

DECADES

< WHAT THE TRENDS TELL US >

Trends in Criminal Justice



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Q: What were the most interesting and important trends in Criminal Justice that occurred in the previous decade? What is the significance of these trends and what insights can we apply to the new decade?

A: Few would disagree that Arizona's most significant criminal-justice trend of the 2000s has been the enormous growth of the state's prison population, which far outpaced state population growth and continued upward even as the rate of major crimes dropped. Here are the numbers:

	2000	2008	Percent Change
State Population	5,130,632	6,629,455	29%
Violent Crime Rate*	531.7	447	-16%
Property Crime Rate*	5,297.8	4,291	-19%
Prison Population	26,747	39,502	48%

* Reported major crimes per 100,000 state residents
Sources: FBI, Arizona Department of Corrections

The figures tell a dramatic story. But what story? Some say they confirm the wisdom of Arizona's decision to lock up so many criminals and achieve one of the nation's highest incarceration rates. After all, they note, crime has dropped. Others sharply disagree, arguing that the crime drop—a national phenomenon—is only partially linked to the rise in incarceration—also a national phenomenon. Mass imprisonment, they claim, often actually promotes crime, unfairly falls on the poor and minorities, and is far too expensive to sustain.

That last point is the one now gaining converts. Given Arizona's daunting budget deficits, its strong pro-incarceration policy is slipping from favor, as state officials search frantically for ways to cut state expenditures. The next decade is likely to witness an increasing emphasis on non-prison criminal sanctions—probation, home arrest, county jail time, fines, restitution, etc.—and on “treatment” approaches to drug and DUI offenses, which together now account for more than one-quarter of all prisoners. A key element of Arizonans' public safety, in other words, will be shaped by factors that have nothing to do with public safety. It won't come easily; few elected officials are eager to release inmates or argue against imprisonment. The only thing more difficult is finding an alternative.



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