

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/in-our-own-backyard-confronting-growth-and-disparities-in-american-jails>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Although local jails are increasingly recognized as the front door to mass incarceration, justice system stakeholders and others historically have not had access to the necessary data to understand how their jail is being used and how it compares with others. To address this issue, Vera researchers developed a [data tool](#) that includes current and historical jail incarceration rates for every U.S. county. The data revealed that, since 1970, the number of people held in jail has increased from 157,000 to 690,000 in 2014a more than four-fold increase nationwide, with growth rates highest in the smallest counties. This data also reveals wide variation in incarceration rates and racial disparities among jurisdictions of similar size, highlighting that the number of people in jail is largely the result of policy choices. With this new information in hand, policymakers can begin to make choices that are better for their communities.

Since 1970, the number of people in jail has quadrupled, with the bulk of this growth driven by mid-sized and small counties. Wide variations in incarceration rates among similar counties show that the number of people behind bars and their demographic disparities is largely the result of policy and practice choices.

New analysis of previously disparate data allows each U.S. county to see how its use of incarceration has changed over time, how it compares with similarly situated counties, and to evaluate reform efforts.

Mid-sized and small counties are where jails have grown the most and hold the majority of the nation's jail inmates, so reform is necessary in all counties, not just the largest.

Policy choices enacted in state and federal laws and interpreted and deployed by the police, prosecutors, judges, and others at the local level have largely propelled the growth of jails.

RESOURCE SITE

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