

HUDSON WEBBER FOUNDATION

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For media inquiries, contact:
Nat Synowiec
Van Dyke Horn Public Relations
O: 313.872.2202
C: 248.525.5375

Hudson-Webber & Vera Institute of Justice Release Report on Reducing Wayne County Jail Population

DETROIT – A comprehensive report released today by the Vera Institute of Justice details the results and recommendations of an in-depth study of Wayne County jail usage. As jails have emerged as COVID-19 hotspots nationwide, the strategies outlined in the report will help fulfill the goals of reducing unnecessary use of local incarceration and increasing equity and public safety in Wayne County.

The full report is available online at: <https://www.vera.org/jail-incarceration-in-wayne-county-michigan>

In May 2019, Hudson-Webber Foundation engaged the Vera Institute of Justice to conduct a study of Wayne County's jail population in conjunction with a working group of local justice-system stakeholders. The report presents findings and recommendations from Vera's analysis of population trends and the policies and practices of the local justice system that affect who is admitted to jail and how long they stay. This work was completed in collaboration with the Wayne County Jail Population Study Working Group, chaired by the chief judge of the Third Circuit Court, Timothy Kenny.

The study's working group included representatives from the Wayne County Executive's Office, the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, the Wayne County Sheriff's Office, the Wayne County Criminal Defense Bar Association, the Neighborhood Defender Service, the Detroit Police Department, the 3rd Circuit Court, the Wayne County Probate Court, the 23rd, 29th and 36th District Courts, the State Court Administrative Office, the Wayne County Board of Commissioners, the Detroit Wayne County Mental Health Authority, Wayne State University, Team Wellness, the Detroit Rescue Mission and the Hudson-Webber Foundation.

"The Vera Institute of Justice's report and recommendations for safely reducing the Wayne County jail population arrive as the Coronavirus pandemic, which has had such a deadly impact on people in confinement, makes plain the steep price we pay for our overreliance on incarceration," said Melanca Clark, president and CEO of Hudson-Webber Foundation. "I commend the Wayne County Jail Population Study Working Group's commitment to this project and look forward to ongoing stakeholder engagement for creating a more just and equitable system of justice."

“The dedication of the working group to this process was vital to establishing a comprehensive picture of the levers impacting the jail population, informed from a multitude of perspectives,” said Timothy Kenny, chief judge of the Third Circuit Court. “This collaborative work has already produced dividends, and has allowed county stakeholders to quickly implement a reduction in the jail population, a demonstration of the working group’s collective priorities, and proof that our shared goals are achievable.”

“We were thrilled to partner with the Hudson-Webber Foundation and members of the Wayne County community to address the crisis of mass incarceration and promote safety and fairness for all people,” said Alex Roth, senior program associate in Vera’s Center on Sentencing and Corrections. “Since this report was written, Wayne County—and especially Detroit—have been hit hard by COVID-19, and the urgency to decrease the number of people languishing in jail has only increased.”

As a result of local efforts, the Wayne County Jail has seen a remarkable decrease in its population, dropping from 1,410 people at the end of February to 871 on May 28, a reduction of over 38 percent

“Using the data we found, we hope that those with decision-making power – including county officials, police, judges, and others – continue to prioritize decarceration, especially with the prospect of the construction of a new local jail that will deplete vital resources better used to support community health,” added Melvin Washington, program associate in Vera’s Center on Sentencing and Corrections.

The eight-month study period involved analyzing quantitative data from the jail, as well as gathering information and perspectives from the working group, and from people who touch the system every day to identify what drives the jail population in Wayne County. The process involved addressing three core questions:

1. What should the jail be used for?
2. Who is actually in the jail and why?
3. What decisions can be made to achieve a different result?

Over the course of the study, Vera’s team analyzed five years of administrative data from the Wayne County Jail and collected qualitative data on policies and practices of the local justice system from stakeholders, inside and outside of the local justice system. Vera also met with community members in Detroit who have direct experience with the local justice system and advocates who have been working for years to make their communities safer and healthier.

The final report for this study includes findings about the population of the Wayne County Jail, and recommendations for steps Wayne County could take to prevent the unnecessary use of the jail and improve the efficacy and equity of the county’s criminal justice system. These are organized around five areas where Vera believes there is significant potential for change:

1. Providing Oversight for the Criminal Justice System

2. Reducing Pretrial Incarceration
3. Reevaluating Approaches to Community Supervision
4. Reducing the Overrepresentation of Black People in the System
5. Partnering with Communities to Address Violence and other Harm

While Wayne County has reached historic lows in jail population as a result of a strong COVID-19 response, the findings in the report highlight that many opportunities still exist to further reduce the jail population and support the county's interest in safety and fairness. The report's recommendations focus on decisions that are made at the local level by county officials, police, judicial leadership and judges in the district and circuit courts, prosecutors, and others.

The report also highlights areas where the recommendations for Wayne County correspond with changes recommended by the Michigan Task Force on Jail and Pretrial Incarceration. Convened by Governor Gretchen Whitmer, the Michigan Joint Task Force released its report and recommendations in January 2020, which provide direction for state-level reforms that can support Wayne County's efforts to shift practices locally.

ABOUT the Hudson-Webber Foundation

The Hudson-Webber Foundation's origins date back to 1939 with major contributions from Mr. and Mrs. Richard H. Webber, other members of the Webber family and The J.L. Hudson Company. The foundation is governed by a 15-member board of trustees, with assets of approximately \$175 million, and has contributed over \$200 million to improve the quality of life in Detroit. The mission areas of the foundation include support of community and economic development, built environment, safe and just communities, and arts and culture.

To learn more about the Hudson-Webber Foundation, visit www.hudson-webber.org.

ABOUT The Vera Institute for Justice

The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely on for safety and justice. Vera collaborates with the communities most impacted by these systems and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement change. Across projects, Vera is committed to explicitly and effectively reducing the burdens of the justice system on people of color and frames all work with an understanding of our country's history of racial oppression. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, providing legal services for immigrants, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve America's increasingly diverse communities. Vera has offices in Brooklyn, NY; Washington, DC; New Orleans, and Los Angeles.

For more information, visit www.vera.org

To learn more about the Vera Institute of Justice's work to urgently respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in the criminal justice system, please visit: <https://www.vera.org/spotlights/covid-19>

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