

Jason M. Groth: The solution to criminal justice flaws is in the data

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By Jason Groth

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Today we know several unsettling facts about Utah's criminal justice system. Our prison population is growing faster than any other state except Idaho; 76% of people entering prison are accused of violating their parole and probation, which is often from technical violations rather than committing new crimes; and 43% of Utahns entering prison are racial minorities despite a state minority population of only 20%.

We know these facts exist because of the data we have available now. Unfortunately, we do not know many of the drivers for mass incarceration in Utah, especially for our state's indisputable racial disparities. For example, we do not know if these outcomes are driven by arrests, how bail is determined, how people are charged, the nuances of plea deals, or sentencing outcomes.

This blind spot is due to our lack of specific data about these intermediate steps of the criminal justice system. For example, we have no information about the racial make-up of who gets a plea deal and the types of plea deals offered. Collecting and sharing this type of information is crucial to addressing the still serious problems of mass incarceration, racial disparities, and recidivism in Utah.

To complete this puzzle, we need new pieces of criminal justice data from law enforcement agencies, jails, prosecutors and the courts. Understanding how people are affected at each incremental step in a criminal case can give us a clearer picture of the overall system and help us focus attention where it is needed.

With a better idea of the actual drivers of mass incarceration, and how racial disparities are introduced and amplified, we can implement policy, programs, and training to address these issues where they actually exist.

Released on Wednesday, [Salt Lake County's Jail Dashboard Project](#) is a new and positive example of how local data accountability and transparency can bridge the chasm between problems and solutions.

County jails are literally the holding cells for people caught in the justice system. People are booked into jail at arrest, held in pretrial detention when they cannot post bail, and serve sentences in jail after being convicted. Jails are not the cause of incarceration, but they serve as a collection point for people impacted by criminal justice.

The Jail Dashboard allows users to see the jail population demographics in real time, which will help advocates and policy makers to better identify the drivers of mass incarceration and racial disparities at the local level. With this up-to-date information, we can promote specific answers to specific problems instead of guessing how we should address systemic criminal justice issues in Utah.

With a goal of reducing mass incarceration by 50 percent and fighting racial disparities, we believe more data is better than less data, especially if we want to make evidence-based decisions. Although some of this new data about racial disparities may make us uncomfortable, or encourage us to make excuses, it will also allow us to focus on the specific location and steps in the criminal justice system where problems arise.

This is especially true at the local level, where a prior reliance on statewide data has led to blame-shifting away from our own jurisdictions.

Starting now, we need to take a good, hard look at the realities of our criminal justice system across the state and in our local municipalities. If new data shows problems with racial disparities, recidivism and mass incarceration, then we can use it to find solutions where the problems start, not just where they end.

Jason M. Groth is an attorney and smart justice coordinator at the ACLU of Utah.

