

JUSTICE REINVESTMENT INITIATIVE FALLS SHORT OF ACHIEVING PUBLIC SAFETY GOALS

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June 2025



**CRIMINAL
JUSTICE
LEGAL
FOUNDATION**

▶ ABOUT THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE LEGAL FOUNDATION

The Criminal Justice Legal Foundation was established in 1982 as a nonprofit, public interest law organization dedicated to restoring a balance between the rights of crime victims and the criminally accused. Its purpose is to assure that people guilty of committing crimes receive swift and certain punishment in an orderly and constitutional manner.

While social, cultural, and economic conditions can have an effect on crime rates, research has shown that in free societies the government's ability to efficiently apprehend, prosecute and punish criminals, in a swift and decisive system of justice is the most powerful deterrent to criminal behavior.

The Criminal Justice Legal Foundation has earned a national reputation for removing legal obstacles to the use of this deterrent while assuring that the constitutional rights of the accused are not forgotten.

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► EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI) is a federal initiative, funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, designed to help states reduce prison populations and improve public safety. Through grant funding, states are encouraged to implement and expand strategies, such as diversion programs, rehabilitation, and alternatives to incarceration. The initiative seeks to incentivize states to adopt reforms that reduce prison spending, which can then be reinvested into public safety measures, such as community supervision, housing, and education.

The concept of justice reinvestment emerged as a response to the growth in incarceration in the United States. The goals of the JRI are ambitious: it aims to reduce prison populations, allocate resources more efficiently, and enhance public safety concurrently. While rooted in well-intentioned goals, there is a growing concern that the initiative overemphasizes reducing incarceration while overlooking the impact on recidivism and public safety.

There is limited peer-reviewed evidence supporting the success of JRI. While some states have seen decreases in their prison populations, this outcome is not universal. Furthermore, key outcomes related to public safety—such as recidivism and crime rates—remain underexplored or unaddressed in most reports, even though they are central goals of the initiative.

Many reports tout the success of JRI, but upon closer examination, they often focus too heavily on reductions in the prison population as the primary measure of success, overlooking the critical issue of public safety. In instances where recidivism was examined, the results were mixed, with some states even experiencing an increase in recidivism after the implementation of JRI reforms. The lack of rigorous evaluation raises doubts about the program's true impact on public safety, and critics argue that the reforms may be too lenient.

While JRI funding is intended to encourage the adoption of evidence-based programs, many states have struggled to implement proven strategies. Instead, untested or inadequately researched programs are often adopted. Moreover, even when evidence-based programs are selected, they are frequently implemented in ways that deviate from the original model, limiting their potential effectiveness.

There are also issues regarding the shallow implementation of programs. Even when evidence-based programs are selected, they are often implemented in a lackluster manner that deviates from the intended model. Obviously, this limits their potential impact, as programs need to adhere to the intended model in order to be effective.

Despite numerous reports of “success,” closer scrutiny reveals that JRI is falling short of its stated goals. This paper will examine examples from various states to demonstrate how JRI reforms have not consistently achieved their intended outcomes and, in some cases, may have negatively impacted public safety. We conclude by calling into question whether federal involvement is the best approach to reforming our criminal justice system. Until clearer evidence of the JRI's long-term impact on recidivism and public safety is provided, it may be time to reconsider our options.

There are two potential solutions. The first is to mend the current system with significant improvements, which would involve overhauling the structure, enhancing oversight, ensuring rigorous evaluation, and prioritizing long-term public safety outcomes. Alternatively, we could end federal involvement and let states lead the way in justice reform. This doesn't mean abandoning rehabilitation programs; rather, it means offering them in a more pragmatic, thoughtful, and responsive way. States would have the freedom to invest in rehabilitation programs where they have proven to be effective, but with a more discerning and targeted approach. This could create a more accountable and efficient system of reform.

► INTRODUCTION

Launched in 2010, the federal Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI),¹ funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and supported by organizations like The Pew Research Center and Arnold Ventures, aims to help states better understand and manage their unique correctional trends. Under the initiative, states apply for grant funding to help them enact legislative reforms and adopt evidence-based practices to reduce prison populations. Essentially, the grant funding acts as an incentive for states to participate in efforts to reduce incarceration rates. The exact reforms vary from state to state, but often include changes to sentencing and release policies, pretrial reforms, and changes to community supervision.

At its core, the federal JRI seeks to generate savings by diverting offenders from prison. This savings can then be redirected to community-based programs that manage offenders locally, such as supervision treatment and reentry programs. These programs are intended to address factors contributing to criminal behavior—such as substance abuse, mental health issues, and poverty—under the assumption that providing individuals with the necessary resources can help them successfully reintegrate into society. By redirecting resources toward community-based programs, the JRI aims to break the cycle of criminality and reduce recidivism.

However, there is not much to suggest that the JRI has met these goals. Forty-four states have implemented JRI reforms,² with statistical reports from many of those states portraying the reforms as successful. But, many of these reports rely on descriptive statistics that are presented in misleading ways, and generally lack the methodological rigor needed to evaluate effectiveness. Additionally, they tend to rely on a very narrow measure of “success”—using reductions in the prison population as the primary outcome measure—with little to no consideration of public safety impact in the analysis.

Thus, most of the available data and reports assessing the impacts of JRI programs are insufficient for determining whether the reforms are meeting their goals. In the rigorous peer-reviewed literature, evidence is even more limited. Key criticisms of the JRI include an overemphasis on reducing incarceration rates, the shallow implementation of evidence-based programs, and growing public safety concerns stemming from insufficient supervision of individuals who may pose a danger to the community.

Given the limited state of knowledge about the impacts of JRI reforms, it is crucial for policymakers to acknowledge these limitations and be aware of the potential risks that could ensue. Policymakers need to be more stringent when selecting the programs in which to invest to minimize unintended consequences. Not all JRI programs are backed by a solid evidence base, and careful vetting of research is necessary to prioritize programs with proven effectiveness. Furthermore, it is essential to monitor program fidelity, ensuring that programs are implemented as intended. States should consider developing fidelity checklists to track whether programs are being run according to the original model.

Policymakers must also be vigilant about potential risks and regularly monitor crime and recidivism rates to better understand the impact on public safety. Real-time adjustments based on these findings can help mitigate negative consequences. One way to achieve this is by piloting programs in select areas before full-scale implementation, allowing for targeted testing and evaluation. This phased approach would allow for program adjustments as needed.

This paper examines the current state of knowledge regarding the varying impacts of JRI reforms across different states, analyzing both their intended and unintended consequences. After discussing

the theory behind JRI and its goals, we explore how these reforms have failed to consistently meet public safety objectives and highlight claims that lack solid evidence. Using examples from numerous states, the discussion highlights the complex and nuanced nature of JRI's real-world application and underscores the urgent need for rigorous evaluations of JRI programs. Lastly, we provide a series of policy recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness of these reforms.

► THE THEORY BEHIND JUSTICE REINVESTMENT

The shift toward “justice reinvestment” began in the early 2000s in response to the massive growth in incarceration that led to overcrowded prisons and soaring corrections expenditures. During this time of increasing incarceration rates, crime rates dropped dramatically but recidivism rates remained high in most states. High recidivism rates led many people to believe that excessive incarceration, especially for low-level offenses, may not reduce future criminality and therefore is not the most effective means for ensuring public safety. In response to this pressing issue, policymakers sought innovative approaches to redirect resources.

The JRI is grounded in the belief that community-based programs are more effective in rehabilitating offenders than traditional incarceration. Advocates argue that diverting offenders into community-based programs will not only reduce the prison population, but will also generate cost savings without compromising public safety or increasing recidivism. Some proponents assert that expanding access to programs can decrease recidivism by addressing the underlying issues that contribute to criminal behavior, such as substance abuse, mental health problems, and lack of education or employment opportunities.

There is some merit to this theory, as certain offenders may indeed benefit from community-based rehabilitation. For example, individuals who are motivated to change but face practical barriers to reintegration—such as limited access to jobs, education, or mental health services—might find support in these programs. Additionally, there is evidence suggesting that work³ and education⁴ programs can improve employment stability and reduce recidivism in some cases. Similarly, addressing behavioral health and substance abuse issues has been shown to reduce the likelihood of reoffending among individuals with these specific needs.⁵

However, the practical challenges of fully and effectively implementing these community-based programs cannot be overstated. Evidence-based practices in community corrections have been shown to work in some instances, but scaling these programs and ensuring comprehensive, high-quality execution remains a significant challenge. Many states have struggled to implement these programs faithfully, and the desired outcomes are often difficult to achieve. The complexity of rehabilitating offenders and the need for coordinated, well-resourced programs suggest that achieving the goals of justice reinvestment requires far more than simply diverting offenders from prison and putting them in a random program. Without careful planning, rigorous evaluation, and a commitment to fidelity, the impact of these programs remains uncertain.

► THE FEDERAL JUSTICE REINVESTMENT INITIATIVE

In 2010, Congress allocated funding to the BJA to launch the federal JRI, establishing grant programs to provide financial support to states, local governments, and nonprofit organizations pursuing justice reinvestment efforts.⁶ These grants have supported a range of activities, including the implementation of diversion programs, expansion of community-based treatment services, and development of reentry programs.⁷ The specific strategies employed vary by state depending on local needs. While some states focus on reinvesting in community corrections and rehabilitation, others allocate funds to housing, healthcare, and educational opportunities.

The JRI emphasizes consensus-based decisionmaking guided by state-specific criminal justice data. Upon securing written commitments from key stakeholders in all three branches of government, states participating in the initiative establish interbranch, bipartisan working groups. These groups, with technical assistance from national JRI partners like the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center, Crime and Justice Institute, the Urban Institute, and Pew Research Center, analyze state criminal justice data to understand the forces driving prison populations and associated costs. Ideally, this process allows stakeholders to assess specific issues, such as the impact of parole policies on recidivism or the effectiveness of particular rehabilitation programs.

While the framework sounds promising in theory, the process is shrouded in a lack of oversight and transparency. This leaves significant questions about the rigor and validity of the data analysis and undermines confidence in the policy solutions derived from it. Without clear guidelines or independent verification of these findings, the credibility of the data-driven recommendations remains in doubt.

Once legislation is drafted, states are expected to implement reforms, track progress, and reinvest savings into community-based programs. Some states target specific policy areas, while others pursue up to 20 different reforms. Following legislative action, states may request up to two additional years of support for the second phase, which focuses on the implementation of reforms and the creation of performance indicators to measure their success. In theory, these indicators would assess whether reforms effectively reduce the prison population, recidivism, and crime rates.

By 2016, every state in the United States had implemented at least one element of the types of reforms advocated by JRI.⁸ While the specifics vary, the general goal is to reduce the number of people in prison, whether it be by shortening sentences, streamlining release processes, or enhancing community supervision. Legislative changes in many states have included downgrading offenses, reducing mandatory minimum sentences, adjusting parole requirements, expanding diversion programs and increasing access to reentry programs for individuals leaving prison. The shared objective is to reserve prison space for individuals who pose the greatest public safety risks, such as those convicted of violent crimes. This goal clashes with the fact that over half of state prisoners are incarcerated for violent offenses and have lengthy criminal histories, complicating efforts to achieve large-scale reductions in the prison population.⁹

► ASSESSING THE IMPACTS OF JRI PROGRAMS

A major concern regarding the JRI is the quality and depth of research into its actual impacts on recidivism and public safety outcomes. Despite widespread belief that the reforms are an effective way to reduce the prison population, save taxpayer money, and get a better return on public safety investments, the peer-reviewed research supporting this belief is scarce.¹⁰ Further, vast differences in how JRI programs are implemented makes generalizations difficult.

States typically conduct assessments of their own JRI reforms, many of which are documented by nongovernmental entities such as the CSG Justice Center,¹¹ the Pew Research Center,¹² and the Urban Institute¹³ via fact sheets, reports, and online articles. Many of these sources tout the effectiveness of JRIs and share lessons learned. The main JRI website¹⁴ displays most of the state reports, as well. These reports tend to be descriptive in nature and are not rigorous enough to truly understand the impacts of JRI reforms.

On the surface, these sources suggest that the reforms have improved recidivism rates and public safety, framing the initiatives in a generally positive light. For instance, an excerpt from the JRI website reads, "To date, 44 states have used the JRI process to improve policies and practices."¹⁵ When viewing state profiles within the CSG Justice Center's website, it is common to see language indicating how JRI "helped" or is "helping" communities.¹⁶ Despite showing no causal relationship between JRI policies and public safety, the state reports have optimistic-sounding titles, such as, "JRI: Helping Law Enforcement Keep Communities Safe,"¹⁷ "Improving Public Safety, Reinvesting in Evidence-Based Practices,"¹⁸ and "New Report Finds that Justice Reinvestment Initiative Helped States Improve Public Safety, Reduce Prison Populations, and Save Millions of Dollars."¹⁹

A closer examination reveals significant flaws in these assessments. The definition of "success" used in many state reports is questionable.²⁰ Many celebrate the effectiveness of JRI reforms based on outcomes that are essentially "process outcomes" (e.g., the number of individuals on probation or reduced average sentence length for drug offenses), rather than focusing on changes in crime or recidivism. This creates an exaggerated perception of reforms' effectiveness.

In reality, much of the analysis in these state summary reports is not rigorous enough to establish causal relationships. The reports primarily highlight implementation milestones rather than demonstrating any clear evidence of improvements in public safety or reductions in recidivism. Only a small number of reports rigorously examine the impact of JRI programs, and even these studies are not conclusive.²¹

The lack of robust, independent evaluations further complicates any claim that JRI reforms have met their objectives. These reports and independent reviews will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections.

► INCONSISTENT IMPACTS ON THE PRISON POPULATION

After JRI reforms, officials expected a slowdown in prison population growth or a decrease in the number of people incarcerated. Thus, one of the most common outcomes examined in various states' assessments is the impact on the prison population.

In some states, prison populations were indeed lower than projected estimates two years after JRI reforms were implemented. For example, a state assessment report by the Urban Institute found that

several of the eighteen states reviewed had prison populations below projected levels two years after reforms.²² These projections were based on “forecast models,” which estimate what the prison population would look like both with and without the reforms. This methodology allows for the prison population to increase under JRI, so long as it remains lower than the baseline projection, framing such increases as a success. However, forecast models are complex, prone to error, and difficult to interpret.²³ The state assessment report did not provide sufficient details to suggest that the forecast models had undergone a critical review, raising doubts about their accuracy.

► LACK OF EVIDENCE ON PUBLIC SAFETY IMPACT

Another key goal of JRI reforms is to maintain public safety while reducing the prison population. According to BJA award documentation, states were supposed to measure the impacts of JRI reforms and assess their outcomes.²⁴ However, state assessments have failed to diligently present data on violent crime and recidivism rates, which remain elusive across the bulk of the newest JRI website.²⁵ The omission of this crucial information limits the ability to assess whether JRIs achieved their goals.

Among the handful of JRI state assessments, most state reports do not explicitly examine the effects of these reforms on crime or recidivism rates. For example, the “About JRI” page of the JRI website²⁶ periodically highlights different states as “Selected JRI Accomplishments.” As of June 2025, the website highlighted Georgia, Missouri, and Louisiana. Among the reported findings for these three states, there is no indication regarding the impacts on crime. With some legwork, it is possible to obtain data from other sources, such as the federal Uniform Crime Report (UCR), as well as individual states’ recidivism data. We will examine some of this data in the following sections.

Given the centrality of public safety to the JRI, the absence of a public record of work done on this issue is concerning. This presents a disappointing gap in knowledge about whether the reforms are effective and whether investments are worthwhile.

Recidivism is a very important measure when it comes to determining “success” of a criminal justice policy, as high recidivism rates contribute to increased crime rates and risks to public safety. Recidivism rates indicate a system’s success in promoting rehabilitation, reducing repeat offenses, and facilitating the successful reintegration of individuals into society. High recidivism rates indicate the opposite, resulting in increased economic and social costs. Thus, the rampant tendency to overlook recidivism rates when determining the “success” of JRI programs is a major concern.

When cross-checking with the data from the UCR, as well as data from various state recidivism reports, it becomes clear that JRI reforms and their association with crime and recidivism varies quite a bit from state to state. At best, violent crime rates as well as recidivism rates ebb and flow with no discernable association with reforms. At worst, reforms might lead to increases in recidivism and violent crime. All told, this data certainly suggests that the JRI was not effective in reducing crime. Despite this, these states are still framed in a positive light and are considered successful.

► CONCERNS ABOUT UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Among policymakers, a common criticism of JRI reforms is that they do not adequately address the needs and challenges of violent offenders and individuals with long criminal histories, who make up the majority of the incarcerated population. States often struggle to accurately assess offender risk, frequently misclassifying individuals and directing the wrong people to community-based programs.²⁷ This has led to concerns about potential increases in crime rates, particularly as many police chiefs blame repeat offenders for spikes in criminal activity, which is consistent with Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data.²⁸ According to BJS, 30% of inmates have five or more prior incarcerations²⁹ and 56% of state offenders are serving sentences for violent crimes.³⁰

Given the high proportion of incarcerated individuals with violent criminal histories, the only way to reduce the prison population by a substantial amount is to dramatically change the way violent offenders are adjudicated. It's not possible to cut the prison population substantially *without* releasing multi-repeat violent offenders from prison. This poses an important question: should we release large numbers of prison inmates if they are almost guaranteed to have a considerable impact on violence and crime?

As such, there are many examples of unintended consequences related to JRI reforms, and most of these pertain to parole failures and inadequate supervision of violent offenders. In many states, the implementation of JRI reforms has led to controversial results, particularly when offenders with violent pasts are released prematurely or are inadequately monitored. The following sections highlight specific examples where JRI reforms led to unintended consequences and stirred controversy.

► CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF JRI REFORMS ACROSS STATES

While some reform measures may have had moderate success in reducing the prison population or improving reentry services, crime rates and recidivism rates remained largely unaffected with no meaningful reductions. The next section will explore this in further detail, drawing upon examples from various states.

We used data from the FBI Uniform Crime Report for the following states to examine the impacts on crime. Data were obtained from the FBI's dataset titled "estimated_crime_1979_2023.csv," located in the "Additional Datasets" section in the Documents & Downloads area of the Crime Data Explorer. This file includes estimated counts for Part I offenses in each state from 1979 to 2023. State population estimates were derived from the FBI's Summary Reporting System (SRS) and reflect only the population served by the agencies that submitted data to the FBI, which may be a subset of the total state population. Using this data, we were able to calculate yearly violent crime rates and homicides rates. For the purposes of this analysis, data from 1979 to 1999 were excluded, and only data from 2000 to 2023 were retained. We also examined recidivism estimates from states where data was publicly available.

Louisiana

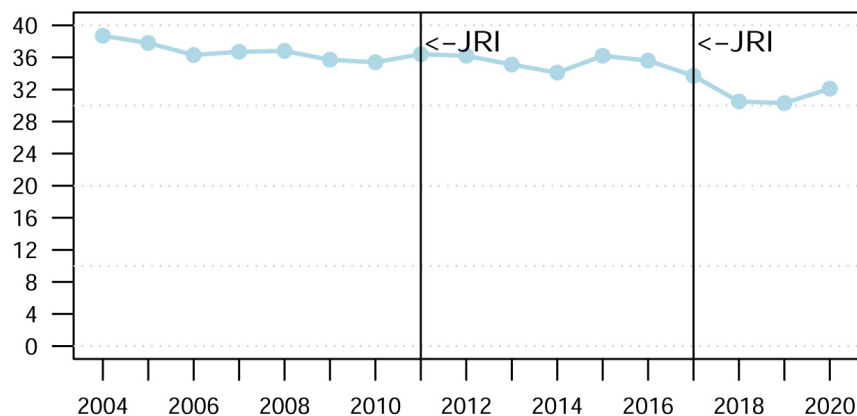
In Louisiana, JRI reforms were implemented in 2011, 2017, and 2021.³¹ Most of these focused on reserving prison space for serious and violent offenders and expanding probation for less serious crimes.³² The 2017 reforms expanded alternatives to incarceration, decreased sentence lengths and probation terms for nonviolent offenses,³³ and expanded earned discharge opportunities for early release.³⁴ The 2021 reforms diverted less serious offenders to community supervision and introduced gender-specific programming.³⁵

Following the first round of JRI reforms, Louisiana's incarcerated population started to decline, dropping from 39,476 in 2011 to 36,533 in 2016.³⁶ This decline continued following the second and third rounds of reforms, dropping from 35,702 in 2017 to a low of 26,404 in 2022. However, since then it has started to pick back up, increasing to 29,207 as of 2024.³⁷

Three-year reincarceration rates (including technical violations) remained essentially unchanged after the 2011 reforms, declining by less than one percentage point between 2011 and 2016 (from 36.4% to 35.6%).³⁸ It continued to decline after the second round of reforms, falling to 32.1% by 2020.³⁹ However, people who reoffended did so more quickly than before, suggesting continued barriers to reintegration.⁴⁰ This is especially true for violent offenders, who are more likely to recidivate according to state data.⁴¹ As such, there is extensive disagreement among criminal justice stakeholders regarding the JRI's effectiveness, especially because the state lacks the integrated data systems that are necessary for calculating statistics and identifying trends.⁴²

Louisiana Recidivism Rates, 2004–2020

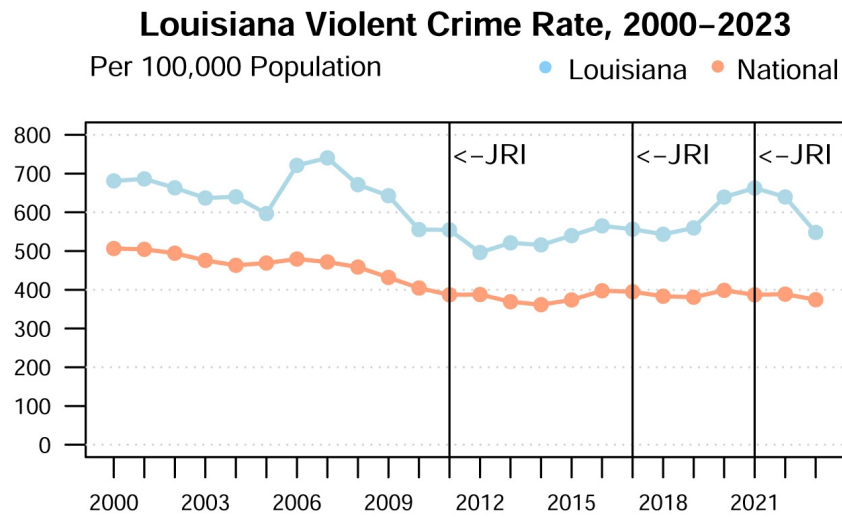
3-yr Re-incarceration Rate, %



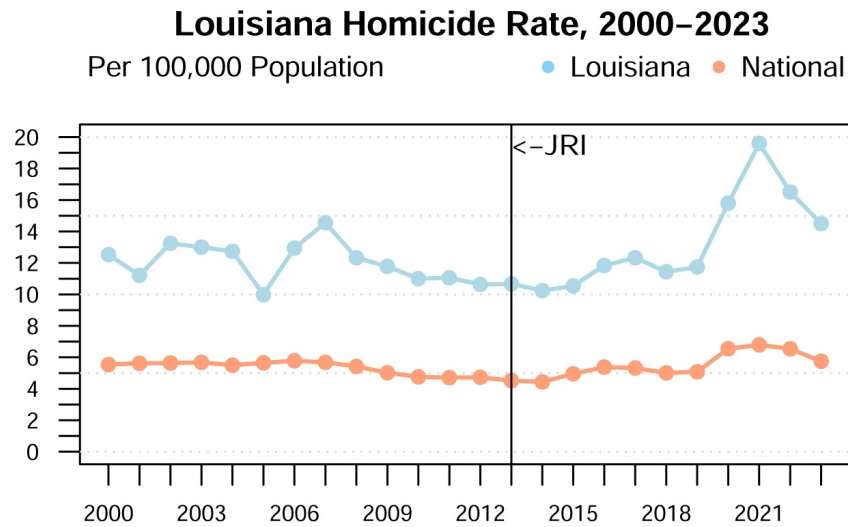
Several implementation challenges are highlighted in a 2024 report by the Louisiana State Auditor. For one, they noted that the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections had not developed performance indicators to measure the effectiveness of funded programs.⁴³ Secondly, they found that the rehabilitation programs had poor participation rates, with fewer than 50% of inmates participating.⁴⁴ Overall, JRI reforms did not appear to have effectively addressed the systemic issues contributing to recidivism for violent offenders.⁴⁵

In 2010, prior to JRI reforms, Louisiana's violent crime rate was 555.3 per 100,000. Since the 2011 reforms, the violent crime rate has fluctuated between 496.2 and 662 per 100,000.⁴⁶ The largest increase in violent crime rates appeared following the second round of JRI reforms, with rates rising from

556.3 to 662.7 per 100,000 between 2017 and 2021.⁴⁷ Though, it appears to have declined again following 2021 reforms, dropping to 628.6 in 2022.⁴⁸



Louisiana’s homicide rate started to slowly increase following reforms, rising from 11.1 per 100,000 in 2011 to 12.3 per 100,000 in 2017. This continued to increase following the second round of reforms, eventually reaching a peak of 19.6 per 100,000 in 2021.⁴⁹ Since 2021 reforms were implemented, the rate has recovered slightly, but still remains higher than pre-JRI levels at 14.5 per 100,000 as of 2023⁵⁰.

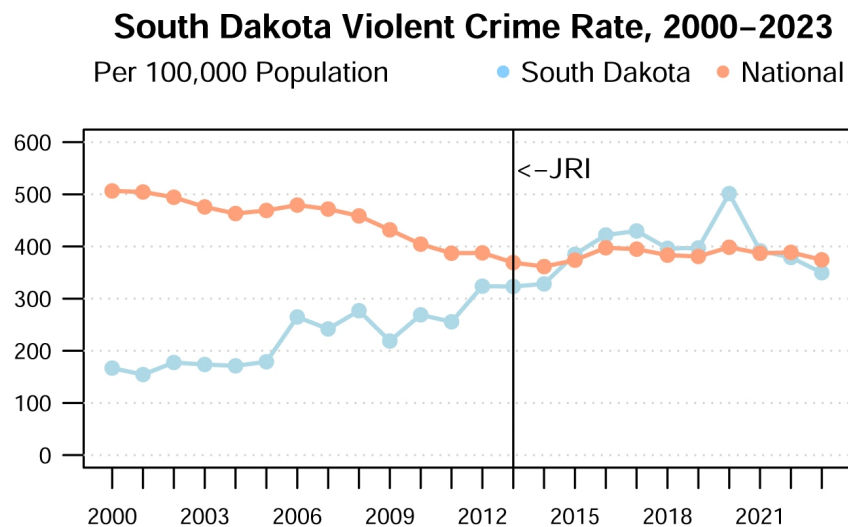


These rises in the crime and homicide rates do not seem to mirror national trends, suggesting that there is something specific to Louisiana driving the increases. Local law enforcement officials, district attorneys, and the then-attorney general (now governor) attributed the increases in crime to JRI reforms.⁵¹

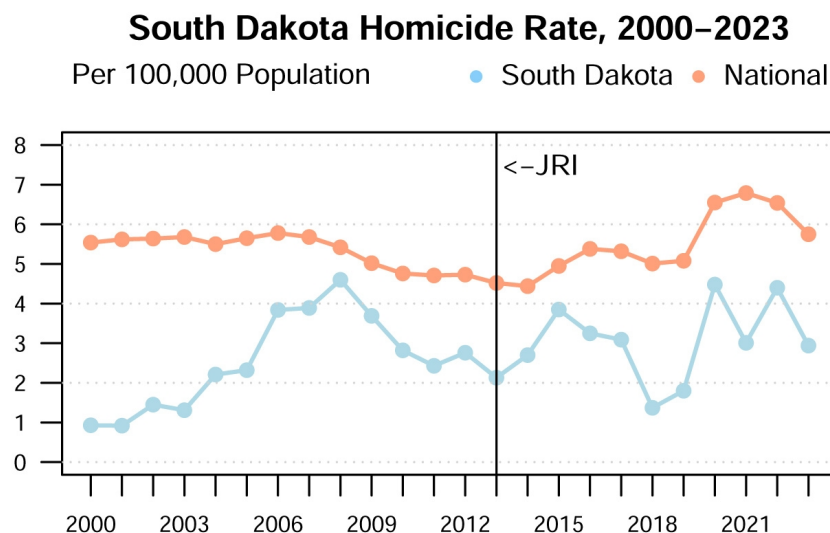
South Dakota

In 2013, South Dakota introduced a series of reforms targeting community supervision and sentencing/pretrial practices.⁵² South Dakota aimed to improve community supervision by enhancing behavioral health interventions, specialty courts, and diversion programs. Regarding sentencing and pretrial procedures, South Dakota introduced presumptive probation for certain offenses and reclassified property and drug offenses.⁵³

South Dakota's violent crime rate increased following reforms, rising from 323 per 100,000 in 2013 to a peak of 501 per 100,000 in 2020. This has since declined, but still remains higher than pre-JRI levels with a 2023 violent crime rate of 350 per 100,000.⁵⁴



The homicide rate also initially increased following reforms, rising from 2.1 to 3.8 per 100,000 between 2013 and 2015.⁵⁵ The homicide rate dropped significantly in 2018 to 1.37 per 100,000 and remained low throughout 2019. However, just like the rest of the nation, the homicide rate surged in 2020, to a rate of 4.48 per 100,000, and remained high as of 2022 (4.40 per 100,000).⁵⁶ These results suggest that the JRI reforms were not effective in reducing violent crime over the long term.

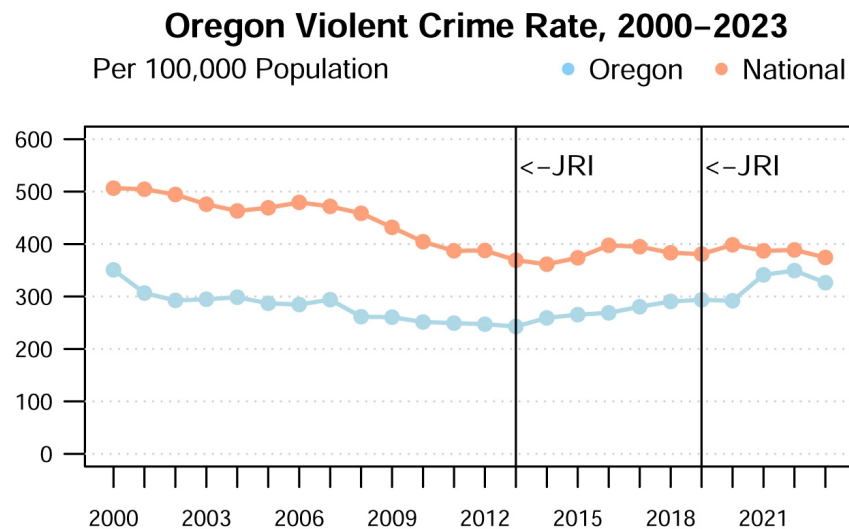


Oregon

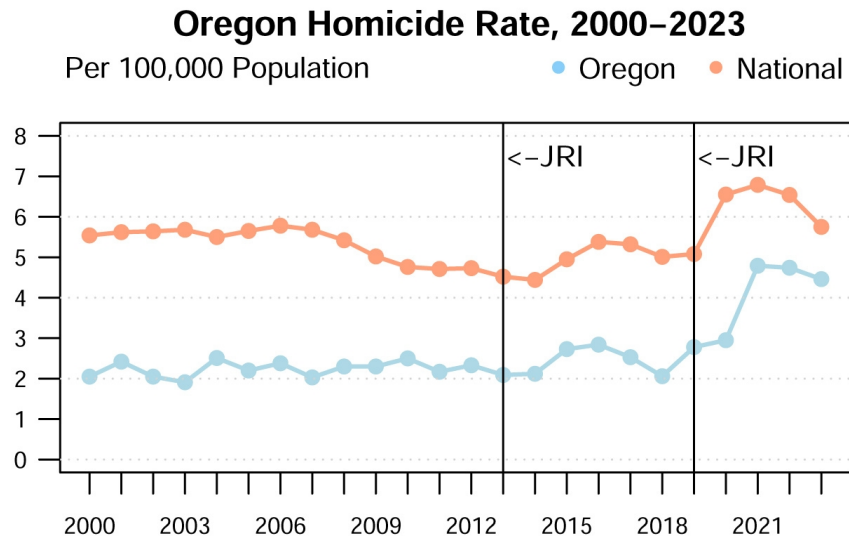
Oregon implemented JRI reforms in 2013 and 2019. The 2013 reforms established oversight councils, restructured community supervision through the implementation of specialty courts, adjusted mandatory minimums, reclassified certain offenses, and expanded earned-time credits and reentry opportunities. The 2019 reforms emphasized reducing incarceration through community-based alternatives and reintegration support. A grant program was established to fund community services, while additional support for reintegration included transitional housing assistance and housing grants to help individuals returning from incarceration.⁵⁷

Despite these reforms, Oregon's recidivism trends provide an inconclusive picture of their effectiveness. Recidivism rates have been increasing since the first set of reforms but declined after the second set of reforms. For those released in 2016, the three-year rearrest rate was 54%, reconviction was 41%, and reincarceration was 17%. By 2017, these numbers increased slightly to 60%, 46%, and 18%, respectively. However, in 2019, the rates declined, with re-arrest at 51%, reconviction at 35%, and reincarceration at 13%.⁵⁸

Following Oregon's 2013 reforms, the violent crime rate steadily increased from 242.8 per 100,000 in 2013 to 293.7 per 100,000 in 2019. It continued to increase following 2019 reforms, rising to 341.3 in 2021.⁵⁹ By 2023, the rate slightly declined to 326.29 but remained elevated compared to pre-reform years.⁶⁰ This suggests that the reforms did not lead to an anticipated drop in violent crime.



Homicide rates also increased after the JRI reforms. In 2013, the rate was 2.09 per 100,000 and remained relatively stable in 2014 at 2.12 per 100,000. However, beginning in 2015, homicide rates rose more significantly, reaching 2.77 per 100,000 in 2017 and 2.95 in 2018. The most dramatic increase occurred in 2020, when the homicide rate surged to 4.79—more than doubling the 2019 rate of 2.74.⁶¹ By 2023, the homicide rate had declined slightly, but remained significantly higher than in previous years with a rate of 4.5 per 100,000.⁶²



This sharp rise likely reflects broader national trends, but still suggests that JRI did not achieve its public safety goals. Overall, while Oregon’s JRI reforms sought to reduce incarceration and improve reintegration, their impact on recidivism and crime rates remains uncertain.

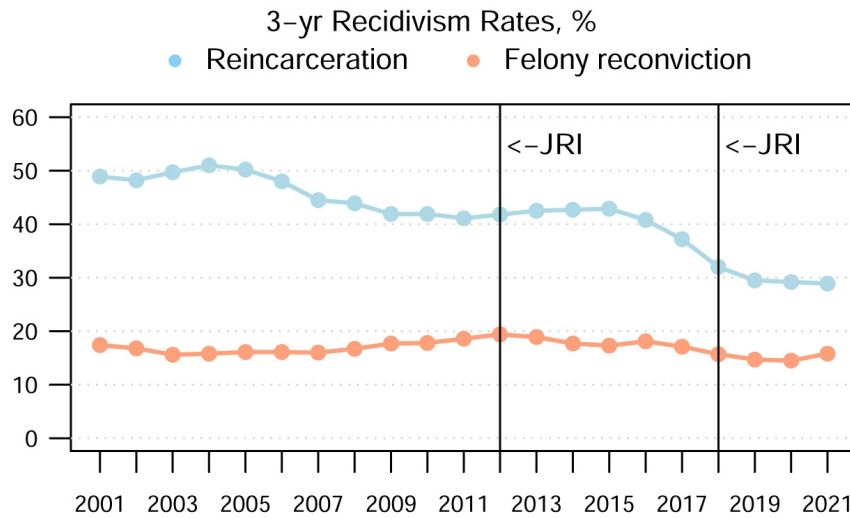
Missouri

In Missouri, lawmakers passed two rounds of JRI reforms; the first in 2012 and the second in 2018.⁶³ In 2012, the state authorized administrative jail sanctions and performance incentive funding, giving local jurisdictions more flexibility in managing offenders. To incentivize good behavior, the state implemented a system of earned compliance credits policy that allows individuals to shorten their time on probation or parole by 30 days for every full calendar month that they comply with the conditions of their sentences.⁶⁴ Additionally, the state introduced measures to cap revocation time, allowing for more reasonable responses to violations of probation or parole. Between 2012 and 2015, more than 36,000 people had their supervision terms reduced by an average of 14 months.⁶⁵

However, by 2017, violent crime was rising, and the prison population continued to grow, prompting Missouri to implement additional JRI reforms.⁶⁶ In June 2018, Missouri enacted comprehensive legislation that aimed to increase community-based treatment for offenders with substance addictions and mental illnesses, expand the use of specialty courts and diversion programs, expand gender responsive practices, increase support for victims, and improve its record management system.⁶⁷ Further, the state established presumptive parole for qualifying cases and adopted actuarial risk-needs assessment tools to guide release considerations. This was to ensure that parole decisions were more consistent, transparent, and data-driven.⁶⁸

Recidivism reports show a decline in three-year reincarceration rates following the first round of reforms, which dropped from 42.9% to 32.0% between 2015 and 2018 release cohorts.⁶⁹ However, this decrease in recidivism is largely attributed to a reduction in technical violations, not a reduction in new crimes. Following the second round of reforms, three-year reincarceration rates decreased only slightly (declining from 32.0% to 28.9% between 2018 and 2021),⁷⁰ while three-year felony conviction rates remained stable (15.7% and 15.8% for the 2018 and 2021 release cohorts, respectively).⁷¹

Missouri Recidivism Rates, 2001–2021



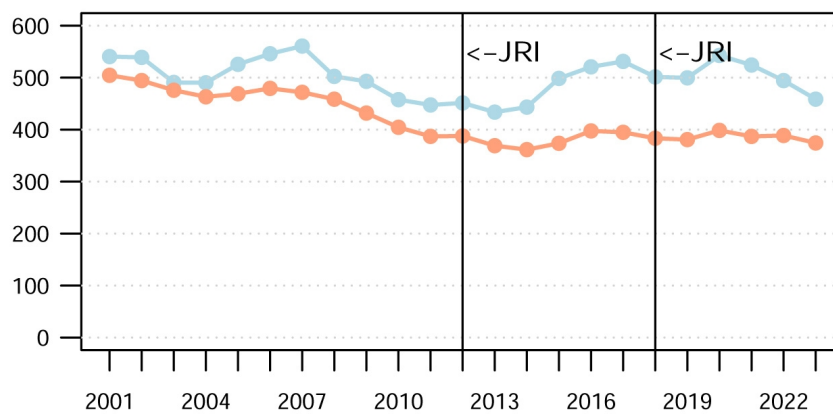
While there have been declines in the reincarceration rate, these primarily reflect fewer technical violations. While the decrease may look good on paper, it doesn't fully capture the fact that many people continue to reoffend and face new convictions. In other words, fewer people are being sent back to prison, but it has not necessarily led to better outcomes in terms of reoffending.

In the 2010s, Missouri saw a period of fluctuating violent crime rates, with occasional spikes (e.g. 2016), before dipping in 2018. However, violent crime generally remained higher than the levels seen in the early 2000s, and even with the fluctuations, the overall trend showed persistent levels of violent crime in Missouri. Over the long term, Missouri's violent crime rate increased following the JRI reforms, from 451 to 459 per 100,000 between 2012 and 2023.⁷² The persistence of high violent crime rates despite reforms suggests that the state's efforts were insufficient in addressing the causes of violent crime.

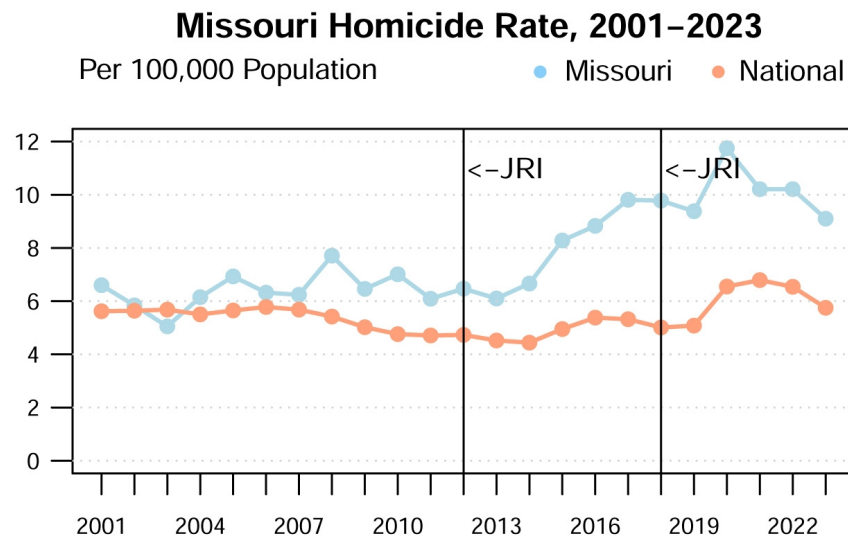
Missouri Violent Crime Rate, 2001–2023

Per 100,000 Population

- Missouri
- National



Missouri’s homicide rates have shown significant fluctuations from 2012 through 2023, ultimately increasing from 6.5 to 9.1 per 100,000.⁷³ A marked increase occurred after 2010, with homicide rates reaching above 8 per 100,000 in 2016 and peaking at 11.75 per 100,000 in 2019. This rise in homicides came after the first round of JRI reforms in 2012, suggesting that the JRI reforms were not sufficient in addressing the underlying causes of violent crime, particularly homicides.⁷⁴



Despite this, a report written by CSG Justice Center claims that Missouri’s JRI “helped law enforcement keep communities safe,” though it did so without examining recidivism or crime rates.⁷⁵ Once again, the outcomes reported on the JRI website have nothing to do with public safety. Rather, the main outcomes describe changes made to reentry facilities and the number of people served.⁷⁶

Alabama

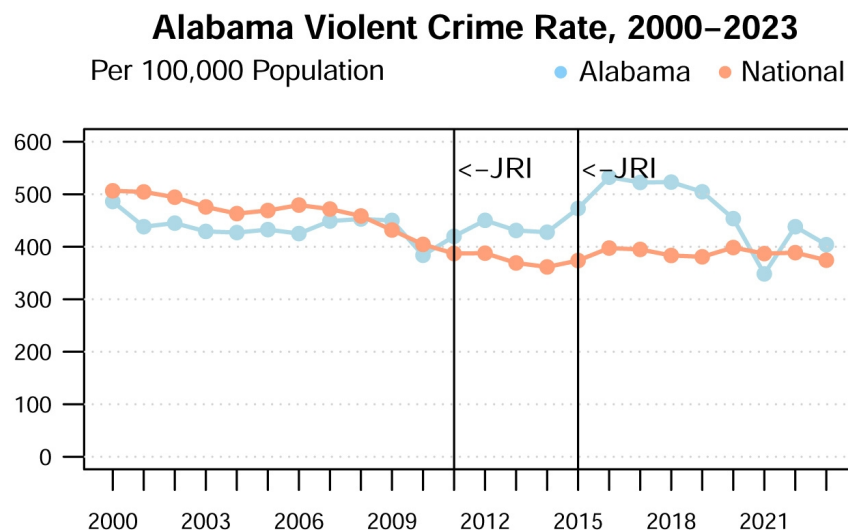
In Alabama, violent crime and recidivism remain high despite JRI reforms implemented in 2011 and 2015. The 2011 reforms focused on enhancing victim restitution and notification while also capping revocation time for probation violations. In 2015, they strengthened community-based supervision and treatment.⁷⁷ Community supervision reforms emphasized improved behavioral health interventions, shorter probation terms, and structured responses to violations through graduated sanctions. Alabama also expanded geriatric and medical parole, increased good-time and earned-time credits, and revised parole eligibility standards. Additionally, sentencing reforms reclassified property and drug offenses and reduced sentencing enhancements.⁷⁸

Alabama’s community-based programs and correctional education systems reflect significant implementation failures. Alabama’s community corrections programs (CCPs) face several challenges in terms of accountability and consistency. There are no state requirements for CCPs to measure outcomes such as adherence to evidence-based practices or recidivism rates, nor is there a mechanism to ensure accountability for the use of CCP funding.⁷⁹ According to a 2021 service assessment of correctional education programs, lack of coordination and data sharing prevented them from looking at records, despite the alleged desire to examine recidivism outcomes.⁸⁰ Additionally, CCPs lack a uniform approach to determining the intensity of supervision and treatment services provided. The state’s correctional education programs are also impacted by disparities in delivery. The length, depth,

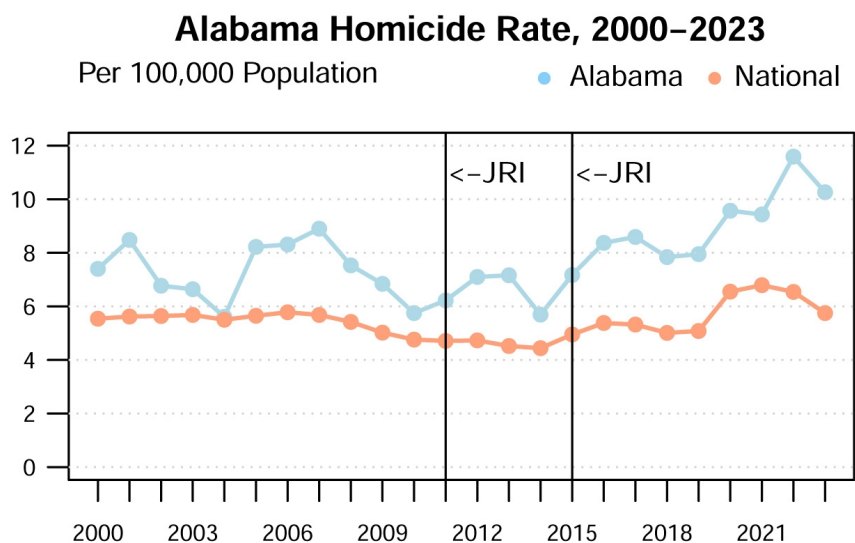
and availability of education programs, such as career technical education (CTE), vary across facilities, potentially affecting participation rates. These disparities, along with identified barriers, contribute to declining persistence rates in education, which have decreased by an average of 2.4% per year since 2012.⁸¹

This decline, coupled with a decrease in CTE participation, has driven up the cost of delivering these programs.⁸² For Alabama to see a positive return on investment in correctional education, the monetized benefits would need to exceed the cost per participant, which has risen from \$2,889 in 2012 to \$2,994 in 2018.⁸³ The number of participants in these programs has decreased, which contributes to the increasing costs of program delivery.⁸⁴ The lack of state requirements to measure results, such as adherence to evidence-based practices or recidivism, demonstrates an essential oversight in ensuring the effectiveness of JRI reforms. Without mechanisms in place to monitor how funding is spent or to track outcomes like recidivism, the initiative’s goals of reducing reoffending and improving outcomes for individuals under supervision have been compromised. The absence of a standardized and evidence-based approach undermines the potential of these community-based programs to rehabilitate individuals effectively.

Alabama’s violent crime rates from 2011 to 2023 show significant fluctuations, with some noticeable peaks and valleys. Violent crime initially increased following reforms, from 419.8 per 100,000 in 2011 to 473.0 per 100,000 in 2015. After another round of JRI reforms in 2015, violent crime sharply increased to 532.4 per 100,000 in 2016 before plateauing in 2017 and eventually dropping significantly to 348.33 per 100,000 in 2020. However, the rate began to rise again in 2021 to 438.13 per 100,000 and ended at 403.94 per 100,000 in 2023.⁸⁵



Alabama’s homicide rates from 2011 to 2023 show significant variability, with notable increases and decreases over the years. The rate started at 6.22 per 100,000 in 2011, gradually rising to 7.17 per 100,000 in 2015. Since the second round of reforms in 2015, the murder rate in Alabama increased dramatically, far surpassing the national average. By 2017, the murder rate had increased to a rate of 8.59 per 100,000. The upward trend continued, reaching 9.57 per 100,000 in 2020 and 11.59 per 100,000 in 2022. By 2023, it decreased to 10.3 per 100,000, but remained higher than the national average by a wide margin.⁸⁶



These trends suggest that, although there were periods of stabilization, Alabama’s homicide and violent crime rates have generally increased, particularly in the years following the implementation of JRI reforms. These rising rates may indicate that the changes in sentencing, incarceration practices, and rehabilitation efforts have fallen short in addressing the causes of violent crime.

Georgia

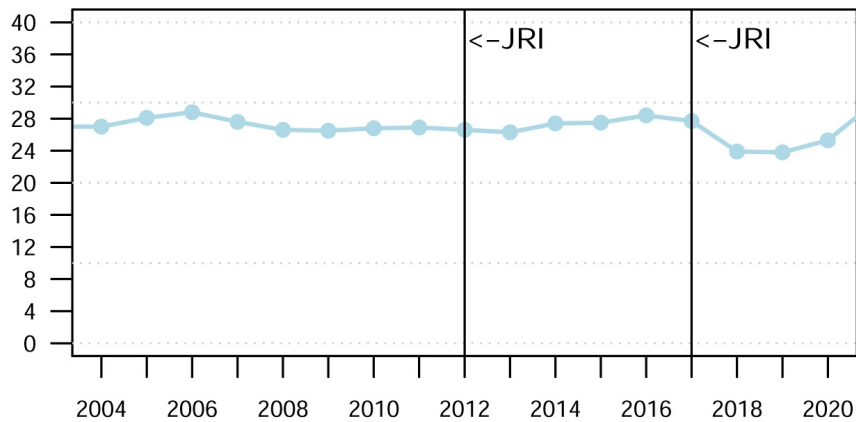
Georgia’s JRI reforms were implemented in two major phases: the first in 2012 and the second in 2017.⁸⁷ The 2012 reforms introduced specialty courts and diversion programs, implemented risk-needs assessments to guide supervision decisions, expanded electronic monitoring as an alternative to incarceration, placed limitations on the length of time offenders could be reincarcerated for technical violations, expanded earned-time credits for prisoners to allow for reduced sentences, and revised sentencing guidelines by reclassifying property and drug offenses and modifying mandatory minimums.⁸⁸ In 2017, Georgia introduced improvements to behavioral health interventions, reduced probation terms, expanded the earned discharge program to allow individuals to complete probation or parole early, and revised parole hearings, decisions, and eligibility standards to ensure fairer and more consistent processes.⁸⁹

According to a “Justice Data Snapshot”⁹⁰ produced by the CSG Justice Center, Georgia’s prison population, as well as probation and parole caseloads, decreased in the years following reforms.⁹¹ However, this did not seem to have any impact on recidivism rates. The JRI report produced by CSG conveniently does not examine post-JRI recidivism outcomes specific to the state of Georgia, and instead deflects by referring to national-level recidivism rates.⁹²

However, taking a look at Georgia’s past recidivism reports can help fill in some of these blanks. In the first few years following 2012 JRI reforms, three-year felony reconviction rates started rising slowly, from 26.6% in 2012 to 28.4% in 2016. Following 2017 reforms, reconviction rates dropped again, reaching a low of 23.8% in 2019. However, this has since increased again to pre-JRI levels, with a three-year reconviction rate of 29.9% in 2021.⁹³ Overall, the fluctuations in Georgia’s three-year felony reconviction rates indicate that there are still challenges in ensuring consistent, long-term reductions in recidivism.⁹⁴

Georgia Felony Reconviction Rate, 2000–2021

3-yr Re-conviction Rate, %

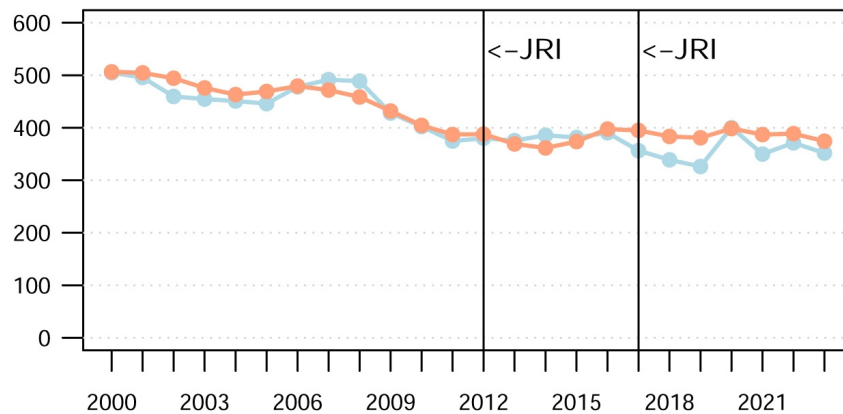


Violent crime and homicide rates in Georgia also appear unimpacted by JRI reforms, and have fluctuated a lot over the years. In 2012, Georgia’s violent crime rate was 380 per 100,000. By 2023, this had declined to a rate of 351.8 per 100,000, showing an overall gradual decrease in violent crime over the years. However, fluctuations mirrored national trends, suggesting that the JRI reforms in Georgia were not instrumental in causing this change.⁹⁵

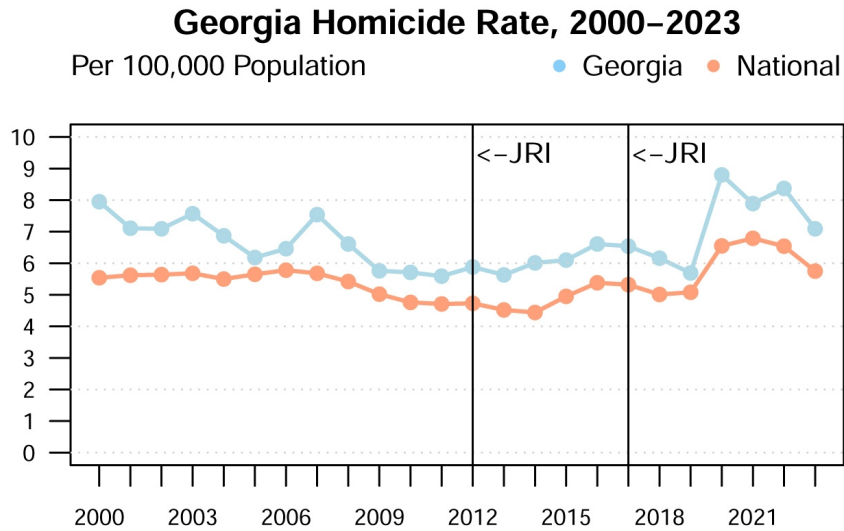
Georgia Violent Crime Rate, 2000–2023

Per 100,000 Population

● Georgia ● National



In the years following 2012 reforms, Georgia’s homicide rates fluctuated between 5.8 and 8.8 per 100,000. Despite a decline in violent crime, homicide rates remained relatively high, much higher than the national average. Rates increased from 5.9 to 6.6 per 100,000 between 2012 and 2016, following the first set of reforms. They dipped slightly to 6.5 per 100,000 in 2017, only to rise again following the second set of reforms, rising to 8.8 per 100,000 by 2020. Since 2020, rates have remained high, with a rate of 7.09 per 100,000 in 2023.⁹⁶ While JRI reforms are not necessarily the cause of the uptick in violence, these fluctuations suggest that addressing homicides and violent crime likely requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond what the JRI policies can offer.⁹⁷



However, because Georgia’s prison population decreased, the initiative is regarded as “successful.”⁹⁸ “Success” in this instance is defined as reducing the prison population, with no consideration of the impact on crime rates and recidivism rates.⁹⁹

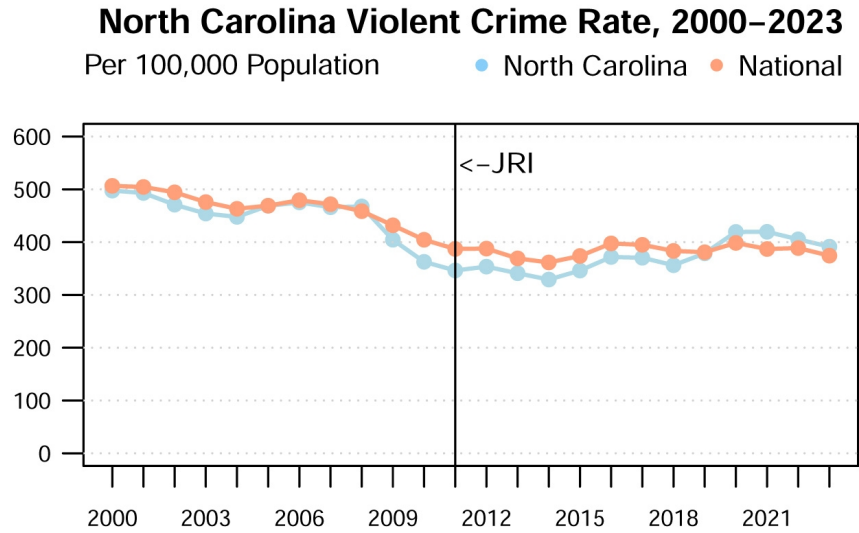
North Carolina

North Carolina’s 2011 JRI reforms were designed to enhance community supervision, reduce recidivism, and improve overall justice system efficiency. A key focus was on strengthening responses to technical violations by introducing graduated sanctions, capping revocation times, and implementing a system of earned-time or good-time credits. North Carolina also enhanced their risk-needs assessments and expanded behavioral health interventions to better address the underlying factors contributing to criminal behavior. Additionally, mandatory reentry supervision was established to assist individuals transitioning from incarceration back into society, ensuring more structured post-release oversight.¹⁰⁰

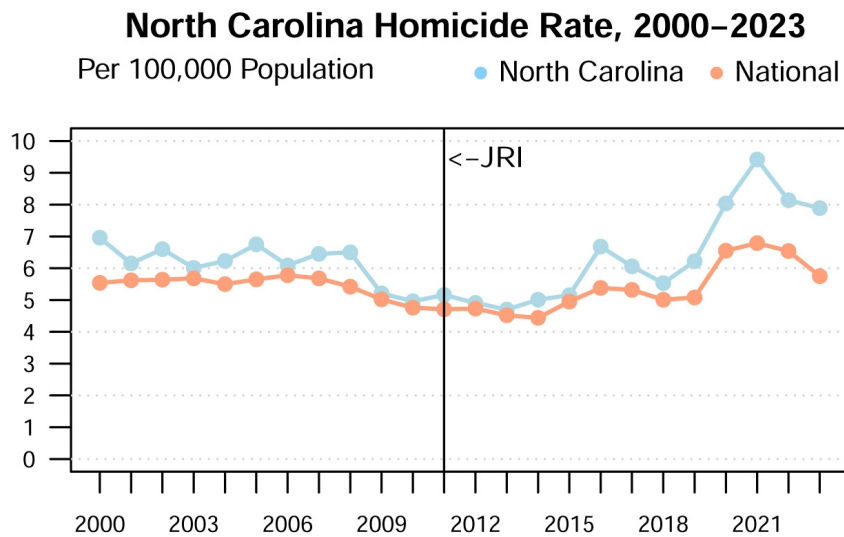
Within the first few years after passing the law, the state saw reductions in the prison population.¹⁰¹ However, recidivism and crime rates continued to rise, raising concerns about whether the policies effectively addressed serious criminal behavior. Between 2015 and 2017, rearrest rates and reincarceration rates increased for both probationers and prisoner releasees.¹⁰² The two-year re-arrest rates for individuals released from prison gradually increased to 51% by 2017. According to a rigorous analysis conducted by the North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission (NCSPAC), violations and responses to violations using the graduated sanctions system consistently predicted recidivist revocation and return to prison, indicating that the policy did not produce the intended outcome.¹⁰³ According to that study, the strongest factors predicting recidivism were number of prior arrests, number of infractions, and current offense severity, which were consistent across all measures of recidivism.¹⁰⁴ The risk and needs assessment tool used in North Carolina failed dismally at predicting recidivism risk, as calculated “risk levels” were not associated with recidivism on any measure.¹⁰⁵

North Carolina’s violent crime rates from 2011 to 2023 show a fluctuating trend, with an overall increase during this period. Violent crime rates initially decreased between 2011 and 2014, dropping from 346 per 100,000 to 329 per 100,000.¹⁰⁶ But by 2015, violent crime began creeping up again, eventually surpassing the national average¹⁰⁷ and reaching a peak of 419.5 per 100,000 in 2021. These trends

suggest that reforms did not lead to an immediate or sustained reduction in violent crime, and more targeted approaches are likely needed to address violent crime specifically.



The impact of the JRI policies on homicide rates also appears to be limited. North Carolina’s homicide rates from 2010 through 2023 show a general upward trend, ultimately rising from 5.2 per 100,000 in 2011 to 7.9 per 100,000 in 2023. The bulk of this increase occurred between 2015 and 2021, rising from 5.2 in 2015 to a peak of 9.4 in 2021.¹⁰⁸ The rise in homicides during this period suggests that additional or targeted strategies may be needed to address violent crime specifically.¹⁰⁹



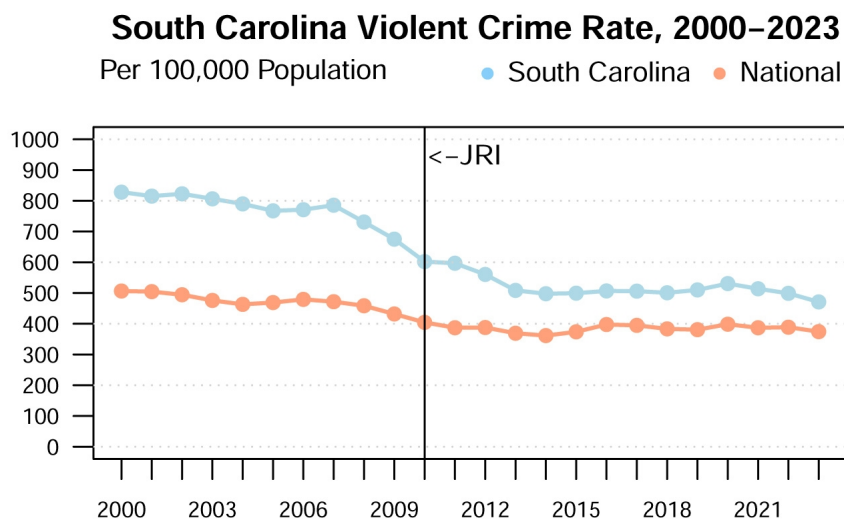
South Carolina

South Carolina’s 2010 JRI reforms aimed to address multiple areas within the justice system, including sentencing, parole, probation, and community supervision. The state established mandatory reentry supervision, introduced graduated sanctions for violations, and expanded earned discharge options for those on probation or parole. Sentencing reforms included revising drug-free school zone policies,

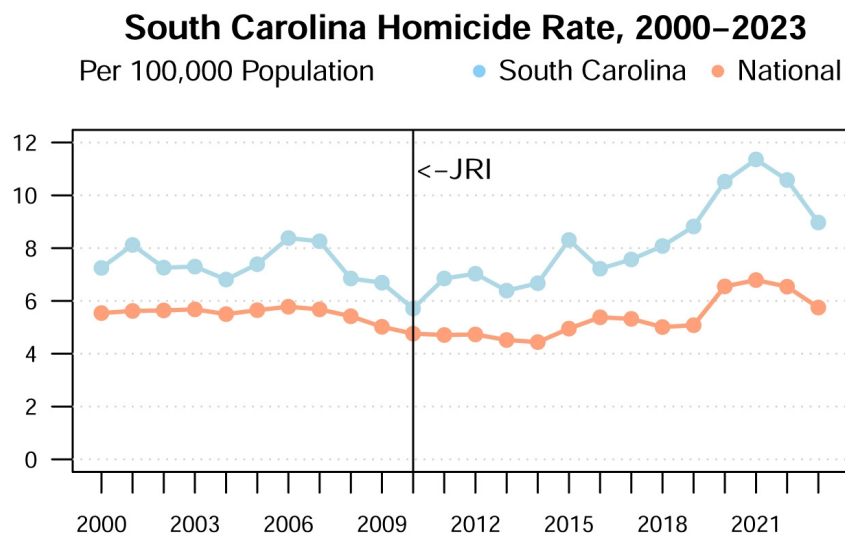
reducing sentencing disparities between crack and powder cocaine, and modifying mandatory minimums and sentencing enhancements. Additionally, South Carolina expanded parole eligibility and adjusted parole hearing processes.¹¹⁰

As a result of these reforms, South Carolina’s prison population decreased by 22.5% between 2009 and 2018, according to a report by the Urban Institute.¹¹¹ Recidivism rates also showed improvement, with a 9% decrease between 2007 and 2015, alongside a 16% increase in successful probation completions and a 58% decline in probation revocations.¹¹²

Despite some positive trends in recidivism, violent crime trends in South Carolina remain concerning. The state’s overall violent crime rates fluctuated between 2009 and 2023, showing periods of decline but also notable increases.¹¹³



More troubling is the increase in homicides following the implementation of JRI reforms. Homicide rates in South Carolina fluctuated over the period from 2009 to 2023, but with an overall upward trend.¹¹⁴ This raises concerns about whether JRI reforms have inadvertently contributed to violent crime. While JRI policies focused on rehabilitation and alternative sentencing, they may not have adequately addressed the root causes of violent crime.

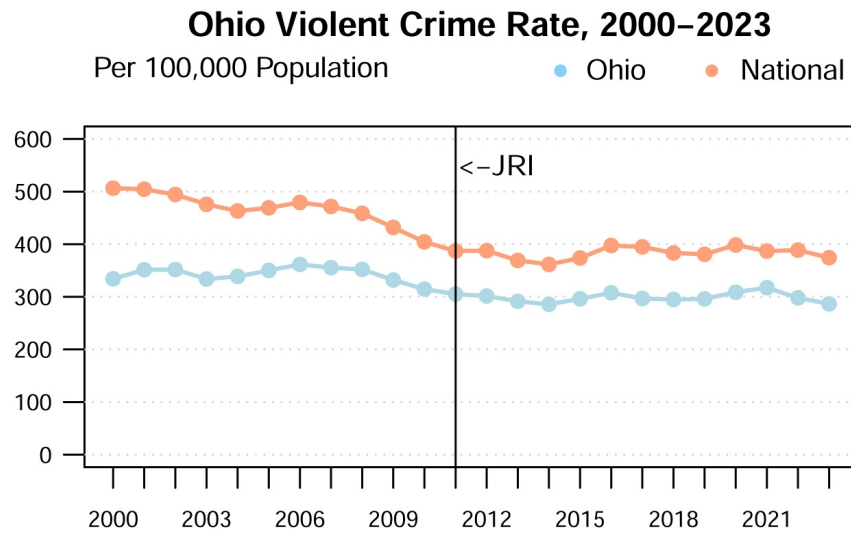


Ohio

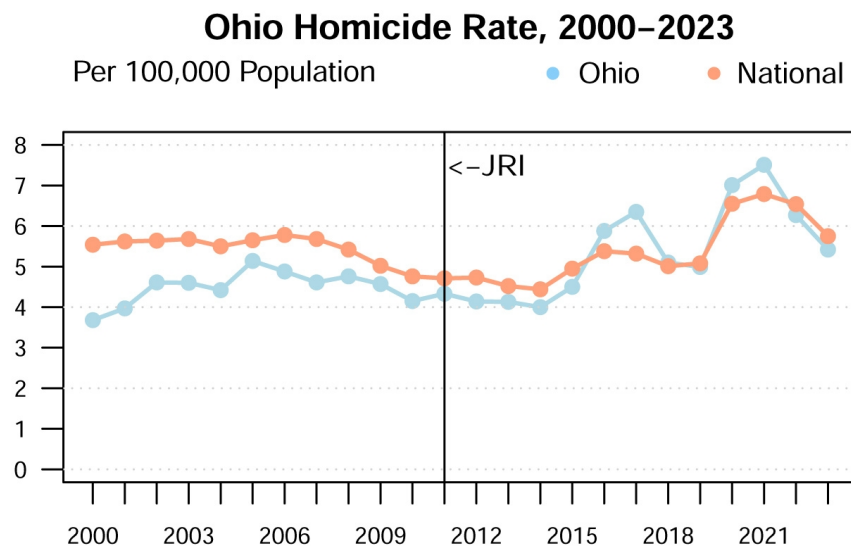
Ohio's JRI reforms in 2011 introduced various changes to the justice system. Key reforms included improving community supervision through enhanced risk-needs assessments, expanding good-time and earned-time prison credits, reclassification of certain property and drug offenses, and revising sentencing laws.¹¹⁵

Despite these efforts, Ohio's recidivism data indicates an overall increase in three-year reincarceration rates, which increased from 27.09% in 2010 to 32.7% by 2020.¹¹⁶

In terms of violent crime, Ohio's rates from 2010 to 2023 show fluctuations but remain relatively stable.¹¹⁷



Ohio's homicide rates from 2010 to 2023 exhibit an overall increase, rising from 4.15 per 100,000 in 2010 to 5.42 in 2023, with significant peaks in 2015, 2016, and 2020. While these trends align with some national patterns, Ohio's homicide rates have shown volatility. The rise in homicides could stem from various factors, including shifts in enforcement priorities, economic conditions, or social unrest, which



were not directly targeted by JRI measures. Additionally, the inconsistent implementation of reforms across different regions could contribute to these trends.¹¹⁸ This suggests that JRI reforms, while focused on reducing incarceration and improving reentry programs, may not have effectively addressed violent crime, particularly homicides.

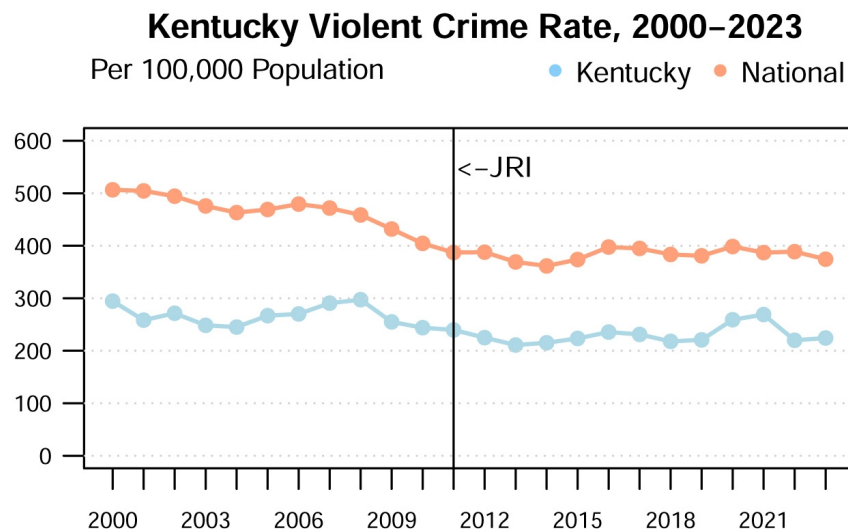
Ultimately, while JRI reforms in Ohio may have improved aspects of sentencing and supervision, they do not appear to have significantly curbed violent crime or homicides.

Kentucky

Kentucky's JRI reforms, implemented in 2011, expanded earn discharge programs, implemented risk-needs assessments, introduced specialty courts and diversion programs for people with substance abuse issues or nonviolent offenses, and implemented graduated sanctions for probation and parole violations, providing a range of sanctions rather than defaulting to imprisonment.¹¹⁹

The reforms had a much smaller impact than originally expected. The inmate population is actually higher than it was in 2011 prior to JRI reforms.¹²⁰ Recidivism in Kentucky has fluctuated over the years, but was already on an uptrend before JRI reforms. Between 2008 and 2015, rates increased from 30% to 44.6%. However, by 2017, a slight decline began, dropping to 43%. The decrease continued into 2021, reaching 29.17%.¹²¹

Crime trends in Kentucky have been mixed. Violent crime rates have experienced some periodic increases here and there, though these largely mirror national patterns.¹²²

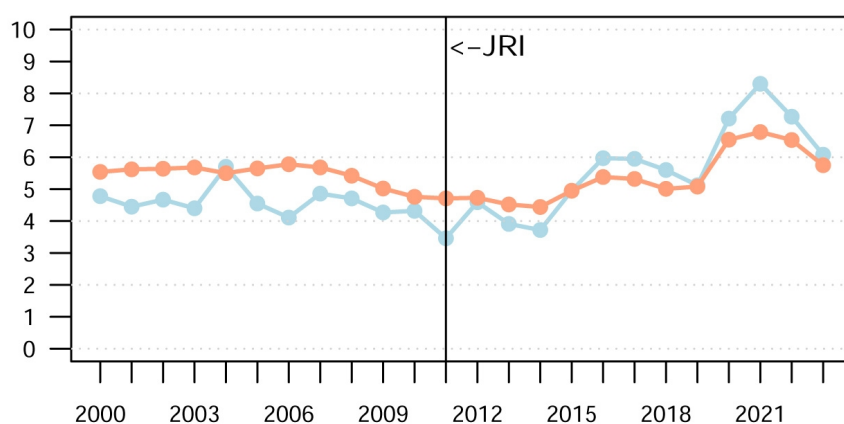


Homicide rates, though, have been steadily increasing since implementation of JRI reforms in 2011. Between 2011 and 2016, Kentucky's homicide rates increased from 3.45 per 100,000 in 2011 to 5.97 per 100,000 in 2016. The rate continued to increase, surging to a high of 8.3 per 100,000 in 2021.¹²³

Kentucky Homicide Rate, 2000–2023

Per 100,000 Population

● Kentucky ● National



Utah

In Utah, a series of JRI reforms were launched in 2015 that attempted to improve and expand behavioral health interventions, specialty courts, and diversion programs. The state also revised parole hearings and eligibility standards, expanded good-time or earned-time prison credits, and reclassified certain drug offenses to reduce the number of low-level offenders behind bars.¹²⁴

According to a report by the CJI, these reforms were a success because they decreased Utah's prison population by 21%.¹²⁵ However, there is no real effort to actually measure the impact on recidivism.¹²⁶ Further, the claim that the prison population decreased by 21% is questionable. They noted a decrease in admission for new crimes, but the Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice found that overall prison population numbers increased due to technical violations of probation.¹²⁷

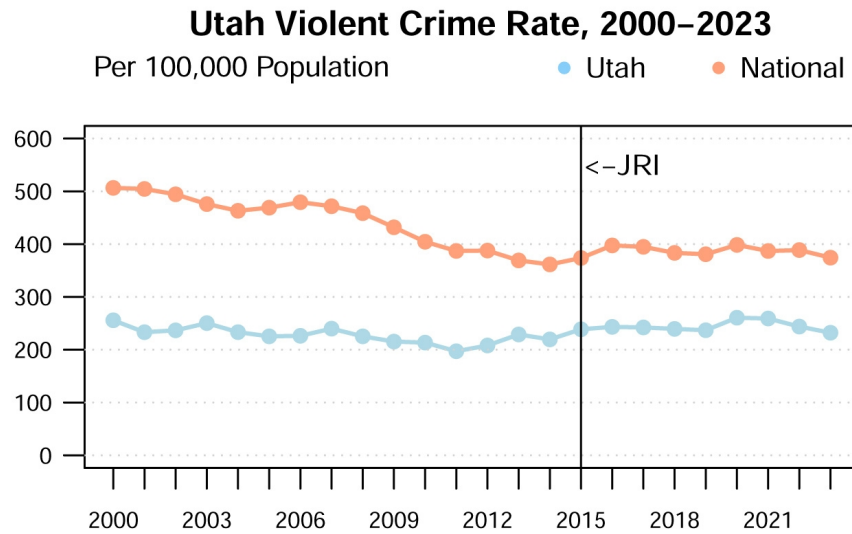
Concerns over early release policies proved to be well-founded. A state auditor's report found that recidivism rates actually increased following reforms. Implementation issues, such as improperly conducted risk-needs assessments and inadequate addiction treatment, further compounded the problem.¹²⁸

According to the state auditor's report, recidivism rates increased the most for the people who were targeted by reforms—low-level, nonviolent drug offenders.¹²⁹ The audit also revealed numerous implementation issues, such as risk/needs assessments not being carried out properly and inadequate treatment for drug addiction.¹³⁰ The three-year reincarceration rates for individuals released from prison remained high, ranging from 62% to 65% for those released between 2005 and 2013. However, the state later started tracking returns for new convictions, which showed that reconviction rates dropped from 20.3% in 2014 to 16.9% in 2019. While this suggests some improvement, overall recidivism remained a serious issue.¹³¹

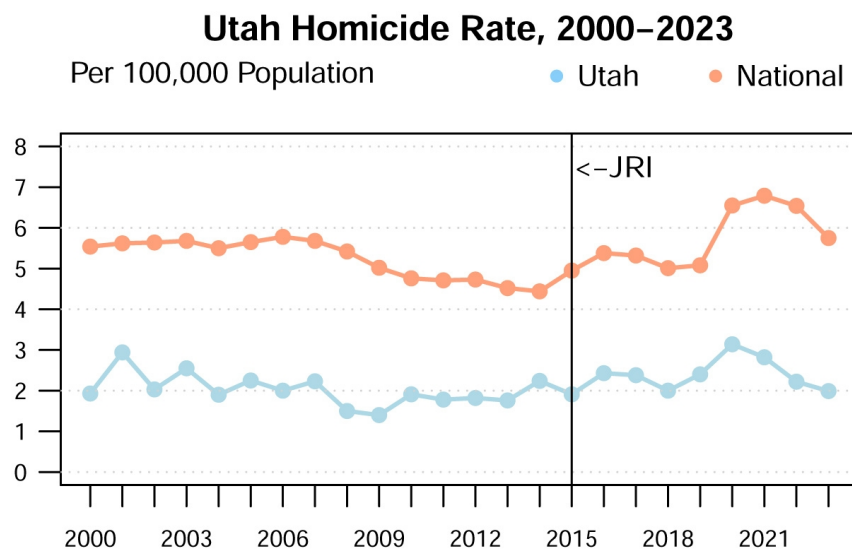
Policies raised significant concerns among the public after numerous parolees granted early release committed serious crimes causing severe injury or death. A lawsuit against the state of Utah filed in May 2023 cited several instances where people were murdered by violent offenders just months after they were released early on parole.¹³² According to the complaint, the Utah Adult Probation and Parole released multiple violent offenders despite knowing that they knew they would not be able to properly

supervise them. The plaintiffs argued that their constitutional rights were violated and demanded accountability for the lack of proper supervision.¹³³ While the lawsuit is ongoing, this incident had far-reaching consequences, and led to the retirement of the state’s corrections director.¹³⁴

Utah’s violent crime rates between 2010 and 2023 show some fluctuation but generally point to a gradual increase over the years. These rates range from a low of 197.1 per 100,000 to a high of 260.6 per 100,000, with occasional dips.¹³⁵ This rise suggests that the JRI reforms were not effective in reducing violent crime.



Homicide rates followed a similar pattern. Although Utah’s homicide rate remained relatively low compared to national averages, there was a noticeable uptick around 2015–2016, coinciding with the implementation of JRI reforms. While the rates declined afterward, these fluctuations suggest that the impact on violent crime requires further analysis. While reforms may have helped in some areas, they do not appear to have had an immediate or direct effect on reducing homicides.¹³⁶



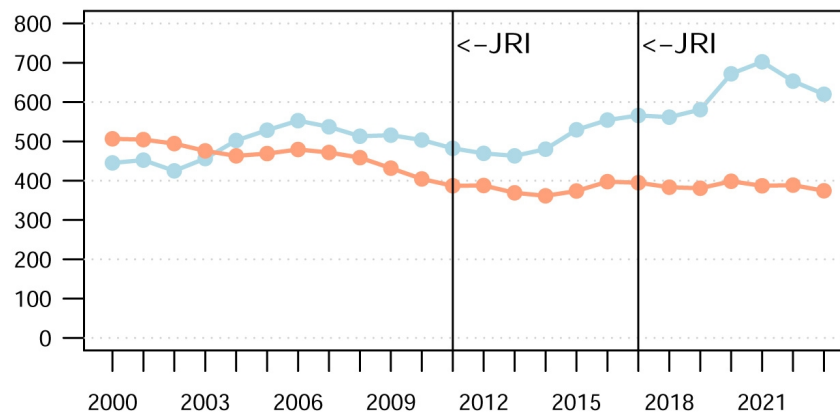
Overall, Utah’s JRI reforms failed to produce consistent improvements in public safety. The rise in violent crime, coupled with increased recidivism and concerns over inadequate supervision of released offenders, raises serious questions about the effectiveness of these policies. The ongoing legal challenges and administrative fallout further highlight the need for a reassessment of Utah’s approach to criminal justice reform.

Arkansas

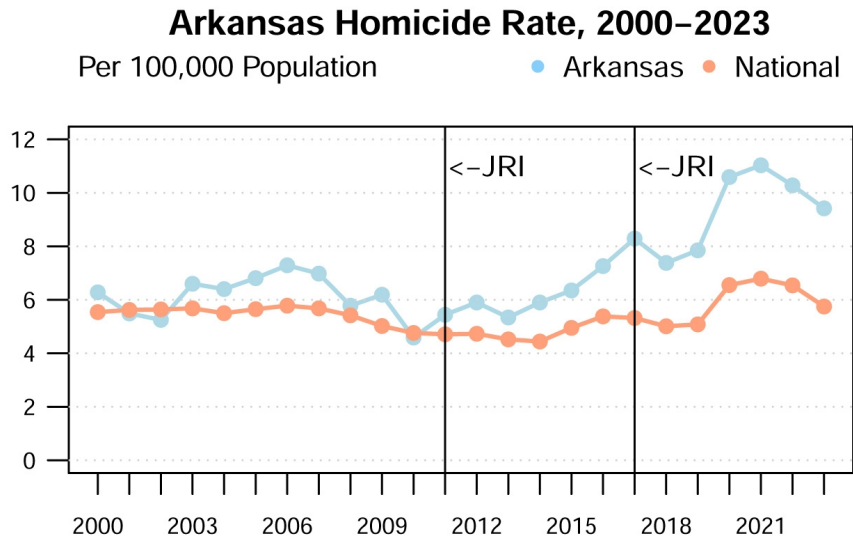
In Arkansas, data suggests reforms didn’t yield substantial impacts on crime or recidivism trends. Arkansas implemented reforms in 2011 and 2017, with a focus on community supervision, sentencing, parole policies, and data-driven oversight. The 2011 reforms emphasized the use of risk-needs assessments, electronic monitoring, administrative sanctions, and performance incentive funding for positive behavior. The state also expanded earned discharge for probation and parole while revising parole hearings and decision-making processes to improve efficiency. In 2017, Arkansas refined these efforts by establishing oversight councils, capping revocation times, and creating a sentencing commission to review sentencing guidelines.¹³⁷

Arkansas has consistently experienced violent crime rates above the national average since 2004. Following the 2011 reforms, the violent crime rate initially saw a slight decrease, which declined to 469.55 per 100,000 in 2012. However, this decrease was brief. From 2013 to 2017, violent crime rates began to rise again, reaching a high of 702.45 per 100,000 in 2017. Following the 2017 reforms, violent crime rates remained stable for a brief period before surging between 2019 and 2021.¹³⁸

Arkansas Violent Crime Rate, 2000–2023
Per 100,000 Population ● Arkansas ● National



Between 2000–2010, homicide rates fluctuated from year to year, with a high 7.29 per 100,000 in 2006 and a low of 4.58 per 100,000 in 2010. Since reforms were implemented in 2011, rates have trended upward. Between 2011 and 2017, rates increased from 5.4 per 100,000 to 8.29 per 100,000. It continued to increase, ultimately reaching a peak of 11.02 per 100,000 in 2021. By 2023, the rate had decreased to 9.42 per 100,000, still above the pre-reform levels but showing some improvement. However, the homicide rate did not return to the relatively stable figures seen earlier in the 2000s.¹³⁹



These patterns suggest that while reforms may have had some long-term effects, the state continues to grapple with challenges in reducing violent crime.

► DISCUSSION

The examples and brief analysis provided in this paper describe concerns about JRI reforms and their impact on public safety. The correctional system seems unable to adequately manage and oversee paroled individuals with a history of violence. There are several instances of negligence and systemic failures in parole and supervision processes, contributing to the inappropriate release and inadequate monitoring of offenders. In many cases, this has resulted in murder and other serious crimes. These concerns, coupled with the lack of evidence on JRI strategies, raises doubt about its ability to improve public safety.

Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, tough sentencing policies led to a slow rise in mass incarceration in the United States. By 2010, many states were grappling with overcrowded prisons and rising correctional costs. In the same time frame, crime rates decreased by a large margin, but recidivism rates remained high. Despite the decrease in crime, the lack of an impact on recidivism rates persuaded many policymakers and a majority of the public to believe that monitoring individuals for longer periods was not the sole or best approach to ensuring public safety.

Consequently, there was a growing call for more aggressive reforms to reduce the prison population further. Since the federal launch of the JRI in 2010, various state reforms have led to a reduction in incarceration and supervision rates. While tracking the sheer number of incarcerated individuals is critical, this alone is insufficient to gauge whether progress is being made toward a more effective criminal justice system. For example, post-2010, the rate of certain crimes, notably violent ones like murder, have increased.¹⁴⁰ This should raise alarm bells, however, proponents tend to overlook this information and instead argue that policies have had no negative impact, citing the fact that crime rates remain lower than the peak in 1990. Objectively though, this is a low bar for designating success—its akin to saying that the 2008 recession wasn't that bad because the Great Depression was worse.

Overall, JRI reforms do not seem to have achieved their goals. While the current state of the literature is limited, there is no solid indication that JRI reforms have led to reductions in prison populations, cost savings, or improvements in public safety. The evidence is particularly lacking for the most important of the three: public safety. The available research lacks meaningful effectiveness outcomes and relies heavily on anecdotes. Most analysis on recidivism rates associated with the JRI is shallow and uninformative, and the existing reports on JRI programs stop short of examining causal relationships with recidivism. Peer-reviewed research on JRI reforms also remains scarce.

Overlooking factors such as recidivism rates when determining program “success” is a major concern. Reducing recidivism is a major goal of our criminal justice system, as high recidivism rates contribute to increased crime rates and added risks to public safety. Therefore, recidivism rates are a crucial metric for assessing whether criminal justice interventions are effective. Low recidivism rates indicate a system’s success in promoting rehabilitation, reducing the risk of repeat offenses, and facilitating the successful reintegration of individuals into society. High recidivism rates indicate the opposite, and result in increased economic and social costs to society. It is also important to understand how all of this contributes to the net impact on crime. Specifically, any reduction in recidivism rates must be balanced by consideration of additional crimes and harm caused by those who do recidivate during the time they would otherwise be in prison.

As discussed above, the various reports regarding JRI impacts produced by the Crime and Justice Institute,¹⁴¹ the Urban Institute,¹⁴² and CSG Justice Center¹⁴³ tend to disproportionately focus on prison population numbers and overlook the broader goal of enhancing public safety. When reforms are nonetheless regarded as “effective” despite this critical omission, it becomes misleading for the average person who likely believes that “success” refers to the rehabilitation of offenders.

There are several existing gaps that limit the potential effectiveness of JRI reforms. For one, JRI policies often rely on untested strategies rather than proven programs. Although JRI policies are purported to incorporate “evidence-based” programs, there appears to be a challenge among state lawmakers in discerning programs with the necessary scientific validity to be considered “evidence-based.” This ultimately leads to implementation of programs lacking such a foundation.

Even when a true evidence-based program is chosen, it is rare that it is implemented well. New policies often require multiple agencies to change how they do business. Educating stakeholders about reforms, securing buy-in, and changing daily practices takes time; resistance to this is common. Numerous failures documented above are examples of this.

Implementation failures can occur for all sorts of reasons, such as inadequate resources, insufficient training, and lack of support staff. Another consideration is broad implementation of programs, which more often than not, results in shallow implementation that is rushed and lacks important attention to detail. This causes deviations from the intended evidence-based models. This hampers program effectiveness, which is contingent on faithful execution and oversight of program activities.

Overall, it’s difficult to say definitively which justice reinvestment approaches are the most effective. The impact of reforms depends on a variety of factors, including implementation quality, external social conditions, and the specific needs of each state’s criminal justice system.

► IMPLICATIONS

The criminal justice system stands at a crossroads with the future of the JRI. As it stands, the federal JRI has not demonstrated a clear, sustainable path toward achieving its primary objectives of reducing recidivism, lowering crime rates, and decreasing incarceration rates in a way that meaningfully improves public safety. The evidence of its effectiveness is mixed, and in many cases, the reforms have been poorly implemented and inadequately monitored.

The issue isn't whether we need criminal justice reform. The real question is whether the federal government should keep running these programs, or if we should let the states handle reform on their own without federal involvement.

On one hand, we could attempt to mend the federal JRI by significantly improving its structure and oversight. However, the current system lacks the necessary depth and commitment to meet its ambitious goals. Federal oversight has been inconsistent, and the process of enforcing reforms has often made things more complicated than necessary. To make the JRI work as originally intended, several significant changes would be required.

First, federal oversight would need to be more consistent and robust, with a clear and transparent framework for monitoring the implementation of reforms at the state level. This would involve more frequent, in-depth audits of state programs, as well as the establishment of concrete benchmarks for evaluating success, particularly in reducing recidivism and ensuring public safety. States would also need to be held accountable not only for meeting population reduction goals but for demonstrating tangible improvements in long-term outcomes like crime reduction and rehabilitation.

Given the political landscape and the historical struggles with the implementation of large-scale reforms, it's unclear if the necessary level of federal dedication could be sustained over time. Moreover, it's uncertain whether the federal government can offer the flexibility and adaptability that states need, especially when each state has unique criminal justice challenges and priorities. The sheer complexity of managing such a large, decentralized program may make it difficult to achieve the level of coordination and effectiveness needed for long-term success.

Alternatively, we could accept that the federal JRI is not working as intended, end federal involvement altogether, and allow states to design and implement their own reforms without the constraints and oversight imposed by the federal government. This would leave the responsibility in the hands of the states, and still allow for tailored approaches to justice reform. States would still have the flexibility to experiment with different models, focus on what works best for their unique populations, and monitor the outcomes they deem most important.

This would not mean the end of rehabilitation programs. In fact, it would allow states to continue implementing programs that work for their specific populations, but without the complexities and limitations of federal involvement. States could focus on what truly works for their communities, ensuring that rehabilitation efforts remain part of the solution for those who benefit from them.

Additionally, states would have more flexibility in allocating funds directly to programs and services that provide the most value, such as targeted rehabilitation, mental health treatment, and reentry programs, without being bogged down by the red tape and administrative costs often associated with federal oversight. The ability to make quick, localized adjustments would also allow states to be more responsive and adaptable, ensuring that they are using resources in the most efficient and impactful way possible.

► CONCLUSION

The JRI has potential as a transformative approach to criminal justice reform, but its implementation has been far from successful. While the reforms may seem promising, they often fall short of achieving their goals of reducing recidivism and ensuring public safety. While reducing prison populations is an admirable goal, the potential negative impacts on public safety may outweigh the modest savings. Without more robust evaluations and evidence of what actually works, it remains uncertain whether JRI programs are achieving the desired outcomes.

Until there is better evidence, it is essential to reconsider how we address reform, whether that means fixing what’s broken or ending federal involvement altogether. Mending the system would require substantial reforms and better oversight, or stepping back and allowing states to manage their own efforts, we must be willing to make hard decisions.

For states considering the implementation of new evidence-based programs, a more strategic and cautious approach is essential. We advise against expanding JRI programs further until there is clearer evidence showing their true benefits. It is also important to recognize that meaningful reform requires balancing rehabilitation efforts with the necessary long-term confinement of individuals who may be resistant to treatment. A one-size-fits-all approach to crime reduction is unrealistic, and it is naive to assume that all offenders will respond to rehabilitation programs in the same way.

It is clear that the current system needs significant changes, or perhaps could be replaced with a more localized, state-led approach. The idea of a state-led approach doesn’t mean abandoning reform altogether. It simply means a more pragmatic, thoughtful, and responsive way to tackle the problems within the criminal justice system. States could still invest in rehabilitation programs where they are shown to be effective, but with a more discerning and targeted approach. By giving states the freedom to innovate and the responsibility to evaluate their own programs, we would create a more accountable and effective system of reform.

At this crossroads, we must be willing to make hard decisions. The ultimate goal is a criminal justice system that works for everyone—one that prioritizes public safety, fairness, and long-term success. The current trajectory may not get us there, and it’s time to ask whether the federal government’s role should continue or if it’s time to let states lead.

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