-release support.
- > **Make better informed criminal justice policy.** A number of states sought a deliberate discussion about the purpose and impact of proposed sentencing and corrections legislation and looked to external groups to debate proposals, collect and analyze data, and formulate policy recommendations. Some states even passed legislation requiring fiscal or social impact statements in order to help legislators consider the ramifications of proposed criminal justice reforms.

MAPPING 2013 STATE SENTENCING AND CORRECTIONS TRENDS



-  Reducing Prison Populations and Costs
-  Expanding or Strengthening Community Corrections
-  Implementing Risk and Needs Assessments
-  Supporting the Reentry of Offenders Into the Community
-  Making Better Informed Criminal Justice Policy