



## Number of New Orleans arrests is dropping, jail expert says

Published: Thursday, October 20, 2011, 9:00 AM



By **Katy Reckdahl, The Times-Picayune**

If the New Orleans criminal justice system were a car, you might say the front end has been fixed, but the rest of it needs more alignment. The front end -- arrests and jail bookings -- is being repaired. The number of arrests during the first half of 2011 fell by 28 percent compared to the same period last year, said national jail expert **James Austin**.



[View full size](#)Times-Picayune archiveThe

seventh floor of Orleans Parish Prison was photographed in February 2008.

But the reform of the rest of the system is moving more slowly, and **Orleans Parish Prison** inmates stayed in custody 10 additional days, on average, compared with the previous year.

"There are fewer people coming into the system. But they're staying longer," said Austin, in a presentation to Mayor **Mitch Landrieu's** jail-size task force on Wednesday.

Last year, Landrieu created the task force, made up of community leaders and all of the city's criminal-justice kingpins to help him determine the size of the city's new jail.

The City Council in February followed the task force's recommendation to give Criminal Sheriff **Marlin Gusman** the go-ahead for a 1,438-bed, stand-alone facility, which is now under construction and slated to open in early 2014.

The new jail's capacity has 80 percent fewer beds than the 7,500 that it had before Hurricane Katrina. The capacity made the jail at one point the ninth-largest jail in the nation, far out of proportion to the city's size.

But now the question is: will recent criminal-justice reforms be enough to pare down the jail's population to 1,438?

Maybe.

"In some ways, you're halfway there," Austin said.

Still, the jail's population of city inmates dropped by only 59 inmates over the past year, to 2,196 in September. Gusman also voluntarily holds an additional 800 to 850 state inmates, for which he's paid by the state Department of Corrections.

One thing seems clear: If the city finally implements its planned "pre-trial services initiative," the jail population should drop, said Austin. But he said that because of the limitations of his data -- they don't, for instance, give information about indigency, past criminal charges, or even the exact reason for inmates' release -- he can't pinpoint what's causing the longer stays.

The Vera Institute for Justice has received a \$468,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to establish a pretrial services pilot in New Orleans. It should begin inmate screenings within a few months.

In many other jurisdictions, pretrial services staff interview each new inmate before a first court appearance and look at factors like past arrests or potential risk to public safety. They then submit reports to the judges who decide whether inmates should be released without cash bond.

Without pretrial services, advocates say, some nonviolent inmates are detained not because of public safety but because of poverty: they can't afford bail.

Austin's reports have consistently shown that when African-American inmates and white inmates are arrested on the same charges, African-American inmates serve significantly more time in jail. Because poverty in New Orleans is linked with race, Austin had hoped that allowing more inmates to be released without cash bond might narrow those racial disparities.

Another side benefit of the screenings, Austin said, is that they will provide him with more detailed inmate information to better understand where the criminal-justice system is inefficient or inequitable, leading to the longer jail stays that he found in his report.

Some in the audience at the City Hall meeting were frustrated by systemic delays, some of which, they said, could be resolved by the very people who sit on the task force.

"A year ago, people at this table said, 'It's a shame these people are spending too long in jail.' But they've done nothing to change that," said Norris Henderson, head of Voice of the Ex-Offender.

Still, almost no one in the room was surprised by the setbacks discovered by Austin.

Some key task-force members have always operated under the idea that a smaller jail drives reform, said Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation head Flozell Daniels, one of the task-force members who has espoused that theory. "Putting a target on it will move us in that direction," he said last year, as the task force approved the smaller jail size.

*Katy Reckdahl can be reached at [kreckdahl@timespicayune.com](mailto:kreckdahl@timespicayune.com) or 504.826.3396.*