

OCCC Expansion: Perspectives from Research

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About Prison Policy Initiative

- Non-profit, non-partisan organization that produces cutting-edge research on the broader harms of mass criminalization.



Prison Policy Initiative & Jail Construction

- Since 2023, we have worked with advocates and lawmakers in 13 states to carefully examine plans to expand jails, provide analysis of needs assessments and other reports, and help create ideas for alternatives to expansion.
- Resources:
 - www.prisonpolicy.org/trainings/#jailexpansion

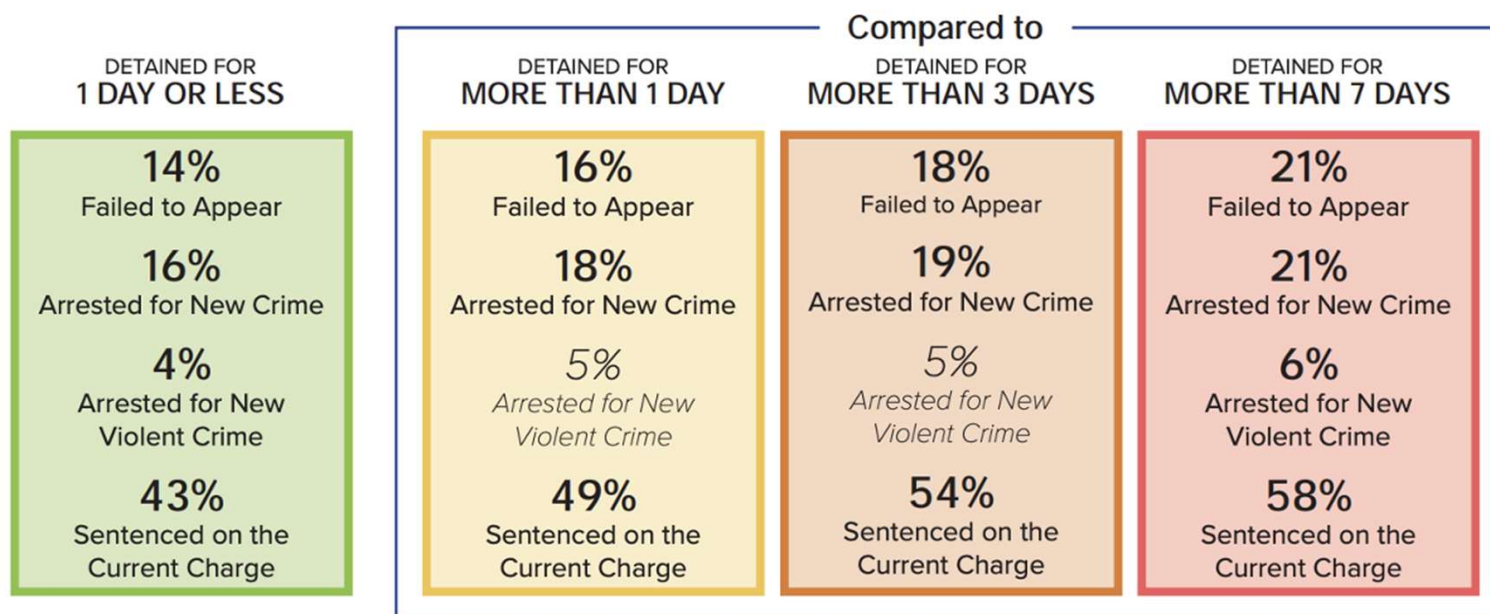


Why We Do This Work

- Research shows that putting someone in jail creates harms that extend well beyond the days they spend behind bars – and pretrial detention causes specific harms.
- Overuse of jails negatively impacts public safety and public health – effects that reach communities beyond jailhouse walls.

Research on the Harms of Pretrial Incarceration

Jail incarceration harms public safety

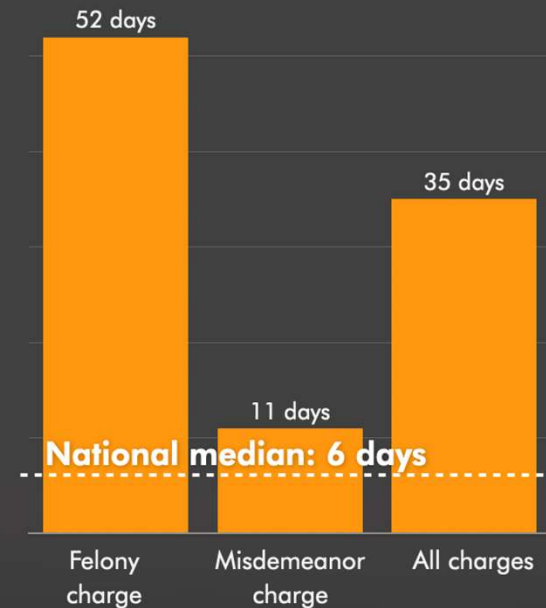


Source: Advancing Pretrial Policy and Research, "Research Brief: The Benefits of Early Release from Pretrial Detention"

OCCC's average length of stay is unusually long, making public safety harms worse.

- In 2023, the median length of stay at OCCC was 52 days for people held pretrial for felonies, and 11 days for misdemeanors.
- The Forecast Report notes that “in a typical large jail, we would expect the median length of stay for pretrial [misdemeanors] to be 2 days or less.”

People are held pretrial at OCCC much longer than in other jails



Jail incarceration harms housing stability

- A high number - 38% - of people in jails in Hawai'i are homeless.
 - Compare that to other jurisdictions: 4% of people in Harris County (Houston); 13% in Atlanta's City jail.
- In one study in New York City, people detained pretrial were over 4 times more likely to become homeless than those who were not detained.
- Jailing people unnecessarily exacerbates Hawai'i's existing housing crisis.

Jail incarceration causes death – both during incarceration and after release.

- People released from incarceration are 18 times more likely to commit suicide and 40 times more likely to overdose than people without recent histories of incarceration.
- Suicide is the single leading cause of death for people in jail, and suicides in jails are increasing nationwide.
- There were 4 suicides in Hawai'i jails in 2024.

Other notable harms of jail incarceration

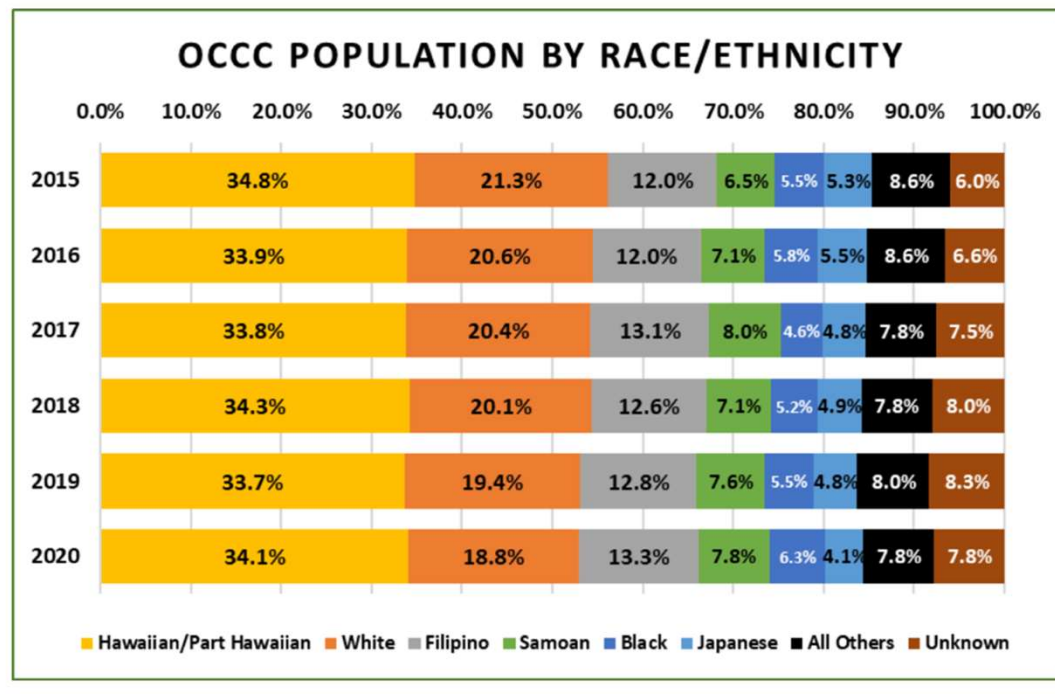
- Loss of employment:
 - 38% of people detained pretrial for fewer than 3 days and 76% of people detained for more than 3 days reported that they lost their job, had to change jobs, or faced consequences at work because of their incarceration.
- Impacts on children:
 - 32% of people incarcerated for fewer than 3 days and 41% of people incarcerated for more than 3 days reported a negative impact on their children who were under 18.

Racial disparities in Hawaii jails

- The human costs of jail incarceration fall hardest on Native Hawai'ian and Pacific Islander people.
- In 2020, OCCC's population was
 - 42% Native Hawai'ian or Samoan, compared to 10% of Hawai'i's overall population.
 - 6% Black, compared to 2% of Hawai'i's overall population.

Racial disparities in OCCC

Figure 1: OCCC Assigned Inmates By Race



New buildings can't solve the fundamental harms caused by pretrial incarceration

- Job loss, housing instability, and family effects are all examples of harms that still exist with even the newest jail building.
- Other jurisdictions that have built new jails with the hopes of improving healthcare or other services inside have found that new buildings do not prevent jail deaths - understaffing and failure of staff to follow procedures do not change with a new building.

New Buildings and Staffing

New buildings are unlikely to solve staffing concerns

Why jails and prisons can't recruit their way out of the understaffing crisis

Jails and prisons across the country have record-high vacancies, creating bad working conditions for corrections staff and nightmarish living conditions for incarcerated people. Why haven't pay raises, benefits, and new facilities turned recruitment around, and what does that tell us about the state of mass incarceration?

by **Brian Nam-Sonenstein** and **Emmett Sanders**, December 9, 2024

Prisons and local jails struggled with staffing well before the COVID-19 pandemic spurred a national labor shortage, and they haven't bounced back

www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2024/12/09/understaffing/

New buildings are unlikely to solve staffing concerns

- Understaffing is common nationwide – correctional staffing is down and shows no signs of rebounding.
- OCCC had a 23% staff vacancy rate in 2022.
- Unfortunately, popular avenues for trying to fix understaffing – wage increases, easing employment requirements, staff wellness programs, and new facility construction have all been unsuccessful.

New buildings are unlikely to solve staffing concerns

- A 2023 study by the American Correctional Association noted the most often-cited reason for leaving the DOC was work/life balance (including overtime).
- The physical work environment was cited as a reason for leaving only half as often.
- In a survey of Hawai'i's correctional staff, nearly three-quarters of respondents reported that mandatory overtime is a problem.

New buildings are unlikely to solve staffing concerns

- Jails that are *bigger* – like the OCCC project is projected to be – may actually worsen staffing concerns.
- The sure-fire way to resolve staffing concerns is to focus on reducing the jail population (decarceration).

Potential Avenues for Decarceration

The Forecast Report's “alternative forecast”

- In the Forecast Report itself, the authors provide an alternative bed estimate that factors in potential diversion opportunities.
- This forecast results in a 2026 male bed need 24% lower than current OCCC plans, which is within the current facility's capacity (while including the same “peaking” and “classification” factors).

Year	Main Forecast			Alternate Forecast		
	OCCC Male Bed Need	Pre-Release	Grand Total	OCCC Male Bed Need	Pre-Release	Grand Total
2026	986	384	1,370	789	384	1,173

- The avenues for decarceration included in the alternative forecast are achievable and modest – and there are still other avenues to explore.

Non-jail responses to technical violations

- OCCC has an unusually high number of people incarcerated for violations of probation – 21% of OCCC's population in 2025.
- The alternative forecast suggests that 80% of those people could be diverted out of the jail. The actual potential is even higher, given that in many jurisdictions, very few people are jailed solely for technical violations. (In two places we looked at, Houston and Louisville, this was just 4%.)

Forecast Report:

an 80% reduction in this population by using non-incarceration alternatives. This is potentially a conservative estimate, knowing that other jurisdictions rarely incarcerate for technical violations. The net result of the 80% estimate is an ADP reduction of 138 inmates.

Releasing people who can safely be in the community: “Community” classification

Forecast Report:

36%. Again, the community classification implies that there are members in this group of inmates who are likely suitable for supervision in the community rather than in detention.

- 22% of people incarcerated pretrial for felonies and 80% of those incarcerated for misdemeanors have been identified by OCCC itself as being low-risk enough that community placement would be appropriate.
- Many of these people are in custody because they cannot afford bail – following through on bail reforms could drastically reduce OCCC’s population and reduce the need for new construction.

Contact

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Or use our contact form at www.prisonpolicy.org/contact.html