

US rural county jails see a rapid rise in incarceration rates

Benjamin Mateus
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A recent report by Vera Institute of Justice, *People in Jail 2019*, found that at mid-year 2019 there were an estimated 758,400 people held in local jails, an increase of 1.8 percent from mid-year 2017. This does not take into account the more than 1.5 million prisoners held in federal and state facilities. Though the population in local jails is half that in state and federal prisons, a 2014 analysis found that more than 11 million people had circulated through the jails that year, a rate 20 times higher than those admitted to prisons the same year.

The peak in incarcerations in jails occurred in 2009, after which a slow decline was noted until 2015. Between mid-year 2019 and 2015, there have been more 31,000 incarcerations, a 4.3 percent increase. As the report explains, “most people in jail have not been convicted of the charges they are facing, and many are being detained in civil matters, such as people incarcerated pretrial for immigration cases or those incarcerated due to unpaid child support or fines and fees.”

The jail incarceration rate in the US stands at 368 per 100,000 working-age adults. When compared to their historic lows more than six decades ago, jail incarceration rates are 2.8 times higher today.

What is particularly notable about the findings in the study is the changing trends in local jail populations across the “urban to rural continuum.” Since 2013 to the present, rural counties have seen jail populations rise 27 percent—from 145,341 to 184,295 residents. Small to mid-sized cities have also seen a modest 7 percent increase—from 242,184 to 260,169 residents.

By comparison, urban counties have had an 18 percent decline—from 203,143 to 166,979 residents. Suburban counties have seen a 1 percent decline—from 148,674 to 146,976 residents. Jail incarceration rates in 2019 were more than double for rural counties’ jails compared to urban centers. The rural population accounts for nearly one-quarter of the total population in local jails.

The data demonstrates that the growing trend in incarceration is directly related to the rising incarceration rates in rural counties. According to the report, since 2013, rural counties have held 39,000 more residents in local jails while small and mid-sized cities have held 18,000 more people. In large metropolitan regions with more than 1 million residents, jail populations have declined. Specifically, cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, New York City, Buffalo, Nashville and Oakland have all seen a more than 25 percent decrease.

Interestingly, though incarcerated populations declined between 2008 and 2015 by 7.4 percent, jail capacities have increased in the same period by 10.4 percent, with a total capacity of 915,100. More than 20 percent of jail occupancy presently remains unused. This average figure, however, hides the reality of overcrowded jails in rural counties such as Hamblen in Tennessee, where their 255-bed jail holds 439 inmates.

According to Vera, one factor contributing to this rise is the impact of the immigration crisis on detention facilities. As cited by their study, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has been transferring a growing number of those apprehended as illegal immigrants to local jails that have contracted with the federal government to boost their threadbare budgets. Since 2013, there has been a 23 percent increase in the number of immigrants detained, with an estimated 22,900 being held in local jails in October through November 2017.

Another major factor has been the impact of the opioid crisis, specifically in rural communities that have been devastated by the crisis. In 2017, there were more than 72,000 overdose deaths reported, making it the second leading cause of death in the US for people age 15-49.

In a 2019 study published in *Lancet Public Health*, “Economic Decline, Incarceration, and Mortality from drug use disorder in the USA between 1983 and 2014—an

observational analysis,” the authors state that since 1980, mortality rates from drug use disorders have increased more than 600 percent.

The *Lancet* analysis of 2,640 US counties between 1983 and 2014 found there was at least a 10-fold increase in drug use disorder demonstrated over this period. They found a strong association specifically with economic hardship, incarceration rates, and a higher number of drug deaths.

The report notes: “Our findings suggest a strong association between the rise in incarceration rates and mortality rates from drug use disorders, over and above the potential effects of low household income and other important confounders. We also highlight a largely neglected dimension of the US criminal justice system—local jails—which are independently associated with drug deaths.”

Incarceration leads to job losses, diminishing prospects, the social stigma of arrest, and a revolving cycle that feeds into itself the endless perpetuation of drug abuse and incarceration. Lack of resources to treat addiction in rural areas, along with county budget shortfalls, is leading to a rapid social decay of these communities. Many who are incarcerated are already mentally ill, having committed misdemeanors such as failure to pay fines or child support, but are unable to post bail while awaiting trial or sentencing.

Incarceration leads to declining incomes for families. Mental illness associated with the stress and anxiety of non-incarcerated spouses and family members creates unstable social relationships, driving the effect more broadly and deeply into the social fabric until there is little left to salvage. See Vera map on pretrial incarceration rates.

According to the Safety + Justice Challenge website:

- While the rate at which legally presumed innocent people are held in jail pretrial has grown 223 percent nationwide since 1970, it has risen 436 percent in rural counties, driven in large part by rural areas in the South and West.

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- Despite their higher jail incarceration rates, rural counties have lower crime rates: their property crime rate is three-quarters, and violent crime rate is two-thirds, those of cities. While the opioid crisis that is unfolding in predominately rural areas is currently under a national spotlight, rural jail incarceration was on an upward trajectory well before the recent crisis.

- Rural jails have a more limited tax base than cities and experience resource challenges that contribute to their reliance on incarceration, including remote location of courts, scarce public defender services, and few diversion and pretrial services programs.

- It is now common practice for jails to rent out extra beds to other jails, state prisons and federal authorities. However, rural areas now use jail beds for purposes other than their own at a rate 888 percent higher than in 1978, while rates in urban areas increased by only 134 percent.

- The expanded use of rented jail beds in rural counties is driven in part by financial incentives, as other agencies offer a per-diem rate for each incarcerated person held in a local jail that can help fill budget gaps or even be used to justify a jail expansion.

Since its nadir in the 1960s, when state and federal prisons held less than 200,000 inmates, incarceration rates peaked in the mid-2000s to 800 per 100,000 residents, with approximately 2.2 million incarcerated people. When those under correctional supervision are included, the number in the justice system under supervision (for 2012 figures) reached an astronomical 7 million individuals.

The preceding three decades that accompanied the massive incarceration of the population through the establishment of draconian sentencing reforms, put into practice as getting tough on crime, went hand in hand with a massive attack on the working class through deindustrialization, wage cuts and the dismantling of benefits and pensions.

While Wall Street enriched itself through speculative investments, the working class faced a demolition of welfare programs, food stamps and unemployment benefits. The cost of living spiked and household debt soared. The creation of a modern police state was a necessary outcome of this counteroffensive by the bourgeoisie state.



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