

Methodology

Overview

This web analysis uses data collected by the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) through the Annual Survey of Jails, a nationally representative survey of U.S. jails (as defined by BJS) intended to estimate the baseline characteristics of the nation's jails and people housed in them.

From 2010 to 2014, large jail jurisdictions (jails) were surveyed about lengths of stay for those released. The data includes ranges of length of stay and conviction status for all those discharged from the jail in the last week of June. The length-of-stay ranges in the data are "less than 1 day," "1 to 2 days," "3 to 7 days," "8 to 30 days," "31 to 180 days," and "more than 180 days." Each range had a corresponding field indicating whether the response was "actual," "estimated," "I don't know," or "not applicable."

Cleaning the data

Jails were identified as "no response" if any units reported all zeros or "missing" for the length-of-stay data fields while also reporting nonzero releases. Of those responding, jails were excluded if they did not provide reliable data. Data was considered not reliable if the jails qualified any responses with an "I don't know" flag, if the total number of releases with length-of-stay data was more than 10% different from the number of releases reported, or if the total number of releases reported increased by over 200% from 2010 to 2014. Although more jails were able to provide reliable responses in 2014 than in 2010, for consistency only the 118 jails that provided reliable responses in both years were included in the analysis of changes in length of stay between those years. Detailed response data for the samples is available upon request.

Estimating jail space used

Using all the reliable cases from 2014, the share of jail spaces used for each length-of-stay range is the portion of annual jail space used by jails within each range. The number of annual releases was estimated by multiplying the weekly releases by 52. The total annual jail space—known as "bed days"—was calculated by multiplying the estimated number of annual releases and the estimated average length of stay for each range.

The average length of stay for each range was estimated by starting with the midpoint of each range and adjusting it to reflect the reported average daily population (ADP). Using the midpoint of each range produced a similar breakdown of space utilization but produced a jail population larger than observed in the data; for the range "180 days or more," the analysis assumed that the maximum length of stay in this group was one year. The estimated average length of stay was lowered for longer length-of-stay ranges (more than one month) until the number of jail bed-days divided by 365 was equal to the reported average daily population that year. The final average length of stay used for each range of less than one month was the midpoint of the range, and 19% less than the midpoint for ranges above one month. See Table 1 for estimated numbers of people released in each category.

Table 1

Comparison of Jail Space Estimates

Findings in data, 2014		Jail space-use estimate		
Length-of-stay range	Estimated number of annual releases	Estimated average length of stay (days)	Total annual jail days	Share of all jail use
Less than 1 day	615,836	0.5	307,918	0%
1 to 2 days	58,4844	1.5	877,266	1%
3 to 7 days	402,844	5	2,014,220	3%
8 to 30 days	446,004	19	8,474,076	11%
31 to 180 days	406,120	85	34,520,200	45%
More than 180 days	135,512	220	29,812,640	39%
Actual ADP: 208,675		Estimated ADP: 208,236		

Source: Pew analysis of U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics 2014 survey of jails, large jails only

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