

THE HUMAN TOLL OF JAIL

www.humantollofjail.vera.org

In the course of a typical year, nearly 12 million people cycle in and out of the nearly 3,000 jail jurisdictions in the United States—equivalent to the populations of Los Angeles and New York City combined. But there's more to this story than just the numbers. Coupled with research, policy analyses, and best practices, The Human Toll of Jail project aims to shed light on the everyday experiences of the people caught in this system and those tasked with administering it.



INSIDE THE MASSIVE JAIL THAT DOUBLES AS CHICAGO'S LARGEST MENTAL HEALTH FACILITY

Today, about 14.5 percent of men and 31 percent of women in jails have a serious mental illness, compared to 3.2 and 4.9 percent respectively in the general population. At the Cook County Jail in Chicago, many of these people are getting their only real treatment after they land behind bars.



JAILED FOR BEING HOMELESS

Nearly 3.5 million Americans experience homelessness in the course of a year. Because they are often unable to access public services, they may commit "survival crimes" that lead to a cycle of punishment and incarceration. Such is the story of the people profiled here, whose temporary encampments are torn down and who are jailed and fined for having no private place to sleep.



RETURN TO RIKERS

For the 2.7 million American children with at least one parent in jail, the financial and emotional effects of their parent's incarceration can have a detrimental effect on their own path. Here's one story about how, after two decades of incarceration, one man returned to Rikers Island for the first time in 20 years—to visit his son.



A NEW APPROACH TO PROSECUTION

Frequently elected on tough-on-crime platforms, prosecutors have historically been judged by how high their conviction rates are. However, as illustrated in this profile, prosecutors in growing numbers are broadening the scope of their role in their communities by integrating more holistic measures of success.



JUDGING WITHOUT JAIL

States around the country have made moves to end the fruitless cycle of arrest and incarceration by moving nonviolent defendants out of prosecution and into more productive intervention programs. In New Orleans, one judge has seen just how effective this shift in approach can be.



BEHIND THE SCENES OF PUBLIC DEFENSE

The American Bar Association recommends no more than 150 felony cases per public defender—yet, in many cities, the case load more than triple that number. An overburdened legal system means the poorest defendants can get stuck in jail for weeks or even months waiting for their case to be resolved—and are often convinced to cop a plea just to get out. The assistance of a determined defender can go a long way.



THE JAIL WITHOUT BARS

Ada County Jail was recently highlighted in a Human Rights Watch report as exemplary, because of low use-of-force incidents. Its innovative approach to incarceration is built on a commitment to the site’s workers and an investment in the inmates’ success. The result is a jail that looks nothing like the ones you’ve seen on TV.



FIGHTING FOR FACE TIME

While prisons still offer face-to-face contact, many jails have implemented video in lieu of or in addition to in-person visitation. As the shape of visitation changes across the country, the stories of four inmates—and their families on the outside—demonstrate why real human contact is so vital.



A HELPING HAND ON THE WAY HOME

Recent studies suggest that visits from community volunteers to incarcerated people may reduce the likelihood of re-offending. After her son’s own brush with the law, one woman explains her role as a therapist at local jails in Sonoma County.



INMATE TURNED ADVOCATE

The unique challenges that women and girls face when they become involved in justice systems—as well as the circumstances that lead them there—are often very different than men. In this story, one New Orleans resident (and Vera staff member) details how she found purpose helping people who have been arrested, after spending much of her own young life bouncing between jail and prison.

The Human Toll of Jail is a storytelling collaboration between Vera and digital publisher Narratively. It is supported by the MacArthur Foundation’s Safety and Justice Challenge and the Robert W. Wilson Charitable Trust. Contact project manager Erika Turner at eturner@vera.org for more information.



Supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation