Mandatory Sentences: How We Got Here

New York’s Rockefeller drug laws come into effect, establishing mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses.

Minnesota and Pennsylvania become first states to establish sentencing commissions.

• Comprehensive Criminal Control Act establishes a federal sentencing commission.
  • Washington state enacts the first truth-in-sentencing law that requires violent offenders to serve most of their sentences in prison.

Congress formally adopts federal sentencing guidelines; five states now have sentencing guidelines.

• California passes Proposition 184 (three strikes law) enhancing mandatory penalties for third-time felony convictions.
  • Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act introduces a federal three strikes law and restricts federal funding for prison construction to states that enact truth-in-sentencing laws. Five states already have truth-in-sentencing laws in place.
  • Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act creates the first safety valve provisions that allow judges to sentence certain nonviolent offenders below mandatory minimums in limited circumstances.

Sixteen states now have abolished parole.

Michigan eliminates mandatory sentences for most drug offenses.

New York eliminates mandatory minimums in low-level drug cases and reduces minimum mandatory penalties in other drug cases.

At least thirteen states now have narrowed sentence enhancements.

State general fund correctional spending*

State prison population sentenced to at least one year**

Minnesota becomes first state to adopt sentencing guidelines.

Anti-Drug Abuse Act establishes mandatory minimums for federal drug offenses and institutes the 100:1 powder-to-crack cocaine sentencing ratio. (100:1)

$7.7 billion 469,934

Eleven additional states pass truth-in-sentencing laws.

• Twenty-four states now have three strikes laws.
  • Seventeen states now have sentencing guidelines.
  • Twenty-nine states now have truth-in-sentencing laws.

Sixteen states now have abolished parole.

Michigan eliminates mandatory sentences for most drug offenses.

New York eliminates mandatory minimums in low-level drug cases and reduces minimum mandatory penalties in other drug cases.

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