



Report: In Harris County, misdemeanor bail reform keeps low-level cases out of jail while preserving public safety

In the 2016 class-action O'Donnell lawsuit, a federal judge ruled that bail practices in Harris County misdemeanor courts violated the U.S. Constitution. As a result, an injunction was imposed in 2017 and the county agreed to a consent decree in 2019 that eliminates monetary bail for most individuals charged with low-level misdemeanors, allowing them to await trial from their homes rather than behind bars. Bail practices for felony charges remained unchanged.

[New research](#) from the Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School finds **Harris County's targeted misdemeanor reform has kept people with low-level cases out of jail and reduced wrongful convictions while preserving accountability and public safety.**

★ The Project

Researchers followed 55,792 cases filed in 2017 for up to 5 years, comparing misdemeanor defendants exposed to the reform to similarly-situated but unaffected defendants charged with low-level felonies.

? The Question

How did targeted pretrial release for people charged with misdemeanors affect case outcomes and their future contact with the criminal justice system?

🔍 The Findings

As a result of Harris County's misdemeanor bail reform, people facing low-level misdemeanor charges: spend less time in jail awaiting release decisions, have fewer convictions and sentences to incarceration, have less repeat contact with the criminal justice system, and are making fewer plea deals.

- -6% new criminal cases over next 3 years
- +13% in misdemeanor releases within 24 hours following arrest
- -15% conviction rate
- -17% likelihood of jail sentence

✓ Quick Facts

- The reform was widely effective, including for people of different ages, individuals of color, and individuals with prior involvement in the criminal system.
- Quattrone observed no evidence that the reform increased crime through more than 4 years of follow-up.
- With fewer people held pretrial, critical public resources can be directed toward other law enforcement priorities, such as fighting violent crime or detaining people with repeat violent offenses.

Sources

1. *Platform and Resolutions as Amended and Adopted by the 2022 State Convention of the Republican Party of Texas*

"We call upon the Texas Legislature to ensure bail in Texas is based only on a person's danger to society, risk of flight, and criminal history."¹

— Republican Party of Texas
2022 Platform