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Economics of Crime
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Project #2

The incarceration rate in the U.S declined from 2019 to the lowest rate since 1995, marking a substantial reversal after decades of growth in prison and jail populations (Gramlich, 2021). In its peak between the years 2006 and 2008, the U.S incarcerated 1,000 people per 100,000 adults (a rate far higher than in other countries). The number of incarcerated individuals declined dramatically to 810 per 100,000 in 2019 due criminal justice policies changes, declining crime rates, and sentencing reform. Despite this massive drop in the incarceration rate, the United States still has the highest incarceration rate in the world at 639 per 100,000 residents.

South Carolina's incarceration trends closely mimic that of the national decline; however, significant disparities do exist at the county level. While some areas have seen reductions in jail and prison populations, others continue to incarcerate at disproportionately high rates. These counties are largely influenced by local policies, economic conditions, and well as law enforcement practices. Gramlich writes, "While the total number of people incarcerated in the U.S. has dropped, jail populations remain significant, largely due to pretrial detention and local policies" (Gramlich, 2021). It is important to understand how rural-urban inequality and county-level legal framework affect patterns of incarceration across South Carolina in order to explain why some areas have not seen the same level of decline that has been seen with the national average. This paper builds on national findings by examining county-level incarceration trends in South Carolina, focusing on prison and jail populations, regional disparities, and the long-term effects of sentencing reforms.

The project utilizes South Carolina incarceration data from the Vera Institute's dataset, which provides county level jail and prison population data. The analysis specifically focuses on

2018 due to it being the most recent year with complete data. Three key measures were examined in the project: Total Jail Population per 100,000 residents, Total Prison Population Rate per 100,000 residents, and Urbanicity which helped distinguish between urban, suburban, small/mid metro, and rural counties to explore regional disparities. The dataset was processed in Tableau, where county-level incarceration rates were visualized via choropleth maps (highlighting the differences in jail/prison populations across counties in South Carolina). A stacked area chart was created in order to look at long term incarceration trends in South Carolina.

South Carolina's jail incarceration rates vary significantly across county, with Fairfield County reporting the highest rate of jail incarceration at 435 per 100,000 residents. The Choropleth map (Figure 1) highlights that rural counties in South Carolina tend to have much higher jail incarceration rates than suburban and small/mid metro areas. This might be a result of limited access to alternative sentencing programs or possibly a higher reliance on pretrial detention. In contrast, small/mid metro counties such as Richland and Berkeley generally exhibit lower rates of jail/prison incarceration. This could be due to greater access to legal resources or deterrence programs. The persistently high jail/prison incarceration rates in smaller counties like Fairfield could suggest that state and federal sentencing reforms have had a limited impact at the local level, where economic conditions continue to drive disparities.

South Carolina's prison incarceration rates vary widely by county, with Marion County recording the highest rate at 1,099 per 100,000 residents. The choropleth map (Figure 2) highlights that rural counties tend to have prison population rates. Once again, this might be due to limited access to legal resources and economic conditions that influence crime and sentencing tendencies. In contrast, more suburban counties tend to have lower prison incarceration rates, for

example Lancaster County with 587.1 per 100,000 residents incarcerated. Suburban Counties may benefit from more investment in rehabilitation and alternative sentencing programs.

South Carolina's incarceration trends have undergone significant changes from 1970 through the early 2000s while peaking around 2005. The trend seen with South Carolina aligns almost perfectly with the national tough on crime policy in the early 1990s. The policy introduced mandatory minimum sentences, harsher laws around drugs, and expanded the capacity of prisons. Figure 3 illustrates this increase in incarceration beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s in line with this tough on crime policy as well as a more general mass incarceration national trend. Since 2007, incarceration rates in South Carolina have steadily declined. This steady decline can be attributed to policy reforms, changes in judicial sentencing, and a reduction in crime rates (Gramlich, 2021). However, jail populations remain high in certain counties, suggesting that local policies, economic conditions, and local law enforcement practices still contribute to incarceration disparities. While South Carolina's overall trend is in line with what we see nationally, the persistence of high incarceration rates in specific counties highlights ongoing systemic challenges at the local level.

South Carolina's incarceration rates vary widely by county. To address these disparities, policymakers should focus on expanding reform policies and pretrial alternatives to reduce unnecessary jail time. Furthermore, investment into reentry programs to reduce the chance of reincarceration and ensuring sentencing reforms are applied equitably across all counties. These measures could help sustain South Carolina's declining incarceration trend while addressing persistent regional disparities. While incarceration can serve as a deterrent to crime in some cases, excessive reliance on imprisonment may have diminishing returns, highlighting the need for balanced policies that promote rehabilitation as well as public safety. These measures could

help sustain South Carolina's declining incarceration trend while addressing persistent regional disparities.

Works Cited:

Gramlich, J. (2021, August 16). America's incarceration rate falls to lowest level since 1995. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/16/americas-incarceration-rate-lowest-since-1995/>

Figure 1: Jail Incarceration Rate (Per 100k)

Figure 2: Prison Incarceration Rate (Per 100k)

Figure 3: Prison and Jail Incarceration Trends

South Carolina Incarceration Trends by County

This dashboard visualizes jail and prison incarceration rates at the county level across South Carolina. Use the highlighter to explore counties by Urbanicity. Click on a county to filter incarceration trends over time.

County-Level Prison Incarceration Map: Prison population rate per 100,000 residents

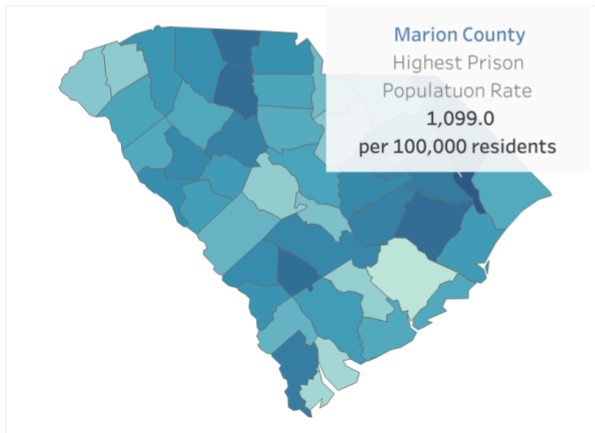
County-Level Jail Incarceration Map: Jail population rate per 100,000 residents

Jail and Prison Incarceration Trends Area Chart: Displays long-term trends in prison and jail populations for individual counties from 1970-2017. The grey bands show recessions in the US.

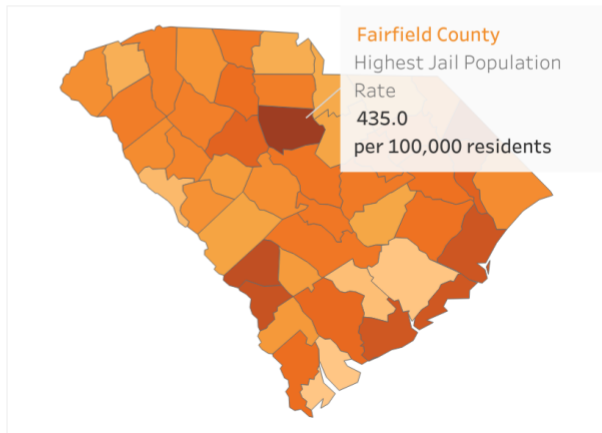
Highlight County Name

No items highlighted

Prison Incarceration Rate (per 100k)

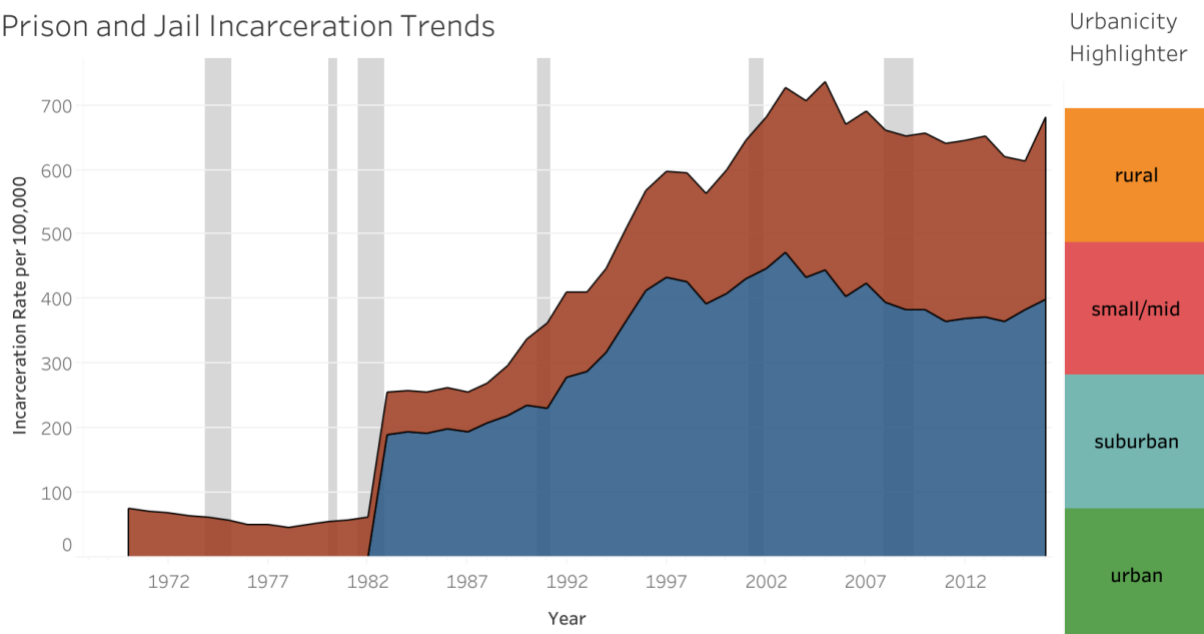


Jail Incarceration Rate (per 100k)



Avg. Total P.. 342.1 1,099.0 Avg. Total J.. 152.4 435.0

Prison and Jail Incarceration Trends



Data Source: This dashboard uses incarceration data from the Vera Institute of Justice's Incarceration Trends Dataset (1970-2018). The dataset includes county-level jail and prison population data across the United States.