



IMPROVING CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM PLANNING AND OPERATIONS: CHALLENGES FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE COORDINATING COUNCILS

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Executive Summary

As states, counties, and cities try to come to grips with significant budget deficits, local-level courts and criminal justice agencies are being forced to slash their budgets and furlough or lay off personnel. There is a strong need for sound local-level policies and practices that enable effective use of limited justice system resources, and there are major challenges that must be overcome if public moneys are to be used wisely and effectively in reducing crime and addressing persistent criminal justice issues.

A primary vehicle for addressing criminal justice issues is through a multi-disciplinary council or commission that includes key leaders from the institutions and agencies involved in criminal justice policymaking and implementation. A myriad of councils and commissions of this kind exist across the United States. They have different names (most commonly “criminal justice coordinating council” [CJCC]), their membership rosters vary, they have widely varying staff capabilities, and their missions are somewhat diverse. At a minimum, they seek to improve communications among the leaders of the organizations and institutions directly involved in criminal justice planning and operations—principally law enforcement agencies, prosecutors’ offices, indigent defense agencies, courts, jails, and probation and corrections departments.

A [white paper](#) was developed that draws on Robert Cushman’s¹ seminal work and on discussions with leaders of a dozen leading CJCCs in outlining key challenges that local governments and their CJCCs face in the second decade of the 21st century. Well-functioning CJCCs can be vitally important resources for local governments, as they seek to fulfill their mandates to assure public safety and fair treatment of all, while coping with reduced budgets. The councils can provide a forum for identifying issues and, depending on their structure and role in county or city government, can be instrumental in setting priorities, allocating resources, and planning to address key systemic issues. To be successful in such efforts, however, the councils must be able to cope with fiscal challenges and internal structural and operational issues.

¹ Robert C. Cushman, *Guidelines for Developing a Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Corrections, 2002).

The specific types of crime and criminal justice problems that local governments face vary considerably across the country, but there are some issues that seem to be prevalent in many communities. From a public safety/crime control perspective, these typically include robberies, assaults, residential and commercial burglaries, auto theft, petty thefts from stores, drug possession and dealing, driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, gang violence, and domestic violence. From a somewhat broader societal impact perspective, the problems include not only specific types of crime but also more far-reaching issues (e.g., decreasing funding for agency operations and programs, disproportionate minority contact, jail and detention overcrowding, bail and pretrial release policy issues, etc.).

The substantive challenges are exacerbated by an array of fiscal challenges. State budget shortfalls and the resultant cuts in state-funded criminal justice agencies put an increasing burden on counties and cities to provide more services on their own limited budgets. Moreover, the budget cutting process has meant reductions in a broad range of areas including the budgets of other agencies that provide services needed by the justice system. A key threshold challenge for criminal justice coordinating councils is to develop a base of knowledge about the funding streams that support the activities of all of a jurisdiction's entities that are involved in criminal justice processes and about the specific functions that each funding stream supports.

At least potentially, CJCCs can help counties and cities to overcome the tendencies toward silo funding and enable them to make more effective use of the limited resources available for activities directly or indirectly related to criminal justice. However, there are significant issues that have to be addressed in order to develop an effectively functioning CJCC. Discussions with CJCC chairs and staff directors have helped to identify seven key internal challenges that any CJCC—whether long-established or newly created—most likely needs to address if it is to be effective in shaping criminal justice policy, funding support, and operations:

1. Establishing a clear mission and role.
2. Developing a viable council structure.
3. Developing and using staff capabilities to support CJCC planning and policy development.
4. Acquiring and using information about system operations.
5. Fostering use of evidence-based practices in ongoing operations.
6. Catalyzing plans for system operations in the event of emergency.
7. Developing the capacity to shape budgeting and resource allocation decisions in a neutral and credible fashion.

To date, the staff and members of CJCCs have had little opportunity to learn about how various coordinating councils across the country tackle the most common issues. In 2010, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, awarded a grant to the Justice Management Institute and its partners, the Pretrial Justice Institute and the National Association of Counties, to create a [national network of CJCCs](#). The network initially brings together the staff and leadership of CJCCs from twelve diverse jurisdictions across the country to provide an opportunity for them to share materials, ideas, and problem-solve in an effort to improve criminal justice system planning in their individual jurisdictions and nationwide.

In addition to the information exchange that has occurred and will continue to occur among the network members, there is much to be learned from these twelve jurisdictions, both in terms of new approaches to existing and emerging challenges as well as how they have dealt with changes during their organizational development. The network also allows for executive members, who are nearly all county-elected officials, to act as a political ally for a stakeholder who has legitimate concerns about public opinion and political fallout. As the network grows beyond the initial twelve members, this information will serve as a guide for other CJCCs nationally to help build even more capacity for criminal justice system planning and continue to increase the effectiveness of coordinating councils.



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