**Executive Summary - January 2024**

# Turning Local Data into Meaningful Reforms

## The Safety + Justice Challenge Approach

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Effective criminal legal reform requires a strong understanding of the key challenges jurisdictions face in building safe and equitable legal systems, as well as an equally strong understanding of the carefully designed solutions—and how to thoughtfully implement them. Data and information must play critical roles in supporting each stage of legal system reform. With this in mind, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation launched the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC), a major initiative to support local criminal legal systems in reducing over-reliance on jails as a response to social problems.

Today, the SJC supports a national network of 57 cities, counties, and states in implementing a range of policy and programmatic interventions to reshape local justice systems, with the aim of safely reducing the number of people who go to jail and how long they stay. Data, measurement, and evaluation has played a pivotal role in guiding this initiative—for identifying drivers of the jail population, designing innovative decarceration strategies, monitoring progress, and evaluating and understanding performance. The Institute of State & Local Governance at the City University of New York (CUNY ISLG) plays a leading role in these data collection and analysis activities across the SJC, serving as a central liaison between local

jurisdictions, external researchers, technical assistance providers, and the MacArthur Foundation.

Safety and Justice Challenge cities and counties lowered jail populations by 18.6 percent—or 11,010 individuals on average—since the start of the initiative.* This data is made possible by the data collection efforts detailed in the Main Report.

## CHANGE IN JAIL POPULATIONS ACROSS SJC SITES, 2016-2023
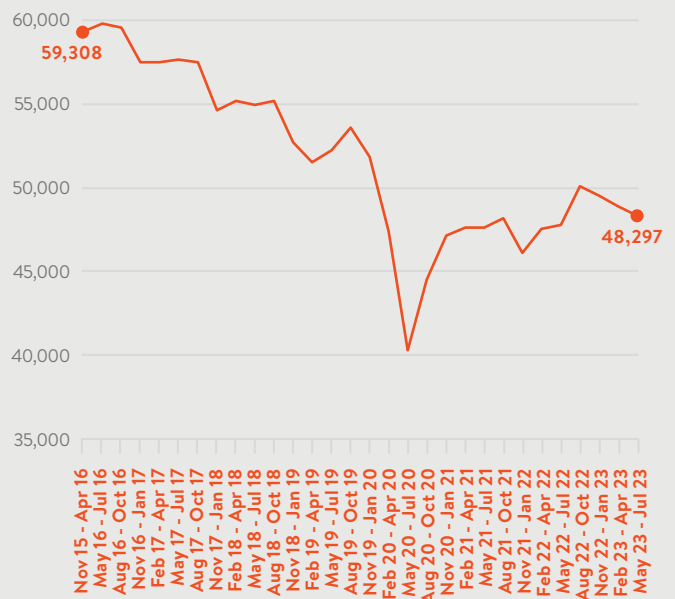


*Includes SJC sites that began implementation of strategies to reduce the jail population in 2016 (except for New York City due to missing data).

This report focuses on the role that local data has played in the SJC initiative and CUNY ISLG's work to develop and support the SJC model of data-driven reform. The report details the collection of data and how data were used by many stakeholders across the initiative; the build-out of CUNY ISLG's data repository; the development and use of standardized performance measures for reporting site progress towards reducing jail populations and eliminating racial and ethnic disparities; and lessons learned from working with cross-agency administrative data to drive reform and evaluate policy change. The comprehensive data activities led by CUNY ISLG in the planning, implementation, and performance monitoring and evaluation phases of the initiative are detailed in the report and summarized in Table 1.

## Table 1. Key Data Activities for Data-Driven Reform in the SJC Initiative

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| **Systematic assessments of local data infrastructure** | Documented how information about people and cases are collected, recorded, and shared within agencies and across justice system partners. CUNY ISLG researchers interviewed data stakeholders and conducted in-depth reviews of database systems in local sites, which served as the foundation for documenting gaps in local data systems, setting up data sharing expectations, and understanding local nuance. |
| **Diagnostic assessment of drivers of local jail populations** | Assessed drivers across multiple decision points in the criminal justice process, from arrest and jail booking to post-disposition community supervision. CUNY ISLG, along with technical assistance providers, assisted each participating site in collecting and analyzing local data to identify populations and policies contributing to jail population growth, and designing solutions to target drivers of the jail population. |
| **Empirical target setting for jail population reduction and strategy-level impact calculations** | To position sites for meaningful impact on their local jail populations, CUNY ISLG assisted the Foundation in setting ambitious decarceration targets—aiming for decreases in jail populations of 15 percent to greater than 30 percent from a pre-SJC jail population level, depending on the site. |
| **Aggregate- and case-level administrative data +collection across sites** | Data sharing is facilitated by multi-agency data sharing agreements and standardized data requests. CUNY ISLG collects aggregate or case-level data from law enforcement, jail, prosecution, defense, courts, and community supervision agencies in over 25 sites, cleaning and maintaining a robust data repository of multi-year criminal justice population data. |
| **Monthly progress monitoring and regular performance measurement** | Standard measures across all jurisdictions allow for consistent comparisons over time and across participating sites. CUNY ISLG developed, collects, and analyzes standard measures across key systems, reporting trends in jail populations and assessing performance toward achieving decarceration goals. |
| **In-depth analysis and external evaluation and research** | Research is focused on key strategies and knowledge gaps in local justice system operations. Using data collected from SJC sites, CUNY ISLG and other partners, including a consortium of pre-qualified research groups, have explored a range of questions, including the impact of jail decarceration on public safety, changes in jail populations during the COVID-19 pandemic, the effectiveness of bond court reform, the impact of jail population review teams for reducing racial/ethnic disparities, and prosecutorial discretion and plea bargaining. |

Guided by these activities, the SJC initiative has been successful in dramatically reducing jail populations across participating cities and counties. By mid-2023, jail populations across SJC sites had fallen by 18.6 percent, or 11,010 fewer people in jail on any given day, from levels at the outset of the initiative in May 2016. However, using data generated by the day-to-day operations of criminal justice agencies and partners to guide systems-focused reform is not without its challenges. In the report, we discuss key challenges encountered by CUNY ISLG in helping partner cities and counties do this, among them fragmented local data systems; lack of consistent person or case identifiers shared across agency data systems; variation across jurisdictions in how key processes are defined and recorded; lack of trust in existing data capacity and its use for analysis; turnover in agency leadership and key staff positions; and varied data needs across different stakeholder audiences. We also discuss several lessons that CUNY ISLG learned about how to effectively build data into systemwide reform efforts from navigating these challenges—lessons that can help both policy and programmatic stakeholders and analysts and researchers who are working to advance reforms locally. Of course, some of the challenges and lessons learned stemmed from CUNY ISLG's work across multiple jurisdictions; even those challenges are relevant to reform efforts within individual cities and counties though, especially those that involve collaborative work across local criminal legal agencies and/or other partners (Table 2).
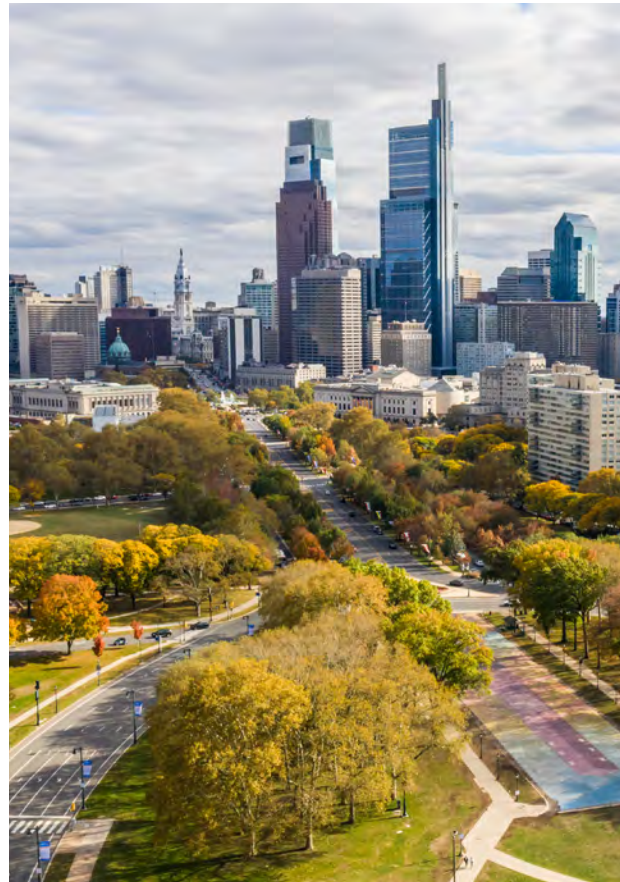


## Table 2. Takeaways for Data-Driven Reform

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| **Collect data with purpose** | Before collecting and analyzing data, researchers and policy- and programmatic stakeholders should first clearly identify and prioritize the types of policy and practice questions that need to be answered using data, engage with the primary users of those data, and facilitate consensus on how data will be used to make decisions. |
| **Use data to diagnose problems and plan impactful solutions** | Where possible, data should be used to identify the scope, scale, and drivers of the issue(s) that stakeholders want to address, as well as to identify key populations or processes for intervention. Additionally, stakeholders should use data to estimate potential impacts of policy and practice reforms as part of the planning process, to maximize positioning for meaningful impacts. |

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| **Create a data infrastructure plan** | Robust data infrastructure plans include clear processes for how data are collected, stored, and used. Analysts or research staff and stakeholders should define clear policies covering data governance; data collection frequency; file layout and formatting; and data security. Documentation of data infrastructure and data use helps to build trust in and reproducibility of data products among internal and external stakeholders. |
| **Facilitate ongoing communication between practitioners and data experts** | Successful data-driven reform requires careful attention to the validity and accuracy of data collected, as well as to how key stakeholders in a reform process will understand and respond to research and analysis. Early and ongoing engagement with strategy and data stakeholders helps to build data literacy, ensure valid and reliable measurement, and encourages trust in the data process. |
| **Regularly query and evaluate data** | Standard sets of measures related to key processes and outcomes, clear definitions, and transparent calculations should be established and reviewed at repeated intervals over the course of any planning, implementation, and evaluation of a reform. These measures should be adapted as needed over time, as needs, questions, and aspects of context change. |
| **Tailor data communications and develop compelling data "stories"** | To facilitate the use of data in decision-making, develop data communications tailored to the specific audience and their data needs. Data presentations should distill findings into a narrative, or "story," going beyond mere presentation of data to provide synthesis and interpretations for the audience in an accessible, jargon-free manner. Critical to every communication is an assessment of the audience and their primary interests—data stories should be adapted and presented in ways that speak most directly to those interests. |