

Mississippi Surpasses Oklahoma as Second-Highest Imprisoning State

Mississippi has been steadily climbing back up the top imprisoning states list and has now moved from third to second highest imprisoning state in the nation. The state's failure in recent years to pass any meaningful sentencing and parole reforms to target extreme sentences bucks the trend in other top imprisoning states where impactful criminal justice reforms are successfully and safely driving prison populations down.

Background

Mississippi is experiencing an incarceration crisis, driven by its reliance on long sentences. The recent deaths in prisons across Mississippi have laid bare the urgent need for reforms aimed at immediately decreasing the state's dangerously high prison population. Both Louisiana and Oklahoma, formerly ranked above Mississippi as the two top imprisoning states, have advanced multi-year criminal justice reforms aimed at reducing sentences and prison terms that have shown marked success in bringing prison populations down.

As states across the country take strides to safely reduce the number of people under correctional control, Mississippi's adherence to failed policies like extreme sentences is directly responsible for a prison population so large that the state is unable to safely house and supervise the nearly 20,000 people in its care and custody. As a result, Mississippi's imprisonment rate (652 people in prison per 100,000 population¹) has surpassed Oklahoma's (625 per 100,000 population²), pushing Mississippi into the #2 spot in the country. Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana are among the large and growing cohort of high imprisonment states to see significant prison population declines and all three attribute success to implementing sentencing, parole, and commutation reforms.

Texas set to close 10 prisons following a decade of reforms.

The Texas Department of Public Safety is set to close two additional prisons over the summer of 2020, bringing the state to a total of 10 prison closures over the last decade.³

The Department estimates a projected annual savings of \$20 million to be reallocated as a result of the latest two facility closures.⁴ Meanwhile, Texas's prison population has dropped by nearly 4,000 people within the last year alone while parole approval rates have shown a modest increase and crime rates continue to fall.^{5 6}

¹ Calculated using the [Mississippi Department of Corrections Monthly Fact Sheet](#) as of February 3, 2020, including the custody population plus "other custody," "at large custody" and "hospital/medical" groups and the U.S. Census Bureau [estimate of Mississippi's 2019 population](#). This excludes individuals on house arrest or ISP.

² Calculated using the [Oklahoma Department of Corrections Weekly Count](#) total inside custody population on February 3, 2020 and the U.S. Census Bureau [estimate of Oklahoma's 2019 population](#). This excludes the county jail back-up and individuals housed outside of facilities or on GPS.

³ [Texas Department of Criminal Justice](#), *The Texas Department of Criminal Justice to close two prison units in 2020*.

⁴ The Associated Press, "Texas Plans to Close 2 State Prisons Amid Population Decline," [The New York Times, February 20, 2020](#)

⁵ [Texas Department of Criminal Justice Correctional Population and Capacity](#) (February 2020)

⁶ [Texas Department of Public Safety](#), *2018 Crime in Texas*

Oklahoma leads on sentencing reform, expanded parole, and historic sentence commutations.

In 2019, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt granted the largest single-day commutation in the nation's history. Governor Stitt commuted the sentences of 462 people serving time for drug and property crimes, allowing people to return home to their families and relieving some of the pressure on Oklahoma's overcrowded prisons.⁷ As of February 2020, Governor Stitt has signed commutations for an additional 147 people incarcerated for simple drug possession.⁸ These commutations build on several years of legislative reforms including expansion of parole eligibility and several significant sentencing reform efforts that included retroactive provisions for people already incarcerated. Due to these combined efforts, the Oklahoma prison population has dropped nearly 10 percent in the last two years.⁹

Louisiana exceeds prison reduction and cost-saving projections.

Louisiana has enacted criminal justice reforms over several legislative sessions and, since 2018, the state's total prison population has experienced a nine percent drop and continues to exceed both prison population reduction and cost-saving projections.¹⁰ Louisiana's focus on sentencing reforms that reduced prison admissions for less serious crimes has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of people incarcerated for drug offenses and property crimes between 2016 and 2018, falling by 26 percent and 22 percent respectively.¹¹ As of FY 2019, the state had identified millions in savings generated from criminal justice reforms each year and reinvested the majority of these savings into recidivism reduction programs and crime victim support services.¹²

Louisiana still has the nation's highest imprisonment rate (675 per 100,000), but if it continues on its reform trajectory, Mississippi is primed for the #1 spot.

⁷ Barbara Hoberock, "462 inmates walk out of Oklahoma prisons today after largest commutation in history," [Tulsa World, November 4 2019](#)

⁸ Darla Slipke, "Governor signs commutations for 147 more drug offenders eligible under HB 1269," [The Oklahoman, February 8 2020](#)

⁹ Calculated using the [Oklahoma Department of Corrections Weekly Count](#) total inside custody population on February 3, 2020 and the U.S. Census Bureau [estimate of Oklahoma's 2019 population](#). This excludes the county jail back-up and individuals housed outside of facilities or on GPS.

¹⁰ [Pew Charitable Trusts](#), *Louisiana Continues Efforts to Protect Public Safety and Reform Justice System* (2019)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.