

People in Jail in 2019

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December 2019

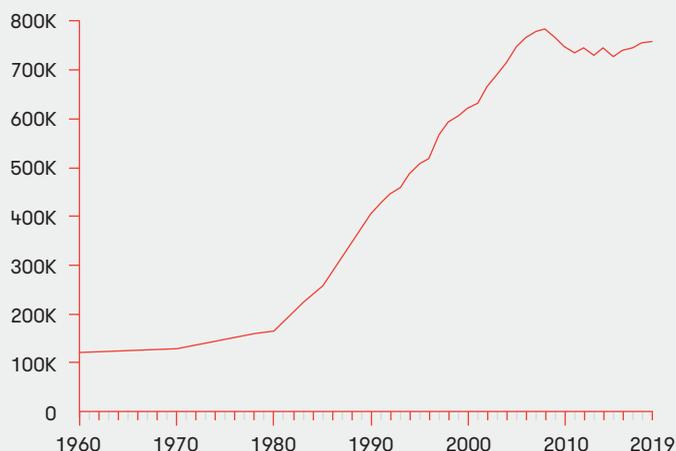
Summary

Effective advocacy and policymaking require up-to-date information. Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) researchers, with support from Google.org Fellows, collected data on the number of people in local jails at midyear in both 2018 and 2019 to provide timely information on how incarceration is changing in the United States. This report fills a gap until the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) releases its report on jail population statistics in 2019—likely in early 2021—which will include additional data such as population breakdowns by race and sex and the number of times people were booked into jail (10.6 million in 2017, according to the most recent BJS data available).¹ Vera researchers estimated the national jail population using a sample of 861 jail jurisdictions, which is similar to BJS's sample size. (See Methodology at page 3 for details of the statistical analyses performed in order to compute a national estimate.)

At midyear 2019, there were an estimated 758,400 people in local jails, up 13,200 (1.8 percent increase) from midyear 2017, which is the most recently available BJS data. (See Figure 1.) This is the highest number of people in jail since midyear 2009, and the number is up 31,000 since the recent trough in 2015 (4.3 percent increase). 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.²

The jail incarceration rate in the United States was an estimated 230 people in jail per 100,000 residents, up from 229 per 100,000 in 2017, representing a 0.5 percent

Figure 1
The number of people confined in local jails at midyear, 1960–2019



increase. This brings the rate of jail incarceration up 1.3 percent since the recent trough in 2015. Jail incarceration rates are 2.8 times higher than they were in 1960.

The national increase in the local jail population hides stark diverging trends across the urban to rural continuum. Since 2013, jail populations have grown 27 percent in rural counties and 7 percent in small and mid-sized metropolitan areas. During the same period, jail populations have declined 18 percent in large urban counties and are down 1 percent in the suburban counties surrounding those large urban counties. In 2019, rural counties' jail incarceration rates were more than double those of urban counties. See Table 1 below for a summary of jail incarceration population counts, rates, and percent changes by geographic type between 2013 and 2019.

Table 1
Summary of jail populations, rates, and changes by region.

Jail population					Jail incarceration rate				
	2013	2019	Change	% change		2013	2019	Change	% change
National	731,208	758,420	27,212	4	National	231	230	-1	0
Urban	203,143	166,979	-36,164	-18	Urban	212	165	-46	-22
Suburban	148,674	146,976	-1,698	-1	Suburban	192	180	-12	-6
Small/Midsize metro	242,184	260,169	17,985	7	Small/Midsize metro	257	265	8	3
Rural	145,341	184,295	38,954	27	Rural	314	398	83	26

Introduction

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) publishes annual reports that provide national estimates of the number of people in jail through the Annual Survey of Jails and Census of Jails data series. These reports provide statistics on jail populations, including by race and sex, with some additional information on the number of people sent to jail each year. The most recent report, which provides 2017 data, was released in April 2019.³ In order to provide the public with more timely information, Vera researchers, with support from Google.org Fellows, collected midyear 2018 and 2019 jail population data directly from a sample of local jails and state oversight agencies. This report will fill an information gap until BJS releases its next reports on jail populations.

All jail population counts in this report are estimates of the number of people under the *custody* of the local jail, not the number of people in the local jail's *jurisdiction*. (See “Methodology” on page 3 for a definition of these terms and a detailed description of Vera’s methods.) Generally, Vera obtained data from local jails’ and state departments’ official websites. In some instances where this data was not available online, Vera requested and obtained the information from local jails by telephone or public information requests. Vera collected data for the total number of people under the custody of all county jails in seven states and a sample of jails in other states. These counts were then used to estimate the national total.

Jail population

There were an estimated 755,000 people in local jails in midyear 2018 and 758,420 in midyear 2019. The 13,200 person rise in the number of people in local jails since 2017 is part of a four-year increase in the total U.S. jail population. As of June 2019, there were 31,000 more people in jail since the recent trough of 727,400 in 2015, representing a 4.3 percent increase. More robust geographic comparisons can be made to 2013, the most recent year that BJS collected information in the Census of Jails, which provides substantially better coverage of lower population jails than the Annual Survey of Jails. The increase in the U.S. jail population is due to larger jail populations in rural counties and small and midsized metropolitan areas. Since 2013, rural counties have 39,000 more people in local jails (27 percent increase), and small and midsized metropolitan areas have 18,000 more people in jail (7 percent increase). In contrast, large metropolitan areas with a million or more residents have fewer people in jail;

core cities and surrounding suburban counties saw declining jail populations. Since 2013, urban areas have 36,200 fewer people in jail (18 percent decline), and suburban areas 1,700 fewer people in jail (1 percent decline).⁴ (See Table 1, above.)

Cities that have led the decline since 2013 include Chicago (42 percent decrease), Philadelphia (41 percent decrease), New York City (35 percent decrease), Buffalo (34 percent decrease), Nashville (28 percent decrease), and Oakland (26 percent decrease).

One factor in the national jail population increase is the construction of new jail space and thus the increased capacity to incarcerate people at the local level. While jail populations declined 7.4 percent from 2008 to 2015, jail capacity in the United States increased because jurisdictions built new jails and expanded existing ones. According to BJS data from 2017, the most recent data available, jail capacity is 915,100, 10.4 percent higher than in 2008. As nearly 20 percent of local jail capacity is unused, capacity is not an obstacle to jail population growth in many jurisdictions.⁵ In many places, local officials have chosen to build large jail space expansions at the behest of state prison or federal agencies, in order to earn revenue from contracts holding people on a daily rate charge.⁶

Another factor in the jail population increase is the heightened use of local jails by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for detaining immigrants and asylum seekers. The number of people in ICE detention in August 2019 reached 55,000, an increase of 21,000 (61 percent) compared to 2013, when ICE held an average of 34,000 people.⁷ Although most people detained by ICE are held in private prisons and other facilities operated by for-profit companies, a substantial and growing number are held in local jails that contract with the federal government.⁸ The average number of people detained by ICE and held in local jails was estimated to be 22,900 in October through November 2017, a 23 percent increase from the average daily population of 18,600 held in local jails in fiscal year 2013.⁹

Jail incarceration rate

Vera estimated the national local jail incarceration rate to be 230 per 100,000 residents at midyear 2019, or 368 per 100,000 working-age adults aged 15 to 64.¹⁰ (See Table 2.) The rate of jail incarceration is up from a recent trough of 227 per 100,000 residents in 2015. The rate of jail incarceration is below the peak of 259 per 100,000 residents in 2007, an 11 percent decline.

Since 2013, rural counties’ jail incarceration rates have

increased from 314 to 398 per 100,000 residents (26 percent increase), and rates in small and mid-sized metropolitan areas have increased from 257 to 265 per 100,000 residents (3 percent increase). In contrast, large metropolitan areas with a million or more residents have lower jail incarceration rates. Since 2013, urban areas' jail incarceration rates have decreased from 212 to 165 per 100,000 residents (22 percent decline), and suburban areas have decreased from 192 to 180 per 100,000 residents (6 percent decline). (See Table 1.)

Table 2
Midyear jail population, jail capacity, and jail incarceration rates, 2005–2019

Year	Midyear jail population	Jail capacity	Jail incarceration rate per 100,000 residents	Jail incarceration rate per 100,000 working-age adults (15–64)
2005	747,500	787,000	253	391
2006	765,800	795,000	256	396
2007	780,200	810,500	259	399
2008	785,500	828,700	258	400
2009	767,400	849,900	250	388
2010	748,700	857,900	242	376
2011	735,600	870,400	236	368
2012	744,500	877,400	237	369
2013	731,200	872,900	231	361
2014	744,600	890,500	234	367
2015	727,400	901,400	227	356
2016	740,700	915,400	229	360
2017	745,200	915,100	229	362
2018	755,000	n.d.	231	366
2019	758,420	n.d.	230	368

Methodology

Vera researchers obtained jail population data for midyear 2018 and midyear 2019 for U.S. jail jurisdictions from various sources. Some came from statewide sources of jail data, and others came directly from local agencies. Seven states have agencies that collect and publicly share timely data (monthly or weekly) on jails at the jurisdiction level: California, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, New York, Tennessee, and Texas. These state-level reports cover 765 jurisdictions.

Vera researchers obtained data directly from an additional 96 jail jurisdictions. Overall, 861 jurisdictions from 851 counties in 21 states were sampled for midyear 2018 and 2019. A public use datafile with jurisdiction-level data for 2018 and 2019 is available on Vera's website.¹¹

Vera researchers, with the support of 12 Google.org Fellows, developed software to collect data from state-provided reports and individual jurisdictions. The software uses a combination of PDF and HTML parsing to derive total jail population data from state and local government websites. The Google.org Fellows worked with Vera researchers to create a central source of data for the nation's jails as part of the In Our Backyards project.¹²

In Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Rhode Island, and Vermont, prisons and jails form one unified system operated by the state. As with BJS reports about jails, this report does not include information for those states because they do not have local jails.

The estimates presented in this paper are of the jail *custodial* population, rather than the *jurisdictional* population. Custodial jail populations and jurisdictional jail populations measure different sets of people. Because jails rent their space to state and federal authorities, people under the *custody* of a jail system may be under the *jurisdiction* of a state prison system or a federal agency, such as ICE. The custody population counts everyone who is in a local jail, but some of these people are serving a prison sentence or may be facing a civil immigration charge.

To validate the midyear 2018 and 2019 jail jurisdiction-level population data, Vera researchers compared estimates gathered from individual jurisdictions to the counts reported in other months of the year, as well as other available sources, to determine their plausibility. In addition, researchers spot-checked counts that differed substantially with those numbers available from BJS for 2013. Finally, the national estimates were compared to the estimates produced by BJS for 2017 for plausibility.

National jail population estimates were computed using a method similar to the sample-weighting technique used by BJS to estimate the national jail population from the Annual Survey of Jails responses. All U.S. jail jurisdictions were divided into strata based on the average daily population in 2013, as reported on the 2013 Census of Jails (or 2013 Survey of Jails, when a jurisdiction failed to respond to the 2013 Census of Jails). The BJS sampling method computes sample weights within seven strata but, because the sampling strategy here was not random, instead the population estimate was computed over a range of number of strata (25 to 75)

and subsequently averaged. This range was determined via a sensitivity analysis on the number of strata and substantially increased the stability of the national jail population estimate. Vera researchers also used a linear regression-based method to estimate the change in jail populations, both nationally and across the urban to rural continuum.¹³ Each method showed a rise in the national jail population compared with 2013.

The U.S. resident population counts used to compute incarceration rates were based on Census Bureau July 1 estimates for 2000 through 2018.¹⁴ Midyear 2019 population estimates were based on the rate of change between 2018 estimates and the June 30, 2019, national census estimate, available at the census population clock.¹⁵ Vera researchers calculated the incarceration rates discussed in the text by dividing each jurisdiction's incarcerated-population estimate by the total resident population for the appropriate geographic unit (United States or geographical region), and multiplying the result by 100,000.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics will release its own jail population estimates, along with estimates of several other jail-related incarceration measures, in the future. BJS, through the Annual Survey of Jails and the Census of Jails data collection programs, releases these figures in their Jail Inmates Series reports, as well as in the Correctional Populations in the United States series.

Jurisdiction source notes

Seven states have agencies that produce reports that detail a set of local jail population statistics for every county in the state. Some of these reports include all jails in the state, others are more limited and miss city jails, work-release jails, or certain county-operated prisons.

California: For average daily county jail jurisdiction population for June 2018 and 2019, see California's Board of State and Community Corrections, Jail Profile Survey data, [app. bscc.ca.gov/joq/jps/QuerySelection.asp](http://bscc.ca.gov/joq/jps/QuerySelection.asp).

Florida: For average daily county jail population for June 2018 and 2019, see *Florida County Detention Facilities' Average Inmate Population* reports, prepared by the Florida Department of Corrections, Bureau of Research and Data Analysis, perma.cc/4FZC-FZ4D.

Georgia: For county jail population in the first Thursday of the month in July 2018 and July 2019, see Georgia Department of Community Affairs, Office of Research, *County Jail Inmate Population Report*, perma.cc/C755-C7PB.

Kentucky: For county jail population, see Kentucky Department of Corrections, Research and Statistics, *Weekly Jail reports*, perma.cc/9DF6-ZKPC.

New York: For average daily county jail populations, see New York Division of Criminal Justice Services, *Jail Population in New York State, Average Daily Census by Month*, perma.cc/YX8S-TL8Y.

Tennessee: For end of month, one-day snapshot jail population, see Tennessee Department of Correction, Decision Support: Research & Planning, *Tennessee Jail Summary Report*, perma.cc/R743-E7NQ.

Texas: Data for 2018 and 2019 were reported to Vera directly by the Texas Commission on Jail Standards. For previous first of month, one-day snapshot jail population information, see Texas Commission on Jail Standards, *Abbreviated Population Reports*, perma.cc/QY38-CVZQ.

Endnotes

- 1 All 2018 and 2019 jail population estimates in this report are based on data collected by Vera, while 1970 through 1978 and 1983 through 2018 estimates are from U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), *Census of Jails and Annual Survey of Jails*. See generally BJS, “Data Collection: Census of Jails,” perma.cc/P992-8N2G; and BJS, “Data Collection: Annual Survey of Jails (ASJ),” perma.cc/N5UQ-DSQQ. The 1960 and 1980 jail estimates are from the U.S. Census, see Margaret Cahalan, *Historical Corrections Statistics in the United States, 1850-1984* (Washington, DC: BJS, 1986), perma.cc/WDP7-35AA. Numbers in the body text may not sum due to rounding, but all tables provide exact estimates for jail population counts.
- 2 For more information, see generally Ram Subramanian, Ruth Delaney, Stephen Roberts et al., *Incarceration’s Front Door: The Misuse of Jail in America* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2015), perma.cc/PQB2-VAAJ.
- 3 Zhen Zeng, *Jail Inmates in 2017* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019), perma.cc/J9LH-HZ2P.
- 4 These estimates are drawn from a large sample of local jails that, together, house approximately half of the country’s jail population. The estimates are consistent with longer term trends. Nevertheless, this is not a census and lacks data on every local jail. It is possible that the populations in those missing jails could have changed in different ways than estimated by Vera. For instance, some unsampled rural areas may have seen steep decarceration, and unsampled urban areas might have instituted jail expansions. Dramatic differences, if they exist, would alter the reported estimates presented here.

Vera’s analysis of the urban-rural continuum changes the six categories defined by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) 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 one 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”).
- 5 Zeng, *Jail Inmates in 2017*, 2019, Table 6: Jail capacity, midyear population, and percent of capacity occupied in local jails, 2005-2017.
- 6 For examples of this in Pennsylvania, New York, Florida, and Kentucky, see Jack Norton, “Why are There So Many People in Jail in Scranton, PA?” Vera Institute of Justice, January 2017, perma.cc/WZZ5-APJD; Jack Norton, “No One is Watching: Jail in Upstate New York,” Vera Institute of Justice, April 2018, perma.cc/YXQ6-SQFR; Jack Norton and Jacob Kang-Brown, “Federal Farm Aid for the Big House,” Vera Institute of Justice, October 2018, perma.cc/7G6H-PSK3; and Jack Norton and Judah Schept, “Keeping the Lights On,” Vera Institute of Justice, March 2019, perma.cc/26CV-PBK2.
- 7 For August 2019, see U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Detention Management, detention statistics tab, “ICE Average Daily Population by Arresting Agency and Month, FY2019 through 9/21/2019,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20190924021811/https://www.ice.gov/detention-management>. For 2013, see Ted Robbins, “Little Known Immigration Mandate Keeps Beds Full,” National Public Radio, November 19, 2013, perma.cc/4NQ3-TSJF.
- 8 For more information on local jails as immigrant detention facilities, see Jacob Kang-Brown and Jack Norton, “More Than a Jail: Immigrant Detention and the Smell of Money,” Vera Institute of Justice, July 2018, perma.cc/H8DC-CGRP.
- 9 Local jail estimate from Emily Ryo and Ian Peacock, “Jailing Immigrant Detainees: A National Study of County Participation in Immigration Detention, 1983-2013,” *Law & Society Review*, forthcoming, perma.cc/95WD-QUAE.
- 10 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Working Age Population: Aged 15-64: All Persons for the United States [LFWA64TTUSM647S], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, October 12, 2019, fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LFWA64TTUSM647S.
- 11 To download the file, please see www.vera.org/people-in-jail-in-2019.
- 12 The Google.org Fellowship enables Google employees to engage in full-time pro bono work to help Google.org grantees solve some of their toughest technical challenges. During this Fellowship, 12 Google staff worked alongside Vera researchers for six months.
- 13 This approach approximates the method used by Andrew Gelman to generate regression results with survey data. See Andrew Gelman, “Struggles with Survey Weighting and Regression Modeling,” *Statistical Science* 22, no. 2 (2007), 153-164, perma.cc/ZT99-GVTR.
- 14 U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau (USCB), “Annual Estimates of the Resident Population: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018,” Table 1. Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for the United States, Regions, States, and Puerto Rico: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018 [NST-EST2018-01], www.census.gov/newsroom/press-kits/2018/pop-estimates-national-state.html; and USCB, “National Intercensal Datasets: 2000-2010,” perma.cc/93K9-2M5M.
- 15 USCB, “U.S. and World Population Clock,” www.census.gov/popclock/.

Acknowledgments

We are very grateful to Jen Carter and Erin Hattersley for their leadership of the Google.org Fellowship and to the Fellowship team: Colin Adams, Aria Ashton, Sonia Chokshi, Rasmī Elasmār, Zach Garcia, Charniece Huff, Arian Karbasi, Jennie Lai, Zachary Lawrence, Terin Patel-Wilson, Carole Touma, and James Wallace-Lee, who worked full time on a pro bono basis with Vera for six months to develop a central source of data for jails in the United States. Thank you to Maab Ibrahim and Justin Steele from Google.org for their support. Thank you to Léon Digard and Cindy Reed for editorial support, and to Jim Parsons for research support. Thank you to Alex Boldin, Jasmine Heiss, Chris Henrichson, Theo Jacobs, Kaylin Jolivette, Chloe Kimball, Chris Mai, Theresa McKinney, Jack Norton, Meg Osborn, Sreya Pinnamaneni, Kelsey Reid, Kristi Riley, and Jonathan Varnad for assisting in collecting midyear 2018 data. Thank you to Paragini Amin for designing the report. This work would not be possible without the excellent work of researchers at the Bureau of Justice Statistics who maintain the National Jail Census and Annual Survey of Jails programs, especially Zhen Zeng. The In Our Backyards project was generously supported by a grant from Google.org.

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Suggested Citation

Jacob Kang-Brown, Oliver Hinds, Eital Schattner-Elmaleh, and James Wallace-Lee. *People in Jail in 2019*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2019.