

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/broken-ground-jail-construction>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Jail construction has vastly expanded Americas capacity to incarcerate people. In 1970, there were 243,000 jail beds in the United States, but by 2017, there were 915,100. This report explores the persistence of jail expansion by examining a convenience sample of 77 counties in 31 states that considered or pursued jail expansion between 2000 and 2019. From this sample, Vera researchers identified three major arguments county officials make to support construction: health and safety concerns due to overcrowding or aging facilities; the need to provide specialized services, including mental health and drug treatment; and the opportunity for revenue from renting beds to other authorities. The report also outlines negative or unanticipated consequences counties experienced from the decision to build or expand and provides examples of places that have pursued better alternatives to new jails.

The cycle of jail growth and overcrowding is not an inevitable feature of local criminal justice systems. Many counties have rejected this assumption, breaking ground on new policies rather than new jails.

In the past decade, the number of people in jail has declined, yet jail capacity nationwide has grown by 86,400 beds.

Urban counties have been at the forefront of the jail population decline, but rural areas, suburban areas, and midsize cities remain in a jail population boom and continue to build larger jails.

Larger jails often become overcrowded again because expansion fails to address the root causes of increased population.

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