Incarceration in Local Jails and State Prisons

Since 1970, the rate of incarceration in America has expanded more than fourfold, and the United States leads the world in locking people up. Many places in America have begun to reduce their use of prisons and jails, but progress has been uneven. Although the number of people sent to state prisons and county jails from urban areas has decreased, that number has continued to rise in many rural places. Racial disparities in incarceration remain strikingly wide. Women constitute a rising number of those behind bars.

This fact sheet provides at-a-glance information about how many people are locked up in both state prisons and county jails and shows where the state stands on a variety of metrics, so that policymakers and the public can better determine where to target reforms.

**STATE TOTALS**

**JAILS**

- **Total population**: 9,691
- **Pretrial population**: 6,003

**PRISONS**

- **Population**: 17,467

% change in population:
- **SINCE 1970**: 362% (↑)
- **SINCE 2000**: -9% (↓)

% change in prison population:
- **SINCE 1983**: 182% (↑)
- **SINCE 2000**: 17% (↑)

**RACE**

- **11% of jail pop.**
- **18% of prison pop.**

In Washington, Black people constituted 5% of state residents, but 11% of people in jail and 18% of people in prison.

**GENDER**

- **655% (↑)**
- **810% (↑)**

Since 1980, the number of women in jail has increased 655%, and the number of women in prison has increased 810%.

**GEOGRAPHY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>JAILS</th>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>PRISONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>27,884</td>
<td>Cowlitz</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garfield</td>
<td>24,414</td>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asotin</td>
<td>22,081</td>
<td>Columbia</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferry</td>
<td>16,007</td>
<td>Garfield</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowlitz</td>
<td>12,462</td>
<td>Asotin</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Incarceration is not only an urban phenomenon. In fact, on a per capita basis, the most rural places in the state often lock up the most people in jail and send the most people to prison.
Although men’s jail admissions have declined by 26 percent since 2008, women’s admissions have increased both as a total number and as a proportion of all jail admissions. Women now make up almost one out of every four jail admissions, up from fewer than one in 10 in 1983. Since 1970, the number of women in U.S. jails has increased 14-fold—from fewer than 8,000 to nearly 110,000 in 2013—and women in jail now account for approximately half of all women behind bars in the country.

Discriminatory criminal justice policies and practices at all stages of the justice process have unjustifiably disadvantaged Black people, including through disparity in the enforcement of seemingly race-neutral laws. Studies have found that Black people are more likely to be stopped by the police, detained pretrial, charged with more serious crimes, and sentenced more harshly than white people—even when controlling for things like offense severity.

Nationally, Latinx people are also overrepresented in prisons and jails, yet common data misclassification leads to distorted, lower estimates of Latinx incarceration rates and distorted, higher estimates of white incarceration rates. Smaller and inconsistent data reporting make it difficult to measure the effects of racism for incarcerated people of other racial groups.

The number of women in Washington’s jails has increased more than ninefold, from 158 in 1970 to 1,494 in 2015.

The number of women in Washington’s prisons has increased more than sevenfold, from 236 in 1978 to 1,729 in 2017.
Statewide trends alone do not tell the whole story of incarceration: there is wide variation in the use of incarceration across the state. Today, the highest rates of prison admissions are in rural counties, and pretrial detention continues to increase in smaller counties even as it is on the decline in larger counties. It is critical to examine incarceration trends in every corner of the state, because although the largest counties may have the most people in jails—the highest rates of incarceration are in smaller cities and rural counties.

Since 2000, the state’s use of pretrial detention has taken different trajectories in different types of counties. The pretrial incarceration rate has increased 34% in the state’s 18 rural counties, 27% in the state’s four suburban counties, and 15% in the state’s 16 small/medium counties. It has decreased 38% in the state’s one urban county.

Vera’s analysis of the urban-rural continuum changes the six categories defined by the National Center for Health Statistics Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties to four. A county is labeled “urban” if it is one of the core counties of a metropolitan area with 1 million or more people and is labeled “suburban” if it is within the surrounding metropolitan area. Vera turns the remaining four categories into two by combining small and medium metropolitan areas (“small and midsize metro”) and micropolitan and noncore areas (“rural”).

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**HOW DOES WASHINGTON COMPARE?**

### JAILS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Rate (2015)</th>
<th>Rate change ('05–'15)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>6,568</td>
<td>-7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>4,422</td>
<td>-27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>3,830</td>
<td>-26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>838</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>-12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### PRISONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Rate (2016)</th>
<th>Rate change ('08–'18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>-14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>-16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>-76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data**

This fact sheet uses data from four U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data series and is supplemented with data obtained directly from state governments for the more recent years for which BJS data is not yet available, when available. The Annual Survey of Jails, Census of Jails, and National Corrections Reporting Program provides data through 2016; the National Prisoner Statistics program provides data through 2017, and 2018 data is sourced from state agencies. Rates are per 100,000 residents aged 15 to 64. See Data and Methods for Vera’s State Fact Sheets: [www.vera.org/incarceration-trends-fact-sheets-data-and-methods.pdf](http://www.vera.org/incarceration-trends-fact-sheets-data-and-methods.pdf) for complete details.

**Acknowledgments**

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**Credits**

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For more information

Visit www.vera.org. For more information about this fact sheet, contact Jacob Kang-Brown, senior research associate, at jkangbrown@vera.org.