

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS IN PUBLIC DEFENSE

Texas

Reporting the State of Public Defense in 254 Counties Through a New Web Portal

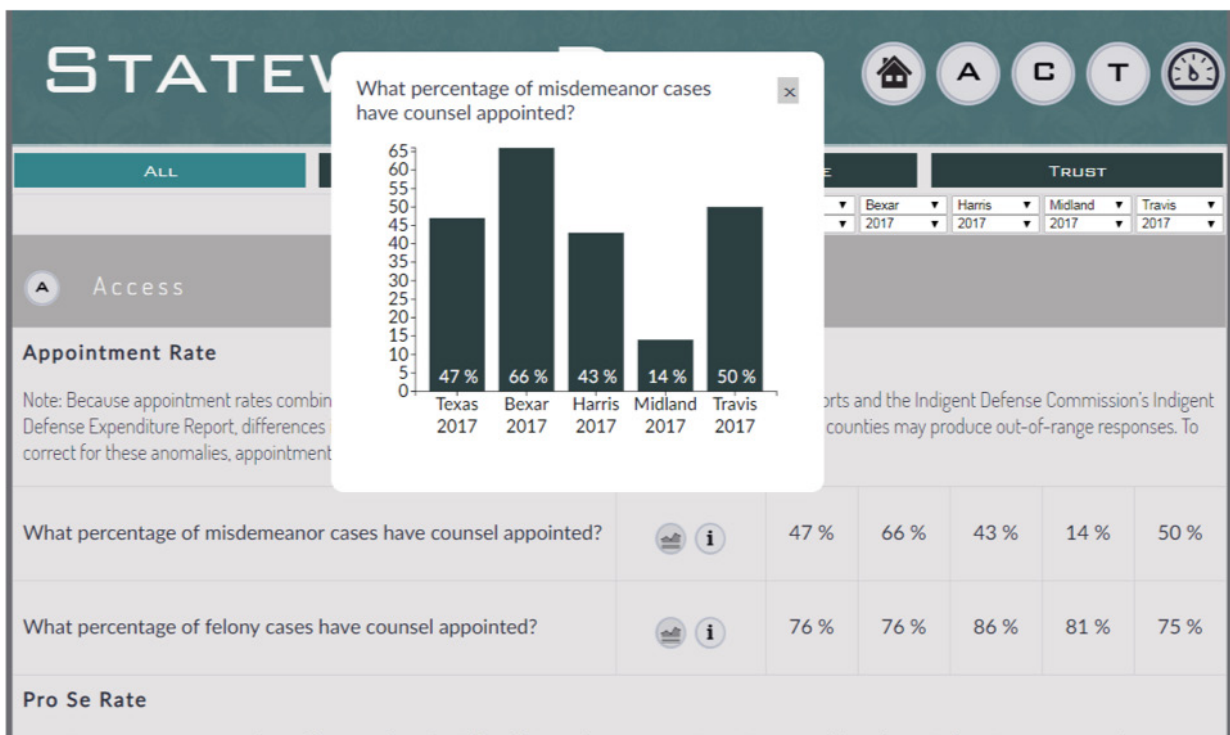


Problem

The state of Texas is made up of 254 counties on whom the primary responsibility rests to design and operate individual indigent, or public, defense delivery systems. The result is a highly decentralized system, which poses a considerable challenge to collecting and analyzing indigent defense data on either a statewide or county-by-county comparative basis. Without this data, counties are missing a crucial tool to evaluate their systems and services and to understand appropriate funding and resource needs.

Solution

The Public Policy Research Institute (PPRI) in the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University partnered with the Texas Indigent Defense Commission (TIDC) to develop an online data portal that would provide detailed and easily navigable information on indigent defense systems in all 254 counties in Texas for use by TIDC, the courts, elected officials, funders, bar associations, the advocate community, and the general public.



Program

TIDC and PPR I collaborated on creation of the web portal, and a system to collect data from across the state. The team structured data collection and presentation around key indicators of performance drawn from national and state legal standards and professional guidelines. To allow the web platform to present that data and allow users to compare and analyze data from multiple counties, the project team made connections with local courts and developed protocols for standardizing data from hundreds of jurisdictions.

“With better data comes a better understanding of Texas indigent defense. Data allows us to make evidence-based decisions and a defensible case for funding and resources. ACT Smart is a springboard for TIDC to become the most responsible, transparent actor in the criminal justice system.”

*Dottie Carmichael, Ph.D.
Research Scientist, PPR I*

The portal was developed to address Principle #10 of the ABA Ten Principles of a Public Defense Delivery System, which recommends that “[d]efense counsel [be] supervised and systematically reviewed for quality and efficiency according to nationally and locally adopted standards.”

Results

Known as the “ACT Smart for Indigent Defense Web Portal,” information about quality indigent defense is being collected and displayed online in three broad categories:

“**Access to counsel**” measures relate to timely eligibility determination and attorney appointment.

“**Competence of counsel**” measures relate to practice standards like workload, training and supervision, continuity of representation, client contact, and case outcomes.

“**Trust and public confidence**” measures are system efficiency and operational indicators describing fair and neutral attorney selection, independence of the defense, funding, and compensation.

The ACT Smart Data Portal is a flexible communication system informing jurisdictions of their performance on multiple quality indicators, and keeping policymakers apprised of “the state of indigent defense” in Texas. Work to expand the portal continues, but a demonstration site is accessible at <http://smartdefense.pprinet.tamu.edu/>.

The project team encountered several challenges in variability of local data collection methods. They eventually determined that they would need to customize data extraction protocols for every jurisdiction or I.T. vendor. This process was slower but more rigorous and allowed the team to more accurately and fully understand the data. The project team has also been able to provide jurisdictions with feedback on data quality (i.e., missing or low-quality variables) and completeness (i.e., where information on indigent defense services is absent).

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