

The New York City Story

Over the past two decades, the number of people on probation in New York City has significantly declined. At the same time, the city's violent crime and incarceration rates have also declined substantially, leaving New York as the safest and least incarcerated big city in America. New York stands as an example of a jurisdiction that has been able to make more parsimonious and strategic use of community supervision, while still reducing its crime and incarceration rates.

Since the mid-90s, the probation population has been declining and is now less likely to include those who don't actually need probation supervision. During that time, the number of people on probation in New York City has declined by roughly two-thirds, from more than 68,000 to fewer than 22,000. By 2014, only 4.3 percent of New York's felony arrestees were sentenced to probation, while 25.8 percent received conditional discharges or other informal dispositions.

Did this two-thirds reduction in community supervision jeopardize public safety? Did jail populations skyrocket as the system made less use of probation as an alternative to incarceration? The answer to both questions is a resounding no.

From 1996, the city's violent crime rate declined by 57 percent, and its jail and prison incarceration rate dropped by 55 percent.

In addition to New York City increasingly using informal dispositions and eschewing formal probation, the nature of probation in the city changed as well, shifting to a risk/needs model that has resulted in more targeted use of resources and calibrated supervision levels. In 1996, the city began to use electronic kiosk reporting in lieu of in-person reporting for low-risk clients, a practice that grew to encompass a significant portion of the city's probation caseload. Research on the kiosk program found that rearrests for both high and low risk probation clients declined after the kiosk program was expanded.

Lengths of stay on New York City probation have been shortened in two different and important ways. From 2007 to 2012, the number of people discharged early from probation grew almost six-fold, from three to 17 percent. Research from 2010 showed that 3 percent of the clients released early from probation were rearrested on felony charges within a year of discharge versus 4.3 percent of clients who continued on probation until their maximum expiration date.

New York State policymakers also changed state law allowing judges to give shorter probation terms. Sixteen percent of persons placed on probation in New York City for felonies during the law's first year (2014) were sentenced to less than the maximum, compared to 3% in the rest of the state.

With fewer people on probation, the per capita budget for those remaining on probation increased dramatically despite a significant overall decrease to the department's budget. In 2002, the budget was \$96.8 million for a caseload of 75,000, for a per capita average of \$1,290. By 2016, as its caseload declined, the probation department's budget dropped to \$73 million. However, for the remaining 21,000 probation clients, the per capita spending was \$3,476 — more than double the 2002 level, controlling for inflation. This has allowed the department to fund a variety of programmatic initiatives, including the NeON (Neighborhood Opportunity Network) Centers, a series of decentralized neighborhood offices offering a variety of employment and education programs, the Arches mentoring program that is facilitated by credible messenger mentors, and ACE (Anyone Can Excel), a supervision model for young people aged 16-24. From 2010 to 2014, the department increased the number of contracts for community-based non-profit services (from two to 54), thus truly returning the "community" to community corrections.