

## Overview of the Justice Index

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*In the United States and around the world, people's lives are compromised in civil legal matters when they do not understand the law, cannot assert their rights, cannot rely on a neutral and unbiased decision-maker, cannot count on the rule of law and cannot enforce the law. When access to justice is denied in these ways, people risk losing their children, their homes, their physical security, their savings, even their freedom. The Justice Index, [www.justiceindex.org](http://www.justiceindex.org), created by the National Center for Access to Justice at Fordham Law School, is an on-line resource that uses data and indicators to rank states on their adoption of best policies for assuring access to justice. The Justice Index has been helping to improve access to justice in the states since 2014. An overview of the Justice Index is set forth below.*

### I. Introduction to the Justice Index

The Justice Index is a website that uses data, indicators and indexing to rank the 50 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C., on their adoption of selected best policies and practices for assuring access to justice. Its driving idea is that a responsible comparison of the access to justice policies established in the states will promote a conversation and debate about those policies both within and between the states, which will in turn promote policy reforms that expand access to justice in each state. By making selected policy models highly visible, the Justice Index also facilitates their easy replication.

### II. The Justice Index four sub-categories

The Justice Index contains four sub-categories (each comprised of multiple indicators) as follows:

- Attorney Access Index – ratio of civil legal aid attorneys per 10,000 poor.
- Self-Represented Index – policies to assist self-represented litigants
- Language Access Index – policies to assist people with limited English proficiency
- Disability Access Index – policies to assist people with disabilities

The Justice Index also contains a Composite Index, which combines the scores from the four sub-index categories by according each category 25% of the composite score.

### III. The Justice Index indicators, data and findings

The Justice Index contains approximately 112 indicators and 5,000 data points organized in four sub-index categories. Operating under NCAJ's direction, teams of volunteer attorneys gathered data and also conducted a quality assurance review of data provided by courts, legal aid programs and other stakeholders. Complete indicators, and all data and rankings, are at [www.justiceindex.org](http://www.justiceindex.org). Short titles and explanations of indicators are below.

A. Attorney Access – This sub-index offers a count of civil legal aid lawyers in each state, and a total for the country. The Legal Services Corporation provided NCAJ with a count of civil legal aid lawyers in organizations that have LSC funds. To obtain a count of civil legal aid lawyers in organizations that do not have LSC funds, NCAJ relied on diverse sources, including State Bar Associations, State Court Systems, State Access to Justice Commissions and State Interest on Lawyers Trust Account foundations. NCAJ also reached out to civil legal aid leaders to obtain information from their programs. Justice Index indicators include: 1) number of civil legal aid lawyers, by state; 2) number of civil legal aid lawyers per 10,000 residents at or below 200% of federal poverty line, by state (This “ratio indicator” is indexed); 3) number and names of civil legal aid programs, by state; 4) number of attorneys in general population, by state.

B. Self-Represented Access – This sub-index relies on 56 indicators that track the presence or absence of selected best policies for assuring access to justice for people who are self-represented:

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| 1. Dedicate a Court Employee (34 states)                        | 22. Fund a Recent Initiative on Court Forms (29)                           |
| 2. Authorize Specific Steps by Judges (23)                      | 23. Maintain Single Web Page with Court Forms (48)                         |
| 3. Train Judges on SRLs (31)                                    | 24A-G. List on Court Web Page Forms for Seven Case Types                   |
| 4. Authorize Court Staff on Specific Steps (32)                 | 25A-G. List on Court Web Page Materials for Seven Case Types               |
| 5. Train Court Staff on SRLs (27)                               | 26A-F. Require Courts to Accept Common Form for Seven Case Types           |
| 6. Authorize Unbundling (44)                                    | 27A-G. Maintain Document Assembly Program for Seven Case Types             |
| 7. Train Judges on Unbundling (9)                               | 28. Maintain Access to Justice Commission (41)                             |
| 8. Fund a Self-Help Center (20)                                 | 29. Collect Data on Frequency of Right to Counsel Appointments (7)         |
| 9. Count Self-Represented Cases (9)                             | 30. Collect Data on Quality of Right to Counsel Representation (7)         |
| 10. Require Plain English Written Materials (7)                 | 31. Collect Data on Frequency of Discretionary Appointments of Counsel (0) |
| 11. Encourage Plain English in the Courtroom (20)               | 32. Recognize a Right to Counsel in Housing Cases (0)                      |
| 12. Designate Responsibility for Plain English in Courtroom (1) | 33. Recognize a Right to Counsel in Abuse/Neglect Cases (41)               |
| 13. Publish a Plain English Style Guide (8)                     |  |
| 14. Train Judges on Plain English (17)                          |  |
| 15. Train Court Staff on Plain English (12)                     |  |
| 16. Make Electronic Filing Accessible (16)                      |  |
| 17. Waive Civil Filing Fees (52)                                |  |
| 18. Simplify Waiver of Civil Filing Fees (26)                   |  |
| 19. Require Court Staff to Explain Waiver (12)                  |  |
| 20. Describe Filing Fee Waiver on Website (34)                  |  |
| 21. Conduct Recent Initiative on Court Forms (43)               |  |

C. Language Access – This sub-index relies on 39 indicators that track the presence or absence of selected best policies for assuring access to justice for people with limited English proficiency:

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| 1. Certify Court Interpreters (43 states)                          | 11. Translate Website Instructions for Self-Represented Parties (26) |
| 2. Require Use of Certified Interpreters (33)                      | 12. Translate on Website when Interpreters are Provided (17)         |
| 3. Train Judges on Working with Interpreters (32)                  | 13. Translate on Website How to File Interpreter Complaint (10)      |
| 4. Train Court Staff on Working with Interpreters (28)             | 14A1-12. Require Certified Interpreters for 12 Case Types            |
| 5. Offer Free Interpreter on Website (21)                          | 14B1-12. Require Interpreters be Free-Of-Charge for 12 Case Types    |
| 6. Use Other Languages to Offer Free Interpreter on Website (13)   | 15. Translate on Website Availability of Court Forms (23)            |
| 7. Require Interpreters at Clerks’ Counters (7)                    | 16. Post Translated Court Forms on Website (30)                      |
| 8. Include Clerk Counter Interpreters in Language Access Plan (31) |  |
| 9. Requires Interpreters at Self-Help Centers (3)                  |  |
| 10. Include Self-Help Centers in Language Access Plan (13)         |  |

D. Disability Access – This sub-index relies on 13 indicators that track the presence or absence of selected best policies for assuring access to justice for people with disabilities:

1. Require Sign Language Interpreters be Free-Of-Charge (46 states)
2. Require Sign Language Interpreters be Certified (28)
3. Prefer Interpreters with Courtroom Training (27)
4. Say on Website How To Request Accommodation (30)
5. Name on Website the Person for Accommodations (32)
6. Say on Website How To File Disability Access Complaint (27)
7. Name on Website the Person for Disability Access Complaints (29)
8. Require Access for Service Animals (45)
9. Refer to Mental Disability on Website (15)
10. Dedicate Court Employee with Mental Health Training (7)
11. Provide for Appointment of Counsel as Accommodation (3)
12. Recognize a Right to Counsel in Involuntary Commitment (51)
13. Recognize a Right to Counsel in Guardianship (42)

**IV. Impacts** – Whether the focus is family, housing, safety, debt, families, veterans, or other areas of direct concern to courts, executive agencies, legislatures, the bar, the press, the academy, or the public, the Justice Index findings encourage progress toward better policies over time, creates a platform for social science research on implementation of the policies and their outcomes, and introduce policy models to reformers and government officials for replication. Media coverage, prompted by the Justice Index, helps to draw attention to justice system concerns, deepen public understanding of the courts, and support incentives for officials and stakeholders to work to expand access to justice. For Justice Index media clips, see <http://justiceindex.org/category/news/>.

**V. Next Steps** – We are strengthening the Justice Index in a variety of ways, including:

- **Support** – We are providing technical support to officials who are relying on the Justice Index findings to urge adoption of policies that expand access to justice in their states.
- **Next Indicators** – We are considering adding indicators on: i) civil right to counsel best policies, ii) fees and fines best policies, and iii) pro bono best policies.
- **Implementation** – We are considering options for posting findings on whether access to justice policies are fully implemented on the ground.
- **Research** – We are encouraging social scientists to examine correlations between Justice Index data sets and other data sets. We are working to incorporate into the Justice Index the arguments and, where they exist, research findings, both in favor of, and against, treatment of selected policies as best policies.
- **Individualized state reports** – We are developing reports for each state in which Justice Index findings for that state are downloadable in the form of an access to justice reform agenda individualized for each state.

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