

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/covid-19-1/covid-19-imperils-people-in-rural-jails>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

People in jails and prisons are among the most at risk for contracting COVID-19 and rural America is home to a large number of prisons and crowded jails. As the number of COVID-19 deaths grows rapidly in rural counties, people who reside and work in jails are safer at home.

The spread of COVID-19 in New York City, Seattle, New Orleans, and other cities has captured the nations attention for the past month. There are now clear signs that the crisis will soon overwhelm these cities hospitals. As the number of COVID-19 cases continues to rise in jails, prisons, and communities, the situation is likely to worsen in the coming weeks.

While COVID-19 caseloads are currently lower outside of the biggest cities, 56 percent of rural counties in the United States had confirmed cases as of Tuesday, March 31, according to [New York Times data](#). Geographically dispersed populations are often [misunderstood](#) as being automatically protected against community spread, but the most recent data puts this fallacy into stark relief. COVID-19 deaths in rural U.S. counties are growing at a higher rate than deaths in urban counties, nearly doubling every two days.

It appears to be just a matter of time until things get much worse, especially when one considers the lack of rural health care resources: 128 hospitals have [closed in rural counties since 2010](#).

People in jails and prisons are among the people most [at risk](#) for contracting COVID-19 and rural America is home to a large number of state and federal prisons and some of the nations most overcrowded jails. The COVID-19 pandemic has reached the inside of correctional facilities where close quarters and poor sanitary conditions are a recipe for disaster. Triage efforts to release people from jail and limit the spread of the disease have not been effective at New York Citys Rikers Island jail complex, where 132 coronavirus cases had been confirmed as of Saturday, March 28. By Monday, March 30, 134 people in Cook Countys jail (Chicago) had tested positive. The crisis at Rikers is already [being repeated](#) across the nation and will soon reach jails in smaller cities and rural counties where local [jail incarceration rates](#) are the highest in the nation.

Many of the big cities hardest hit by the pandemic have taken at least some steps to reduce the jail population; [data](#) collected by Vera shows that the number of people behind bars is down in each of these cities. In some places, this may be less the result of ambitious, lifesaving decarceration efforts and more a product of a reduction in arrests amidst social distancing and stay at home orders. In cities that were first hit by the pandemic, however, incarceration was not cut quickly enough. Now, as the novel coronavirus spreads to more rural places, efforts to decarcerate are markedly uneven.

In Kentucky, by March 23, confirmed cases of the virus had spread from seven to 27 counties in less than a week. Kentucky Supreme Court Chief Justice John D. Minton Jr. [urged court officials](#) to reduce jail populations: We know what a potential disaster this could be, and its our responsibility to work with jailers and other county officials to safely release as many defendants as we can as quickly as we can. However, half of the people in Kentuckys jails are held for the state Department of Corrections, the U.S. Marshals, or ICE and no such swift action has been taken to release people held for these agencies. As such, although the number of people detained pretrial or on a misdemeanor jail sentence [declined](#) by 3,209 or 28 percent between March 12 and March 26, the total jail population declined by only 13 percent.

In Tennessee, [pretrial](#) incarceration rates are even higher than in Kentucky and [state data](#) indicates that more than 4,700 Tennesseans were held pretrial on misdemeanor charges in February. On March 13, the Chief Justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court declared a state of emergency for the judicial branch and ordered each judicial district to develop a [written plan](#) to affirmatively address issues regarding the incarceration of nonviolent offenders in furtherance of efforts to reduce the jail population, including but not limited to bond reductions or eliminations, deferred sentences, and suspended sentences. In Northeast Tennessee, Carter Countys jail population declined 27 percent between February 29 and March 31. One hundred and seventy miles away in Roane County, the jail population declined 35 percent, dropping from 201 people in jail on March 1 to 130 people on April 1, according to jail staff. This brings the county jail population to its lowest point in nearly a decade, alleviating more than 17 years of persistent overcrowding.

Roane County has been moving forward with a costly jail construction plan just 10 years after building the current jail and is among the hundreds of rural counties in which the hospital is designated at risk of closure by experts.

The speed with which so many places have downsized their jail populations affirms what is possible when the dangers of incarceration are magnified by a public health crisis. But it is still not enough in scale or geographic scope to [ensure the safety](#) of the millions of people behind bars. In the midst of the pandemic, people who reside and work in jails are safer at home.

As the number of confirmed cases in rural communities grows rapidly, state, local, and federal policymakers should recognize the associated dangers in areas that are home to the vast majority of Americas jails and prisons and to the most fragile public health infrastructure. And when this crisis subsides, policymakers and the public should seriously consider which of the sentencing, bail, supervision, and release policies crafted in this moment of crisis ought to endure and reevaluate plans to spend taxpayer money to expand

jails while shuttering health care services. If the pandemic has revealed anything about incarceration, it is that the safety of people on both sides of prison and jail bars is interconnected, and that our budget priorities must be reorganized to prioritize public health and true public safety.

See Vera's [Kentucky](#) and [Tennessee](#) dashboards to track jail populations.

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