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Dr. Gottlieb's research focuses on the causes and consequences of mass incarceration in the United States and how to effectively reduce U.S. reliance on incarceration. His professional interests include promoting effective and just criminal justice reform and effective and just policies to reduce poverty.


**Introduction**

The United States’ criminal justice system is overwhelming in scope and characterized by substantial racial disparities. Researchers have demonstrated that a substantial portion of this racial disparity is attributable to differences in criminal case sentencing outcomes.

This project explores whether public defender resources – conceptualized as caseloads for public defenders and their support staff such as investigators, paralegals, social workers, etc. – influence case outcomes for felony defendants and racial disparities in those outcomes.

In order to explore how public defender resources affect sentencing outcomes, the project created a new dataset linking data from the Census of Public Defender Offices to State Court Processing Statistics data. Indigent defense refers to the provision of public legal representation for individuals who are unable to afford a defense lawyer on their own.

**Findings**

- Higher caseloads for public defenders are associated with higher rates of detention before a trial begins.
- Higher caseloads for support staff are associated with higher levels of detention before the trial and longer incarceration sentences.
- Lower caseloads can help lessen the severity of criminal justice disparities between African American and White defendants. Notably, African Americans are more likely to rely on public defenders and attorney caseloads have a larger effect on some of their case outcomes.

**Recommendations**

Policy makers across the political spectrum have shown an interest in reducing rates of incarceration and racial disparities in the criminal justice system. While much of the focus has been on sentencing practices, the findings from this research suggest that increasing public defender resources for indigent defense is an effective approach for reducing overall levels of incarceration and racial disparities in incarceration. Though policymakers should prioritize an increase in public defender resources as an important tool in addressing mass incarceration, they should also recognize that increasing these resources is one of many tools that should form a multipronged approach to solving the challenges of mass incarceration.

Moreover, by focusing on the impact of attorney and support staff caseloads, the research project provides policymakers and practitioners with insights into how indigent defense resources can be most effectively and efficiently allocated. In order to affect public policy and criminal justice practices, findings from this study will be shared with relevant community organizations (i.e., ONE Northside, Cabrini Green Legal Aid, and The Safer Foundation), state legislators, and aldermen.