



Article

State-Level Variation in Juvenile Decarceration: An Exploratory Analysis

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Abstract

In 1999, 107,493 juveniles were in residential placements; by 2023 this number declined to 29,314, a decrease of 73%. This extraordinary decline in juvenile incarceration—which we refer to as juvenile decarceration—has been reported primarily by justice advocacy groups without rigorous explanation or exploration. In this paper, we provide a state-level exploration in which we consider how relevant characteristics of states relate to their levels of decarceration. We analyze data from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and several publicly available sources and find correlations between the extent of a state's rate of decarceration and that state's poverty rate, high school dropout rate, adult incarceration rate, and voting results in the 2020 presidential election. Most striking, however, is the relative consistency of decarceration across states, and the absence of more robust patterns.

Keywords: incarceration; decarceration; net widening; harms of punishment

1. Introduction

The number of juveniles incarcerated in the U.S. has plummeted in the twenty-first century. Since 2000, one-day counts of juveniles in “residential placement”, more accurately called juvenile incarceration, have decreased by almost 75% (Rovner 2025). While troubling racial disparities persist, there are 68% fewer Black youth incarcerated today than in 1999.

To be sure, juveniles are still subjected to probation and other forms of intensive supervision that subject them to a number of debilitating exclusions, and as a result youth are still often exposed to harmful punishments. Yet the uniquely brutal harm of incarcerating juveniles must not be underestimated (McCarthy et al. 2016). An imposing literature on this practice documents myriad negative consequences, such as psychological trauma and a number of nefarious post-incarceration outcomes, including the end of one's academic career and a greater likelihood of future criminal involvement (Lopez-Aguado 2018; Pyrooz et al. 2017). The extensive level of juvenile decarceration observed since 2000 is clearly important, since it means fewer youth are exposed to the harms of incarceration.

In this paper, we analyze official data on juvenile incarceration rates to explore this trend of juvenile decarceration. Our exploratory analyses seek out patterns in the variation of state-level decarceration. Our goal is to better understand how states differ. That is to say, the analysis presented here can be viewed as a step toward understanding why and how decarceration has occurred across the U.S.



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2. The Extent of Juvenile Decarceration

The 1980s and 90s were a time of increasing punishment for youth in the U.S. The public was increasingly afraid of crime, particularly at the hands of so-called “superpredators” (Dilulio 1995). This mass panic led states across the U.S. to change laws in ways that emphasized punishment, including the transfer of youth to adult criminal courts, and longer custodial sentences for youth who were adjudicated delinquent (see Feld 1999; Zimring 2005). The increase in punishment for youth occurred at the same time that rates of adult incarceration continued to rise exponentially. Prominent criminologists argued that this shift in policy for both populations was driven by fear of violent youth crime (Zimring 1999) and a heightened emphasis on fear of crime as a chief focus for state and federal governance (Simon 2007), with a particular focus on harsh punishment for low-income youth of color (Feld 1999).

Yet in recent years the punitive turn toward youth crime seems to have waned. One strong indicator that the tide is turning involves the dramatic scaling back of transfer laws (Thomas et al. 2019). The Campaign for Youth Justice, an advocacy group devoted to ending the punishment of youth as adults, closed its doors in December 2020 with a letter by its CEO titled “15 Years of Impact: How We Won” (Mistrett 2020). Further, the U.S. Supreme Court ended the use of capital punishment for individuals convicted of capital crimes who were younger than eighteen (*Simmons v. Roper* 2005). Most recently, the Supreme Court has abolished mandatory sentences of life without parole for juveniles (*Miller v. Alabama* 2012).

In addition to legal changes, the number of youth behind bars has plummeted. In 1999, 107,493 juveniles were in residential placements according to one-day counts reported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; by 2023 this number declined to 29,314, a decrease of 73%. The number of facilities for incarcerating youth, particularly large facilities, has shrunk as well. In 2000 there were 264 large (100-bed) facilities for incarcerating juveniles, but only 42 remained by 2022 (Rovner 2025). As before, racial disparities in juvenile incarceration rates strongly persist, and have even become worse in recent years. In 2017, 42% of boys and 35% of girls who were incarcerated identified as Black, but in 2023 these percentages rose to 47% and 39%, respectively (Rovner 2025).

In this article, we focus on the reduction in the number of juveniles who are incarcerated (or “placed in a residential facility” to use the juvenile justice system’s euphemistic language). The issue is important, given the harms youth face when incarcerated. Indeed, youth who are incarcerated suffer pains of imprisonment that negatively impact mental (Fagan and Kupchik 2011) and physical health (Barnet et al. 2016), risk of future justice system involvement, and a myriad of other negative outcomes (Mendel 2023). Though data are readily available, this rather seismic change in the juvenile justice system has received relatively little scholarly attention. Consider this statement from Barry Feld, who is perhaps the leading scholar on youth punishment, minimizing the significance of the punishment declines observed as of a decade ago: “Despite substantial declines in youth crime, the punitive legacy of the 1980s and 1990s remains in place. Belated judicial recognition that children are different and the softening of punishment in a few states marks, at best, modest retreat from repressive policies” (Feld 2017, p. 274).

Though far fewer youth are subjected to the harms of incarceration, this is not to suggest youth incarceration is no longer a serious problem nor that it is no longer necessary to confront America’s harsh and often harmful methods for responding to youth crime. Indeed, as of 2023, a staggering 29,000 juveniles remain locked up. Focusing on juvenile decarceration, however, remains an important empirical endeavor. This is especially apparent when compared with adult incarceration rates. While there is a recent decline among adult populations, it is a fraction of the rate of decline seen among juveniles. At its peak in 2009, the one-day count of adults in state and federal prisons was 1,615,487

(Carson and Anderson 2016); in 2023 this number was at 1,254,200, a decrease of only 22%, far lower than the 73% decline found among juveniles. Scholars writing before the decline in juvenile incarceration presumed that juvenile and adult punishment trends ran parallel and, importantly, had similar causes (see Kupchik 2006). The recent divergence in these two trends invites us to revisit this presumption.

3. Prior Research on Juvenile Decarceration

Previous research on juvenile decarceration explores several themes to explain the United States' decrease in incarcerating its youth population. As Nam-Sonenstein and Sawyer (2025) describe:

The progress toward decarceration in the juvenile system can't be attributed to any single change; rather, historical factors, ongoing research, and dogged advocacy efforts all played important roles. Youth crime rates dropped. Some of the most egregious conditions of confinement were widely publicized, jolting policymakers to action. Adolescent brain research made it impossible to deem youth fully culpable and incapable of change. Evidence piled up showing that confinement leads to worse outcomes.

Importantly, however, much of this research seeks out immediate causes, such as changing laws, rather than the underlying causes producing both the immediate causes and decarceration. Thus, we know little about why states implemented policy reforms or why the conditions of confinement and lower crime rates became a powerful incentive for reforming youth incarceration more than for reforming the incarceration of adults, for example.

One particularly important theme to help explain decarceration is cost. Weiss (2013) describes how the high operating cost of facilities has led states to close facilities in order to reduce spending. New York, for example, shut down several statewide youth custodial facilities and transferred youth to facilities and/or non-custodial programs in their local communities instead (Weiss 2013; see also Bright et al. 2018; Cate 2016 for analyses of transfer to alternative local programs in other jurisdictions). More expensive public institutions were shuttered and replaced with purportedly cheaper privatized youth confinement facilities (Butts and Pfaff 2019).

States also seem to have considered the negative impact of incarceration on youth. Severe harms of youth incarceration such as diminished mental health and developmental delays have been documented in recent research (Mendel 2023). Given these concerns, states such as Missouri have shifted to using "treatment centers" designed as a last resort for "youth identified as having no other alternative" (Mallett and Boitel 2016, p. 160). Other states such as Washington now prohibit the incarceration of some youth (e.g., status offenders) but place them at risk of entry into their mental health system instead (Bronstein 2022; see also Nam-Sonenstein and Sawyer 2025).

Lawsuits challenging the conditions of youth confinement and seeking settlements for formerly incarcerated youth have also resulted in pressure to close facilities or reduce the number of youth who are incarcerated. For decades, both media and advocacy groups have documented widespread abuses in juvenile correctional institutions (Schiraldi and Soler 2004). Indeed, between 2000 and 2015 alone, abusive conditions were found to exist in juvenile correctional facilities in 29 states and Washington, DC (Mendel 2023). Lawsuits filed by people incarcerated as youth have resulted in states having to pay large sums (e.g., Hubler 2025; Watford 2025). Evidence of mistreatment and the growing liability of incarcerating youth might be a factor encouraging decarceration and the closure of facilities across the U.S. (Rovner 2025).

The growing popularity of and belief in the effectiveness of community-based alternatives to juvenile incarceration might shape youth incarceration rates as well. Missouri, for example, restructured their juvenile justice system, relying on small, unlocked cottages located in or near youths' home neighborhoods rather than large prison-like facilities. These cottages relied considerably on group and individual counseling and involved families in youths' treatment plans. This system became known as the "Missouri model," which garnered media attention and criminal justice system innovation awards ([Mendel 2010](#)). Other states, too, have reformed juvenile correctional strategies to move away from large prison-like facilities ([McCarthy et al. 2016](#)). The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) is another example of a positively viewed alternative to juvenile incarceration. Beginning in Broward County, FL, in the 1990s, the JDAI counsels justice agencies to use a screening instrument to limit the number of juveniles who are detained, offering them community-based therapeutic services instead. While this was directed at reducing the detention of juveniles pre-adjudication, rather than reducing their incarceration post-adjudication, it nevertheless demonstrates investment in alternatives to putting youth behind bars ([McCarthy et al. 2016](#)). While it is unclear the extent to which community-based alternatives reduce youth incarceration instead of widening the net of youth control nationally, nor why states have turned toward community-based alternative responses to youth crime, the growth of such alternatives highlights a societal shift away from periods marked by increased enthusiasm for incarcerating youth, such as that observed in the 1990s.

[Webster et al.'s \(2019\)](#) analysis of juvenile decarceration in Canada is also instructive. Juvenile correctional facilities there saw an 86% decline in their population from 1997 to 2015. They argue that shifting values, in which restraint in use of incarceration was valued more than the goal of using incarceration as a tool for youth rehabilitation, and broadly shared political will, led to national-level juvenile justice policy change. As a result of the 2003 Youth Criminal Justice Act, the entire Canadian juvenile justice system—from policing practices to sentencing—changed in ways that led to decarceration. [Webster et al. \(2019\)](#) demonstrate the effectiveness of a strong national-level policy in reducing juvenile incarceration, though it is not clear how their analysis might relate to the U.S. That is to say, in America's system of federalism, the criminal and juvenile justice systems are decentralized and operate not only in the context of fifty sovereign states, but thousands of counties ([Garland 2025](#); [Pfaff 2017](#)).

Other scholars have considered declining rates of youth incarceration in the U.S. but frame them as outweighed by other punitive trends. In one analysis, [Cate \(2016\)](#) analyzes Texas's juvenile justice system. This research finds that decreases in incarceration in state-run facilities are offset by the increased numbers of youth put on probation and incarcerated in county-level detention facilities. Other analyses raise concern about the intensive control over youth who are shifted to mental health facilities instead of youth detention centers ([Bronstein 2022](#)). These important critical analyses are reminiscent of prior work on how apparent efforts to rehabilitate youth can lead to net widening and harsh community control (e.g., [Cohen 1985](#); [Hudson 1984](#)).

[Cox \(2019\)](#) also offers an important critique of recent drivers of juvenile decarceration. She argues that juvenile justice system reformers' focus on traumatic histories, harsh conditions in juvenile custodial institutions, and developmental deficiencies only reinforce state control over youth. Cox argues that such concerns animate the same logic used to frame youth criminality and punitive responses. A continued focus on past trauma, for example, harkens back to early twentieth century penal-welfarism. Focusing on youth as "damaged individuals" in need of intervention rather than on broader structural inequalities calls into question decline in juvenile incarceration as nothing more than a passing trend.

This argument highlights the important limitations in much of the current juvenile justice reform rhetoric, particularly the lack of critical attention to developments in the control of youth.

4. Underlying Causes of Juvenile Decarceration

As we describe above, there is relatively little prior work explaining the underlying reasons for juvenile decarceration in the U.S. One notable exception is research conducted by [Evans et al. \(2020\)](#). This research studied the relationship between “state policy environments” and rates of youth confinement. More specifically, Evans et al. analyzed the relationship between declines in youth confinement and states’ “progressive policy environments”, which is operationalized using several indicators, including less punitive juvenile court practices (e.g., immaturity as an explicit factor in assessing competency), services provided (e.g., access to evidence-based programs), and jurisdictional restrictions (e.g., raising the age at which youth are considered juvenile delinquents). Interestingly, the researchers found that “the extent of progressive youth justice policy did *not* affect the downward trend in youth confinement” ([Evans et al. 2020](#), p. 22, emphasis added).

[Green \(2015\)](#) provides another notable contribution and perhaps the most rigorous theoretical exploration of underlying causes of US penal reform and the potential weakening of the US carceral project as a whole. Specifically, he identifies ten “catalytic factors and drivers that together opened windows of opportunity for progressive penal reforms” ([Green 2015](#), p. 276). Some of the shifts in policy identified by Green may be particularly relevant for understanding juvenile decarceration. These include the crime decline and changing dominant conceptions of the criminal offender.

Youth crime had risen extensively in the 1980s and 1990s, far more than adult crime increased during this time. Yet since the mid-1990s, high rates of youth crime and violence have declined dramatically. The increase in crime rates in the late 1980s and early 1990s that spurred the fear of crime and mass incarceration ([Garland 2025](#)) primarily reflected an increase in youth crime. Thus, youth crime declines may have been even more impactful than adult declines on policymakers’ views of crime and punishment because they represented improvement in a situation some experts (wrongly) forecasted as a wave of youth predatory violence (see [Nam-Sonenstein and Sawyer 2025](#)).

Another reform catalyst that [Green \(2015\)](#) focuses on is changing conceptions of the criminal offender. This seems relevant to youth, especially given the increase in widespread understandings of diminished competency among youth. While [Evans et al. \(2020\)](#) did not find any significant effects of juvenile court policy reforms that attempted to address diminished capacity and juvenile decarceration, it is important to consider this in the context of profound changes in knowledge of the juvenile brain. Aided by new neurological research technologies since the early 2000s, neuroscientific research has shown that the prefrontal cortex, which controls judgment and decision-making, is the last part of the brain to physically mature ([Casey et al. 2008](#); [Cauffman and Steinberg 2012](#)). Additional work showed that adolescents lack psycho-social maturity in several ways that reduces their culpability for criminal behavior. On average, youth as compared to adults are more influenced by peer pressure, more sensitive to rewards and less sensitive to risks of deviant behavior, and less able to empathize with others ([Steinberg and Monahan 2007](#); [Cauffman et al. 2005](#)). The recognition that youth lack the decision-making ability of adults has influenced the juvenile justice system by recasting the narrative of juvenile offenders as youth in need of support, care, and time to mature.

In our analyses, we build on the work of [Evans et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Green \(2015\)](#) to explore what might underlie changes in policy and practice that result in juvenile decarceration. Rather than testing theory, we consider how state-level decarceration relates to potentially

important state-level factors in ways that future research can test with rigorous data analysis. Our analyses are also influenced by [Garland's \(2025\)](#) recent work illustrating how the buildup and continuation of mass incarceration and carceral control is largely a function of the political economy. He argues that the combination of free-market capitalism, limited state capacity for social-economic investment in marginalized communities, and racialized indifference has resulted in sustained levels of policing and punishment that are far more aggressive and extensive than those of other Western nations. Other scholars also demonstrate the extensive efforts to police and punish the most marginalized populations, particularly those (e.g., young males of color) perceived to be threatening (e.g., [Feld 1999](#); [Rios 2011](#); [Wacquant 2009](#)).

With these prior scholars' work in mind, we consider how a variety of indicators of socio-economic disadvantage (poverty, high school dropout rates), populations that might be seen as threatening (young adults, Black young adults), crime, state investment and disinvestment in social welfare (state expenditures), and progressive politics (Democratic candidate votes) relate to state-level decarceration.

5. Methods

To explore these ideas about how state-level variation in juvenile decarceration relates to characteristics of states, we analyze publicly available data from a variety of sources. Our variables and their sources include the following; we show descriptive statistics for them in Table 1:

1. Juvenile incarceration rates: Annual state-level rate (per 100,000 youth) of juveniles committed to a residential placement (in either public or private facilities), reported by The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) website providing access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement.¹ We use rates from 1999 and 2023 to assess change over time.
2. Adult incarceration rates: The National Prisoner Statistics program report of incarceration rates (per 100,000 U.S. residents) in 2020 from the Bureau of Justice Statistics within the US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs ([Carson 2021](#)).
3. Presidential election results (2020): Data reported by the Federal Election Commission on statewide voting results ([Federal Election Commission 2022](#)). We calculate the proportionate surplus Democratic votes as the number of votes for Biden minus the number of votes for Trump, divided by the state population (using the U.S. Census reported "base" population as of 1 April 2020).
4. Number of juveniles serving sentences of life without parole (LWOP): Appendix B of [Mills et al. \(2016\)](#).
5. Poverty rates: 2019 release of the U.S. Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates program. We use the statewide estimated number of people in poverty, divided by the statewide population.
6. Public expenditures (all expenditures and public welfare spending): U.S. Census Bureau 2000 Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances. We divide the total expenditure value by the statewide population, and the expenditure on public welfare spending by the statewide population, for the per person estimates of each.
7. Juvenile crime rates: The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention report on rates of arrests per 100,000 youth, adapted from the FBI 2019 Crime in the United States Report. ([OJJDP 2022](#); [Federal Bureau of Investigation 2020](#)). We compute the mean of standardized (Z-score) arrest rates² for aggravated assault, robbery, larceny theft, drug abuse, and weapons.
8. Young adult population ages 18–24 (overall, and Black young adults): Annie E. Casey Foundation 2020 population estimates of 18–24-year-olds overall and by race, in the

KIDS Count Data Center. We compute the proportion of the statewide population that are 18–24-year-olds, generally, and the proportion of 18–24-year-olds who identify as Black.

9. High school dropout rates: Data on percentage of high school dropouts among persons 16–24 years old in 2018, reported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, adapted from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables Analyzed.

Variable	Observations	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Prop. Juvenile Incarceration Growth	52	−0.77	0.20	−0.96	0.13
Juvenile Incarceration Growth	52	−185.46	84.10	−447.00	13.00
Poverty Rate	52	0.12	0.03	0.07	0.19
Prop. Population 18–24	52	0.09	0.01	0.08	0.11
Black Proportion 18–24 Population	52	0.13	0.11	0.01	0.46
Adult Incarceration Rate	51	308.55	120.18	103.00	584.00
State Expenditure Rate—All	52	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.03
State Expenditure Rate—Public Services	52	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01
HS Dropout Rate	52	5.39	1.49	2.70	10.30
JLWOP	50	92.08	331.65	0.00	2295.00
Surplus Democratic Presidential Votes	52	−0.08	0.37	−0.94	0.84
Crime Rate	51	0.00	0.68	−1.42	2.21

Our dependent variable is the proportionate change in incarceration rate from 1999 to 2023. To compute this, we calculate the change in juvenile incarceration rate (the first item on the above list) from 1999 to 2023, divided by the 1999 rate, for each state. Positive values mean that states increased their juvenile incarceration rates, and negative values indicate decarceration, relative to the 1999 rate. Note that for descriptive purposes, in Table 1 we also show the summary statistics for overall change in incarceration rate (i.e., not normed to the 1999 incarceration rate).

The remaining data sources and variables listed above are independent variables in our analyses. We include each of them because prior literature or theory suggests they might relate to juvenile decarceration. To consider whether juvenile decarceration mirrors general trends in punishment or political conservativeness, we include measures of adult incarceration rates, presidential election results, and juveniles serving life without parole (Evans et al. 2020; Green 2015). Given the importance of youth crime rates in shaping punishment (Garland 2025; Green 2015; Nam-Sonenstein and Sawyer 2025), we include the variable for juvenile crime rates. Our measures of poverty rates and high school dropout rates account for socio-economic status and allow us to explore how juvenile incarceration coincides with the extent of the poor and undereducated (Wacquant 2009), while including data on public expenditures considers whether juvenile incarceration relates to broader themes in states' progressive policy environments and social spending (Evans et al. 2020; Garland 2025). Additionally, our indicators of the young adult populations and Black young adult populations allow us to consider how the size of groups that might be perceived as threatening relate to the levels of decarceration (Feld 1999).

To begin, we present a correlation matrix showing the bivariate correlation between our dependent variable and each independent variable: the poverty rate, the proportion of the state population aged 18–24, the proportion of the 18–24 state population that are Black, adult incarceration rates, the state's rate of expenditure on public services, the state's total rate of expenditure, high school dropout rate, number of youth serving JLWOP, the proportionate surplus of Democrat over Republican 2020 presidential election votes,

and the juvenile crime rate index. To illustrate relationships between variables that show potentially important relationships, we then show the scatterplot of juvenile proportionate incarceration rate change, and each other variable that has a correlation of approximately $r = 0.20$ or above. This includes poverty rate ($r = 0.28$), adult incarceration rate ($r = 0.20$), high school dropout rate ($r = 0.19$), and Democratic votes ($r = -0.32$). Each scatterplot includes a linear regression prediction line.

In our initial analyses we found a negative correlation between juvenile crime rates and incarceration rates ($r = -0.20$), suggesting that states with higher juvenile crime rates had decarcerated more than others. Upon further inspection, we realized that this is driven by a single outlier case, West Virginia, which has a low reported crime rate and was the only state to increase their incarceration rate. Once this outlier was removed, the correlation was $r = 0.05$. The analyses below show the results after removing West Virginia only for the correlation between crime rates and change in incarceration rate; otherwise, the results for the full version of the data are presented. Our data sources did not have data on adult incarceration rate, JLWOP, or juvenile crime rates for Washington DC, nor JLWOP numbers for New York; these observations are missing from our analyses.

6. Results

All states reduced their rates of juveniles committed to a custodial facility from 1999 to 2023, except for one, West Virginia, which increased its rate of juvenile commitment during this time span. Washington DC's rate of juvenile commitment remained stable, neither increasing like West Virginia, nor decreasing like all other states. Other than Washington DC and West Virginia, states reduced their juvenile commitment rates between 43% and 96% of their 1999 rate. In Figure 1 we display each state's proportionate change in incarceration rate from 1999 to 2023. To better understand this trend of decarceration we explore how a number of relevant characteristics relate to the extent to which states decarcerated. Our analyses are limited, given that we lack statistical power with a sample size of 52 (each state plus Washington DC and the US total). In Table 2 we show the bivariate correlation matrix between our variable for the proportionate incarceration rate change, 1999 to 2023, and each other variable. Because the variable measuring proportionate juvenile commitment rate looks at the change from 1999 to 2023, negative values of our dependent variable indicate decarceration relative to the state's 1999 commitment rate. A negative correlation therefore indicates that higher values of that independent variable are associated with greater rates of decarceration.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Variables Analyzed.

	Prop. Juv. Incarc. Growth	Poverty	Pop. 18–24	Black Pop. 18–24	Adult Incarc. Rate	Expend.— Public Serv.	Expend.— All	HS Dropout Rate	JLWOP	Surplus Dem. Votes	Crime Rate
Prop. Juv. Incarc. Growth	1.00										
Poverty	0.28	1.00									
Population 18–24	−0.12	0.00	1.00								
Black Population 18–24	−0.10	0.50	−0.15	1.00							
Adult Incarceration Rate	0.20	0.75	0.01	0.47	1.00						
State Expenditures—Public Serv.	0.05	−0.18	0.11	−0.34	−0.29	1.00					
State Expenditures—All	0.02	−0.25	0.11	−0.35	−0.23	0.91	1.00				
HS Dropout Rate	0.19	0.65	−0.15	0.10	0.55	−0.19	−0.29	1.00			
JLWOP	−0.04	0.08	−0.06	0.10	0.11	−0.20	−0.19	0.01	1.00		
Surplus Dem. Votes	−0.32	−0.32	−0.14	0.07	−0.47	−0.18	−0.29	−0.22	0.08	1.00	
Crime Rate	0.05	0.00	−0.14	0.19	0.15	−0.10	−0.03	0.11	−0.02	−0.15	1.00

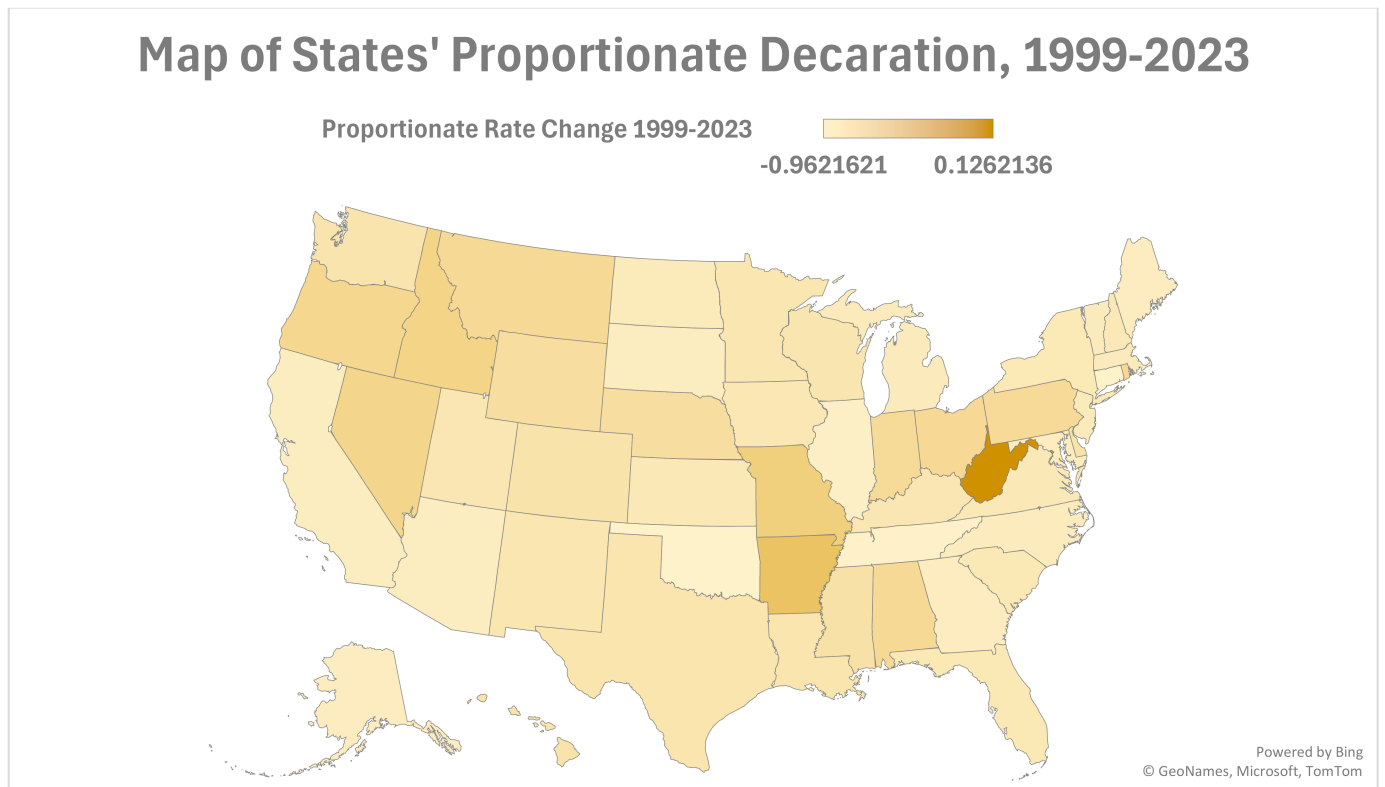


Figure 1. Map of Proportionate Juvenile Decarceration of U.S. States 1999–2023 (change in youth commitment rates from 1999 to 2023 as a proportion of 1999 youth commitment rates).

The correlations shown in Table 2 are relatively small; the largest correlation between proportionate juvenile commitment rate change and any other variable is $r = -0.32$ and shows an association with the surplus of 2020 presidential election votes for the Democratic candidate (Biden). The only other correlations that are noteworthy are the correlation between proportionate juvenile incarceration and poverty rate ($r = 0.28$), adult incarceration rate ($r = 0.20$), and high school dropout rate ($r = 0.19$). States with relatively high poverty rates, adult incarceration rates, and high school dropout rates each showed somewhat lower rates of decarceration, or juvenile commitment rates that were closer in 2023 to their 1999 rates compared to other states. In contrast, states that Biden won in 2020 by a wider margin showed somewhat greater rates of decarceration, or juvenile commitment rates that changed more and in a negative direction, as a proportion of their 1999 commitment rates.

Though each of these correlations is relatively small, they are all consistent with prior research on punishment, generally. That is, prior research shows political conservativeness helps predict state-level incarceration rates (Greenberg and West 2001), and that poverty and incarceration rates tend to be linked as two related methods of controlling the poor (e.g., Wacquant 2009). Prior research also shows a very strong connection between high school graduation rates and overall incarceration rates (Western 2006). It seems reasonable that states that invest more in penal control for adults and less in social services such as public education would also have relatively higher rates of juvenile incarceration (e.g., Garland 2025).

To further explore state-level decarceration, we graph the relationship between proportionate decarceration and each of these four variables in Figures 2–5. Each Figure shows a scatterplot where proportionate change in juvenile incarceration rate is on the Y axis, and one of these four predictor variables is on the X axis. Each includes a linear regression prediction line to help summarize the trend between pairs of variables. The scatterplots

clearly illustrate that all states (other than West Virginia and Washington DC) decarcerated, and they did so unevenly.

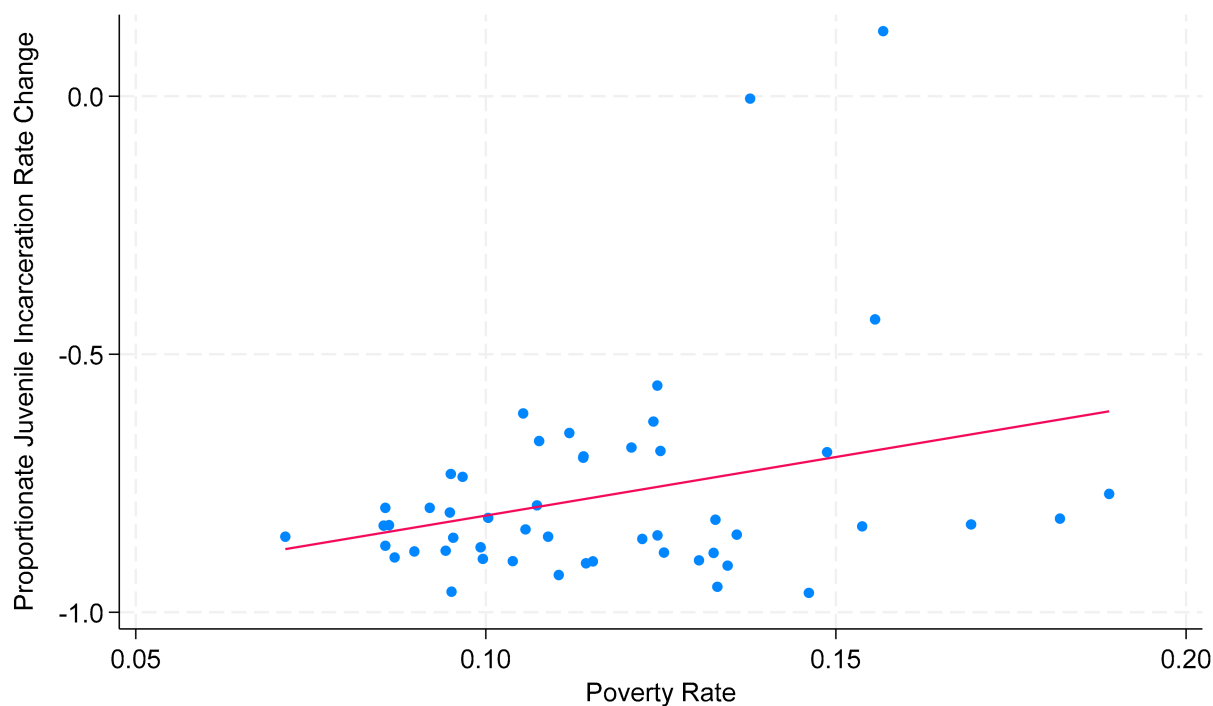


Figure 2. Scatterplot of Relationship Between Proportionate Juvenile Incarceration Rate Change and Poverty Rate.

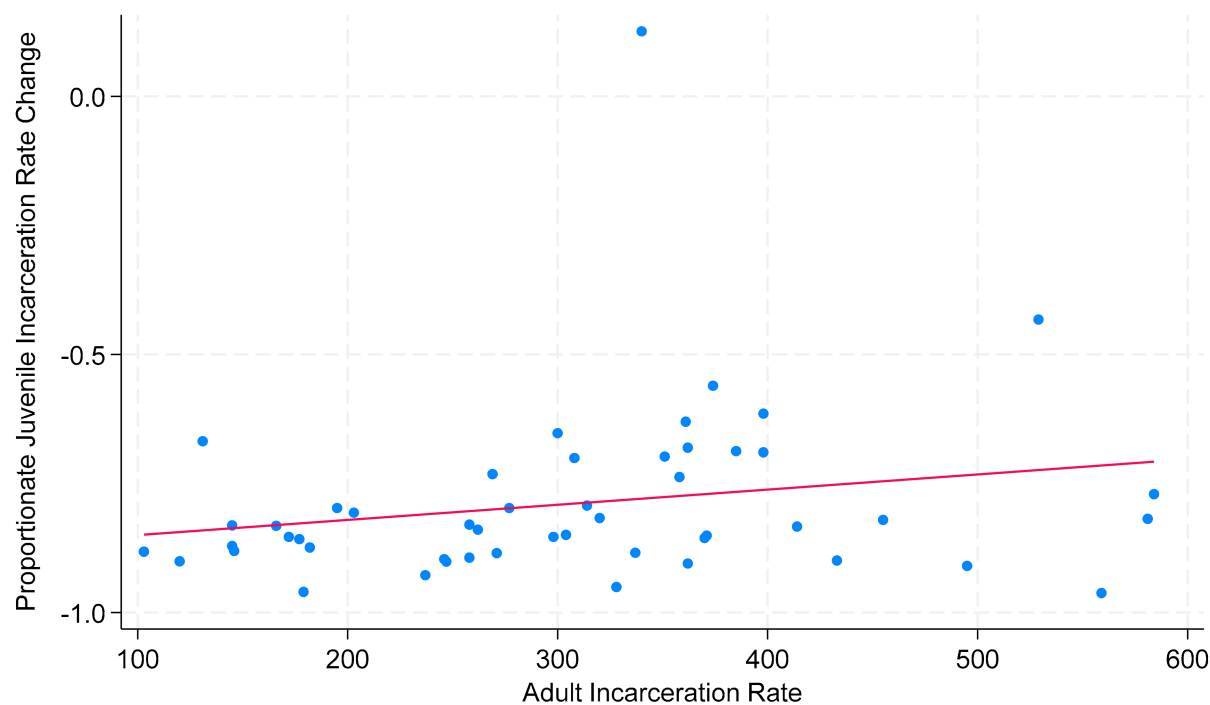


Figure 3. Scatterplot of Relationship Between Proportionate Juvenile Incarceration Rate Change and Adult Incarceration Rate.

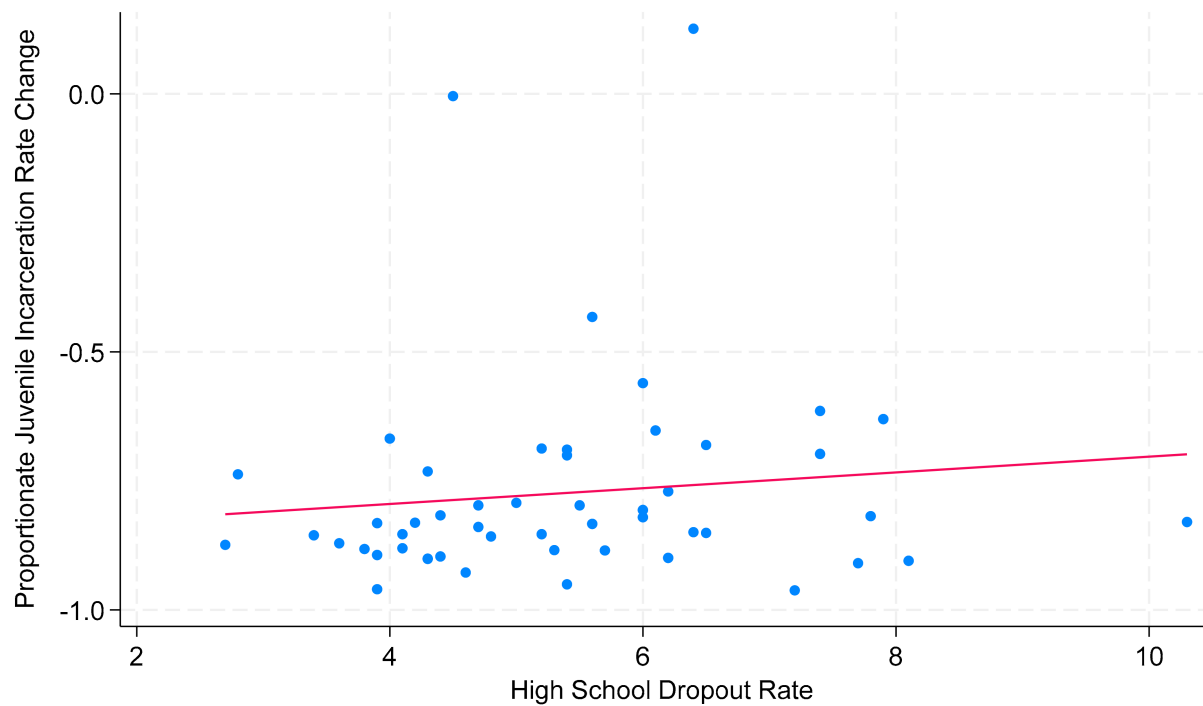


Figure 4. Scatterplot of Relationship Between Proportionate Juvenile Incarceration Rate Change and High School Dropout Rate.

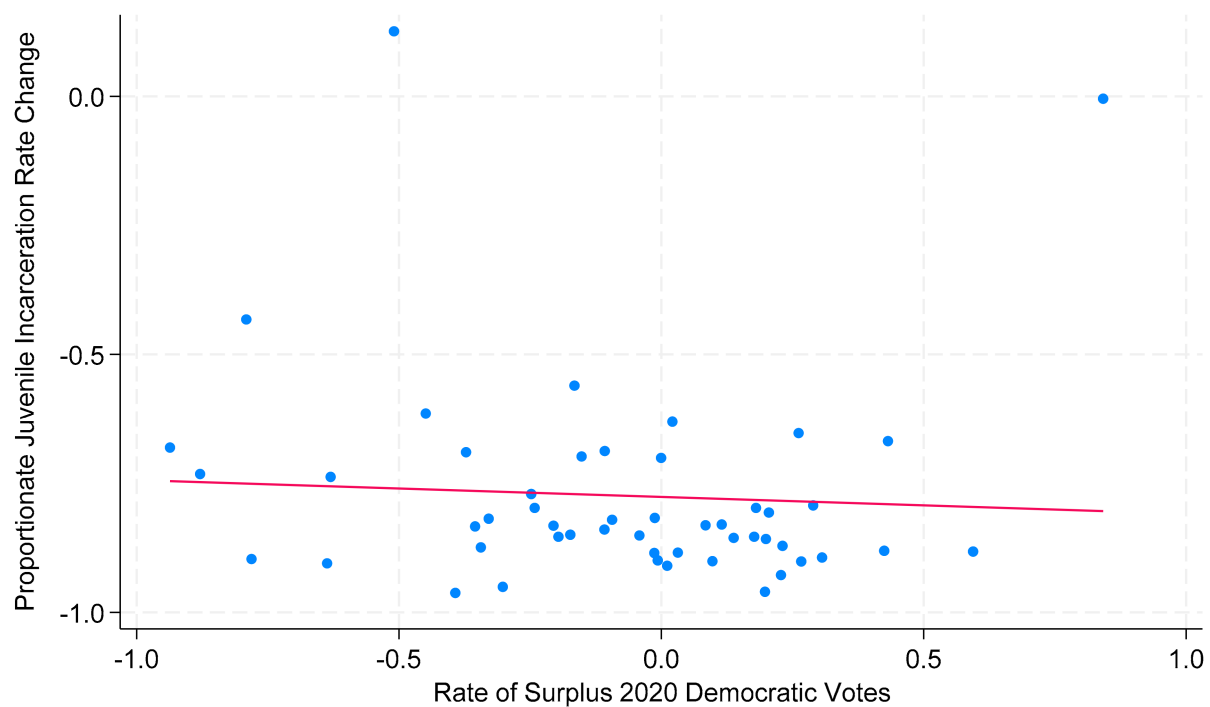


Figure 5. Scatterplot of Relationship Between Proportionate Juvenile Incarceration Rate Change and Surplus Votes for Biden Over Trump in 2020.

The positive relationships seen in the correlations between juvenile incarceration and poverty, high school dropouts, and adult incarceration are clear in Figures 2–4. In Figure 5 the negative correlation between 2020 presidential election Democratic votes and the change in juvenile incarceration is clearly displayed. Each Figure demonstrates a trend, though considerable variation and some (low leverage) outliers are evident.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper, we provide descriptive analyses that show a trend toward the decarceration of juveniles in the U.S. While we argue that decarceration is one step toward a society where youth face less harmful punishment, we recognize clear limitations in our analyses. For one, an invasive youth control complex remains in place in marginalized neighborhoods of color (Rios 2011). Clearly, more local level analyses must be conducted to better understand variation in the extent and consequences of juvenile decarceration.

Garland et al. (2014) define decarceration not only as the shrinking of institutional populations but also as movement from more secure forms of confinement to less secure forms of correctional control, emphasizing that the change is not uniform across states, localities, or the federal government. Existing research similarly argues that decarceration (among states such as New York) should not be read automatically as total reform or investment in rehabilitation, but may instead signal a new regime of ‘justice disinvestment’, marked by a movement away from state institutions and toward differentiated community-based control, new private and nonprofit actors, and expanding data and hardware technologies (Martin 2016). Viewed from this perspective, juvenile decarceration may be one part of a broader restructuring of punishment across the country. It is also important not to overstate the successes of programs such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI)—a program that is well regarded, but that involves 300 jurisdictions in a country with over 3000 jurisdictions nationally—and to pay close attention to problems such as net widening and punitive control logics.

Indeed, recent research on reforms designed to reduce youth confinement in Ohio (Park et al. 2024) are instructive in this regard. While lower youth crime rates in the state resulted in lower incarceration rates, legal reforms aimed at diverting youth into community alternatives only impacted youth assessed to be low-risk. There was no reduction in confinement for youth involved in higher-risk, violent offenses. Following Beckett’s (2022) recent research finding that new laws passed to limit the incarceration of lower-level adult offenses were offset by more severe sentences for violent adult crimes, we fear the same may occur with youth offenses. While reforms resulting in less incarceration for lower-level offenses are a laudable goal, on their own they are unlikely to produce significant declines in incarceration rates in the long run. A focus on so-called “non, non, nons” (Gottschalk 2016)—non-violent, non-sexual, and non-serious offenses—is a limited approach to sustained decarceration.

We also note that our analysis is based on a small state-level sample, which constrains statistical power, limiting our ability to conduct additional analyses. Given our limited statistical power and the fact that all but one state reduced their juvenile incarceration rates, our limited results may be due to the fact that decarceration is driven by national trends rather than state-level conditions. The relative decline across states suggests that decarceration may be influenced more by nationwide shifts such as widespread decline in support for zero-tolerance punishment policies, fiscal pressure, legal reform, advocacy, and changing views of youth, and less by state-level poverty, punishment, or politics alone. In contrast, it is also possible that our state-level analyses mask substantial variation across regions within each state.

Again, we caution that decarceration should not be interpreted uncritically as good news. Fewer youth in locked facilities is important and likely means fewer youth exposed to the severe harm of confinement; but the literature repeatedly warns that decarceration can coexist with the expansion, relocation, or rebranding of penal control rather than its contractions (Cate 2016). Moreover, community-based alternatives to incarceration often expand rather than reduce punitive supervision, inadvertently producing net widening by drawing more youth into intrusive systems. At the same time, the literature also shows

why the appeal of decarceration remains so strong. Youth who are supervised locally and placed near home rather than sent farther away to state institutions are better able to maintain family and school ties (Butts et al. 2015).

Whether decarceration represents true transformation depends on what replaces confinement. If juvenile incarceration is replaced by robust community resources, educational support, family-centered services, and reduced system contact, then decarceration may represent real progress away from invasive carceral control. If, instead, it is replaced by county detention, electronic monitoring, intensive probation, privatized programming, and widened surveillance, then the decline in incarceration may mask continuity in the underlying logic of punishment.

Our analyses offer a framework for continuing to consider drivers of decarceration. It is our hope that future research continues to explore these themes in a number of directions. One is to conduct more fine-grained, local analyses within states. A state may appear to have a high level of decarceration in aggregate, yet that pattern may conceal substantial county, local, and neighborhood variation. Second, future research should pay attention to rural–urban differences, both within and across states, because the closure of state institutions and the expansion of local alternatives may affect communities very differently depending on institutional capacity, local resources, and political context. Third, future research should continue to assess whether racial inequality changes as states decarcerate. A state may incarcerate fewer youth overall while deepening racial disparities in who remains under confinement or supervision. Finally, more research geared towards longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches would be useful for identifying whether declining state confinement produces durable reductions in punishment or merely redistributes control across new actors, sites, and technologies.

8. Conclusions

In this study we examine state-level trends in juvenile decarceration, identifying factors that help to explain why some states may have decarcerated more than others, and how relevant characteristics of those states may relate to their level of juvenile decarceration. Though we identify a handful of state characteristics that meaningfully relate to decarceration, these relationships do not appear very robust. This might be due to methodological constraints, including low statistical power, or it might be due to juvenile decarceration being a national phenomenon driven more by broad historical and institutional shifts than by state-level conditions. The central challenge for future research is to explain why juvenile incarceration has declined, and also to determine what exactly has replaced it, where that replacement is occurring, and for whom decarceration represents genuine transformation rather than punishment in a new form.

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Justice and Delinquency Prevention; KIDS Count Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation; National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education.

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Notes

- ¹ All direct reports of OJJDP data are based on the authors' analysis of the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement, available at <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/> (accessed on 28 October 2025).
- ² The OJJDP data on juvenile arrest rates includes the percentage of the state that reported to OJJDP ("reporting coverage"). This ranges from 1% (Illinois) to 100% (several); West Virginia has a reporting rate of 53%.

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