

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/out-of-sight-growth-of-jails-rural-america>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Americas 3,283 jails are the front door to mass incarceration. But for too long, county jail systems have operated and grown outside of public view. Vera's Incarceration Trends [data tool](#), launched in 2015, illuminated the growth in local jail populations over the last 40 years.

This report and accompanying data visualization explores one of the Incarceration Trends projects most startling revelations that the main drivers of mass incarceration are small and rural counties, not major cities. Vera's research identified two drivers of this trend: an increase in the number of people being held pretrial, and in the number of people being held for other authorities. Read the report to learn more, and explore the interactive data visualization, below, to see the data for your county.

The use of pretrial detention is driving jail overuse nationally. During the past decade, pretrial incarceration rates in rural counties have continued to grow while they have declined in urban counties. In 2013, the national pretrial incarceration rate was 220 per 100,000.

This table ranks the highest rates of pretrial incarceration. Use the filter to see the list across just urban, suburban, small and mid-sized metros, or rural counties. Use the search box to add any county of interest to the list, and click any county for complete detail. Pretrial incarceration rates are per 100,000 county residents aged 15-64.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Census of Jails (2013).

Notes: These tables provide rankings for 2,584 of the 3,144 U.S. counties and county equivalents. The 560 excluded counties are the 54 counties in the six states (Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Rhode Island, and Vermont) that do not have local jails because the state prison system also provides pretrial detention; the 145, mostly rural, counties that did not supply the necessary data to BJS; the 357, mostly rural, counties that either have pretrial incarceration rates in excess of 1,000 per 100,000 or more than 90 percent of the jail population held for other authorities. This latter group is excluded because these places are generally very small counties (e.g., fewer than 10,000 residents) in which the jail effectively serves as a regional jail or contract jail for the state and federal government. Because the preponderance of detainees are from out of the county, the county pretrial incarceration rate cannot be reliably estimated. There are a total of 25,025 pretrial detainees in these excluded counties, or an average of 70 per county. Because of reporting error, St. Louis County, MO, Allegheny County, PA, Davidson County, TN, Cameron County, TX, and El Paso County, TX use 2012 data from the Survey of Jails instead of 2013.

The number of pretrial detainees, and the number of individuals held for other local, state, and federal authorities, is the single day count on December 31, 2013.

The pretrial incarceration rate is calculated using the county population aged 15 to 64 to account for the fact that under-15 and over-64 population varies widely by county and including them would skew rates and complicate comparisons.

More than 8 in 10 jails hold individuals for other corrections and law enforcement agencies, and 22% of all people in jail are being held for another authority. This practice is most common in rural jails, which typically hold individuals for other local jails and the state prison system. The urban jails that do hold a large number of individuals for other authorities tend to be near federal court houses and hold people facing federal charges.

This table ranks the counties with the highest share of the jail occupied by people held for other authorities. Use the filter to see the list across just urban, suburban, small and mid-sized metros, or rural counties. Use the search box to add any county of interest to the list, and click any county for complete detail.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Census of Jails (2013).

Notes: These tables provide rankings for 2,584 of the 3,144 U.S. counties and county equivalents. The 560 excluded counties are the 54 counties in the six states (Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Rhode Island, and Vermont) that do not have local jails because the state prison system also provides pretrial detention; the 145, mostly rural, counties that did not supply the necessary data to BJS; the 357, mostly rural, counties that either have pretrial incarceration rates in excess of 1,000 per 100,000 or more than 90 percent of the jail population held for other authorities. This latter group is excluded because these places are generally very small counties (e.g., fewer than 10,000 residents) in which the jail effectively serves as a regional jail or contract jail for the state and federal government. Because the preponderance of detainees are from out of the county, the county pretrial incarceration rate cannot be reliably estimated. There are a total of 25,025 pretrial detainees in these excluded counties, or an average of 70 per county. Because of reporting error, St. Louis County, MO, Allegheny County, PA, Davidson County, TN, Cameron County, TX, and El Paso County, TX use 2012 data from the Survey of Jails instead of 2013.

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