

Changes in North Carolina Jail Populations During COVID-19

Jessica Smith, W.R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Professor & Director, Criminal Justice Innovation Lab

Ross Hatton, Graduate Research Assistant

UNC School of Government Criminal Justice Innovation Lab

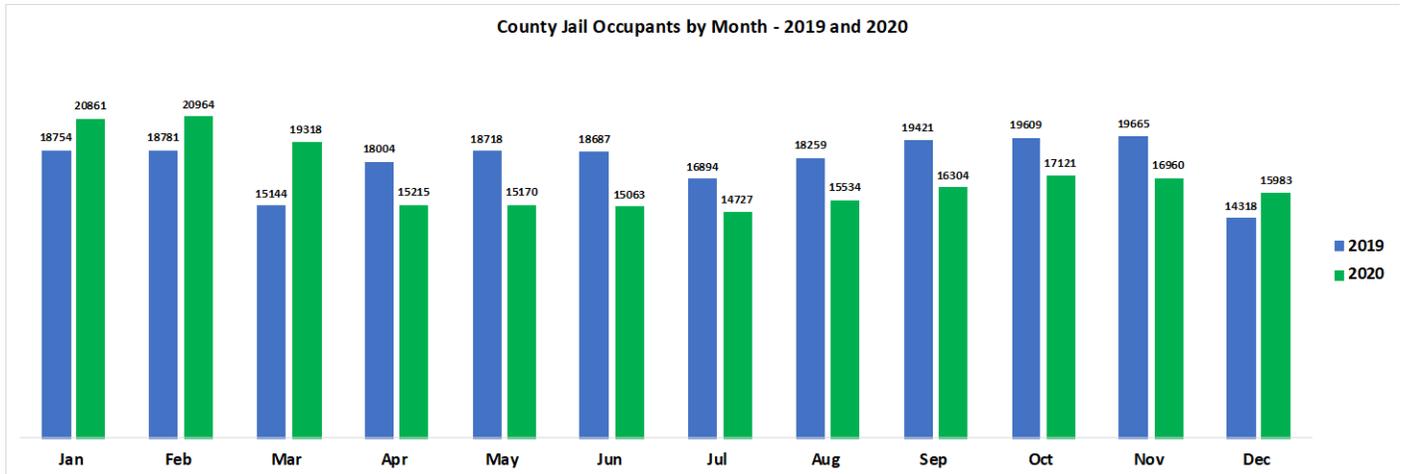
March 2021

This report provides North Carolina jail population data for 2019 and 2020. Please refer to our April 2020 jail report ([here](#)) for information on data sources and calculations.

State Level Data

In February 2020, before COVID-19 began impacting North Carolina, the statewide jail population was 20,964, a figure above the 2019 total for that month (Figure 1). Starting in March 2020—the onset of the pandemic—the statewide population started dropping, hitting a low of 14,727 in July 2020. Monthly statewide populations then increased in August, September, and October, before dipping in November and December. Except for December, all monthly 2020 populations after March are below 2019 numbers. Although not pictured in Figure 1, we also examined jail populations in January 2021. The January 2021 figure is 15,910, a slight dip from December 2020 and lower (4,951 persons) than the January 2020 population.

Figure 1. Number of individuals detained in jail statewide—January through December, 2019 & 2020



Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Net Change	2107	2183	4174	-2789	-3548	-3624	-2167	-2725	-3117	-2488	-2705	1665

Note: Figure 1 shows a significant decline in the statewide jail population in March and December 2019. However, in March 2019 a large number of facilities—40 of 114—did not report jail data, and 27 facilities did not report data in December. As a result, the March and December 2019 numbers are artificially low.

County Level Data

Because statewide data can hide variation at the local level, we also looked at county level jail population changes. At the local level, the vast majority of jails reporting data had lower populations in December 2020 as compared to February 2020. Specifically, of the 90 counties accepting occupants in those months that reported data¹, 83 (92.2%) had December populations that were below pre-pandemic levels. Population declines ranged from 3 to 360 persons; in terms of percentage change, declines ranged from 3.6% to 65.1%. Seven counties (7.8%) experienced increased populations. In terms of persons, increases ranged from 1 to 111 occupants; in terms of percentage change, increases ranged from 1.0% to 97.4%. Table 1 presents these changes.

Table 1. County level changes in jail occupants—February to December, 2020

County	Changed in Occupants: Feb - Dec	Percentage Change in Occupants: Feb - Dec
Guilford	-360	-34.5%
Cumberland	-255	-35.3%
Forsyth	-249	-29.4%
Alamance	-185	-39.4%
Buncombe	-165	-31.3%
Cabarrus	-154	-44.1%
Wilson	-151	-60.9%
Gaston	-143	-23.0%
Onslow	-138	-33.3%
Wake	-119	-9.4%
Rowan	-118	-30.8%
Sampson	-91	-32.4%
Davidson	-89	-27.1%
Nash	-89	-44.5%
Wilkes	-84	-35.7%
Wayne	-82	-19.8%
Cleveland	-82	-25.3%
Caldwell	-79	-40.9%
Lenoir	-76	-29.9%
Hoke	-76	-43.2%
Johnston	-74	-23.9%
New Hanover	-67	-12.0%
Robeson	-67	-18.2%
Durham	-60	-15.4%
Pitt	-59	-13.5%
Ashe	-58	-42.3%
Catawba	-57	-20.5%
Mecklenburg	-55	-3.6%
Lincoln	-55	-32.9%
Orange	-55	-47.0%

County	Changed in Occupants: Feb - Dec	Percentage Change in Occupants: Feb - Dec
Randolph	-51	-18.2%
Edgecombe	-51	-25.2%
Person	-49	-45.8%
Vance	-46	-29.7%
Columbus	-45	-25.6%
Caswell	-41	-65.1%
Alexander	-38	-36.9%
Bertie	-38	-41.3%
Union	-37	-14.6%
Rutherford	-37	-18.8%
Haywood	-35	-25.7%
Chatham	-34	-34.7%
Duplin	-32	-28.1%
Transylvania	-32	-40.5%
Bladen	-30	-18.5%
Richmond	-28	-25.7%
Montgomery	-28	-28.3%
Dare	-28	-34.1%
Davie	-27	-43.5%
Pasquotank	-26	-11.7%
Cherokee	-26	-19.4%
Hertford	-25	-34.7%
Northampton	-25	-34.7%
Henderson	-23	-11.7%
Surry	-23	-12.3%
Stanly	-23	-15.5%
Greene	-22	-31.0%
Craven	-21	-6.8%
Carteret	-21	-13.5%
Warren	-20	-51.3%

County	Changed in Occupants: Feb - Dec	Percentage Change in Occupants: Feb - Dec
Swain	-19	-18.6%
Jackson	-19	-28.8%
Moore	-18	-11.0%
Granville	-18	-28.1%
Stokes	-17	-12.8%
Macon	-17	-18.9%
Brunswick	-16	-7.9%
Watauga	-16	-19.3%
Avery	-16	-37.2%
Iredell	-15	-5.2%
Halifax	-14	-17.1%
Franklin	-13	-7.1%
Chowan	-13	-39.4%
Currituck	-12	-35.3%
Polk	-11	-21.6%
Yancey	-11	-30.6%
Lee	-9	-6.8%
McDowell	-8	-4.7%
Alleghany	-8	-32.0%
Jones	-8	-42.1%
Anson	-4	-7.5%
Beaufort	-3	-7.1%
Clay	-3	-8.1%
Yadkin	1	1.0%
Madison	2	3.3%
Washington	3	15.8%
Harnett	3	1.2%
Graham	6	50.0%
Pender	9	17.3%
Pamlico	111	97.4%

¹ Facilities in Burke, Rockingham, and Scotland did not report data in December.

As noted above, the statewide population hit a low in July 2020 and then rose in August, September, and October before dropping slightly in November and December. When focusing on the period of July 2020 to December 2020, we found that only 23.6% of the counties that reported data² had lower populations in December 2020 than in July of that year. Thus, while the majority of counties saw a decrease in populations from February to December 2020, the majority of counties saw an increase in populations from July to December 2020.

Specifically, and paralleling the statewide experience 65 counties (73.0%) saw increased occupants in this period. In terms of persons, increases ranged from 1 to 138 occupants; in terms of percentage change, increases ranged from .9% to 120.6%. Three counties (3.4%) experienced no change.

Table 2. Changes in County Jail Populations—July to December, 2020

County	Changed in Occupants: July - Dec	Percentage Change in Occupants: July - Dec
Guilford	-27	-3.8%
Cumberland	-20	-4.1%
Forsyth	-19	-3.1%
Wilson	-13	-11.8%
Davie	-12	-25.5%
McDowell	-9	-5.3%
Pasquotank	-8	-3.9%
Onslow	-7	-2.5%
Haywood	-7	-6.5%
Lee	-6	-4.7%
Person	-4	-6.5%
Jackson	-4	-7.8%
Avery	-4	-12.9%
Chatham	-3	-4.5%
Bertie	-3	-5.3%
Alleghany	-3	-15.0%
Transylvania	-2	-4.1%
Bladen	-1	-0.8%
Vance	-1	-0.9%
Anson	-1	-2.0%
Jones	-1	-8.3%
Catawba	0	0.0%
Cherokee	0	0.0%
Chowan	0	0.0%
Dare	1	1.9%
Warren	2	11.8%
Currituck	2	10.0%
Macon	2	2.8%
Cabarrus	2	1.0%
Randolph	2	0.9%

County	Changed in Occupants: July - Dec	Percentage Change in Occupants: July - Dec
Richmond	3	3.8%
Graham	4	28.6%
Washington	4	22.2%
Ashe	4	5.3%
Polk	5	14.3%
Granville	5	12.2%
Hertford	5	11.9%
Clay	6	21.4%
Caswell	7	46.7%
Pender	7	13.0%
Greene	8	19.5%
Lenoir	8	4.7%
Hoke	9	9.9%
Rutherford	9	6.0%
Yancey	10	66.7%
Edgecombe	10	7.1%
Orange	11	21.6%
Montgomery	11	18.3%
Alexander	12	22.6%
Halifax	12	21.4%
Surry	12	7.9%
Columbus	13	11.0%
Stokes	14	13.7%
Northampton	15	46.9%
Watauga	15	28.8%
Swain	15	22.1%
Caldwell	16	16.3%
Sampson	16	9.2%
Harnett	16	6.6%
Johnston	17	7.8%

County	Changed in Occupants: July - Dec	Percentage Change in Occupants: July - Dec
Brunswick	18	10.7%
Buncombe	18	5.2%
Alamance	19	7.1%
Henderson	20	13.0%
Madison	21	51.2%
Stanly	21	20.2%
Wilkes	21	16.2%
Franklin	26	17.9%
Yadkin	27	36.0%
Nash	30	37.0%
Rowan	31	13.2%
Duplin	32	64.0%
Carteret	32	31.4%
Robeson	33	12.3%
Moore	35	31.8%
Union	37	20.7%
Lincoln	41	57.7%
New Hanover	41	9.1%
Cleveland	46	23.5%
Davidson	47	24.4%
Pitt	49	14.8%
Iredell	65	31.4%
Craven	74	34.4%
Gaston	75	18.6%
Wayne	81	32.1%
Mecklenburg	93	6.8%
Durham	94	40.0%
Pamlico	123	120.6%
Wake	138	13.7%

* * *

A number of factors may account for observed trends, including the halt in jury trials, initiation and current status of efforts to reduce jail populations during the pandemic, and changes in criminal charging to name a few.

We will continue to update this work as new data become available. For more detailed information on county-level populations, see our spreadsheet [here](#). On the spreadsheet’s first tab, entitled “Occupant Graph,” select a county in the dropdown menu in the upper left corner to get a county-level graph similar to Figure 1 above.

² Facilities in Beaufort, Burke, Rockingham, and Scotland did not report data in either July or December 2020.

© 2021. School of Government. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Use of this publication for commercial purposes or without acknowledgment of its source is prohibited. Reproducing, distributing, or otherwise making available to a non-purchaser the entire publication, or a substantial portion of it, without express permission, is prohibited. For permissions questions or requests, email the School of Government at copyright_permissions@sog.unc.edu.