

Justice Reinvestment Advisory Council
Impact of COVID-19 on Local Jail Populations Case Study
December 11, 2020

Background and Purpose of Case Study

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted state and local criminal justice operations, including the management of local jail populations. Between March and July 2020, self-report data from Indiana’s 91 jails indicated many had reductions in their populations, some of which were significant. To better understand this trend, the Justice Reinvestment Advisory Council (JRAC) voted at its June 19, 2020, meeting to review the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indiana’s jail populations.

Methodology

In September and October 2020, JRAC members requested information from criminal justice stakeholders in 11 counties¹ to identify local strategies, collaborative efforts, and policy decisions those stakeholders considered to have impacted their local jail population between March and July 2020.

Through this process, JRAC identified two categories of local policies and practices impacting one or more of the 11 counties’ jail populations during this time:

1. Local changes made during the pandemic resulting from collaborative efforts to implement evidence-based practices that may persist and/or further develop over time. These include:
 - law enforcement increased use of cite and release for low-level, non-violent offenses
 - new or expanded use of pretrial risk assessment (IRAS-PAT), resulting in earlier releases from custody to various forms of pretrial supervision
 - reduced bond amounts
 - remote/virtual court proceedings and community supervision meetings, resulting in fewer failure to appear warrants
 - increased use of summons to appear versus arrest warrants

¹ Counties selected for the study reported modest to significant reductions in jail populations between March and July 2020. The eleven counties included Cass, Grant, Hamilton, Huntington, Martin, Monroe, Montgomery, St. Joseph, Vanderburgh, Vigo, and Wayne. Criminal justice stakeholders who provided information included sheriffs and jail staff, prosecutors, public defenders, community supervision agencies, district parole offices, and judicial officers.

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2. Local policy or practice changes adopted due to circumstances unique to the pandemic that have either already been discontinued or are unlikely to continue long-term. These include:
- community restrictions, such as curfews and travel restrictions
 - reduction in law enforcement patrols, resulting in fewer arrests
 - prosecutor delay in filing charges
 - increased frequency of detention/bond review hearings, resulting in earlier releases on recognizance or to pretrial supervision
 - reduced in-person activities and supervision from probation, parole, and community corrections officers, resulting in fewer technical violations
 - transitioning sentenced jail and work release inmates to electronic monitoring
 - early release of inmates near completion of their sentence
 - suspended warrant service

Through this review, JRAC noted some counties studied reported less significant reductions in their jail populations. This is likely attributable, in part, to collaborative and evidence-based practices in place prior to the pandemic that are specifically designed to prioritize jail beds for individuals posing a risk to public safety. In addition, stakeholders identified the following ways that JRAC and others can support local efforts to manage jail populations while maintaining public safety:

- provide technical assistance and funding to support implementation of Ind. Criminal Rule 26 and pretrial services
- increase funding and resources for substance use disorder and mental health services, including medications, for persons in jail and after release to the community
- develop a jail management information system that can track and report real time, statewide jail data

Conclusion

JRAC recognizes that the issue of jail overcrowding is complex, and not any one factor or condition is solely responsible for a trend in increases or decreases in local jail populations. To address short- and long-term jail population issues, JRAC recommends continued support for the recommendations outlined in the [Jail Overcrowding Task Force Report](#) and the [JRAC Pretrial and Bail Reform Report](#). In particular, the group recommends providing support for local efforts around collaboration and evidence-based pretrial services.