

# MDRC CENTER FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH

## Mission and Project Portfolio

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**M**DRRC's Center for Criminal Justice Research is committed to conducting research that advances evidence-based, equitable, and accessible solutions to some of the most pressing challenges facing criminal legal systems across the United States. To achieve these ends, it adopts rigorous research methods to identify and implement effective solutions to systemic problems. It partners with state and local criminal justice agencies, policymakers, and community-based organizations to assess innovative policies and programs that seek to reduce unnecessary incarceration, support public safety, address racial and economic inequities, and diminish the system's role in perpetuating poverty. This document summarizes the Center's existing work and future directions for that work.

### Pretrial Justice

The Center's research seeks to document the negative impacts of status-quo practice during the pretrial period, including overreliance on financial conditions of release (money bail) and pretrial detention, overcrowded jails, and untested alternatives such as pretrial monitoring. The Center aims to provide practitioners and policymakers with reliable evidence and to offer research-supported alternatives that may mitigate these negative effects.

The Center's [Pretrial Justice Collaborative](#) project has recently released three studies of non-financial release conditions, including a study of [supervision intensity](#) that used a regression discontinuity design and a randomized controlled trial of [remote versus in-person supervision](#). These studies, along with results of an analysis of [electronic monitoring](#), all support an over-

all finding that more intensive supervision does not improve pretrial outcomes, especially when used without taking into account a person's needs or risk of failing to appear in court or committing new crimes.

The Center was also recently engaged by the New York City Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) to assist in the development of an intensive case management model intended to serve the city's pre-trial-supervision clients with the most service needs. In this role, the Center is providing technical assistance by conducting random assignment learning cycles in close collaboration with MOCJ and the two participating supervision providers ([the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services](#) in Manhattan and [the New York City Criminal Justice Agency](#) in Queens). It is helping the providers with random assignment, documenting new services the providers are pilot testing, analyzing data to assess the effects of these services, and guiding MOCJ and the supervision providers as they reflect on the results and determine how best to adapt and strengthen the service model going forward.

Finally, the Center has two new reports focused on racial equity in pretrial systems. The first is a [multisite, descriptive analysis](#) examining where racial disparities are likely to emerge across pretrial decision points in seven jurisdictions. In one of these jurisdictions, the Center also conducted a more detailed analysis and interviews with stakeholders to explore how disadvantages may accumulate over multiple decision points in the pretrial process and lead to longer sentences for Black and Latino defendants. The second is a [mixed-methods study](#) of the effects of New Jersey's 2017 Criminal Justice Reforms on racial equity in pretrial outcomes and the experiences of people who have come into contact with the court system following these reforms.

## Fines and Fees Justice

The use of fines and fees (also known as legal financial obligations, or LFOs) to fund public services, including police and court operations, has created equity and efficiency issues in jurisdictions across the country. The [Jefferson County Equitable Fines and Fees project](#) was developed in 2021 in partnership with judges from the Tenth Judicial Circuit Court of Alabama and the advocacy organization Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice. The project involves exploratory, quantitative analysis of a longitudinal data set of more than 7,000 cases where fines and fees are owed. Early findings suggest that LFOs are largely uncollectible and are creating debt burdens that disproportionately affect Black and low-income individuals and communities in Alabama.

This area is also one where MDRC is drawing on its in-house expertise in **cost-benefit analysis**. MDRC is partnering with North Carolina's Indigent Defense Services agency to analyze the cost-effectiveness of the state's public defender fee system and inform the development of efforts to improve it.

## Prearrest Diversion and Alternatives to Incarceration

In the past year and a half, the Center has launched two federal projects in these areas: [Tucson Mental Health Diversion \(TMHD\)](#), funded by the National Institute of Justice, and an evaluation of [Manhattan's](#)

[Felony Alternative to Incarceration \(ATI\) Court](#), funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. TMHD is a retrospective study that will assess the implementation, impacts, and costs of Tucson, Arizona's approach to 911 response, which diverts people experiencing mental health crises away from the criminal legal system before an arrest occurs and instead provides them with mental health support.

While TMHD focuses on prearrest diversion, the evaluation of Manhattan's Felony ATI Court is set later in the criminal legal process, following arrest and arraignment. The program aims to reduce the use of incarceration for people charged with felonies and prevent new arrests through a comprehensive, collaborative approach that integrates programs and services with court supervision and monitoring. It is the first specialty court model that serves individuals facing felony charges and does not limit eligibility to those who exhibit specific clinical needs (as is the case in drug or mental health courts). Importantly, the program also does not exclude participants who face violent charges or those with prior convictions that might make them ineligible for other specialty courts. In collaboration with the New York State Office of Court Administration and the [Center for Justice Innovation](#), the MDRC Center for Criminal Justice Research will assess the effects of this program on case resolutions, sentencing, incarceration, and new arrests, and will conduct an implementation study of a peer navigator program for individuals with substance use disorders.

Both the TMHD and Manhattan Felony ATI Court projects are currently in the design phase; for both, the Center hopes to execute nonexperimental impact evaluations.

## Citizens Returning to the Community After Incarceration

Since 2019, MDRC has partnered with the Los Angeles County Justice Cares and Opportunity Division to conduct implementation and nonexperimental impact studies of five different supportive-service programs for individuals returning to the community from jail or prison. These programs provide a range of services, including peer navigation of social services and transitional housing to programs for returning citizens, gender responsive reentry services, and supportive and sectoral employment programs. MDRC's recently published, mixed-methods study of [one of these programs](#) suggests that peer navigation services are a promising model that should be studied further.

Additionally, MDRC is completing a mixed-methods study of the [Returning Citizens Stimulus Project](#), which provided cash transfers to people who had just been released from incarceration as the COVID-19 pandemic hit. A 2021 survey of participants showed that they used that money to meet basic needs and prepare for employment. A forthcoming evaluation brief will explore the relationship between participation in the program and criminal justice outcomes.

## Future Directions

MDRC's Center for Criminal Justice Research is committed to engaging with topics that are of critical importance to practitioners and policymakers. Examples of current priorities for expanding current areas of inquiry or developing new work include:

- Rigorous research regarding the effects of different conditions of pretrial release, including financial and nonfinancial release conditions, with a focus on findings relevant to jurisdictions across the country
- Cost-benefit studies of programs and policies in the criminal legal system, and simulations of potential alternatives in terms of effectiveness and cost
- Nonenforcement strategies for preventing violent crime in communities with fewer resources
- Court processes beyond pretrial decision-making, with a specific interest in prosecution, defense, and judicial decision-making across decision points
- Corrections, with a focus on the impact of higher education on the outcomes of returning citizens

In all these areas, the Center aims to develop strong research-practice partnerships, with an eye toward translating rigorous research evidence into sustainable program or policy changes.

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