

2025 State Public Safety Agenda



INTRODUCTION

Of the 1.2 million Americans currently incarcerated, a staggering **87 percent** are in state prisons or local jails. By comparison, the federal government is responsible for a meager 13 percent. Florida alone **houses more prisoners** than the entire Federal Bureau of Prisons. Much like **crime itself**, most crime policy decisions occur at the state level or below. This means the incoming “**law and order president**” will need governors and state lawmakers to deliver on campaign promises to get tough on crime.

The R Street Institute is here to help. This public safety agenda outlines strategies for state leaders in three critical areas: juvenile justice, pretrial systems, and court fines and fees.

AGENDA

JUVENILE JUSTICE

- ❓ **Why:** Because so many adults begin their journey through the system before age 18, **juvenile justice** should be the starting point on crime policy. Addressing youthful misbehavior before it develops into real criminality **improves almost every outcome** we care about.
- ✅ **Benefit:** Early intervention delivers **unmatched return on investment**. Steering a young person away from delinquency toward a healthy, productive life generates benefits that multiply over decades. Younger brains are also more malleable, making rehabilitation **far more effective in children than adults**.

- 🗨️ **Keep in Mind:** Involvement in the juvenile justice system is [associated with poor life outcomes](#) across the board. Once a teenager is entrenched in the system, they are [up to three times more likely](#) to be convicted of a crime as an adult. States should look to deflectionary strategies like restorative justice to avoid even worse downsides, such as the [systemic sexual abuse crisis](#) plaguing youth detention facilities across the country.
- 📍 **Where States Stand:** One state that has overhauled youth justice is Georgia. In 2013, under Gov. Nathan Deal’s leadership, the state enacted bipartisan reductions in out-of-home placements, focusing resources on high-risk youth and dramatically [shrinking its juvenile justice system](#). According to the [Georgia Bureau of Investigation](#), the law has been successful: Violent crime is down 10 percent since it went into effect, while property crime has plummeted by 46 percent.
- ❓ **Why:** Every day, thousands of Americans languish in local jails—not because they have been convicted of a crime, but because they cannot afford bail. Imprisoning innocent people is obviously counterproductive, as it disrupts jobs and families, creating social instability that [leads to more crime](#). For these reasons, pretrial policy must be on the agenda for any lawmaker who values personal liberty and the presumption of innocence.
- ✅ **Benefit:** Common sense suggests that a suspect’s propensity for antisocial behavior (rather than their bank balance) should be the primary consideration in pretrial decisions. Limiting pretrial detention to the [tiny slice of the population](#) who truly pose a threat ensures the right people stay behind bars. Relatively inexpensive [pretrial support](#)—such as court reminders and substance abuse support—improve appearance rates and help defendants comply with release conditions. Detention alternatives like “[arrest and cite](#)” give police the discretion they need to keep nonviolent offenders out of the system.
- 🗨️ **Keep in Mind:** As long as they have the money, dangerous criminals can post bail. In 2023, a man named Kirkland Warren was out on bail for a murder charge in Arkansas when he was arrested in Washington state for assaulting his ex-girlfriend and firing a shot into her apartment. After quickly posting bail, he was released yet again. The woman and her 7-year-old daughter [were found deceased](#) just days later, and Warren was charged with the new murders.
- 📍 **Where States Stand:** Last year, R Street published “[Navigating Bail Reform in America: A State-by-State Overview](#),” the ultimate guide to where states stand on pretrial policy. The report showcases a diverse and evolving set of strategies to address the systemic challenges posed by traditional cash bail systems. For example, Nevada and Pennsylvania have made significant strides in adopting mandatory pretrial risk assessments that objectively evaluate whether a defendant poses a flight or safety risk.

FINES AND FEES

- ? **Why:** Unlike the [federal government](#), state governments must balance their budgets. This presents lawmakers with an inconvenient dilemma: either make voters unhappy by raising taxes or find another way to foot the bill. For the rare politician willing to consider the tax route, structural barriers—like a recent Florida law that requires a legislative supermajority to approve new taxes—make raising revenue nearly impossible. Although fines and fees may be the easier option, funding the government in this way creates bad incentives, encouraging localities to [invent infractions out of thin air](#) to generate revenue.
- ✓ **Benefit:** Paying for government via fines and fees may be less costly to politicians' re-election prospects, but it is hardly cost-free. Financial penalties create a cascading set of consequences that damage family stability and make communities less safe. For a rideshare driver struggling to make ends meet, a \$500 fine for driving without insurance only makes them less able to afford future payments, resulting in license suspension and loss of livelihood. Minimizing this hidden tax on the poor can help break the [brutal loop of poverty and incarceration](#) responsible for so much crime.
- ⏸ **Keep in Mind:** Not only do the best reforms minimize fines and fees, but they also eliminate counterproductive penalties like [driver's license suspension](#). Policymakers should also conduct regular audits to ensure fines and fees are applied fairly and proportionally. Alternatives like payment plans, community service, or ability-to-pay assessments provide accountability without bankrupting defendants. At a more foundational level, lawmakers must decide if a given fine or fee accomplishes its intended purpose and eliminate those that do not.
- 📍 **Where States Stand:** States have [passed a flurry of legislation](#) in recent years to alleviate the burden on individuals and reduce the prominence of fines and fees in state budgets. [New Mexico](#) is a standout, having eliminated all post-adjudication fees for state courts, state-mandated fees for municipal courts, and all bench warrant fees. It also [joined the majority of U.S. states](#) that now prohibit debt-based driver's license suspensions. At the very least, state leaders can stop creating new financial burdens, as [Montana](#) did recently by introducing interest on fines and restitution.

FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

● If you need help with further research around these issues, information on implementing these types of initiatives, or anything else, please do not hesitate to reach out.

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