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U.S. & INDIANA COUNTY JAIL POPULATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

BACKGROUND

In late January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared SARS-CoV-2 to be a public health emergency of international concern. On March 11, 2020, WHO escalated that status to a global pandemic. The virus causes COVID-19, a respiratory disease with a variety and severity of symptoms including fever, cough, difficulty breathing, and fatigue. It is highly infectious and is transmitted as an airborne pathogen through coughs, sneezes, and breathing. Prolonged physical proximity to a contagious person increases the risk of infection.

As the virus spread across the world and the U.S., jails across the country worked to prevent outbreaks. Largely, these measures amounted to physical distancing and personal hygiene precautions, as well as frequent disinfecting of common areas. However, implementing some of these precautions in jail settings were either impossible or ineffective. In late February and early March, it became apparent that COVID-19 was likely to cause extensive disruption, illness, and death. Officials knew they needed to reduce incarcerated populations.^{1,2}

National trends indicate that more than 10 million U.S. residents enter jails during any given year. Most are there awaiting court decisions.³ Additionally, jails operate near capacity with roughly 4 out of every 5 available beds typically occupied. In order to temporarily reduce inmate population levels to address COVID-19, court systems and county jails across the country have reviewed inmate populations, defined eligibility criteria, and released individuals as quickly as is practicable.^{4,5,6} The timeliness and

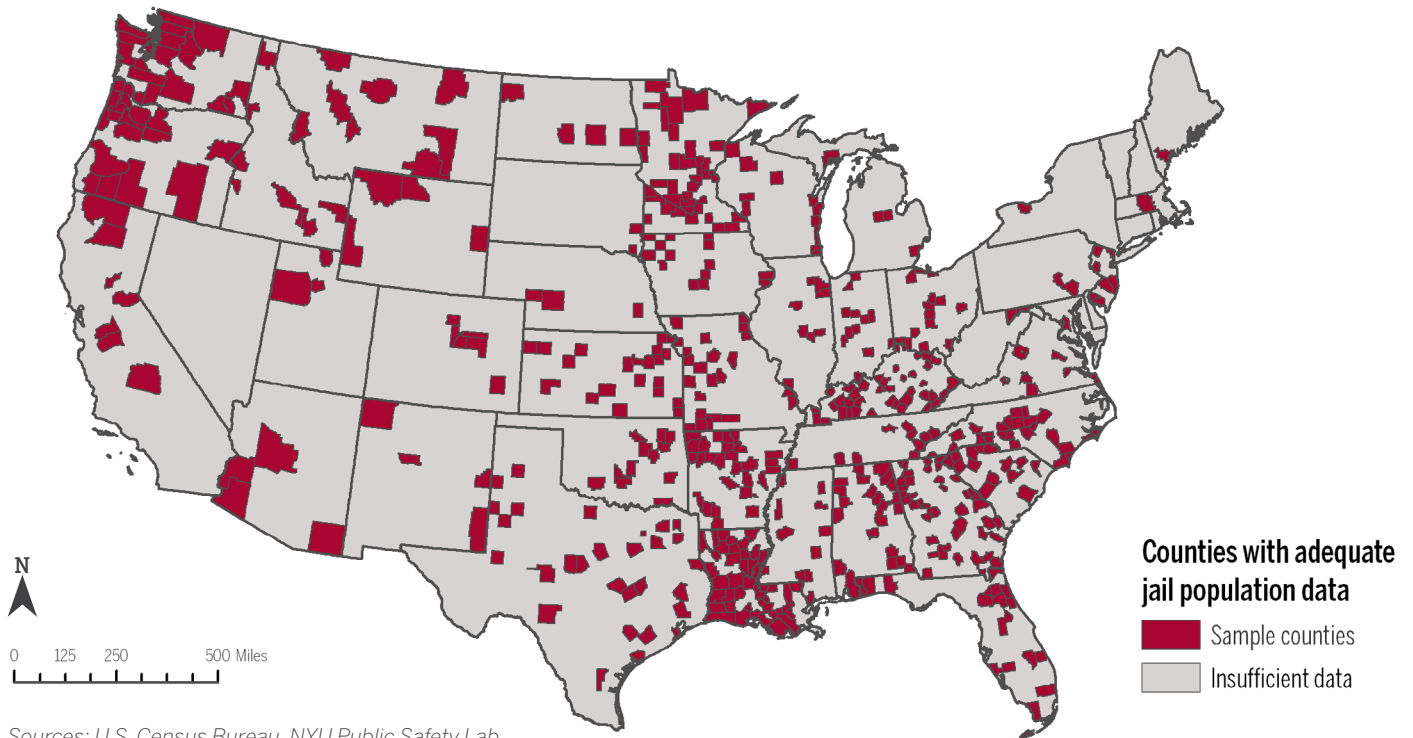
KEY FINDINGS

Preliminary analysis of national county-level jail population data suggests that during the pandemic:

- There was a nearly 17 percent reduction in jail populations among the 557 counties sampled.
- About 6 percent of counties experienced increases in jail populations.
- Indiana jails experienced a 20 percent reduction across our sample of 11 Indiana counties.
 - Counties with the largest jail population reductions included St. Joseph, Hendricks, Hamilton, and Tippecanoe counties.
 - No Indiana facilities in our sample experienced an increase in jail populations.
- A lack of publicly available, timely, and consistently reported data on county jail populations makes tracking precise trends in removing people from jails during the COVID-19 pandemic difficult.

effectiveness of this process are crucial: outbreaks have already been confirmed at dozens of facilities nationwide, with several emerging as high-profile hot spots for the disease.^{7,8} Making matters worse, the demographic and existing health conditions of incarcerated people make them especially vulnerable to the disease.^{9,10}

FIGURE 1. Geographic context of counties in sample



Five days after WHO declared a pandemic, the Indiana Supreme Court ordered lower courts to implement emergency operations to ensure continuity of operations, suspend nonemergency detentions, review the sentences of nonviolent offenders and juveniles, and consider population reductions in local facilities.¹¹ On April 3, 2020, Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb, Hon. Chief Justice Loretta Rush, State Senate President Rodric Bray, and State House Speaker Todd Huston released a joint letter applauding early efforts by local criminal justice stakeholders who had taken steps to prepare for COVID-19 in correctional facilities. The letter acknowledged the resource limitations of local facilities and encouraged judges, sheriffs, and county leaders to continue releases of low-risk, nonviolent juveniles and adults.¹²

The following brief explores whether U.S. county jails have managed to reduce their inmate populations in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the magnitude of those reductions. This brief also examines trends in Indiana county jails compared to nationwide trends. We conclude with recommendations for monitoring jail populations in the wake of COVID-19.

METHODOLOGY

The data used in this brief was gathered by New York University's Public Safety Lab through its Jail Data Initiative. The initiative uses a web-scraping algorithm to collect daily jail population data on approximately 1,000 jails across the United States. This data shows daily jail population counts and is available for analysis.⁸

We defined the start of COVID-19 pandemic as March 11, 2020, based on the WHO pandemic declaration. For this study, we narrowed our focus to 565 county jails that were analyzed at least seven times between February 1 and March 11, 2020 (pre-declaration), and seven additional times between March 12 and April 14, 2020 (post-declaration). Means calculated from the data were used to gauge each facility's typical inmate population for each time period: pre-declaration and post-declaration. In the sample that resulted, four counties had two jail facilities and two counties had three facilities. Jail population counts for those facilities were aggregated to the county level, resulting in a sample of 557 counties across 41 states. This sample accounts for slightly more than 1 out of every 6 U.S. counties (see Figure 1).

TABLE 1. Characteristics of sample counties

		U.S.		MIDWEST		NORTHEAST		SOUTH		WEST	
		Counties	%	Counties	%	Counties	%	Counties	%	Counties	%
TOTALS		557	100%	154	27.7%	12	2.2%	311	55.8%	80	14.4%
JAIL POPULATIONS	Small (0–50)	123	22.1%	61	11%	1	0.2%	40	7.2%	21	3.8%
	Medium (50–150)	162	29.1%	51	9.2%	1	0.2%	92	16.5%	18	3.2%
	Large (150–300)	111	19.9%	20	3.6%	0	0%	74	13.3%	17	3.1%
	Extra-large (300+)	161	28.9%	22	4%	10	1.8%	105	18.9%	24	4.3%

Note: Jail population refers to the pre-declaration jail population size per county that is accounted for in our sample. Jail population figures may include inmates held in multiple facilities. Source: NYU Public Safety Lab

We further segmented our sample to analyze trends among similar categories of jails (Table 1). After examining national trends, we focused on Indiana. The Indiana subsample consists of 11 Indiana counties, all of which experienced reductions in jail populations. A small jail in Madison County, Indiana, was excluded from Table 3 for visualization purposes because it had a pre-declaration population of one. However, it is included in statewide totals. We report on trends specific to these Indiana counties and examine how Indiana compares to the rest of the nation in responding to the call to reduce jail populations.

The Indiana subsample included 11 counties (Table 3). Before WHO’s pandemic declaration, there were approximately 2,800 people behind bars in those 11 counties, representing about 14 percent of Indiana’s total jail population on a typical pre-declaration day.¹⁴ After the declaration, those 11 counties housed about 2,200 people. This change indicates a reduction in jail populations of nearly 21 percent, a rate consistent with several other Midwestern states.

FINDINGS

JAIL POPULATION REDUCTION

In our sample of 557 counties nationwide, the total inmate population was about 147,000 pre-declaration and dropped to nearly 123,000 post-declaration. On average, there are about 264 people in each jail among all sample counties before the pandemic declaration. Post-pandemic, that number dropped to nearly 221 inmates. This change reflects a nearly 17 percent change of about 24,300 people (Table 2).

All regions of the country saw overall reductions in jail populations, ranging from about 14 percent in the South to almost 22 percent in the West. About 94 percent of all counties in the sample saw reductions in inmate populations from February 1 to April 14, 2020, while about 6 percent saw increases during that time.

TABLE 2. Pre- & post-declaration jail populations

	JAIL POPULATIONS		
	Total	Per 10K people	% change
MIDWEST (154 counties)			
Pre-declaration	27,305	18	-
Post-declaration	21,695	15	-20.6%
NORTHEAST (12 counties)			
Pre-declaration	5,908	12	-
Post-declaration	4,967	10	-15.9%
SOUTH (311 counties)			
Pre-declaration	89,836	33	-
Post-declaration	77,358	28	-13.9%
WEST (80 counties)			
Pre-declaration	24,083	17	-
Post-declaration	18,822	13	-21.9%
U.S. (577 counties)			
Pre-declaration	147,132	24	-
Post-declaration	122,841	20	-16.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS Estimates (2018), NYU Public Safety Lab

TABLE 3. Pre- & post-declaration jail populations in Indiana counties

	JAIL POPULATIONS				
	Pre-declaration		Post-declaration		
	Total	Per 10K people	Total	Per 10K people	% change
Indiana (11 counties)	2,809	24	2,226	19	-20.8%
Clay County	162	62	128	49	-20.8%
Clinton County	150	47	138	43	-8.2%
Dearborn County	256	52	207	42	-19.2%
Hamilton County	313	10	234	7	-25.2%
Hendricks County	269	17	207	13	-23.1%
Jackson County	258	59	210	48	-18.6%
Perry County	59	31	48	25	-18%
Putnam County	91	24	58	16	-36.2%
St. Joseph County	623	23	450	17	-27.7%
Starke County	125	55	105	46	-15.6%
Tippecanoe County	502	27	439	23	-12.5%

Note: Madison County removed for visualization purposes but reflected in statewide totals. Sources: U.S. Census Bureau ACS Estimates (2018), NYU Public Safety Lab

CONSIDERATIONS

In looking at our sample counties and facilities nationwide, the pre-declaration figure of 147,000 represents about 20 percent of the total U.S. jail population on a typical day before the pandemic declaration.

When looking at jails by size, the populations were fairly evenly spread out. However, several high jail population outliers may have skewed the sample. For example, the 10 largest pre-declaration county jail populations accounted for more than 18,000 people—about 12 percent of the pre-declaration total. Finally, it should be noted that county-level jail population figures may only reflect a portion of the total jail population in that county, as not all jail facilities are included in this sample.

Additionally, our sample also does not reflect an even regional distribution across the country. The sample is dominated by counties in the South and Midwest, while data was only available for 12 counties in the Northeast. Those 12 counties account for a total pre-declaration jail population of less than 6,000—an amount that several individual states in the South

exceed. The Louisiana sample alone accounts for nearly 13,000. Regions other than the Northeast have adequate representation that is consistent with overall jail population size and distribution. While counties in the South do make up a majority of the entire sample, this is also somewhat reflective of the higher incarceration rates in the region.

CONCLUSIONS

SUCCESS IN REDUCING JAIL POPULATION

Using publicly available data on jail populations, our findings indicate that jails across the U.S. have reduced their populations by approximately 16.5 percent in response to COVID-19. Jails in Indiana have reduced their populations by approximately 20.8 percent during that same time. A large majority of all counties in our sample saw reductions in their jail populations, while all Indiana counties in our sample reduced their jail populations.

VARIATION IN JAIL POPULATION REDUCTION

Initial trends suggest that local justice system stakeholders were responsive to calls to reduce jail populations as one means to mitigate the spread

of COVID-19. However, the findings suggest that the rate of reduction is not uniform. For instance, jail populations in the South dropped by almost 14 percent, while those in the West fell nearly 22 percent. Our sample of Indiana jails showed similar trends. Future research should examine how the variation in release rates affects the health and safety of incarcerated individuals, deputies, jail vendors, support staff, and communities.

These estimates provide preliminary information about local policy choices to manage jail populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the trends do not shed light on how release decisions are made. Eligibility criteria and release decisions will be influenced by local dynamics between judges, law enforcement, county leaders, and the public. Knowledge of local jail population characteristics also varies by county, meaning these decisions are made with varying degrees of access to information. To contextualize reductions and develop standards for managing subsequent infectious diseases, research activities must begin to dissect decision-making inputs and outcomes.

DATA COLLECTION

COVID-19 highlights systemic challenges within justice systems, especially with regard to accessing and integrating routine data collections to inform operations. Although there is traction to foster data-informed jails across the nation, there are still significant organizational and cultural issues that have tempered the ability of sheriffs' offices to collect, analyze, and apply data.¹⁵ As these findings have demonstrated, jail population data collection is difficult to access. Even when accessible, data is often incomplete or limited. The unprecedented circumstances presented by this pandemic have the potential to shape future justice system policy and practice as the old ways of administering justice may no longer be feasible. Among a number of plausible reforms, an investment in the systematic collection and dissemination of jail population counts and characteristics should be prioritized given the wide reach of jails and potential role as an intervention point.¹⁶

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