

## Commentary: How Charleston County is using data to cut jail populations

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Sheriff Al Cannon Detention Center on Leeds Avenue in North Charleston. File/Staff

Charleston County has joined a growing national trend that invests in data-based solutions to address community criminal justice issues, and the results are already beginning to show. The county is one of 11 jurisdictions recently chosen to receive funding for its Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) to support evidence-based research and reform. The council works together with local chiefs of police, probation and parole, victim advocates and other community members to propose targeted solutions to improve [public safety](#) and reduce local jail populations.

The idea behind a CJCC is simple — data driven improvements are more successful than blind attempts at reform. Each local community faces a unique set of issues, which means that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to criminal justice reform. Of course, it's exceedingly difficult to provide a tailored solution without the research or interagency collaboration necessary to identify a community's specific needs, let alone address them. But this requires methodic quantitative and qualitative research on a local level that is beyond the state legislature's

[https://www.postandcourier.com/opinion/commentary/commentary-how-charleston-county-is-using-data-to-cut-jail/article\\_9ffd8966-b073-11e8-a6ff-a7d897c0d081.html](https://www.postandcourier.com/opinion/commentary/commentary-how-charleston-county-is-using-data-to-cut-jail/article_9ffd8966-b073-11e8-a6ff-a7d897c0d081.html)



resources. Local CJCCs fill this gap by researching and identifying the issues, pinpointing possible solutions and proposing data-driven improvements for the community to implement.

Charleston County's CJCC recently released its annual report, which focused on six evidence-based strategies that would address the county's most pressing needs. For example, the report identified pre-trial justice as a major challenge, as it drove an astonishing 91 percent of the county's local jail use in 2017, up from 85 percent in 2014. The CJCC found huge disparities between individuals released on bond and those released on their own recognizance, suggesting that too often a defendant's financial circumstances matter more than his risk to the community when it comes to pre-trial release decisions. The CJCC noted, for example, that in 2015, 71 percent of offenders released on financial bond returned to jail before trial compared to only 41 percent of those released on their own recognizance.

Thankfully, the CJCC has encouraged a variety of mechanisms to bring low-risk individuals out of jail, with a focus on pre-trial assessment and release. Already, Charleston's local jail population has decreased by 13 percent since 2014. Local law enforcement has also increased its use of cite and release for low-level, nonviolent charges by 46 percent, and the number of familiar faces cycling through the jail each month has decreased by 42 percent since 2014. With the encouragement and cooperation of its law enforcement community, the CJCC is continuing to explore different ways to reduce the county's jail population and recidivism rates.

Charleston County's recognition of the importance of funding pre-trial assessments as an alternative to detention is an excellent example of a growing trend of evidence-based and public safety-minded approaches to criminal justice. Social science research continues to show that keeping low-risk, nonviolent offenders out of jail reduces both crime and the rate at which individuals reoffend. For instance, an Arnold Foundation study found that when low-risk defendants are held for approximately three days, their chance of reoffending increases by almost 40 percent over that of similar defendants held for less than 24 hours. The effect is magnified the longer the person is detained.

Counties like Eau Claire in Wisconsin prove the sweeping effect that pre-trial reform can have on a local jail population. In 2014, the county emptied over 17,000 jail beds after its CJCC implemented a pre-trial assessment and diversion initiative through a new Community Transition Center. These changes had a significant impact on the community's safety, with less than 30 percent of offenders who were sentenced to the Community Transition Center receiving new criminal charges within one year of program completion. An investment in these kinds of reforms provides individuals with an opportunity to remain engaged with their community and maintain employment. This drastically reduces their chances of re-arrest and makes the community more secure — all with a cheaper price tag.

The work of the CJCC is critical to this effort. Charleston County would never have fully understood the challenges in its pre-trial framework or which evidence-based solutions were most likely to address its needs without the research and cooperation of its CJCC and local criminal justice partners.

It's clear why so many jurisdictions across the country have begun to work with the CJCC. The intergovernmental cooperation and localized solutions make it an attractive and successful way to manage local jail population problems. The results are profound: safer communities via data driven policy initiatives, all at an ultimately lower cost to taxpayers — win, win, win.

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