

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/incarcerations-front-door-the-misuse-of-jails-in-america>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Local jails exist in nearly every town and city in America. Intended to house only people deemed to be a danger to society or a flight risk, jails have become massive warehouses primarily for those too poor to post even low bail or too sick for existing community resources to help. And the burden of jail incarceration doesn't fall on everyone equally; it disproportionately impacts low-income communities of color. This report published as part of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's [Safety and Justice Challenge](#) examines existing research and data to take a deeper look at our nation's misuse of local jails and to determine how we arrived at this point. The research and data include characteristics of the people currently being held; the key policies that have contributed to their cycling in and out; and the negative impacts that jail incarceration can have on people, their families, and the communities to which they return.

The misuse of jails in America is helping to drive mass incarceration and is part of a system that is neither economically sustainable nor beneficial to public safety, community well-being, and individual rehabilitation.

Data from Chicago and New York suggest that one-half of all jail admissions are from a small minority of people meaning the same people are cycling through the system over and over.

People are often brought to jail for minor, nonviolent misdemeanors, such as driving with a suspended license, public intoxication, or shoplifting, and stay in jail because they can't afford even low bail.

People who are in jail end up facing consequences beyond incarceration itself, including lost wages, worsened physical and mental health, and possible loss of custody of children, a job, or a place to live.

PUBLICATION

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