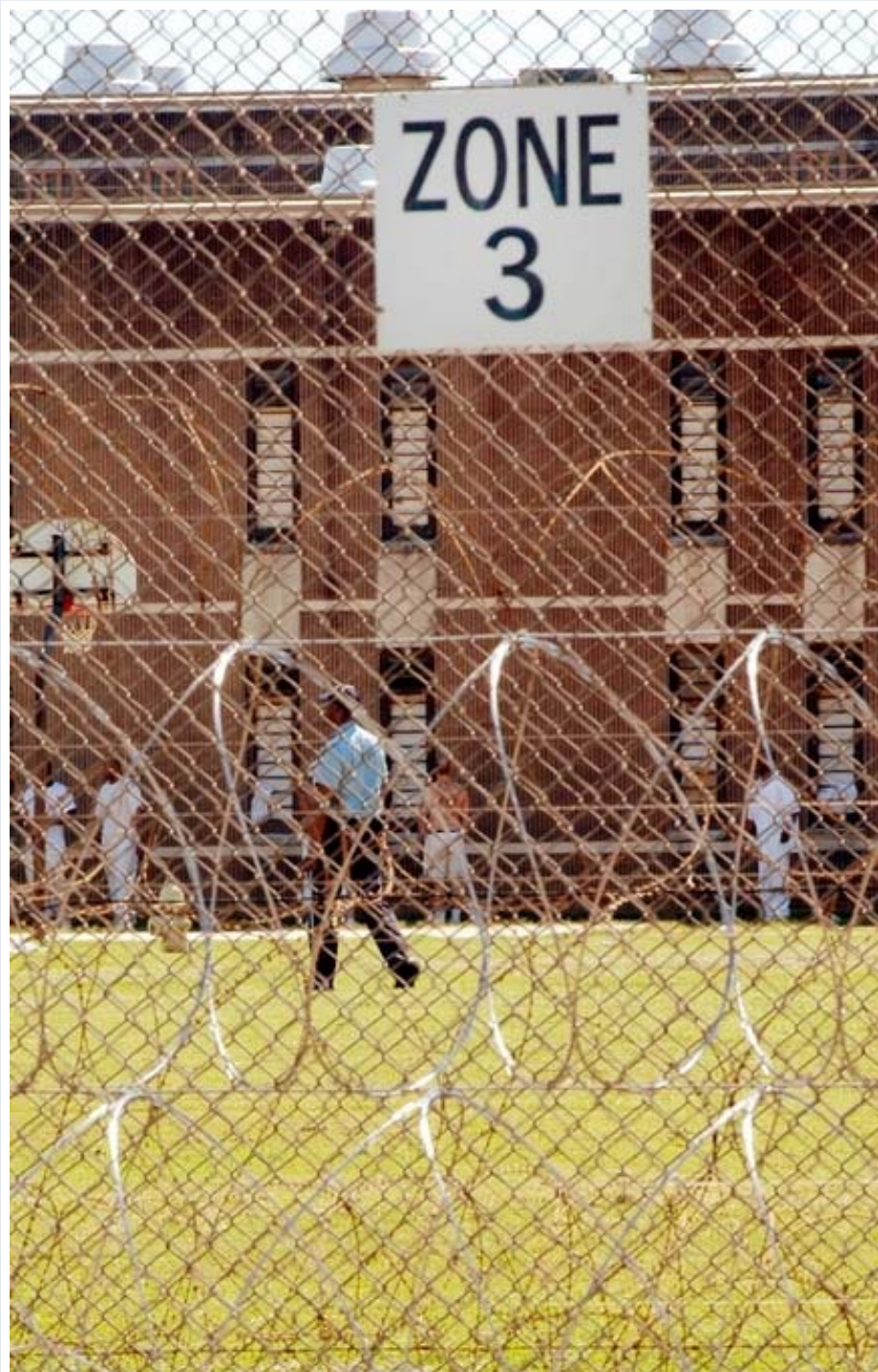




## Alabama inmate numbers on rise

By Tom Gordon -- The Birmingham News

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(AP Photo/Jay Reeves)

A correctional officer walks inside a fence past inmates at Donaldson Correctional Facility near Bessemer, Ala., in this file photograph.

The nation's number of state prison inmates dropped slightly in 2009 -- the first decrease recorded in nearly 38 years -- but Alabama's prison population went in the other direction.

According to a report from the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Center on the States, Alabama's jurisdictional prison population -- the number of inmates the state is responsible for housing -- totaled 31,561 on Jan. 1. That is an increase of 3.5 percent over the population of 30,508 listed on Dec. 31, 2008.

Over the same period, according to the report, the nation's state prison population dropped 0.4 percent, from 1,408,830 to 1,403,091.

Alabama Corrections Commissioner Richard Allen said his department has been working to reduce its prison population. If the state had not adopted a package of sentencing guidelines several years ago, the population would be even higher, he said.

One problem is that judges and district attorneys are not using the guidelines as much "as we think they should," Allen said.

### **Drug courts**

Alabama Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb said district attorneys need to be more willing for drug-addicted, nonviolent offenders to go to drug courts instead of prison. According to The Associated Press, drug courts allow nonviolent drug offenders to go through a lengthy program that involves intense supervision and testing while they are rehabilitated. The charges are dropped if they stay drug free for a year.

The state has 55 drug courts in 51 counties, and 12 more are planned.

"It's absolutely essential that we get the DAs on board so that we start making people safe and stop wasting tax dollars," said Cobb, who is hoping to hold a state sentencing conference in September.

According to a Department of Corrections report prepared for Allen, drug offenders made up nearly 34 percent of the 11,729 inmates who entered the jurisdictional prison population in fiscal 2008.

Allen also said state courts are recording about 3,000 more felony convictions than they did in 2001. Felonies are serious crimes, punishable by death or a prison sentence of more than a year.

Lynda Flynt, executive director of the Alabama Sentencing Commission, said the state has added 100 felony crimes to the books since 1998 and people convicted of some of those crimes must serve mandatory minimum sentences. One example: second and additional convictions for first-degree domestic violence.

During the same period, state lawmakers also upgraded eight misdemeanors to felonies, Flynt said. One example: enticing a child under 16 into a house or a vehicle for immoral purposes.

### **Increase in 23 states**

According to the Pew report, prison populations in 23 of the 50 states increased in varying percentages in 2009, and seven were in the Southeast. The Southeastern state with the highest percentage increase was Louisiana, with 3.7 percent, slightly above Alabama's.

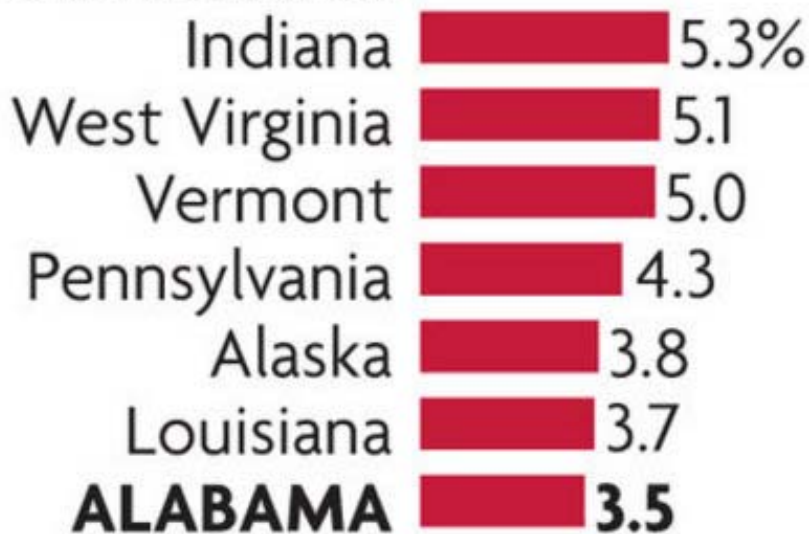
Three of Alabama's neighbors -- Tennessee, Florida and Georgia -- registered smaller percentage increases in their prison populations. Mississippi, however, recorded a drop of 5.4 percent, and the Pew report attributes that in part to a 2008 change in state law that "rolled back to 25 percent, from 85 percent, the portion of sentences that nonviolent offenders are required to serve prior to parole eligibility."

## FEWER INMATES IN NATION, MORE IN ALABAMA

The number of state prisoners in the U.S. declined 0.4 percent from 2008 to 2009, for the first time since 1972. In the Southeast, Alabama's increase in prison population was second only to that in Louisiana.

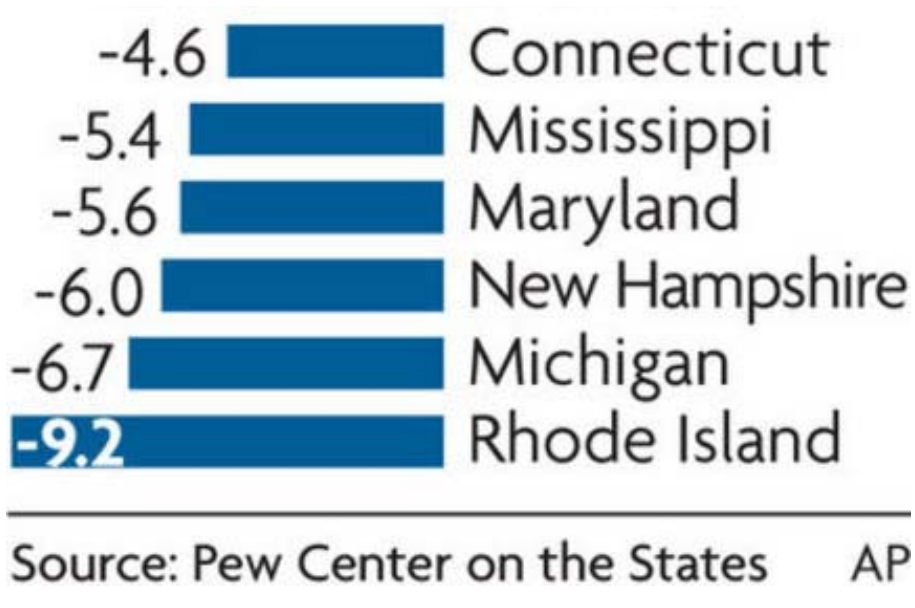
### Percent change in prison population, 2008-2009

#### BIGGEST INCREASES



#### BIGGEST DECREASES

-4.2%  Delaware



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