

## ***Ten Best Practices in Data Collection for Pretrial Service Agencies***

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1. ***Ask data-driven questions.*** What does your agency want to know about the pretrial services you provide? What information could help you improve operations? To guide data collection, a data-driven question should be *relevant* – it should address issues that matter to your agency. A question should also be *specific* and *focused* rather than vague or broad. A good question should also be *feasible* to answer through information you can collect. A good question should also seek to inquire about measurable inputs and outcomes that can be provided by quantitative data and a good question could also seek to inquire about successes and challenges that can be provided by qualitative data. Also consider qualitative data captured through mechanisms such as focus groups, interviews, and surveys.  
A potential starting point is to consider questions that other pretrial agencies have explored, but that have not been answered for your specific context or population. (However, every jurisdiction is different, and questions may need to be adapted or reframed to apply to your circumstances.) As you develop questions, consider what data your agency already possesses that can help answer these questions. And consider the sources of data currently available or that you'd like to have available. Then, ask yourself what additional data you'd need to collect.
2. ***Clearly define your terms.*** Agencies and jurisdictions can differ in how they define key pretrial concepts, so it's important to clearly describe all terms before you start to collect and analyze data. What does your agency consider to be a *failure to appear*? Do *re-arrest rates* include people under supervision or only those on pretrial release? What conditions fall under *non-monetary release*? Clearly defining all terminology will improve the trustworthiness of your organization's data, as well as help you identify any discrepancies or redundancies in the metrics you're already measuring. Defining key terms will also help others understand your findings and compare your results with statistics released by other jurisdictions. It's best practice to develop and maintain a *codebook* or *data dictionary* that explains how each term is defined and provides a record of when definitions are updated or changed.
3. ***Prioritize data security.*** Pretrial service agencies cannot accomplish their goals unless they can be trusted with sensitive information about individuals, including criminal history data. It is therefore essential to institutionalize safe procedures for handling and collecting data and to make certain that all staff members are appropriately trained. You might consider having a nondisclosure or confidentiality agreement signed by staff. In addition to following organizational regulations and all federal, state, and local laws, it's important to promote an organizational culture that respects the privacy and the rights of the individuals we serve. Agencies must take steps to minimize the risk of inadvertent disclosure of identifiers and develop plans for how data will be protected. Think about

how long you are storing data, as there should be a specified and explicit purpose for storing data that is beyond the data required for Annual Reporting and other mandated reporting purposes.

4. **Think carefully about data ethics.** Data security is not the only ethical issue to consider when working with data. *Informed consent* is another key ethical principle in research, and it involves apprising individuals of how their data will be used as well as treating individuals with respect. *Transparency* is also fundamental, and pretrial service agencies should strive to ensure that all stakeholders, including taxpayers and justice system-involved communities, can understand and benefit from the findings of the data that's collected.
5. **Promote fairness.** In order to promote fairness in the justice system, we need data to identify racial and other disparities. Think about how your data collection methods can help illuminate racial, ethnic, gender, and other inequalities. What data would you need to evaluate whether changes in policy or practice are reducing such disparities and promoting fairness? As disparities can build at each stage of criminal justice processing, data from the pretrial phase is essential to consider in any discussion of fairness.
6. **Engage broad audiences.** Pretrial service agencies must work closely with many partners in the justice system and in the community. When developing a data collection strategy, think about how you can engage the perspectives of these different partners to identify gaps in your plans and increase the transparency of your results. It is particularly important to incorporate feedback from the community, including those individuals and families disproportionately affected by the justice system. Community members' local knowledge can prove invaluable in helping your agency to improve your operations and services.
7. **Consider costs and benefits.** Not all jurisdictions have access to the same resources. Therefore, when developing your data collection strategy, consider what's feasible for your agency. Even if resources are limited, there may be small steps you can still take. For example, can you utilize the opportunity provided by OCA's Annual Reporting requirement to collect a few additional variables that are of interest to your agency? When determining what's feasible, consider what can be achieved using your current technological resources, as well as what could be achieved in future if new IT resources become available.
8. **Think creatively. Use positive language.** Data is not just numbers. *Qualitative data* consists of written or spoken words and other pieces of useful, non-numeric information. Feedback surveys are a potential source of qualitative data and allow clients and stakeholders to share their perspectives and suggestions about the services your agency provides. Qualitative data can also illuminate the "why" behind the numbers and, by utilizing both quantitative (or numerical) data and qualitative data together, you may be able to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of a research question. Furthermore, it's important to examine your agency's key documents and

consider replacing negative language (e.g. “failure to appear” with language supporting the success of individuals with whom you are working like “court appearance”, or, replacing “defendants” with “clients” or “individuals”).

9. ***Translate findings into practice.*** Many organizations find it difficult to translate findings into practice, which is unfortunate as data can improve the services we provide. To bridge this gap, it’s important to clearly communicate findings and show why they are important to your region. Data visualizations – such as graphs and charts – can help communicate findings, and some of the most effective data visualizations are relatively straightforward to create with standard software. When presenting results, it’s important to be objective and unbiased when selecting which findings to highlight and, whenever possible, findings should be disseminated to stakeholders and community members to aid transparency.
  
10. ***Learn from peers, experts and partner organizations.*** Learning from peer pretrial service agencies as well as experts and partner organizations is a great way to share knowledge and resources. There are helpful data-driven reports and guidelines already available from the [National Associated of Pretrial Services Agencies \(NASPA\)](#), the [National Institute of Corrections \(NIC\)](#), [The Center for Effective Public Policy](#), and other experienced pretrial service agencies nationwide. You may also want to think creatively about the knowledge resources already available in your community. University partnerships, for example, can be an integral part of turning research into practice, and many academic institutions have students trained in data analysis who are looking to assist organizations with projects. Such partnerships can also help provide research oversight, theoretical knowledge, and skills if in-house research capacity is limited.