

OPINION

Criminal justice reform is great. But where's the data to show us whether it's working?

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Not enough information is collected. Existing stats are inconsistent making analysis of racial disparities, bail, tax dollars in system difficult.

At both the federal and state level, 2018 was a big year for criminal justice reform.

In a bipartisan effort, Congress passed the First Step Act, paving the way for some of the biggest changes to the federal criminal justice system the country has seen. In Louisiana, voters [eliminated nonunanimous jury convictions](#) in felony cases; and in [Florida](#), legislation was passed to bring more transparency to criminal justice.

But justice in the United States often happens first at the county level: County jails detain people pretrial and frequently just after conviction. And there are more people locked away in [local jails and state prisons](#) than in federal institutions.

Yet, unlike our ability to assess many federal reforms, it's virtually impossible to know whether reforms at the county level are working. Data about local criminal justice is often incredibly limited, inconsistent and not easily accessible to the public or policymakers.

There are [more than 3,000 counties](#) in America and at least three times as many agencies that record county data. But there's no common standard to evaluate or compare information on how well the justice system is keeping the public safe and whether we're seeing fair justice outcomes at the local level.



A county jail (Photo: Rick Jervis/USA TODAY)

There is also no uniformity across or within states specifying the type of data elements that are collected or how they are defined. And many local agencies still don't have access to computerized systems to track cases. It is very difficult to evaluate how the system is working, and make good decisions as a result without solid, consistent data.

In the past three decades, most of the research that has emerged using criminal justice data has depended on case studies, often focusing on the largest jurisdictions, which tend to have better data. But little is known about what transpires outside of the largest urban areas.

Too many counties across the USA can't answer basic questions: Who is getting access to pretrial diversion programs? What percentage of defendants are in jail for failing to pay low bail amounts? How many people are getting their driver's licenses suspended or revoked as part of their sentences? Are tax dollars being spent efficiently on proven methods that reduce crime? What are the racial and socioeconomic disparities across all of these outcomes?

Last year, [Florida proved to be a great example](#) of how increased and easy access to data can inform policymaking and highlight areas that need attention.

For instance, by collecting data on what's causing probation and parole revocations (for example, technical violations like missing an appointment with a parole officer or staying out past curfew versus a new crime), the state will have a more accurate picture of which people are reoffending and how better to tackle the problem. The Sunshine State's move is a huge win for transparency and informed policymaking; other states should follow suit.

In the end, citizens have a right to know how their county criminal justice system is performing, and the officials who operate it have a duty to ensure they're making decisions based on objective data. Much like the criminal justice system reforms taking place in Washington, we need to take steps to improve data collection at the state and local level. And knowing more about how taxpayer money is spent and the outcomes we're seeing can help guide the legislation we should pass to improve it.

Americans of all political affiliations expect their civic institutions to make informed decisions. But without good data on the criminal justice system, we're missing the mark. Public and valid data leads to better decisions, more accountability and increased trust in government institutions. Data also provides a foundation for dialogue about advancing public safety and fiscal responsibility and ensuring a justice system that works for everyone.

Let's build on the recent wave of bipartisan criminal justice reforms by ensuring we have the means to measure results.

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