

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/people-in-jail-and-prison-in-2020>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Vera Institute of Justice researchers collected data on the number of people in local jails and state and federal prisons at both midyear and fall 2020 to provide timely information on how incarceration is changing in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers estimated the national jail population using a sample of 1,558 jail jurisdictions and the national prison population based on a sample of 49 states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Vera also collected data on people incarcerated and detained by the U.S. Marshals Service (USMS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Triggered by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. saw an unprecedented drop in total incarceration between 2019 and 2020. But despite the historic drop, the decrease was neither substantial nor sustained enough to be considered an adequate response. Incarceration in the United States remains a global aberration.

The sharp decrease in incarceration during the first half of 2020 was not uniform across the country.

The most substantial drop in incarceration happened during the first half of the year. From June through September, prison numbers continued to decline while many jails began to refill.

Releases from jail of Black women and white, Asian, and Latinx people all comparatively increased in 2020, but releases of Black men decreased.

PUBLICATION

SPOTLIGHT

PUBLICATION

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