The Rural Jails Research Hub is a collaboration of the Carl Vinson Institute of Government, the Department of Sociology, and the School of Social Work. The Vera Institute selected two universities as hubs to conduct the research — Washington State University and the University of Georgia. In 2019, the Vera Institute of Justice awarded the University of Georgia a $235,000 grant, funded by Arnold Ventures, to create a pilot “hub” site to better document and understand rural incarceration rates. The project had several goals:

- Gather and analyze administrative jail data from select rural counties throughout Georgia.
- Build knowledge of specific local criminal justice issues — especially factors affecting jail population trends — rural counties face through data analysis and conversations with local prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, law enforcement, and other county representatives.
- Share lessons from research and data analysis with local representatives and stakeholders.
- Convene representatives from rural counties for roundtable discussions.
- Establish a national network of researchers that will share findings and replicate successful programs and processes.
- Convene representatives from rural counties for roundtable discussions.
- Demonstrate a realistic, inclusive process for data-driven reform that other rural counties can follow.
- Build knowledge of specific local criminal justice issues — especially factors affecting jail population trends — rural counties face through data analysis and conversations with local prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, law enforcement, and other county representatives.

Lessons Learned:

- Data are not consistent. This includes charge language, data elements, electronic record management systems, and mental health/substance use disorder information.
- Making generalizations across rural counties is nearly impossible.
- Sheriffs must champion the collection and use of data for decision making.

Of the charges between January 2019 and June 2020, 38% were for motor vehicle or traffic-related offenses while 18% were for drug-related offenses.

**Most Frequent Charges**

- Motor vehicle or traffic-related charges, drug-related charges, and probation violations were the most frequent charges for 5 counties.
- Theft was among the top 5 most frequent charges for 5 counties.
- Assault/battery was among the top 5 most frequent charges for 4 counties.
- Early County’s third most frequent charge was a tie between education (failure to enroll children ages 6 to 16 in or attend school) and probation violation. Each made up about 10% of all charges.
- Sumter County’s third most frequent charge was assault/battery (11% of all charges), which is a violent offense whether it is a felony or misdemeanor.
- “Criminal procedure” or “court offense” was among the top 5 most frequent charges for Habersham, Towns, and Treutlen counties, though the percentages were small (3–5% of all charges).

**56%** of people booked were Black.

**40%** of people booked were White.

**4%** of people booked were Hispanic.

**23%** of people booked were female.

* Data do not include Early or Habersham counties.

**Holds for Other Agencies**

- **64%** of people booked were held for another jurisdiction.
- **7%** of people booked were held for another GA county.
- **70%** of people booked were held for Georgia’s Sheriff’s offices.
- **5%** of people booked were held for Georgia’s Police Department.
- **10%** of people booked were held for Other/Unknown jurisdictions.
- **1%** of people booked were held for Federal Government.

In an average month in 2019, 114 people were booked into jails in the seven participating counties. During the first six months of 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, bookings dropped by 30%, to 79 bookings on average per month. In April 2020, there were only 267 total bookings in all seven counties, a 66% decrease from January 2019.