

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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

Policy Issue Resources

A Look at Spending in Americas Large Cities

Local governments spend [\\$25 billion](#) annually to operate more than 3,000 jails nationwide. There are more than 10 million bookings into jail each year, usually for crimes related to poverty, mental illness, and substance use. The cost and reach of jails are staggering and do not make communities safer, healthier, or more resilient. Fortunately, jail populations in the countrys largest cities have [declined](#) dramatically during the past decade.

To see if spending on jails has changed in line with local incarceration numbers, Vera examined the county jails in 48 large cities.

Since 2011, jail budgets increased 13 percent accounting for inflation while jail populations declined 28 percent. Jail costs have continued to increase because counties have not downsized the number of jail employees, who account for 73 percent of jails costs.

If, in the 48 places Vera studied, local governments rightsized their jail budgets, they would save \$2.2 billion a year and even more as jail populations decline further. This money could be allocated to other government programs that better serve the needs of the community.

Select a city to see a more detailed breakdown of its jail budget. A calculator for each county lets you explore how reductions in the number of people behind bars can translate into cost savings. Decreasing the use of jails will reduce the number of people who are subjected to the harms of incarceration each year and free up money that can be spent to support and grow your community through education, healthcare, and social services.

The table below presents several important metrics on jail spending among the nations large cities. Clicking on each column allows you to sort the data to see how your jurisdiction compares to others.

[Read more about Vera's methodology.](#)

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