

Incarceration and Inequality Data Explorer

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Overview

The Incarceration and Inequality Project (IIP) [Data Explorer](#), created by the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), allows users to examine trends in, and relationships between, measures of incarceration and a range of economic metrics at the county-level and for the entire country. The Explorer includes multiple views, allowing users to compare metrics for different demographic groups and levels of geography, providing easy-to-use information to stakeholders and advocates.

The Explorer is built on the foundation of Vera’s [IIP Public Dataset](#), incorporating calculated measures and the results of a multi-phase analysis, to provide a set of metrics that local advocates and other stakeholders can use to better understand their own counties. Vera will update the Explorer as further data releases become available.

This document contains a high-level description of the data that feeds into the IIP Data Explorer. For additional technical details on how Vera grouped similar counties, please refer to the IIP Data Explorer [“Similar Counties” Methodology](#).

Data Sources

The data in the Explorer is derived from three sources:

Vera’s Incarceration Trends Project

The Data Explorer incorporates incarceration metrics from Vera’s [Incarceration Trends Project](#) (ITP), which includes jail, prison, and total incarceration data. The ITP combines this information with population statistics from the National Cancer Institute’s Surveillance Epidemiology and End Results Program (SEER) to calculate incarceration rates at the county level (see next section for details on how the measures are calculated). The Explorer contains incarceration data for the years 2009 through 2022—and through 2025 for a selection of states.

Detailed documentation of the incarceration data is available on the ITP [GitHub repository and Codebook](#).

U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey

Beyond the SEER data referenced above, Vera used American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates for all other demographic and socioeconomic data, except for business data. This data is the basis of most of Vera’s calculated measures. Vera selected 5-year estimates, as opposed to 1-year estimates, because they provide greater county-level

coverage and allow for disaggregation by racial groups. The Explorer contains all years of available data from this source at the time of publishing; 2009 through 2024.

The variables from this source include the following:

- population (including by racial demographics),
- labor force and unemployment rates,
- poverty rate,
- home ownership rate,
- health insurance coverage rate,
- public assistance utilization rate,
- median income and rent, and
- county and state metadata.

For additional information about the raw data extracted from the ACS, see the Incarceration and Inequality Project's [Public Dataset Release documentation](#).

U.S. Census Bureau Census of Business Patterns

Vera collected and aggregated business data at the county level using the Census of Business Patterns (CBP), which provides this data on an annual basis. The Explorer provides this data in the form of counts of business per 100,000 residents from 2009 through 2021.

For additional information about the raw data extracted from the CBP, see the Incarceration and Inequality Project's [Public Dataset Release documentation](#).

Variable Descriptions

A detailed list of the data points presented in the Data Explorer, including data sources and formulas for calculated variables, is available in the [Data Dictionary](#).

In some instances, Vera suppressed data in the Data Explorer tool to mitigate rate instability. Vera did this in cases where there were ten or fewer observations used in a rate calculation. This is to ensure rate stability and accuracy, as small count estimates are generally less accurate, and small changes can create large swings in rate values that are not necessarily reflective of overall trends.

Calculated Measures

Vera calculated incarceration rates (drawn from ITP, including prison and jail rates—overall, by racial demographics, and across geographic aggregation levels) by dividing the count of incarcerated people by the population ages 15 to 64 (from SEER), then multiplying by 100,000. Vera calculated all other rates using the relevant denominator from the ACS.

Vera constructed the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) groups by totaling all racial groups except ‘white not Latinx’ when ethnicity could be separated from race. Otherwise, it is a total of all racial groups except white.

Vera constructed total incarceration rates within racial groups by summing the jail and prison populations for each racial group and dividing by the total population ages 15 to 64 (from SEER) within that racial group. There is a minor limitation to this method as there is some overlap between jail and prison populations (through the “jail from prison” population, in which people who have prison sentences are housed in jails), which is only provided in total and not by race. Because it is likely that there are racial disparities in that subsection of the incarcerated population, it is not possible to generate an estimate of the impact of this limitation for different racial groups. However, Vera estimates that the “jail from prison” population typically represents less than 8 percent of the total jail population.

To calculate the ratios displayed in the “Disparities in the county” section of the tool, Vera divided the rate for the relevant subsection of the population (Black, BIPOC, or Latinx) by the rate for the white population (or white/not Latinx population, where available). The data explorer presents these results as the ratio between the two populations for each of the three incarceration and five economic metrics.

Counties sharing regional jails: As described in the [ITP Codebook](#), multi-jurisdictional jails do not report populations disaggregated by the county the individual person is held for. To approximate the county-level jail populations in these jurisdictions, the ITP dataset apportioned multi-jurisdictional jail populations across all of the associated counties, weighted according to the county population ages 15 through 64. (For example, if a regional jail held 100 people and served two counties—one with 90,000 residents and the other with 10,000 residents—this method would assume 10 people were from the smaller county and 90 from the larger county.) Incarceration rates in these counties should therefore be considered approximations. This method also means that, when the race and the ethnicity breakdown varies drastically between counties that share a regional jail, disparity rates may be artificially inflated or shrunk in one or more of those counties as a result and should be treated with caution.

For a full list of variables and their formulas, see the Explorer [Data Dictionary](#).

“Similar Counties”

The Explorer allows users to compare incarceration rates and changes in incarceration over time for counties that are grouped based on similarities across multiple economic and incarceration measures. To generate these groupings, Vera utilized a series of calculated measures representing the following four domains: urbanicity and racial inequality, incarceration, economic opportunity, and economic stability. Vera data scientists implemented a multi-phase machine learning analysis, which considered baseline rates and trends overtime, for each of the domains. In the tool, the “Similar Counties” groups represent counties that are similar across all four domains.

For a more detailed explanation of this analysis, please refer to the [“Similar Counties” Methodology](#).

Contact Information

For more information on the data or methods described in this brief, please contact the IIP team at Vera at iip@vera.org or V Thompkins by mail at 34 35th Street, Suite 4-2A Brooklyn, NY 11232.

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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.