

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/the-perils-of-probation-how-supervision-contributes-to-jail-populations>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Probation has been viewed traditionally as an alternative and solution to the problem of mass incarceration. However, as the number of people on probation has grown massively and probation supervision has become more punitive over the past few decades, recent reports have focused on how probation is actually contributing to mass incarceration.

But there is little information about probation's impact on jail populations in particular. To remedy this, Vera obtained detailed data from nine cities and counties participating in the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC), a national initiative that seeks to address over-incarceration by changing the way the United States thinks about and uses jails. This report explores how probation drives jail populations in racially disparate ways through stringent and difficult-to-meet probation conditions that can result in revocation and through the detention of people awaiting violation hearings.

Probation has been considered an alternative to incarceration, but it has become more common and more punitive over time. It is increasingly a driving force in mass incarceration. By sentencing fewer people to probation, limiting the length of probation terms, and preventing probation violations, jail populations overall can decrease.

Increasingly large numbers of people are having their probation supervision revoked and are then being sentenced to incarceration.

Two SJC sites—St. Louis County, Missouri, and Allegheny County, Pennsylvania—reduced the number of people on probation in their jails by funding support services and providing for early termination.

There are pronounced racial disparities in the population of people held in jail for probation violations, with Black and Native American people disproportionately incarcerated.

PUBLICATION

PUBLICATION

SPECIAL REPORT (CHAPTERED)

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