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.

1,103 people were in the McLennan County jail on a typical day in 2020.

2,582 people from McLennan County were in state prison at the end of 2019.

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.

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

Just a few days behind bars is enough to:

lose housing
cause strain on a family
lose employment

MARCH 2021
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.²

Cost
In 2010, McLennan County spent $49 million in taxpayer dollars to build a new jail, and in 2019, the county took over a private facility, bringing the total beds to 1,750. Jail costs continue to make up a sizable portion of the budget. Every dollar spent is one that could have gone to critical community needs.

Increase in state prison admissions
The number of people sent to state prison from McLennan County has risen 18 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.

Rising incarceration
On an average day in 2020, 1,103 people were being held in the county jail, 66 percent of the total capacity. The 121 percent increase in incarceration since 1990 does not necessarily reflect an increase in serious crime.³ In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the jail population decreased 21 percent from 2019. This decline shows that McLennan County can quickly reduce its jail population.

County jail population
- Total jail population
- Pretrial jail population
- Jail capacity
- Jail construction

Pretrial detention
643 people were detained pretrial on a typical day in 2020. Many are sitting in jail simply because they cannot pay bail.

Admissions to state prison
- Total prison admissions

People held in jail pretrial are likely to receive more severe prison sentences than those released before trial.²

Nearly everyone who goes to prison first spends time in the local jail.
Different agencies using the county jail (2020)

- 23% of people held for McLennan County
- 50 people held for the state prison system
- 205 people held for other counties

Cashing in on incarceration
On a typical day, 23 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)

- Latinx and Black people are 41% of the county population...
- ...but 65% of the county jail population.
- Black 31% of jail population
- Latinx 34% of 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. Seemingly “color-blind” policies may still disproportionately impact communities of color.

People of every race and ethnicity are incarcerated at higher rates than they were in 1970. The county’s white incarceration rate has grown 156 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.

Women in the county jail

- 205 people held in jail for other counties
- 50 people held in jail for the state prison system
- 848 people held in jail for McLennan County

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

Women in jail

- 270 women in jail in 2018
- 57 women in jail in 1990

2 in 3 of women in jail across the country are mothers of young children.
More than half of all people who are in jail because they couldn’t make bail are parents to young children.
Nearly half of adults in the United States have had an immediate family member in jail or prison.
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
McLennan County. You can get involved with or start local efforts to shift
power into the community and end mass incarceration in McLennan County.

---

**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 Texas Commission on Jail Standards, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, and the McLennan 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.

**Acknowledgments**

This fact sheet would not be possible without the excellent work of researchers at the Bureau of Justice Statistics—E. Ann Carson, Todd Minton, and Zhen Zeng—who maintain the Annual Survey of Jails, Census of Jails, National Corrections Reporting Program, and National Prisoner Statistics program. This report was designed by Paragini Amin at Design for Progress and created by Eltal Schattner-Elmaleh, Sarah Minion, and James Wallace-Lee. Thanks to Jessica Zhang, Maurice Smith, Bea Hallbach-Singh, and Jacob Kang-Brown for research support.

**Credits**

© Vera Institute of Justice 2021. All rights reserved. An electronic version of this report is posted on Vera’s website at vera.org/projects/in-our-backyards/community-grants/mclennan-county-tx.pdf.

**For more information**

For questions, contact backyards@vera.org.