

Report to Tulsa County Stakeholders on Jail Reduction Strategies

August 2017
Report Summary

Like many counties across the country, Tulsa County, Oklahoma has experienced a dramatic increase in its jail population over the past five decades, with the per capita jail incarceration rate growing nearly 200 percent between 1970 and 2016. In response to concerns about this continued growth, its costs to taxpayers, and the impact on the community, in 2016 Tulsa County stakeholders sought the assistance of the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), which worked with criminal justice leaders to examine drivers of growth and overcrowding at the Tulsa County jail and devise strategies consistent with the county's public safety goals to reverse that growth. This report is the culmination of those efforts.

Findings

- Tulsa County's pretrial detention rate has risen more dramatically than the overall jail incarceration rate in the past three decades and has surpassed the state and national average for much of the last 20 years.
- The majority of people booked into the jail had a nonviolent top charge. Five of the 15 most common reasons for jail bookings were probation violations or failures to pay court costs, and 46 percent of jail admissions were for municipal violations and misdemeanors.
- The number of women in the jail grew 3,400 percent between 1970 and 2016.
- Black people made up 30 percent of people in the jail, yet constitute only 10 percent of the county's population. Racial disparities were most pronounced for people admitted for the lowest-level offenses: for municipal offenses, black people were admitted to the jail at more than three-and-half times the rate of their white counterparts.
- In 2016, more than 1,300 people were booked into the jail three or more times.
- The average length of stay for the average daily population was 95 days, and above-average lengths of stay were not limited to people charged with the most serious felonies.

Recommendations

- To alleviate jail bookings for low-level offenses, the county should employ alternatives to traditional arrest and booking such as citations and book-and-release.
- Decisions about pretrial release are largely controlled by the bail schedule—those who can afford bail are released; those who cannot stay in jail. To reduce the number of people held pretrial, the district court should implement an individualized, risk-based system for pretrial release decisions and employ pretrial supervision services more frequently and efficiently.
- Long lengths of stay are partly a result of long case processing times, which could be averted through earlier assignment of counsel and expediting less complex cases.
- Court costs and probation fees are common pathways to jail. There should be alternatives to jail incarceration for nonpayment of fines and fees, and officers in the field should be able to determine if a warrant is related to non-payment so that arrest alternatives can be employed.

- Many people are admitted to the jail with substance abuse and mental health needs, but existing programs to address mental health and substance abuse are costly, and people are not routed into specialty courts early enough to avoid sometimes lengthy jail stays. Specialty court resources should be accessible at the earliest stages of a case and available regardless of ability to pay.
- To address the issue of frequent cycling through the jail, better data is needed so that a new approach can be developed for this population.
- A concerted dedication to eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in jail admissions should be a key component of any reform process.

Overall, better resourced and informed interagency collaboration is essential to tackle the challenge of jail growth and to monitor the local justice system. In order to put the strategies in the report into effect, a criminal justice coordinator should be appointed and a criminal justice coordinating council should be created to assist with data collection and capacity building.