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**Will N.J.'s release of thousands of prisoners trigger a crime surge? Here's what data and research show.**

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New Jersey recently released thousands of prisoners ahead of schedule because of the threat of COVID-19 behind bars, prompting some residents and officials to raise concerns the move could contribute to a surge in crime.

Fatal shootings are rising in New Jersey, with big spikes in Trenton and Paterson especially.

Recent state history and research suggest prison releases do not automatically mean crime will increase, but there are caveats.

“Providing resources and support to returning citizens is extremely vital to their success — and cheaper than having them re-offend and get re-convicted and be put back in the prison system,” said Tarika Daftary-Kapur, associate professor of justice studies at Montclair State University.

## ***Did prison releases increase crime before?***

New Jersey has been lowering its prison population for a decade.

More than 25,000 people were in prisons, halfway houses and other facilities in 2011, according to the corrections department's annual reports. That number slipped to fewer than 18,500 by January.

There was no crime surge during that time.

In fact, both violent and property crime in New Jersey generally decreased, according to FBI Uniform Crime Reporting data.

While there were almost 25 crimes for every 1,000 residents at the start of the last decade, that number had slipped to a little more than 15 last year, the most recent year available.

There are more than a dozen other national and international examples of large-scale releases that did not trigger crime waves, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit which opposes mass incarceration.

### ***But didn't some former prisoners break the law again?***

The share of former inmates who committed more crimes was relatively consistent during part of this period.

A little more than half of the prisoners released each year from 2011 through 2015 were re-arrested, according to corrections department data. The year 2015 is the most recent available because officials track inmates for three years after release.

Around 40% were eventually re-convicted of another crime, and a little less than a third ended up back behind bars. Each rate dipped slightly during those five years.

The state parole board also tracks how many people end up back behind bars.

About 1,330 had parole revoked during the last fiscal year, about 8% of the current caseload, according to spokesman Tony Ciavolella.

Sometimes parole was revoked for only a "minor infraction," Ciavolella said, and not necessarily another crime.

There is not yet data on the thousands of people set free after Election Day.

### ***How does New Jersey compare to the rest of the country?***

It's difficult to make an exact comparison, because nationwide studies often lag several years behind.

One U.S. Department of Justice study looked at how hundreds of thousands of inmates from 30 states fared.

About 83% were arrested at least once during the first nine years after their release, researchers said. (About 51% of Garden State inmates re-arrested in three years, according to the most recent data available.) People arrested for drug or property crimes were more likely to be picked up again than those who committed violent crimes.

Other research into "recidivism," which is when a former prisoner is re-imprisoned, suggest about half are re-incarcerated.

However, one 2016 study in the journal *Crime & Delinquency* found that recidivism numbers in general may be inflated, since small groups of people who are arrested over and over may artificially increase the numbers.

### ***What helps prevent these crimes?***

A number of factors influence the odds that someone will break the law again.

For example, a recent Montclair State University study looked at 174 prisoners recently released in Philadelphia.

Each had received a life sentence for a murder committed as a juvenile, and many had spent decades behind bars. Yet only six were re-arrested after their release, according to the study. Of those, just two were convicted of a new crime: One for contempt and the other for robbery.

“Folks who spend a long time in prison, and who in their late 30’s, 40’s, 50’s, generally speaking have low recidivism rates,” Tina Zottoli, assistant professor of psychology and the study’s co-author, told NJ Advance Media. Even when people originally convicted of a violent crime broke the law again, the new offense was generally non-violent, she said.

Part of Philadelphia’s success stemmed from the help offered, researchers said.

New Jersey’s corrections department has also found that inmates who received state services and help at halfway houses were less likely to re-offend, and state lawmakers restored millions of dollars to reentry organizations before approving the early releases.

### ***Isn’t the pandemic increasing the risk?***

Not necessarily, said Nathan Link, a criminologist and assistant professor at Rutgers University in Camden who studies recidivism.

Crime often goes down in the winter because fewer people outdoors create less opportunities for theft and other crimes, he said.

“If they did re-offend, it would probably be a minor offense, and these minor offenses are harder to commit right now,” Link said. Even if a tenth of those recently released did break the law soon, that number would be too small to count as a crime wave, he said.

Research from the Crime, Law and Social Change Journal has also pointed out that returning people to their communities can actually lower crime, because it allows more people to get jobs, creating more income for more families.

At the same time, many people behind bars in New Jersey are there for drug crimes, and opioid deaths are on the rise statewide. One man released early from a county jail immediately overdosed and was taken back.

Groups that help former prisoners have said the corrections department has made it difficult to care for those just released from prison. Reentry organizations do not know the names of who’s getting out ahead of time, advocates said. Most inmates are only

given an ID from the corrections department that expires in weeks, which can make it difficult to apply for jobs, they said.

About 1,000 more prisoners are expected to be freed early in the following weeks through January.