There are a staggering 1.8 million people behind bars in the United States, a number so big it can make mass incarceration seem abstract. But mass incarceration is a local problem, driven by more than 3,000 county-run jails and local justice systems and nearly 18,000 police departments.

Jails are primarily funded by county-level taxpayer dollars and used to lock up people who are awaiting trial but have not been convicted of the charges they are facing. The vast majority of people in jail are simply too poor to pay bail. Some jails also hold people serving shorter prison sentences, and many jails rent beds to the state prison system or federal authorities—like U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In Pennsylvania, jails are called “county prisons” and are run by an appointed warden.

Prisons are primarily funded by state and federal tax dollars and hold people serving sentences of more than a year. Prisons are run by state departments of corrections and are managed by wardens. Fewer than 9 percent of incarcerated people are held in private prisons.

This fact sheet will help you understand who is locked up in your county prison and how this impacts your community.

Use it to:

- Explore trends
- Talk about their impact
- Change the system

Just a few days behind bars is enough to cause strain on a family, lose employment, lose housing.

3,000 18,000

1,340 people were in the Delaware County prison on a typical day in 2021.

2,204 people from Delaware County were in state prison at the end of 2019.
PUBLIC HEALTH

Jails have revolving doors, often churning the same people in and out. Even before COVID-19, jail stays led to worse physical and mental health outcomes.³

RISING INCARCERATION

On an average day in 2021, 1,340 people were being held in the county prison, 80 percent of the total capacity. The 179 percent increase in incarceration since 1983 does not necessarily reflect an increase in serious crime.³ In 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the prison population decreased 27 percent from 2019. This decline shows that Delaware County can quickly reduce its prison population.

COST

Jail costs make up a sizable portion of the county budget, and every dollar spent is one that could have gone to critical community needs. As counties face increasing budget constraints, reducing jail spending has a big impact.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Jails have revolving doors, often churning the same people in and out. Even before COVID-19, jail stays led to worse physical and mental health outcomes.³

INCREASE IN STATE PRISON ADMISSIONS

The number of people sent to state prison from Delaware County has risen 268 percent since 1990.

Note: Prison admissions reflect current sentencing practices more clearly than does the prison population. This is because the prison population, which includes people serving long sentences, changes more slowly in response to reforms.
Mass incarceration begins and ends in our backyards.

**Cashing in on incarceration**

On a typical day, 2 percent of people being held in the county prison fill beds “rented” to other agencies. The county gets paid a per diem to incarcerate or detain them.

Most counties charge fines and fees for court costs and prison stays. This further traps people in cycles of poverty.

**Criminalization of immigrants**

In 2021, 3 people were being held for ICE. Renting beds to ICE ties a county’s financial interests to the criminalization of immigrants.⁵

**Understanding disparities**

Racial disparities begin with who gets stopped by the police and multiply throughout the legal system. When charged with similar offenses as white people, Black people are more likely to be detained pretrial, convicted, and given harsher sentences.⁶ Seemingly “color-blind” policies may still disproportionately impact communities of color.⁷

People of every race and ethnicity are incarcerated at higher rates than they were in 1970. The county’s white incarceration rate has grown 105 percent since 1990. Latinx people are also overrepresented in the nation’s jails, yet common misclassification of ethnicity leads to distorted, lower estimates of Latinx incarceration.⁸

**Women in the county prison**

In Delaware County, the rate of women’s incarceration is growing much more rapidly than men’s.

Two-thirds of women in jail across the country are mothers of young children.⁹ More than half of all people who are in jail because they couldn’t make bail are parents to young children.¹⁰ Nearly half of adults in the United States have had an immediate family member in jail or prison.¹¹

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**Agencies using the county prison (2021)**

- 1,316 People held for Delaware County
- 21 People held for the state prison system
- 3 People held for ICE

**Racial disparities in criminalization (2019)**

- Black people are 23% of the county population...
- ...but 55% of the county prison population.

**Women in the county prison**

- 295 Women in county prison
- 368% Increase from 1990
As a community member, **YOU** have influence over decision-making in Delaware County. You can get involved with or start local efforts to shift power into the community and end mass incarceration in Delaware County.

### Citations

10. Ibid.

### Data

This fact sheet uses data from four U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data series and is supplemented, when available, with data obtained directly from the Delaware County Sheriff’s Office for the more recent years for which BJS data is not yet available. The Census of Jails provides data through 2013; the Annual Survey of Jails provides data through 2018; the National Corrections Reporting Program provides data through 2016; and the National Prisoner Statistics program provides data through 2017. A complete dataset and documentation are available on Vera’s GitHub at https://github.com/vera-institute/incarceration-trends.

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### Credits

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For questions, contact backyards@vera.org.