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# Oregon Bill Seeks More Data From Jails After Investigation Into Inmate Deaths

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Erin Wilson [Follow](#) OPB April 4, 2019 4:21 p.m. [Portland, Ore.]

Oregon lawmakers want to get a better understanding of rising death rates in overburdened county jails after an investigation by OPB, KUOW and the Northwest News Network. Earlier this week, the news organizations revealed that [since 2008 at least 306 people have died after being taken to county jails](#) across the Pacific Northwest.



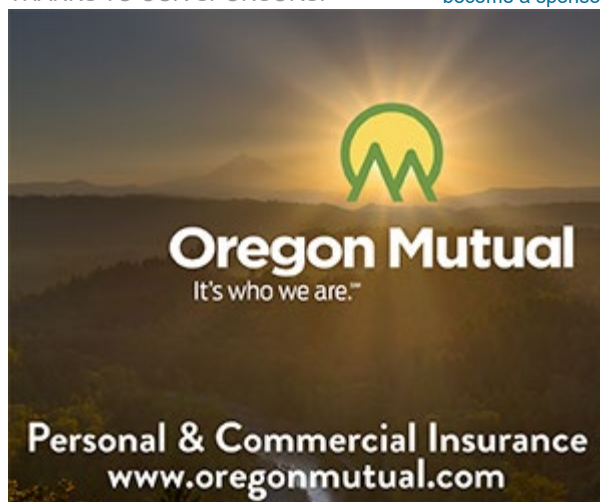
House Majority Leader Jennifer Williamson, D-Portland, who chairs the House Judiciary Committee, introduced legislation Thursday that would require local and

regional jails provide the state with more data and documentation about their in-custody populations by

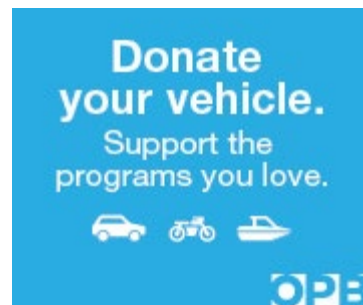
House Majority Leader Jennifer Williamson, D-Portland, signals her vote on the House floor at the Capitol in Salem, Ore., Tuesday, April 2, 2019.

Bradley W. Parks/OPB

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“What this reporting made painfully clear was that there is a problem within our correctional facilities, and that we lack the kind of information we need in order to stop the rise in jail deaths,” Williamson said in a written statement.

Until now, the number of deaths in Northwest county jails was unknown, in part because Oregon and Washington have not comprehensively tracked the number. Over the past 10 years, the rate of jail deaths has trended upward in Oregon and Washington, the public media investigation found.

“I am hopeful that the amendment to House Bill 3289 will allow us, for the first time ever, to have an accurate picture of what is happening in our jails,” Williamson said. “We can and must do better by the people who go through these facilities.”

Williamson’s legislation would direct the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission to study a range of issues, including how data is collected at each jail, policies and procedures at the facilities, as well as the costs and barriers of achieving adequate health care.

The commission would make a report to the Legislature by Sept. 15, 2020.

“We’ve asked jails for data before, and some of them give it to us. They want to partner with us,” said Mike Schmidt, executive director of the Criminal Justice

Commission. “I think some of them, out of an abundance of caution, have chosen not to give it to us.”

Schmidt said the investigation has raised the profile on the need for more data about local jails. He said the legislation is a good first step for the state to go county by county and get a sense of what data jails keep.

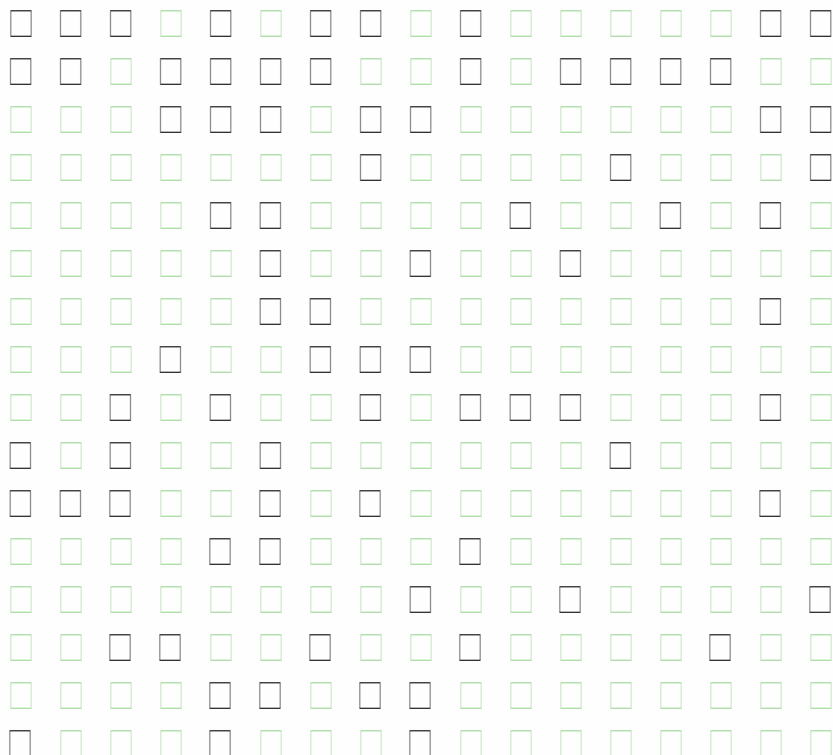
“I think what’s going to be available varies county by county and some of it is going to be because they don’t have resources,” he said. “If a jail can’t give us the data, it’s not like we can put them in jail.”

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THE DEATH TOLL IN NORTHWEST JAILS



Jails are the entry point to the criminal justice system. Nearly **70 percent** of deceased inmates were not yet tried. They died in jail **still innocent** under the law.





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While Oregon doesn't track jail deaths, local jails do provide data to the federal government on a voluntary basis. Those reports are lack detailed information about individual jails and the full circumstances of a person's death.

The investigation by OPB, KUOW and the Northwest News Network [found at least 70 percent of Northwest inmates](#) who died in the past decade were awaiting trial at the time of their deaths, still considered innocent under the law. That figure points to the need for pretrial medical, mental health and addiction services that could assist inmates, rather than having their conditions worsen in underequipped jails.

It also found suicide, [by far the leading cause of jail deaths in the Pacific Northwest](#), accounted for nearly half of all cases with a known cause of death.

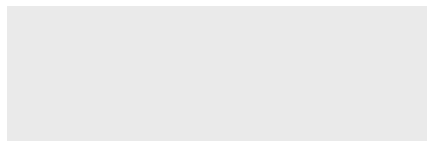
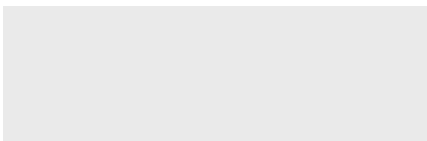


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