

The Price of Jails: Measuring the Taxpayer Cost of Local Incarceration

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REPORT SUMMARY

For More Information

The Vera Institute of Justice is an independent nonprofit organization that combines research, demonstration projects, and technical assistance to help leaders in government and civil society improve the systems people rely on for justice and safety.

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This report was created with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of its Safety and Justice Challenge initiative, which seeks to address over-incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails. Core to the Challenge is a competition designed to support efforts to improve local criminal justice systems across the country that are working to safely reduce over-reliance on jails, with a particular focus on addressing disproportionate impact on low-income individuals and communities of color.

More information is available at www.SafetyandJusticeChallenge.org.

Read the complete report at www.vera.org/price-of-jails.

Jails—locally run facilities used primarily to detain persons arrested but not yet convicted of any crime—now hold more than 730,000 people on any given day, more than triple their population in 1983. These are the places where most arrested men and women land and where many remain as their cases wind through the criminal justice system. Bigger jail populations mean increased costs for staff and other expenses. The U.S. Department of Justice estimated that local communities spent \$22.2 billion on jails in 2011.

But as high as \$22.2 billion sounds, it underestimates the actual price of jails, because other government agencies often bear a large share of jail costs not reflected in jail budgets. For example, in addition to the \$1.1 billion spent by the City of New York Department of Correction in 2014, other city agencies spent an additional \$1.3 billion for jail employee benefits, health care and education programs for incarcerated people, and administration, bringing the total cost to \$2.4 billion.

Because reported jail costs are too often incomplete, policymakers and the public are seldom aware of the full extent of their community's financial commitment to the jail. As policymakers focus on justice reform at the local level, they need to understand how much the community is actually spending. To this end, researchers at the Vera Institute of Justice developed a survey to help counties tally the actual price of their jails.

The only way to safely reduce the cost of jail is to limit the number of people in the jail, because the cost largely comprises expenses for staff and the number of staff is dictated by the population of incarcerated people. In fact, the inmate population is such a key cost driver that it is possible for "expensive" jails (meaning those with a high average per-inmate cost) to be the least costly to taxpayers.

Consider the example of two counties of similar size: Johnson County, Kansas, and Bernalillo, New Mexico. By comparing the average cost per inmate, the jail in Johnson County appears to be more than twice as expensive as the jail in Bernalillo County (\$191.95 per day versus \$85.63 per day in 2014). But taxpayers in Johnson County actually spend less on the jail than taxpayers in Bernalillo County do, because the incarceration rate in 2014 was more than three times lower (121 per 100,000 versus 369 per 100,000). As a result, the annual cost of jail in Johnson County is \$49 million (\$82 per county resident), versus \$78 million (\$113 per county resident) in Bernalillo County.

Recognizing the urgent need to reduce the jail population, Bernalillo County formed the Criminal Justice Review Commission in 2013 to reduce jail overcrowding. Many of their initiatives have been implemented and, as a result, the jail population has already declined 39 percent since 2014. This decline, in turn, is yielding saving for taxpayers: The county spends less for out-of-county jail beds. And the jail has closed one housing unit and plans to close another later in the year—a striking turn of events in only a couple years made possible through the collaborative efforts of justice system stakeholders throughout the county.

A tale of two counties: Inmate populations drive costs (FY 2014)

Johnson County is about the same size as Bernalillo County.



574,272
RESIDENTS



675,551
RESIDENTS

Jail is more expensive in Johnson County.



\$191.95
PER INMATE PER DAY



\$85.63
PER INMATE PER DAY

BECAUSE

Staffing ratio is lower.
Salaries are higher.



: 1.4
INMATES

\$94K
AVG. SALARY



: 4.1
INMATES

\$54K
AVG. SALARY

BUT

Fewer are incarcerated in Johnson County.



693 inmates
(121 PER 100,000)



2,496 inmates
(369 PER 100,000)

SO

Taxpayers in Johnson County spend less on the jail.



\$49 million
(\$82 per resident)



\$78 million
(\$113 per resident)

TOTAL ANNUAL COST