

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/what-prosecution-costs>

Policy Issue Resources

A Look at Spending in Americas Largest Cities

Throughout our countrys history, the criminal legal system has been wielded as a tool of racial oppression and social control, especially toward Black people and communities. The systems heavy reliance on incarceration, fines, probation, and punishment over community health and well-being ultimately undermines public safety.

Prosecutors play a critical, but often hidden, role as one of the criminal legal systems most powerful actors. They decide who to charge with a crime, what crime to charge, whether to seek bail, and what sentence to recommend upon conviction. Increasingly, progressive prosecutors are limiting the charging of, or declining to prosecute, [low-level charges](#) such as [drug possession](#), [theft](#), or [driving with a suspended license](#) charges that stem from overpolicing and the criminalization of poverty, not public safety.

Prosecutors budget allocations reflect their priorities and goals. Through their budgets, prosecutors can reduce or eliminate units within their offices dedicated to prosecuting low-level offenses. Prosecutors can form partnerships with, or [grant funds](#) to, community organizations and social services providers. Prosecutors can further their commitment to accountability and transparency by hiring data analysts to release ongoing data, or by funding independent research to evaluate the impacts of policy changes. Though prosecutors budgets are smaller than those for police departments and jails, prosecutors critical decisions drive jail, probation, prison, and parole populations and impact the costs of mass incarceration.

Budget documents are the primary source of information for the public to understand how prosecutors offices spend their money. However, these can be difficult to access and vary greatly in the level of detail and transparency they provide. To see the role prosecutors currently play, and the fiscal footprint of this role, Vera collected budgets in 58 large cities. In 2021, prosecutors budgets totaled \$2.6 billion in these cities alone.

Select a city to see a breakdown of its spending on prosecution, in addition to details about spending on jails and police. By viewing your local budget, you can assess the offices priorities and advocate for new investments that promote community safety and well-being outside of the criminal legal system. In cities where the budget lacks enough detail to provide a clear picture of how the office allocates its money, you can use this data to call for greater transparency in the role and cost of prosecution.

¹ US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), *2007 National Survey of Prosecutions* (Washington, DC: BJS, 2011), <https://perma.cc/7DCC-F84T>.

² Court Statistics Project, *State Court Caseload Digest: 2018 Data* (Williamsburg, VA: National Center for State Courts and Conference of State Court Administrators, 2020), <https://perma.cc/5ZQ2-9KPG>.

³ BJS, *2007 National Survey of Prosecutions*, 2011. This figure is adjusted for inflation using the [Consumer Price Index \(CPI-U\)](#) and presented here in 2020 equivalent dollars. The nominal budget figure is \$5.8 billion.

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