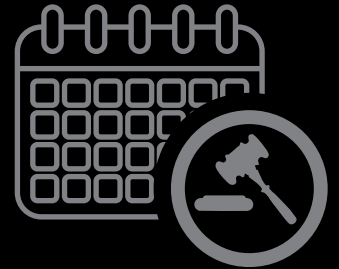


Swift Justice, Safer Society

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U.S. state courts handle about 18 million criminal cases annually. Although it takes an average of 256 days to resolve a felony case and 193 days for a misdemeanor, one study found that one-sixth of felonies take over a year, and nearly one-fourth of misdemeanors take over six months—both of which exceed of national standards. In California alone, more than 1,300 people have waited in jail for more than three years, including 332 who have waited for over five years.



Delays in resolving criminal cases drain resources, deny victims of closure, increase dismissals, and fuel recidivism. On the other hand, efficiently resolving cases ensures accountability, reduces costs, and fosters confidence in a fair and effective legal process.

Prolonged timelines often result from numerous continuances and hearings—a situation that is **worsened by** court backlogs, understaffed prosecutor and public defender offices, and COVID-19-related backlogs.

Delayed Justice Harms Victims, Defendants, and Communities

The justice system exists to protect, restore, and hold people accountable. Yet when cases drag on for years, the costs extend far beyond legal delays.

For victims, delays can mean years of trauma and uncertainty. Each postponed court date shatters hopes for closure and makes justice feel increasingly out of reach as witnesses forget details and cases lose momentum.

For those accused, pending charges disrupt jobs, damage relationships, and leave lasting scars. Prolonged instability can spiral into **homelessness** or other destructive behaviors, keeping people trapped in cycles of hardship and leading to an **increased risk of reoffending**, even among low-risk defendants. And even when charges are dismissed, the emotional and financial toll remains long after the case is resolved.

Additionally, when dangerous individuals are not immediately held accountable, harmful behaviors can persist, and the opportunity for meaningful intervention may be lost. **Research** shows that swift consequences deter crime more effectively than severe ones, but delayed punishments fail to achieve this goal, compromising both justice and public safety.

Communities also pay the price, with taxpayers spending **\$52 billion on courts** annually. This cost is even higher when factoring in law enforcement court appearances—often paid at overtime rates—and additional spending by prosecutors' offices to address backlogs. Extended case timelines can also lead to **higher dismissal rates**, as **witnesses move, forget details**, or **fail to appear** in court.

Targeted Policy Solutions

The pretrial process involves multiple stages that often face delays but could be streamlined with targeted policy improvements. **To safeguard justice and public safety and enhance efficiency, policymakers must prioritize actionable changes like those suggested on the following page.**

QUICKER PRETRIAL RELEASE DECISIONS

Delegated Release Authority

Allows designated officials, such as bond commissioners, jail staff, or pretrial services staff, to release individuals from custody before court based on risk assessments or predefined guidelines.

IN PRACTICE: Kentucky courts use an “[Administrative Release Program](#),” where pretrial services apply a risk-based matrix to streamline the release of low- to moderate-risk defendants charged with nonviolent, nonsexual misdemeanors.

Bail Decision Deadlines

Requires bail to be set in a specific timeframe, typically within 24 to 48 hours of arrest, to avoid unnecessary prolonged detention, especially for low-risk individuals.

IN PRACTICE: Eight states, including [Alabama](#), [Florida](#), and [South Carolina](#), require that bail be set within 24 hours. In contrast, 24 states mandate only “without unnecessary delay” or similar language.

QUICKER CHARGING

Charging Decisions

Jurisdictions with charge filing deadlines help prevent preemptive arrests, reduce unnecessary pretrial detention, and protect due process rights. [Artificial intelligence \(AI\)-enabled case management systems](#) further improve efficiency by flagging problematic cases and automatically referring diversion-eligible ones.

IN PRACTICE: [Charging timelines](#) vary significantly by state: [Florida](#) requires filing within 30 days of arrest, [Arizona](#) within 48 hours, and [Georgia](#) up to 90 days. However, a [2022 Atlanta, Georgia, study](#) revealed that 500 individuals continued to be jailed more than 90 days without formal charges.

QUICKER ATTORNEY REPRESENTATION

Quick Access to Public Defenders

Sufficient funding for public defenders ensures timely assignments, efficient case preparation, faster resolutions, and protection of defendants’ rights.

IN PRACTICE: In Multnomah County, Oregon, judges recently [dismissed at least 173 felony cases](#) because staffing shortages prevented timely assignment of public defenders, as required.

QUICKER DISCOVERY

Open-File Discovery

Promptly providing all unprivileged and unprotected evidence to the defense can minimize the need for continuances. Giving prosecutors direct access to law enforcement reports can further streamline this process.

IN PRACTICE: In [North Carolina](#), prosecutors must provide defendants, upon request, access to all case files from law enforcement, prosecutors, and other investigatory agencies within 10 days of the probable cause hearing.

AI for Discovery

AI can analyze, summarize, and organize large volumes of digital evidence that would otherwise take weeks or months to review manually.

IN PRACTICE: [Florida’s Eighth Judicial Circuit State Attorney’s Office](#) adopted a platform that automates case-building tasks, provides video and audio transcription, and highlights key evidence, allowing prosecutors to focus on evaluating cases thoroughly and prioritizing serious ones.

QUICKER CASE RESOLUTIONS

Control of Continuances

Case continuances are the top cause of delays. Some states limit them with strict [speedy trial laws](#), others tie docket management to [judicial retention](#), and some courts prioritize efficiency on their own.

IN PRACTICE: [One Virginia court](#) uses a rotating “calendar call” system, with two judges reviewing continuance requests each morning and granting them only for good cause. Generally, continuances are discouraged, and trial dates are firm.

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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