

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/people-in-jail-and-prison-in-spring-2021>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) researchers collected data on the number of people in local jails and state and federal prisons throughout 2020 and into spring 2021. Vera researchers estimated the incarcerated population using a sample of approximately 1,600 jail jurisdictions, 50 states, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the U.S. Marshals Service (USMS), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The data shows that a little more than a year since the first calls to release incarcerated people during the COVID-19 pandemic, decarceration efforts appear to have stalled even as the pandemic still rages and the country continues to lead the world in incarceration. The relative stasis in incarceration since late 2020 is the result of a refilling of many jails and a small, further decrease in prison populations.

Jail and prison population changes reflected a deepening of preexisting political, economic, and social orientations toward punishment and detention. Racial inequalities in incarceration rates increased, and states and counties with high incarceration rates prior to the pandemic tended toward relative inaction during the pandemic.

After an unprecedented 14 percent drop in incarceration in the first half of 2020 from 2.1 million people to 1.8 million, incarceration declined only slightly from fall 2020 to spring 2021.

By spring 2021, jail populations increased 13 percent from the mid-2020 low, while state and federal prison populations declined by 9 percent.

States that started 2020 with higher incarceration rates made fewer efforts to reduce incarceration through spring 2021.

PUBLICATION

WHAT JAILS COST LANDING

PUBLICATION

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