

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/price-of-prisons-what-incarceration-costs-taxpayers>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

State corrections budgets have nearly quadrupled in the past two decades yet the true taxpayer cost of prison reaches far beyond these numbers. State corrections budgets often fail to reflect certain costs such as employee benefits, capital costs, in-prison education services, or hospital care for inmates covered by other government agencies. In partnership with the Pew Center on the States, Vera developed a tool to calculate these costs and create a more holistic view of what taxpayers are paying to maintain these systems. While overlooked costs can vary from state to state, Vera's survey of 40 states found that prison costs were in reality 13.9 percent higher than those states combined corrections budgets. This report explores those findings, and our calculation tool, while offering a breakdown of per-inmate costs in each state. It also offers recommendations for reducing these costs without jeopardizing public safety.

State survey responses revealed considerable variation in prison costs that fall outside the corrections budget from less than 1 percent (Arizona) to as much as 34 percent (Connecticut).

The temptation to compare states per-inmate cost should be avoided, as lower expenses may lead to poorer outcomes in terms of safety and recidivism.

Ways to lower spending without reducing public safety include: modifying sentencing and release policies, strengthening strategies to reduce recidivism, and boosting operating efficiency.

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