

# In Our Own Backyard: Confronting Growth and Disparities in American Jails

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REPORT & PROJECT SUMMARY

## About *Incarceration Trends*

*Incarceration Trends*, a project of the Vera Institute of Justice, aims to inform the public debate on mass incarceration and help guide change by providing easily accessible information on the number of people in jails and prisons for every county in the United States.

The centerpiece of the project is a new data tool—available at [trends.vera.org](http://trends.vera.org)—that collates and analyzes publically available, but disparately located, data about incarceration. This tool can be used for reference and measurement by justice system stakeholders and others looking to understand how their jail is being used, how it compares with others, and spot problem areas—such as excessive growth or racial or ethnic disparities.

Currently, the *Incarceration Trends* tool includes jail data for every one of the approximately 3,000 counties in the country and combined jail and prison data for every county in New York and California. In the months and years ahead, Vera will incorporate additional data on the number in prisons, by county, for all 50 states.

For more information about the *Incarceration Trends* project, contact Christian Henrichson, unit director, Center on Sentencing and Corrections, at [chenrichson@vera.org](mailto:chenrichson@vera.org).

Jails are the way stations through which nearly all people who are arrested pass briefly or remain until their cases are resolved, often because they are too poor to post bail or fail to comply with the conditions of their pretrial release. Since 1970, the number of people held in jail has escalated, from 157,000 people to 690,000 in 2014—a more than four-fold increase.

This growth in jail populations has spurred the costly construction of new—or the expansion of existing—jails. Indeed, there was a notable rise in the number of counties with “super jails”—very large jail systems of more than 1,000 beds—from only 21 in 1970 to 145 by 2014.

The largest jails—Rikers Island (New York City), Los Angeles County Jail, Miami-Dade County (Florida) Jail, or Cook County (Chicago) Jail—often draw the most attention and are the ones most often discussed by policymakers and in the media. But these jails have not grown the most, nor are they located in the jurisdictions with the highest incarceration rates. Rather, mid-sized and small counties—which account for the vast majority of jails administered by the country’s approximately 3,000 counties—have largely driven growth, with local jail populations increasing since 1970 by 4.1 times in mid-sized counties and 6.9 times in small counties. In contrast, the jail populations in large counties grew by an average of 2.8 times.

As with prison incarceration, the growth of jails has not affected everyone equally. Jail incarceration rates among African Americans and certain other minority groups are steeply higher than those of whites; and female jail incarceration rates have grown far faster than jail incarceration rates for men. Despite the fact that African Americans comprised 13 percent of the general population in 2014, they made up 35 percent of the jail population. Compared to a four-fold increase for men, the number of women in jail has increased 14-fold—from fewer than 8,000 in 1970 to nearly 110,000 in 2014.

Policymakers and the public can use Vera’s *Incarceration Trends* tool to take a look at incarceration trends in their own local jurisdictions and identify similarly-situated counties elsewhere that have managed to reduce their jail populations and might serve as resources while weighing options on how to deal with jail growth.

Any local reform effort will beg the question: What size should any given county or municipality’s jail be? Following four decades of growth, it is easy to forget that jails were not always the size they are today. There is no mathematical formula that can offer a precise answer to this question for every one of the country’s almost 3,000 jail jurisdictions. However, the wide variation among similar counties demonstrated in Vera’s analysis show that the number of people behind bars—and their demographic disparities—is largely the result of policy and practice choices.

# WHAT'S TRENDING IN YOUR COUNTY?



The tool also includes historical data for jail admissions, length of stay in jail, and—in California and New York—the number of people in state prison that were sentenced from each county.