

Sheriff Dustin D. Heuerman
Champaign County Sheriff's Office
204 East Main Street
Urbana, Illinois

January 7, 2020

Dr. Jack Norton
Center on Sentencing and Corrections
Vera Institute of Justice
34 35th St. 4-2A
Brooklyn, New York 11232

Dear Sheriff Heuerman,

I am writing in my capacity as a researcher at the Center for Sentencing and Corrections at the Vera Institute of Justice. For the past two years, I have been working with a team of researchers, data scientists, and policy analysts conducting research on rising incarceration rates in rural counties and small cities across the country. I have interviewed hundreds of people—sheriffs, legislators, mayors, justice-affected individuals, and policy professionals—in states including Indiana, New York, Kentucky, Colorado, Georgia, Texas, California, North Carolina, Iowa, and Pennsylvania.

Across the country, we have found that smaller cities and rural counties have been investing considerable resources into building jails, and jailing more and more people, often against the wishes of community members who would prefer to see funds invested in social infrastructure such as schools, or community-based mental health or drug treatment.

For many years, mass incarceration has been understood—across the political spectrum—as an urgent racial and social justice issue that must be addressed. What has been less understood, however, is that the locus of mass incarceration has been, for many years, smaller and medium sized counties such as Champaign, Il. The number of people in jail nationwide has increased over the past four years – rebounding after a brief dip – and it is rural counties and small cities that have been the primary driver of that increase, even as major cities continue to lock up fewer people. According to our data, jail incarceration in rural counties has risen a staggering 27% since 2013, while urban incarceration has declined 18%.

Jail incarceration is often framed as an inevitability. Incarceration, however, reflects policy choices and priorities. Between 1986 and 2016, the rate at which Champaign County incarcerates people more than doubled. National increases in jail incarceration have been driven in large part by the increased use of pretrial detention, which is largely a product of the growing role of money bail. According to federal data, as recently as 1990, less than a third of the people facing felony charges were assessed monetary bail. It is only since 1998 that most people facing felony charges in state and federal courts have had to

pay to secure their freedom before trial.¹ Across the country, many other people are detained on civil matters such as unpaid child support, fines and fees, or immigration charges.

There is a quiet jail boom happening across our country, as county officials continue to prioritize jail construction over investments in community-based programs and infrastructure. Research [shows](#) that jail impoverishes people and communities, and that even short jail stays can shred social stability, causing people to lose their homes and jobs. Research also [shows](#) that economic decline and increased jail incarceration each lead to higher rates of drug overdose deaths, playing an even bigger role in the overdose crisis than the prescription rate of opioids. To put it simply, investment in incarceration has been demonstrated to cause the very problems that it purports to address.

The unique combination of citizen engagement and stakeholder commitment in Champaign County has created an opportunity to do something other than simply continue the county's use of incarceration by building a new jail. Champaign, like much of the country, is at a crossroads, and can instead take the opportunity to ask fundamental questions about who is in the county jail system and why, and put practices into place that address the underlying drivers of incarceration and to address unmet community needs.

Sincerely,

Jack Norton

¹ Thomas H. Cohen and Brian A. Reaves, "State Court Processing Statistics, 1990-2004: Pretrial Release of Felony Defendants in State Courts," Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington, DC, 2007.