



Reformers Looking to Intervene in Mass Incarceration Must Understand the Role of Rural County Jails

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Since the 1970s, the prison population in the United States has skyrocketed, with more people incarcerated than ever before. While prisons—where people who have been convicted of crimes are confined—are more frequently the topic of popular discussion, jails—where those awaiting trial or serving sentences for minor crimes are held—are also important, as they serve as the gateway to prison. And while **prison admissions have been declining over the last decade and a half, jail incarceration has been steadily increasing**, largely driven by rural and small city jails.

My research and that from evidence-forward advocacy organizations, like the Vera Institute of Justice, shows that considering jails and their political, social, and spatial contexts is a critical element in the project of ending mass incarceration in the United States. Interventions that seek to reduce local incarceration should consider the roles necessary social services may play in the diversion of vulnerable populations from jails, especially in rural counties, and the prospect of inter-county collaboration between government staff who share responsibilities toward populations with shared characteristics.

Rural Jails are Too Often the Site of Social Service Provision in Local Government Jurisdictions

Research from the Vera Institute shows that urban jails have been incarcerating fewer individuals over the past decades, **while jails in rural counties and small cities have been steadily incarcerating more**. Despite the popular understanding of mass incarceration as an inherently urban problem, rural counties now feature the highest jail incarceration rate of any type of spatial category, far outpacing that of their urban counterparts. And since there are more rural counties than any other type in the United States, those high incarceration rates compound even further. **Maine, as a largely rural state, fits this pattern**: Based on data from 2015, Maine ranked first in the Northeast for jail admissions and second in jail pre-trial and jail-sentenced populations and prison admissions.

Unlike prisons, jails are a local government institution and are found in most counties in the United States. Most jails in the United States are county jails, funded by county governments. Most jail inmates are held for minor, non-violent violations, and jails in many communities have become a de facto way of managing homelessness, addiction, and mental illness. This is exacerbated by declining access to health care in rural areas, **driven by the accelerated closure of rural hospitals. Rural county governments already tend to offer fewer social services than urban county governments, due to constrained financial and administrative capacity**. As a result, the rising rural jail rate may be tied to a lack of local alternatives to incarceration, with jails serving as one of the few remaining institutions through which to address local issues. Making arrest and incarceration a prerequisite for accessing essential services such as housing and medical care does rural residents a disservice, especially when rural communities already face substantial barriers to accessing a wide range of essential services.

Local Governments and Local Contexts

In my own research, I find that jail incarceration is closely connected to local government characteristics, spatial context, and local social conditions. **I conducted a national-level study of counties in the United States**, examining the extent to which local government social programs, local government financial capacity, and other local factors such as rural location, poverty, crime, and unemployment were related to jail incarceration. I found that after accounting for a range of local government and social factors, rurality was not significantly associated with higher jail incarceration rates. Rather, local politics and the number of local government social

services offered (which tend to be lower in rural areas) were. However, higher unemployment, higher employment in the extractive sector (mining, oil, and gas extraction), and lower local government spending on education are all closely related to jail incarceration levels—and disproportionately represented in rural counties. In short, the social profile of rural counties is strongly associated with jail incarceration outcomes.

I also find that high jail rates tend to be clustered across county borders. Thus, even after accounting for a host of local and contextual factors, certain areas emerge as jail incarceration hotspots. This suggests the existence of local or regional incarceration trends, independent of crime rates or local government and social conditions.

Recommendations

Given the [documented impacts of jail incarceration](#) and the unique challenges faced by rural communities, examining rural jails is important for both criminal justice reform and rural community well-being. Reformers and policymakers interested in affecting changes in the criminal justice system need to understand and examine the ways in which jails are closely integrated into the local governmental and institutional fabric of communities. Doing so generates important opportunities to build long-term community development partnerships and learn about the challenges facing rural and small counties that result in elevated jail incarceration rates.

An important step toward understanding jail phenomena, particularly in rural counties, is to reframe how we think about the jail in the first place: Even if the jail is a punitive institution used for incarceration and punishment, the rhetoric surrounding jail incarceration and the types of funds used to finance the jail are varied and complex, and may reference law and order while also pointing to social welfare and economic development. The jail is part of a local constellation of institutions, including health care, education, government, and the economy. In communities that lack alternatives, jails may become a catchall solution to local health and economic crises. In addition to local government and law enforcement, local healthcare facilities, schools, employers, and housing agencies (among a range of others) are all necessary partners in addressing rising rural jail incarceration.

Finally, because jail incarceration rates in a particular county are also significantly correlated with the jail incarceration rates of adjacent counties, impactful and effective solutions will necessarily require actors from multiple neighboring counties. In many cases, inter-county collaborative infrastructure may already exist for economic development or governance purposes, which could provide an important springboard for other community-based work like jail reform.

Read more in Sarah Walton, “[The Gateway to Mass Incarceration: A County-Level Analysis of Jails in the United States](#),” Ohio State University, forthcoming; and [research from the Vera Institute of Justice](#).