



Changes in North Carolina Jail Populations During COVID-19

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Background

In North Carolina in 2021, 109 jails across 93 counties were in operation and able to house people. The total capacity of these facilities was 27,412 as of December 2021. Generally, the majority of people detained in jail are held pretrial. However, jails also house other individuals, such as those serving sentences. Together, these individuals comprise the North Carolina jail population. This brief provides an update to the Lab's previous reporting on jail populations. It provides an update on the size of the jail population in 2021 and changes in total occupancy from the previous year. Although this report largely focuses on statewide trends, county and facility-level information is available upon request.

How many people were detained in 2021?

The average number of people detained per month in 2021 was 17,295, a 2% increase over that average for 2020. The average jail population peaked at 18,884 in September and hit its lowest point at 15,881 in April.

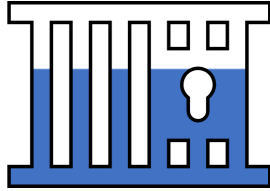


These averages, however, do not reflect the larger number of people who entered and exited North Carolina jails in 2020 and 2021. Rather, they represent the average number of people held in North Carolina jails throughout the year.

How much of the state's jail capacity was used in 2021?

Although the average number of people detained in 2021 was higher than in 2020, occupancy was unchanged: an average of 64% of the statewide capacity was used in both 2020 and 2021. This remained fourteen percentage points lower than the 2019 average of 78%.

¹ The June report was updated in September 2022 to correct for missing data in the calculation of 2021 county occupancy rates.



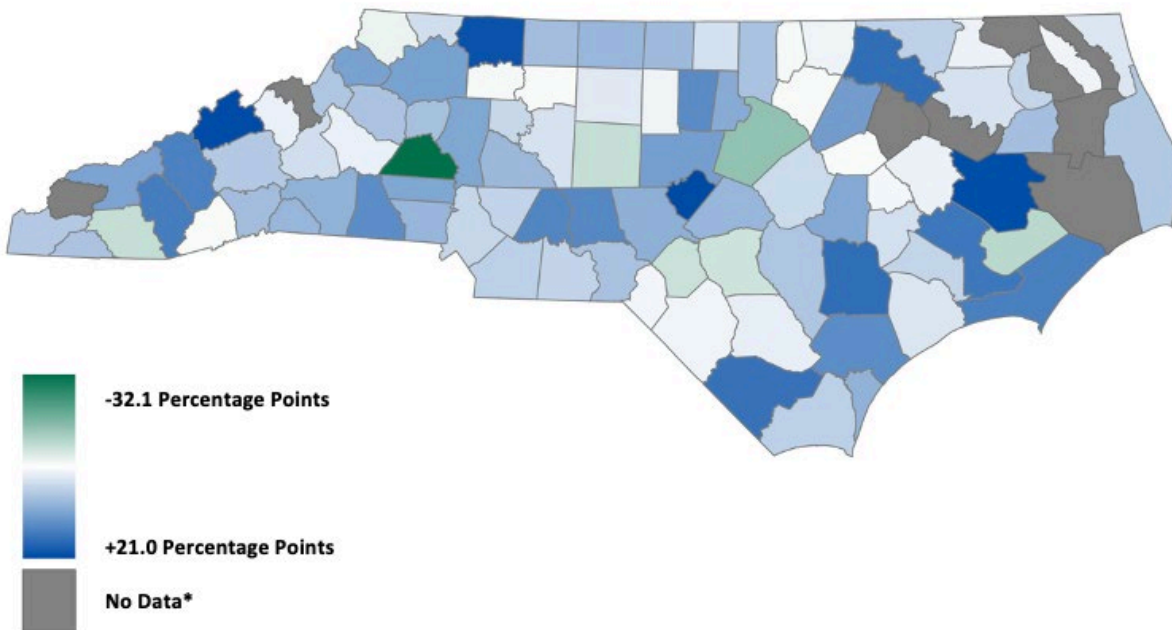
In 2021, **64%** of statewide jail capacity was used on average, which is unchanged from 2020 and **14 percentage points** lower than 2019.

The primary reason occupancy remained flat despite an increase in the average number of people detained is that two jails increased capacity and a third became available to house people. These changes increased average statewide capacity from 26,450 in 2020 to 27,129 in 2021.²

How did county occupancy change in 2021?

In 2021, average jail occupancy (i.e., average number of occupants divided by average capacity) fell or remained unchanged in thirty-seven (40%) of the ninety-three counties with active jails. The remaining fifty-six (60%) counties experienced increases in their average occupancy rates. For county-specific changes, see Appendix A.

Figure 1. Change in County Occupancy Rates: 2020 – 2021



² A jail’s capacity only is counted if it is able to house people overnight (some jails are not used or equipped for this purpose) and it is in a state of repair such that it can accept people.

*Seven counties lacked an active jail that was capable of housing people overnight. These are depicted in gray in the map. Graham County experienced a substantial increase in its occupancy because it typically houses individuals out-of-county but was unable to do so due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The size of this increase was far outside the range of changes in other counties, which distorted the color of these counties in Figure 1. This county is therefore also depicted in gray as having “no data.” Appendix A includes county-specific data for all counties, including Graham.

Were any jails over capacity in 2021?

In 2021, thirteen (12%) jails had an average annual occupancy of over 100%. In other words, 1 in 8 facilities had an average annual occupancy above stated capacity. Five jails consistently had greater than 100% occupancy throughout the year. For the remaining eight jails, occupancy was below 100% at various points in the year but nonetheless averaged over 100%.

1 in 8

Jails averaged over 100% of occupancy in 2021.

But this annual measure understates the number of facilities that exceeded capacity at any point in 2021. Twenty-seven (25%) facilities exceeded 100% capacity during at least one month of the year. This ranged from a low of eight facilities exceeding capacity from January through March to as many as twenty-one facilities in August. Generally, fewer jails exceeded capacity in the first half of the year compared to the second half.

Conclusion

Data from 2021 suggest that, overall, the North Carolina jail population remains relatively unchanged from 2020, though there is considerable variation at the county level. The Lab will continue to monitor and update its reporting on the state jail population on a semi-annual basis. More detailed data is available upon request. Please contact the Lab with any questions or recommendations about current or future reporting on jail populations.

Appendix A – County Occupancy Rates: 2020 – 2021

County	2021 Occupancy	2020 Occupancy	Percentage Point Change
Alamance	66.0%	70.1%	-4.1%
Alexander	49.3%	45.9%	3.5%
Alleghany	27.8%	28.8%	-0.9%
Anson	85.2%	84.6%	0.6%
Ashe	52.3%	59.8%	-7.5%
Avery	69.1%	66.7%	2.4%
Beaufort	53.7%	33.4%	20.3%
Bertie	71.8%	73.1%	-1.4%
Bladen	58.5%	61.9%	-3.4%
Brunswick	46.2%	44.9%	1.3%
Buncombe	68.7%	66.5%	2.1%
Burke	43.4%	46.9%	-3.5%
Cabarrus	35.7%	35.2%	0.6%
Caldwell	70.6%	67.7%	2.9%
Carteret	121.8%	108.7%	13.1%
Caswell	38.5%	34.3%	4.2%
Catawba	59.0%	91.0%	-32.1%
Chatham	75.8%	67.3%	8.4%
Cherokee	75.3%	73.3%	2.0%
Chowan	101.1%	100.7%	0.4%
Clay	65.0%	62.1%	2.9%
Cleveland	86.9%	75.7%	11.2%
Columbus	87.0%	72.0%	15.0%
Craven	109.0%	94.6%	14.4%
Cumberland	52.9%	63.3%	-10.4%
Currituck	36.7%	38.8%	-2.2%
Dare	49.7%	47.5%	2.3%
Davidson	85.3%	86.7%	-1.4%
Davie	66.3%	66.4%	-0.1%
Duplin	105.9%	90.1%	15.8%
Durham	48.0%	41.3%	6.7%
Edgecombe	45.6%	45.6%	0.0%
Forsyth	61.0%	67.2%	-6.2%
Franklin	85.1%	91.3%	-6.2%
Gaston	89.3%	84.3%	5.0%
Graham	350.0%	186.5%	163.5%
Granville	60.5%	57.4%	3.1%

County	2021 Occupancy	2020 Occupancy	Percentage Point Change
Greene	49.6%	54.3%	-4.7%
Guilford	44.9%	47.5%	-2.6%
Halifax	93.1%	77.4%	15.8%
Harnett	80.7%	75.7%	5.0%
Haywood	85.0%	72.1%	12.9%
Henderson	77.7%	73.8%	3.9%
Hertford	53.8%	57.5%	-3.7%
Hoke	44.3%	55.1%	-10.8%
Iredell	51.5%	44.0%	7.4%
Jackson	89.7%	76.2%	13.4%
Johnston	130.8%	131.2%	-0.4%
Jones	63.5%	63.1%	0.4%
Lee	114.9%	94.0%	21.0%
Lenoir	58.6%	59.9%	-1.2%
Lincoln	69.6%	62.2%	7.4%
Macon	98.0%	109.4%	-11.4%
Madison	98.2%	77.5%	20.7%
McDowell	91.6%	92.5%	-0.9%
Mecklenburg	47.0%	46.9%	0.1%
Montgomery	79.3%	67.5%	11.9%
Moore	53.3%	47.4%	5.9%
Nash	46.4%	37.8%	8.6%
New Hanover	80.1%	74.5%	5.6%
Northampton	54.2%	53.2%	1.0%
Onslow	58.4%	60.4%	-1.9%
Orange	69.2%	57.7%	11.5%
Pamlico	101.1%	113.7%	-12.5%
Pasquotank	79.9%	84.0%	-4.1%
Pender	69.4%	58.2%	11.1%
Person	50.3%	51.6%	-1.3%
Pitt	58.2%	61.9%	-3.7%
Polk	69.2%	64.2%	5.0%
Randolph	103.7%	115.2%	-11.5%
Richmond	131.3%	128.0%	3.2%
Robeson	70.4%	74.5%	-4.1%
Rockingham	75.7%	70.7%	5.0%
Rowan	79.1%	74.5%	4.6%

County	2021 Occupancy	2020 Occupancy	Percentage Point Change
Rutherford	87.5%	81.6%	5.9%
Sampson	84.7%	81.9%	2.7%
Scotland	90.3%	94.7%	-4.5%
Stanly	108.9%	96.8%	12.2%
Stokes	78.2%	74.2%	4.0%
Surry	147.2%	127.4%	19.8%
Swain	85.8%	77.9%	7.9%
Transylvania	40.9%	46.9%	-6.0%
Union	81.9%	80.7%	1.2%
Vance	76.3%	82.8%	-6.5%
Wake	55.9%	72.6%	-16.7%
Warren	66.0%	70.0%	-4.1%
Washington	49.8%	46.0%	3.8%
Watauga	71.2%	63.1%	8.2%
Wayne	82.1%	75.0%	7.1%
Wilkes	67.1%	59.0%	8.1%
Wilson	44.9%	50.9%	-6.0%
Yadkin	84.5%	91.0%	-6.5%
Yancey	67.4%	70.9%	-3.5%

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