

Out of Sight: The Growth of Jails in Rural America

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Report Summary

As concern in the United States has grown over the number of people behind bars, policymakers and the public are turning their attention to addressing the decades-long growth in the number of people held in the country's 3,000 locally-run jails. With local jail populations swelling from 157,000 on any given day in 1970 to over 700,000 people in 2015, there are now an astronomical number of jail admissions annually—nearly 11 million—prompting many to question whether local jails have grown too large, and at too high a cost for the communities they serve. This has in turn spawned increasing efforts to better understand the size, scope, and distribution of local incarceration.

In contribution to this effort, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) developed the *Incarceration Trends* data tool in 2015 to better understand how jails have grown in every U.S. county. In an initial analysis, Vera researchers found that small counties, defined as counties with fewer than 250,000 people, have driven overall jail growth since 1970, despite the conventional perception that this has been exclusively a phenomenon of large cities.

To further understand the contours of jail growth, Vera researchers turned once again to its data tool to study the newly-released 2013 *Census of Jails* from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and conduct an updated historical analysis of jail population trends. What they found is that it is not simply small counties that have increasingly been the locus of rising local incarceration rates, but rural ones—despite their substantially lower crime rates in comparison to urban areas. In their analysis, Vera's researchers examined two specific drivers of local incarceration: 1) changes in the number of people held in pretrial detention; and 2) changes in the number of people who are held for another authority.

Two underlying trends emerged:

- > **Rural jails have the highest rates of growth in pretrial detention in the country.** While overall rates of pretrial detention have risen nationally, the highest rates now feature most prominently in rural counties across all regions of the country. Pretrial incarceration rates in rural counties increased 436 percent between 1970 and 2013.
- > **Financial incentives encourage rural jail systems to board in individuals from other authorities.** An escalating number of rural jails—mainly in the South and West—are renting out jail beds to hold people for federal, state, and other local governments. In some cases, jails are even building new capacity to meet external jail bed demands unrelated to crime in their own jurisdictions. In 11 states in the South and West, for example, more than 30 percent of people in jail were held for other authorities.

While there are no doubt varied reasons underlying these trends, one possible root cause appears likely: Fewer system resources in rural counties discourage the use of alternatives to detention. Given that the distribution of scarce state and county resources likely favors those areas with more people, access to critical criminal justice and community services may be spread thin the further away a place is from population clusters in a state or county. This means there may be fewer judges to quickly hear cases, less robust pretrial services, and fewer diversion programs available to decrease jail use.

These findings highlight a need to include smaller counties—especially rural areas—in jail reduction efforts, and for more research to design solutions tailored to their unique needs and the challenges they face.

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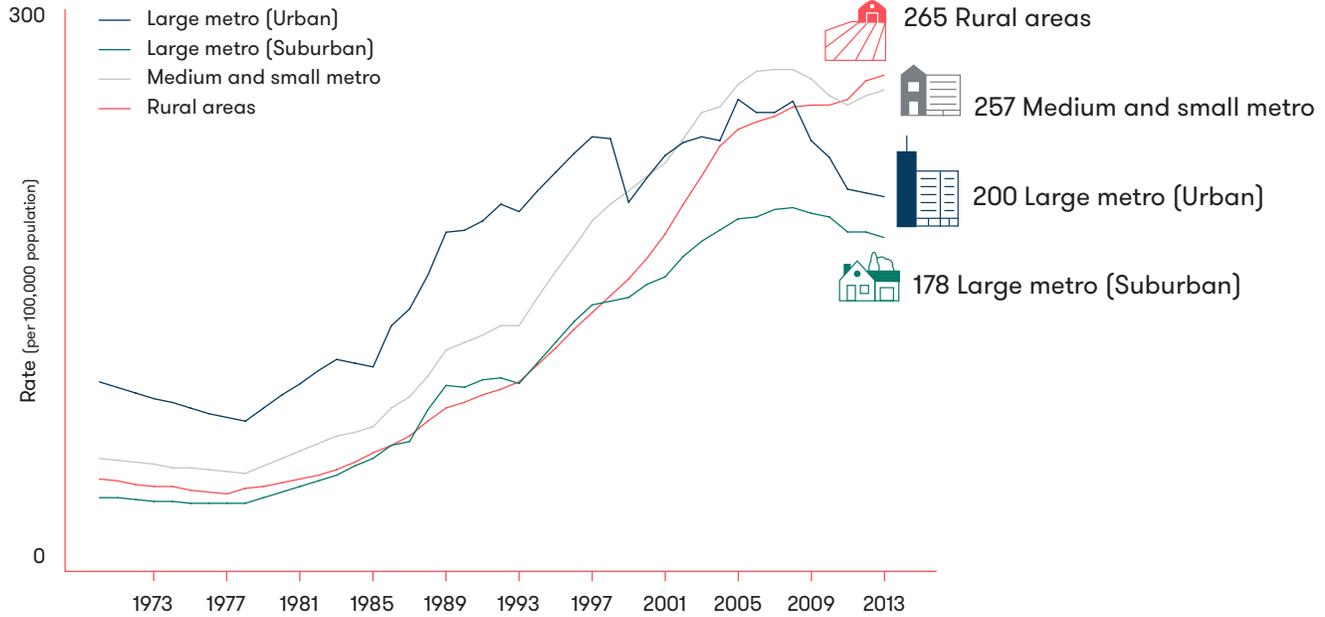
To learn more about Vera's *Incarceration Trends* data tool and the factors driving the growth of rural jails, read the full report at www.vera.org/out-of-sight. For more information about this report, contact Ram Subramanian, editorial director, at rsubramanian@vera.org.

The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice, and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve America's increasingly

diverse communities. For more information, visit www.vera.org.

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Pretrial incarceration by urban-rural counties



The expanding local jail market

