

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/target-2020/time-for-a-new-federal-commitment-on-rural-jail-incarceration>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Across America, in rural communities and small cities, jail incarceration is rising at an alarming rate. We are learning more and more about the federal role in local jail growth. Yet this crisis at [mass incarcerations front door](#) local jails has failed to capture the attention of federal policymakers.

The time has come to push beyond the federal governments generally accepted hands-off approach to local corrections and ensure a new federal commitment to rural jail decarceration.

During this recent era of criminal justice reform, the nations smaller communities have been left behind. Major cities have reduced jail populations *and* experienced declines in crime. At the same time, rural areas and small cities have driven an overall increase in jail incarceration. Since 2013, [recent Vera research](#) supported by [Google.org Fellows](#) found, the jail population has grown 27 percent in rural counties and 7 percent in smaller cities even as the number of people in jails in the nations biggest cities declined by 18 percent. Whats more, racial disparities are worse in rural jails, and smaller counties are driving much of the increase in the number of incarcerated women in recent years. Finally and contrary to the American notion of justice people who have not been convicted of any crime make up a staggering [two-thirds of those held in the countrys jails](#).

Decades of disinvestment from health, education, and other services have coincided with higher incarceration rates, resulting in additional public resources devoted to law enforcement and incarceration. This has created a vicious cycle, with the increased need to fund carceral systems seemingly self-evident. Then, when local jails fill their beds, communities too frequently resolve the apparent problem by [building larger jails](#), rather than revisiting the policies and practices that led to more people being locked up. [The story of Hamblen County](#) exemplifies the dynamics in communities and states across the country, and we are starting to understand how [rural incarceration is a cause](#) not just a consequence of the broader set of crises in these areas.

Although much of this process has played out through local and state policies and budgeting, federal programs have lent a hand. Indeed, [a 2018 Vera report](#) revealed that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has given more than \$350 million in grants and low-interest loans to jail construction projects since 1996. (The USDA has funded additional projects since that report was published, for example, in [Clay County, Tennessee](#), and in Ohios [Monroe County](#) and [Fayette County](#).) A forthcoming Vera report will show how other federal agencies are pumping more than a billion dollars into local jail budgets every year. But jails and pretrial issues have mostly been left out of federal policy conversations about criminal justice.

To stem the tide of people cycling through mass incarcerations front door, federal leadership needs to step up. At the most basic level, federal policy must reject the false and counterproductive narrative that jails are economically beneficial to communities. Indeed, even if a jail creates a few new jobs, these institutions eventually usurp an increasing share of municipal coffers, and federal policymakers should never incentivize this kind of damage to a community. To that end, federal agencies should be prohibited from encouraging local agencies to expand existing jails, build new facilities, or increase jail capacity in any way.

It also makes little sense to pour dollars from federal agencies into jails with no coordination. Instead, the federal government should adopt a comprehensive strategy to decarcerate jails. Such a strategy should start with an analysis of the full range of federal programs and funding streams affecting local jails. With this accounting, policymakers can make informed decisions about how to use federal funding to prioritize the goals of shrinking jail populations and creating true public safety through health care, education, job training, and other investments.

The challenge of rural jail incarceration also calls for new federal programs. These programs should offer incentives to local jurisdictions to move away from money bail, decrease arrests and prosecution, invest in community-based alternatives to incarceration, implement restorative justice initiatives that also focus on the needs and healing of survivors of crime, eliminate unnecessary and onerous fines and fees, reduce readmissions to jail for minor offenses (such as technical violations of probation or parole conditions), and provide early assistance of counsel.

In the end, jails will remain local entities that require local attention. Yet the scale and nature of the current crisis require federal action and leadership. The spotlight and resources of the federal government can turn back this tide of rural incarceration, and communities can be empowered to invest in themselves to make long-term investments that will lead to real strength, health, and growth.

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