

The Incarceration and Inequality Data Explorer

Bridging the data gap between incarceration and economic inequality

April 2026

Incarceration in prisons and jails severely damages the economic well-being of families and communities and furthers inequality. The [Incarceration and Inequality Project \(IIP\) Data Explorer](#) is an interactive tool that maps incarceration and economic conditions across the United States, revealing in detail how they change over time and place.

Mass incarceration has devastated communities around the country, exacerbating poverty, inhibiting economic mobility, stagnating local economies, and causing persistent stigmatization—particularly for people of color.¹ For example, a 2020 study estimated that, on average, prior incarceration reduced people’s lifetime earnings by 52 percent, with a far greater impact on Black and Latinx people than on white people.²

Despite the substantial evidence linking incarceration and economic distress, community leaders and policymakers advocating for change do not have ready access to data on this critical intersection.

The Incarceration and Inequality Project (IIP) Data Explorer is an interactive tool that brings county-level incarceration trends and economic indicators together in one place. The explorer provides easy-to-access metrics of community well-being, including median income, health insurance coverage rates, postsecondary education rates, and the number of businesses per capita. You can contrast these metrics with indicators of how the local jurisdiction has invested in incarceration with a decade’s worth of prison and jail incarceration rates. The data explorer is designed to help advocates and policymakers enhance their understanding of the geography of incarceration and economic outcomes—both nationally and within their counties.

Use the IIP Data Explorer to help you:

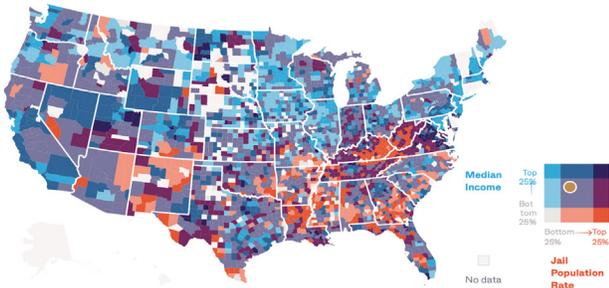
- › **Understand the needs of your community.** By compiling information from multiple sources and providing breakdowns by geography, race, and over time, the data explorer serves as a one-stop shop for those seeking to learn about incarceration and economic distress in their county.
- › **Generate buy-in.** Use the tool to build data-informed campaign materials and develop a compelling case for change. By drawing on data from a range of issue areas (education, public health, and workforce development), the data explorer can provide persuasive evidence to support your policy or program advocacy.
- › **Target resources and find opportunities for collaboration.** The data explorer allows you to compare conditions across a collection of counties, an entire state, or nationally. This information can help you identify jurisdictions that are case studies for success, build coalitions across localities, and target resources and services where they are needed the most.

Key Features of the IIP Data Explorer

National view and county profiles

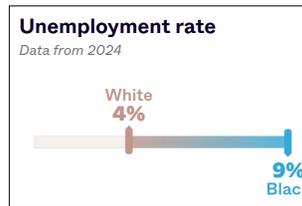
Explore county-level variation in both incarceration rates and economic conditions across the country, and see how your county compares to national averages.

Median Income and Jail Population Rate per 100k People 2019 data



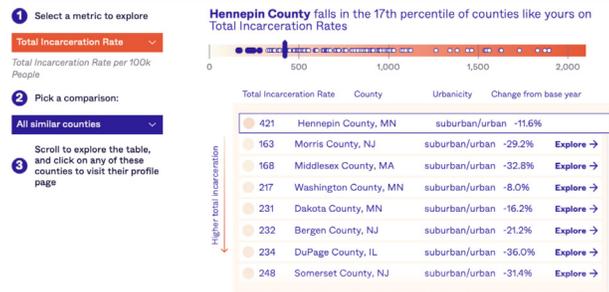
Racial disparities

Understand how incarceration rates and economic outcomes differ across race and ethnicity in your county.



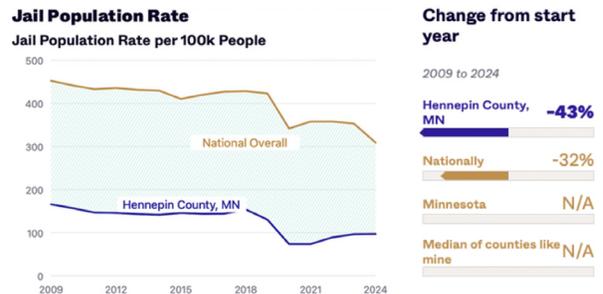
Compare your county to similar counties

Find out how trends in your county compare to those in similar counties—within your state or across the country—along a variety of incarceration metrics.



Changes over time

Visualize trends in your county's incarceration rates and economic conditions with a decade of data across a range of variables.



Explore the IIP Data Explorer

www.vera.org/iip



Data overview: The IIP Data Explorer combines county-level data from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, the Census of Business Patterns, and Vera’s Incarceration Trends dataset. For further details, see “About the Data.”

The Vera Institute of Justice’s Incarceration and Inequality Project produces data, research, and communications that highlight the nexus of incarceration and economic inequality as a national policy priority.

The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and community organizers working to transform the criminal justice and immigration systems until they’re fair for all. Vera’s headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit vera.org.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Hinton, LeShae Henderson, and Cindy Reed, *An Unjust Burden: The Disparate Treatment of Black Americans in the Criminal Justice System* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018), <https://www.vera.org/publications/for-the-record-unjust-burden>; and Christian E. Weller, Akua Amaning, and Rebecca Vallas, *America’s Broken Criminal Legal System Contributes to Wealth Inequality* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2022), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/americas-broken-criminal-legal-system-contributes-to-wealth-inequality/>.
- 2 Terry-Ann Craigie, Ames Grawert, and Cameron Kimble, *Conviction, Imprisonment, and Lost Earnings: How Involvement with the Criminal Justice System Deepens Inequality* (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, 2020), 6, 19, <https://perma.cc/V37Y-U9N2>.