

JUSTICE AND SAFETY

Criminal Case Processing Reforms in Harris County, Texas

Findings from the Safety and Justice Challenge

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RESEARCH REPORT

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Criminal Case Processing Reforms in Harris County, Texas

Jail incarceration is a significant part of the United States' uniquely high incarceration rates. Although the general trend over the past 10 years has been a decrease in the jail population rate, this decrease has been unequally felt, with non-Hispanic white and Hispanic people seeing greater declines than Black and Native American people.¹ Moreover, while the jail incarceration rate has decreased since 2013, the number of people held in jails has increased by 3.2 percent, and since 2015, the time people spend in jail has increased by an average of seven days. Since 2020, when the jail population fell significantly, the number of adults held in local jails has increased by 21 percent.²

High levels of jail incarceration impose substantial costs on jurisdictions, requiring greater resources with potentially limited impact on public safety (Bail Project 2025; Clear and Montagnet 2021; NRC 2014). Jail incarceration also places a great deal of strain on the people incarcerated, who may be at high risk of being victimized while incarcerated, have lower wages after their release, and experience worse mental health and substance use issues (Ellison et al. 2022; Turney and Conner 2019). In addition, incarcerated people's family members experience emotional stress, work-family conflict, social stigma, and parenting and financial strain (Turney and Conner 2019).

People in jail pretrial make up a large part of the jail population, and case processing time contributes to pretrial incarceration's impact. For those people who are not released before their cases are resolved, efficient case processing is vital for minimizing time spent in jail. It may also be important for those who are released: many defendants are released onto pretrial supervision, and longer times spent on supervision may result in higher rates of reincarceration. As cases linger, pretrial supervision officers may be more likely to identify behavior that outside of supervision would not result in further incarceration, such as failing to abstain from alcohol use or maintain employment or associating with people with criminal records.

To address the harms of pretrial jail incarceration by minimizing jail use, Harris County, Texas, has taken multiple approaches to expedite case processing. These approaches include the use of scheduling orders, more efficient evidence gathering, and the introduction of the Responsive Interventions for Change (RIC) docket. In this case study, we describe these approaches and the challenges Harris County has faced implementing each. We also discuss the perceived impacts and limitations of the approaches so other jurisdictions interested in similar approaches can determine whether they might be a good fit.

Throughout, we also discuss the relationship between case processing time and public safety and the role of pretrial supervision. We begin with overviews of our methodology and Harris County, focusing on the county's courts and pretrial supervision system. We then discuss each of the county's approaches to expediting case processing in detail and the successes and challenges associated with each. We end by summarizing the lessons learned from these efforts.

Case Study Methodology

This case study highlights some of the work supported by the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC; box 1), and examines Harris County's experience implementing a variety of strategies and practices to improve case processing times. We relied on three primary data sources for this case study: semistructured interviews with Harris County stakeholders, analysis of materials and documentation provided by stakeholders, and analysis of jail population data collected from SJC sites by the Institute for State and Local Governance (ISLG). ISLG shared those data with the Urban research team in January 2025.

BOX 1

The Safety and Justice Challenge Implementation Case Studies

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation launched the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) in 2015 to address the misuse and overuse of jails, a main driver of incarceration in America. The network of cities, counties, and states participating in the SJC are working to rethink local justice systems with strategies that are intended to be data-driven, equity-focused, and community-informed, and that safely reduce jail populations, eliminate ineffective and unfair practices, and reduce racial disparities. This case study is part of a series that examines how SJC network jurisdictions that received significant, sustained grant investment in comprehensive system reform worked to change the way that they use jails, in order to provide practical insights to other localities seeking to realize similar reform ambitions.

Interviews

Between December 2024 and April 2025, the research team conducted 11 one-hour virtual interviews with Harris County stakeholders from the county courts, state district court, and the county's pretrial services division. The research team interviewed a range of stakeholders including two criminal court judges, two presiding judges, two court managers, one presiding judge, and staff in the pretrial services division. In these interviews, the team gathered information on the stakeholders' professional

backgrounds and roles in case processing, Harris County’s case processing landscape, strategies for expediting case processing, those strategies’ design and implementation, and the strategies’ challenges, successes, and impacts. After collecting these data, we transcribed the interviews and uploaded them to NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, where we used thematic analysis of stakeholders’ responses to identify trends using a codebook developed for this case study.

Document Review

We requested documentation related to case processing strategies from all stakeholders we spoke with. At the county level, relevant documentation included a copy of a scheduling order, caseload trend reports, and a public dashboard that displays caseload trends for misdemeanors in Harris County. At the state level, we received a document compiling recommendations for docket and case flow management compiled by the county’s case management analysts. We also received two resources that summarized the impact of the RIC docket, including a local news article and slideshow presentation. For the pretrial services division, we accessed and compiled data from the division’s annual reports from 2015 through 2024, noting key statistics such as number of cases placed with pretrial services every year, rearrest rates, and cases diverted to the RIC docket.

ISLG Data Analysis

ISLG provided cleaned, processed jail trends data from Harris County. We used univariate and bivariate descriptive statistics to analyze trends in the county’s jail population using these data. All SJC site data were provided by ISLG unless indicated otherwise.

Harris County Courts and Pretrial Services

Background on the County

Home to Houston, Texas’s largest city, Harris County is the most populous county in the state and the third most populous in the country, with nearly 5 million residents.³ Harris County is in southeastern Texas near the Gulf of Mexico, and as a result has endured several major hurricanes, including Hurricane Harvey in 2017, which temporarily shut down much of the county’s court systems owing to weather damage. As of 2020, Harris County had a poverty rate of 16 percent, higher than the statewide average of 13.7 percent.⁴ As of 2024, it had a murder rate of 9.63 per 100,000 residents, a robbery rate

of 171.21 per 100,000 residents, and a burglary rate of 465.83 per 100,000 residents, all of which are higher than similar Texas counties, including Bexar, Dallas, El Paso, Tarrant, and Travis.⁵

Background on the Court System

In Harris County, cases are divided between the Harris County Courts (hereafter, county courts), which primarily hear misdemeanor cases, and the Harris County District Courts (hereafter, state courts), which primarily hear felony cases. Below we describe how these courts operate separately and how they work together, and how this affects case processing.

County Courts

Harris County's 16 criminal courts deal with lower-level criminal offenses, focusing on Class A and B misdemeanors. County court judges affect case processing through the management of their dockets and how quickly they dispose of cases. Other court and criminal legal system actors wield influence in affecting case processing time. County court managers can expedite case processing by encouraging both the prosecution and defense to promptly hand over discovery and working between agencies to resolve any miscommunication. They can also do so by working directly with clerks to use available technology and tools, spotting and quickly correcting data-entry mistakes, and leading educational initiatives for judges and other staff that may improve their practices. As one county court manager noted, they can improve court processing by “nudging” all parties, informally, through policy and through education. In addition to supporting communication and best practices, court managers have handled emergency situations in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey and COVID-19, including the coordination of relocating and sharing courtrooms.

State Courts

The state courts in Harris County deal with more serious offenses, focusing on felony cases. Case processing at the state level is mostly determined by judges, who like county court judges are responsible for managing their own dockets. A stakeholder we spoke with expressed that in contrast to county court managers, who support case processing through various responsibilities and initiatives, state-level case managers' coordination responsibilities are more hands off.

The Split Between County and State Courts

In Texas, felonies and misdemeanors are processed separately, meaning people who are charged with both receive both state and county court dates. This can create a difficult environment for ensuring efficient case processing. Yet state and county court staff attempt to minimize the burden of felony-

misdemeanor charges. In some cases, they will attempt to schedule misdemeanor and felony court cases on the same day, and if possible, in the same building. One stakeholder explained, “On a felony case, if you make bond, most of the time you have to go to court the next business day. If you get arrested Saturday and make bond, you go to felony court Monday, misdemeanor court Friday, but we try to keep [hearing dates] together if we can.”

Texas’s separate processing of felonies and misdemeanors also splits sentencing and supervision. This creates complications, such as multiple attorneys being assigned to the same defendant, violations doubling under supervision, and human resources being expended on two separate trials. State court judges aim to collaborate with county court judges on setting parallel bond conditions to avoid duplication, but this does not occur by default and needs to be an explicit goal for both judges. This dual processing system is also disorienting for the accused person, who receives different communications from different court systems with different expectations.

In addition to frustrations around the logistics of felony-misdemeanor cases, most stakeholders we spoke with agreed that dual processing creates some unusual charging decisions. One stakeholder described an example related to aggravated robbery:

“We do have weird scenarios where someone might be charged with aggravated robbery in the felony court. Same transaction, the gun or weapon used is now filed in my [county] court, and that’s just kind of, that’s a little redundant, right? If you’re going to charge [them] with aggravated robbery there, why are you now charging for the misdemeanor unlawful carrying of a weapon in my court?”

This sort of double charge also delays case processing. At the misdemeanor level, cases that are attached to a felony may sit idle on judges’ dockets for months because felony cases often require more time to process. ISLG analyzed administrative case-level court system data from Harris County and found that misdemeanor cases associated with at least one felony charge made up 3 to 9 percent of all misdemeanor cases between 2016 and 2024; in 2023, about 166,160 misdemeanor cases were filed and approximately 13,140 were linked to at least one felony charge. Some stakeholders suggested that felony-misdemeanor cases should be tried concurrently and are exploring statutory options that would allow misdemeanor cases to go with their felony cases to the state court to avoid these complications.

Background on Harris County’s Pretrial Services

Harris County Pretrial Services provides information that judges use to make pretrial release decisions in Harris County and supervises people released on bond to ensure they comply with court orders,

make court appearances, and do not incur additional charges. Though it has no direct influence on conditions of supervision, case processing time, or sentencing, pretrial services supports case processing by completing relevant paperwork, instructing those under its supervision on where to report and when, and, with the district clerk, updating systems to inform the Harris County Sheriff's Office on when to release people from jail. Occasionally, after consulting with the prosecution and defense, pretrial services may ask the court to remove certain supervision conditions. It will not recommend that conditions be enhanced. Whether people successfully complete supervision is affected by both the conditions and length of supervision, and the actions taken by county and state court actors therefore directly affect the work of pretrial services.

Pretrial services supervises a wide range of cases with a wide range of conditions. Conditions are based mostly on the offense with which a person is charged. Pretrial services is working toward implementing conditions that are also based on risk level, especially risk of any rearrest and rearrest for a violent offense specifically.

Supervision may be as minimal as only being on supervision on paper (with no reporting requirements or other conditions) or as extensive as involving frequent compliance checks and use of numerous monitoring devices. As one staff member noted, "It can go as low as administrative, meaning that they get text reminders of their next court dates, or it can go as high as monitoring devices. That could be one or a combination of any of these, which is electronic monitoring, SCRAM, alcohol portables, and ignition interlock."

One recent change pretrial services made that has improved supervision is splitting the agency into two divisions, one focused on case management and supervision and one on dealing with the courts. This has improved morale and enabled case managers to provide higher-quality supervision. One pretrial supervision staff member described pretrial services' activity, from advising the court to the start of supervision, as follows:

"When someone gets arrested on a Class B misdemeanor and above, all the way through murder and capital murder, the pretrial officers that are assigned to JPC, which is a Joint Processing Center, it's a facility within the Harris County Jail.... They interview those defendants to collect financial information. They do criminal background checks. They do public safety assessments.... They compile all that information and provide it to a magistrate for review.... After they see pretrial services, they talk to the public defenders. Then they get assigned to a docket over there. Then that pretrial officer then provides a report from all the information they collected to that magistrate for review. If that magistrate then approves a personal bond, then they get placed under pretrial supervision.... Once those clients get released from jail, they are instructed by our staff in the jail to report to our offices down here in downtown, 49 San

Jacinto, which is where our intake center's located; that's where I have my staff located in part, to then screen those defendants once they report to our office. Then that's where we take over as case managers."

Based on pretrial services' annual reports, in 2024, out of a total of 69,589 cases, 51,141 defendants were granted pretrial supervision. That year, 80 percent of cases were compliant with supervision. Among the 20 percent of cases categorized as unsuccessful, 1.7 percent resulted from new offenses, 0.1 percent from a defendant's failure to report, 9.3 percent from violations of conditions, and 37.1 percent from bond revocations. Failure to appear constituted 24.4 percent of unsuccessful cases and 5.1 percent of all cases terminated from supervision. For 27.5 percent of unsuccessful cases, a noncompliance type was not specified.

Research shows that detaining a person before trial based solely on the charge can increase the likelihood of both pretrial and postsentence failure.⁶ The director of pretrial services noted that courts have faced heavy criticism from the media and policymakers, and that charge-based policies may actually undermine public safety. They added that such policies make it difficult for pretrial services—and the justice system as a whole—to follow legal and evidence-based practices.

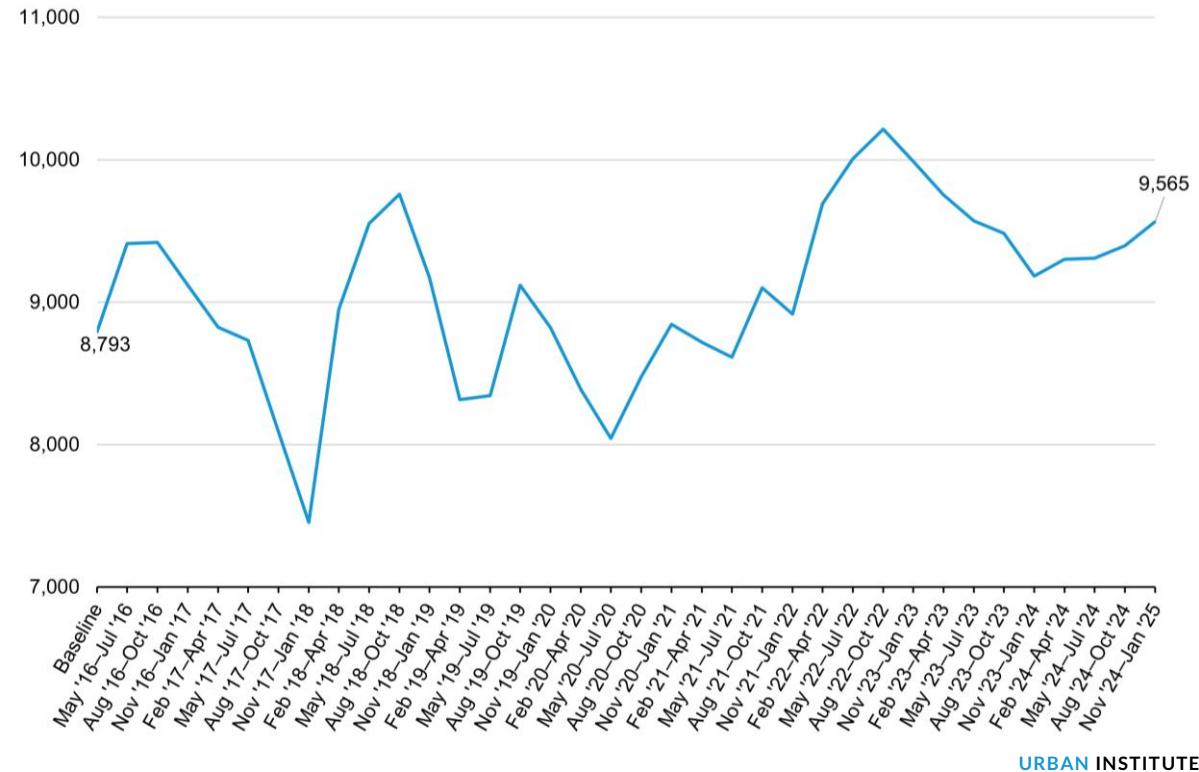
Harris County Jail Population Characteristics and Trends

Before Harris County joined the Safety and Justice Challenge in 2016, one-fifth of its jail's pretrial detainees were held for low-level, nonviolent offenses. Seventy percent of those pretrial detainees ended up reentering the jail system.⁷ Black people have historically been overrepresented in the jail, and in 2015 more than three-fourths of the jail population was Black or Hispanic. According to data for 2025, the jail's racial and ethnic composition remains almost the same. Eighty-nine percent of the jail population is male and 12 percent is unhoused. Sixty percent falls between the ages of 25 and 44. One-fifth suffers from a mental health issue.⁸

Since joining the Safety and Justice Challenge, Harris County Jail's average daily population (ADP) has fluctuated slightly. The county's jail reform efforts prioritized case processing and pretrial release measures. Since these reforms were made to improve early release rates, some measures of the jail population have not been positively affected, one of them being the ADP. In 2015, the ADP sat at 8,793, and the most recent data for 2025 indicate an ADP of 9,656—a 9.8 percent increase (figure 1). The ADP hit its lowest point (7,454) between November 2017 and January 2018, a period that closely followed Hurricane Harvey's landfall in August 2017. As figure 1 shows, the ADP has fluctuated notably from quarter to quarter, but overall, the percentage of people confined pretrial increased by 7.8 percent over the course of the SJC. Yet ADP is driven not only by the amount of time people spend in jail pretrial, but

also by the number of people incarcerated, which is a product of both the crime rate and police activity, which the county and state courts have little influence over.

FIGURE 1
Harris County’s Average Daily Jail Population Increased 10 Percent Between November 2015 and January 2025



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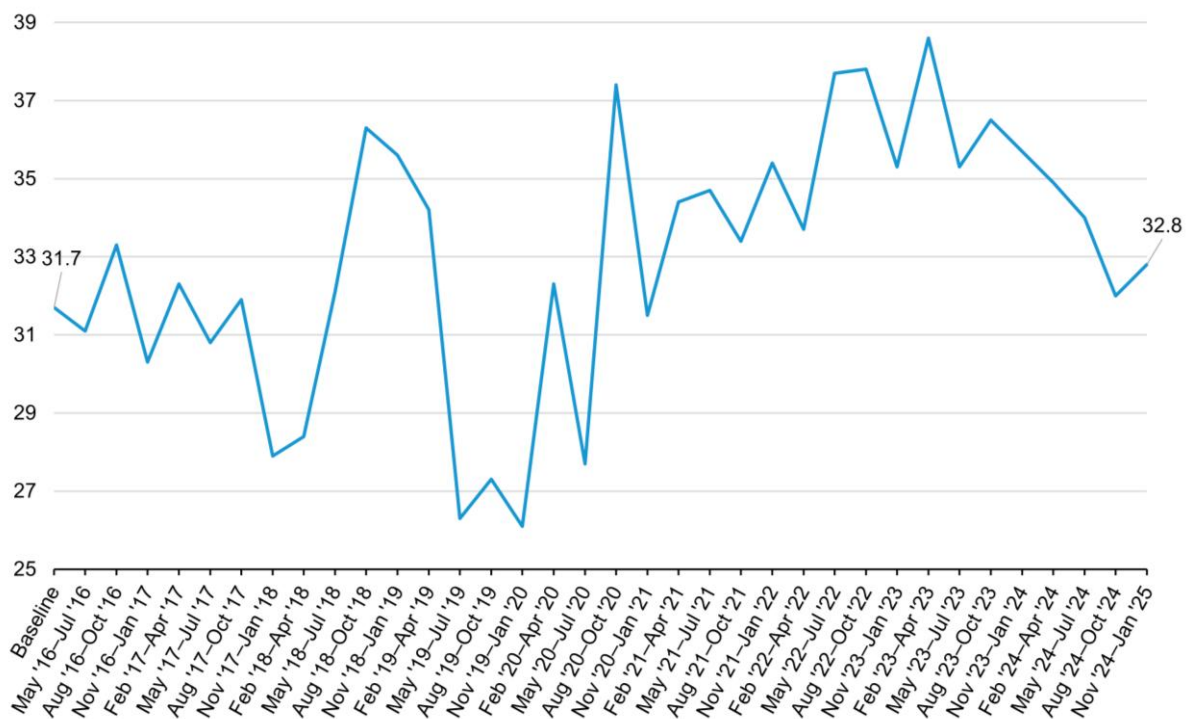
Source: Analysis by the CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance. Data were shared by ISLG with the Urban research team in January 2025; not publicly available.

Note: Baseline = November 2015 to April 2016.

The county’s focus on case processing and pretrial release also had a minimal impact on average length of stay (ALOS). In late 2015, the ALOS was 31.7 days. It underwent a notable dip that coincided with *ODonnell et al. v. Harris County et al.*, a class action lawsuit that reformed the county’s bail practices, and the COVID-19 pandemic (figure 2). Since late 2020, though, the ALOS has increased, peaking between February and April 2023 at nearly 40 days then declining to 32.8 days in 2024. One stakeholder noted that ALOS could be driven by a small share of people whose length of stay is unlikely to be affected by case processing reforms; these people likely face high barriers to release, including homelessness, mental health struggles, and substance abuse disorders. Moreover, pretrial reforms that expedite the release of people with low-level charges may even increase ALOS, with those who remain

in custody facing more serious charges with longer lengths of stay. Research finds that people with serious felony charges contribute to lengthier ALOSs: one analysis of three jail jurisdictions found that people with a violent felony charge spent more than 100 days in jail, twice as long as people charged with a nonviolent felony and 10 times as long as those charged with a misdemeanor.⁹ It is possible such people skewed the ALOS for Harris County despite real reform to other cases.

FIGURE 2
Harris County's Average Length of Stay Increased by One Day Between November 2015 and January 2025



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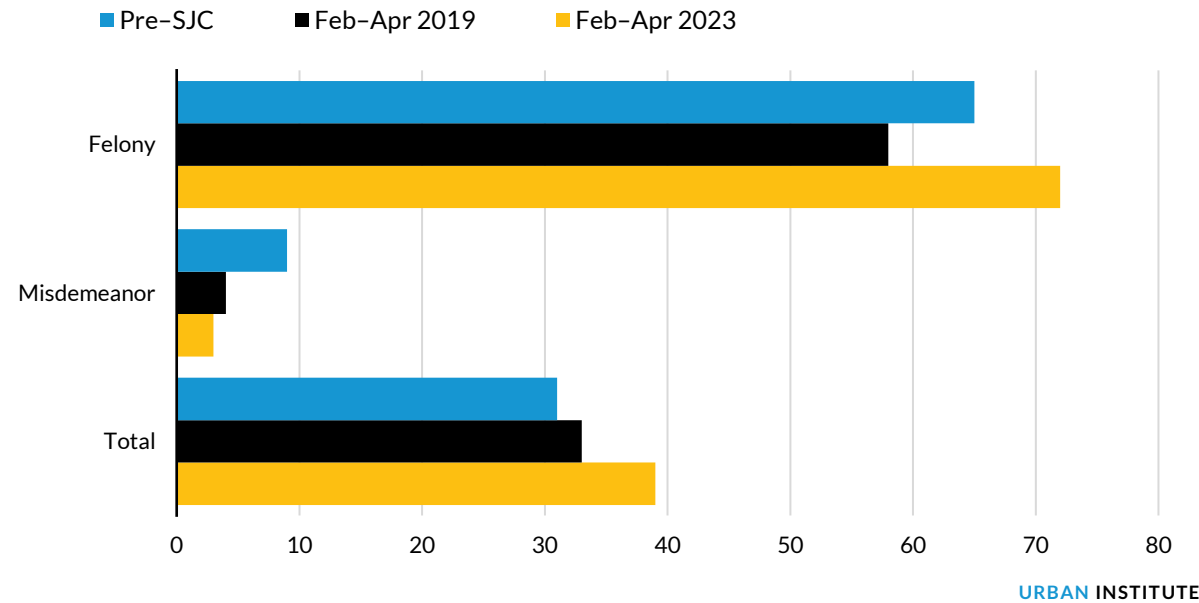
Source: Analysis by CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance. Data were shared by ISLG with the Urban research team in January 2025; not publicly available.

Note: Baseline = November 2015 to April 2016.

Examining ALOS by case type, ALOS for felony cases appears to be driving the overall trend, increasing from 65 to 72 days from the pre-SJC baseline through April 2023 (figure 3). For misdemeanor cases, on the other hand, ALOS decreased by two-thirds, from 9 to 3 days. Differences in state and county courts' adoption of case processing measures and those courts' differing needs and challenges may account for this difference. Furthermore, this supports the theory that average case processing times are driven by a handful of outlier cases, as most outlier cases will be felony cases. The

decrease in ALOS among misdemeanor cases may better represent the experience of people with less serious risks and needs whom the interventions Harris County undertook were designed to serve.

FIGURE 3
Harris County’s Average Length of Stay Increased Only for Felony Cases

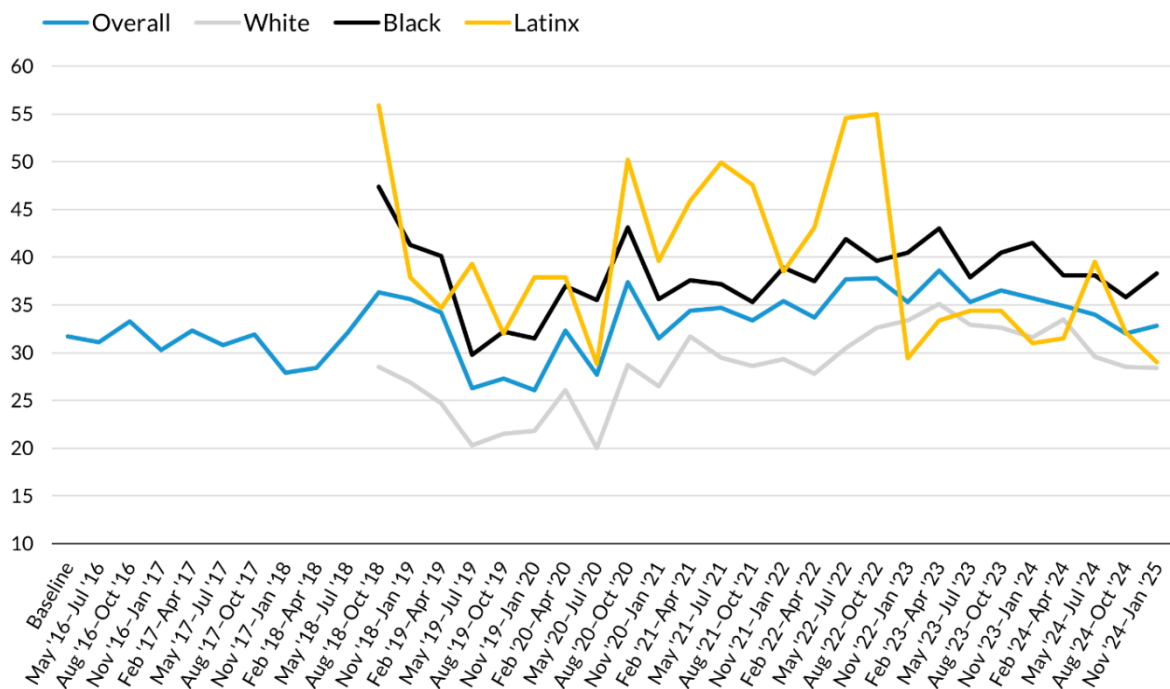


Source: Analysis by CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance. Data available at “Measuring Progress: Jail Trends in SJC Sites: Overall Length of Stay is Up,” Safety and Justice Challenge, accessed January 7, 2026, <https://safetyandjusticechallenge.org/measuring-progress-jail-trends-in-sjc-sites/#length-of-stay>.

ALOS also differs somewhat for jail population subgroups. Black and Latinx people consistently experience disparities in ALOS compared with white people (figure 4): in late 2015, the ALOSs for Black and Latinx people were 31.7 and 39.8 days, whereas for white people it was 26.9 days. Though there is a gap in the data from 2016 to late 2018 across racial and ethnic groups, available data from 2018 onwards show that these disparities mostly persisted for Black people. Most recently, from November 2024 to January 2025, the ALOS for Black people increased to 38.5 days. Notably, though, the ALOS for Latinx people has declined in recent years. The most recent ALOS for Latinx people was 29.0 days, only slightly above the 28.0 day average for white people, and at multiple points it has fallen below the average for white people. Harris County does not report data for Asian and Indigenous people.

FIGURE 4

Harris County's Average Length of Stay Differs by Race and Ethnicity



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Source: Analysis by CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance. Data were shared by ISLG with the Urban research team in January 2025; not publicly available.

Note: Baseline = November 2015 to April 2016.

Case Processing in Harris County

For the past decade, between Hurricane Harvey, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an expanding population, Harris County has always dealt with case backlogs. One stakeholder from pretrial services noted how these events have shaped how their courts function over the years:

“Our courthouse was completely flooded, and then I think as we were just getting out of [Hurricane Harvey], then, boom, COVID comes in 2020. That exacerbated everything. As you know, no jury trials were happening for a very, very long time, and so, that makes things even worse. I would say we’re finally starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak, through various initiatives that the county and state officials have taken.”

Stakeholders also noted a shift in the county’s expenditures on improving case processing capacity. These include the addition of six district courts and an associate judge, and allocating more federal dollars to tackling the backlog.

Before changes were made to case processing, cases in Harris County more commonly resulted in plea deals. Cases were often processed quickly, with fewer people granted personal bond and consequently held in custody. This changed following *ODonnell et al. v. Harris County et al.*¹⁰ The *ODonnell* consent decree established a new rule that most people held for misdemeanors should be released immediately after arrest on a personal bond without having to see a judge. For serious offenses, people are guaranteed an individualized bail hearing. Efforts to implement the rule began in 2019, and stakeholders noted that *ODonnell* has reduced the number of people held in Harris County's jails solely because they cannot afford bail, and that it has reduced racial disparities in sentencing. As one county court actor noted, "It wasn't uncommon years ago for folks to be in custody because they couldn't afford their bonds. Driving with license suspended, for example. Wasn't uncommon for them to plea. That has changed with bail reform." *ODonnell* is an underlying change in the county that, in addition to the reforms discussed below, has likely had a notable impact on the jail population.

Stakeholders also described how specific case processing practices have changed, having smaller but still notable effects on case processing time. The case processing landscape used to be simpler, with misdemeanor cases growing increasingly complex in recent years. With greater availability of video footage for every case, reviewing and preparing evidence now takes longer. A DUI case that used to take a day to process now takes two to three. In addition, Harris County did not previously rely heavily on pretrial diversions, which are now more common for case resolutions.

One county court stakeholder succinctly summarized the underlying goal of Harris County's efforts to change case processing in recent years: the "priority is getting real justice done as quickly as possible but recognizing there are differences in individual cases."

Efforts to Improve Case Processing in Harris County

Harris County used three primary strategies to speed up case processing: the use of scheduling orders, more efficient evidence gathering, and the creation of the Responsive Interventions for Change (RIC) docket.

A scheduling order is a court order that establishes a timeline for case proceedings, including deadlines for pretrial events, completing discovery, and filing motions.

Stakeholders had identified evidence backlogs as a factor delaying case processing, driven by a lack of capacity to process various types of evidence. Efforts were focused primarily on physical evidence, including bodycam and dashcam footage, in addition to blood and DNA analysis. They included making

technological improvements to automatically upload and store video footage, and allocating more resources to blood and DNA labs.

The RIC docket allows for pretrial interventions or deferred adjudications for people charged with low-level felony drug offenses. It helps move cases through the system by diverting people from jail and connecting them with community-based services, reducing the number of convictions in the county. More than 8,500 cases across 22 criminal district courts have been consolidated into this one docket.

Scheduling Orders

The Harris County Courts began implementing scheduling orders in late 2021. At the most basic level, a scheduling order is nothing more than a document that specifies both the settings that are to occur ahead of the trial and the timing for those settings. The settings outlined in the scheduling order include arraignment, nontrial settings, motions, pretrial motions, and pretrial conference, in that order. The form defines each setting and indicates who must appear there, with italics indicating when defendants must appear. The timing of each setting depends on the track for a case. Noncomplex misdemeanors are Track A and require shorter periods (30 days) between all events. Complex misdemeanors are Track B and include DWI cases where evidence is gathered using a blood sample and cases with a felony pending on the same incident. These cases allow for more time between events: the time between nontrial settings and motions may be 60 days, and the time between motions and pretrial motions may be 60 days; the time between other events must still be 30 days. The scheduling order also notes that a plea may be taken at any time, and doing so accelerates case processing. Though the form allows both parties to request additional settings, such requests must be approved by the judge. The form is signed by the judge and dated. (See the appendix for the scheduling order form used in Harris County.)

These scheduling orders lay out how a case will proceed, attaching clear dates to all court activity and committing all partners in the court process to those dates. A county court judge explained that scheduling orders outline what is expected from the state and the defense counsel as to how the case will flow, essentially managing the docket for them. Judges and county court managers believe the reason scheduling orders are effective is that they set clear expectations for all parties and apply peer pressure to meet them. As a county court manager noted, they allow judges to call out people who are not meeting courts' established expectations of timeliness: "It's peer pressure on the part of some but when the court has a conversation like that in a courtroom with 15 other attorneys present. They don't want to be the next one to have that conversation. The vast majority [of court actors] comply. They do the work. You address the exception as the exception. Things like that."

Scheduling orders have also resulted in a culture shift, such that court actors have begun to engage in more efficient case processing activities in the absence of formal scheduling orders. For example, in many county courts they have motivated pretrial conferences at which all parties ensure necessary documentation is in place before a hearing.

The rollout of scheduling orders has been slow in Harris County but has recently picked up. Eight courts have adopted them, with three adopting informal scheduling order processes in which they do not use a scheduling order form but still stick to a clear schedule. One court has also added a second “track” for more complex cases to the order. Scheduling orders can even be used in cases that cross over into state courts, although state courts are not required to follow them and interviewees from county courts noted that they do not always follow the schedules as well as county courts. Nonetheless, use of scheduling orders at the county level motivates state courts to look at their own schedules and adjust them if they can.

Evidence Gathering

Improvements in evidence gathering in Harris County include increased availability of bodycam and dashcam footage, better sharing of digital evidence across departments, and better processing of blood analysis, with stakeholders noting the additional capacity and time needed to process these forms of evidence.

The availability of bodycam and dashcam footage provides many hours of additional evidence across cases. This and other digital evidence is now better shared across the county. An officer’s bodycam footage is uploaded to a cloud server once they complete their shift, and the footage is organized by case and incident number. Dashcam footage is also uploaded between shifts but can be subject to delays if a patrol car is used for consecutive shifts. This footage has all been made available on a portal created by the Harris County District Attorney’s office in 2014, which gives attorneys access to all evidence the state has. Bodycams were implemented at the Houston Police Department beginning in 2014, and the availability of video evidence has grown in the the years since. Before the evidence portal, requests for video footage could significantly slow down a case. As one county court stakeholder noted,

“The DA’s office could have access to that within a couple days at most. Then the DA has an evidence portal that’s available to defense counsel. As soon as it’s available to the DA, it’s available to the attorney of record in that case. That sped that process up quite a bit. Still people have to view it, all that, but at least it’s available. Because in the past it was six, eight months again, sometimes a year we didn’t have all the video.”

In addition, court managers have ensured the process moves along by simply following up with all parties: “One thing we’ve been involved with pretty closely is that sometimes they may hear something from the prosecutor that they haven’t received the evidence, but the law enforcement said they provided it, so we intervene in that gap if there’s a consistent issue, and it gets resolved.” More footage provides more evidence for decisionmaking, but interviewees noted this has come with the tradeoff of increased evidence backlogs.

Another change that has improved evidence gathering is putting more resources toward blood and DNA analysis. Beginning in 2015, the county’s commissioners court provided local funding to expand capacity for blood processing at the county lab. A few years later, it added funding for DNA processing. One county court stakeholder said,

“We have in Harris County about 12,000 [first or second DWI incidents] every year, a little over. Probably a third of them have a request for blood. The labs weren’t prepared for the volume, so there were delays six months or more to get results back, which delayed case processing. Defense attorney didn’t want to plea without seeing that. Understandably. Courts put a spotlight on that to local government who did give resources to the labs. We cut that six-month time down to about 45 days.”

Harris County continues to invest in enhancing blood and DNA analysis capabilities. In 2023, it allocated approximately \$2 million to the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences as part of a larger effort to combat case backlogs.¹¹ The county also received a \$12 million federal grant to expand the institute and improve DNA analysis to help reduce the county’s jail population.¹² In addition to improving facility operations and upgrading DNA systems, the grant consolidates the medical examiner’s office and crime laboratory services.

The RIC Docket

The RIC docket was created in 2016 to reduce the burden of low-level felony drug offenses on state and county jails. Cases that are eligible for RIC diversion are those in which a person has been charged with possession of up to four grams of a controlled substance. Rather than face a conviction, the person is directed to recovery treatment services with the assistance of peer support specialists. This is distinct from the county’s drug courts, where people plea to a conviction. Diversion under the RIC docket leaves a person’s case open, pending completion of the required treatment. If they fail to meet their treatment requirements, the case is refiled in their home court. The RIC docket allows these cases to be processed quickly without needing to proceed through normal court processes, keeping people out of jail pretrial for minor drug charges.

In the RIC docket, all cases go before the same judge, which a state court stakeholder saw as advantageous because it provides more consistency for those accused of the same offense: “I think it’s better when the home court doesn’t get their finger on the case and allows rehabilitative efforts to happen first. If you have one judge handling the same type of offenses, he deals with them very consistently across the board. Better than something handled by 29 different courts.”

The RIC docket is unique in its provision of resources based on the person’s charge and needs. As one stakeholder described, in “agencies like mental health, probation, all of the resources are housed physically in [the RIC] docket. That’s the only docket that does that. RIC is like a salad bar for the accused, they can get the resources they need.” As such, the RIC docket can reduce the jail burden by reducing recidivism through the provision of services that people with drug charges may need.

Perceived Impacts and Successes

County court, state court, and pretrial supervision actors believe that scheduling orders, improvements to evidence gathering, and RIC dockets have had impacts on case processing time, pretrial jail incarceration numbers, and racial and ethnic disparities in the Harris County criminal legal system’s impact. The statistics highlighted above demonstrate this impact, especially in the county courts.

The Impact of Scheduling Orders

Most county court actors believe scheduling orders have shortened case processing and reduced the number of settings until disposition. This is backed up by the data collected by the courts. A county court manager noted, “The judges who use it, we see a difference in their court performance indicators. I’m glad we can compare that data. When they implemented their scheduling orders, we saw their dispositions increase.... They do level out and those numbers stop dropping, but it’s because they got rid of the cases that went away.” A county court manager also noted the time between settings has shortened for those judges using scheduling orders. They have also noticed a reduction in settings to disposition: “One of the other metrics that we looked at to help encourage judges to look at this and take it more seriously was settings to disposition. If we reduce the settings to disposition from six to five overall, that’s on average, it reduces the number of defendants in an individual court’s courtroom every single day by over 20. That’s significant. Again, fewer settings, more meaningful settings, and that’s a part of that scheduling order, that mindset.”

Stakeholders have also noticed an impact on the lives of both defendants and complainants, who benefit from having court cases resolved efficiently. One judge noted this impact on those awaiting trial as follows:

“That’s huge for folks, for people with things hanging over their heads. I know that these cases need to get resolved in a timely manner. It’s not only for the defendant but also for the complainant as it has reduced the time that they have to deal with the criminal legal system and the cost. When folks come here, they have to pay for parking and take time off work.”

The Impact of Improved Evidence Gathering

Through local government grants, Harris County has been able to reduce the time it takes to process blood analysis from 6 months to 45 days. Another court actor expressed that agencies that have gone online for records and 911 calls have experienced quicker processing times. In addition, agencies have benefited from the creation of an evidence portal where bodycam footage is automatically uploaded and indexed and made accessible to the prosecution and defense counsel, which also allows them to access evidence that the state possesses. To further expedite evidence gathering, stakeholders suggested that judges can communicate with the prosecution and defense to set timelines and ensure accountability and transparency.

The Impact of the RIC Docket

A state court judge and county court actors with knowledge of the RIC docket viewed it as successful. As a rehabilitative measure, the docket offers people the opportunity to seek help before their case is filed in their home court. In addition, appointing one judge to preside over multiple docket cases makes decisions more consistent. The docket also alleviates some of the burden for the state courts, which helps them process non-RIC docket cases faster.

Furthermore, failing on the RIC docket is rare. Cases in which people facing state felony drug charges were detained in jail decreased from a daily average of 800 before the RIC docket to just 42 in 2023, and the average length of stay decreased from 137 to 22 days during that period. Since it began using the RIC docket, Harris County has also seen a reduced rearrest rate among RIC-eligible cases of nearly 50 percent. More broadly, the county went from accounting for 26 percent of Texas's state jail felony population when the RIC docket was implemented to just 10 percent in 2019.¹³ On a more personal level, an article told the story of one person who credits the RIC docket and other Harris County reforms with helping him recover from drug addiction.¹⁴

Impacts on Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the Criminal Legal System

Court staff believe racial and ethnic disparities have been reduced by Harris County's reforms. Though the goal was to decrease case processing time for all, they believe the actions have nonetheless reduced the impact of the criminal legal system on Black and Hispanic/Latinx people, the latter of whom saw a notable drop in ALOS.

Reducing racial disparities is also a broader countywide goal, as one interviewee described: "We have within the county and our coordinating counsel a racial and ethnic disparity team. There's a work group, there's a director over that and so very much is a piece of what we're looking at." In addition, interviewees mentioned that many changes were made in parallel to and to complement the changes to case processing, including bail reform (e.g., *ODonnell*), more allowances for children to be in court, and the waiving or reducing of pretrial supervision fees. These have all resulted in reductions in racial and ethnic disparities. As one interviewee noted about bail reform, "I think it used to be before we had bail reform, more rich white kids were getting out of jail than young poor Black kids or Hispanic or Latinos or any other brown-skinned person." This interviewee also said reducing pretrial supervision costs increased equality, ensuring the impact of the system was equal regardless of one's financial situation. Interviewees believe these changes have reduced case processing time for Black and Hispanic/Latinx people.

As the data from ISLG discussed above show, average length of stay oscillated substantially over the years, making clear patterns difficult to discern. But one pattern that stood out was that Hispanic/Latinx people have experienced a larger reduction in ALOS: from 2018 through early 2025, ALOS decreased 0.1 days for white people and 9.1 days for Black people but 26.9 days for Hispanic/Latinx people. Starting more recently, from 2021 onward, the average quarter-to-quarter change (the difference between the current quarter's ALOS and the previous quarter's ALOS) was 0.02 for white people, -0.28 for Black people, and -1.25 for Hispanic/Latinx people. Thus, while ALOS has been declining for each group since 2020, it has been declining most steeply for Hispanic/Latinx people.

Case Processing Challenges

The implementation of these approaches has come with some notable challenges in Harris County, and general challenges expediting case processing remain a concern. These challenges provide an opportunity for other agencies to learn from Harris County's experiences as they seek to implement similar approaches.

Scheduling Order Challenges

Judges who have implemented scheduling orders raised few challenges with the process. One court manager said scheduling orders had been implemented differently in different courts, which can tie into broader concerns about establishing consistency across the courts. Some courts use the formal scheduling order form, other courts have adopted informal scheduling order practices and timelines without using an official form, and others do not use schedule ordering at all. This can create difficulty standardizing practices across the judiciary, and court managers said many of their efforts revolve around educating judges and their staff on best practices.

Another challenge is that as new judges join the county courts, they may resist using scheduling orders and prefer taking their own approaches to managing cases. As a county court manager said,

“Everyone comes in new and they want to do things differently. They don't always recognize all the tools available to them. We keep nudging people in the right direction so to speak. We set up procedure to make it as easy as possible to do the right thing, to utilize a best practice, and that constant presence in that way helps, again, nudge people to a better place. We do that through policy. We do that through education.”

Evidence Gathering Challenges

The largest challenge affecting evidence processing is staffing shortages and layoffs. For larger agencies, such as the Houston Police Department, stakeholders reported manpower is inadequate for reviewing, sorting, and categorizing incoming footage. This can lead to four-month delays delivering evidence to the prosecution, especially in the felony courts. Combined with a presumed commitment to not decide cases without this evidence, this contributes to continued backlogs. As one stakeholder noted,

“Unfortunately, I believe one of our agencies lost some funding, and so they've had to lay off quite a few people, so then that slows down discovery when it comes to getting those videos, because even though the officer may, when they take their video camera or whatever off and then they dock it, it may just upload to a cloud, but then you need a physical person to then be able to title it, categorize it, or label it, so that it then can be searchable by the DA's office, so that takes time.”

Technical issues have also arisen around information blockage. Stakeholders recounted instances in which officers had assumed their bodycam footage had automatically been uploaded to the cloud, but the district attorney's office could not view the video files. One said there was a lack of infrastructure to support the evolution of digital evidence: “There's been an issue with the onset of new technology with

police officers wearing body cameras and stuff like that. There's more discovery to come in, but the infrastructure to get us that discovery, I don't know that was there."

A county court stakeholder suggested a solution to these challenges similar to a scheduling order for evidence gathering: "It would be nice if the legislature could set an actual statutory timeline, not when it should be disposed, but when evidence should be given to defense. This is harder if someone is representing themselves, but [easier] if someone is represented and there's some deadline."

RIC Docket Challenges

Interviewees noted two primary challenges with the RIC docket: capacity and space. Some stakeholders said the RIC docket is often large and wanted there to be more than one, as there is a disproportionate burden on judges who handle it. Creation of additional RIC dockets is limited by resource constraints, however, such as a lack of additional facility space.

Not having proper facilities for handling people's concerns, both in and out of custody, in the same place also presents challenges. One stakeholder described the need for a criminal justice center that could be a one-stop destination for lawyers and people who have been charged. As a judge from the state court noted,

"Another negative is that we don't have the right facility to handle in and out of custody in the same place. I think the lawyers hate walking over there.... So we definitely need an ancillary criminal justice building with a skywalk that combines everyone—a criminal justice center. Harris County is centrally located, so everyone comes downtown. So if you come downtown, things need to be centrally located in one place."

Other Case Processing Challenges

One of the most salient case processing challenges in Harris County is a staffing shortage. This staffing shortage affects work across other agencies, delaying evidence processing, mental health evaluations, and the addition of people to the pretrial services docket. Many staff are juggling unrealistically large caseloads, driving staff turnover. Large caseloads also lead to higher dismissal rates and to lengthy case processing regardless of disposition. Relatedly, one stakeholder noted the relative lack of experience among many lawyers:

"Specifically in Harris County, I think that we've experienced quite a bit of turnover in our district attorney's office, and so when there's constant turnover you're always starting over it feels like. Also, I would say the experience of the lawyer nowadays, it's much younger than

what it used to be back in the day. I remember there was a point in time at the DA's office I think you had to practice somewhere between three to five years to be seriously considered. Now we're getting attorneys straight out of law school. They're interning one semester, pass the bar, and now they're a lawyer. Nothing wrong with that, but there's a learning curve there that we have to overcome."

Failed coordination and collaboration has also produced challenges. For example, attorneys sometimes fail to coordinate client visits and complete other responsibilities to move cases along, contributing to cases such as that of one person who was held in the Harris County Jail for 18 years without trial.¹⁵ Though an extreme example, this and similar cases demonstrate the consequences of trial partners failing to coordinate and communicate and the need for a system for tracking attorney-client visits. Complications with special dockets present a similar challenge, where people are assigned to a special docket but unable to fully transfer and get stuck in limbo. One interviewee said, "I think there's still a big mystery in lawyers going to see their clients promptly.... The judge may not know that's going on, and [it] may not be a priority on both sides. There needs to be a better way of the court knowing that if someone is on a docket, that the lawyer has visited with the person."

Lastly, stakeholders noted barriers to coordinating with external stakeholders. One interviewee wanted to partner with local agencies, such as the Harris County Public Health Department, to provide wraparound services, but acknowledged this would be a large undertaking. Another challenge arises from stark differences of opinion among collaborators, which can lead to conflict and difficulty reaching consensus.

Public Safety Perceptions

Harris County's case processing reforms have been met with apprehension among the public, with local media engendering fear around their impacts on public safety. One county court stakeholder noted that in a recent local election, there was heightened coordination against the *O'Donnell* bail reform lawsuit: "I know people that are against [bail reform], and in this last election put a lot of money into advertisements that we're just letting murderers out on the street, but it's not actually factual." Another stakeholder from pretrial services shared similar observations, stating that the media implies a negative relationship between early release on supervision and threats to public safety:

"When you have that constantly every evening, you have some news stations that have, even today, specials specifically designed to folks that are on bond. That's all they highlight and show their audience. When you have that on repeat day after day after day, yes, the public perception of safety and crime in the community is greatly impacted through the cases not being tried efficiently and in a timely manner."

Despite media narratives that portray a causal effect between case reforms and public safety, multiple stakeholders in the county courts and pretrial services believe reforms around supervision and early release do not jeopardize public safety. A few interviewees in pretrial services even said the inverse is actually true: the longer someone is held unnecessarily on supervision, the more likely they are to be rearrested. As one said, “We didn’t see that large of an increase in crime, even with our jails being less crowded, but what it’s hard to articulate to the public as well as the courts, like, listen. The longer a case goes on, the more likely—it increases the likelihood of risk. It increases the likelihood of a person being rearrested.” Indeed, pretrial services’ annual reports support these claims, showing that in 2024, only 20 percent of cases were marked as not successful, only 1.7 percent of those unsuccessful cases were unsuccessful because of a new crime, and only a third of the new crimes were for violent or sex offenses. The other 98.3 percent of unsuccessful cases were deemed unsuccessful for technical violations of supervision.¹⁶

Many stakeholders also noted that safety is a personal and professional priority for them, with one county court stakeholder saying,

“Everybody who works here lives in this community too. We all want other members of the community to be safe, us to be safe, everyone to be safe, but we don't want people that are housing insecure that keep picking up the same trespass at the same Shell station because they think they live there because they're also mentally ill to get stuck in the Harris County Jail.”

Lessons Learned

Harris County’s efforts to reduce case processing time and the challenges it faced in the process provide a few key takeaways for other jurisdictions seeking to expedite case processing. These include the benefits of organizational changes; the importance of understanding intra-agency and countywide drivers of case processing time; focusing on the individual, human benefits of improving case processing; and being ready to respond to the public safety fears that may arise from these efforts.

The changes implemented by the county and state courts in Harris County did not involve substantial reorganization or reform. They involved scheduling orders, an organizational tool that commits all parties to sticking to an orderly schedule; improvements to evidence gathering, including adding staff and using technology to build a system where data and documents could be shared more easily; and the RIC docket, which involved setting aside some space and effort to use a more streamlined process for certain cases. Small organizational and structural changes like these provide

notable benefits while adding little burden to the courts. As such, they are the types of changes other jurisdictions could try with minimal risk or cost.

The changes made in both court systems were based on an understanding of the drivers of case processing time in those courts. The county courts, led by a quantitatively minded court manager, made changes based on the issues highlighted in the data. Namely, the time between settings was highly inconsistent across cases and evidence gathering was a major limiting factor. With this knowledge, they were able to implement changes that directly addressed these problems. Similarly, in the state courts, data suggested that 40 percent of jail felony offenses among the pretrial detainee population were related to drug possession, and 64 percent of people with a drug charge were in jail at disposition. Rearrest and reincarceration rates were between 50 and 70 percent. The state courts were able to focus the RIC docket on these exact cases, maximizing the impact on case processing for felony cases without making expansive or monumental changes.

Yet while each court system noticed significant changes in its case processing, data from across the county suggest more modest changes in the jail population. This likely owes to the fact that certain high-risk and high-need cases drive overall case processing time. Moreover, while the state courts made real change and impact with the RIC docket, larger changes were observed in the county courts because of the scheduling orders and improved evidence gathering, which likely reflects that certain felony cases are driving overall case processing times. A broader understanding of the countywide drivers of case processing time would have helped both court systems see that in addition to these changes, expediting case processing for high-risk and high-need cases would allow for even greater impact. Obtaining such a countywide view is often difficult because of data limitations, however, and an understanding of the scale of this issue would have required collaborative cross-agency analysis. This suggests that counties seeking to see a large impact on their case processing time (or other court outcomes) would benefit from first investing in understanding the full picture across their jurisdictions.

As many court and pretrial services staff noted, while the overall impact of Harris County's reforms on case processing may be moderate, the impact of reduced case processing times on any one person's life is significant. For victims of crime, lengthy case processing means waiting for justice to be served and may have implications for their mental and physical health (Clemente and Padilla-Racero 2020; Subhalakshmi 2022). And for those awaiting trial, longer trials may increase the strain on their mental health (Clemente and Padilla-Racero 2020). Indeed, awaiting trial while incarcerated has a number of deleterious effects, including on health, earnings, and family relationships (Ellison et al. 2022; Turney and Conner 2019). Even awaiting trial while on supervision may have negative effects, as the conditions of supervision limit a person's actions enough to restrict their ability to maintain employment or assist

their partner with child care duties, such as dropping off and picking up children at school (Capece 2020; Harding, Western, and Sandelson 2022; Phelps and Ruhland 2022; Shlafer et al. 2023). GPS monitors in particular place a large burden on people awaiting trial. Decreasing case processing time by even a small amount may alleviate these burdens on defendants and dramatically improve their lives and the lives of their loved ones.

Pretrial services, county court, and state court employees all noted that public perceptions that shortened case processing could increase crime and decrease public safety was a challenge. While everyone interviewed agreed the changes did not increase crime, and while pretrial services staff (who are specifically tasked with maintaining public safety during case processing) believed longer case processing times, not shorter ones, decreased public safety because of the strain they placed on all parties, all parties agreed it was a significant challenge convincing the public otherwise.

It is worth noting that public perceptions of crime and actual crime do not necessarily align (Ambrey, Fleming, and Manning 2014). Hipp (2010) found that while a community's aggregate perceptions show a moderate relationship with crime, any one person's perception of crime in their neighborhood is weakly correlated with actual crime. Furthermore, perceptions of crime appear to be largely driven by violent crime rather than property or overall crime (Hipp 2010), and by media consumption, especially local news coverage (Callanan 2012), the source many stakeholders said influences public perception in Harris County. Relatedly, research has found that messaging matters when enacting criminal justice reforms. Effective messaging should directly address perceptions of crime and the issue of crime (Dunbar 2022). It has also been shown that messaging that appeals to the interests of the general public and emphasizes the harms of additional sanctions, such as longer jail stays or delayed case processing, is most effective (Gottlieb 2017). Those seeking to replicate Harris County's activities would benefit from attempts to proactively address these concerns.

Conclusion

Lengthy case processing can have a negative impact on people awaiting trial and others involved in criminal cases. Its impact is especially notable for those who are incarcerated awaiting trial. Case processing time can also contribute greatly to the overall size of the jail population. Harris County took actions to shorten case processing through scheduling orders and improved evidence gathering at the county court level and through the RIC docket at the state court level. While these actions all faced challenges, they were generally successful at improving case processing time without negatively affecting public safety. And they did not involve substantially reinventing practices in Harris County,

but instead involved focused, data-driven changes. They are actions that other agencies can replicate without substantial burden or resource demand. In addition to reducing the Harris County jail population, the changes to case processing had real impacts on the people involved in Harris County trials, allowing them to see their cases resolved days, weeks, or even months sooner than they would have otherwise.

Appendix

FIGURE A.1

Harris County's Scheduling Order Form

CAUSE NO. _____		
THE STATE OF TEXAS	§	IN THE COUNTY CRIMINAL
v.	§	COURT AT LAW NO. _____
_____	§	HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS

CASE SCHEDULING ORDER

This matter is assigned to:

☐ **Track A: Non-Complex Misdemeanor**

☐ **Track B: Complex Misdemeanor** (*Judge's Discretion: DWI Blood Cases, Felony Pending Same Transactions, etc.*)

The Defendant, as well as the Attorneys for the State and Defendant, are ordered to appear, unless otherwise ordered by the Court, as follows:

Arraignment (ARRG) Setting: If necessary, the Court will address probable cause, magistrate warnings, bond conditions, and other preliminary matters. If the Defendant is in custody, the Defendant will be appointed an attorney, and bail may be reviewed as appropriate. *Defendant is required to appear.*

Non-Trial (NTRL) Setting: (30 days from Arraignment). Court's Standing Discovery Order *shall* be filed by this setting. *Defendant's appearance is waived and not required to appear.* The Court will hold this setting via Zoom.

Motions (MOTN) Setting: (**Track A:** 30 days after NTRL/ **Track B:** 60 days after NTRL). All discovery Motions are ordered to be filed with the Court by this date in accordance with the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure 28.01. *Defendant's appearance is waived and not required to appear.* The Court will hold this setting via Zoom.

Pre-Trial Motion (PTMO) Setting: (**Track A:** 30 days after MOTN/ **Track B:** 60 days after MOTN). All discovery and evidence exchange are ordered to be completed by this date, or this setting shall be a Discovery Hearing. Witnesses shall be subpoenaed in the absence of the evidence and ready for this setting. Parties may appear via Zoom. Witnesses must appear in person, unless otherwise agreed to by both parties. *Defendant is required to appear.*

Pre-Trial Conference (PTCR) Setting: (**Track A:** 30 days after PTMO/ **Track B:** 30 days after PTMO). All Pre-Trial Intervention and Diversion application processes *shall* be completed by this date. If the case is not resolved prior to this setting and/or if the Court has not otherwise ordered, all parties shall appear at this setting to determine the status of the case. *Defendant is required to appear.*

Anticipated Plea: If the matter is to be disposed by plea at any of the settings above, the plea will be *taken at the time of and in lieu of the events of that setting.* Additionally, upon agreement of both parties a setting to dispose of a case by a plea may be accelerated. Counsel shall have plea paperwork completed and e-filed prior to the scheduled setting. *Defendant is required to appear.*

Additional Settings: Either party may request settings or hearings in addition to the ones listed above for good cause shown. Any additional settings must be approved by the Presiding Judge of the Court.

MAJ/MRP Settings: Motions to Revoke or Adjudicate Community Supervision will be reset for 30 days and then set for a hearing unless good cause is shown. Any additional settings must be approved by the Presiding Judge of the Court. *Defendant is required to appear.*

Date Entered: _____

Judge Presiding
Harris County Criminal Court at Law No.

01-01-2024

Source: Provided by Harris County Courts, February 2025.

Notes

- ¹ Zhen Zeng, “Jail Inmates in 2023 – Statistical Tables,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, April 2025, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/web-report/jail-inmates-2023-statistical-tables>.
- ² Zeng, “Jail Inmates in 2023 – Statistical Tables.”
- ³ “Harris County, Texas,” US Census Bureau, accessed January 6, 2026, https://data.census.gov/profile/Harris_County_Texas?g=050XX00US48201.
- ⁴ “Harris County, Texas,” US Census Bureau.
- ⁵ Harris County Office of County Administration, <https://oca.harriscountytexas.gov/About/Data>.
- ⁶ “Pretrial Detention,” Advancing Pretrial Policy and Research, <https://cepp.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Pretrial-Detention-2020.pdf>.
- ⁷ “Harris County, Texas,” Safety and Justice Challenge, accessed January 6, 2026, <https://safetyandjusticechallenge.org/our-network/harris-county-tx/>.
- ⁸ “Jail Population,” Harris County, Texas, accessed January 6, 2026, <https://charts.hctx.net/jailpop/App/JailPopCurrent>.
- ⁹ Julie Wertheimer and Tracy Velázquez, “Many Jails Are as Full as They Were Before COVID-19 Pandemic,” Pew Charitable Trusts, November 27, 2022, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2022/11/17/many-jails-are-as-full-as-they-were-before-covid-19pandemic>.
- ¹⁰ “Odonnell Consent Decree,” Harris County Office of County Administration, <https://oca.harriscountytexas.gov/ODonnell>.
- ¹¹ Adam Zuvaich, “Harris County medical examiner’s office using \$1.8 million funding allocation to combat accelerating attrition,” Houston Public Media, June 20, 2023, <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/harris-county/2023/06/20/454829/harris-county-medical-examiners-office-using-1-8-million-funding-allocation-to-combat-accelerating-attrition/>.
- ¹² Jonathan Bruce, “Harris County forensic lab receives federal grant for massive upgrade in effort to combat backlogs,” ABC 13 News, December 20, 2023, <https://abc13.com/post/harris-county-institute-of-forensic-sciences-gets-12-million-grant-facility-upgrades-slated-by-the-end-2025/14202377/>.
- ¹³ In Texas, property crimes and low-level controlled substance offenses that occurred after September 1, 1994, are classified as state jail felonies. State jail sentences cannot exceed two years for one offense, but those with multiple offenses may receive sentences of up to three years.
- ¹⁴ Patrick Graves, “Reinventing Probation in Harris County: Reforms key to recovering drug addict’s turnaround,” Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, August 2019, <https://comptroller.texas.gov/economy/fiscal-notes/archive/2019/aug/probation.php>.
- ¹⁵ Alexandra Hart, “How did a Houston-area man end up jailed for 18 years without a trial?,” Texas Standard, March 24, 2025, <https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/edric-wilson-houston-harris-county-jail-18-years-without-trial/>.
- ¹⁶ “Annual Reports,” Harris County, Texas, <https://pretrial.harriscountytexas.gov/Annual-Reports>.

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About the Authors

Walter Campbell is a senior research associate in the Justice and Safety Division at the Urban Institute. His research focuses on community supervision, reentry, drug-related issues, and the experiences of those who are incarcerated. In addition to experience with qualitative and mixed-methods analyses, Campbell has extensive experience designing, executing, and managing descriptive, quasi-experimental designs and randomized controlled trials. His work has investigated various forms of treatment for those under community supervision and those leaving incarceration. Campbell has also led numerous analyses of individuals who are currently incarcerated. His current work includes an evaluation of within-prison programming for the Bureau of Prisons and an assessment of those affected by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's ban on participation by those with felony drug convictions. Before joining Urban, Campbell worked as a senior associate at Abt Associates. He has also taught as an adjunct professor in criminal justice for Rutgers University since 2015. He earned his BA in psychology from Colby College, his MS in criminology from the University of Pennsylvania, and his MA and PhD in criminal justice from Rutgers University.

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