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L.A. County jails are a costly resource, study says

By Maggie Clark, Stateline Staff Writer



PUBLIC SAFETY BEAT

Los Angeles County's jail system is the largest of its kind in the world and one of the most chronically overcrowded, with a daily population of about 19,000 incarcerated offenders as of 2009. A new [report](#) recommends dealing with the problem by switching to a pre-trial release program that would place more emphasis on a detainee's perceived public safety or flight risk, rather than the ability to meet bail.

The report comes from the Vera Institute of Justice, a New York City-based research organization that issued its suggestions after three years of study. L.A.'s Countywide Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee, a legislatively mandated group charged with improving the county's criminal justice system, solicited Vera's help.

The report concludes that "the county's jails are a resource: limited, useful, and expensive." It says that in 2007 and 2008, only three percent of offenders were able to make their bail payments and only 18 percent could post a bond, leaving the rest to remain behind bars until their case is adjudicated, at a cost of between \$95 and \$140 per day per inmate. The report also recommends that police order more lower-level offenders to respond to an accusation in court at a later date, rather than arresting and booking everyone they suspect is guilty of a crime.

The recommendations, according to Peggy McGarry, director of the Vera Institute's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, could apply to many jurisdictions across the country. "These are common problems in many places," she says. "The jail is there and everyone has legitimate interests (for using it), but you can't hold everybody. It's matter of prioritizing."

California is already struggling under a U.S. Supreme Court [decision](#) that described conditions in its state prisons as amounting to cruel and unusual punishment. Now counties are being required to deal with the state's [realignment](#) program, which is shifting state prisoners convicted of low-level offenses to county supervision.

Realignment certainly changes the equation, says Mark Delgado, executive director of the Countywide Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee, but he points out the county has already begun to adopt some of Vera's recommendations for its pre-trial program. Currently, county agencies are evaluating the report and deciding which recommendations are feasible, both from a public safety and political perspective.

The pressures on the local criminal justice system will continue to mount — L.A. County [expects](#) that in the first year of the realignment program, it will supervise an additional 9,000 offenders released from state

prisons. In years two and three of the program, the county expects to supervise about 15,000 additional state prison inmates.

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