

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

**<https://www.vera.org/publications/report-to-whatcom-county-stakeholders-on-jail-reduction-strategies>**

## Policy Issue Resources

### Publication

Between 1970 and 2014, the number of people in jail in Whatcom County grew almost ninefold from 45 to 391 on any given day while the overall county population only grew two-and-a-half times. With the county's jail population surging, local government leaders, justice system practitioners, and community members became increasingly concerned about the public safety, fiscal, and human costs of jail overcrowding. To begin exploring ways to reverse the trend, the county convened the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force (Task Force), a multidisciplinary group of justice system and community member stakeholders.

Building on the efforts of the Task Force, Whatcom County hired the Vera Institute of Justice to develop a more thorough understanding of the factors driving the growing number of people in jail and to identify opportunities for reduction. Vera's final report to the Task Force offers a number of responsive strategies that Whatcom County can undertake to reduce the number of people in its jail without compromising public safety.

This report presents the findings from Vera's assessment and recommendations for how Whatcom County can reduce its jail population and create a safer, more effective local justice system.

Recommended reduction strategies include deflecting people away from the justice system before they enter jail; eliminating backlogs of outstanding warrants and preventing new warrants from issuing; shifting from relying on financial bail to data-driven, risk-based pretrial justice; and increasing case processing efficiency.

The recommendations included in this report are based on Vera's quantitative and qualitative research. They should be seen as a starting point, understanding that reform takes time, dedicated cross-system collaboration, ongoing data analysis, and leadership.

To realize the benefits of jail population reduction fully, jurisdictions must continuously gather data to evaluate who may be safely released or diverted from jail.

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