



Wasted Resources: The True Cost of Jail Detention in Berks and a Vision for Public Safety

Vera INSTITUTE
OF JUSTICE



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May
2025

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Foreword

Building Justice in Berks and The Real Deal 610 are proud to have worked with the Vera Institute of Justice to illuminate the experiences of people detained in Berks County jail and to recommend a new vision for public safety.

Our two groups have much in common: we are local, non-governmental, and share a deep concern for the wellbeing of those who have been marginalized by poverty, racism, and the criminal legal system. We all want our communities to be safe, vibrant, and free from violence.

Where we differ is in our background and mission. Building Justice in Berks is a volunteer advocacy group focused on criminal legal system reform, while The Real Deal 610 is a nonprofit organization, staffed by formerly incarcerated people, providing coaching and reentry services to the Berks County community.

Together, we speak with one voice, calling for a recognition of the true cost of jail detention, an end to wasteful and counterproductive spending, and a paradigm shift in our criminal legal system away from incarceration as a default response, toward supportive, non-detention alternatives. Just as those who break the law must be held responsible for their wrongdoing, so too must those who impose the penalties be held responsible for doing no further harm.

A great deal of work has already been done to plan for a new jail in Berks County—an estimated \$340 million project that would be the largest in county history. But something was missing from that plan: the views of people who know firsthand what it means to be locked up in Berks County jail.

We talked, face to face, with 121 formerly incarcerated people, family members, and service providers. They felt comfortable sharing with us because our interviewers were people who had done time themselves and knew they were human beings, not statistics. We heard hope and despair, courage and frustration,

gratitude, betrayal, and the wisdom that comes only from experience. These folks know what works and doesn't work, and, like all of us, they very much want to live and work in peace and dignity.

While the county has put the new jail on hold, the stories we heard and the issues uncovered are as salient as ever. In fact, this is precisely the time to take stock of the realities of our current use of jail detention—the wasted resources, the human and economic costs—and look to changes that promise better outcomes.

We thank those who bravely and generously shared their stories and those who work to help them succeed. We thank the team at Vera for their deep knowledge of carceral systems, skill at making sense of the data, and unfailing patience with the process. And we thank you, our readers, for your willingness to imagine a Berks County where respect for each human life is fully compatible with fiscal responsibility and public safety.

—Building Justice in Berks and The Real Deal 610

Executive Summary

This project emerges from debates in Berks County about a potential new \$340 million jail that would be the largest infrastructure project in the county’s history and would be fueled by debt and increased taxes.¹ The existing jail has real problems that the county needs to remedy, but the county already spends more than \$52 million annually on jail operations—its single largest expenditure.² This report, by the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), a national nonprofit organization, and two local organizations—Building Justice in Berks, with support from The Real Deal 610—highlights the views of people who have been missing from the debate so far: those with firsthand experience of detention in the Berks County Prison (Berks County jail).³ It also uses jail roster data to provide a clear picture of the jail population and the policy choices that shape admissions and releases.

Berks County government leaders, who have publicly paused the new jail project in 2023 to further explore strategies for “jail population reduction,” have a rare opportunity to make transformative decisions about how the county invests its resources in public safety.⁴ This is a critical juncture at which to dig deeper into the realities of current jail usage and the consequences of jail for local residents and to explore potential policy changes that are likely to generate better outcomes than expanding jail detention.

Combining analysis of official jail administrative data and stories from 121 local people, this report shows that stakeholders in the debate about a new jail are likely underestimating the human and economic costs of jail incarceration and overestimating its benefits. The current jail is too often used as the default tool—rather than as an expensive option of last resort—to address complex social issues such as poverty, homelessness, and substance use. Meanwhile, resources to provide more effective responses to serve those needs are insufficient. The overuse of the jail comes at a great cost to the county budget, the well-being of residents, and the economic vitality of Berks County.

Regardless of whether the county pursues jail construction, this report asks Berks County government leaders to consider the Berks County jail in a different light: as just one tool among many in the public safety toolbox—one that should be used with precision only for cases that pose real threats to public safety. It also asks leaders to confront the negative costs of responding to socioeconomic and public health problems with the wrong tool (detention) time and time again.

This report shows that current practices and policies in Berks are putting too many people in jail and holding people there for too long without a clear public safety benefit. Many people are incarcerated for nonpayment of child support, trespassing, drug possession, theft, and violations of community supervision (such as probation)—and the county has not yet attempted to find meaningful and effective alternative strategies to reduce such activities in a sustainable way. Excessive pretrial detention is not unique to Berks, but national research shows it is harmful to individuals, public safety, and due process.⁵ Rather than going further down the path of detention, Berks County could invest in more effective and less costly policies that keep people out of detention. The concrete examples of policies and practices implemented in other counties are already showing positive outcomes and would be more humane and affordable.⁶ Berks County is well-positioned to be a leader in the region by taking a new, bold path: reducing its reliance on expensive and ineffective jail detention and expanding policies and programs that strengthen safety and economic inclusion.

Introduction

This report, by the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), a national nonprofit organization, and two local Berks County organizations—Building Justice in Berks, with support from The Real Deal 610—highlights the views of people who have so far been missing from the debate about a possible new jail: those with firsthand experience of detention in the Berks County Prison (Berks County jail). It also uses jail data to provide a clear picture of the jail population and the policy choices that shape admissions and releases.

This new picture suggests that, far from needing more jail space, Berks County is putting many people in jail without a clear safety rationale, holding them in jail for unusually long periods, subjecting them to needlessly harsh and dehumanizing treatment, and returning them to the community with greater social, emotional, and economic disadvantages than they had to begin with. These policy choices are costly to local families and to the local economy—limiting the county’s ability to meaningfully fund community-based interventions. Using jail detention as the first option—rather than last resort—for people facing nonviolent, low-level charges makes it harder for them to stabilize their lives. The research findings, human stories, and examples of alternative approaches in this report suggest that Berks should reduce its reliance on jail detention and expand services in the community that strengthen safety and economic inclusion.

DEBATES ABOUT THE JAIL: LISTENING TO THE PEOPLE MOST AFFECTED

In 2019, Berks County Commissioners began considering a multi-year construction project for a 1,277-bed facility, based on a needs assessment from an architecture firm with a vested interest in the construction contract.⁷ The assessment did not consider policy options other than expanding jail detention capacity. The county’s consultation with residents and stakeholders about this proposal did not include the voices of people who have the clearest view of

the human costs of incarceration—those who have experienced jail detention.

In 2022, after robust pressure from Berks County residents to reduce the jail size, the county endorsed an updated needs assessment that called for a 24 percent reduction of the initially proposed bed capacity, but it still did not call for changes to the county policies and procedures that lead to incarceration.⁸ At the cost of \$340 million for a 974-bed facility, this would still have been the most expensive infrastructure project fueled by taxpayers in county history.⁹ The proposed facility would also still constitute an overall expansion from the current rated jail capacity of 881 beds.¹⁰ The county's review process, again, excluded key voices.

In 2023, county commissioners paused the project to explore strategies for population reduction and made a commitment to cap the jail capacity at no more than 700 people, a conservative goal given that the average daily population was already 781 people in 2023.¹¹ In an effort to add the perspectives of people who had experienced detention into the conversation, two local community organizations, Building Justice in Berks (BJB) and The Real Deal 610, with support from the national nonprofit Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), began to gather and analyze information about who is in the jail, why they are there and for how long, and at what cost, as well as stories and comments about their experiences with detention.

Starting in November 2023, organizers from BJB and The Real Deal 610 conducted a countywide listening tour called “Walk With Us,” inviting more than one hundred formerly incarcerated people to share their experiences with incarceration.¹² Held at events and community organizations across Berks County that serve people impacted by incarceration, these conversations were wide-ranging, with questions about the circumstances of incarceration, the services available inside the jail, people's experiences navigating life after release, and their ideas for change.¹³

The report draws from two main sources: Berks County jail administrative data and this countywide listening tour, which included conversations with 121 people with direct and indirect experience in the criminal legal system.¹⁴ The following analysis provides a much-needed window on the human and economic impacts of Berks County’s most expensive public safety tool: jail detention.

JAIL IS BERKS COUNTY’S MOST EXPENSIVE PUBLIC SAFETY TOOL

In 2024, Berks County allocated \$52,076,255 to jail operations, making it the largest budgetary burden in the county.¹⁵ Holding a person in jail for even one day is an expensive choice for the county—costing approximately \$150 per incarcerated person per day, or more than \$4,500 per month and \$54,000 annually.¹⁶ By comparison, one standard period of outpatient drug rehabilitation treatment, which can last anywhere from about three to 20 months, is around \$8,000 annually, and the cost of residential drug treatment programs is around \$50,000 annually per person.¹⁷ Despite the lower costs of services that help to keep people out of jail, Berks County spent far less on them and other social programs. (See Figure 1.) Although jails typically are a significant cost in any county, Berks spends a higher proportion of its budget (22 percent or about \$107 per capita) on jail operations than many other counties across the country, where proportions in recent years range from 6 percent to 15 percent, or around \$77 dollars per capita.¹⁸

FIGURE 1

Jail vs. supportive services spending in Berks County in 2024

Of every \$100 of its general fund, Berks County spends...

\$22 on jail operations.

\$4 on recreation and culture.

\$2 on public defenders.

\$1 on the Reading community college.

\$0.39 on the Office of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities (MH/DD), which provides substance use and mental health treatment, housing, and vocational programs.

\$0.37 on Connections Work, the county's pretrial services agency, which provides direct services such as employment training to people with system involvement.

\$0.20 on BARTA (the Berks Area Regional Transportation Authority).

< \$0.01 on the Council on Chemical Abuse, a nonprofit that promotes addiction treatment in Berks through education and campaigns.

Note: Analysis of Berks County budget information calculated by Vera researchers, on file with Vera. See County of Berks, Office of Budget & Finance, *Adopted 2024 Budget*, 2023, 9–12. Note that these numbers do not include all funding sources for local services (such as state, federal, or philanthropic sources), only funding that the county planned to allocate for 2024. General funds are primarily resourced through resident property taxes. OMH/DD provides a wide range of behavioral health services, including substance use disorder services, mental health treatment, case management, and housing and vocational programs. County of Berks, "Welcome to the Office of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities," <https://www.berkspa.gov/departments/mental-health-developmental-disabilities>.

There are certain fixed costs inherent to jail budgets (like building operations and certain staffing levels) that do not apply to other county services. Nonetheless, the current distribution of resources suggests an imbalance between services that are crucial for preventing criminalized activities, ensuring due process for people accused of crimes, and helping people stabilize their lives after returning home from jail. The

following sections of this report illustrate that many people who cycle through the Berks County jail need more access to these supportive services, instead of jail detention.

PARTICIPANTS OF THE “WALK WITH US” LISTENING TOUR

The participants in the listening tour—the vast majority of whom are formerly incarcerated—came from across the Berks County community, including parents, siblings, former nurses, college students, construction workers, and artists, many of whom had grown up locally. Each relayed their desire to be close to their families, contribute to society, and have a sense of safety and belonging in the world.

Nearly two-thirds were in precarious housing situations, and nearly one-third had been incarcerated as children younger than



18. (See Figure 2.) People spoke about the lengths they went to for economic survival, which included stealing and selling drugs, followed by arrest and detention. People also spoke about ways they tried to cope with trauma, which included using drugs. While in jail, they missed chances to work, care for their families, and attend school. Many commented that for people facing dire economic circumstances, jail did not push them away from crime or provide meaningful alternative paths. As one participant put it, “[Jail time] is not a deterrent—it becomes like, just a hassle to deal with.”

All names used in this report are aliases.

Jail did not push [people] away from crime or provide meaningful alternative paths. As one participant put it, “[Jail time] is not a deterrent—it becomes like, just a hassle to deal with.”

FIGURE 2

Listening tour participant demographics

Who are the people who walked with us?

94% (112 of 119) are formerly incarcerated

7% (8 of 119) are service providers, some of whom also experienced incarceration

3% (4 of 119) are loved ones of formerly incarcerated people

121 people participated

43 years is the median age among 105 people who shared this info

79% are men

21% are women

74 people shared their racial/ethnic identity:

53% identified as Hispanic/Latino/a^a

22% identified as Black

20% identified as white

5% identified as multiracial or Asian

58% (58 out of 100) are unhoused or living in transitional housing facilities.

28% (29 out of 105) said their first experience of incarceration happened when they were younger than 18^b

9% (11 out of 121) had their conversation in Spanish

Note: Listening Tour Cohort, on-site interviews by members of Building Justice in Berks, The Real Deal 610, November 2023–July 2024.

a. This is based on 74 people (61 percent of all the participants) who shared their racial identity.

b. This is based on information from 105 people (87 percent of participants) who shared their age of first incarceration.

Key Insights

In addition to the listening tour, Vera researchers also analyzed 2023 administrative data provided by the Berks County jail (admissions and release data and a daily census) to understand the trends in the jail population and the pathways by which people enter and leave the jail. This data has some limitations.¹⁹

Sections 1 and 2 of this analysis reveal two key insights: first, the jail detains some people for unusually long lengths of time; and second, the jail detains many people on low-level charges (nonpayment of child support, trespassing, drug possession, theft, and violations of community supervision) for which there are more effective and safer responses than jail.²⁰ To reduce the jail population in any county, government agencies must decrease the number of people who enter and increase the number of people who safely leave. However, in Berks County, policies and decisions by legal system officials are generating an overuse of jail detention: too many people enter without a public safety need to be there, and many unnecessarily remain in the jail for too long.

Section 3 centers stories from the listening tour and discusses how overusing the jail has grave human costs beyond just the economic. Many who have been detained were arrested for drug use, theft, and other low-level illegal behaviors that are often acts of survival. Many people who turn to these actions are struggling to cope with poverty and trauma from difficult childhood experiences, plus addiction and unstable housing as adults. Generally, jail contributed to a destabilization of community members already living in precarious circumstances, making it more difficult to overcome substance use and mental illness, find jobs, and support their families. On top of facing structural inequalities, which disproportionately affect people of color, Black and Latino/a participants felt they experienced particularly harsh treatment at every step of the system, from feeling racially targeted by law enforcement to being treated more harshly in the jail.

Section 3 also discusses the resentment people have toward how court, jail, and probation staff—and therefore the Berks County government writ large—treated them. People experienced a lack of dignity and basic understanding of the conditions and costs set by the court, which were nearly impossible to meet when living on the margins. They wished that they had been given more robust support services and an opportunity to contribute to the workforce.

Section 4 considers Berks’s current economic climate in which businesses, particularly in the advanced manufacturing sector, need reliable workers and shows that the overuse of the jail comes at a great cost to Berks County’s overall economic vitality.²¹ In short, rebalancing legal system strategies and resources would benefit all residents of the county, not just those who have spent time behind bars.

1 – THE BERKS COUNTY JAIL DETAINS PEOPLE FOR UNUSUALLY LONG LENGTHS OF TIME

One of the most striking trends in the Berks County jail is how long people remain in jail, often for low-level, nonviolent charges. These long stays contribute to unnecessarily high jail populations. This can be remedied. Given the existence of a pretrial services team and population review team, Berks County already has some of the resources to reverse course.

1.1 – People spend more time in jail detention in Berks County compared to people in other county jails.

The average length of stay in the Berks County jail has increased by roughly 33 percent, from 56 days in 2007 to 78 days in 2021.²² Comparatively, people admitted to local jails nationally in 2022 stayed for less than half that amount of time, an average of 32 days.²³ Because some very long lengths of stay influence these averages, it is more useful to consider the median number of days that people remained in detention.²⁴

The median stay for people admitted to the Berks County jail in 2023 was 19 days. People booked in on felony charges stayed



for a median of 54 days, while people booked in on misdemeanor charges stayed for a median of 17 days. Typical median lengths of stay in other county jails often range from a few days to a week and occasionally are closer to two weeks.²⁵

As shown in Figure 3, fewer than one in five people booked were released within two days—the period in which a person who can pay bail typically does so—and nearly a quarter of bookings led to jail stays of more than three months.²⁶ This data suggests that although some people post bail quickly, many cannot do so and remain in detention for this reason alone.²⁷ Jail data does not capture the reasons people become “stuck” in jail, so a closer review of cases with long stays—as well as trends—is needed.

FIGURE 3

Berks County jail bookings by length of stay in jail, 2023



Source: Berks County jail data, 2023

STORIES FROM THE LISTENING TOUR

Long lengths of stay

How are they always trying to put people in jail and not try to help them when it comes to drug abuse? . . . I think it'd be more helpful if they were to help you with a program. Instead of having to go to jail right away, you could go to a rehab or go to a sober living house. Try to help yourself better for recovery. Instead of just throwing you in a cell and making you sit for nine months. I went three months without even seeing a courtroom. They could make the process a lot faster.

—**James**, a young father who struggles with substance use and has been twice incarcerated in the Berks County jail

1.2 – Some of the longer lengths of stay were for low-level, nonviolent charges.

About a quarter of people booked into jail in 2023 stayed for longer than 90 days (see Figure 3). Some of these stays likely have clear explanations, such as very serious violent felony charges with no likely option for release on bail, probation detainers, or mandatory sentences of a set number of days. However, a notable portion (26 percent) of these very long stays have only low-level charges as their most serious charge, such as theft, drug possession, or trespassing. As shown in Figure 4, 234 bookings on these charges with stays of more than 90 days make up 6 percent of all bookings

but occupy 16 percent of all jail bed-days. The 113 people booked on theft charges who stayed more than 90 days occupied 8 percent of all jail bed-days in 2023, with a median stay of 150 days.²⁸

Jail stays on drug possession charges alone are strikingly long: a median of 11 days for possession of marijuana and 33 days for possession of drugs. Seventy-six people stayed for more than 90 days on drug possession or paraphernalia charges, with median stays of 137 days. People booked for misdemeanor trespassing as the most serious charge had a median stay of 33 days—but the very long-stay subset of trespassing bookings (35 people) had a median stay of 132 days. Although jail data does not include other salient factors—like a person’s assessed risk level or if they have a probation detainer—such issues would not plausibly account for these patterns across thousands of admissions.

FIGURE 4

A closer look at jail stays of more than 90 days

Median length of stay (LOS) and bed-days occupied by people booked for more than 90 days on selected low-level charges. These 234 bookings represent 6.4% of all 3,647 bookings and 26.4% of 888 bookings with stays of more than 90 days.

Top charge type	# of bookings	Median LOS	Bed-days	% of bed-days
Theft	113	150	19,124	8.4%
Drug possession	76	137	11,535	5.1%
Trespassing	35	132	4,968	2.2%
Child support nonpayment	10	115	1,328	0.6%
Total	234	-	36,955	16.2%

Bed-days are a common way to measure how much a given set of bookings contributed to overall jail occupancy. Each bed-day represents one person occupying a bed for one day. Percents are based on a total of 227,612 bed-days in 2023.

Drug possession includes possession/use of drug paraphernalia.

Source: Berks County jail data, 2023

The jail data does not provide full information on why these people remained in detention for so long. The jail population review team at the Berks County jail currently focuses on identifying and resolving barriers to release for new admissions.²⁹ Similar attention and action are required for this long-stay group, since they occupy a disproportionate share of bed-days, staff time, and other resources.

Reducing lengths of stay is crucial for decreasing the jail population, driving down jail spending, and mitigating harm to accused people and their families. Common strategies for reducing length of stay include jail population review teams that identify and address obstacles to release for individual cases on a regular basis, offering virtual court hearings, shortening case processing times, and revising bail amounts.³⁰ Local county governments have safely reduced their pretrial jail population through policies that encourage or mandate narrower use of money bail and/or require an assessment of a person's ability to pay and building up pretrial service models that support people in attending their first court appearance and adhering to court orders without jail detention.³¹

2 – BERKS COUNTY OVERUSES JAIL BY DETAINING PEOPLE FACING LOW-LEVEL CHARGES WHO COULD BE BETTER HELPED BY SUPPORTIVE SERVICES

A significant portion of people admitted to jail in Berks County are facing minor, nonviolent charges that relate to illegal actions that



people often take when facing dire economic or health needs, like homelessness or drug addiction. More than half of all bookings into the jail in 2023 were for misdemeanors or local ordinance violations. Nearly a quarter of all bookings in 2023 (23 percent) were for common minor misdemeanor charges (drug possession/paraphernalia, theft, nonpayment of child support, trespassing, public drunkenness/vagrancy, or traffic infractions).

County residents and politicians are understandably concerned about petty crime, drug use, and disruption in public spaces.³² But jail is an ineffective and often harmful response to such concerns, as it can place people at risk of repeating illegal actions after release.³³ Jail detention destabilizes people already living precariously and should be reserved as a last resort for situations with a legitimate public safety or flight risk.

Jail detention destabilizes people already living precariously and should be reserved as a last resort for situations with a legitimate public safety or flight risk.

The following sections highlight low-level charges for which Berks County could pursue alternative, non-detention responses: (1) nonpayment of child support, (2) trespassing, (3) drug possession, (4) theft, and (5) violations of community supervision.

Figure 5 shows the most serious charge for each booking into the Berks County jail in 2023, broken down by category. Property, public order, and drug charges make up the majority (55 percent) of the bookings.

FIGURE 5

Jail bookings by top charge category, 2023

Bookings with multiple underlying charges are classified by their most serious, or “top” charge.

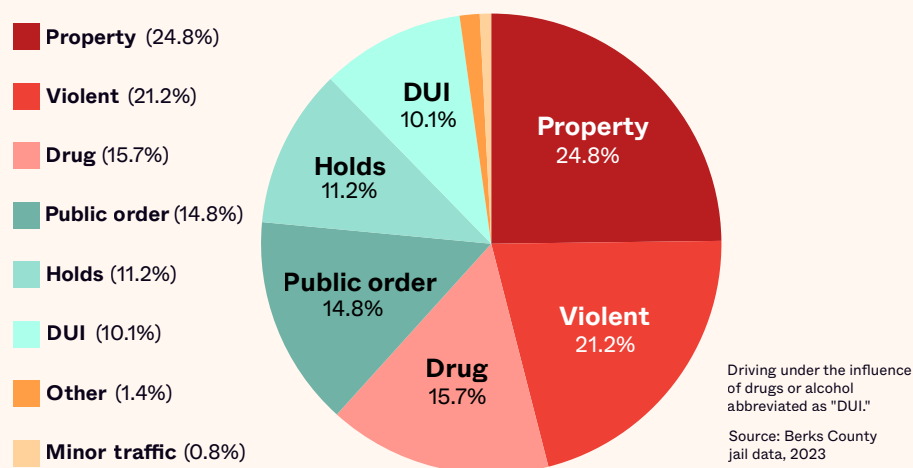


Figure 6 shows the same top charge categories as Figure 5 but provides more detail for the most common charge categories. The most common type of property charge was theft, and the majority of violent charges were assault-related. Seven in 10 bookings on drug-related charges were for possession of drugs, not selling.

FIGURE 6

A closer look at types of charges

Berks County jail bookings by specific top charge categories, 2023.

Property charges	% of property	Violent charges	% of violent	Drug-related charges	% of drug	Public order charges	% of public order
Larceny/theft	40.6%	Aggravated assault	36.8%	Possession/use	69.2%	Nonpayment of child support	20.8%
Forgery/fraud	14.3%	Simple assault	32.7%	Distribution	30.1%	Weapon offenses	20.4%
Trespassing	13.6%	Robbery	8.9%	Other	0.7%	Obstruction of law enforcement	15.8%
Burglary	11.4%	Murder	3.0%			Drunkenness/Vagrancy/Disorderly conduct	14.7%
Receiving stolen property	5.8%	Other	18.6%			Contempt of court	14.3%
Other	14.2%					Other	14.1%

Percents are within top charge category. For example, 69.2% of drug-related top charges were for drug possession or use. Weapon offenses are nonviolent in nature (e.g., unlicensed possession).

Source: Berks County jail data, 2023

2.1 – Detention for nonpayment of child support is counterproductive.

Jail detention for nonpayment of child support is an especially concerning example of how Berks County uses the jail counterproductively. Among the 15 percent of jail bookings for which the most serious charge was a public order charge, one-fifth (about 100 admissions in 2023) were for willful nonpayment of child support. Although holding people accountable for this conduct is a reasonable goal, using jail detention as a penalty for this charge only weakens someone’s ability to make those payments.³⁴

In Berks County, current laws and policies call for a variety of penalties for persistent nonpayment of child support, the most severe being incarceration for up to six months and probation for

up to a year.³⁵ Although jail detention is, in fact, used as a last resort in these cases, the other punitive measures that are taken—fines up to \$1,000, driver’s license suspension, property seizure, liens, and credit bureau reporting—are similarly counterproductive, as they can land people in cycles of additional debt. These measures are particularly burdensome for low-income earners. For someone working full-time at minimum wage, which is \$7.25 an hour in Pennsylvania, a \$1,000 fine would be worth almost an entire month of earnings.³⁶

STORIES FROM THE LISTENING TOUR

Punishment for nonpayment of child support

I wasn’t able to make those payments, and they came and took my housing, they took my car, and when I got out [of jail] it was like starting over at zero. [Every time] I try to get back to that point where I’ll start working, I’ll start making payments . . . right before they get to take the payment out, it’s like a warrant [for nonpayment] comes out, something happens where I end up in police contact, they run my name, and then I’m right back locked up again before I even got my check. So it’s just, it’s a vicious cycle.

—**Blake**, a noncustodial parent speaking on being incarcerated for struggling to make child support payments

Many other counties have found ways to ensure parents who owe money actually meet child support payments without saddling them with additional debt or incarcerating them. Alternative approaches include developing employment assistance programs to help unemployed noncustodial parents pay child support and revising rules to direct payments to custodial families rather than to pay welfare debts.³⁷

Neighboring Allegheny, Dauphin, Delaware, Lancaster, and Philadelphia Counties in Pennsylvania, for example, have implemented New Employment Opportunities for Noncustodial Parents (NEON), a program that operates through collaborative efforts among child support enforcement agencies, family courts, and private partners to provide individualized employment counseling, financial education, and referrals to housing and expungement clinics—resources that indirectly contribute to someone’s economic stability.³⁸ Participants in this program also

benefit from administrative relief like driver's license reinstatement and financial incentives for complying with the program and gaining employment.³⁹ These non-detention strategies have shown promising outcomes, including increased monthly amounts of child support payments to the custodial parent.⁴⁰

2.2 – Detention for trespassing perpetuates homelessness.

State and local trespassing and vagrancy laws indirectly criminalize homelessness, a growing problem nationwide.⁴¹ Living in public spaces makes people more visible to police and thus more susceptible to arrest on charges such as trespassing.⁴² National research shows that unhoused people are more frequently booked into jail for trespassing charges—often repeatedly—and less often for more serious charges.⁴³ Among property-related charges in the Berks County jail in 2023, one in seven was for trespassing. (See Figure 6.) Trespassing can be disruptive to residents, but jail detention is ineffective at preventing it when people have no alternative places to sleep or stay.

Listening tour participants noted from firsthand and secondhand experience that the court system commonly released previously unhoused people without a place to stay, leading to frequent returns to jail. These experiences align with national trends, which show that people in jail are far more likely to be unhoused than people in the general community.⁴⁴ The prevalence of homelessness in Berks County (13 people out of 10,000) is higher than in the state of Pennsylvania (10 people out of 10,000). In 2023, 554 people out of a population of 432,821 were unhoused in Berks County.⁴⁵ Criminalization measures fail to address underlying housing needs and instead reinforce the cycle of homelessness and incarceration.⁴⁶

Housing helps people find and keep employment, develop supportive relationships, and avoid further criminalized activity—all of which contribute to longer term safety.⁴⁷ Listening tour participants who were given places to live—whether in shelters, residential treatment, or supportive housing—were able to end their cycle of incarceration and get back on their feet. Participants who eventually found housing, which provided stability, expressed deep gratitude for Berks County organizations that offer housing

support. However, their gratitude was accompanied by a dark subtext: housing opportunities in Berks County are so scarce, especially for people with conviction histories or substance use issues, that finding housing felt like a miracle. Others, less fortunate, said they struggled to access shelters due to strict sobriety and drug testing requirements.

Although tackling homelessness is a complex task involving many sectors, criminal justice entities in Berks can take immediate steps to reduce the use of jail as a tactic. Berks County can, for example, review and eliminate any ordinances that criminalize behavior associated with homelessness, such as sleeping or camping outside, loitering, and begging. If state and local lawmakers are unsupportive, litigation to challenge criminalization may be successful.⁴⁸ Civilian-led crisis response teams can also address public disorder situations without arresting people. (See Section 4.3.) One city in South Dakota approached this issue by establishing a “Care Campus” that offers short-term stays and connections to treatment and housing as an alternative to arrest without the restrictive eligibility requirements—such as drug testing—often imposed by homeless shelters.⁴⁹

STORIES FROM THE LISTENING TOUR

The life impacts of housing (in)access

You have people not knowing where to go. You have police officers out in the street harassing everybody that's living in the street. You can't live in the street, but you also can't live in the shelter because there's strict rules in the shelter . . . the help here for housing is horrible. It's horrible. It's not the prison, it's Reading.

— **Aiden**, speaking on being out of the Berks County jail and various homeless shelters over the past two years

Darren, on the other hand, was fortunate to receive the benefits of a shelter program when he was released from jail. Unfortunately, this program shut its doors several years ago:

They would give you a stipend and a room free of charge. And so I was pretty much being paid to live and work and learn there. . . . After my year on that, I got promoted from the front desk lead to the intake coordinator, which was a position in case manage[ment]. . . . It was exciting. And then I got some money together, and I moved out.

2.3 – Detention for drug charges makes recovery harder.

Drug possession charges are one of the most common reasons people end up in jail in Berks County. Seven out of 10 bookings in 2023 for which the most serious charge was drug-related were for possession, not sale, of drugs, making up 11 percent of all admissions. Using arrest and detention as the principal response to drug use does not meaningfully reduce drug use, substance use disorders, or drug-law violations.⁵⁰ The way that police and courts enforce drug laws—stopping, searching, arresting, and convicting Black and Latino/a people more frequently despite similar rates of drug use as other groups—also exacerbates the racial disparities that permeate all stages of the justice system.⁵¹

Although listening tour participants did report sometimes receiving support for their substance issues while in detention, jail should not be the primary provider of substance use treatment. People who use drugs are most at risk of overdose immediately after release from jail, due to interruptions in treatment and tolerance levels.⁵² It is important that people who are in jail detention for other criminal charges have access to appropriate treatment—including medication-assisted treatment (MAT) for opioid use.⁵³ However, this does not mean that jail should be the primary doorway to access affordable treatment in general in the community. Relapses are a natural part of recovery from addiction, making consistent, personalized, affordable, and supportive care essential.⁵⁴ People who have been incarcerated at the Berks County jail did report receiving drug programming while inside, but few found it helpful because counseling was not supportive, individualized, or consistent. Participants also said that prior to their incarceration they lacked information about and access to effective drug treatment options in the community.

Any serious strategy to address problematic drug use requires accessible, well-funded treatments based in the community. In parallel, justice agencies can steer away from detention as a tactic.⁵⁵ Some counties, for example, have decriminalized simple

It is important that people who are in jail detention for other criminal charges have access to appropriate treatment—including medication-assisted treatment (MAT) for opioid use. However, this does not mean that jail should be the primary doorway to access affordable treatment in general in the community.

drug possession in local ordinances. Since local governments cannot change state laws, some have instead directed police departments to issue citations in lieu of arrest and/or have required that police departments refer people to services and evidence-based care instead of booking them into jail.⁵⁶ (See more in Sections 2.4 and 2.5.)

STORIES FROM THE LISTENING TOUR

Inadequate drug treatment in jail

They'd be quick to give you pills and stuff, but not [counseling], because they're short staffed.

—**Allen**, speaking on his experience receiving MAT in jail but never getting counseling despite spending 10 months on a waiting list

I took a core drug and alcohol class . . . but the class really was run by the inmates. The counselor just let us talk about whatever they wanted, but somebody would start talking about their personal life or their case or all these other things. And they would say, oh, well, for homework, do these pages, and then nobody would do it. It wasn't really informative.

—**Darren**, speaking on his experience of drug counseling in the Berks County jail

2.4 – Theft charges are common, but detention worsens economic instability.

The prevalence of theft charges, including minor charges, suggests that some people are turning to crime out of economic need. Among the quarter of jail bookings that were for property-related charges, two in five were for theft. (See Figure 6.) A notable portion of these (43 percent) were misdemeanor-level.⁵⁷ Incarcerated people's income prior to detention is drastically lower—41 percent in one study—than the general population.⁵⁸ One listening tour participant shared that his family stole and sold baseball bats in order to get food on the table.

The effects of theft, especially retail theft, are highly visible and have strong impacts on local businesses and people's perceptions of safety.⁵⁹ But jail detention does nothing to make people who have been harmed by theft whole. It simply worsens the economic

standing of those charged and creates barriers to obtaining a job, making them more likely to continue activities like theft. Listening tour participants who were arrested for stealing inherently understood this logic and expressed that jail only made subsequent stealing more necessary to survive.

STORIES FROM THE LISTENING TOUR

Jail should be used as a “final resort”

[Don't] be so quick to put someone in jail. I feel like jail is the worst thing you could do to somebody. It's just so inhumane. It'd be like a final resort for me, like if I could choose.

— **James**, Berks resident booked into the Berks County jail for theft of a power tool that he had rented for contract work but did not return

Connecting people to stable housing, employment, and treatment services can break the cycles of incarceration for minor property and drug charges. This can even happen at the point of police contact by giving people facing certain minor charges a notice to appear in court in lieu of arrest.⁶⁰ Some counties have written cite-and-release practices into policy or special programming. San Marcos, Texas, for example, became the first city in the state to implement a cite-and-release ordinance.⁶¹ In Philadelphia, the Police Assisted Diversion (PAD) program gives police officers discretion to connect people in need with appropriate social services in lieu of arrest.⁶²

2.5 – Onerous probation conditions drive up the jail population.

The Berks County jail does not currently report how many admissions are due to technical violations of supervision alone—that is, with no new criminal charge—but, anecdotally, this appears to be a common pathway back to jail. Some “Walk With Us” participants were reincarcerated after a judge revoked their supervision as punishment for technical violations of probation or parole conditions—such as failing to check in with an officer, not paying fees, or testing positive for drugs on a urine screen—without any new criminal charges.⁶³ Many people felt that their parole or probation officers acted as prison guards, ready to punish them for the slightest infraction, rather than acting as supportive

coaches trying to help them succeed. Probation is not meant to be punitive; it is supposed to provide the right balance of incentives and consequences to help people stabilize and shift away from illegal activities.⁶⁴

People who had experienced probation in Berks struggled to comply with the terms of probation or parole, which were incompatible with trying to hold a job or care for family because of the frequent appointments during working hours. One person described the experience of probation as being a tripwire back into jail saying, “one foot’s already in the door,” with the door representing readmission to jail.

Pennsylvania’s probation system is punitive compared to other states; one out of every 34 adults was on probation in the state, 36 percent higher than the national average.⁶⁵ Probation detainers—which occur when someone on probation is arrested on a new charge, and a judge orders the person to remain in detention until that case is resolved, regardless of charge severity—can keep people incarcerated for lengthy periods with few options for recourse.⁶⁶

STORIES FROM THE LISTENING TOUR

Surveillance under community supervision

I got a job [as a] forklift operator . . . I worked every day. I’m going from 6 in the night to 6 in the morning, you know, 12 hour shifts. . . . I get an apartment, I get a new car. I’m doing well, right? But you still got me going to these classes. But if I miss a class, you’re quick to tell me, you keep missing class. . . . So I gotta go through all this and you’re threatening me. Every time [the parole officer] gives me a directive—‘Or I’m gonna be forced to lock you up.’ . . . I don’t feel safe around my parole agent, the person who I’m supposed to be able to go to as an ally . . . I have no one I can go get advice from. I have no one I can go and really talk to about what’s going on with me mentally and inside.

—**Derrick**, lifelong Reading resident speaking on how he eventually lost his job because of his inflexible parole schedule

[Probation and parole] holds a person that has all these issues to a perfect status, but you can’t scare people that’s traumatized into doing right.

—**Charlie**, Berks resident who has been in and out of jail since his teens, many times for violations of probation and parole

Incarcerating people on technical violations and probation detainers drives up jail populations, leads to worse outcomes for people on probation, and consumes valuable resources.⁶⁷ Judges and probation officers can reduce over-supervision of low-risk people by setting fewer conditions and shorter terms and using graduated sanctions, which reduce the use of jail as a penalty for violations).⁶⁸ Research also shows that effective probation officers do not merely enforce rules like “referees” but instead act as “coaches” whose goal is to build skills and find ways to overcome mistakes.⁶⁹

3 – SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EXCLUSION PUSHES PEOPLE INTO CYCLES OF JAIL DETENTION

Although the listening tour participants come from many different walks of life (see Figure 2), they also shared similar pathways to incarceration. Most experienced some form of social marginalization, such as poverty and/or childhood trauma, that pushed them into repeated illegal behavior and then ongoing cycles



of detention and exclusion. As one participant articulated: “Once people reach the point of incarceration, something’s already gone wrong. It’s not like they walked out the door and said, ‘Hey, I’m gonna do a crime today.’”

Participants also expressed that the criminal legal system unduly stigmatizes and burdens them. The clearest examples they mentioned were how law enforcement and corrections officers treat them, the fines and fees levied on them throughout the court process, and barriers to employment they experience due to having a conviction record. When faced with further crises or police contact, people who are already disadvantaged had the fewest options and the harshest treatment by the justice system. Black and Latino/a people reported facing even harsher consequences, including what they felt were longer sentences for similar charges than white people and more degrading treatment in jail.

3.1 – Poverty, mental health issues, and substance use: common pathways to jail.

The experiences and insights that the 121 listening tour participants shared about how they ended up in jail and their struggles after that point align with the booking data presented above. Many people with few economic options said they turned to crime as a survival strategy—and jail time did not deter them or help them. Most listening tour participants were born from the 1970s to the 1990s, which means they experienced the effects of Reading’s declining economy due to deindustrialization and capital flight.⁷⁰ In 2011, Reading was among the poorest cities in the United States, with a poverty rate of 40.1 percent.⁷¹ While its ranking has improved since then, in 2023 about one-third of Reading’s population was still living below the poverty line, almost triple those living in poverty in Berks County as a whole.⁷²

Pathways into jail also involved drug use as a coping strategy for trauma and untreated mental health conditions. Many listening tour participants experienced traumatic childhood circumstances and abuse, such as having absent parents due to incarceration and drug addiction, witnessing violence, struggling with mental illness and drug use, being bullied, and experiencing racism—incidents

that would qualify as Adverse Child Experiences (ACEs).⁷³ Against the backdrop of the opioid crisis, in 2022, Pennsylvania ranked the fifth highest in drug overdose mortality out of all 50 states.⁷⁴ In Berks County, an estimated 7,894 people out of a population of 432,821 live with substance use disorders.⁷⁵ Frustrated about how people in need of help are unable to access it due to insurance or cost barriers and lack of bed space, one participant said Berks County should “stop putting addicts in jail.”

Black and Latino/a participants in particular spoke about how unduly heavy police surveillance made it even more difficult to deal with problems related to poverty, mental illness, and substance use. Many spoke of experiencing and witnessing frequent and aggressive police contact, such as being rounded up along with other young people of color while living in a public housing project in Reading.

3.2 – Fines, fees, and employment barriers deepen marginalization.

As is typical for many jurisdictions, people incarcerated in the Berks County jail must “pay to stay,” even if they have not yet been convicted of a crime. In Berks, this means a \$50 processing fee, a \$10 daily fee for intermittent/weekend sentences, and a \$5 fee per request to see a medical professional, among other fees, plus the cost of basic supplies like toothpaste and soap in the commissary; even “indigent kits” meant for people with no money cost money.⁷⁶

Fees create a two-tiered system, in which someone with means can pay and move on after they are released, while a person without money faces day-to-day life with insufficient basic supplies, on top of a spiraling set of economic and judicial consequences for any debt they incurred in jail.⁷⁷ While in detention, they may have to choose a required work role instead of necessary treatment programs. Some neighboring counties have policies to waive all detention-related fees for indigent people.⁷⁸

The stain of incarceration, via a searchable conviction record and the associated stigma, followed people long after coming home from jail. People with established careers also lost their employment and professional licenses due to their convictions, the nature of which

typically have little bearing on the quality of a person's work. Many had to take on temporary, labor-intensive, and lower-wage employment to survive.

STORIES FROM THE LISTENING TOUR

Poverty, mental health, drug use, and racial bias in Reading, PA

I had to hit the streets fast because [my mom] was poor. My mom didn't know how to handle six kids and pay all the bills at the same time with no husband, so, whatever I could do to make extra, [I gave] to her. I grew up too fast.

—**Jaime**, a Latino man who came of age in Reading during the “War on Drugs” in the 1980s. He has lost count of the number of times he has cycled through the Berks County jail and still struggles to find work to this day.

I was born . . . to a 12-year-old who was raped. I was always protecting myself [but] I'm sure it looked different to older people. A person that's never been protected is just doing what he can with what he got. So I got suspended like 17 times one year. I think that it was just easier to just lock people up . . . but not actually give them what they need.

—**Charlie**, a Black man who grew up in group homes and schools “for social[ly] and emotionally disturbed kids.” At 14, he was incarcerated in a juvenile facility. As an adult, he turned to cannabis, alcohol, heroin, and cocaine to “self-medicate” and was eventually incarcerated.

I got an aggravated assault on a police officer 'cause they were chasing me, and I fell on top of one of them in the middle of the chase. . . . That's a serious charge to be given to some 20-year-old kid I was coerced into just taking the plea because [I thought] nobody's gonna believe you. They're gonna believe the cop.

—**Cameron**, a Black man who spent nine months in jail after being racially targeted by police. **Alex**, who is white and was involved in a more serious incident, was given a similar charge and received a lighter sentence of 90 days in jail and nine months of house arrest. Alex also had the benefits of a strong lawyer, social support, and extensive drug counseling to support recovery from underlying substance use issues. Alex is employed, but Cameron still struggles to find work.

STORIES FROM THE LISTENING TOUR

Economic burden of jail incarceration

They charge you \$50 from the door. For the stamp and soap and envelope, they charge you \$7 every time. Every week. Soap and two envelopes and toothpaste. . . . I had no income to buy some soap through the three months. Imagine that.

—**John**, Berks County resident who has been incarcerated several times and owes about \$4,000 in fines and fees

The fines you get, they're hard to keep up with. The same time you have to pay bills and then if you don't pay the fines, then you go back to jail or you get a warrant for your arrest and you go back to jail.

—**Tyler**, speaking about the consequences he faced from being unable to pay court-related fees

How am I gonna get by? Because I can't get a job anywhere. . . . Me as someone who worked in healthcare for 10 years, gone to school, gone to college after I had gotten outta jail, and now I am a bartender. And it's like this is not my potential. And now I can't find a job anywhere.

—**Alicia**, speaking on her struggles to find work after incarceration

3.3 – People face harsh and degrading treatment in jail.

Pain, anger, and frustration weighed heavily in people's stories, particularly around their treatment in jail. Some said they had been treated like “dogs” and “scum” rather than human beings. One person described the culture among corrections officers as “kick ‘em while they're already down.”

Many said the jail kept people in their cells for all but one or two hours a day, making it nearly impossible to communicate with family or lawyers or access programs. Even though such confinement is common in jails across the country, it is still harmful: the standard definition of solitary confinement is 22 hours or more per day in a cell.⁷⁹

People who underwent protocols meant to prevent suicides found these practices to be superficial and harmful, as well as misdirected against people based on attitude more than real risk

level. People also reported witnessing and experiencing particularly harsh treatment for people of color in the jail.

FIGURE 7

Demographics of people in Berks County jail

Black men made up **24.1%** of the jail population in 2023 but just **4.5%** of county residents.

Latino/a people made up **42%** of the jail population in 2022 but just **24%** of county residents.^a

Note:

a. The 2023 data is provided by the Berks County jail leadership to the Vera Institute of Justice. Data on Latina/o race or Hispanic ethnicity was not included in the 2023 dataset provided by the jail. The numbers on Latino/a people in the jail and in the county, therefore, are from Vera Institute of Justice, “Incarceration Trends: Berks County, PA,” 2018, October 16, 2024, https://trends.vera.org/state/PA/county/berks_county. This dataset draws on Bureau of Justice Statistics 2022 Survey of Jails (collected via reports submitted by counties), which does include this category. See Zeng, “Jail Inmates in 2022,” 2023.

Most understood that jail detention is a lawful part of the process of facing charges or serving a conviction—but poor living conditions or aggression from staff should not be an additional punishment. When a local government opts to detain a person, it becomes responsible for that person’s safety and health—regardless of whether that person was convicted of a crime or broke a rule inside the jail and regardless of operational challenges such as understaffing. Participants made urgent calls for more humane and dignified treatment by jail staff toward detained people and their families.

STORIES FROM THE LISTENING TOUR

Experiences inside the Berks County jail

I done seen the CO [corrections officer] strobe a dude that knew that he has problems with light so he can catch a seizure. Berks is bad. It is vicious.

—**Drew**, speaking on his interactions with correctional officers in the Berks County jail

The windows are scratched and you can't see outside, you can't leave, you're living in a bathroom with another person. Not being able to see anything. I don't need a giant bay window that I can lounge in, but it would be nice to be able to see the outside world or at least be able to get out and walk around.

—**Scott**, speaking on solitary confinement in jail

One of the questions they ask you in your intake there now . . . [is] do you think tomorrow is gonna be a better day? I said, no, tomorrow is not gonna be a better day. . . . Do you know what happened? They stripped me down, put me in a turtle suit, and kept me under suicide watch for the night.

—**Jamison**, speaking on the jail's arbitrary suicide risk assessment practices and use of "turtle-suits," which are designed to restrict movement and self-harm. While in these restraints, people are naked, an added humiliation.

Nobody should be treated like that. I really feel like if you ain't got the room or the means to house these people, then you shouldn't lock 'em up Getting people to sleep on the floor, getting things to eat that they can't describe. I think all that needs to change. I even think far as the COs I think they need to [be] better trained, I think they'd need to be more understanding.

—**Casey**, speaking on how he would reform jail conditions

4 – A NEW VISION FOR PUBLIC SAFETY IN BERKS

Despite the difficult experiences described above, many participants want to contribute to their communities: they want to work stable jobs, pay taxes, and care for their families. Removing barriers related to prior arrests or jail time—from formal policies to social stigma—would benefit the entire county. With the right opportunities and guidance, people who have experienced jail detention in Berks County are well equipped to fill certain gaps in the Berks County workforce generally, as well as to offer unique knowledge in peer counseling roles, leadership in service agencies, and participation in advisory boards to guide government decision-making on criminal legal system reform issues.

4.1 – Jail culture change and population reduction can happen in tandem.

The concerns about conditions and treatment of accused people in jail outlined previously are serious and call for drastic changes to how the jail runs—no matter its size. A May 12, 2022 visioning session run by the county about the proposed new or expanded Berks County jail highlights the county’s focus on reducing jail harms by transforming culture, promoting dignity, redefining officers’ roles, and prioritizing community reintegration.⁸⁰ These suggestions are mirrored in a Massachusetts program called People Achieving Change Together (P.A.C.T.), in which Middlesex County Jail and House of Corrections staff are trained to become mentors and “agents of change” rather than traditional corrections officers. People in detention said they were grateful for the educational programs and opportunities within the jail and for providing them with hope.⁸¹ A state prison in Chester County, Pennsylvania, called Little Scandinavia, where residents go to school and work, receive treatment, and have older mentors to rely on, operates with a similar radically different culture and has had positive outcomes.⁸²

Deliberate, bold culture change can transform interactions among incarcerated people and staff, improving safety inside. Nonetheless, aiming for a more humane culture does not justify building a larger jail.

Deliberate, bold culture change can transform interactions among incarcerated people and staff, improving safety inside. Nonetheless, aiming for a more humane culture does not justify building a larger jail. Culture change is important but not a silver bullet. It is most effective when done in tandem with broader criminal legal system reforms that reserve incarceration as a last resort for far fewer people.

STORIES FROM THE LISTENING TOUR

Experiencing the impact of county budget decisions

If you don't see other people caring for you, you think you're not worthy of care and concern 'cause you don't see it. You see it everywhere else. It's like, what, what, what's going on? We keep hearing about these billions of dollars and stuff getting spent. Like, my mom pay taxes. You feel me? I sat in jail, y'all. I didn't have no problem sending me in there. So where's the concern? All we see is police. There's nothing else. There's nobody else.

—**Evan**, speaking on government spending in Berks County

I see that these agencies are so overwhelmed because there's so many people that are in need of help. . . . The caseworkers, they're overwhelmed. They have piles on their desk, piles and piles of them. [They need] more funding, you know what I mean? More funding for these agencies so that they can advocate for the people who need it.

—**Stacy**, speaking on the underfunding of supportive services in Berks County

4.2 – People coming home from jail want to work.

The majority of people in the Berks County jail are of prime working age. The median age of people in jail in Berks County is 35 years old, and 75 percent of admissions are of people who are 25 to 54 years old. The criminal legal system has, thus, removed them from the Berks County labor force at a time when they could be breadwinners for their families and contribute to the economic engine of a county that needs workers. Pennsylvania currently has only 77 available workers for every 100 open jobs.⁸³ Berks County also has a growing gap between people entering the labor market and likely retirees, with the shortage particularly prevalent in the advanced manufacturing sector.⁸⁴ By reducing incarceration in the first place and encouraging job options for people returning from jail, the county could overcome some of its workforce challenges.

Listening tour participants said they are actively seeking and willing to work, and they could be excellent candidates for these jobs—if the community can overcome key barriers related to conviction records and stigma.⁸⁵ Even though Reading has

implemented a “ban the box” policy, which provides applicants a fair chance at employment by removing conviction and arrest history questions from job applications, the policy only applies to public employers, and they can still conduct a background check after making a conditional offer.⁸⁶ However, many interview participants with conviction histories reported being hired, working for several months, and making financial decisions based on having an income, only to be fired once employers discovered their records. This pattern suggests that post-background check protections are inadequate or may be unevenly implemented.

4.3 – System reforms must include input from people who have experienced jail detention.

When listening tour participants were asked what they wished for in the community, none mentioned a desire for a better jail. Instead, they responded that they wanted “a chance,” “better employment opportunities,” “housing,” “mental health resources in the community,” and “more trees, more plants.” When asked what their personal goals were, many shared they simply wanted to stay sober, work a stable job, pay taxes, and care for their families. Some said they wanted to make sure that other people would not have to suffer the same experiences in life. Many resented how they were treated at the hands of the Berks County criminal legal system but still expressed compassion for their community and a desire to see it thrive. Far from being mere casualties of the Berks County criminal legal system, many hoped to be agents of change. In part, this desire is what motivated many to participate in the listening tour.

The perspectives of system-impacted people are lacking in all ranks of local justice system positions. Based on feedback from listening tour participants, community-based service agencies, pretrial services, and the jail need to have peer counselors who have shared similar life experiences—as this enables them to be more effective counselors. Some of the participants who ended up becoming service providers after their incarceration are some of the most beloved in the community because of their ability to relate to clients. These work opportunities would help repair some of the harm caused by their incarceration.

More broadly, criminal legal system reforms will fail if they do not meaningfully address the problems that people with detention experience can identify. County leaders should include directly impacted people in all stages of policy design, implementation, and evaluation. Berks County may also be well positioned to expand its civilian-led crisis response teams staffed by unarmed teams of clinicians as an alternative to police-led responses. Civilian-led crisis response teams are one tool among many that Berks County might develop to build out a more holistic public safety toolkit that addresses people's root needs. Berks County already has a 988 crisis line that people can call for mental health emergencies.⁸⁷ Expanding its functions may reduce police contact, decrease arrests, and improve access to social services. This is also an area in which system-impacted people can and should be consulted.

Recommendations

If you spend a billion dollars on the jail system and nobody's really getting help, you should take responsibility for that.

—**Charlie**, longtime Pennsylvania resident

This report identifies some of the problems with the current use of jail detention and sets out a more holistic, effective, and affordable vision for public safety in Berks County. To build and implement new practices, all county stakeholders have a role. The following recommendations are grounded in research, rich in examples of what other local governments have done, and include concrete actions that specific county agencies can take in the near term. They serve as a starting point, not an exhaustive list or plan. Government and community leaders can leverage the energy and resources that already exist in Berks County to build these ideas into full-fledged practices.



REDUCE THE JAIL POPULATION AS BOLDLY AS POSSIBLE

Putting too many people in jail and keeping them there for too long puts a burden on the county and jail staff, and it undermines the potential effectiveness of programs inside jail and in the community. Reducing the jail population requires curtailing who is booked in and finding more ways to release those who are already there. These recommendations focus on limiting pretrial detention to those people who pose serious flight or safety risks and using non-detention options for charges stemming from circumstances better addressed by public health and other civilian institutions. They also offer ways to facilitate quicker and more frequent pathways out.

Commissioners

- Eliminate local ordinances that criminalize low-level actions such as trespassing.⁸⁸
- Develop a civilian-led crisis response program for serious behavioral health crises, staffed by unarmed teams of clinicians who work separately from but in coordination with police, as an alternative to police-led responses.⁸⁹

Judges

- Provide guidance to local judges to encourage or require unsecured bail for a list of low-level charges (in cases without flight or safety risk).
- Waive all court fees charged to people accused of crimes.
- When setting probation terms, follow evidence-based guidance to use fewer conditions, shorter terms, and graduated sanctions. Use revocation only in rare circumstances as a response to noncompliance.⁹⁰

The District Attorney's Office

- Adopt declination policies for a specified list of charges such as drug possession, trespassing, and vagrancy.
- With local social service agencies, expand diversion programs for other low-level charges.

The Berks County Jail

- Along with Court Administration, the District Attorney, and the Public Defender, expand the jail population review process to include people with longer stays. With these agencies, increase resources to identify and resolve unnecessary detentions and shorten lengths of stay.

The Office of Adult Probation/Parole

- Amend policies to encourage fewer conditions, shorter probation terms, graduated sanctions, procedures allowing for early termination, and very restricted use of re-incarceration as a penalty for technical violations.

The Reading Police Department and other police agencies in Berks County

- Expand cite-and-release policies that connect people to services and/or that give a person a notice to appear in court in lieu of arrest for people suspected of minor offenses and/or facing potential charges that relate to indigency, homelessness, substance use, and mental health crises.

PRIORITIZE SUPPORTIVE SERVICES, DIGNITY, AND INCLUSION OVER PUNISHMENT

These recommendations focus on prioritizing and expanding social services and economic inclusion over punishment by investing

in mental health and addiction care and reducing barriers to transitional and affordable housing.

Commissioners

- Allocate funding to social services organizations and diversion programs that address social, economic, and public health needs, including both government and community-based providers, without charging fees to clients.

The Housing Authority

- Expand transitional and affordable housing to address homelessness or remove barriers such as sobriety and drug testing to housing and to shorter-term shelter options for people with conviction histories.⁹¹

Workforce Development

- Remove barriers to employment for people with conviction or arrest records, including reversing bans on certifications for specific professions, discouraging conviction history as a reason to disqualify an applicant, and incentivizing local employers to hire people returning home from jail.

Local Social Service Providers

- Work with people impacted by jail incarceration to identify unmet needs, build trust, and improve services and collaboration across organizations.

The Berks County Jail

- Implement stronger policies to reduce the use of restrictive housing in the jail (22+ hours in cell), reserving it as a last resort.

- Employ more caseworkers to help people detained in the jail navigate their social and legal support options while in the jail and plan for their release.

Pretrial Services, Probation/Parole, and the Berks County Jail

- Employ more system-impacted people, including in frontline positions that require trust and rapport, and involve system-impacted people in improving policies and practices.

Probation

- Require training for probation officers in a “coaching model” (as opposed to the “referee model”) and specialized supervision models related to mental health and substance use needs.⁹²

The District Attorney’s Office

- Develop guidelines and training to ensure that plea bargaining processes are not coercive and that people can exercise their rights without the threat of harsher penalties or withdrawn plea offers, especially for people in pretrial detention. This could include providing more comprehensive information to accused people, their families, and the public; ensuring complete access to discovery materials, and outlining the consequences of a guilty plea (such as creating a criminal record).⁹³

IMPROVE COLLABORATION ACROSS AGENCIES AND TRACK TRENDS

Given the need for collaboration across government sectors to meaningfully improve public safety, these recommendations focus on improving collaboration and tracking trends in programming across the criminal legal system, as called for in the 2016–2019 Berks County Reentry Strategic Plan.⁹⁴

Commissioners

- Create an advisory board to coordinate and maintain a spotlight on the county's criminal legal reform actions. This board should include a range of perspectives, notably including people who have direct experience of arrest and detention.
- Set clear and ambitious goals, and develop concrete plans and resources to reach them.
- Work with all relevant agencies to align practices and technical elements of data collection and management to generate meaningful metrics for progress such as reductions in specific categories of jail admissions or long stays and expanded access to key supportive services.

The Berks County Jail

- Improve data collection and management in the Jail Management System to enable easier tracking of trends in jail bookings and releases and, with Probation, improved integration of probation data.
- Enhance integration of case management systems across service providers inside and outside the jail to ensure smoother assessments, services, and outcome tracking with pretrial services.

Conclusion

This report combines human stories about Berks County residents' pathways into jail detention with clear data about who was in jail and for how long in 2023. The county is already deeply engaged in difficult conversations about how to reduce crime and improve safety for the coming decades. This report provides crucial insights into current practices and their consequences that amount to a strong rationale for rejecting the status quo and taking a bold new path. The county is spending a significant portion of its scarce resources on incarceration, which does little to build stability or new economic opportunities for the people who need this. The voices from the listening tour included in these pages underscore that jail is rarely rehabilitative or a deterrent to future crime. Jail is a costly option that should be reserved for cases that truly require holding a person behind bars to prevent flight or direct harm to people.

As Berks County reconsiders its plan for a new jail, there is a unique opportunity to take a broader, long-term approach. This approach means investing in services that meet residents' basic needs and foster inclusion, as well as shifting institutional cultures to support, rather than punish, those entangled in the justice system. Police, courts, jails, and probation should be used only when truly necessary, not as the default response to disorder or desperation. Those who have experienced incarceration possess hard-earned insights into building safety, trust, and resilience. Berks County is stronger when all its residents have a voice in shaping its policies.

ENDNOTES

- 1 During the July 28, 2022, commissioners' board meeting, former Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt said the board wants to ensure the facility is right-sized because it would be paid for by the taxpayers. County of Berks, "County of Berks Commissioners' Board Meeting 2022_07_28," YouTube video, 00:34:54–00:35:19, streamed live on July 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bnx8ERnydQ&list=PLK5hTPk-hq11aVqgQxOHAU4g5wqlrDcku&index=109>; and CGL Companies, "Project: Berks County Correctional Facility," <https://perma.cc/LSD8-MBFL>. See also Mike Urban, "Study Seeks to Reduce Berks Jail Inmate Population," *Reading Eagle*, December 4, 2023, <https://www.readingeagle.com/2023/12/04/study-seeks-to-reduce-berks-jail-inmate-population/>; and County of Berks, Pennsylvania: Office of Budget & Finance, *Berks County 2019 Proposed Budget* (Reading, PA: County of Berks, Pennsylvania, Office of Budget & Finance, 2018), <https://perma.cc/556R-8BVN>.
- 2 See the 2024 Adopted Budget, which shows general fund expenditures of \$308,690.636 on page 1 and jail expenditures of \$52,076,255 on page 5. Pages 5 and 6 further outline the allocation of funds to different functions within the county. County of Berks, Pennsylvania: Office of Budget & Finance, *County of Berks Adopted 2024 Budget* (Reading, PA: Office of Budget & Finance, 2023), 1 & 11–12, <https://perma.cc/D5EJ-QMR8>.
- 3 Jails, unlike state-funded prisons, are primarily funded by county level taxpayer dollars and used to detain people who are awaiting trial but have not been convicted of the charges they are facing, people serving sentences of less than a year, and people awaiting transfer to other facilities like state prisons. In Pennsylvania, jails are called "county prisons" and/or "correctional facilities" and are run by an appointed warden. Read more about incarceration trends in Berks County at Vera Institute of Justice, *Berks County Fact Sheet* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://vera-institute.files.svdcn.com/production/inline-downloads/berks-county-pa.pdf>.
- 4 See Project Timeline on the Berks County Correctional Facility, <https://bccf.countyofberks.com/>; and Berks County Correctional Facility, "Frequently Asked Questions," <https://bccf.countyofberks.com/about-the-project/faqs/>.
- 5 Léon Digard and Elizabeth Swavola, *Justice Denied: The Harmful and Lasting Effects of Pretrial Detention* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2019), <https://vera-institute.files.svdcn.com/production/downloads/publications/Justice-Denied-Evidence-Brief.pdf>; and Claudia N. Anderson, Joshua C. Cochran, and Andrea N. Montes, "How Punitive Is Pretrial? Measuring the Relative Pains of Pretrial Detention," *Punishment & Society* 26, no. 5 (2024), 790–812, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/14624745231218702>.
- 6 See Recommendations and associated notes.
- 7 Although the original needs assessment is no longer on CGL Companies' website, coverage of the assessment and original bed count can be found here: Karen Shuey, "Berks County Officials Given Two Expensive Options on Prison," *Reading Eagle*, updated August 19, 2021, <https://www.readingeagle.com/2019/05/11/berks-county-officials-given-two-expensive-options-on-prison/>; and Prison Policy Initiative, "A Co-Governance Success Story," <https://perma.cc/DNT9-KATC>.
- 8 CGL Companies, LLC, *Berks County Correctional Facility Needs Assessment Update* (Miami, FL: CGL Companies, LLC, 2022), AB-3 & AB-5 (automatic download), <https://bccf.countyofberks.com/download/243402/>; and CGL, "Project: Berks County."
- 9 CGL, *Berks County Correctional Facility, Needs Assessment Update*, 2022; and

CGL, “Project: Berks County.” For more on the project being the most expensive project fueled by county taxpayers, see Urban, “Study Seeks to Reduce Berks Jail Inmate Population,” 2023.

- 10 Email from Warden Jeffery R. Smith, Berks County Jail System to Beatrice Halbach-Singh, Vera Institute of Justice re: “Clarification on jail bed capacity,” March 24, 2025, on file at Vera. Rated capacity is the maximum number of people a jail can hold, as determined by a rating official and calculated based on a variety of factors such as bed capacity, staff capacity, and availability of programming resources and amenities. Zhen Zeng, *Jail Inmates in 2021 – Statistical Tables* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022), 4, <https://perma.cc/7EGR-YD6T>.
- 11 For statement on the commitment to cap the jail at 700 people, see comment by Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt at Berks County Commissioners Meeting, video, 00:49:53–00:50:38, November 17, 2022, <https://www.bctv.org/video/berks-county-commissioners-meeting-11-17-22/>; and Prison Policy Initiative, “A Co-Governance Success Story,” https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/A_Co-Governance_Success_Story.pdf. The number for average daily population comes from Vera analysis of Berks County jail administrative data for 2023, provided by jail leadership for this report.
- 12 For more information about the “Walk With Us” project, see Building Justice in Berks, “Walk With Us,” <https://www.buildingjusticeinberks.org/about-3>.
- 13 These conversations were recorded and shared with Vera to distill main themes. Not every participant shared demographic or housing status details, but many did. A summary of these characteristics can be found in Figure 1.
- 14 The Berks County jail provided Vera with data on all bookings into the jail in 2023, including criminal charges, dates of admission and release, and some demographic information.
- 15 County of Berks, Office of Budget & Finance, *Adopted 2024 Budget*, 2023, 5.
- 16 Karen Shuey, “Berks Officials Will Consider Request to Fund Reentry Programs,” *Reading Eagle*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.readingeagle.com/2024/10/07/berks-county-officials-will-consider-request-to-fund-reentry-programs/>.
- 17 This number is based on a 2016 study and adjusted for inflation in 2022. See National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, “Average Cost of Drug Rehab,” [2023], <https://drugabusestatistics.org/cost-of-rehab/>.
- 18 The 2017 figures from Pew put the national average spending on jails at 6 percent of county spending. The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Local Spending on Jails Tops \$25 Billion in Latest Nationwide Data* (Philadelphia: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2021), 4, <https://perma.cc/6HJE-S4NF>. A 2019 Vera study of jail budgets from counties in Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee found that jails made up 15 percent of county budgets in Kentucky and Tennessee, and only 8.5 percent in Indiana. Vera Institute of Justice, “What Jails Cost Statewide,” <https://www.vera.org/publications/what-jails-cost-statewide>.
- 19 The jail data includes a roster and a daily census, and Vera researchers combined these with U.S. census figures and historical jail data for analysis. The jail data does not include information on pretrial status, technical violations of probation or parole supervision, Hispanic ethnicity, or people with multiple bookings in 2023.
- 20 On community-based alternatives to jail detention, see Melvin Washington II, *Beyond Jails: Community-Based Strategies for Public Safety* (New York: Vera

Institute of Justice, March 2021), <https://www.vera.org/beyond-jails-community-based-strategies-for-public-safety>; and Sana Khan, Emily West, and Stephanie Rosoff, *Jail Populations, Violent Crime, and COVID-19: Findings from the Safety and Justice Challenge* (New York: Institute for State and Local Governance, March 2023), <https://perma.cc/EG8J-BYGX>.

- 21 Berks County Workforce Development Board, *Industry Sector Priorities (2024-2029)* (Reading, PA: Berks County Workforce Development Board, 2024), 1, <https://perma.cc/4C5V-BV4Z>.
- 22 CGL, *Berks County Correctional Facility, Needs Assessment Update*, 2022, ES-3 and Table 1-11 on page 1-27.
- 23 The average of 32 days figure is from data collected July 2021 to June 2022. See Zhen Zeng, *Jail Inmates in 2022 – Statistical Tables* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2023), 1, <https://perma.cc/M8VN-NRCH>.
- 24 For example, the average length of stay for people diagnosed with the most severe mental health instability in the Berks County jail is 199.7 days, a number that applies to a comparatively small number of people but might skew the overall average length of stay for the whole jail population. See CGL, *Berks County Correctional Facility, Needs Assessment Update*, ES-4 2022.
- 25 The median length of stay for some other sites that have been analyzed is low in comparison. However, many counties and federal reports only measure average length of stay, which is typically a much higher number because of a few very long stays. Some counties' median length of stay is quite short: rural counties in Georgia ranged from 1-4 days, while Douglas County, Kansas, had a median length of half a day. Jennifer Peirce, Madeline Bailey, and Shahd Elbushra, *Findings from the Rural Jails Research and Policy Network in Georgia and Washington* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022), <https://www.vera.org/publications/findings-from-the-rural-jails-research-and-policy-network-in-georgia-and-washington>; and Bea Halbach-Singh, Sarah Minion, Jennifer Peirce, et al., *Jail Charge Data Analysis and Jail Reduction Strategies for Douglas County, Kansas* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022), 19, <https://www.dgcoks.gov/sites/default/files/media/groups/cjcc/pdf/jail-charge-data-analysis-and-jail-reduction-strategies-douglas-county-kansas.pdf>. Notably, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, a larger county, reports a median length of stay of 16 days for 2023–2025, <https://perma.cc/2APC-GZJG>.
- 26 On the point of typical bail payment timelines: researchers who studied hundreds of thousands of cases filed between 2008 and 2013 in Harris County, Texas, the third most populous county in the United States, found that 77 percent of all those who eventually made bail did so in the first 48 hours following the bail hearing. See Paul S. Heaton, Sandra G. Mayson, Megan T. Stevenson, “The Downstream Consequences of Misdemeanor Pretrial Detention,” *Stanford Law Review* 69 (2017), 753, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2809840>.
- 27 See average bail amounts for people held pretrial in the Berks County jail on pages 1-40 to 1-41 in CGL, *Berks County Correctional Facility, Needs Assessment Update*, 2022. This report notes that if 15 percent of people with bail amounts less than \$50,000 were released, 18 beds on average could be saved.
- 28 One bed-day represents one person staying 24 hours in jail. Vera's analysis of jail booking data from 2023 in Berks County found that the county jail used 227,612 bed-days in total.
- 29 Email from Nikki Schnovel, Connections Work, to Crystal Kowalski, Building Justice in Berks, December 11, 2024, on file with Vera.

- 30 National Association of Counties, “County Guide for Reducing Jail Populations and Costs,” September 2022, navigation: Pretrial Length of Stay: County Solutions and Examples, <https://www.naco.org/resources/county-guide-reducing-jail-populations-and-costs>.
- 31 On the topic of bail reform, see Terry-Ann Craigie and Ames Grawert, *Bail Reform and Public Safety* (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, 2024), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/bail-reform-and-public-safety>, which finds that there is no statistically significant relationship between crime and bail reform. For examples of jurisdictions that have safely reduced their jail populations by reviewing individual cases and providing recommendations, such as expediting case processing for people who have had long stays, see National Association of Counties, *Jail Population Review Teams* (Washington, DC: National Association of Counties, 2023), <https://perma.cc/92MQ-PJEN>. On the topic of pretrial services, see an example of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania’s pretrial services program, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, “About Pretrial Services,” <https://www.montgomerycountypa.gov/3919/About-Pretrial-Services>, which helps with smooth case processing by providing initial risk assessments at arraignment, facilitating virtual arraignments, and expanding supportive services as part of supervision. On supportive pretrial services, see Vera Institute of Justice, *Successful Pretrial Systems Rely on Supportive Pretrial Services* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice), <https://perma.cc/QMR2-9LMB>. On ability to pay assessments, see Sandra van den Heuvel, Anton Robinson, and Insha Rahman, *A Means to an End: Assessing the Ability to Pay Bail* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2019), <https://www.vera.org/publications/a-means-to-an-end-assessing-the-ability-to-pay-bail>.
- 32 A 2023 Gallup poll showed that 77 percent of people in the United States believed that crime was increasing across the country despite historic declines in crime rates. See Gallup, “More Americans See U.S. Crime Problem as Serious,” November 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/544442/americans-crime-problem-serious.aspx>; and Abdallah Fayyad, “Why Do Americans Always Think Crime Is Going Up?,” *Vox*, June 27, 2024, <https://perma.cc/6EU5-3FGN>.
- 33 Damon M. Petrich, Travis C. Pratt, Cheryl Lero Jonson, and Francis T. Cullen, “Custodial Sanctions and Reoffending: A Meta Analytic Review,” *Crime and Justice* 50, no. 1 (2021), 353–424, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/715100>.
- 34 Incarceration lowers a person’s subsequent wages by 11 percent and reduces annual earnings by 40 percent. See The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Collateral Costs: Incarceration’s Effect on Economic Mobility* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010), 4, <https://perma.cc/FQ6K-WYTM>.
- 35 In Berks County, if a person fails to appear in court for their hearing for nonpayment of child support, the court can automatically issue a bench warrant for their arrest. For more details on how payment of child support is enforced through punitive measures, see Berks County Compliance/Enforcement Unit of the Domestic Relations Section, “Enforcement of Support Orders,” <https://perma.cc/9932-K277>.
- 36 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Minimum Wage Advisory Board, *Analysis of the Pennsylvania Minimum Wage* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry, 2024), 1, <https://perma.cc/E9F8-JK5V>.
- 37 Eleanor Pratt and Heather Hahn, *Promising Innovations and Pilots in the Child Support Field* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021), <https://perma.cc/CSL9-SSZE>. For arguments supporting a non-incarceration model to address nonpayment of child support, see Laura Lane-Steele, “Working It Off: Introducing a Service-Based Child Support Model,” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law and Social Change*, 19, no. 2 (2016), 163–183, <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1191&context=jlasc>. For an evaluation of an Iowa-based program that

focuses on proactive, positive engagement with noncustodial parents to increase child support payments, see Daeyong Lee, Carl F. Weems, Heather L. Rouse, et al., “Targeted Child Support Enforcement and Its Association with Child Support Payments: Evidence from a Program Evaluation,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 118 (2020), 105343, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105343>. Using data from 2016–2019, Lee et al. find the program led to an average \$25 monthly increase in payments and a 6 percent rise in payment compliance. The findings highlight the importance of positive, tailored interventions in child support enforcement.

- 38 Programs such as NEON might be funded through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), federal grants, or local resources. For additional examples of child support-led employment programs being implemented in at least 25 states, see U.S. Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Services, “Child Support-Led Employment Programs by State,” June 1, 2024, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/training-technical-assistance/child-support-led-employment-programs-state>.
- 39 NEON Program, “Home,” <https://neonprogram.org/>.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 State and local laws for trespassing-related offenses penalize potential acts of survival for unhoused people, thereby indirectly criminalizing homelessness. Pennsylvania’s statute on criminal trespass, 18 Pa. C.S. § 3503 (2024), penalizes acts such as unauthorized entry of secured buildings or agricultural lands. Berks County, Pennsylvania County Ordinances § 01-2022 and § 07-2018 prohibit entering certain county-owned properties and “camping” in parks. Reading, Pennsylvania Code of Ordinances § 353 and § 536 penalize “loitering,” “panhandling,” and “tampering with public property.” See also Brie Diamond, Ronald Burns, and Kendra Bowen, “Criminalizing Homelessness: Circumstances Surrounding Criminal Trespassing and People Experiencing Homelessness,” *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 33, no. 6 (2022), 563–583, 577–578, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08874034211067130>, which shows that of a 2018–2019 random sample of 250 cases from a large, southern district attorney’s office (not named), people experiencing homelessness made up a substantial portion of all criminal trespass cases, were more likely to be repeat criminal trespass defendants, and accounted for most jail sentences.
- 42 Ibid, 579.
- 43 Leah Wang, *Jailing the Homeless: New Data Shed Light on Unhoused People in Local Jails* (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2025), https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2025/02/11/jail_unhoused_bookings/.
- 44 Wang, *Jailing the Homeless*, 2025; and Chris Herring, Dilara Yarbrough, and Lisa Marie Alatorre, “Pervasive Penalty: How the Criminalization of Poverty Perpetuates Homelessness,” *Social Problems* 67, no. 1 (2020), 132–133, <https://perma.cc/YPM6-M6DW>. See also Doris James, *Profile of Jail Inmates, 2002* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004), 9, <https://perma.cc/387S-C6Z9>.
- 45 For general population count and poverty level statistics, see U.S. Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: Berks County, Pennsylvania,” database (July 2023) (search: Persons in poverty, percent), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/berkscountypennsylvania/IPE120223>. The statistic on the unhoused population comes from a Point-in-Time (PIT) count done in January 2023. Berks Coalition to End Homelessness, *2023 Berks County PIT* (Reading, PA: Berks Coalition to End Homelessness, 2023), 7, <https://perma.cc/8XYA-TVXM>. According to this PIT count, 504 people were living in emergency and transitional shelters in Berks County.

- 46 See Bailey Gray and Doug Smith, *Return to Nowhere: The Revolving Door Between Incarceration and Homelessness* (Austin, TX: Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, 2019), <https://perma.cc/R3B6-ZHNL>; and Madeline Bailey, Erica Crew, and Madz Reeve, *No Access to Justice: Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness and Jail* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2020), <https://www.vera.org/publications/no-access-to-justice-homelessness-and-jail>.
- 47 See Phillippa Carnemolla and Vivienne Skinner, “Outcomes Associated with Providing Secure, Stable, and Permanent Housing for People Who Have Been Homeless: An International Scoping Review,” *Journal of Planning Literature* 36, no. 4 (2021), 508–525, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08854122211012911>; Breanne Pleggenkuhle, Beth M. Huebner, and Kimberly R. Kras, “Solid Start: Supportive Housing, Social Support, and Reentry Transitions,” *Journal of Crime and Justice* 39, no. 3 (2016), 380–397, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.2015.1047465>; and Leah A. Jacobs and Aaron Gottlieb, “The Effect of Housing Circumstances on Recidivism: Evidence From a Sample of People on Probation in San Francisco,” *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 47, no. 9 (2020), 1097–1115, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820942285>.
- 48 Although *Martin v. Boise*, 920 F. 3d 584 (9th Cir. 2019), prevented cities from criminalizing unhoused people for camping on public property unless there was an available shelter bed, it was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2024 in the case *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson*, 603 U.S. 520 (2024). The new ruling allows cities to ban camping on public property, even if there are no available shelters. However, advocates might still pursue litigation, as is being done in Oregon. *Disability Rights Oregon et al. v. City of Grants Pass*, No. 25CV05989 (Or. Cir. Ct. January 20, 2025) (Complaint), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6387d767fc8a755e41aa5844/t/679d17c8ce864043beee4a2b/1738348489264/DRO+et+al+v.+City+of+Grants+Pass+Complaint.pdf>. See also Disability Rights Oregon, “Lawsuit: Protecting People with Disabilities Who Are Homeless,” <https://www.drOregon.org/litigation-resources/dro-v-grants-pass>.
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- 51 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>. On drug use rates, see SAMHSA, *2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed Tables* (Rockville, MD: SAMHSA, 2019), <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2018-nsduh-detailed-tables>.
- 52 Vera Institute of Justice, “Overdose Deaths and Jail Incarceration – National Trends and Racial Disparities,” <https://www.vera.org/publications/overdose->

[deaths-and-jail-incarceration/national-trends-and-racial-disparities](#); and Daniel Hartung, Caitlin M. McCracken, Thuan Njuyen, et al., “Fatal and Non-Fatal Opioid Overdose Risk Following Release from Prison: A Retrospective Cohort Study Using Linked Administrative Data,” *Journal of Substance Use and Addiction Treatment*, 147, 208971 (2023) (automatic download), https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/145946/cdc_145946_DS1.pdf.

- 53 MAT employs FDA-approved medications alongside behavioral therapies to treat opioid use disorder. The three most common medications—methadone, buprenorphine, and naltrexone—can reduce the cravings and pleasure associated with opioids. John Howard, Lauren Ciminieri, Tamekia Evans, et al., *Medication-Assisted Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2019), 2, <https://perma.cc/8632-9YA8>.
- 54 Studies about addiction, both national and international, highlight that relapse during addiction recovery is inevitable and stress the importance of persistent, person-centered, and supportive interventions. See T.F. Martinelli, D.P.K. Roeg, L. Bellaert, et al., “Understanding the Process of Drug Addiction Recovery Through First-Hand Experiences: A Qualitative Study in the Netherlands Using Lifeline Interviews,” *Qualitative Health Research*, 33, no. 10 (2023), 857–870, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/10497323231174161?cid=int.sj-abstract.citing-articles.6>; and National Institute on Drug Abuse, “Drugs, Brains, and Behavior: The Science of Addiction,” July 2011, Drug Misuse and Addiction section, <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugs-brains-behavior-science-addiction/drug-misuse-addiction#ref>.
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- 56 Lancaster County, PA, approved an ordinance granting police leeway to treat possession of small amounts of marijuana more leniently than state law regulations do. See Tim Stuhldreher, “City Council Reduces Penalties for Small Amounts of Marijuana,” LancasterOnline, September 25, 2018, https://lancasteronline.com/news/local/city-council-reduces-penalties-for-small-amounts-of-marijuana/article_b2f6ca60-c134-11e8-b4cc-93020c7e47af.html. Upper Merion Township, PA, also passed an ordinance that downgraded possession of small amounts of marijuana to a summary offense, in which police can issue a non-traffic citation with a fine. See Michael Tanenbaum, “Upper Merion Downgrades Marijuana Possession to a Summary Offense,” PhillyVoice, April 16, 2021, <https://www.phillyvoice.com/upper-merion-marijuana-possession-summary-offense/>.
- 57 Severity of theft charges are categorized differently depending on the type of theft. Misdemeanor theft charges generally refer to amounts less than \$2,000 (see 18 Pa. Cons. Stat. § 3902). Misdemeanor retail theft charges refer to amounts less than \$1,000 (see 18 Pa. Cons. Stat. § 3929(a)).
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Acknowledgments

The Building Justice in Berks (BJB) team includes Crystal Kowalski and Jane Palmer. The Real Deal 610 team includes Seleda Simmons and Shawn Bridges. The Vera research and writing team were supported by Angie Carpio, Bella Hung, Nathaniel Erb, Claudine Constant, and Nina Siulc.

Vera, BJB, and The Real Deal 610 extend sincerest appreciations to all listening tour participants who shared personal stories and insights from their experiences and interactions with the criminal legal system. Thank you also to Dalai Zambrano Galvis who conducted interviews in Spanish, as well as to Alvernia University, Camp Joy, Centro Hispano, Clare of Assisi, Connections Work, DoubleTree, Easy Does It, Hope Rescue Mission, Make the Road, New Journey Community Outreach, Penn State University, Reading Public Library, and WCR Center for the Arts for their support with hosting the “Walk With Us” interviews. Thank you to Warden Jeffrey R. Smith and his staff for providing data and responding to our many questions.

From Vera, the authors thank Cindy Reed for developmental editing, Ariel Goldberg and Lisha Nadkarni for editing and project managing, Tammy Ackerson for cite checking, Abbi Leman for copyediting, James Cui for proofreading, illustrations by Alex Nabaum, and Patrick M Design for design of the report. Funding for the project came from the Building Justice in Berks Fund of Berks County Community Foundation and the Vera Institute of Justice.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Caitlin Yee, Jesmeen Grewal, Ari Kotler, et al., *Wasted Resources: The True Cost of Jail Detention in Berks and a Vision for Public Safety* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2025).