There are a staggering **1.8 million people** behind bars in the United States, a number so big it can make mass incarceration seem abstract. But mass incarceration is a local problem, driven by more than **3,000** county-run jails and local justice systems and nearly **18,000** police departments.

**Jails** are primarily funded by county-level taxpayer dollars and used to lock up people who are awaiting trial but have not been convicted of the charges they are facing. The vast majority of people in jail are simply too poor to pay bail. Some jails also hold people serving shorter prison sentences, and many jails rent beds to the state prison system or federal authorities—like U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Most jails are run by elected sheriffs or jailers.

**Prisons** are primarily funded by state and federal tax dollars and hold people serving sentences of more than a year. Prisons are run by state departments of corrections and are managed by wardens. Fewer than 9 percent of incarcerated people are held in private prisons.

**Just a few days behind bars is enough to**
- lose housing
- lose employment
- cause strain on a family

This fact sheet will help you understand who is locked up in your county jail and how this impacts your community.

Use it to:
- Explore trends
- Talk about their impact
- Change the system

960 people were in the Knox County jail on a typical day in 2021.

2,429 people from Knox County were in state prison at the end of 2019.
Public health

Jails have revolving doors, often churning the same people in and out. Even before COVID-19, jail stays led to worse physical and mental health outcomes.³

Cost

Jail costs make up a sizable portion of the county budget, and every dollar spent is one that could have gone to critical community needs. As counties face increasing budget constraints, reducing jail spending has a big impact.

Rising incarceration

On an average day in 2018, 1,461 people were being held in the county jail, 107 percent of the total capacity. The 184 percent increase in incarceration since 1983 does not necessarily reflect an increase in serious crime.³

Admissions to state prison

The number of people sent to state prison from Knox County has risen 172 percent since 1990.

Note: Prison admissions reflect current sentencing practices more clearly than does the prison population. This is because the prison population, which includes people serving long sentences, changes more slowly in response to reforms.

Pretrial detention

1,287 people were detained pretrial on a typical day in 2018. Many are sitting in jail simply because they cannot pay bail.

 Nearly everyone who goes to prison first spends time in the local jail.
Different agencies using the county jail (2018)

- 9% People held for Knox County (1,327)
- 8% People held for the state prison system (86)
- 5% People held for other counties (5)
- 1% People held for U.S. Marshals (43)

Cashing in on incarceration

On a typical day, 9 percent of people being held in the county jail fill beds “rented” to other agencies. The county gets paid a per diem to incarcerate or detain them.

Most counties charge fines and fees for court costs and jail stays. This further traps people in cycles of poverty.

Racial disparities in criminalization (2018)

- Black people are 9% of the county population... but 28% of the county jail population.

Understanding disparities

Racial disparities begin with who gets stopped by the police and multiply throughout the legal system. When charged with similar offenses as white people, Black people are more likely to be detained pretrial, convicted, and given harsher sentences.⁶ Seemingly “color-blind” policies may still disproportionately impact communities of color.⁷

People of every race and ethnicity are incarcerated at higher rates than they were in 1970. The county’s white incarceration rate has grown 121 percent since 1990. Latinx people are also overrepresented in the nation’s jails, yet common misclassification of ethnicity leads to distorted, lower estimates of Latinx incarceration.⁸

Women in the county jail

In Knox County, the rate of women’s incarceration is growing much more rapidly than men’s.

Women in jail

- 1990: 35
- 2018: 347

Rising incarceration of women

Two-thirds of women in jail across the country are mothers of young children.⁹

Nearly half of adults in the United States have had an immediate family member in jail or prison.¹⁰

Locking up loved ones

- 2 in 3
- 1 in 2
- 1 in 2

More than half of all people who are in jail because they couldn’t make bail are parents to young children.¹⁰

Nearly half of adults in the United States have had an immediate family member in jail or prison.¹¹
Each of these officials makes decisions that lead to criminalization and incarceration in your community:

**Police and the sheriff** → decide who gets stopped, who gets arrested, what they’re charged with, and whether or not they’re booked into jail.

**Prosecutors** → decide who gets diverted and who gets prosecuted and on which charges. They also make bail recommendations, control most of the evidence in a case, offer plea bargains, and make sentencing recommendations.

**Probation and parole officers** → decide supervision rules and requirements, what costs people under supervision must shoulder, and whether to reincarcerate someone for inability to meet those requirements.

**Judges** → decide who gets released or detained pretrial and who must pay a money bond to secure freedom. A judge or jury determines whether someone is found guilty and selects the terms of a sentence.

**City, county, and state legislators** → decide spending priorities for the community, control the purse strings that fund each of these systems, and enact local policies. State legislators write the criminal code, determining what constitutes an offense.

As a community member, **YOU** have influence over decision-making in Knox County. You can get involved with or start local efforts to shift power into the community and end mass incarceration in Knox County.

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**Citations**

10. Ibid.

**Data**

This fact sheet uses data from four U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data series and is supplemented, when available, with data obtained directly from the Tennessee Department of Correction and the Knox County Sheriff’s Office for the more recent years for which BJS data is not yet available. The Census of Jails provides data through 2013; the Annual Survey of Jails provides data through 2018; the National Corrections Reporting Program provides data through 2016; and the National Prisoner Statistics program provides data through 2017. A complete dataset and documentation are available on Vera’s GitHub at https://github.com/vera-institute/incarceration-trends.

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**Credits**

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For more information

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