

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/covid-19-1/albany-georgia-reduces-jail-population-by-27-percent-in-response-to-coronavirus>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As the coronavirus pandemic spreads across the country, high incarceration rates in small cities and rural counties often overlooked in discussions of mass incarceration threaten to compound a mounting crisis. Decades of investment in carceral infrastructure, and disinvestment in public health, have brought us to a moment in which rural U.S. landscapes are defined by sprawling jails, massive state and federal prisons, and shuttered hospitals. Weeks into the current crisis, many counties in the rural United States are now scrambling to decarcerate, bringing into stark relief the crisis that was already there: rising rural incarceration.

The seat of Dougherty County, Albany is a city of around 80,000 people that serves as the urban hub for the surrounding agricultural counties of southwest Georgia. The death rate from COVID-19 for Dougherty County is nearly twice that of New York City, according to the most recent data. Baker County, to the south, has a similar COVID-19 death rate. Lee County, to the north, also has a death rate that is higher than that of New York City. All of the counties surrounding Albany rely on Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital, which [is straining under the pressure](#) of the pandemic. There are only [50 ICU beds](#) in Dougherty County.

The Dougherty County Jail, however, has the capacity to incarcerate 1,230 people, making it the largest or second-largest jail facility in the state according to jail administrator Colonel John Ostrander. Three years ago, an average of 677 people were incarcerated in the jail on any given day, meaning that one in every 100 people living in the county between the ages of 15 and 65 was locked in the jail. This rate is double Georgia's statewide average and three-and-a-half times the national average. The day before the first COVID-19 diagnosis in Dougherty County, there were 585 people locked up in the jail. As of April 6, after measures taken by the Dougherty County Sheriff's Department and other agencies, that number is around 430.

As of now, no one in the Dougherty County Jail has been confirmed positive for COVID-19, although two incarcerated people who were displaying symptoms have been tested. Both of those tests came back negative. We have taken very active steps to reduce the jail population, Ostrander said. Georgia has a state law that allows a sheriff to award earned time credit, and we have released any inmate that was eligible for early release. Ostrander said last week that the sheriff's office has been working closely with local judges, police departments, and other agencies to release people held in the jail as rapidly as possible and to reduce the number of people being brought into the jail.

The sheriff's office has released anyone in jail on a technical parole violation and has requested judicial review of misdemeanor cases and nonviolent felony cases in order to lower bond amounts or release people on recognizance. All staff at the jail, according to Ostrander, must wear masks at all times, and all visits to the jail have been cancelled. Those steps were taken upon the state of local emergency declared by Dougherty County, said Ostrander. Since these steps, the jail population has decreased to 429 as of April 6 a reduction of nearly 27 percent.

Even with a 27 percent reduction, Dougherty County's jail incarceration rate is 73 people in jail per 10,000 working age adults, nearly 10 times higher than New York City and nearly double that of Atlanta and surrounding Fulton County. As is the case in many smaller cities and rural communities, Dougherty County's massive jail stands in stark contrast to the dearth of public health infrastructure that is so needed in this time of crisis. As county after county invested in the means to incarcerate people over the last two decades, rural hospitals have been closing. In 2019, Georgia ranked 36th in public health funding by state. As the novel coronavirus began to spread, Governor Brian Kemp's proposed 2021 budget included a \$9.2 million reduction in grant funding for county health departments, which would have harmed the state's smaller, resource poor communities. Both the state House and Senate have pushed back against some of the governor's cuts, but they can't undo what has already been done: in rural Georgia counties that are even smaller and more vulnerable than Dougherty, seven hospitals have closed over the past 10 years.

Before this pandemic, rural jail incarceration rates were rising, even as large cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago cut jail populations. Rural jail incarceration increased 27 percent since 2013, a rise that went along with massive local investment in incarceration, as county after county directed resources and went into debt [to build new jails](#) or expand existing facilities. In the absence of meaningful social investment in education and health infrastructure, jails have been positioned as the *de facto* institutions to address mounting problems of poverty, mental health, and substance use disorders, even as sending more people to jail exacerbated those same problems. In our current crisis, jails and prisons appear as exactly the wrong infrastructure to deal with a pandemic: places with little to no health care capacity that concentrate poor people against their will in dense quarters, in contact with staff who move in and out of the jail. Incarceration has always been deadly; jail incarceration will be [catastrophic](#) in our current moment.

Two years ago, [I spoke with local advocates](#) in Albany about what high jail incarceration rates meant for people living in the city. Karen Lawrence, a community organizer, described how incarceration shaped the fabric of daily life for many of the city's residents. Young people go to jail for being Black and out of place, she said. If a group of kids gather in a place, outside a store for example, someplace where there is light, that is an issue. Albany is 73 percent Black, and one-third of people in Albany live below the poverty line. Lawrence described incarceration as a way to keep people in poverty, to keep families struggling.

The importance of rapid decarceration for the health and well-being of rural communities is becoming clearer to more people, while at

the same time begging the question why there are so many people locked up in jails to begin with. I spoke with one of the staff at the Dougherty County Jail, who explained that the sheriffs office has been meeting with other agencies every day as part of the countys coronavirus task force. We tell people, she said, dont just be bringing people to jail for playing loud music. I asked Ostrander if he expects to release enough people to bring the jail population down further. We are approaching the bottom of the well, he said, explaining that they will continue to hold anyone accused or convicted of a violent offense. With social distancing and executive orders in place, we might see an increase as violators are brought to jail.

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