



Connecticut at the Crossroads: An Overview

[University Network for Human Rights](#) and the [Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy](#)

The COVID pandemic has caused grave harm to those in Connecticut's correctional centers and institutions. At the same time, due to decreasing revenues and increased vital expenditures during the crisis, the state faces one of the most severe budget deficits in decades. As Department of Correction (DOC) Commissioner Ángel Quiros has noted, jails and prisons will not be spared. As he recently said, "There will be facility closures in the upcoming budget years." This critical moment, however, comes with a silver lining: a simultaneous reduction in the prison population provides the state the chance to turn away from mass incarceration.

Connecticut's incarcerated population has been decreasing since its peak in the early 2000s. The pandemic has accelerated this trend. During 2020, the number of people housed in state DOC facilities fell from 12,284 to 9,094—a 26% decrease in a single year. Similar decreases occurred in Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, and Pennsylvania, demonstrating the widespread nature of this trend. Connecticut lawmakers must design policy for an incarcerated population that will be at its lowest level in decades.

Faced with this reality, the state may choose one of two broad paths. Down one path lies outdated policies and the expensive, ineffective infrastructure of mass incarceration. The alternative involves seizing the opportunity presented by a decreasing prison population to humanize the criminal justice system, and move towards a renewed, strengthened justice reinvestment framework. This latter option respects human rights, is consistent with best practices in other countries, and reduces long-term costs.

Two principles guide international human rights norms regarding criminal justice. First: an individual's right to remain at liberty may be restricted only when clearly justified and only to the extent absolutely necessary. Second, rehabilitation and reintegration must be the primary goals of the any rights-respecting system. As Connecticut seeks reform, it should follow standards established by the UN and other international bodies. This means that the state should consult with communities most affected by mass incarceration, employ alternatives to incarceration, and prioritize rehabilitation in its policy.

Many countries offer a useful model for Connecticut as it continues to shift away from mass incarceration. In Germany, only 3% of those tried are sent to adult prison. German prisons offer extensive educational opportunities. Norway's prisons center on humane treatment, creating environments in which correctional officers and inmates socialize frequently and cordially, and in which guards serve educational or therapeutic roles. The goal of this system is to "create good neighbors" – which has shown a vastly more positive impact on those returning from prison in the form of more successful reintegration and far less likely returns to prison. These programs diverge from the norm in United States, which to this day perpetuate racist and harmful practices rooted in slavery and the Jim Crow system.

To achieve alignment with human rights and international standards, we recommend that Connecticut:

1. Strengthen Justice Reinvestment Initiative, reinvesting funds saved through closing prisons and reducing prison populations.
2. Establish a community oversight board to facilitate Justice Reinvestment and other reforms.
3. Further invest in reentry, resocialization, and restorative justice.
4. Ensure that prison conditions are more humane for those incarcerated.
5. Employ alternatives to incarceration more frequently.