



70
million
ONE JAIL AT A TIME.
story

REFORM TOOLKIT

S2 E10

Two Rural Counties Take Diverting Paths to Jail Reform

A PODCAST BY

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WHO



**Sheriffs Robert Jackson and
Kirk Taylor**

WHO

“We went from 75, 80 probably to 170 inmates really quick. No place to put them.”

-Alamosa Sheriff Robert Jackson

[Alamosa County’s](#) Robert Jackson and [Pueblo County’s](#) Kirk Taylor serve as sheriffs in southern Colorado. They were patrol partners early on, and have shared the struggles of jail overcrowding since becoming sheriffs.

When Jackson was elected in 2014, Alamosa’s jail population was just under its maximum capacity, but it more than doubled by the time his term started in 2015. The jail was also old and didn’t have a sprinkler system.

The Pueblo County jail is meant to house 509 people, but the week [70 Million](#) visited there were over 650 people in custody. Cells that were meant to hold one person had three beds. Those that didn’t fit in cells, were sleeping in common areas in “boats,” cots that rise a few inches off the ground.

Alamosa County Sheriff Robert Jackson. Photo by Andrew Meeker.



WHAT



Ways to fix jail overcrowding

WHAT

“We are the most overcrowded in the state. So you never want to be first, but we’re number one.”

-Pueblo County Sheriff Kirk Taylor



By advocating for and getting a penny sales tax increase, Sheriff Jackson raised enough money to renovate and expand the county jail.

The new jail is three times its original size and has [64 more beds](#). It also has a staff nurse for the first time and a sprinkler system. But even as the the upgrades were happening, the county was reducing the number of people it typically houses in the jail.

In Pueblo County, Sheriff Taylor is also [trying to build a new jail](#). The current jail is not large enough to safely house the current population, and the [building is falling apart](#), he says.

But so far Taylor has not gotten the necessary funding approved because of locals’ resistance to taxes and desire to reduce the jail population.

Pueblo County Sheriff Kirk Taylor. Photo by Andrew Meeker.

WHERE

**Alamosa and Pueblo Counties,
Colorado**

WHERE

“We don’t have places where you can take mentally ill folks and get them treatment and get them help paid for by the state. So we’ve replaced that with jail.”

- Public Defender Jamie Kearns



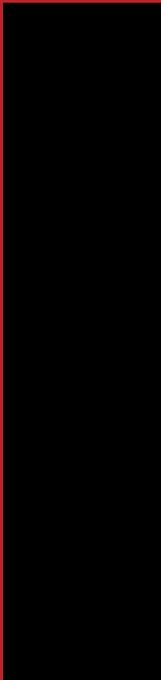
Alamosa County lies about an hour north of the New Mexico border in the San Luis Valley and has a population of 16,000. [Almost 28%](#) of Alamosa’s population lives below the poverty line.

The larger Pueblo County is northeast of Alamosa and has a population of 159,000. In Pueblo County, the unemployment rate is nearly 50% higher than the state as a whole.

While the counties stand out for their challenges with poverty and opioids, they are by no means alone. A [2017 survey of Colorado jails](#) found that at least seven had daily populations that exceeded the jail’s capacity.

Nationwide, [rural jail populations are growing at a faster rate than urban ones](#).

Jamie Kearns, the head of the Alamosa Public Defender’s office. Photo by Andrew Meeker.



WHEN

2015 - Present

WHEN

“You know, we’re kind of the dumping ground for people. Nobody knows what to do with them. Put them in jail, let us deal with them. Not OK.”

-Sheriff Robert Jackson



The opioid epidemic has driven much of the rise in jail populations in southern Colorado.

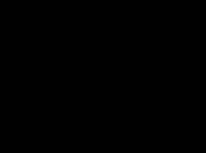
The [San Luis Valley has the highest rates of drug overdose deaths](#) in the state. And Pueblo County’s opioid overdose death rate has [nearly tripled in the past 15 years](#).

For the judicial system, the opioid crisis has meant that [three times as many felony drug court filings were made in the San Luis Valley](#) in 2017 compared to 2015. (Across Colorado, [felony drug court filings doubled](#) in that same period.)

Earlier this year, [Colorado downgraded some drug felonies](#) to misdemeanors. Sheriff Taylor worries that this change will mean even more people will be sent to county jails.

Holding cell at the Alamosa County Jail. Photo by Andrew Meeker.

WHY



**The Experiences of Nathan
Hawkins and Jeffrey Seis**



WHY

“Our jail is not in a liveable condition. We’re not animals. We’re humans, you know.”

-Nathan Hawkins



Jeffrey Seis was staying in a “boat” in Pueblo County jail when [70 Million](#) met him. Without privacy or a shelf to keep his belongings, Seis put his towel, toiletries and photographs alongside the cot that lifts off the floor when it’s time for bed.

In addition to being overcrowded, the jail has severe plumbing problems, Seis said. The building [regularly floods when it rains or snows](#).

Nathan Hawkins was assigned to a cell on the top floor of the Pueblo County jail. When heavy rains flooded his housing unit, the pod became “like a lake,” he said, and he worried that the wing would collapse and cause fatalities.

Inside a triple-bunked cell a Pueblo County jail wing segregated from greater populations. These cells used to house inmates with more serious offenses, but now there is not room for such segregation. Instead, those inmates are mixed with the general population and these cells are used to house more vulnerable populations. Photo by Andrew Meeker.

HOW

**Improving conditions while
reducing the jail population in
Alamosa**

HOW

“When I was a new cop and we caught somebody with heroin, oh my God, you're going to prison. But nowadays we are training them to be a little bit more understanding, a little bit warmer and fuzzier. You don't absolutely have to arrest a guy with heroin and put him in jail.”

-Sheriff Robert Jackson

In Alamosa County, where [92% of the people booked into jail are addicted to heroin](#), Sheriff Jackson saw the need for alternatives to incarceration. To reduce the jail population, he is working with judges, the district attorney and public defender's offices and nonprofit organizations like the [Center for Restorative Programs](#), that brings together victims and offenders to address harmful behaviors.

At the core of their work is the [LEAD program](#), or Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion, which is funded through taxes on marijuana. Officers who would normally charge a person with a crime instead connect them with a case manager who can help them with housing or drug treatment.

While Alamosa's new jail has 160 beds, there were only 74 people there when [70 Million](#) visited.

Alamosa Sheriff car in front of the Sangre de Cristo Range. Photo by Andrew Meeker.



RESOURCES

To get started developing a reform project like those in southern Colorado, check out:

- [“Pueblo County Jail Task Force Comprehensive Report”](#)
- The ACLU’s [“Justice Derailed: A Case Study of Abusive and Unconstitutional Practices in Colorado City Courts”](#)
- [“Life and Jail in Southern Colorado” from the Vera Institute of Justice](#)
- [LEAD National Support Bureau](#)
- [Center for Restorative Programs](#)

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