

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/covid-19-1/use-this-data-to-hold-your-local-jail-accountable-during-the-pandemic>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

On Monday, America crossed the threshold of [10,000 deaths](#) from COVID-19. As bad as things are on the outside, the pandemic pales in comparison with the horrors that are being faced by people behind bars right now. Prisons are kill-boxes. Incarcerated people are going to suffer. They have no way to get away from it, wrote Michelle Jones, who spent 20 years inside Indiana prisons, in a [report](#) submitted to Indiana state authorities on March 30. And the situation will only get worse.

Jails are places where people, even during ordinary times, are at greater risk of death. Its clear that the best way to keep people safe is to let them return home. Although there have [been some efforts](#) to decarcerate, they have been too small.

Now, [using a new tool from Vera](#), you can hold policymakers accountable by monitoring jail populations across the country. The tool presents the most recent jail population data available, as well as the jail population before the crisis. You can see who is taking the steps necessary to downsize jails during this crisis and identify places acting less quickly, where we should concentrate efforts to decarcerate.

It is important to note that reductions in the number of people in jail are not necessarily the result of changes enacted in response to the crisis. Fewer people may be entering jail because mandated social distancing has reduced court operations, law enforcement presence, and social activity. As the crisis worsens, decreases in jail populations can also be the result of people being transferred to medical facilities or dying from the novel coronavirus.

Our new tool reveals that, in the more than 300 places we are tracking, jail populations have fallen about 20 percent during the past few weeks. This is not sufficient to keep people safe. Although this may seem like a steep decline, it is critical to underscore that the United States is a global anomaly in its use of mass incarceration and locks up people at a rate more than six times the rest of the world. About two-thirds of the people in U.S. jails are held before trial, legally innocent. It is crucial that jails immediately decarcerate to avoid catastrophe.

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