

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/covid19-jail-population-decline>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

From mid-March to mid-April 2020 the first month of rapid spread of COVID-19 in the United States there was an unprecedented reduction in the number of people held in local jails. Vera's analysis of the most comprehensive jail data available shows that the number of people in jail in the United States fell by one quarter, mainly over the course of that month.

Jail bookings dropped as people who would otherwise have been arrested stayed home, and police and sheriffs made fewer arrests. Simultaneously, many judges and prosecutors used their broad discretion to facilitate the release of people they deemed safe, while public defenders filed thousands of motions to secure the release of their clients. But as the United States faces continued outbreaks of COVID-19, it is crucial to recognize that decarceration has still been inadequate, from both a public safety and a public health perspective.

Maintaining recent reductions and further reducing jail populations will make communities safer in the coming months and years by reducing the likelihood and severity of future outbreaks of COVID-19 and enabling reinvestment of state and local dollars into community-based services and resources that support public health and public safety.

Vera studied 1,278 counties. In 527 counties, the number of people in jail declined rapidly and remained stable in the following weeks.

In 454 counties, the jail population never decreased substantially.

In 270 counties, the jail population initially decreased but then increased quickly, approaching previous levels of incarceration.

NEWS

SPOTLIGHT

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