

The North Carolina Rural Jail Project

In the North Carolina Rural Jail Project, the UNC [School of Government Criminal Justice Innovation Lab](#) (the Lab) and [RTI International](#) are supporting the work of local leaders in Columbus County, North Carolina as they seek to explore the unique drivers of pretrial practices and incarceration in their community. Throughout the process, stakeholders will be working to address local issues that they identify and to advance their primary goal: improved community safety. The project also is designed to develop a foundation to better understand rural criminal justice systems more broadly.

The project has three components. First, analyzing local data to learn more about Columbus County's jail population and interviewing local stakeholders and justice-involved individuals to provide context for the data findings. Second, supporting local stakeholders in their effort to understand the data and develop policy initiatives that they believe make sense for their community and will make it safer. And finally, convening a focus group of North Carolina criminal justice stakeholders to learn how their experiences align or diverge from those in Columbus County. This work will help us determine which aspects of the county's experience are tied to its rural nature versus those that are common across jurisdictions.

Bringing Data & Policy Options to Local Experts & Policy Leads

After putting out a call for applications from North Carolina's rural counties, Columbus County was selected as the partner jurisdiction. Local stakeholders participating in the project include the Senior Resident Superior Court Judge, the Chief District Court Judge, the Clerk of Court, the Chief Magistrate, the District Attorney and an Assistant District Attorney, a local defense attorney, the Columbus County Sheriff and other representatives from that office, a police chief, the Chief Probation Officer, the County Manager, and a representative from Trillium Health. These local stakeholders drive and control all policy conversations and decision-making. Supporting their work are Lab Director [Jessica Smith](#) and Lab Project Managers [Ethan Rex](#) and [Hannah Turner](#). Empirical research assistance is provided by RTI's [Pamela Lattimore](#) and Suzanne Strong.

Project Support & Timeline

This project is supported by Arnold Ventures' Advancing Pretrial Policy & Research (APPR) Initiative. The project began in December 2021 and is expected to conclude in December 2022. A final report will be produced at project end.

For more information, please contact [Jessica Smith](#) or [Hannah Turner](#) at the Lab.