

Failure to Appear in Court

A review of pretrial research and recommendations for
Dane County

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2026

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Executive Summary

Failure to appear (FTA) in court is a significant issue that impacts the efficiency of the legal system and the lives of the individuals involved. As part of the Dane County Community Justice Council strategic plan, the Office of Justice Reform has examined research on the causes and potential solutions to non-appearance in court. Missed court appearances create substantial costs, with conservative estimates at over \$1,400 per FTA for the court, and with imposed financial and legal burdens, costs can exceed \$1,300 for individuals. In Wisconsin, failing to appear in court can result in severe legal consequences, including the issuance of arrest warrants. This research aims to better understand why individuals fail to appear in court and to identify practical, evidence-based strategies to improve court appearance rates in Dane County.

Research from across the country demonstrates that FTAs are rarely the result of intentional absconding. Rather, they stem from a combination of structural, logistical, and personal barriers. Studies from San Francisco (CA) highlight housing instability as a key predictor of court nonappearance, while research in Jefferson County (KY) and Salt Lake County (UT) identifies unawareness of the court date, lack of transportation, and not understanding the pretrial process as key reasons. In Lake County (IL), many individuals reported life responsibilities, logistical or technical issues, and basic survival needs as barriers to court appearance. Additionally, findings in Harris County (TX) emphasized the role of fear, confusion, and distrust of the legal system as the reason for absconding.

Importantly, multiple interventions have demonstrated success in reducing FTAs, particularly text message reminder systems. Tulsa County (OK), Santa Clara (CA), and New York City (NY) have demonstrated that clear, timely communication can significantly reduce missed appearances and related warrants. Santa Clara and New York City demonstrated that reminders sent 7, 3, and 1 day before court are empirically effective; and New York City found that the most convincing message to encourage appearance was informing individuals of the consequence to non-appearance.

Based on these findings, improving communication systems in Dane County is a feasible and impactful first step in reducing non-appearance rates. Specifically, transitioning from an opt-in to an opt-out reminder system would increase participation and reduce barriers to enrollment. Routine verification of contact information at all court dates would ensure accuracy and reduce administrative burden for individuals. Additionally, enhancing the reminder messages by using plain language, multiple notifications, and clear instructions can reduce confusion and increase compliance. While these recommendations do not address all barriers associated with court non-appearance, they offer practical improvements that can strengthen perceptions of fairness, reduce system inefficiencies, and support better outcomes for individuals and the broader community. This research paper is meant to be a persuasive body of work to advocate for procedural changes in Dane County and for State implemented improvements to the CCAP reminder texts.

Failure to Appear in Court

Failure to appear (FTA), also known as an appearance rate, refers to the failure to attend court (Kirby, 1979). FTAs have a significant impact on the court system, as the court requires all necessary parties to attend a court proceeding. According to the article *Improving Court Attendance: The Essential Guide to Court Reminder Programs*,

“Missed court dates create case backlogs, overburden dockets, waste financial and human resources, and lead to jail overcrowding. We conservatively estimate each missed court date costs the government \$1,496 in staff time and other resources. This includes rescheduling hearings, issuing warrants, locating individuals and possible jail time. Yet this figure likely underestimates the true financial impact on courts...” (p.1, 2025).

This significant burden on the court systems impacts daily operations and individual workloads. FTAs lead to increasingly punitive consequences for defendants as they, “...can incur additional charges for failing to appear, heighten penalties for the instant offense, issuance of an arrest warrant, and difficulty in obtaining bail,” (Borstein et al, p. 70); and, when an FTA does result in a warrant it costs the individual around \$1,350 when considering fines, lost wages, potential loss of bail, inability to work, possible pretrial supervision and loss of other benefits (No-Show No More: Rethinking Court Appearances & Reminders, 2025). The prevalence of FTAs not only strains the court system but perpetuates a cycle of hardship for the defendants demonstrating the need for effective interventions to prevent FTAs.

A defendant's history of FTAs impacts the court commissioner's ruling in terms of pretrial release conditions. Considerations include: the likelihood of a defendant attending scheduled court appearances; this leads to increased use of cash bail as a deterrent for FTAs. Both cash bail and pretrial detention can lead to negative impacts on an individual's health and well-being with evidence showing that the inability to afford cash bail can result in a defendant losing their jobs, homes and custody of their children (Scheidler et al, 2025); while a period of pretrial detainment, even a short one, is associated with multiple negative outcomes—more punitive sentences, future involvement in the criminal legal system, negative impact on mental health and ability to maintain employment (Jannetta and Duane, 2022).

Defendants are not the only cause of court proceedings being halted due to the failure of the necessary parties to attend. A ten-year review of court data from Philadelphia found that other parties necessary for a criminal proceeding, witnesses, lawyers, police officers, victims, fail to appear in 53% of all cases compared to defendants who fail to appear in 19% (Graef et al, 2024). When key participants in court proceedings fail to appear, case resolution is delayed, which can result in the defendant remaining in pretrial detention, having their cash bail withheld, or being unable to move forward with their life. Such delays can public confidence in the reliability and accountability of the court process. Further, this demonstrates that FTAs are an issue that all participants in a court proceeding are susceptible to and calls us to question the disproportionate consequences that can occur to defendants.

Failure to appear is a complex problem, but one that is not unique to the criminal justice system. The Journal of Family Medicine and Disease Prevention estimate that missed healthcare appointments cost the United States \$150 billion a year (2018). Additionally, from an analysis of

26 studies that reviewed missed general practitioner appointments researchers found that the most cited explanations were work, family or childcare commitments, forgetting the appointments and transportation difficulties. The patients most likely to miss appointments were those from minority ethnicity, low sociodemographic status and younger patients (Parsons, Bryce, Atherton, 2021). These studies demonstrate that an individual's ability to be available for medical appointments and court dates are deeply tied to the kind of access they have to resources, inevitably leaving the most resource scarce members of our community vulnerable.

Addressing FTAs is not only a method to reduce system waste but to also increase fairness as missed court dates often impact low-income people the most (No-Show No More: Rethinking Court Appearances & Reminders, 2025). Furthermore, creating innovative solutions to reduce FTAs builds public trust. Recognizing failure to appear as a complex, systemic issue rather than an individual offense, underscores the need for evidence-based, humane reforms that address structural barriers to court participation and promote fairness within the justice system.

Wisconsin Pretrial Framework

Post-arrest and after an individual is formally charged with a crime, but before conviction, is known as the pretrial period (U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services, n.d.). At a defendant's initial appearance, the court commissioner sets any pretrial release conditions. Pretrial release decisions play a crucial role in the criminal justice system, balancing the presumption of innocence with concerns about public safety and court appearance compliance. Pretrial release conditions can change as the court case proceeds. Cash bonds can be reduced to a signature bond, and a signature bond can escalate to a cash bond. Dane County Wisconsin utilizes the Public Safety Assessment (PSA), which uses nine factors that generate a score that assesses the likelihood of a defendant to FTA, be charged with a new criminal arrest or commit a new violent crime (APPR, 2025). The judicial officials use a variety of sources including information from the complaint, victim statement, prosecutorial input (Dane County Pretrial Services, 2025); and the PSA if available.

In Wisconsin, these decisions are made through the use of signature bonds or cash bail, each carrying different implications for defendants and the broader community. According to McNamara, a signature bond allows a defendant to be released from jail without payment while their court case is pending, provided they agree to attend all court hearings and obey any court-imposed conditions. Or cash bail, which requires the defendant to pay a specified amount to secure their release. This amount is refunded at the conclusion of the case if the defendant complies with all court appearances and conditions, or it may be forfeited if they fail to do so. In Wisconsin, every bond condition includes that the defendant must attend all court proceedings, inform the court of any change of address, and to not to commit a new crime (2018). There are additional conditions that can be imposed on an individual basis. However, defying any of these conditions can lead to significant criminal consequences.

Court officials may impose a significant cash bail for a defendant, but they cannot typically mandate pretrial detention with the opportunity to post bail. McNamara states that,

“Wisconsin does have a statute that permits a court to deny release of a defendant charged with a violent offense; this amounts to pretrial detention without the opportunity

to post cash bail. But the procedures under this statute are quite burdensome to the state...consequently, the state practically never proceeds under this statute,” (p.5, 2018).

Whether a defendant receives a signature bond or cash bail is largely up to judicial discretion and their ability to make a decision based on the law and specific circumstance (Assesfa, 2018). Understanding this legal framework provides the necessary information when discussing Wisconsin's approach to pretrial release and its outcomes for defendants and the community.

Dane County Pretrial

Dane County offers pretrial services within the criminal justice system. The Pretrial Service Department includes social workers who monitor the conditions of bond, assess an individual's needs, and make referrals to various community resources (Dane County Pretrial Services, n.d.). Pretrial services are a part of Dane County's commitment to pretrial release as defendants await trial. As of October 2025, 91% of the pretrial population remains in the community, either through signature bond or a paid cash bond (CJC, 2025). However, inextricable from Dane County are the disproportionate racial disparities that are seen in the justice system. In the Dane County jail, the majority of its residents are those who are in pretrial detention, and as of October 2025, Black individuals make up 5% of the total population but account for 51% of residents in the jail. In contrast, white individuals comprise 78% of the population yet represent only 47% of the jail population (CJC, 2025 & Neilsberg, 2025). Specifically, of the pretrial detention population 56% are Black, while 42% are white. Such disparities reveal that pretrial detention not only disproportionately impacts Black individuals but reflects deeper systemic biases that harm Black communities.

These patterns reflect broader concerns of how historically marginalized groups face higher rates of incarceration and social disruption even before being found guilty. As discussed, appearance for all court proceedings is a mandatory condition for all bonds. Perceptions of a defendant's likelihood to appear influence a judge's pretrial release decision, which can reinforce racial disparities. While Dane County remains committed to pretrial release and seeks to support released defendants, systemic bias in assessing who is considered a risk can still result in racial disparities within pretrial detention. Therefore, addressing FTAs through providing policy solutions to increase the appearance rate is critical to improving racial equity in Dane County. As of October 2025, only 64% of the share of open cases for which defendants attended all required court appearances to date (CJC, 2025). In an attempt to address racial disparities in release decisions Dane County implemented the Pretrial Safety Assessment, a risk tool with several indicators to provide the court commissioner an overview of the defendant. However, a study conducted by Harvard Law School's Access to Justice Lab found that the PSA had no impact on racial disparities in Dane County: “here was thus no evidence that PSA-DMF availability improved or worsened racial or gender disparities” (p.8). Given that pretrial release decisions are made, in part, based on a defendant's likelihood to appear in court, these disparities in pretrial detention raise important questions about how Dane County can effectively increase the appearance rate among all defendants.

Pretrial Detainment

One way to address FTAs is through pretrial detention as it confines defendants in jail until all court proceedings are finished with a case deposition. However, various bodies of research indicate that pretrial detention undermines the justice system through biasing judicial perception, worsening legal outcomes, weakening a defendant's ability to prepare their case, and causing significant social and economic harm before guilt is established. In the article *The Pretrial Detention Penalty: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Pretrial Detention and Case Outcomes* author Stacie St. Louis identified over 21,000 relevant texts regarding the impact of pretrial detention, removed all duplicate studies and data to narrow down the analysis to 57 journal articles, dissertations, agency reports, and book chapters. This analysis will examine the themes that demonstrate the negative impacts of pretrial detainment and explain why Dane County will not utilize it as a potential solution to address FTAs.

Pretrial detention can bias a judge's decision-making through reinforcing perceptions of guilt and dangerousness. According to St. Louis, this can lead to detained defendants to face more severe case outcomes compared to released defendants, as pretrial detention may signal danger or culpability to the various judicial bodies as the case progresses, leading to harsher punishments (2023). Judges may unconsciously interpret detention as proof that a defendant poses a risk even before trial violating the presumption of innocence. The impact of the association of guilt and danger can be seen in the outcomes of pretrial defendants, as pretrial detention increases the likelihood of conviction and incarceration. As stated by St. Louis, “detained defendants faced 102% higher odds of conviction and 104% higher odds of pleading guilty than release defendants” (p.358, 2023); and “...detained defendants had a 236% higher odds of being incarcerated in prison/jail” (p.360, 2023). These findings suggest that being detained before trial pressures defendants into accepting guilty pleas to avoid longer confinement, while also biasing judicial bodies to convict the defendant, effectively punishing an individual before they are found guilty.

Additionally, St. Louis found that pretrial detainment restricts a defendant's ability to gather evidence, contact witnesses, and meet with their attorney (2023). Limiting the capacity that the defendant has to argue their innocence and further disadvantages them throughout the legal process. Finally, St. Louis found that pretrial detention has significant impacts upon one's ability to return to their life post-case as “pretrial confinement may imperil the suspect’s job, interrupt his source of income, and impair his family relationships. Released defendants, however, can show the court that they can contribute to the community, maintain a job, abstain from criminal activity, be responsible by attending court, and overall, be a good candidate for a probation sentence” (p.349, 2024). This can further the bias a judicial body may have against the defendant and severely limit their ability to maintain a support system and economic stability. The article illustrates how pretrial detention profoundly impacts individuals, creating systemic disadvantages that can shape defendants’ lives long after their cases conclude.

Why do Defendants FTA?

Failure to appear in court is commonly characterized as ‘criminals’ fleeing the jurisdiction to avoid criminal prosecution. However, in *Defining Flight Risk*, Lauryn Gouldin discussed that those who are a ‘true flight risk’—defendants who pose a high risk of leaving the jurisdiction—represent a very small number of defendants who FTA. Gouldin emphasizes that the need to isolate these defendants from those experiencing ‘local nonappearances,’ which are defendants who miss court for reasons such as forgetting the date, lacking transportation, work conflicts, or being unable to afford the costs (2018). The use of FTA as a category that conflates ‘true flight risk’ with ‘local nonappearances’ is problematic, as it obscures the underlying cause of nonappearance. Ideas42 highlights that the legal system’s punitive response to nonappearance often assumes intentional evasion. Many reasons defendants’ failure to appear are wealth-based, with economic and structural factors contributing, rather than a willful disregard of the law (2022). In this discussion, the focus will be on the barriers and challenges that prevent local non-appearance defendants from appearing in court. However, it is important to acknowledge that most defendants do appear for their scheduled court dates, and maintaining the integrity of the judicial process requires that defendants prioritize attendance as a critical component of accountability.

San Francisco, California

In the policy brief, *Understanding and Improving Court Appearance Rates* (2023), research was conducted by the Resource Development Associates in partnership with the San Francisco Pretrial Diversion project and presented by Debbie Mayer, Ardavan Davaran and Cesangari Lopez-Martinez.

Methods

The sample of 3,699 unique cases spans the period from May 2016 to April 2020 for defendants who had at least one scheduled court appearance. These cases were referred by Assertive Case Management (ACM) supervision, which conducts supervision for defendants with high needs or who may be at risk for failure to appear or rearrest. The study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the trends and factors associated with failure-to-appear outcomes among clients released to ACM. Inferential analysis was utilized to identify the factors associated with failure to appear, and qualitative data helped provide context and nuance in regard to why these factors act as a barrier to court appearance. Quantitative data was collected through variables of client demographic characteristics: stability, needs, crime characteristics, and criminal history. Variables related to the ACM program included date of arrest, referral, termination, program termination status, and a record of court hearings and their outcomes. The factors associated with failing to appear in court were identified through logistic regression from the 3,699 unique case sample. Qualitative data were collected through focus groups and in-depth interviews with San Francisco Pretrial staff, supervised released clients, and representatives from San Francisco justice agencies. The researcher sought to further examine what barriers were the most prevalent barriers among defendants who fail to appear in San Francisco.

Key Findings

The brief focused on two key findings: individuals with high needs, especially housing needs, were more likely to miss court hearings and warrants issued due to missed court appearances were usually issued within the first three months of pretrial supervision. Pretrial staff and representatives from the San Francisco justice agencies note that many defendants do not intentionally miss court but are rather faced with difficulties that make it challenging for them to attend. Housing status at the time of the release was the most significant predictor of a missed court appearance. Individuals with unstable housing (unsheltered, staying in shelter) were nearly 1.5 times as likely to miss a court hearing as individuals with transitional or stable housing. The effect of housing stability has a consistent impact across race/ethnicity, age, and gender. Unstable housing can impact the likelihood of court appearance in numerous ways. As clients who are experiencing unstable housing often do not have reliable contact information, making it difficult for them to receive court reminders, they may not have a safe place to store their belongings or pets, preventing them from attending court.

Medical needs, substance use, employment, childcare, and transportation issues were also identified as factors impacting court appearance. Nearly 70% of individuals enrolled in ACM experienced high medical needs; these groups were also 13% more likely to miss court than those with low medical needs. Thirty four percent of people who missed court had mental health need. Data in regard to substance use, employment, childcare, and transportation were unavailable for the quantitative analysis. However, ACM stakeholders and clients note that these

barriers are a consistent challenge for defendants. One San Francisco judge states, “...failure to appear is related to lack of resources in the community. I think an FTA is choosing between childcare and a job and coming to court” (p.5). Housing instability and mental disorders are often interrelated and mutually reinforcing and can exacerbate difficulties in court appearances. According to the article *Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders Among Individuals Experiencing Homelessness: A Systemic Review and Meta-Analysis*, 67% of people experiencing homelessness also experience a mental health disorder, including substance use disorder, which comprises 44% of the unhoused population (2024). This is important when considering low-level offenses that the unhoused population is particularly vulnerable to, such as trespassing, loitering, or disorderly conduct.

The second key finding discovered that 80% of warrants due to missed court were issued within the first and fifth court hearing, and 50% of warrants were issued when clients missed their first or second court hearing. The first three months after release from custody are when individuals are most likely to have warrants issued due to missed court appearances. These findings suggest the importance that the pretrial supervision practice more focused on rehabilitative human service-oriented models rather than compliance-driven, would more effectively address clients’ needs. Other findings from the logistics regression analysis found that these groups were more likely to miss court hearings:

“Women compared to men. Younger individuals (18-39 years old) compared to older individuals charged with property offenses than older individuals charged with violent offenses. Individuals with prior convictions compared to those without prior convictions. Individuals who failed to appear in court in the past two years compared to those who did not. White individuals compared to Black individuals” (p.3).

This study did not conduct any interventions.

Relevance to Dane County

Although Mayer et al., study was conducted in San Francisco, the findings are relevant to Dane County due to shared structural challenges. Dane County, like San Francisco, has experienced rising housing costs, a shrinking supply of affordable units, and an increase in the unhoused population. As the study demonstrates, housing instability is not merely a social issue but a critical factor influencing court appearance and overall system outcomes. Further, in San Francisco, individuals charged with lower-level offenses were found to have a higher likelihood of appearance failure. These findings are consistent with data collected in Dane County, which found that for misdemeanors, defendants failed to appear at least one time in 21% of cases and one time in 19% of non-traffic criminal cases. While defendants with a felony charge failed to appear at least one time in 17% of cases (McNamara, 2018). This may suggest that defendants who are charged with lower-level crimes are less likely to take court appearances seriously or may fail to understand the severity of failure to appear. These findings are relevant to Dane County when considering what services are going to be the most effective at increasing court appearance. The authors suggest that from their study's findings, pretrial release programs focus on a rehabilitative human-service oriented model that is accompanied by resources that are dedicated to addressing individuals’ needs.

Jefferson County Ky and Salt Lake County UT

In the article *What Really Prevents Court Appearance? Survey Findings from People Who Failed to Appear in Two Counties* (2025), the Crime and Justice Institute partnered with Jefferson County, Kentucky, and Salt Lake County, Utah, to survey people who have been arrested on a failure to appear warrant. The report was prepared by Jess Hickman, Mei Yang, Andy Tisdell, Charlie Riccardelli, Ashley Neufeld, and Amanda Coscia.

Methods

The survey asked participants why they missed their court date and included several categories of questions: awareness of the court date and process, conflicts such as transportation or dependents' care needs, perceptions of the justice system, and case outcomes. The Crime and Justice Institute used a unique ID to connect and survey responses with administrative records to note any trends or differences in the reason people with various charges, risk level or other characteristics gave for missing court. Across the two counties, 432 people completed the survey.

Key Findings

The survey found that the two most common reasons for failure to appear were forgetting the court date and unawareness of the court appearance. This was followed by a lack of transportation and not understanding the pretrial process. Of the respondents, 79% cited two or more reasons for missing court. Life circumstances and other responsibilities were found to pose a significant challenge for defendants as well. 49% of respondents at least somewhat agree that it was difficult for them to find transportation to court (20% strongly agree). Among the participants with dependents, 68% at least somewhat agree that it was difficult to find care (16% strongly agree). 49% of the employed survey participants found it at least somewhat difficult to take time off work. The survey participants who were unemployed were more likely to report missing a court date due to lack of transportation. The least reported reasons were defendants intentionally absconding for reasons such as a belief that their outcome would not be fair, out of fear, or that they were innocent of the charges. However, in both locations, the survey found that people charged with more serious offenses were more likely to report intentionally avoiding court.

This study did not include any interventions.

Relevance to Dane County

This study highlights efficient resource allocation that Dane County can utilize. With the most reported reasons for missing court being forgetting the court date or not being aware of the appearance, a need for a court reminder system can provide more effective support for those who may need reminders. Ideas42 states that "rigorous evaluations consistently show that court reminders reduce nonappearance by 20-40%" (p.2); and to further decrease nonappearance Colorado state court reminder system switched from an opt-in system to an automatic enrollment (opt-out system) and saw an increase of reminders from 56,000 to 224,000 with consistently higher appearance rate among defendants (2025). The survey findings regarding transportation challenges suggest that Dane County pretrial services may find prioritizing resources towards bus passes or gas cards may eliminate that challenge for defendants and increase appearance.

Lake County, Illinois

In the report, *Understanding Court Absence and Reframing “Failure to Appear”* (2023), was conducted by JSP, a non-profit, multidisciplinary team that assists with criminal and juvenile legal systems and community partners in transforming their systems. This report was created through the support of the John D and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge. This report was prepared by Shannon Magnuson, Amy Dezember, Kevin Kuehmeier, Cherrell Green, and Dana Gautschi.

Methods

The three primary research questions were: what barriers do individuals face when trying to get to court as scheduled? What services or supports would help individuals get to court as scheduled? Do notification systems and virtual court proceedings help individuals get to court as scheduled? Participation eligibility required that the individual speak English or Spanish, be at least 18 years of age, have no open/pending criminal cases and receive a bench warrant for missing court as scheduled. There were three recruitment strategies utilized to recruit participants. Starting in August 2021 and continuing until November 2021, a convenience sample approach was used as the Lake County Probation Department provided a list of 76 individuals with closed cases but had received a bench warrant for not appearing in court as scheduled. The JSP research staff reached out to all individuals by phone, email, or letter correspondence. Research staff would provide information about the study, describe the risks and benefits, and offer a \$50 visa gift card as compensation for participating. This resulted in one interview. The second recruitment strategy was conducted from November 2021 to February 2022. The research teams utilized a community-based approach and hung flyers with study information in two non-profit community centers with QR codes directing potential participants to a SurveyMonkey link to sign up for the study. Once signed up, a research staff member would contact them. From this recruitment strategy, 3 interviews were conducted.

The research team contacted the Public Defender’s office to update them on the pacing of the recruitment and the difficulty the “open case” exclusion made in finding participants. To address this and access a larger participant pool, the Public Defender’s office agreed to have their investigators ask the interview questions to individuals currently in jail for a bench warrant and send the research team de-identified interview data. The JSP research team worked with the Public Defenders’ investigation unit and trained them on asking for informed consent, the interview protocol, and writing interview notes. Moving forward the lead investigator would check the Bond Hearing List for individuals who were currently in custody for missing court and assigned to the Public Defender’s office for representation. The investigator could only meet with a potential participant in custody after the individual met with an attorney from the Public Defender’s office.

The new eligibility requirement included that the individuals speak English or Spanish, be at least 18 years of age, previously met with an attorney while in custody, and be currently in-custody for a bench warrant for missing court as scheduled. Individuals who met the criteria would be assigned to a junior investigator who would conduct the interview, usually within 48 to

72 hours of the initial booking. Individuals who participated in the study would receive a \$50 visa gift card upon release. From this method, 46 individuals were recruited, totaling to 50 participants in the study. The study sample included 66% men, Black men (27%) and white men (27%), Hispanic men (10%) and multiracial men (2%); and 33% women, white women (16%), Black women (12%), multiracial women (4%) and Hispanic women (2%). The research sample exclusively included individuals represented by the public defender's office, and 92% of participants could not post bail within 48 to 72 hours. Of the participants, 24% were charged with non-violent misdemeanors, 20% violent misdemeanor, 20% non-violent felonies, 18% violent felonies, and 10% non-reported offenses. Of the participants, 60% identified as a primary caregiver, 58% were employed, and 24% were enrolled in school. All interviews were uploaded and transcribed into a qualitative analysis software using a semi-grounded theory approach. The research team used four focal areas to guide the initial coding scheme: reasons individuals did not get to court, consistent or situation barriers, perception of court reminders and virtual court, and recommendations for services or support needed to get to court as scheduled.

Key Findings

The researcher reported three major barriers for participants who are trying to get to court: (1) life responsibilities and challenges, (2) logistical and technical issues, and (3) past experiences and emotional reactions. These barriers are not mutually exclusive and may be experienced simultaneously. 68% of participants cited (1) life responsibilities and challenges as a barrier to court appearance. Both men and women reported these challenges at similar rates, and there was not a significant variation across the race of participants or offense type, except that all Hispanic participants cited that competing family obligations interfered with their court appearance. Navigating life responsibilities and challenges does not mean that court appearance is not a priority for participants. Life circumstances can cause extreme difficulty in court appearances, especially while navigating multiple challenges. Omar, a research participant, described why he missed court,

“I had rented a room but then moved to another apartment. I was working the nightshift, and my wife recently was diagnosed with cancer. My daily schedule was really busy, and I had also mis-scheduled my court dates. Honestly, court is a big priority for me, but I couldn't keep up with my other responsibilities and schedules,” (p.25).

Other life responsibilities participants described included: managing mental health diagnosis and medication compliance, frequent moving, securing shelter, navigating homelessness, responsibilities as a primary caregiver, managing drug use and treatment, night shift, newborn exhaustion, forgetfulness, custody and divorce cases, challenging family and relationship dynamics, work responsibilities, COVID-19, other illnesses, or hospitalization.

The second barrier participants listed to court appearance is logistical and technical concerns, which refers to challenges navigating transportation and scheduling of in-person court and/or issues accessing the virtual court platform. More than 54% of participants cite at least one logistical or technical challenge, and 20% of participants described experiencing two or four different types of logistical challenges which prevented them from getting to court as scheduled. Men and women reported these challenges at similar rates. Black and Brown participants report these challenges at lower rates than they did for challenges pertaining to life responsibilities and challenges. The most cited challenge from the logistical and technical domain was issues related

to transportation. Tyra, a research participant, described how transportation became a major barrier to court appearance,

“I couldn’t get a ride to the court. The actual day of my court, I was told I had to come in-person. And, by the time I found that out, it was too hard to get transportation on the day of,” (p.27).

Other logistical and technical barriers that participants reported were living in another county/state and either no public transportation or challenging transit, unreliable car, no/suspended driver’s license, bus segments that do not align, no computer/internet to use virtual court option, no password to Zoom/Zoom password no working, no directions for Zoom/not listed on Zoom and address issues for notice.

The third barrier that participants described is past experiences and emotional reactions. This refers to participants’ perceptions, attitudes, and cynicism that is felt due to past interactions with the court and/or the emotions participants experience while navigating the process. Researchers found that 28% of participants described that an emotional reaction acted as a barrier to court appearance. Men and women reported these experiences at a similar rate. Black and brown participants reported these challenges at a lower rate than they did for the first barrier listed (life responsibilities and challenges); however, Black participants reported “feeling overwhelmed” as an additional barrier while navigating the court. Variation in reports of past experiences and emotional reactions did not vary based on offense severity. Participants cited the court process as a source of intense stress and trauma, with one participant, Lavaughn described,

“I was scared and fell into depression. I’m also going through divorce court. I have a lot going on and I was scared to show up and continue with my case,” (p.29).

Other cited past experiences or emotions reactions participants described included: fearful/scared about the process and going to jail, nervous/scared, overwhelmed, court actors as unhelpful, refuse to provide help, intimidating or purposefully aggressive, participants being confused about the process due to lack of information, too much information, or conflicting information, confusion on navigating the building or court technology, and lastly participants experiencing racist, ablest or stigmatizing experiences with the court.

Of the three categories of barriers, 38% of participants reported navigating more than one barrier for the court appearance that they missed. These co-occurring barriers can result in compounding challenges. Specifically, 10% of participants reported that the court rules and inflexibility made their court absence unavoidable. The impact of compounding challenges can be seen through Candace’s experience,

“My judge intimidates me and made me cry at the last hearing. It is not pleasant to attend court with that judge (barrier 1). And, I don’t have a driver’s license, so I can’t drive (barrier 2). Plus, I live over the border [in Wisconsin] and the ride to the courthouse is pretty far. I rely on my parents to drive me. They work, and I told that to the judge. I did tell my judge that I could make it to court by 3:00pm and asked if I could make it by then. The judge said that wasn’t soon enough and he issued a warrant” (p.35).

Further, 28% of participants reported that the court on a specific day risked their ability to meet basic needs such as income, food, or shelter. Researchers refer to the choice between court

and meeting one's basic needs as the "survivalist decision" to not attend court. This experience can be seen through Jack,

"I'm homeless. As part of the agreement with the local shelter, they drop several of us at the community library and tell us to stay there until 2:30pm. If I leave, the shelter won't guarantee my place for that evening. I called pretrial services to let them know I couldn't visit them because I was staying at the library. I emailed them too using my phone. No response, but my phone can be spotty. Also, I couldn't Zoom from the library. I thought my message to pretrial would reschedule my court. As it turns out, I didn't reschedule. I didn't want to jeopardize my shelter for that evening by leaving the library," (p.37).

The researchers note that they did not explicitly ask about court rules, basic needs, or compounding challenges; these difficulties came up organically throughout the interview. This does not mean that the remainder of the participants did not experience these challenges, but that they were not mentioned at the time of the interview. A necessary piece of discussion in regard to FTAs is that many participants are navigating these barriers for each court appearance they have. This ongoing challenge can be further compounded by the inflexibility of the court itself, as for many individuals, case processing may require several court hearings. Of the participants, 12% cited that they had missed more than one court hearing, given that their barriers to court are consistent and situational. Further discussion of the researchers' findings in regard to court notification systems and virtual proceedings will be discussed throughout the potential solutions section of the analysis.

Relevance to Dane County

This study demonstrates the difficulty in accessing relevant and necessary knowledge to better understand failure to appear in court. As researchers faced tremendous difficulty in recruiting participants who had only closed cases. This suggests that Dane County will need to find a collaborative compromise that maintains the integrity of the research while also protecting an active case. Additionally, these findings suggest that the main barriers to court appearance are associated with situational instability, logistics, and trauma, rather than a preemptive disregard for court. This must encourage a shift in court proceedings and judicial culture to move away from strict punitive responses and move towards a more humanitarian-focused response. Recognizing that a missed court appearance is in response to unmet needs rather than intentional disregard of court proceedings. From this research, courts can take these findings and potentially integrate or expand flexible court scheduling or grace periods to reduce the number of required hearings. Additionally, courts could work to combine cases if a defendant has several ongoing cases at the time. As the research suggests that logistical barriers are prevalent for participants, allowing out-of-county defendants to be considered for remote-eligibility may aid in FTA reduction. As noted by participants, fear, trauma, and confusion are associated with the court. Dane County can invest in trauma informed court practices and judicial training while also encouraging multiple methods of communication and the use of plain language.

Harris County, Texas

In the article *Navigating the real-life challenges of appearing in court: recommendations for addressing wealth-based barriers to court appearance in Harris County* (2024). Research was conducted by Ideas42 in collaboration with stakeholders in Harris County. Authors of this article are Shannon McAuliffe, Samantha Hammer, Alissa Fishbane, and Andrea Wilk.

Methods

Multiple methods of data collection were used throughout this research process. The first data collection method researchers developed was journey mapping of the experience from arrest to the disposition process. Researchers journey-mapped the key steps that a person with a misdemeanor case experience from arrest through the disposition of their case. The journey map identified key areas in the process where challenges related to learning about, preparing form and showing up to court on the correct day and time could occur. This aided researchers in hypothesizing about potential challenges and focusing on exploring them in interviews with court users and stakeholders.

The researchers developed thirty-three hypotheses through the use of multiple sources: the 11 possible causes of non-appearance detailed in the Consent Decree a literature review, and Ideas42's prior research into drivers of court nonappearance, interviews with Harris County stakeholders, and aggregate data on the Harris County caseload and nonappearance available at the start of the research. The list of hypotheses can be found [here](#) on page 165.

For the second data collection method, researchers conducted 43 semi-structured interviews through two phases: the first phase was from July-August 2021, which comprises the bulk of interviews, and then a second phase from December 2021 to January 2022 with the intention to increase representation among key subgroups in the interview sample. Researchers sought interviews to provide insights into: (1) which barriers were most prevalent and for whom, (2) how and why barriers impeded court appearance, and (3) which kinds of practice changes and supports would be most helpful for court users facing the barriers. Researchers used interview guides that were structured around their hypothesis, which focused on understanding barriers to court, circumstances around missed appearance or struggles to appear in court in detail. Interviewees were recruited through multiple methods: direct outreach at the courthouse and pretrial services, connection via Public Defenders Office (PDO) and community organizations, flyers posted in the courthouse and online platforms, community service providers, and advocacy organizations.

Interviewees were given information about informed consent, were not asked about any potentially incriminating activities, and were allowed to skip any questions and end the interview at any point. The interview notes were analyzed using a thematic coding approach from Braun and Clarke. Interview passages were coded based on the extent to which they contained relevant information for each hypothesis. Researchers state that this process allows them to evaluate the frequency at which barriers are named and the extent to which interviewees indicated that a barrier presented a real challenge in attending court. After each interview was coded, researchers

collaborated to determine that they had reached consensus on any coding discrepancies. All interview processes, informed consent process, and material, recruitment materials, and interview guides were reviewed and approved by the IRB.

Researchers encountered several limitations throughout the research process. Researchers struggled to recruit a diverse sample of individuals who could speak about their missing court appearances. Researchers could not be provided with a list of names and contact information of court users who had missed court and pivoted towards the recruitment methods listed. Further, these methods posed a challenge in verifying the information provided. These challenges were exacerbated by the pandemic and the inability to recruit in-person at the courthouse. Thus, from the 43 interviewees, 36% reported that they had not missed a court appearance, and half of that, 18%, reported not having been late or missed an appearance. In response to the fact that not all interviewees had missed a court appearance throughout the coding and analysis of the data, researchers analyzed the differences in the prevalence of barriers and challenges to court appearance for interviewees who reported having missed court versus those who reported having not missed court. This allowed researchers to describe the extent to which each barrier contributes to court appearance. Researchers were further limited in their ability to recruit non-English speaking participants, and individuals who missed court due in part to mental health or substance use challenges.

The third data collection method analyzed anonymized text recorded by PDO attorneys in 3,893 interviews conducted with clients who had missed court and were awaiting a bail revocation hearing. These interviews were conducted between May 7, 2021, and January 7th, 2022, for defendants who had misdemeanor charges and missed court. The analysis of these interviews was conducted through a machine learning method and manual coding and analysis. The researchers present a high-level analysis of the topics present in the interview data in the report.

The fourth data collection method was a survey of 60 individuals with active cases in Harris County. These participants were recruited from outreach via Pretrial Services and the Reentry office of the Harris County Sheriff's Office. This data was collected to measure the prevalence of hypothesized barriers to nonappearance to help determine which barriers to focus on in qualitative interviews. The survey has 8 questions, primarily multiple choice. Demographic information was not collected but was available in both English (88%) and Spanish (12%). The survey content and recruitment process were approved by the IRB.

The fifth data collection method was interviews with court stakeholders and community organizations. Researchers interviewed 83 individuals representing 29 court agencies and programs, community services providers, and advocacy organizations. Researchers found these interviews critical in triangulating insights drawn from the interviews and surveys done with court users, as they provided a sense of overall trends in nonappearance, contextualized individual stories of struggle with appearance, and pointed to influential elements of policy and practice. Some stakeholders were interviewed at several points to gather follow-up information about relevant programs or policies; and eight sessions with stakeholder groups were held following the qualitative research findings to seek input on potential recommendations resulting from the research.

The sixth data collection method was through participant observation in the form of mystery shopping activities. Mystery shopping activities included navigating the court website to find court contact information and appearance details, conducting phone calls and/or sending emails to courts, the District Clerk's Office, and the Justice Navigators to inquire about topics like arrival times, the possibility of bringing children to court, and transportation options. These observations are included in the qualitative interview data and coded and analyzed using the same processes as the interviews.

The seventh data collection method was the review of supporting documents on court agency policies and programs. Researchers reviewed over 40 policy and program documents provided by court stakeholders. Examples of documents reviewed are release requirements described in the Consent Decree, detailed practice reviews, and preliminary reports of outcomes of new initiatives. The document review was a continual effort throughout the research process that informed research questions, hypothesis and research instruments.

The eight data collection methods researchers utilized were analyzing Harris County 2021 misdemeanor case data to identify factors such as race, age, gender, violation type, and timing associated with court nonappearance. However, after discovering significant concerns about the reliability of the data, researchers and community stakeholders decided not to include the analysis of appearance rates in the report. Instead, the report presents descriptive statistics about the 2021 caseload. The study focuses only on cases initiated in 2021 (49,780 cases involving 41,613 individuals) because appearance data prior to 2020 was not systematically recorded and therefore, deemed unreliable. The researchers conducted quantitative and qualitative research simultaneously rather than sequentially. Further, researchers did not receive data on mental health and substance use incidence in the caseload until March 2022, after the qualitative research was completed. In the initial analysis of the administrative data, researchers developed a descriptive statistic of court user, case, and appearance characteristics, then employed a mixed effects model to identify observable factors related to non-appearance and appearance rate. However, after the initial analysis, significant concerns were raised about the reliability of the data.

From the 2021 Harris County data (data collection method eight), researchers found that 77% of court users were male, while 23% of court users were female. There is no mention of transgender, nonbinary, or gender queer individuals throughout this report. Researchers note that the following race and ethnic data should be used with caution, as court users were not typically asked what they identified as but Joint Processing Center staff manually entered that information, leaving room for bias. The percentage of court users by race and ethnicity is as follows: 57% white, 39% Black/African American, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, <1% Native American, and <1% missing race data. In this data Hispanic/Latino were included in the white category. From this data, researchers note that Black people are over-represented in the caseload by approximately 2x based on their portion of the Harris County population (20% based on 2021 Census estimates). The age demographic of the court users was as following: 18-24 (24%), 25-34 (36%), 35-44 (23%), 45-54 (10%), 55-64 (5%), 65+ (1%), unknown (<1%), missing age (1%). Of the total number of court users in 2021 (41,613), 19% of users had a mental health or substance use flag. This identification varied significantly by race and is as follows: 25% Black/African American, 15% white, 9% Native American, 7% Asian American, 1% unknown or missing mental health and substance use and/or race data.

Key Findings

From these various data collection methods, researchers found many major barriers that impact defendants' ability to appear in court. I have broken these down into five different categories to discuss their impact on defendants.

Category 1: Personal and Systemic Barriers. Many defendants encounter personal challenges that are often intensified by insufficient systemic support or limited public resources. Researchers found that many respondents cited difficulties in having transportation to court. Some spoke about the difficulty in securing a ride to court from a friend or family member, while others could not afford transportation. The lack of public transportation or financially accessible public transportation was also noted as an issue. This barrier was particularly salient for the unhoused population of the study. Defendants noted that they simply had work the day of the court appearance or that they could not miss work. Some defendants cited that their work was in another county or even another state and either could not or forgot about the court date. A smaller number of participants said that they had been afraid that if they took time off work, they would lose their jobs. Family emergencies, such as a sudden death or taking care of a loved one, also led to barriers to court appearances.

Court users often noted that they had no one to look after their children on their court date. The lack of affordable childcare, therefore, contributes to FTA rates, as many court users have children. Many court users noted that they simply forgot their court date. Some provided more insight and said that they lost their court paperwork or did not know how to confirm their court date. However, many demonstrated that scarcity makes it difficult for court users to remember their court date as they are facing multiple challenges simultaneously, job loss, eviction, homelessness, etc. Ideas42 suggests that chronic poverty not only limits the resources available to court users but can also affect cognitive functioning. Humans can only perceive, process, and act on a fixed amount of information. Vital resources such as housing security, food access, or childcare can fill up an individual's mind, leaving other things pushed aside (2022). Housing insecurity and homelessness also intersect with many of the issues listed for court users. Being unhoused creates a myriad of challenges in everyday life, such as transportation, food access, nightly shelter, and childcare. Therefore, unhoused defendants are not only experiencing difficulties accessing basic necessities, but they must also do so while navigating a complex legal system.

General fear and mistrust of the justice system also played a significant part in why defendants did not appear in court. 77% of interviewees reported that they feared being jailed due to arraignment or the case unexpectedly resolving in a way that could harm them. 20% of survey respondents cited fear of lockup as a challenge to court appearance, and 20% named having to pay fines as a fear of court appearance.

The days leading up to the court date, he was very emotional and could not sleep—it was “something that haunts you.” He was so scared about the first arraignment that he and his mom practiced the route to court the night before. On the day of court, they arrived early at 8:30 a.m., and when sitting outside the courtroom, he heard people talk about what could happen. He did not have a lawyer at the time, did not know one would be assigned to him, and fully expected to go to jail that day. The only information he had was his bond paper, and since “no one explains the process literally,” he expected the worst.

Despite being early, he left court before being called and went straight to Mexico. When he returned and was picked up on the warrant and jailed for two weeks, the judge asked why he went to so much trouble to miss a court date, and he explained he had no idea what to expect and his fear just got the better of him” (Ideas 42, p.51,).

This court user's story demonstrates how fear can erode rational thinking and leave defendants feeling that they are backed into a corner with no way out.

Category 2: Health. Many court users cited that serious medical conditions were the reason they missed court. Ranging from hospitalization, quarantine, miscommunication between lawyers over whether it was necessary to show up for court, to believing that the court was closed due to the pandemic. Others cited mental health issues that led court users to be in crisis and hospitalized or in another institution during the period of their missed court appearance. Other respondents describe suicide attempts, severe depression, or general mental instability as the reason for their missed appearance. Further, substance use and rehab were cited as reasons for their missed appearance as well. The intersection of substance uses, and other psychiatric or mental health disorders is common. From the article Navigating the Complex Intersection of Substance Use and Psychiatric Disorders: A Comprehensive Review reported that adults with dual diagnoses made up 26% of those with psychiatric disorders, 37% of those with substance use disorders, and 18% of the total 76 million adults are affected by either condition. Among individuals with psychiatric disorders, having a dual diagnosis was linked to substantial social and psychological difficulties, including increased violence, poorer mental health and quality of life, more frequent encounters with law enforcement, homelessness, and higher rates of incarceration (2024). Experiencing co-occurring symptoms of psychiatric disorder and substance use can impair a defendant’s comprehension, memory, or emotional regulation, creating difficulty in understanding or remembering court processes, instructions, dates, or compliance with legal instructions. The vulnerability this population faces is tremendous, as many face issues that are more immediate than court appearances.

Category 3: Legal Concerns. Researchers note that most respondents who cited immigration and deportation as a concern were detained by ICE or had been deported. A smaller portion of the court users said that they avoided court out of fear of ICE and possible deportation. It can only be assumed that this experience has been exacerbated by the current administration and its mass deportation policies. Many respondents also noted that general financial hardship interfered with their ability to attend court. As some stated that they needed to save up money for them to fulfill their court obligation or obtain representation, others noted that they needed to pay for things related to their conditions, such as breathalyzer, classes, or court fees.

Category 4: Court Issues. Frequently reported was that court users were misinformed about whether their appearance had been waived, mixed up the court date for a different case, believed that the case had been disposed of, or were simply unaware that they had a court date because they did not receive (or did not remember receiving) a notice. Court users also cited poor communication with their defense attorney as connected to their court absence. Researchers noted that this fell into three main themes: court users reported that they were told their appearance had been waived when it was not, that a lawyer had not provided information for a reset court date, or that a lawyer had not responded to attempts by the court user to clarify court date information. Court users also expressed that their appearance date had been reset several times, and they either lost track of the new date or did not receive the notification. A small

portion of court users were also detained in another detention facility and were unable to contact their lawyer about their Harris County case.

Category 5: Technology Issues. Commonly reported among court users was losing their phones and being temporarily unable to contact the court, remember their court dates, or appear via Zoom. A smaller portion of respondents noted that they were unable to pay their phone bill or not have a phone at all. Court users whose non-appearance was related to Zoom issues frequently missed court due to confusion about whether they were to appear in person or over Zoom. Others faced technological difficulties on Zoom or were not called on while on Zoom.

Overall, researchers found that court users believe that appearing in court is an important obligation; the fear of going to jail and general scarcity are massive barriers to appearance. Even interviewees who did appear in court reported these as challenges to their appearance. Additionally, these barriers are not in isolation from one another, and many court users experience multiple barriers to appear in court, each time their appearance is required.

Relevance to Dane County

These findings demonstrate that the gaps in the system leave court users vulnerable to non-appearance if they do not have the personal resources available to ensure attendance. For Dane County, it suggests that through identifying system gaps and recognizing ways that the court can provide extra resources or flexibility, court attendance could increase. Dane County can recognize how scarcity, substance use, and mental health all intersect and impact one's cognitive availability and comprehension. Perhaps using multiple methods of information communications (via mail, case manager, phone calls, etc.) and having courts confirm defendants' addresses and phone numbers each time they appear in court can increase communication comprehension. To reduce fear among our immigrant population, Dane County should not cooperate with ICE agents. Communicating not only the nuts and bolts of the court process but also understanding the internal experience of defendants is important when thinking about appearance rates. Courts should use these findings to determine how they can fill the gaps that vulnerable defendants can strengthen perceptions of procedural justice and could lead to higher compliance with the law generally.

What has been done to reduce failure to appear?

There have been various kinds of interventions done to reduce FTAs. The focus on text reminders is an attempt to provide empirical research on successful initiatives that are also cost-effective. Text message reminders have been implemented in various contexts including hospitals, hairdressers and reservation reminders. Their effectiveness is demonstrated in-part with how common it is for us to receive them. Other interventions can be and should be done to best encourage appearance, however, text reminders are cost-effective and empirically proven.

Removing Barriers to Pretrial Appearance: Lessons Learned from Tulsa County, Oklahoma and Hennepin County, Minnesota

In this article *Removing Barriers to Pretrial Appearance: Lessons learned from Tulsa County, Oklahoma and Hennepin County, Minnesota* (2021), researchers tested whether UpTrust, a two-way messaging system in Tulsa Oklahoma and a Court Ride program in Hennepin Minnesota could reduce failure to appear. Tulsa OK, found success in its text messaging system with a reduction in FTA rates and an increase of communication between the court and defendants. Hennepin MN found that providing rides to court was helpful, however, due to privacy concerns required a tremendous amount of administrative work on public defenders. Reviews were overall mixed.

Tulsa County Oklahoma

In 2017, Tulsa County, Oklahoma, and the Vera Institute of Justice began to examine the drivers of growth and overcrowding of the county jail. The reported incarceration rate in the jail had increased 43% in two decades and exceeded the national average since 2012. The Vera Institute researchers found that a key driver was people being jailed because of warrants (30%) particularly, warrants for failure to pay fines and failure to appear in court which accounted for 14% of the 2017 jail admissions. Those detained for FTA were detained on average for 15 days, costing the county nearly \$1.2 million in jail costs. The Vera Institute recommended that Tulsa County adopt a court reminder system in the municipal and district courts and examine the current rates, timing, and causes of FTA.

Implementation

Tulsa County implemented UpTrust, a two-way messaging system tool that reminds clients of their upcoming court dates, facilitates transportation, and connects clients with their Family & Children's Services (FCS) manager. Tulsa County hired an FCS case manager who worked in the public defender's office to enroll clients in UpTrust, monitor UpTrust messages, and refer public defender clients to services such as counseling, recovery services, psychiatric support, and transportation regardless of their ability to pay. UpTrust served not only as a court reminder but also allowed clients to flag unmet needs that the FCS case manager could work to address through linking services to clients.

Outcomes

The Tulsa County Public Defenders' Office provided the Urban research team with the first-year implementation data from the UpTrust system. This time period ranged from February 2019 through March 2020. In the first year, an estimated 10,214 public defender clients (67% of defendants) enrolled in the UpTrust app. These clients accounted for 35,000 court cases or an average of 3.45 court dates per client. However, only 1,256 clients (10%) had access to a cell phone, but 30% of the public defender clients were in the community and able to engage with UpTrust through another device. Demographic breakdown of this first-year cohort was 65% male, most client cases involved felonies and misdemeanors, 4,903 were felonies, and 2,583 were misdemeanors. 32% of enrolled clients cited that they required childcare assistance and only 9% of clients registered that they had reliable transportation to court.

After the first year of UpTrust, only half (16,00 of the 35,000) of the court cases registered with UpTrust had occurred. Of those 16,000, only 9% (1,376) of these cases resulted in an FTA, while 44% were excused (client could not make the court appearance but was able to obtain a waiver). Almost half, 47%, of these cases appeared in court, and 13% of cases were removed from the court calendar. Tulsa County could not provide a baseline number of FTA before the implementation of UpTrust. Stakeholders have credited the app with significantly reducing FTAs, with one stating “...before, 50% of clients didn’t show, now it’s about 15%” (p.12). UpTrust sent over 14,480 messages to clients throughout the first year, and 75% of the messages were successfully delivered to clients. The most common types of assistance requested by clients were unmet transportation needs, which were met mostly by calling Uber and Lyft. However, the Public Defenders’ office also provided bus tokens and gas cards. Other assistance included employment information, court information, childcare, housing, and mental health referrals.

Hennepin County Minnesota

In 2015, Hennepin County, Minnesota, issued 17,000 warrants for defendants who failed to appear in court. One of the most cited reasons for FTA was the defendant being unable to find or pay for transportation to court. Public defenders reported that clients were unable to access reliable transportation or afford the costs of public transportation in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul area. Courthouses in suburban areas of the county were largely inaccessible to many clients. The Hennepin County Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee, a committee of local justice system stakeholders that includes members of law enforcement, prosecutors, public defenders, and public officials at the county and city levels, established the Adult Detention Initiative that worked on reducing bench warrants and created a program to send email reminders to people with upcoming court dates. The Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee furthered these efforts with the Court Transportation Pilot, called Court Ride, as an extension of efforts to reduce FTA and bench warrants.

Court Ride provided eligible defendants with free rides to and from court and court-related appointments through a partnership with Hitch Health, a local company that focuses on improving transportation services for people served by Hennepin Healthcare. Hitch Health adapted its model by using data to contact eligible clients and coordinate free rides using Lyft. Before a client’s court date, they receive a text message prompting them to opt in to the program. After doing so, they receive another text asking whether they need a ride. If they select yes, a Lyft driver will pick them up and drive them to their court date. Once finished, they can text “Ready,” and a Lyft driver will pick them up and return them to their original location. The largest benefit of this software is that a smartphone is not needed to utilize these services. Any cellphone with texting ability can communicate with Hitch Health to receive free rides.

Implementation

As Hennepin County has three courthouses, public defenders have reported that transportation was inaccessible for their clients. Further, stakeholders had identified that local affordable housing is not always near good public transportation options. The Minneapolis City Attorney’s Office learned about Hitch Health and reached out to the County’s Public Defenders Office to gauge interest in a pilot initiative to use the Hitch Health platform for their clients. The Hennepin County Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee provided research, support,

marketing, and additional funding for this project as well. The aim of Court Ride was to reduce bench warrants and FTA rates in the county.

Originally, Court Ride was meant only for defendants who were assigned a Hennepin County public defender and who had an open case with the City of Minneapolis in the Hennepin District Court with either a misdemeanor or a gross misdemeanor. However, due to low engagement, they expanded the program to include eligibility criteria for adult public defender clients at all offense levels at the downtown Minneapolis courthouse and to provide rides for court-related appointments in addition to court appearances. In April 2019, the program expanded to serve clients at the two suburban courthouses in addition to the one in downtown Minneapolis.

Hennepin County conducted stakeholder interviews conducted in February 2020 and a web-based Qualtrics survey (distributed to 112 Hennepin County public defenders) administered between March 2020 and May 2020, which revealed that there were challenges throughout the implementation process. The survey only achieved a 30% response rate. Of the public defenders who responded, 57% indicated that increased workload challenges conflicted with their ability to properly inform clients of Court Ride. Additionally, 33% of respondents cited technological issues, 26% reported issues with clients not obtaining rides after requesting them, and 10% reported that messages were not delivered to clients. Further, 10% had difficulties explaining Court Ride to clients and noted that there was no standardized script to use when telling clients. This was exacerbated by the fact that there were changing eligibility criteria as well.

Another challenge Court Ride had was data-sharing practices through the state courts. As they were not able to share personally identifying information, such as a defendant's names and phone numbers. Data-sharing capacity and automation with Hennepin County Jail through the Sheriff's office to enroll people being released from jail in Court Ride so they could receive free rides to court was proposed to mitigate data-sharing issues; however, stakeholders wanted to reserve rides for public defender clients. Therefore, due to technological issues, the Hennepin County Public Defenders' Office had to expend extensive staff resources to manually input client information and set up each needed ride. Researchers note that not only was this incredibly time-consuming, but it also undermined the main benefit of Hitch Health's technology.

Also, stakeholders discussed the limitations of Hitch Health. As rides were only able to be scheduled five to seven days in advance, and court dates are typically set months ahead. Upon this, Hitch Health adapted its software to allow rides to be scheduled up to two weeks in advance. Public defenders had to send email requests to a program administrator at the public defender's office and keep track of client's court dates and court-related appointments to schedule rides through Hitch Health software two weeks before. Stakeholders noted that public defenders already have busy caseloads and must juggle many clients' needs, and that this additional task is further stretching scarce resources. This was the first time Hitch Health had been utilized in the criminal justice environment, which required a steep learning curve to understand the quality of justice data and processes across justice agencies. Finally, 36% of public defenders who responded to the survey indicated other challenges, such as clients not having cell phones, public defenders not understanding the program and not remembering to mention to their clients, manual entry within a two-week timeframe, clients requesting rides then not taking them, and Court Ride not providing enough reminders to clients.

Outcomes

Hennepin County Public Defenders' Office provided the Urban research time with ride-level data from February 2019 (when Court Ride launched) through March 2020. This represented the entire Court Ride implementation period under the Innovation Fund Grant. During this time, Court Ride provided 1,079 rides to an estimated 551 people. 38% of the rides were for people facing misdemeanor charges, 23% were for people facing gross misdemeanor charges, and 37% were for people facing felony charges. Most of the rides provided, 74%, were to transport people to court. However, people also used rides for court-related appointments such as meeting with attorneys (3%), non-attorney meetings with social workers or probation officers (2%), and other appointments for mandated programming or community supervision conditions (20%). Most participants used Court Ride for their pretrial hearing (57%), but after January 2020, the Hennepin County Public Defenders' Office stopped recording the type of hearing each ride was used for.

Of the 551 people who used Court Ride, the largest age cohort was people between the ages of 25-34 (35%), and 77% of users were younger than 45. Additionally, information on race was self-reported for 67% of Court Ride users. Of those who reported, 61% identified as Black or African American, 27% identified as white (non-Hispanic or non-Latinx), 6% percent identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, 2% identified as two or more races or ethnicities, 1% identified as Hispanic or Latinx, and 0.2% identified as Asian. Information on gender identity was not collected.

Research highlights that Court Ride experienced a significant number of cancellations from riders, 46% of rides were cancelled. Data on why these rides resulted in a cancellation was not collected. Of rides for which the rider did not show up, 6% resulted in the issuing of a bench warrant, and 2% of rides for which the rider did not show up did not result in the issuing of a bench warrant. Thirty-six percent of rides were successful, and on time, 4% were successful but late.

In the Public Defender survey on Court Ride, almost all respondents had reported that they talked to their clients about Court Ride. However, 87% of respondents reported that only a few of their clients had used Court Ride, 6% said half of their clients had used it, and 6% were unsure. Further, 96% of respondents reported that rides were used for court appointments. Lastly, the survey measured perceptions of Court Rides regarding impact. Most respondents 87% agreed or strongly agreed that Court Ride has reduced barriers to court appearance, and 78% agreed or strongly agreed that it reduces FTA rates for their clients, and 64% agreed or strongly agreed that it had reduced the number of their clients in custody. However, largely respondents indicated “neutral” regarding whether Court Ride had improved their effectiveness in managing cases (45%) and whether it has enhanced communication with their clients (58%). Most reported that they used Court Ride as a strategy to gain release for their clients.

Additionally, most respondents agreed (31%) or strongly agreed (62%) that their clients needed transportation to their court-related appointments and that their clients were satisfied with Court Ride (90% total). The majority of respondents (93%) agreed or strongly agreed that Court Ride was a worthwhile investment of time and resources of the public defender's office.

Relevance to Dane County

Tulsa County, Oklahoma, demonstrates how text reminders with two-way communication and resource connections can decrease court non-appearance rates. This suggests that expanding pretrial services to tackle a larger portion of the pretrial population could effectively reduce court non-appearance, as many defendants need resource connections and reminders to attend court. Hennepin County Minnesota demonstrates to Dane County that transportation needs are a serious barrier for defendants, but that providing rides while maintaining confidentiality may require an undue burden upon public defenders. It may be a more resourceful option to provide bus passes and gas cards to all public defender clients throughout the pretrial process to meet their needs. Madison Metro has 30-day bus passes that the county could buy and provide for clients during the month of their scheduled court hearing.

Automated Reminders Reduce Incarceration for Missed Court Dates: Evidence from a Text Message Experiment

From the article Automated reminders reduce incarceration for missed court dates: Evidence from a text message experiment (2025), researchers found that an automatic text reminder system had positive impacts on arrest and incarceration. In this randomized control trial researchers tested if automatic text messages reduced bench warrants for FTAs and what the downstream impact on incarceration rates were. They found that automatic text reminders had a significant impact on reducing bench warrant rates (20% reduction after the first scheduled court date and 15% reduction by the end of the experiment) and that the reminder texts had a 21% reduction in the rates of incarceration.

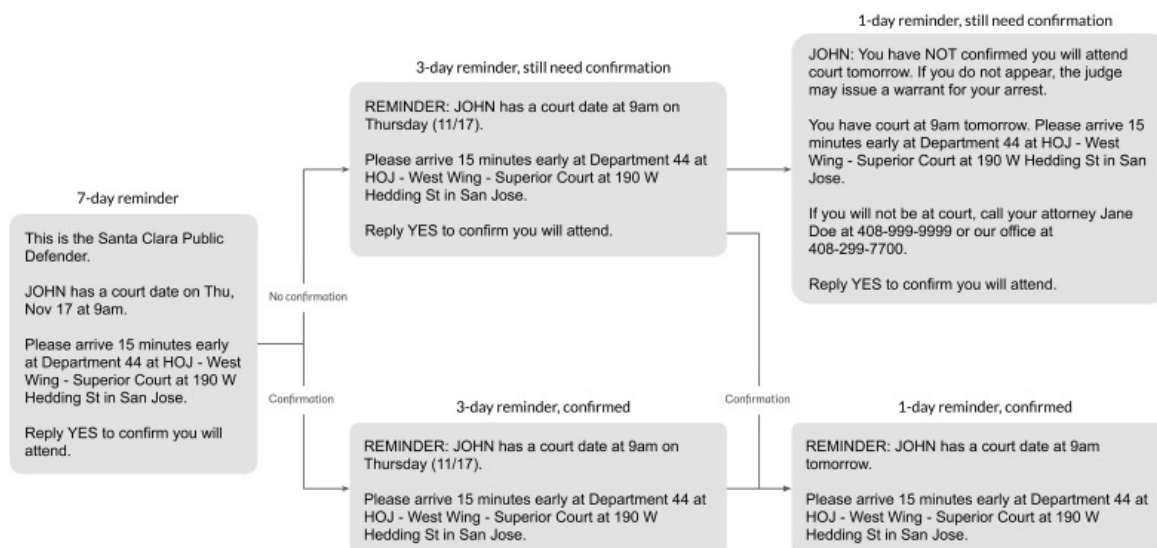
Santa Clara, California

Researchers in the Santa Clara County Public Defender's Office sought to gain a better understanding of the downstream impacts of automatic reminder systems on arrest and incarceration. Researchers are building on previous research about automatic text messages decreasing court non-appearance by looking at whether automatic court date reminders achieve any social benefits beyond increased adherence to court date schedules. To determine whether text message reminders increase court appearance and reduce incarceration, researchers conducted a randomized controlled trial with clients at the Santa Clara County Public Defender's Office. This study specifically examines the effect of reminders for clients of public defenders.

Methodology

5,709 clients from the Santa Clara County Public Defender Office (SCCPDO) were charged with felonies, misdemeanors, or supervision violations. Of these clients, 2,397 had court dates between May 17, 2022, and September 21, 2022, and 3,322 had court dates between October 14, 2022, and August 24, 2023. Clients were randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions. 2,811 clients were assigned to the control condition, and 2,898 clients were assigned to the treatment condition. Inclusion eligibility consisted of clients must have had at least one court date in the timespan, have had a cellphone number available in the SCCPDO's case management system, and have never previously received an automated reminder from SCCPDO.

Clients in the treatment group received reminders 7 days, 3 days, and 1 day before each upcoming court date. Translated versions of these reminders were provided in Spanish and Vietnamese for the 22% of clients who had previously indicated a need for translation in these languages. Clients were asked to confirm their attendance at each court date, with the timing of their confirmation determining their path through the messaging flow.



Results

Researchers looked at how reminders affected two primary outcomes: (1) Issuance of a bench warrant for failure to appear and (2) remands to custody on a bench warrant. When measuring the impact on bench warrants, researchers looked at two timeframes: first, when the issuance occurred at the client's first scheduled court date after assignment, and second, issuance of at least one bench warrant at any point between assignment and the end of the experiment. When measuring the impacts on remands on custody, the researchers looked at the second timeframe since several events must occur before a remand: a client fails to appear, a judge issues a bench warrant, a client, sometime later, must be taken back into custody by law enforcement.

In the control group, 12% of clients received a bench warrant at their first scheduled court date after assignment, compared to 9% of clients in the treatment group. This 2.5 percentage point difference (95% confidence interval) corresponds to a 20% reduction in bench warrant rates. At the end of the experiment, 20% of clients in the control condition received at least one bench warrant, compared to 17% of clients in the treatment group. A 3.1 percentage point difference corresponds to a 15% reduction in the issuance of bench warrants.

These reductions are reflected in the rates of incarceration. A total of 6% of clients in the control group were remanded on a bench warrant after assignment, compared to 5% of clients in the treatment group. A 1.4 percentage point corresponds to a relative reduction of 21%. Impacts on bench warrants and remands to custody are qualitatively similar for clients with both misdemeanors and felony level cases. To further improve the precision of results, the researchers also estimated the impact of text message reminders via a logistic regression model corresponding to each of the outcomes of interest and adjusting for available pretreatment covariates.

Researchers found that automated reminders increase court attendance and reduce pretrial incarceration among public defender clients by 20%. Researchers calculated that the average marginal cost of 60 cents per defendant per case, automatic text reminders are an inexpensive and effective method to increase court appearance. Automated text messages seek to

address forgetfulness or confusion surrounding court appearances. The optimal timing of text messages is unclear. There have been other studies that utilize the 7, 3, and 1-day text messages, but the timing could be altered.

Relevance to Dane County

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of multiple reminder messages and having a follow-up confirmation to structure the message around. The reductions in bench warrant rates suggest that the upfront costs of a text reminder system have a significant pay-off for the decrease in incarceration. Dane County should consider the positive impact a multi-day reminder system could have on the county budget and the long-term outcomes of defendants.

Behavioral Nudges Reduce Failure to Appear for Court

From the article Behavioral Nudges Reduce Failure to Appear for Court (2020), researchers in New York City conducted two field studies. In the first study researchers redesigned summons form to simplify the information presented and found that new forms reduce failure to appear by 13%. In the second study researchers tested whether failures to appear could be further reduced through court text reminders and what kind of messaging was the most effective. They found that text reminders reduced failure to appear by 37% relative to the control group and that messages with the consequence to non-appearance were the most effective at reducing FTAs.

New York City, New York

The researchers from Ideas42 are exploring the possibility that the reason defendants might miss court is simple human error. Even though defendants may have access to all the relevant information they need to attend court, they might be unaware of this information. Their hypothesis is that insufficient awareness can cause court nonappearance. The researchers conducted two field studies in New York City where they redesigned the summons form and provided text message reminders.

First Study

In the first study, they redesigned the court summons form to simplify how the information is presented. Criminal summonses are typically issued for the lowest level of criminal offenses in New York City resulting from open containers, disorderly conduct, or park trespassing. In 2015, the year prior to the study intervention, 256,488 summonses were issued that required a court appearance. Typically, defendants are not arrested for these offenses, taken into custody, or detained but they are provided a summons form and are required to attend a court date in 60-90 days. However, if they fail to appear in court, a warrant is out for their arrest. Failure to appear is a separate arrest and carries a fine of \$250 or 15 days in jail. If the individual voluntarily appears in court a day later, the warrant will likely be vacated; however, many defendants may not know they have open warrants. Historically, in New York City, the failure to appear rate for summons that require a court appearance is around 40%.

Methodology

Researchers used data from the New York State Office of Court Administration. The data contains the defendant's gender, date of birth, address, information about violation, and court outcomes. The primary sample includes all 323,922-summons issued in New York City between January 1, 2016, and June 14, 2017. At the time of the study, the only notification of the defendant's required court appearance was the summons ticket they received at the time of the original offense. The original summons had the court date written at the bottom of the form, below details about the issuing officer. Only on the back of the form was there information about arrest warrants issued for those who fail to comply. Researchers collaborated with the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, New York City Policy Department, and the New York State Office of Court Administration to redesign the summons ticket to make relevant information more prominent on the form. The updated summons form clearly states in bold typeface on the front of the form that missing the assigned court date will lead to a warrant.

To evaluate the effectiveness of this intervention, the researchers used a regression discontinuity design, comparing whether failure to appear rates were lower for defendants who happened to be among the first to receive the new form given by a particular police officer versus one of the last to receive the old form given by that same officer. New forms were rolled out between March and August 2016. Police officers only had one pad of summon forms with them and switched from the old forms to the new forms when they used up their old pad. Researchers obtained the ID of the issuing officer for each form, and each summons form has a serial number that can match new forms or old forms. They constructed an officer's "switch date" by randomly choosing a date between when the officer issued their last old form and their first new form. Since the introduction of the new summons form was staggered, researchers controlled for seasonality and other time trends. There are no observable differences in defendants' characteristics based on whether they received a summons form prior to or after an officer's switch date. There are no differences in prior summons or failure to appear, types of offenses, or their predicted failure-to-appear likelihood based on observables. There is a small difference in gender. The only notable difference in failure to appear rates for defendants before and after the switch date is the redesigned form.

Results

Failure to appear rates are lower after the introduction of new summons forms. To estimate the magnitude of this drop, the researchers followed Calonico et al which allowed them to obtain consistent estimates when all covariates were included. Researchers found that new forms reduce failure to appear by 6.2 percentage points or by 13% relative to the 47% baseline failure to appear in the estimation bandwidth.

Second Study

In the second study, researchers tested whether failures to appear could be further reduced through texting defendants court information, date, location, and information about the consequences of missing court. Defendants who received the new summons form could provide their cell phone number to the citing officer, though it was not mandatory. All defendants who provided their cell phone numbers were included in this evaluation.

Methodology

Around 11% of defendants (23,243) provided their phone numbers. Defendants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. The control group received no text messages. In the summons groups, recipients received three messages: seven days before, three days before, and one day before their scheduled court date. Researchers varied the content of the messages to better identify what information is most effective at reducing failure to appear. In the "consequence group", defendants received messages that described their court date and location and also told them a warrant would be opened, and they might be arrested if they missed their court date. In the "plan-making group," defendants received messages that described their court date and location and prompted them to make a plan to attend court, including marking their calendars, setting an alarm, and looking up directions. There was no mention of consequence. In the "combination group", defendants received a mix of messages from the consequence and plan-making groups.

Results

Relative to the control group, where 37% failed to appear, receiving any text message reduced failure to appear by 8 percentage points, which represents a 21% relative reduction. Among the various text message groups, “consequence” and “combination” were the most effective at reducing failure to appear by 8.9 and 9.9 percentage points relative to the control group (23% and 26%). This suggests that a significant portion of defendants miss court because they are unaware of the consequences. The “plan-making” group, which did not mention consequences, reduced failure to appear by 6 percentage points or 15%. These findings suggest the defendants missed court because they lacked basic information about their scheduled appearance.

Effects across socioeconomic status and race

Researchers found suggestive evidence that the interventions were more effective for poorer defendants. They divided the sample of summon recipients by quintiles. The treatment effect for the text messaging intervention is 12.5 percentage points (27%) for defendants living in the bottom quintile of neighborhood wealth, which is significantly greater than the average of 6 percentage points (19%) for defendants living in other quintiles. The effectiveness of the summons form redesign does not significantly vary by wealth, but the results trend in the same directions. The form redesign reduced failure to appear for those living in the bottom quintile of neighborhood wealth by 8 percentage points (15%), compared to 5 percentage points (13%) for defendants living in other neighborhoods. These results are mixed, but it's helpful to think about the greater demands poorer individuals have on their cognitive bandwidth. Researchers did not find that the effectiveness of their interventions depends on the racial composition of defendants' neighborhoods.

Relevance to Dane County

The first study demonstrates how the structure of court notification forms can impact the information that defendants read. This is relevant to Dane County at all levels of offenses. There could be an easy and effective method to reduce court non-appearance for traffic offenses and misdemeanors. It also further enhances the need for plain language in legal documents. The second study demonstrates once again the effectiveness of multi-day text reminders. From this research, it can also be seen that the most effective message to ensure court appearance is the notification of the consequences of non-appearance. This is a very important consideration for Wisconsin. If the State decided to alter the message of the CCAP text reminders, it would be imperative that the consequence of non-appearance be added to the message format.

Lucas County: Reducing Reliance on Jail through Comprehensive Pretrial Reform

In the article Lucas County: Reducing reliance on jail through comprehensive pretrial reforms (2020), Lucas County Ohio sought to transform its pretrial decision making through a complete overhaul of their pretrial system with improvements at every phase of the pretrial process.

Lucas County Ohio

Beginning in 2015, Lucas County, Ohio, began to transform its pretrial services as they were facing jail overcrowding, high amounts of FTA, and rearrests while on pretrial release. Lucas County took a comprehensive approach to pretrial reform and began to look at multiple aspects of their system to best determine how to improve the defendants' outcomes. This research was done through the aid of the MacArthur Foundation Safety and Justice Challenge. The focus areas of their comprehensive review of the justice system were as follows: policing, jail bookings, first appearances, early case resolutions, differential supervision, measures to reduce FTA and new arrests, jail population review, and consequences of noncompliance. Five years after the implementation of these system changes, an external evaluation was conducted by a research team that studied jail bookings and pretrial outcomes between January 2012 and December 2018. Their analysis examined the three-year period prior to the implementation of the improvements and compared it to the four-year period post-implementation.

Policing and Jail Booking: Lucas County law enforcement focused more on community relations and arrest alternatives. Law enforcement focused on community policing, crisis intervention training for all officers, and more frequent diversion to drug and mental health treatment. Lucas County implemented the Public Safety Assessment and uses the results to help identify people suitable for release prior to their initial appearance. The study found that Lucas County reduced its jail bookings by 1,600 annually, on average, for a total reduction of 6,400 fewer estimated bookings during the post-PSA period.

First Appearances, Early Case Resolution, and Differential Supervision: PSA results were used to aid judicial decisions at first appearance hearings. The Public Defenders' office led a program to identify cases (based in part on PSA results) that could be resolved at arraignment through dismissal or plea. Early resolution reduces the need for future court appearances and expedites the release of people who otherwise might spend prolonged time in jail. The PSA tool was also used to help assign people to different levels of supervision, low, medium, and high, based on their likelihood of returning to court and remaining arrest free. The pretrial release rate was higher (86%) during the pre-PSA implementation period compared to the post-PSA (80%) implementation period.

Measures to Reduce FTA and New Arrests: Lucas County expanded its use of court date reminders and electronic monitoring. Researchers found that there was a six-percentage point decrease in FTA rates (30% vs 24%) and a five-percentage point decrease in new violent crime arrest rates (6% vs 4%). Researchers estimated that in the post-PSA period, there were 3,350 fewer FTAs, 2,374 fewer new criminal arrests, and 700 fewer new violent criminal arrests.

Jail Population Review: Lucas County launched a jail population review team weekly to examine who is in jail and to identify people based on charge and PSA scores to determine who could be released either through modifying their release conditions or through expediting resolution of their case. The researchers found that there was a 22% decrease in daily population bookings since 2016. The pre-PSA period had about 150 bookings per week, while the post-PSA period had, on average, about 119 bookings per week. However, the post-PSA period was associated with a larger portion of individuals booked with at least one felony.

Consequence of Noncompliance: Lucas County implemented a revised system of responding to noncompliance, using administrative action where appropriate and reserving revocation for those cases where pretrial failure is most likely.

Researchers note that they validated the PSA tools' predictive strength and its ability to predict outcomes across racial groups. Testing revealed that there were some calibration issues with the FTA scale: Black people had higher predicted FTA rates than white people at the lower end of the scaled scores, and they had lower rates of FTA at the highest end of the scaled scores. Women were shown to have a slower increase in the rate of FTA as compared to men. In addition, researchers found that false positives, which occur when people are classified at the higher end of an assessment instrument but do not fail before trial, were more common among Black people when compared to non-Black people. False negatives, which occur when people are classified at the lower end of the spectrum but do fail pretrial, were more common among women relative to men.

Relevance to Dane County

This study demonstrates a review of the pretrial services offered as well as the offenses that are booked into jail.

Court Date Reminders Reduce Court Nonappearance: A Meta-Analysis

In the article *Court date reminders court nonappearance: A meta-analysis* (2023), researchers conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of studies that examined whether providing people with a post-card, phone call, or text message reminder of their court dates reduced their likelihood of failing to appear in court. Researchers sought to answer two questions: (1) Do court reminders reduce failure to appear in court for those who receive them relative to those who do not? (2) Are there moderators of the effect of court reminders, such as study design and the types of charges faced by people included in studies? The meta-analysis included 12 studies (N=79,255), which compared court appearance rates between groups of people who receive a reminder and groups who did not receive a reminder. Researchers found from this meta-analysis that court date reminders have a small, significant effect on the reduction of failure to appear in court. People who received reminders had lower odds of failing to appear in court relative to those who did not receive a reminder.

Methodology and Literature Search

Researchers followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines for reporting inclusion criteria, assessment of publication bias, and synthesis of results. Their review strategy and inclusion/exclusion strategy were established prior to the form of preregistration. The preregistration, supplementary materials, and data can be found [here](#). The systematic literature was conducted using 11 databases: Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science, Criminal Justice Database, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, NCJRS, MEDLINE, Google Scholar, Social Services Abstracts, Social Sciences Database, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. In each database, the following search terms were used: “failure to appear,” “failure to appear AND improve,” “failure to appear AND notification,” “court appearance,” “court appearance AND improve,” “court date reminders,” “court reminders,” “court date notification,” and “court notification.” Researchers did not limit their search to a specific type of publication or specific design study. Additional articles were identified through reviewing the reference list of articles after the title and abstract screening, outreach to experts, and reviewing reference lists of the three existing reviews that include court reminder programs.

The initial database search resulted in 711,042 records. If a search returned with more than 500 records, researchers examined the first 300, reducing the number of records screened at the title and abstract level to 10,175. There were four inclusion criteria to guide the screen process: (1) the study empirically examined court reminder programs, (2) the study included a comparison/control group that did not receive reminders, (3) failure to appear in court was included as an outcome, and (4) the study was written in English. The overwhelming majority of articles were not empirical and did not qualify to be included. Many studies addressed related topics (probation violations, drug testing, etc.) but did not test reminders. Researchers were left with 86 records, added 105 records found from other sources (references lists, etc.), but were not able to obtain copies of 23 records (age, unavailable data, etc.), and were left with 168 full-text reviews. 156 records were excluded because they failed to meet the inclusion criteria or were unable to provide sufficient data for the meta-analysis, leaving 12 studies for inclusion.

Data Extraction

Authors Samantha A. Zottola, William E. Crozier, and Sarah L. Desmarais coded all 12 articles. To begin, authors coded two studies together using the data extraction codebook. During that process, edits were made to the codebook to ensure that the items were clear and that all relevant information was being extracted. The three authors coded the following information from eight studies using the revised codebook: study characteristics (e.g., publication type, study dates), court reminder design (e.g., type of reminder, timing, intended population), study sample (e.g., age, sex, race) study design (control group size, treatment group size, outcome source), and results (e.g., effect sizes, control variables, outcome frequency). When a study did not include any necessary information, the researchers contacted the authors. The researchers assessed study quality using the Quality Assessment Tool for Qualitative Studies, which allowed them to measure bias for all studies included and account for bias among researchers.

Data Analysis

Researchers summarized sample characteristics, court reminder designs, and study designs using basic descriptive statistics. Not many of the studies included the effect size, but rather the percentage decrease in failure to appear seen in the treatment sample compared to the control sample. Researchers used information about sample size and failure to appear frequencies to calculate the relative risk reduction, absolute risk reduction, and number needed to treat the court reminder intervention. Appearance was coded as 0, and failure to appear was coded as 1. The odds ratio of less than 1 indicates a beneficial intervention effect. Researchers conducted a meta-analysis of the odds ratio in Comprehensive Meta-Analysis software and reported results from both a random effect-model and a fixed-effect model for the main analysis. The random-effect model accounts for wide variability in intervention and study characteristics and variability in sampling and is better for generalizable findings. Researchers performed an exploratory narrative synthesis and grouped studies into the appropriate category for each variable, study design, reminder format, and reminder frequency, and descriptively compared the size effect.

Results

Of the 12 studies selected, half ($n=6$) were peer reviewed, five were reports written for government agencies, and one was an article published in a preprint data base. The studies selected were conducted between 1977 and 2019, and among the oldest academic publications was 2009, and the most recent was 2018-2019. The oldest government data was from 1977, and the most recent 2017. Three studies were conducted in New York, two in Oregon, one in the United Kingdom, and one study location was not reported. The remaining five studies were conducted in jurisdictions across the United States. The combined analytic sample size of the 12 studies was 79,255. Only four studies reported the racial/ethnic makeup of samples; among those, sample composition ranged from 10% to 50% Black or African American, 23% to 70% white, and 7% to 32% Hispanic. The four studies did not consistently report additional racial/ethnic categories. Only three studies reported the proportion of their samples that were men, ranging from about 62% to 82%. Five studies reported an average age ranging from about 33 to about 35.

The format of reminders varied across studies. Five studies used phone calls, two used postcards or letters, and three used text messages. Two studies used a combined format of text messages and phone calls, or text messages, phone calls, and emails. Most studies (n=8) included one reminder before their court date. One study sent two reminders to some people and one reminder to others. Two studies included three reminders. In studies that used phone calls, multiple attempts were made to contact the recipient if the first attempt did not result in contact either with the person or the ability to leave a message. All reminders include the date and time of the court hearing, and most include the court location.

Authors, year	Reminder type	Number of reminders	Reminder timing	Included additional content in reminders
Ben-Ami (1978)	Letter	1	6 days	no
Chivers and Barnes (2018)	Text message	1	1 day	yes
Ferri (2020)	Phone call	1	3 days or 1 day	No
Fishbane et al. (2020)	Text message	3	7 days, 3 days, 1 day	yes
Nice (2006)	Phone call	1	About 3 days	no
Bornstein et al. (2013)	postcard	1	“Several days”	yes
Howat et al. (2016)	phone call	1	5-9 days	no
Lowenkamp et al. (2018)	Text message, phone call	1	No reported	yes
O’Keefe (2007)	Phone call	1	No reported	no
White (2006)	Phone call	1	5-7 days	unclear
Emanuel and Ho (2021)	Text message	3	14 days, 7 days, 1 day	yes
Williamson (2017)	Text message, email, phone call	unclear	3 days	yes

There were a variety of designs used to evaluate court reminder programs. Seven of the 12 studies met the criteria for RCT (randomized control trial) or a CCT (controlled clinical trial) per the QAT (quality assessment tool). Five studies used quasi-experimental or field study designs that compared a group of people who were reminded to a group of people who were not reminded over the same or differing intervals of time. Most studies were rated as low quality via

the QAT ($n = 9$), a few studies were rated as moderate quality ($n = 3$), and no studies were rated as high quality (table 1 in the report). Researchers chose to include all studies despite quality ratings for two reasons: (1) the already small number of available studies, and (2) the studies are commonly cited as providing empirical support for the effectiveness of court reminders.

For all studies, the outcome was failure to appear at the next court hearing that occurred following the reminder. Half of the studies reported that the source for outcome data came from court records, and the other half did not report the source of outcome data. Below is a table that displays the percentage of people who failed to appear in both the treatment and control group for each study. The table also shows the relative risk, the proportionate decrease in failures to appear that is associated with being in the treatment group relative to the control group, and the absolute risk reduction that shows the risk for failing to appear between study groups.

Author, year	Reminder Type	FTA% treatment group	FTA% control group	Relative risk reduction %	Absolute risk reduction %
Ben-Ami (1978)	Letter	32.4	37.6	13.8	5.2
Chivers and Barnes (2018)	Text message	33.8	32.4	-4.3	-1.4
Ferri (2020)	Phone call	12.1	19.3	37.3	7.2
Fishbane et al. (2020)	Text message	29.9	37.9	21.1	8.0
Nice (2006)	Phone call	19.3	28.0	31.1	8.7
Bornstein et al. (2013)	postcard	9.7	12.6	23.0	2.9
Howat et al. (2016)	phone call	35.5	51.8	61.0	16.3
Lowenkamp et al. (2018)	Text message, phone call	11.5	13.0	11.5	1.5
O'Keefe (2007)	Phone call	22.6	29.0	22.1	6.4
White (2006)	Phone call	12.9	21.2	52.6	14.3
Emanuel and Ho (2021)	Text message	12.9	21.2	39.2	8.3
Williamson (2017)	Text message, email, phone call	10.8	16.9	36.0	6.1

Researchers found from this meta-analysis that court date reminders have a small, significant effect on the reduction of failure to appear in court. People who received reminders had lower odds of failing to appear in court relative to those who did not receive a reminder

Relevance to Dane County

This meta-analysis shows that reminders are not the end-all, be-all solution to court non-appearance. Its use can be effective; however, structural barriers that prevent court appearance will not disappear due to court date reminders. Court reminders should be used to treat the symptoms of structural barriers while also seeking permanent solutions to the root causes of crime.

Recommendations

A significant reduction in failure to appear in Dane County will not happen overnight. However, there are ways to implement changes that can incrementally improve the pretrial experience. It is our duty not only to ensure that justice is served but to hold ourselves accountable to higher standards of operations.

Procedural Changes

Procedural changes in the Dane County Courthouse can be leveraged to reduce failure to appear at little to no cost. As of now, there are no procedural standards surrounding asking individuals if their phone number or address has changed throughout the pretrial period. Usually, contact information is collected at the initial interaction with law enforcement, but it is generally not asked if that information needs to be updated, except at the initial appearance, when the lawyer will confirm or change the address on file for the defendant. Inaccurate contact information is a major barrier to court appearance, as the necessary parties must be able to frequently communicate with one another. To change best practices, the court commissioner should confirm the address *and* phone number with the defendant. Then, as the case moves forward, the Judge should confirm the defendant's phone number and address at each court appearance. If either has changed, the notification at the court hearing will go into the court record and be updated in CCAP. With no other changes to the court system, this procedural change can be used to increase communication between the defendant and the court.

The pretrial period for a case can require multiple court hearings. This can be a difficult task for defendants to balance with their other life responsibilities. Scheduling court dates are complex, and court clerks work diligently to find dates that balances the desire to have a speedy pretrial period, the Judge's busy schedule, and court operations. However, taking the extra time and effort to ask the defendant, "Does this date work for you?" can build trust between the defendant and the presiding Judge and can work to empower the individual. It is understandable why many Judges do not engage in this practice, but as discussed, feelings of fear and expectations of unfairness are central parts of court users' experience. Encouraging individuals to have some autonomy during the pretrial period can demonstrate goodwill and allow defendants to assert some degree of control over the experience.

Resources that are aimed to help defendants navigate the legal system must be easily accessible. On the Dane County Court website, the user interface makes it difficult to find the SMS Hearing Date Notice Sign-up Form. It is not under the "Prepare," "Assistance," or "Resources" tab at the top of the page. Also, "SMS Hearing Date Notices Sign-up Form" is a lengthy way to say, "Court Text Reminders;" to better fit within colloquial language people may more commonly say, "you should sign up for the court text reminders." The court should consider creating an independent tab on the court website and changing the sign-up form name. As of now, there are no formal standards or expectations that the court inform defendants of the text reminders. There are myriad ways that the courthouse can best leverage this information and make it more widely available. After individuals have their initial appearance before the court commissioner, they then receive their Notice of Hearing from the bailiff. One simple change could be having a QR code attached to the Notice of Hearing that links to the text reminder sign-up form. Or there could be posters with the QR code posted throughout the courthouse

(elevators, doors, bathrooms, etc.). Even at the initial appearance, there could be a sign posted where the bailiff is sitting. Providing this information is at little cost to the court. See below.



Our current legal system is quite complicated. It takes three years of rigorous work to complete the required schooling. The legalese is complex. The average American does not have the comprehensive understanding of legal terminology. The Notice of Hearings defendants receive is full of legal language that can be confusing and overwhelming. Without a lawyer a defendant could not receive the most vital information presented in the Notice of Hearing. A Notice of Hearing summary could be used to simplify the necessary information for the defendant. The consequence for nonappearance includes the date, time, location, contact information to reschedule (absent from the official Notice of Hearing), and a QR code to sign up for text reminders. This is a workaround given that the official Notice of Hearing is a state document that requires a legal change. See below.

For all scheduled court dates in-person appearance is **REQUIRED**

The failure to attend court in-person can result in the following:

- Bench warrant
- Arrest
- Court Sanction
- Default judgment
- Loss of driver's license

Upcoming Court Dates

Date	Time	Location – In-Person Attendance REQUIRED
January 23, 2026	9:30am	Bail/bond hearing 7th Floor, Courtroom 7B 215 S Hamilton Street, Madison WI 53703

If you cannot attend court, please contact your attorney.



Scan QR to sign up for court date text reminders or go to courts.danecounty.gov/SMS-Signup

Dane County Stakeholder Interviews

In Spring 2026 stakeholder interviews were conducted to gather information on system processes and second-hand information on why defendants in Dane County failed to appear in court. Interviewees were selected due to their participation on the Community Justice Council-Pretrial Subcommittee. The interview questions asked about the prevalence and trends in court non-appearance, reasons for court non-appearance, court system processes and barriers defendants experience and possible solutions. The interviewees were: Dane County Circuit Court Judge Nicholas McNamara, Office of Justice Reform Director Colleen Clark-Bernhardt, Dane County Executive Melissa Agard, Dane County Public Defender Peter Middleton, CJC-PT Community Member James Morgan, Dane County Clerk of Courts Jeff Okazaki, CJC-PT Community Member Marianne Oleson, Dane County District Attorney Ismael Ozanne, Director of Dane County Pretrial Services Department Shannon Pierce and Dane County Sheriff's Office Captain Kelly Splinter.

Transportation was discussed in every interview I conducted. Harris County tried to provide Lyft's or Ubers to defendants and found generally mixed results. The biggest burden is the added administrative task for public defenders. Instead, it may be more economical and advantageous to provide bus passes or gas cards to defendants who struggle with securing transportation. This would work to reduce the barriers defendants face but not add tasks to public defenders' workloads.

A notable success of the Dane County Courthouse is our Pretrial Services program. At the time of the interview, the Director of Pretrial Services noted that they had around a 93% success rate for court appearance. Some of the notable practices that the Pretrial Services case manager does to increase appearance rate are contact information updates and frequent reminders. A potential way to increase appearance is through the expansion of pretrial. As of now, pretrial services face a capacity limit and can only work with higher-risk individuals based on arresting offense, equipment, GPS, or alcohol monitoring. Pretrial Services could expand to have a set of social workers that serve "lower tier" individuals who may not require equipment but could still benefit from phone check-ins or resource connections. As of now, Pretrial Services only touch around 4% of the pretrial population; expansion of Pretrial Services could engage individuals who are at risk but do not require equipment, such as individuals who have a history of FTAs. The expansion of pretrial could be widely beneficial. If Pretrial Services had the capacity to work with a larger subset of the population, those who are "at risk" could be referred to pretrial services rather than having to post bail. Further, additional pretrial case managers could allow real-time problem-solving with defendants if they encounter barriers on the day of court.

Discussed in the research and throughout the stakeholder interviews, confusion and mistrust of the legal system were frequently brought up. Not knowing what to expect or believing that the system is working against them can be further exacerbated with the general degree of complexity of our legal system. Mandatory information pamphlets could be provided to individuals at initial appearance, which can map out what is next. It would be most important that an information pamphlet uses accessible language and that translated versions are available. It would also be helpful if any legal terminology used has a coinciding definition. Transparency

through accessible educational resources is one way to combat the distrust people feel. In Tennessee, there is a process and resources tab that maps out the case flow. They also have an FAQ area that explains in detail answers to common questions people have. These could be helpful resources that are on the website or provided to individuals. Find the example [here](#).

Peer support was mentioned as a “priceless” resource that could be offered to individuals. Especially when it comes from those with system involvement, peer support can be utilized to not only provide system education but also emotional and mental support throughout a difficult process. Peer support can attempt to engage individuals who are mistrustful of the legal system and the actors within it while offering support regardless of the outcome of the case. It also connects defendants with people who maybe cannot be able to completely relate or understand their position, but who have their own lived experience and a shared commonality. In New York City, the Criminal Justice Agency has a peer support network made up of individuals with lived experience to help individuals navigate the system and provide wrap-around support. See [here](#).

Leveraging technology use could be an effective avenue to improve the court user experience. Governments are notoriously years behind technological advancements; however, this could be used to our advantage as Dane County can look at what other counties across the county have implemented and where success was found. North Carolina implemented eKiosks across state courthouses that provided the public with easier access to engage with the court. Before, North Carolinians could only access court records and case events at the clerk's office or at public computer terminals inside the courthouse. Now individuals will be able to search court dates, case events, file documents, make payments, use the scanner and printer, along with other services at the eKiosk. See more [here](#).

Feedback gathered from stakeholders across the board suggests that some court hearings results in situations where effectively “nothing happens”. Requiring in-person attendance for these court dates can cause unnecessary risk for the livelihood and security of defendants. At the same time, in-person appearances serve an important function by allowing defendants and their lawyers to have discussion. One potential improvement could involve building an incentive structure into the pretrial process where those who have maintained adequate contact with all required parties are eligible for remove appearances via Zoom. Additionally, hearings that do not require a defendant’s presence could be scheduled solely between the attorney or the Judge. Reducing the overall number of court hearings per case was also discussed. Overall, it is important to recognize that there are minor procedural matters that are not necessary for a defendant to attend in-person. As defendants are balancing other life responsibilities, the threat of a bench warrant may be inappropriate when their in-person attendance is not needed in the first place. There is consensus among stakeholders that there is an opportunity for improvement, and further discussion should be sought out. California found positive experiences with Zoom courts in a recent study. See [here](#).

State Level Changes

There are effective methods for reducing court nonappearance at both the local and state level. The text message reminder format is a state level change. Acknowledged throughout various interviews was the desire to create various categories of FTA to allow for discernment in the consequences of nonappearance. Narrowing down a shared definition of FTAs and further breakdown of categories will require cross-agency coordination and consensus. Hopefully, varying degrees of consequences to FTAs will be able to integrate into the Dane County pretrial space. As nationwide leaders in progressive pretrial policy, reasonable explanations for nonappearance should ideally be met with understanding rather than a set punishment. Dane County Courts used to have grace periods after a defendant failed to appear in court. However, that policy was revoked when the court felt it was being abused. Once an opt-out text reminder system is implemented, the courts could consider reinstating grace periods, as this would likely reduce FTAs and increase contact with defendants.

An opt-out reminder system can be used to better communicate with defendants and provide the court with additional foundation and information to delineate punishment. If the court knows the individual received text messages and they still FTA with no communication, this better informs the court of a person's intent. Further, clear, consistent, and effective communication can provide the required clarity to reduce fear, anxiety, and feelings of expected unfairness. Opt-out text reminders have been proven to reduce non-appearance, which would also provide more capacity for court officials to consider one's circumstances to a greater extent once an FTA has occurred. Multiple messages have been proven to increase court appearance rates. 7 days before notifies people of their obligations with time to make arrangements, 3 days prompts people to make concrete plans, and 1 day before mitigates last-minute forgetfulness.

The content of these reminders is important as well. These reminders should use plain language, as unfamiliar terms can confuse people. Using their name can draw their attention to the message, providing directions can decrease confusion about where to go and information on who to contact for questions can aid individuals in system navigation. But most importantly, research has found that the most effective message that courts can send out is informing the individual of the consequences to nonappearance. Further text messages can increase communication about court operations generally. You could provide information on mass about court closures due to weather or follow-up with defendants about their non-appearance and inform them that a warrant has been issued. Text reminders are empirically proven cost-effective resources that can better the pretrial experience and produce better outcomes. More information on text reminders can be found [here](#).

Suggested Text Formats

Emelia, welcome to Dane County Court Reminders. We'll text you about upcoming court dates, cancellations and court closure.

Most people find reminders helpful but to Opt-Out please send a letter to the Clerk of Courts, Rm. 1000, 215 S Hamilton St., Madison WI 53703. The request must include your name and case number.

Welcome & Opt-out Information

Dane County Court will be closed today. Court is cancelled. DO NOT go to the courthouse today. The court will notify you of your rescheduled court date.

Court Closure

Helpful Reminder: Emelia, you have court on Monday April 6th at 8AM at the Dane County Courthouse.

Show up to avoid an arrest warrant.

For questions, call your lawyer.

7 Days

Helpful Reminder: Emelia, you have court on Monday April 6th at 8AM at the Dane County Courthouse.

215 S Hamilton St. Madison WI, 53703

Show up to avoid an arrest warrant.

What time should you leave to arrive by 8AM?

3 Days

Emelia, you have court tomorrow at 8AM at 215 S Hamilton St. Madison WI, 53703

Missing court can lead to your arrest.

If you are going to miss court, call your lawyer.

1 Day

Emelia, you missed your court hearing today. A warrant will be issued at the end of the business day. Come by TODAY to get your Notice of Hearing to avoid a warrant.

Post-FTA

Emelia, since you missed court on April 6 at Dane County Courthouse a warrant has been issued. Please go to 215 S. Hamilton St., Madison WI 53703 to clear the warrant.

Issued Warrant

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