

The Safety and Justice Challenge

Amid growing national attention to the number of Americans confined in state and federal prisons, significantly less attention has been paid to the local level, where the criminal justice system primarily operates and where over-incarceration begins.

Jail populations have more than tripled since the 1980s, as have the cumulative costs of building and running them. Nationwide misuse of jails most harshly impacts low-income communities and communities of color. For example, while African Americans and Latinos make up 30 percent of Americans, they make up 51 percent of the U.S. jail population. Today, one in three Americans believes his or her local justice system is unfair.

The Safety and Justice Challenge is a national initiative supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to reduce over-incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails. The Challenge is establishing a collaborative network of jurisdictions to model and inspire effective local criminal justice reforms across the country. The 20 diverse jurisdictions participating in the Challenge are working to reduce jail populations, create fairer and more effective local justice systems, and model reforms for the nation.

Who is participating in the Challenge?

Following a selection process in 2015 that drew applications from nearly 200 jurisdictions in 45 states and territories, the Foundation chose 20 jurisdictions for initial grants and expert counsel to develop plans for creating fairer, more effective local justice systems. In April 2016, the Foundation announced a commitment of nearly \$25 million across the 20 jurisdictions to support implementation of their plans. As the jurisdictions work to reduce their jail populations and address racial and ethnic disparities in their local justice systems, their work will produce a variety of innovations and models for reform that communities across the United States can adopt.

In 2016, the Foundation awarded each of the following 11 jurisdictions grants between \$1.5 million and \$3.5 million and access to expert technical assistance to implement their plans over two years:

- Charleston County, SC
- Harris County, TX
- Lucas County, OH
- Milwaukee County, WI
- New Orleans, LA
- New York City, NY
- Philadelphia, PA
- Pima County, AZ
- Spokane County, WA
- State of Connecticut
- St. Louis County, MO

All of these sites, if their progress warrants, will be eligible for renewal of implementation funding beyond the initial two years.

The Foundation awarded each of the following nine jurisdictions \$150,000 grants and access to expert technical assistance to continue their local reform work and participate actively in the Safety and Justice Challenge Network:

- Ada County, ID
- Cook County, IL
- Los Angeles County, CA
- Mecklenburg County, NC
- Mesa County, CO
- Multnomah County, OR
- Palm Beach County, FL
- Pennington County, SD
- Shelby County, TN

The Foundation's goal is that these sites will be in a position to receive implementation funding in 2017.

What are the jurisdictions looking to achieve through the initiative?

With support from the Foundation and help from a consortium of national experts and technical assistance providers, jurisdictions are making changes in policy, practice, and system alignment designed to safely drive down jail usage and reduce racial and ethnic disparities. The 11 jurisdictions the Foundation selected to support implementation of their plans over two years have set ambitious goals for lowering their jail populations, ranging from 15 percent to 34 percent. Many are launching initiatives to address the disproportionate impact of jail misuse and overuse on people too poor to post bail, as well as on people with mental health or substance abuse issues.

The jurisdictions' plans employ an expansive array of local solutions, such as diversion programs, which can steer people out of the criminal justice system who are not a threat to public safety; implicit bias training for police and other system practitioners, probation officers, prosecutors, and judges; and expanded community-based treatment options. Their diversity of sizes, geographies, demographics, and challenges will produce a variety of creative approaches and models for reform that jurisdictions across the country can adopt.

Which organizations are providing technical assistance to grantees?

Several of the nation's leading criminal justice organizations are providing technical assistance and counsel to Safety and Justice Challenge jurisdictions: the Center for Court Innovation, the Institute for State and Local Governance at the City University of New York, the Justice Management Institute, Justice System Partners, and the Vera Institute of Justice.

Why jails?

The overuse and misuse of jails in America has reached a crisis point. Local jails—intended to hold people who pose a flight risk or threat to public safety—are instead warehousing people for non-violent offenses, or simply because they are too poor to post bail. This is one of the greatest drivers of over-incarceration in the U.S.

Some key statistics that illustrate the extent of the problem:

- There are nearly 12 million local jail admissions in the U.S. every year—almost 20 times the number of prison admissions, and equivalent to the populations of Los Angeles and New York City combined.
- Three out of five jail inmates haven't been convicted of a crime and are awaiting trial. Many of these people—all presumed innocent—spend long stretches of time in jail because they are too poor to post bail.
- Nearly 75 percent of the population of both sentenced offenders and pretrial detainees are in jail for non-violent traffic, property, or drug offenses.

Research shows that only a few days in jail can limit future job prospects, worsen the health of those detained, increase the likelihood of a repeat offense, and increase the likelihood of incarceration—making jail a gateway to deeper and more lasting involvement with the criminal justice system. Taxpayers spend billions of dollars each year on local jails; more effective local justice systems would allow cities and counties to reinvest in critical services that improve lives and strengthen communities, such as education, mental health care, and workforce development.