

# Data Accessibility in Criminal Justice

A Guide to Finding Opportunities and  
Overcoming Challenges



# Why Is Access to Criminal Justice Data So Important?

Data is critical to our collective understanding of the criminal justice system, but it can be difficult to access. We're here to help you understand the obstacles you may face, find ways to overcome these challenges, and feel confident to seek out the data you need.

Measures for Justice works with criminal justice data every day. We help communities, including the institutions that serve them, reshape how the criminal justice system works using high-quality data. Getting access to data, however, isn't always easy. We've learned a lot through our efforts, and we're excited to share our learnings with you so you too can use data to advocate for the changes you want to see in your own community.

This toolkit provides an overview of three common data access barriers paired with tips to help you prepare for and mitigate these potential difficulties. It also includes a list of centralized data sources to be considered as starting points on your journey to better understand the criminal justice system.



## Common Obstacles to Data Access

In your efforts to access criminal justice data in order to better understand and evaluate the system, there are several obstacles you're likely to come across, including:

### Legal restrictions & privacy concerns.

It's important to remember that data collected by criminal justice agencies are more than numbers in a spreadsheet or lines on a dashboard. These data represent the experiences of real people, and may include Personal Identifiable Information (PII) and other sensitive information that could be harmful if mishandled. For these reasons, there are often restrictions around the types of information you can receive from agencies. This is particularly true of records pertaining to cases that have been sealed or expunged, as well as the records of justice system-involved youth, posing additional challenges to understanding the way these cases are processed through the system.

### Agency feasibility & technical limitations.

Beyond privacy concerns and legally imposed restrictions governing data sharing, many agencies - including police, prosecuting attorneys, or the courts - are grappling with resource and technical limitations that present feasibility concerns to fulfilling requests for data. There is significant variability within and across jurisdictions in the information agencies can feasibly provide. Whereas a prosecutor in one county may have a state-of-the-art case management system with complex reporting capabilities, a neighboring county may be using paper records or an Excel spreadsheet for tracking data. These stark differences further complicate attempts to paint a complete picture of how justice unfolds in communities across the country.

## Data quality challenges.

Even when the information you seek is legally and feasibly obtainable from a criminal justice agency, challenges related to data quality may pose barriers to successful data analysis. If data points are tracked disparately across multiple case management systems or entered in a nonsystematic way, the resulting data will likely be marked by inaccuracies and/or missingness. Like legal restrictions and agency feasibility, data quality challenges are highly variable across jurisdictions and agency types.



# Overcoming Obstacles to Data Access

While it's true you may run into a number of barriers on your criminal justice data search—and that many of these systemic challenges can't be solved for quickly or easily—the good news is that there are strategies you can consider to prepare for and mitigate these challenges. Consider trying one (or all!) of the following:

## Explore existing sources.

Once you've identified the type of data you need to conduct your analysis, a first step is to consider where the data lives. Agencies operating at the federal, state, and local levels have increasingly explored ways to make data available for research and analysis. Before beginning on what may be a lengthy and complex path to requesting information, consider whether the information you're seeking is made publicly available. The following section provides several starting points as you consider where you might find the information you're seeking.

## Familiarize yourself with laws & policy governing data.

Familiarize yourself with laws & policy governing data. If the data you're looking for are not publicly available, consider beginning by reviewing the laws and policies governing access to criminal justice data in the jurisdiction you're interested in. Each state has its own freedom of information laws as well as rules and policies governing particular types of data. While many laws can be complex and difficult to decipher, having a general understanding of the information you're legally permitted to (and the information you are not) can save you from unexpected barriers down the road.



Curious about your state's public records laws? The National Conference of State Legislatures provides [a compilation of relevant laws](#).

## **Tailor your request in response to agency capabilities.**

Once you've identified the type of data you need and have confirmed the data is generally legally obtainable, you're ready to begin a discussion about data collection. Depending on the agency of interest, there may be information on their website outlining the steps to make a data or records request. Often this information is not readily available, and you will need to connect with the agency's data/records personnel to discuss how to submit a request for data. During this process, be mindful of the resource constraints and technological challenges noted above. If possible, have a discussion about the data you're seeking. Are there particular pieces of your request that pose a burden to the agency? For example, is there a data point you're requesting that they do not track electronically or data spanning a date range that precedes the agency's electronic case management system? When learning of these limitations, consider amending your request to be responsive to what the agency can feasibly provide.

## **Practice responsible data stewardship.**

Because criminal justice data are often marked by inconsistencies, it is especially important to be mindful of the limitations of the information you receive. As you discuss your request with an agency, strive to understand where these potential pitfalls lie to avoid misrepresenting the data in your analysis. In addition, criminal justice data often include sensitive information with the ability to identify the individuals represented by the numbers. As such, data containing PII are often subject to additional securities and protections. When possible, limit your request to exclude PII such as name and date of birth. If a unique case or individual identifier is required for your study, consider asking the agency if they can feasibly provide a unique identifier in place of PII. As you submit your data request, you may be asked to sign a data sharing agreement (sometimes called a data use agreement or more generally, a memorandum of understanding) that includes important considerations about data transfer, storage, use, and dissemination. Be mindful of these considerations and ensure you have the right mechanisms in place to accommodate requirements.

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## Where to Get Started: Criminal Justice Data Sources

When thinking about your data request, a good first step is to consider whether the data you're seeking may be accessible through an existing source. Many agencies at the state and local level collect and report data and sometimes it's made publicly available via reports or dashboards. Increasingly, agencies are exploring new avenues for sharing data with their respective communities. Here are a few avenues you can consider as a starting point on your data collection journey:

### Nationwide data sources.

Federal agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice manage several long-standing nationwide data reporting programs. Due to the various challenges and limitations noted above, data are not reported consistently for every jurisdiction across the country. Still, these initiatives lend some of the most robust and historical data available to people interested in better understanding the criminal justice system by way of data.

- **UCR & NIBRS.**

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has long encouraged law enforcement agencies to collect and report data. The Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program was launched in 1930 with the goal of providing reliable data to inform law enforcement operations and management. In 1989, the FBI implemented the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which provides a more detailed look at crime occurrences.



- **NCVS.**

NCVS. The Bureau of Justice Statistics provides another example of a long-standing data collection effort in the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Unlike the UCR and NIBRS, the data generated from NCVS are self-reported from a sample of United States residents. These data speak to victimization experiences, and criminologists often turn to self-report initiatives like NCVS to better understand “the dark figures” of crime<sup>1</sup>.

## Statewide data sources.

In addition to efforts to bring together data at a national level, state agencies often play a key role in the administration and management of data recorded throughout the state. Further, many state governments have created “open data portals” to draw together and make available data from multiple sources, including criminal justice agencies. Below are examples of these efforts.

- **State Courts.**

Every state has a state court administrator (or equivalent) responsible for overseeing a variety of court functions, including record keeping. The AOC<sup>2</sup> is a particularly helpful starting point in states where courts report to a centralized data system that allows for bulk extractions of data.

### Examples of transparency among state courts:

- [Michigan Courts Interactive Court Data Dashboard](#)
- [California Court Data and Statistics](#)

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<sup>1</sup> The “dark figures of crime” include crimes not reported to or identified by criminal justice agencies. As a result, these crimes are not captured in official statistics.

<sup>2</sup> Here we use “AOC” generally to represent “Administrative Office of the Court”, a common acronym for this statewide office. However, names vary across jurisdictions. For example, in New York we have the Office of Court Administration (OCA) whereas Michigan has the State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) and Missouri has the Office of State Courts Administrator (OSCA).





Curious about how your state's trial and appellate courts are organized and administered? The [State Court Organization Data dashboard](#) by the National Center for State Courts provides insight into the differences.

- **State Correctional Departments.**

Every state has a department of correction that records data on state correctional institutions, such as capacity, population demographics, staff, programs, and resources.

#### Examples of transparency among DOCs:

- [Iowa Department of Corrections](#)
- [Oregon Department of Corrections](#)



Curious about the number of people held in state and federal prison facilities? BJS's [National Prisoner Statistics \(NPS\)](#) program provides these numbers annually for the 50 state departments of collection and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

- **State Police.**

To access things like criminal history or statewide crime reported and arrest statistics, often the state police are the primary source to go to. Many state police departments have a statistics center, crime lab, or analytics department. If you can find their page on the state police website you may be able to find some data.

- [Arkansas State Police](#)
- [New Jersey State Police](#)

- **Open Data Portals.**

In addition to the federal open data portal (data.gov), states have increasingly been adopting similar open data initiatives. Many of these open data portals source information collected by local and state criminal justice agencies, such as police and correctional institutions.

#### Examples of state Open Data Portals:

- [Iowa Open Data Portal](#)
- [Colorado Open Data Portal](#)

## Local data sources.

If you're looking for data spanning an entire state (or more than one state!), you're likely to begin by looking at state- or nationwide sources. But what if your question is specific to your community? Agencies operating locally, like police and prosecutors, each collect data to some extent. Below are examples of recent efforts to bring criminal justice transparency to local policing and prosecution practices.

- **Prosecutorial transparency efforts.**

Every county or parish has a District Attorney. District Attorneys are responsible for the prosecution data within their jurisdiction which can include crimes prosecuted, conviction rate, and much more.

#### Examples of transparency among prosecutors:

- [Philadelphia District Attorney Office Data Lab](#)
- [Jackson County District Attorney's Office](#)

- **Police transparency efforts.**

City, town, village, and university police departments record information on arrest rates and overall crimes reported.

### Examples of transparency among police departments:

- [Pittsburgh Police Data Portal](#)
- [Redmond Dashboard](#)

- **Trial court transparency efforts.**

Trial court transparency efforts. Trial and district courts are generally one of the first level of courts those justice involved face (besides municipal or magistrate courts). They may maintain data that speaks to a large portion of the criminal justice process from offense charged to conviction.

### Examples of transparency among local trial courts:

- [Kentucky Courts](#)
- [Montana District Court Public Dashboard](#)



# We're Here to Help!

Although there are a number of obstacles you may run into on your journey to collect criminal justice data, you're now well-equipped to prepare for and mitigate these potential barriers in advance.

Utilizing criminal justice data is a powerful avenue for understanding the system and advocating for change.

If you'd like additional resources, we encourage you to join All In, a network of individuals who are committed to data-driven change. You'll gain exclusive access to additional resources like this, have an opportunity to connect with agency leaders and community members alike, and more. [Join today!](#)



Do you have feedback about this resource? We'd love to hear it!  
Reach out to us at [engagement@measuresforjustice.org](mailto:engagement@measuresforjustice.org).