

California: The State of Incarceration, Explained

Despite California's reputation as a [progressive state](#), it is one of the epicenters of mass incarceration in the United States. Given the challenges of accessing timely, easily interpretable data on the various channels of incarceration in the state, painting a complete picture of just how large and expensive the system of mass incarceration has been difficult. A new Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) resource consolidates criminal legal system data for every California county so that anyone can find out what's happening in their community and—equipped with that knowledge—take action to reform the system.

Did you know? Each year in California, law enforcement agencies make nearly 800,000 arrests and book people into county jail more than 600,000 times, and courts send almost 35,000 people to prison.¹



Why this tool?

California has [long been associated with liberalism and progressive policies](#). Yet, despite this reputation, it has a mass incarceration problem. California spends billions on incarceration rather than working to reduce pretrial detention, expand alternatives to incarceration, and ensure people can access community-based mental health care.

It's hard to find state-provided data on incarceration in California since it is [strewn across various governmental websites, hidden in spreadsheets and antiquated databases, and generally inaccessible to all but the most determined and technologically savvy users](#). Inspired by the work of organizers, advocates, and directly impacted people, Vera's new data hub, [California: The State of Incarceration](#), gathers, maps, and makes sense of disparate data—from jail and prison populations to corrections budgets, racial demographics in arrests, and more. For the first time, this data is available in a single platform that brings new clarity to the state of incarceration in California, provides current data to users, and produces county-level fact sheets that will help supercharge advocacy to change the criminal legal system in the state.

¹ The most recently available data for arrests, jail bookings, and prison admissions is from 2021.

Users can find answers to the following questions:

- How many people are incarcerated across jails, prisons, and ICE detention in my county? How many facilities incarcerate people?
- What are people arrested for? Does the jail hold mostly pretrial or sentenced people? For misdemeanors or felonies? How many incarcerated people have mental health conditions?
- What opportunities exist to reduce the number of people who are incarcerated?
- What racial disparities exist in arrests?
- How does my county fund policing, detention, and the criminal legal system and how does this compare to funding for mental health services, medical care, and public assistance? What could money spent on detention pay for if invested elsewhere?
- What is the scale of incarceration across the state, including statewide trends and a map of county jails and state prisons?
- What is happening in my county? The tool produces county-level data fact sheets that include the following information:
 - summary data points about the scale of incarceration, including the number of facilities, arrests, jail admissions, and prison sentences from the county;
 - arrest types and racial disparities;
 - the number of people the county sends to prison; and
 - county budget investments in incarceration and the opportunity costs of those investments.

While any one of these facts is compelling, the synergy of having them side by side can empower and supercharge advocacy in places where it is needed most.

Key findings from the California State of Incarceration data hub

Although California is a large and diverse state, Vera’s findings demonstrate how systemic approaches to criminal legal spending and incarceration create similar issues across the state.

- **Rural incarceration rates exceed urban rates.**
 - Although large, populous counties like Los Angeles incarcerate the most people, rural and small to mid-sized counties have the highest incarceration rates—in fact, small counties like Trinity, Modoc, and Lassen have the three highest jail incarceration rates in the state.
- **California jails have high pretrial populations.**
 - In 2021, 75 percent of the people in jails statewide had pending charges for which they had not been convicted, many because they can’t afford the astronomically high cost of bail. For instance, in 2022 in Los Angeles County, the median bail was \$235,000, four times that in New York City.
 - The pretrial population makes up more than 50 percent of people in every county jail, with some counties—such as Alameda, Fresno, and Merced—reporting more than 90 percent of their jail populations in pretrial status.
- **California is outspending its actual use of incarceration.** The state’s prison and jail populations are shrinking while spending on the criminal legal system is increasing.
 - The state is set to spend \$18 billion dollars on the criminal legal system in fiscal year 2023—while cities spend an additional \$14 billion on police and counties spend \$19 billion on policing, jails, probation, and the judicial system. Each year, California spends tens of billions of dollars on mass incarceration, \$32 billion of which comes from city and county budgets that local advocacy can influence.

- This spending is occurring while jail and prison populations are decreasing. In 52 out of 58 counties, the number of people in prison has declined in the last 10 years, and county jail populations decreased by 16 percent from 2011 to 2021.
- Despite these decreases, from 2011 to 2021, county spending on detention increased by 20 percent—from \$3.4 billion to \$4.1 billion (inflation-adjusted to 2021 dollars).
 - This spending creates opportunity costs. Money spent on incarceration is money not spent on public health and social welfare programs, such as mental health treatment and housing. For instance, in Sacramento County, if the county had maintained its spending at the 2017 level instead of increasing it annually, it could pay rent each year for 3,148 one-bedroom apartments at fair market value, housing 57 percent of the homeless population of the county. Or with the same savings, it could pay for 8,073 people to receive medication for opioid use disorder, along with associated medical support services.
- **All counties have racial disparities in arrests.** In all counties, arrest rates vary by race, and people of color are arrested in disproportionately high numbers. Fifty-one out of California’s 58 counties arrest Black residents at a higher rate than white residents, which translates into similar racial disparities in jailing and imprisonment.
 - In some places, like San Francisco, the arrest rate for Black people is more than five times the rate for white people.
 - Even the data that is available sometimes lacks clarity, like the data given on racial demographics in arrests: in 13 counties, the data identifies the highest disparities in arrest rates as being for “people of other races.” This provides only a vague impression of a group of people who are clearly impacted. They are not identified with enough specificity to measure and validate their experiences.
- **Most arrests are for misdemeanors.**
 - In 2021, only 12 percent of California’s 792,797 arrests were for violent felonies; the vast majority of people arrested were charged with misdemeanors.
 - California jails house a large number of people with mental health conditions.
- **More than a third of people in California’s jails have a mental health condition, and in some places, like Siskiyou County, it’s as high as 66 percent of the jail population.**

How can you use this tool to help transform the system?

Using the information in Vera’s California data hub, community members, advocates, and policymakers can work to change California’s system of mass incarceration.

- **Learn what is happening in other California counties to inspire local strategies and provide opportunities for coalition-building.**
 - Reducing the use of incarceration across the state will require strategies for all types of counties, and even modest advocacy could have huge payouts in smaller to mid-size counties.
- **Use the specific and measurable examples of opportunity costs from your county to ask for better investments in safety.**
 - The tool provides budget calculations for each county, including the percentage of that county’s unhoused population that could be housed if funds were diverted from the criminal legal system. Advocates can use this information to engage in targeted budget advocacy; investments in housing and health care instead of the criminal legal system can foster public safety.
- **Redirect funds from incarceration and detention facilities toward community health and support programs.**
 - Although jail populations are going down, spending on incarceration is going up. The lion’s share of spending typically goes toward salaries and benefits, not reentry or diversion programs

nor mental health and community health programs. Advocates can use this information to seek to right-size corrections budgets to better match the shrinking populations. They can show how that money could be invested in the types of supports that provide more public safety, like housing, mental health care workers, and substance use disorder treatments.

- **Pretrial detention data could be used to demonstrate the huge impact potential of reforms such as ending money bail.**
 - Any plans to tackle mass incarceration in California need to include every county, no matter the size, with a commitment to reduce pretrial incarceration. By asking for regularly tracked and released data on the use of money bail, including information on bail amounts, length of stay, and release reasons, advocates everywhere can call for a fairer and more just pretrial system.
- **Data transparency will be key to making progress for some of the impacted populations, including women, people of color, and people in the LGBTQ community.**
 - Despite how deeply interwoven the various criminal legal systems in California are, there is a high barrier to current, robust, and integrated data and reporting on its carceral system. This resource is a first attempt at painting a more complete picture, but there is still plenty of work to be done to unveil the full scope of the workings of the system of mass incarceration in California in a timely manner. Advocating for greater access to robust, real-time data on key metrics such as racial demographics and gender expression across all channels of incarceration would go a long way toward changing the system.

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The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and policy experts working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they're fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn't determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera's headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit vera.org. For more information about this fact sheet, contact Michelle Parris, program director, at mparris@vera.org.