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New Report Shows Lengths of Stay at St. Louis County Jail Increasing Even as Admissions Decline

Research Network on Misdemeanor Justice report shows high bail amounts, jailing people for probation violations and other factors drive longer jail stays, with Black individuals disproportionately affected

St. Louis, Missouri – A 40% decline in admissions to the St. Louis County Department of Justice Services (DJS) over a 10-year period has not produced a proportionate reduction in people in jail, according to a new report from [Research Network on Misdemeanor Justice](#) (“Research Network”), a project of the [Data Collaborative for Justice \(DCJ\)](#) at John Jay College. This new research – conducted by members of the Research Network who are based at [University of Missouri-St. Louis](#) – indicates that fewer arrests, and thus admissions to St. Louis jails, are being offset by a rising number of people who remain jailed for longer periods of time (thereby increasing the average length of stay).

Several factors appear play a role in the increasing average length of time that people stay in jail, including:

- Holding people on high bail amounts
- Jailing people for probation violations
- People facing more serious charges are staying longer, even as individuals charged with non-violent felonies continued to occupy the largest proportion of bed days

[Understanding Trends in Jail Population in St. Louis County, Missouri: 2010 to 2019](#) examines data on arrest and admissions, bail, lengths of stay, and population levels at St. Louis County jail between 2010 and 2019. The research finds that despite the lower rate of arrests and admissions, the average length of stay has increased by 56% -- demonstrating that **longer lengths of stay, rather than growth in bookings, are a stronger driver of the jail population**. The report outlines five notable trends:

- **Fewer arrests for misdemeanors, violations, victimless non-violent charges (e.g., drug use and possession) and traffic offenses are driving decreases in the number of people admitted to jail.** From 2010 to 2019, annual admissions to DJS decreased by 40%, from a high of 33,976 admissions to a low of 20,216.
- **Increases in length of stay are a key driver of jail populations.** The average length of stay rose from 14.9 days in 2010 to a high of 26.4 days in 2018, a 77% increase. It then declined to 23.3 days in 2019, when it was 56% longer than in 2010.
- **People under probation supervision make up a significant portion of jail populations.** While the group’s average length of stay declined from 40.7 days in 2010 to 30.4 days in 2019, individuals who entered jail for only a probation violation had the second-longest length of stay over most of the study period. The only group with a longer average length of stay was people booked into jail on a sentence for a city or county conviction.

- **Bail continues to be a key driver of jail populations.** In 2010, 259,751 bed days were occupied by individuals with bail amounts over \$5,000, which is 49% of all bed days used in that year. In 2019, this number rose to 361,175, or 70% of all bed days.
- **Black people are disproportionately represented in jail admissions and experienced significant increases in lengths of stay between 2010 and 2019.** In 2019, 25% of St. Louis County residents identified as Black, but Black people accounted for 55% of admissions and 67% of bed days. In 2019, Black people stayed in jail an average of 12 days longer than white people.
- **Understanding people who are frequently re-admitted to jail may help reduce jail populations.** Of individuals released from jail in 2010, 58% were readmitted by 2019; 40% returned more than once and 15% were readmitted 5+ times.

Despite the 40% decrease in annual admissions during the study period, the average daily population only fell by 21%, and the number of people with a length of stay for over one year more than doubled. **Moreover, racial disparities in admissions persist as Black people continue to stay in jail longer than white people.** The average length of stay for Black people increased 75% over the study period, while the average length of stay for white people increased by 30%.

This research in St. Louis could shed light on jail population trends elsewhere in the nation and signal that average length of stay is driving increased jail populations rather than arrests and admissions. While attempts at reforming the criminal justice system often aim to curb jail populations through reductions in arrests and pretrial detention, this research suggests that such efforts may be offset by factors (e.g., money bail, probation violations) that increase the number of days people are detained in jail.

There are serious public health implications to long jail stays. Nationwide, rates of COVID-19 infection have been much higher in jails compared to the community at-large. Like many other jurisdictions, the St. Louis jails released individuals at an increased rate when pandemic began to spread in 2020. Jails elsewhere have been responsible for some of the nation's largest outbreaks of COVID-19 to date, despite a decline in some jail populations during the early parts of the pandemic. With Delta variant on the rise, the populations experiencing longer average lengths of jail stay in St. Louis – Black people and individuals with less economic means who cannot afford bail – face a disproportionate risk of infection.

“This data raises critical questions for people who decide the policy for our nation’s local justice systems. After the findings of the Ferguson report, St. Louis County made a concerted effort to reduce arrests and the number of people admitted to its jails. But our research shows that alone is not enough to curb the number of people in jail each night,” **said Erica Bond, Policy Director of the Data Collaborative for Justice.** “This data makes it clear we need to be talking about more than reducing jail admissions – it is time for local leaders to take a serious look at how long people stay in jail and the policies contributing to longer stays.”

“This report gives us a big picture view about what’s behind the trends we saw in our jail population before COVID -- from the revolving door of the same small group of people being admitted to our jails repeatedly to high bail amounts to probation violations -- and it points us toward a set of critical questions as we

continue to navigate a pandemic that further illustrates the danger of a crowded jail,” said **St. Louis County Jail Director Douglas Burris**.

“Our number one priority is keeping the people of St. Louis safe and ensuring their resources are used effectively to ensure justice. Research like this is a critical tool to advance public safety, because it helps us to ensure we’re making decisions based on data and directing resources to where they can have the biggest impact,” **St. Louis County Executive Dr. Sam Page**. “This report shows some clear signs of progress – a 40% reduction in the number of people admitted to our jails even before COVID. But, it also points to areas where we need additional research to help prevent over-crowding in our jails, like bail amount, probation violations, and length of jail stays.”

“Our analysis shows that Black persons are more likely to be held in jail on high bail amounts and to spend a longer amount of time in jail compared to White persons, even after controlling for criminal history and other relevant factors.” said research co-author, **Professor Beth Huebner of the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri-St. Louis**. “In addition, reducing the number of arrests and admissions to jail has not produced a corresponding decline in the number of people detained in St. Louis County jails. Individuals booked into the jail today spend a considerably longer time in jail than they did ten years ago. Lengthy pretrial detention stays can have deleterious effects on employment and social relationships for those incarcerated, and long stays can also come at the expense of other county public services.”

The full report can be viewed [on the Data Collaborative for Justice’s website](#).

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[Data Collaborative for Justice](#) (DCJ) leads critical research about frequent interactions between community members and the criminal justice system and aims to ensure that communities, and the governments that serve them, have the necessary information to develop and implement evidence-based policies, practices, and programs. DCJ’s work has informed policy reforms, facilitated partnerships between researchers and government agencies across the country, spurred new scholarly research on lower-level enforcement, and been cited extensively in the press. More information about the Data Collaborative for Justice’s work is available at: www.datacollaborativeforjustice.org.

About the [Research Network on Misdemeanor Justice](#): In 2016, DCJ launched [The Research Network on Misdemeanor Justice](#) to study lower-level enforcement actions, which represent the most common interactions between communities and the criminal legal system. The Research Network is comprised of researcher-practitioner partnerships in seven jurisdictions committed to producing data, research, and scholarly work on lower-level enforcement trends: Durham, NC; Los Angeles, CA; Louisville, KY; New York City, NY; Prince George’s County, MD; Seattle, WA; and St. Louis, MO. The Research Network seeks to inform criminal justice system operations and policy at the local and state levels. It also seeks to support

a national discourse, informed by data, on the role of lower-level enforcement in public safety, trust in the criminal legal system, racial justice, and efficient use of finite taxpayer dollars.