

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/the-arrest-jail-admission-gap-jail-admission-rates-surpass-arrest-rates-in-small-and-rural-counties>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

More than 10 million arrests were made across the United States in 2016. Although the numbers have decreased since 1997, roughly 28,000 arrests still happen every day. This means one arrest every three seconds. Moreover, arrests continue to disproportionately impact communities of color.

Vera's recent report [Gatekeepers: The Role of Police in Ending Mass Incarceration](#) demonstrates that it is increasingly likely that an arrest will lead to jail incarceration:

The striking increase over time in the ratio of arrests to jail admissions suggests that arrests have become an expressway to jail. But more work is needed to investigate that ratio and to understand whether national trends play out similarly in different parts of the country.

To answer these questions, we drew data from two of Vera's interactive data tools, the development of which have empowered us to undertake new analyses and expose new trends: [Arrest Trends](#) and [Incarceration Trends](#).¹

Vera's Arrest Trends data includes the total number of arrests in any U.S. county and the rate of arrest per 100,000 people. Certain types of counties have disproportionate rates of arrest. (See Figure 1.) For example, although rural and [small/midsize](#)² counties make up 45 percent of the U.S. population, they account for 51 percent of all arrests nationwide and 57 percent of all jail admissions.

To better contextualize the relationship between arrests and jail admissions, we took county-level arrest data and merged it with Vera's Incarceration Trends jail admissions data.

Although arrest rates in urban areas were the highest prior to 1993 (5,457 per 100,000 residents), they dropped much more rapidly than those rates did in other areas (2,648 per 100,000 residents in 2014). But small and midsize counties now have the highest arrest rates (3,487 per 100,000 residents), followed by rural areas, where the arrest rates are slightly lower (3,358 per 100,000 residents).

When we look at arrest rates and jail admission rates together, several interesting trends emerge. Figure 3 shows arrest rates and jail admission rates from 1990 to 2016. Based on the rising incarceration rates in rural and small/midsize counties, it isn't surprising that as of the early 2000s, arrest rates in these areas outpaced arrest rates in urban and suburban areas. And consistent with national trends, the ratio of arrest rates to jail admission rates in urban and suburban areas has moved toward a 1:1 ratio in the past few years. But the ratio of arrest rates to jail admission rates looks very different in rural and small/midsize counties, particularly in these ways:

The fact that rural and small/midsize counties experience significantly higher jail admission rates than arrest rates is both curious and concerning. At a minimum, it indicates that people in these areas are potentially being admitted to jail for reasons not related to an arrest.

But why does this jail-arrest gap exist? First, it is important to acknowledge that differences in counties data collection, data sources, and documentation could have contributed to the gap. Federal statistics have some data gaps; not all arrests are reported in FBI statistics, and some jail admissions are missing in states that have city level pre-arraignment detention that is not considered a jail. This gap could also be the result of people being arrested in one county and admitted to jail in another county (something that happens for a number of reasons). But recent scholarship highlights that people are being admitted to jail for reasons that may not have warranted an arrest, including parole violations, bench warrants, failure to pay fines or fees, and failure to appear in court. For example, [one report](#) found that in some jurisdictions, 20 percent of incarcerated people are serving time for failing to pay criminal justice debts. This blog highlights a serious, troubling gap in the literature and raises some of the following questions:

Further research exploring why this gap exists can help drive change in an underexplored and misunderstood area criminal justice systems throughout the United States.

¹ The development of Arrest Trends was made possible with support from Microsoft and the Charles Koch Foundation.

² Vera's analysis of the urban-rural continuum collapses the six categories defined by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties to four, 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 noncore areas (all other areas not considered metropolitan or micropolitan).b Vera counts the latter as rural. A county is labeled urban if it is one of the core counties of a metropolitan area with a million or more people, and a county is labeled suburban if it is within that surrounding metropolitan area. Rural areas are the most

numerous category, with more than 1,900 counties.

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