

# Justice Counts Core Talking Points

*November 2020*

**At a time when up-to-date, accessible data is more crucial to policymakers than ever, states across the country are charting a course for their criminal justice systems while flying blind.**

- Criminal justice data is often collected but not analyzed, analyzed but not shared, or shared but not acted upon.
- While some systems still operate with major gaps in the data they collect, thousands of individual agencies hold an extensive amount of data, but lack the time, ability, or mandate to paint a complete picture.
- Whereas counterparts in public health and labor agencies act on timely data and track trends in real-time, criminal justice data reflects a reality that is months, if not years, old by the time it reaches policymakers, rendering it useless at best and misleading at worst.
  - Criminal justice data on everything from reported crime to success on parole is often reported annually or delayed by months as tides shift within the system and problems fester.
- When critical information is delivered, it is often spread across various reports, forcing policymakers to probe multiple agencies to answer a single question.
  - For instance, to learn how many people on probation were rearrested and on what charges, a policymaker needs to match data from probation and law enforcement departments across the state. In some states, that could mean crosswalking data from hundreds of agencies.

**As state leaders face the most devastating fiscal outlook in recent memory, policymakers need timely data from across government agencies in order to assess and govern their criminal justice system as a whole.**

- The size of the expected fiscal shock to states is estimated to be more than three times as much as the entirety of state corrections budgets.
- The situation will reduce criminal justice investments for at least three years, leaving many leaders under pressure to make decisions that could have long-lasting implications for corrections, law enforcement, community supervision, and our overall public safety.
- Now more than ever, policymakers desperately need a guidepost that offers them the timely information they need from the right sources and presented in a digestible way.

**Justice Counts is a national, consensus-building initiative bringing together an unprecedented coalition of state and local leaders to enhance policymakers' decisions by making criminal justice data more timely, less disjointed, and as useful as possible.**

- With 21 partners representing officials at every corner of our nation’s state, county, and municipal justice systems, Justice Counts is led by The Council of State Governments Justice Center and backed by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance.
- The initiative is also led by a steering committee of active state and local officials—from law enforcement, to corrections, to legislatures, and beyond—who will reach consensus about a baseline set of criminal justice metrics that can drive budget and policy decisions.
- The initiative’s partners aim to mobilize policymakers and stakeholders from states across the country in order to put these metrics to work, and the initiative will offer a range of helpful tools to help them get there and measure what matters.
- As a first step to inform the metrics, Justice Counts will pull together data spread across state and local agencies to provide policymakers—who typically receive disjointed, piecemeal strands of data—a timely breakdown of trends across their criminal justice systems.

#### FAQs:

- **How is this different from previous data initiatives?**
  - The shortcomings of criminal justice data aren’t new and haven’t gone unnoticed. Many organizations have set out to improve the landscape of criminal justice data and have made great strides in demystifying what continues to be a complex system.
  - Different initiatives have focused on critical parts of the problem: creating databases through sweeping data collection efforts, focusing on analysis to pinpoint the latest trends in criminal justice systems, and conducting extensive research with the end goal of public consumption.
  - Justice Counts builds on the momentum set by these individual efforts, mobilizing state and local leaders around a broader mission to improve how they collect, analyze, and report the most useful data from across the entire criminal justice system.
  - It is flexible and meets states and localities where they are at in terms of data policy and practice, encouraging jurisdictions to analyze and report data they already collect instead of just collecting more and more data that goes unused.
  - Justice Counts will create the most essential metrics that are limited in number and won’t require excessive costs to jurisdictions.
- **Will the Justice Counts state data component involve sharing any case-level data?**
  - No, Justice Counts seeks to organize and display statewide criminal justice trends to allow policymakers to make more informed decisions about policy, practice, and investment.
  - All data reported through Justice Counts will be aggregated at the state level.