

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/what-jails-cost-statewide>

Policy Issue Resources

Spending on Jails Across the Rural-Urban Spectrum

Every year, cities and counties spend billions of dollars locking up some of their most vulnerable residents in local jails, a harmful practice that diverts scarce resources away from the community. However, county budgets can be opaque documents that are difficult to compare, impeding the public's ability to hold local governments to account. In this tool, Vera has gathered jail budgets from counties in Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee. You can see how jail spending varies across counties in each state and how reducing the locally held jail population could reduce spending, sparing people from the harms of incarceration and saving taxpayers money.

Millions of people are booked into jail each year, usually for crimes related to poverty, mental illness, and substance use. Most people in jail today have not been convicted of any crime, often sitting behind bars simply because they cannot afford to pay bail. Increasingly, jails are holding people serving state prison sentences and people being held for federal authorities.

While jail populations have been declining in the nation's major cities over the past decade, they have continued to rise in small and rural counties. Jacob Kang-Brown, Chase Montagnet, and Jasmine Heiss, *People in Jail and Prison in 2020* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://perma.cc/WEE2-2ZK4>. And although many communities saw substantial declines in jail populations following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many jails began to refill in the second half of 2020. By the end of that year, three out of five people incarcerated in local jails were in smaller cities and rural communities.

Nationally, spending on jails increased 13 percent from 2007 to 2017, from \$22 billion to \$25 billion. Jake Horowitz, Tracey Velazquez, and Kyleigh Clark-Moorman, *Local Spending on Jails Tops \$25 Billion in Latest Nationwide Data*, The Pew Charitable Trusts, January 29, 2021, <https://perma.cc/4U4M-ETER>. Vera's research shows that jail spending grew most rapidly in the nation's smaller cities and rural communities, where incarceration rates are the highest; between 2007 and 2017, local corrections spending increased by 13 percent in rural communities and 2 percent in urban areas. Vera researchers calculated these percentages by analyzing data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances, as shared by the Urban Institute. See Urban Institute, *State and Local Finance Data: Exploring the Census of Governments*, <https://state-local-finance-data.taxpolicycenter.org/pages.cfm>. Vera categorized each county by urbanicity, a measure that Vera adapted from the National Center for Health Statistics Urban-Rural Classification Scheme by combining medium with small metropolitan areas and micropolitan (an urban area with a population of at least 10,000 but less than 50,000) with non-core areas (all other areas not considered metropolitan or micropolitan). Vera counts the former as Small and Mid Metros and the latter as Rural. A county is labeled Large Metro, Urban if it is one of the core counties of a metropolitan area with one million or more people. See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties*, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data_access/urban_rural.htm#:~:text=National%20Center%20for%20Health%20Statistics,of%20urban%20and%20rural%20residents. This investment does not make communities safer, healthier, or more resilient. Instead, incarceration increases overdose risk and worsens overall health outcomes, further impoverishes people, contributes to housing instability, separates families, and increases the likelihood that a person will be arrested in the future. See, generally: Andrew Taylor, Charlotte Miller, Jason Tan de Bibiana, and Jackson Beck, *Overdose Deaths and Jail Incarceration: Using Data to Confront Two Tragic Legacies of the U.S. War on Drugs* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://www.vera.org/publications/overdose-deaths-and-jail-incarceration>; Ram Subramanian, Ruth Delaney, Stephen Roberts, Nancy Fishman, and Peggy McGarry, *Incarcerations Front Door: The Misuse of Jails in America* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2015), <https://www.vera.org/publications/incarcerations-front-door-the-misuse-of-jails-in-america>.

As counties face budget shortfalls exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, reducing the local jail population provides an opportunity to protect the health and safety of people behind bars and people who work in local jails. It can also enable counties to save money that can be reinvested in resources that better strengthen communities, such as community-based substance use and mental health treatment, affordable housing, and reentry services.

What Jails Cost presents jail budget data for 2019 for counties in Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee. Data was not available for Knox and Robertson Counties in Tennessee and for 18 counties in Indiana. See "Methodology" for a list of missing counties. Click on the states above to access statewide summaries of jail spending and revenue. The county pages feature detailed breakdowns of jail budgets in each county. They also include calculators that let you estimate how much money could be saved by reducing the number of people held pretrial or serving local sentences in each jail.

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