

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/what-do-local-jails-really-cost>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

How much does it cost to house the 730,000 men and women in Americas jails? Seems like a simple enough question to answer, but the fact is, no one really knows. The U.S. government estimates \$22.2 billion per year, but as we found in our latest report, [*The Price of Jails: Measuring the Taxpayer Cost of Local Incarceration*](#) this amount excludes correctional costs borne by other government agencies, such as jail employee benefits and medical care for those incarcerated.

So what does this mean for the price of your local jail? It means that its likely more expensive than estimated. Our research found that, in a quarter of the 35 jurisdictions we surveyed, more than 20 percent of jail costs came from outside the corrections budget.

Take New York City for example, where the cost of jail has been widely reported yet is still difficult to pin down. In August 2013, *The New York Times* cited the [Independent Budget Offices \(IBO\)](#) annual per-inmate figure at \$168,000. Fourteen months later, the *Times* cited the [city comptrollers](#) analysis, which put the annual figure at nearly \$100,000 per inmate. What gives?

The comptrollers analysis only included the cost to the citys correction department and excluded all the costs outside the jail budget, including employee benefits, inmate health care, and inmate education, to name a few. The IBO analysis included the employee benefits, but excluded the other outside costs.

New York City was among the jurisdictions that participated in the Price of Jails survey. Our research found that, when nearly all the outside costs are tallied, the citys per-inmate figure is actually \$208,000. And even that figure is low, because the respondents were unable to identify the cost of retiree health care and legal judgments, which are also outside the jail budget.

Knowing the actual price of jail is fundamental to reform. Without having a grasp of the costs, policymakers will not know the full scope of potential jail savings as inmate populations decline. For example, between 2008 and 2014, the jail population in Hampden County, Massachusetts declined by 30 percent. As a result, the Hampden County Sheriffs Department was able to close six housing units and downsize 11 others, enabling the department to remove 154 staff positions from the payroll. Consequently, the sheriffs department saves \$13.1 million annually. Because the Commonwealth of Massachusetts pays for jail employee benefits, the state saves an additional \$2.9 million annually, bringing the total savings to \$16 million per year.

A comprehensive analysis of jail savings is only possible with a thorough inventory of jail costs. We hope that *The Price of Jails* can serve as a tool to help cities and counties identify the full scope of potential savings as they reshape their systems to better meet their justice and safety goals.

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