

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/a-former-budget-officials-perspective-on-cost-benefit-analysis>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When I was a New York City budget official, I frequently heard from economists who would criticize budget makers, and me, in particular, for not using cost-benefit analysis as part of our decision-making process. While the idea made sense in principle, the prevailing cost-benefit models were either too academic or too skewed by their presuppositions to be useful to government officials tasked with crafting budgets.

When I joined Vera, one of my goals was to change the way cost-benefit analysis was used in criminal justice. I wanted budget officials to have a realistic and reliable source of data on costs and benefits. And, I wanted practitioners and policymakers to have access to practical cost-benefit results that could inform justice policy. At the very least, I knew that cost-benefit analysis, if done carefully, could give government officials more information than they previously had about the impact of their justice spending.

Earlier last year, the Bureau of Justice Assistance funded Vera to create the Cost-Benefit Knowledge Bank for Criminal Justice (CBKB). The debut earlier this month of the website for CBKB, www.cbkb.org, is one way that Vera is helping to build this type of capacity for cost-benefit analysis in justice. CBKB guides practitioners on how to get reliable estimates for the costs and benefits of a program or practice. It also connects decision makers to studies, reports, and articles that can inform criminal justice policy.

As a former budget official, I'm really excited that Vera has taken on this work. Cost-benefit analysis has great potential to improve the justice system, but it must be done carefully and with attention to practical application. CBKB encourages just that.

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