

Study: Local lockups can be more pricey to run than thought

May 21 2015, by Jake Pearson

It turns out running a jail can be even more expensive than previously thought.

A study released Thursday examining what it actually costs to operate local lockups has found that a whole host of costs—from providing inmate health care to funding employee benefits—aren't always covered as line items in a corrections department's budget.

Instead, researchers from the nonprofit Vera Institute of Justice found those costs are sometimes covered by other county agencies or general funds, adding to the true costs of incarceration.

"Knowing the actual price of [jail](#) is fundamental to reform," said Christian Henrichson, the report's lead author. "Without a grasp of the costs, policymakers will not know the full scale of potential savings."

Running the more than 3,000 county jails across the country, which nearly 12 million people pass through every year, is notoriously expensive and federal statistics put the price tag at about \$22.2 billion.

But the Vera researchers, who surveyed 35 jails of all sizes from 18 different states with a combined average daily population of 64,920, found that another agency besides the corrections department or sheriff's office paid for costs representing between 1 percent and 53 percent of total jail costs.

The New York City Department of Correction, which runs the nation's second-largest jail system with about 11,000 average daily inmates, has a \$1.1 billion budget. But an additional \$1.2 billion from outside the budget is spent on jail operations such as inmate health care, education programs and pension obligations, the researchers found.

In Boulder County, Colorado, which has a \$14 million annual jail budget for the 484 average daily inmates, another \$4.6 million is spent on the jails from outside agencies. And King County Public Health paid \$29 million in [health care](#) for Seattle, Washington, inmates last fiscal year, representing about 20 percent of all jail costs, the study found.

The biggest jail expense across the board is staffing for corrections officers, including salaries and benefits, which on average account for about 75 percent of the surveyed jails' expenses.

Decreasing the overall inmate population is the only way to achieve significant savings, the report concludes.

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, where officials have instituted a series of criminal justice reforms such as issuing more citations than arrests, the jail population dropped over the course of fiscal 2014 by about 39 percent, from 2,496 inmates-per-day to 1,523. That decrease has allowed officials to stop spending money on out-of-county jail beds and to close a housing unit.

And in Springfield, Massachusetts, where dropping crime, fewer arrests and an increase of diversion and supervision programs resulted in a 30 percent drop in the inmate population between 2008 and 2014, the sheriff's department closed six 55-bed housing units among other cutbacks, saving the department \$13.1 million.

"The surest and safest way to save money is to take steps to reduce the

inmate population," Henrichson said.

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