

## UT Dallas Study to Help Curb Jail Costs, Cut Repeat Offenses

Dec. 1, 2011

A UT Dallas study seeks to find the most efficient, safe and cost-effective ways to handle Dallas County defendants who are released from jail before their cases go to court.



Dr. Robert Morris

Dr. Robert Morris, an assistant professor of criminology in the [School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences](#), will lead the study, which will use county data to answer key questions, such as how release practices affect court appearance rates.

Morris said the study has the potential to enhance public safety by reducing repeat offenses and could also save Dallas County millions of tax dollars annually.

“The period between release from jail and formal sanction, that is before being sentenced or admitted to a diversion program, is a time for which not much research has looked at and could be the period when a defendant is most receptive to a recidivism reduction initiative,” he said.

The researchers will use 2008 county data, such as offender demographics, criminal history and the type of pre-trial release used. Currently, those who are accused are released before trial on personal, cash bond, pre-trial or surety bonds. The study will review the data over a two-year period to determine whether offenders appeared in court, re-offended, or absconded.

Morris said media coverage about jail spending and overcrowding in Dallas County piqued his interest, and he realized little research had been done on the topic. The [Dallas County Commissioners Court](#) recently approved the study, which has already elicited favorable public response.

*The Dallas Morning News* recently penned an [editorial](#), highlighting Morris’ efforts. Local judges and policymakers have also called Morris to offer their support.

“Area policy makers understand better than anyone how important our criminal justice system is and how heavily we invest in it,” he said. “Criminal justice in its present form is entirely too expensive. Every public official that I’ve been contacted by has been excited by the prospect of having some ‘what works?’ research

conducted specific to the county and have offered to help out where they can.”  
Dr. Robert Morris

Some of the questions the study seeks to answer focus on the millions of dollars taxpayers spend on jailed defendants.

The county estimates it spends \$57 per day to hold an inmate in jail, which generally houses more than 6,000 people on any given day. Based on those figures alone, Morris said the county spends a minimum of \$124 million annually just on jail costs.

“We know that not everyone who is released from jail will re-offend,” Morris said. “If we trim just 5 percent off the jail population simply by knowing which release mechanisms work, and for whom, this economic downturn becomes that much less of a problem for the Dallas area.”

Morris said jail release is a very political topic nationwide because there are competing interests between pretrial justice advocates and the commercial bond industry.

“This research, however, is not political; this is an objective scientific study,” Morris said. “The findings of my study will be driven solely by the data, and I guarantee transparency. Science will tell us which release mechanisms might be giving taxpayers a better return on their investment.”

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