

NEW YORK TIMES

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Justice by the Numbers

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Published: August 10, 2010

Rochester

IN communities across the country, people use statistics on hospitals, schools and other public services to decide where to live or how to vote. But while millions of Americans deal with their local criminal courts as defendants and victims each year, there is no comparable way to assess a judicial system and determine how well it provides basic legal services.

This lack of data has a corrosive effect: without public awareness of a court system's strengths and weaknesses, inefficiencies and civil liberties violations are never remedied.

That's why America needs a "justice index" to show how the essential aspects of our local courts are working. The index, compiled according to national standards, would function roughly like college rankings, evaluating county courts on factors like cost, recidivism, crime reduction and collateral consequences, including whether people lose their jobs or homes after contact with the criminal justice system.

True, hospitals and schools serve everyone, while most Americans will never directly interact with a criminal court. But many will — an estimated 47 million Americans have criminal records, and though exact statistics don't exist, it's a good bet that similar numbers have passed through the courts as victims.

Of course, those numbers count only direct contact. We all benefit from better courts, which deter crime and remove public threats from the streets.

A justice index would be relatively straightforward to create. It would start by amassing data from the country's [25 biggest counties](#), where the courts are most likely to collect large amounts of information.

Next, a panel of lawyers, community representatives, statisticians and law professors would establish standards for the measurements — for example, the percentage of people who plead guilty without an attorney or average bail amounts, because a high bail figure often compels defendants to plead guilty.

Another critical measurement would be the percentage of certain types of cases that get thrown out after a defined period of time, a possible indicator of inefficiency as well as disregard for traditionally under-prosecuted crimes. The index would also assess whether a county court has certain legal protections in place, like requiring that interrogations and confessions be taped.

The information would be analyzed by a nonprofit organization, then posted to a Web site in a ranked order and in terms clear enough for the public to understand. Users would be able to shuffle the rankings by focusing on data related to specific areas like civil liberties or crime reduction, in the same way college applicants can look at which schools are best for student life or athletics.

Once the data for those 25 counties has been assembled, smaller counties could gather their numbers using a detailed do-it-yourself kit from the coordinating organization.

Rankings for hospitals and public schools create healthy competition. To get the justice we deserve, we would do well to bring a similar approach to bear on our criminal courts.

*Amy Bach is the author of "Ordinary Injustice: How America Holds Court."*