

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/the-price-of-jails-measuring-the-taxpayer-cost-of-local-incarceration>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Jails are far more expensive than previously understood, as significant jail expenditures such as employee benefits, health care and education programs for incarcerated people, and general administration are often not reflected in jail budgets, but rather in other county agencies. This report surveys 35 jail jurisdictions in 18 states to tally the actual price of their jails and discovered that the untallied cost of jail can be sizable. More than 20 percent of jail costs were outside the jail budget in nearly a quarter of the surveyed jurisdictions.

The surest way to safely cut jail costs is to reduce the number of people who enter and stay there. In doing so, jurisdictions will be able to save resources and make investments necessary to address the health and social service needs of their communities.

As government leaders and the public question whether jail is being used cost-effectively to meet a community's safety and justice needs, they need to understand what the total costs are. The methodology developed for this study can serve as a tool to do that.

The annual cost, per incarcerated individual, averaged \$47,057 in the 35 jurisdictions that responded to Vera's survey.

Payroll expenses comprise 74 percent of the total cost of jails.

The cost of jails, nationwide, has grown four-fold between 1983 and 2011 from \$5.7 billion to 22.2 billion.

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