

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/local-leadership-in-criminal-justice-reform>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Most discussions about the potential of criminal justice reform center on decreasing the number of people we put in prisons and state and federally operated facilities that hold sentenced people. Equally important, though often absent from these conversations, is the role that local jails play in our criminal justice system. The number of annual admissions to jails which hold people who are awaiting trial or are serving short sentences, often under a year, has nearly doubled in the past three decades. As a result, county and city justice systems now contain a third of the country's incarcerated population on any given day. Paying close attention to our use of jails can reveal both the high costs they carry and the wide potential for reforms they offer.

Our [recent report](#) on the true price of jails confirmed what we suspected: they cost more than most policymakers and the public realize. The price tag is more than the commonly quoted \$22 billion per year because significant jail costs often sit outside jail budgets, costs like employee pensions and the health care and educational programming incarcerated people receive. In a quarter of the jurisdictions we surveyed, costs were 20 percent higher than their budget allowed for, and one jurisdiction was more than 50 percent higher.

There is, however, promise for change, as reinvestment of jail savings into the things that help communities thrive stands a better chance of succeeding at the local level than in larger systems. Leaders close to their communities know best how to reallocate funds for positive outcomes, both inside and outside of the criminal justice system. And because cities and counties commission and pay for community-based services, they are well positioned to redirect savings that meet the needs of the people they serve.

Through my years at Vera and beyond, I have seen firsthand how local justice reform can achieve real change. Our organization was formed in 1961 in response to a local problem: the overuse of cash bail and the solution that Vera and New York City came up with was soon spread nationwide by influencing the 1966 Bail Reform Act. Even large counties and cities like New York are nimble enough to act on opportunities to safely reduce the number of people they incarcerate more nimble than state and federal systems. Local jurisdictions also have many system players with discretion to act, from prosecutors and judges to law enforcement officials and mayors' offices. Finally, jails don't oversee large populations of people serving long sentences, like prisons do. As just one example of recent success, Bernalillo County in New Mexico achieved a 39 percent decline in jail population in two years after creating an emergency jail population reduction plan due to a federal lawsuit it faced.

The [Safety and Justice Challenge](#), a \$75 million MacArthur Foundation initiative to reduce America's use of jails, is an opportunity not only to reinvest the high costs of jail use, but also to rebuild and restore the trust that has been absent between many communities, particularly communities of color, and their law enforcement and local leadership. I look forward to watching what the 20 jurisdictions selected to be part of the [Challenge Network](#) do with this opportunity.

This post was originally published on the [Safety and Justice Challenge blog](#).

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