

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/new-orleans-jail-population-drops-to-its-lowest-point-since-1979>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As the City of New Orleans marks its [tricentennial](#), Mayor Mitch Landrieu announced today that the city's jail population has reached its lowest level in nearly 40 years.

This is a remarkable accomplishment for a city that just a few years ago held more people in jail per capita than any other urban jurisdiction in the country.

For [the last 12 years](#), Vera has worked collaboratively with New Orleans community advocates and policymakers to rethink the use of the Orleans Parish jail and cap the number of existing jail beds, with the understanding that if we build them, we will fill them. Momentum for reform has grown considerably in the last three years, spurred by the MacArthur Foundation's [Safety and Justice Challenge](#) (SJC) initiative. Today, the Challenge is a network of 34 counties, four cities, and two statewide systems across the country, all working to safely reduce their jail populations and the ethnic and racial disparities that persist within them. In the spring of 2016, New Orleans was one of just 11 jurisdictions selected to receive funding to implement an ambitious strategic plan to reduce its jail population by 21 percent in three years, from 1,545 people to just 1,277 people. Promisingly, by December 2017, the jail population had been reduced to 1,427 already reaching 56 percent of the final goal.

In [a report](#) released today, city leaders detailed progress toward their plan to reduce the jail population, with various initiatives, spanning almost every stage of the criminal justice system. The following successes were highlighted:

New Orleans has come a very long way, but still has work to do. Some initiatives, such as a new tool to assess defendants' ability to pay prior to imposing fines and fees, have stalled. Others are still evolving like the transition to a new pretrial risk assessment or will need to be expanded and institutionalized, such as a citywide expansion of LEAD. The work that remains will fall to the new mayor and council, all set to enter office in early May.

This progress, however, comes with a sobering truth: When New Orleans reaches its current goal of 1,277 people in jail, our jail incarceration rate will still be 40 percent higher than the national average. Policy makers and the general public will need to come together under the city's new leadership to sustain existing gains and find new ways to reduce the harms of over-incarceration on all our residents. This year marks the city's tricentennial. We must seize this unique opportunity to [envision a different criminal justice system](#).

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