

# Misdemeanor bail reforms in Harris County, Texas had a positive impact on public safety

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The Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School has released a [new report](#) finding that Harris County, Texas's targeted misdemeanor bail reforms

are improving public safety and keeping low-level cases out of jail.

Led by Professor of Law and the Quattrone Center's academic director Paul Heaton, the report set out to compare post-reform outcomes to pre-reform outcomes to help inform future policy conversations related to bail reform in Harris County and beyond.

Harris County's misdemeanor bail reform, which stems from the O'Donnell [et al. v. Harris County et al] litigation, was first implemented through a judicial injunction in 2017 and a consent decree in 2019. The new system eliminates monetary bail for most individuals charged with misdemeanors, allowing them to await trial from their homes rather than behind bars. Due to its targeted focus on people with low-level cases, the O'Donnell lawsuit generated widespread support from a diverse coalition of stakeholders, including conservative and law enforcement groups.

"We looked at this particular reform because it got national attention when it occurred in 2017, and, in my view, is actually politically feasible in many places," said Heaton. "We show that it's possible to change the pretrial system and release more people in a way that benefits the [general public](#), helps defendants, and doesn't lead to more crime. Harris County provides an example of that."

Quattrone researchers examined 517,000 cases covering all misdemeanor and felony cases in Harris County from 2015 to May 2022. After a thorough examination of the data, researchers observed several important findings, including:

- A 6% decrease in new prosecutions over three years following arrest, indicating a reduction in a person's likelihood of future contact with the criminal justice system.
- A 13% increase in misdemeanor releases within 24 hours following arrest.

- A 15% drop in guilty pleas combined with a 17% reduction in likelihood of a jail sentence and a 15% drop in the conviction rate, indicating fewer innocent people are serving time for crimes they did not commit.
- A 15% average reduction in sentence length.

These findings provide valuable information to support future policy conversations related to bail reform in Texas and across the country, as well as credible, independent research to combat misinformation surrounding the impact of Harris County's updated pretrial misdemeanor bail system. Despite an increase in attacks on bail reform, typically rooted in misleading characterizations or flawed interpretations of data, the Quattrone Center's report joins a growing cache of research demonstrating the invaluable, positive impact that these reforms can have and positioning Harris County as a success story.

"The initial ODonnell litigation was supported by a broad coalition of conservatives and liberals, defense attorneys and prosecutors, reform activists and law enforcement leaders who all knew cash bail unjustly kept poor and working-class Texans stuck behind bars simply because they didn't have enough money," said Ezekiel Edwards, Arnold Ventures vice president of criminal justice. "These successful findings should inspire that ODonnell coalition to take the next step in further reducing unnecessary pretrial detention."

"After 23 years as a city of Houston cop and nearly seven years as Sheriff of the third largest county in the United States, most people I met thought that jailing people for petty misdemeanor crimes before their trials was a poor use of valuable resources," said Adrian Garcia, Harris County commissioner for precinct 2. "Everyone—Democrats and Republicans—agrees that people shouldn't be kept in jail simply because they're poor."

**More information:** The Effects of Misdemeanor Bail Reform:  
[www.law.upenn.edu/institutes/q ... eports/bailreform/#/](http://www.law.upenn.edu/institutes/q...eports/bailreform/#/)

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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