



National Center for Access to Justice

AT FORDHAM LAW SCHOOL

NCAJ's Mission:

The National Center for Access to Justice (NCAJ) is relying on data to expand access to justice in the civil and criminal justice systems.

What is Access to Justice?

Access to justice is the opportunity to be heard and to obtain a fair result. Everyone deserves it, some have more of it than others, and it is unavailable to millions in disputes over the most elementary human needs including keeping a home, holding a family together, defending life savings, and securing sustenance, health and safety. It is routinely compromised in criminal cases. And it is out of reach in civil disputes when people are unaware of legal remedies, unable to qualify for free legal aid, unable to afford the expense of private counsel, and unable to overcome discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability and other factors. We all have a stake in access to justice, not only because we (and those we love) may face a legal crisis at a crucial moment in our lives, but also because the basic stability of our society – the rule of law and the reliability of democratic institutions – requires justice for all.

NCAJ's Flagship Project - The Justice Index:

Our flagship project at NCAJ is the Justice Index, justiceindex.org, the online resource we created that sets up carrots and sticks incentives to improve the justice system by ranking the 50 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C. on the degree to which they have best policies in place for access to justice. With 120 indicators and 5000 data points, the Justice Index makes it easy to see and understand these policies in four core categories: i) the progress states are making toward the goal of at least 10 civil legal aid lawyers per 10,000 residents who are poor, ii) policies for self-represented litigants, iii) policies for people with limited English proficiency, and iv) policies for people with disabilities. Online since 2014, the Justice Index is increasing the power of people in the American justice system, promoting public understanding of American courts, and facilitating social science research. It is [widely covered in the media](#), and used by countries developing indexing systems of their own. In an era when facts are pitted against “alternative facts,” it is an objective measure of whether policies that expand access to justice are being advanced or undermined.

NCAJ's Role in the Year Ahead:

In 2020, NCAJ will be helping to bring about justice system reform through its work with data on the following specific projects: **i) The Justice Index** – updating its national map of justice system policies as a means of expanding access to justice in the states; **ii) Criminal Justice Fines and Fees** – identifying principled, pragmatic policies that each state should have in place to reverse the trend of targeting vulnerable communities to pay fines and fees as a means of financing government; **iii) Legal Empowerment to Move Beyond Lawyers-Only** – making the case to allow people to obtain the legal help they need from people qualified to provide it despite having fewer than three years of law school; and, **iv) Gathering AtJ Scholars** – advancing a National Science Foundation initiative to unify scholars across disciplines as a means of growing the field of access to justice research, and promoting justice system reform.

Relationship to the Fordham Law School Access to Justice Initiative:

NCAJ is a free-standing nonprofit that enjoys a special relationship with Fordham Law School in New York City where it is based and where NCAJ's executive director, David Udell, co-chairs the [Fordham Law School Access to Justice Initiative](#) with Dean Matthew Diller and with Senior Counsel of Latham & Watkins, former Chief Judge of New York's highest court, Jonathan Lippman. NCAJ's Legal & Policy Director is Chris Albin-Lackey, and its Senior Counsel and Director of the Justice Index Project is Jamie Gamble. In addition to its program initiatives, NCAJ partners with faculty members and students on courses, guides students on research projects, co-teaches the Access to Justice Seminar, and hosts public gatherings that advance the access to justice movement.

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