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**Disclaimer**

APPR developed this summary—using online searches of academic databases and publicly available information—to provide an overview of current research on this topic. The online search may not have identified every relevant resource, and new research will shed additional light on this topic. APPR will continue to monitor the research and will update this summary as needed. Due to the broad nature of this summary, readers are encouraged to identify areas to explore in depth and to consider the local implications of the research for future advancements related to pretrial goals, values, policies, and practices.

# Court Date Notification Systems

**When a person is released while their case is pending, a jurisdiction has two primary interests: to maximize court appearance and maximize community well-being and safety (i.e., minimize the likelihood of the person’s rearrest during the pretrial stage). Most people succeed on pretrial release: they return to court and abide by the law. Courts sometimes order additional conditions of release to provide reasonable assurance of these positive outcomes. This summary examines the current base of knowledge regarding the effectiveness of court date notification systems in improving court appearance, as well as some of the ancillary benefits and costs associated with implementing such a system.**

Pretrial research is always evolving. This research summary, which was updated in April 2024, includes findings from recently published studies that may slightly change the interpretation of the takeaways and conclusions presented in the earlier document. To explain why these slight changes occurred or why there may not be a singular conclusion, greater detail is provided on research study methodology, and additional guidance is offered on how to interpret findings. Overall, the inclusion of more recent research and a closer critique of past studies have not significantly altered the key findings previously presented to the field.

Several updates have been made to this summary, including:

- the inclusion of new studies,
- outlines of different research designs and study limitations, and
- an overview of different features to consider when designing and implementing a court date notification system.

It is hoped that this update will equip readers with a greater understanding of the state of research in the field.

## What Are Court Date Notification Systems?

Many people who fail to appear for court-related appointments do so for innocent reasons, such as misunderstanding court orders, forgetting appointments, or facing practical obstacles to getting to court. A survey of nearly 500 people with open cases in Nebraska found that scheduling conflicts, lack of reliable transportation, the inability to find childcare, or simply losing track of dates are among the most common reasons people give for missing court appearances.<sup>1</sup> These findings are also reflected in interviews between people involved in the criminal legal system and leading experts in the field that were conducted by *The Appeal* magazine and Human Rights Watch.<sup>2</sup>

The use of court date notification systems (also known as court date reminder systems) has been shown to be effective in increasing court appearance rates. These systems are used to notify people released pretrial of their next court date, the consequences of not appearing, any changes to previously scheduled court dates, and missed court dates, allowing time for people to remedy the situation before a warrant is issued. Notifications also encourage problem solving and offer assistance to address barriers to timely appearance. Notifications can be sent through automated, system-generated texts, phone calls, or emails; through individual calls, texts, or emails; or in letters or postcards.<sup>3</sup>

This summary reviews key research findings on the effect of court date notification systems on court appearance and other outcomes.

### Research Designs

Court date notification systems are just one in a complex set of factors that influence whether a person accused of a crime appears in court or result in other positive outcomes. Studies vary in their ability to isolate the effects of court date notification systems and to produce causal or more credible findings. Rigorous studies can rule out alternative explanations and more convincingly link an intervention to differences in outcomes (as opposed to suggesting a correlational relationship).

1. **Randomized controlled trials (RCTs)** are considered “the gold standard” in research. People are randomly assigned to either an experimental group (which is subject to an intervention or to a policy or practice change) or to a control group (which is not subject to the intervention or to the policy or practice change). If the sample size is large enough and there is an effective randomization procedure, all of the factors that could influence the outcome other than the

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intervention or policy change will likely be distributed evenly between the two groups. In this way, differences in outcomes can be explained by the intervention or policy change alone rather than by an alternative factor. While it is often difficult or impossible to implement RCTs in a criminal legal setting due to logistical and ethical constraints, court date notifications are one intervention that can be tested through RCTs. Therefore, **RCTs are included in this research summary.**

2. **Quasi-experimental studies** aim to estimate the effect of an intervention, policy, or practice without random assignment driven by the researcher (e.g., changes to policies focused on court date reminders).<sup>4</sup> Quasi-experimental studies encompass a broad range of approaches: more rigorous quasi-experimental studies can produce causal estimates while weaker quasi-experimental studies may leave the door open to alternative explanations. **Some studies cited in this research summary are quasi-experimental studies.**
3. **Descriptive or correlational studies** examine differences in outcomes between nonequivalent groups who were or were not subject to an intervention or to a policy or practice change. Under these designs, it is difficult to attribute any changes in outcomes to an intervention. Differences in outcomes may be driven by pre-existing differences or alternative explanations. In general, strong conclusions should not be drawn from these studies. **This research summary does not cite any descriptive or correlational studies.**

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## Key Finding #1: Court Date Notifications Can Increase Appearance Rates

Studies using RCTs have shown that a variety of delivery methods for court date reminders can be effective in improving appearance rates:

- *Text notifications.* Recent RCTs of text notification systems in New York City, Santa Clara County, California, Shasta County, California, and a large de-identified jurisdiction with over 700,000 people and 30,000 cases found that, compared to no notification, court date reminders increased court appearance rates. In New York City, an evaluation of approximately 20,000 summons recipients found that the introduction of text notifications decreased the failure to appear (FTA) rate by a statistically meaningful 21%.<sup>5</sup> In the de-identified jurisdiction, reminder texts reduced FTA rates at first arraignment by 39%, bench warrant issues by 16%, and new arrests within 6 months of the case by 16%.<sup>6</sup>

In Santa Clara County, a study with over 5,000 people found that automated text reminders reduced warrants issued for missed court dates by 20% and reduced pretrial detention for missed court dates by 23%. One unique aspect of the Santa Clara RCT is that it used text reminders in Spanish and Vietnamese to meet the needs of people who requested a translation in these languages.<sup>7</sup> In Shasta County (a rural jurisdiction), text reminders reduced FTA rates by 10% but, as discussed below, had no effect on unhoused people.<sup>8</sup>

- *Phone calls.* Similarly, RCTs of phone call notification systems found that phone call reminders improve appearance rates. In another New York City evaluation, FTA rates were examined for over 2,000 people who were issued a “desk appearance ticket”<sup>9</sup> (equivalent to a citation or summons) and either did or did not receive live reminder phone calls at varying intervals before their scheduled arraignment. The rate at which arrest warrants were issued dropped by 37% for people who received the reminder calls, no matter when they received them (i.e., three days before and/or the day of the arraignment), compared to those who did not.<sup>10</sup> In Jefferson County, Colorado, phone call reminders to 2,100 randomly selected people summonsed to appear on a misdemeanor or traffic offense led to a 43% reduction in the FTA rate.<sup>11</sup>
- *Other notification systems.* Additional approaches to court date notification, such as mailing postcards or using street outreach workers, can also increase appearance rates. In 14 Nebraska counties, more than 7,500 people charged with a misdemeanor were sent postcard notifications that reflected different reminder messages. Any reminder message meaningfully increased court appearances by 14%.<sup>12</sup> In King County, Washington, a juvenile court used street outreach workers with community connections to locate and support youth and their parents/guardians in attending court hearings. Youth assigned to outreach support were 30% less likely to receive a warrant for missing their arraignment.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, non-RCTs have found that court date notifications are associated with higher appearance rates, though it is more difficult to draw definitive conclusions from these studies because of their lack of controls for other factors that may contribute to the results.

- An evaluation of the impact of automated court date reminders in Multnomah County, Oregon, demonstrated a sharp reduction in FTA rates among people who were successfully reached (i.e., the automated call was either answered by a person or an answering machine) as compared to people who were not called or not reached. Following more than 4,400 phone calls for 2,400 court dates, the evaluation

found that those receiving the calls—regardless of age, gender, race, scheduled court date, and severity of charge—were twice as likely to appear as the comparison group.<sup>14</sup> One challenge with this study is that people who cannot be reached may be less likely to appear in court regardless of receiving court date reminders, which could lead to overestimates of the program’s effectiveness.

- In Lafayette Parish, Louisiana, a non-RCT study of approximately 1,000 people required to appear for misdemeanor pretrial, misdemeanor trial, felony pretrial, or traffic court hearings revealed that those who received a live phone reminder for any hearing type were significantly more likely to appear for court than those who did not receive a reminder.<sup>15</sup> The researchers noted that the effect was “extremely significant”; there was a “greater than 99% chance the increase in appearance rates was related to the reminder phone calls.”<sup>16</sup> However, this study did not control for potentially confounding factors (e.g., demographics, severity of charge, etc.).

A small number of RCTs have found that court date reminder systems had no effect on appearance rates although, importantly, none of the existing impact evaluations suggests that receiving court date notifications has any harmful effects, such as increased FTA rates.<sup>17</sup> In Kentucky, court appearance rates were already high (slightly under 90%), suggesting that some jurisdictions may have diminishing returns with court date reminder systems.<sup>18</sup> In other studies, the systems failed to deliver the reminders to large segments of the population. For example, in Philadelphia, the automated call-in system malfunctioned, and the issue was not discovered until the end of the study period.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in a study conducted in England, only 42% of the listed numbers were valid. In Shasta County, only 34% of unhoused people received a text reminder.<sup>20</sup> These studies underscore the importance of ensuring that notification systems are implemented carefully, with accurate contact information, and that they operate correctly; otherwise, the benefits of notification may not be realized. The studies also highlight the difficulty of extending court date reminders to more vulnerable populations—particularly those without reliable contact information—suggesting the need for different interventions.

*Compared to no notification, rigorous studies conclude that any type of court date reminder is effective in increasing court appearance rates.*

Jurisdiction	Year	Assistance Method	Court Appearances	Rearrests	Other
<b>Randomized controlled trial</b>					
Philadelphia*	2006	Phone call	Same	Same	–
Jefferson County, Colorado	2012	Phone call	Higher	–	–
Nebraska	2013	Postcard	Higher	–	–
Kentucky*	2017	Text, phone call	Same	Same	–
Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary, England*	2018	Text	Same	–	–
Detroit, Michigan	2018	Phone call, mailers, flier	–	–	Increased access to post-warrant clearance program and requests for relief
King County, Washington	2019	Street outreach workers	Higher	–	–
New York	2020	Phone call	Higher	–	–
New York	2020	Text	Higher	–	–
De-identified large jurisdiction (700,000 people)	2020	Text	Higher	Lower	Increased use of court accommodations such as rescheduling and payment plans
Santa Clara County, California	2023	Text	Higher	–	–
Shasta County, California	2023	Text	Higher	–	–
<b>Nonrandomized controlled trial</b>					
Coconino County, Arizona	2006	Phone call	Higher	–	–
Multnomah County, Oregon	2006	Phone call	Higher	–	–
Lafayette Parish, Louisiana	2016	Phone call	Higher	–	–

\* The systems evaluated in these studies did not deliver notifications to large segments of the population, which could explain the null results.

## Key Finding #2: Post-FTA Notifications Can Increase Future Appearance and Warrant Clearance Rates

Court date notifications sent to people who missed a court date improve future appearance rates and can help resolve outstanding warrant issues. The aforementioned Jefferson County, Colorado, RCT evaluation demonstrated that when people were called by a court representative to notify them of their failure to appear, explain the consequences of an arrest warrant, and advise them to appear within five business days to avoid the issuance of a warrant, approximately 50% of people (38 out of the randomly selected 75) returned to court compared to a baseline of 10% (i.e., those who return on their own initiative in the same time frame without notification by the court).<sup>21</sup>

In the New York City evaluation, post-FTA text message notifications resulted in a 15% overall reduction in future failures to return to court within the subsequent 30 days. The research demonstrated that the most effective message type included a notification regarding the consequences of missing court (e.g., “Since you missed court on [date], a warrant was issued. You won’t be arrested for it if you clear it at [location].”) as compared to notifications that indicated the person’s behavior violated social norms (e.g., “Most people show up to clear their tickets, but records show you missed court for yours. Go to court at [location].”). Both types, however, resulted in FTA reductions (16% and 14%, respectively). The study found the most effective notification methodology was a pre-court date notification combined with a post-FTA message, which reduced the open FTA warrant rate by 32%.<sup>22</sup>

In Detroit, Michigan, an RCT study examined phone calls and mailers sent to 3,589 people with outstanding warrants to raise awareness of a post-warrant clearance program. Compared to people who received no notification of the program, people receiving notification were more likely to access the program and request relief, usually through a new court appearance or a payment plan.<sup>23</sup>

*Court date notifications that inform people of failures to appear, the consequences of missing court, and ways to resolve the situation are shown to be effective at increasing the likelihood that people will return to court and clear their warrants.*

## Key Finding #3: The Design, Content, and Frequency of Court Date Notifications Affect How Well They Work

It is highly likely that court date notification systems achieve such positive outcomes because missing court is often simply a case of human error, forgetfulness, or a lack of understanding about the importance of appearing in court. Varying the design, content, and frequency of court date reminders to highlight key information can place the information front and center and improve people’s understanding of the consequences of an FTA.

- *Design.* When New York City redesigned its summons forms to display pertinent information first, such as the court location and date, FTA rates dropped by 13.2%. Laboratory experiments found that participants identified the court date and time more quickly, and accurately recalled this information at a higher rate, when viewing the modified form compared to the old form.<sup>24</sup>
- *Content.* Court date reminders that include information on the consequences of failing to appear (e.g., issuance of an arrest warrant, being charged with an additional crime of failure to appear) and that facilitate planning increase appearance rates at a higher rate compared to reminders with just date information. The New York City RCT revealed that text messages that included prompts on how to plan ahead for court dates (e.g., “Mark the date on your calendar and set an alarm on your phone”; “What time should you leave to get there by 9:30 a.m.?”) were more effective in reducing FTAs than messages without this information. These plan-making messages reduced failures to appear by 16%. Messages containing information on both plan-making *and* the consequences of missing a court date further reduced failures to appear by 26%.<sup>25</sup> In Nebraska, postcards including the consequences of failures to appear were also more effective than postcards with just a reminder.<sup>26</sup>
- *Frequency/Timing.* The effect of the frequency and timing of reminders is inconclusive. Only one study examined the difference in FTA rates based on the timing of reminders. In the New York RCT evaluating desk appearance tickets, people were given a reminder on the same day, three days in advance, or on both days. People receiving a reminder three days in advance were more likely to appear than people receiving reminders on the same day or on both days.<sup>27</sup> However, more research is needed in this area.

*Designing court date reminders that improve the clarity and ease of understanding key dates and consequences produces higher appearance rates.*



## Key Finding #4: Court Date Notification Systems Are Most Effective When There Is Direct Contact with Court Representatives

The efficacy of court date notification systems depends in large part on their ability to reliably connect people with court representatives. Systems that ensure or increase the likelihood that people review and understand the reminder are more effective. In Jefferson County, Colorado, appearance rates rose from a baseline of 79% to 87% when a message was left on voicemail or with a responsible adult, and to 92% when a court representative spoke directly to the person.<sup>28</sup> In Coconino County, Arizona, only 6% of people who spoke with a court representative failed to appear compared to 15% to 21% among those who were not reached directly.<sup>29</sup> In the aforementioned Lafayette Parish study, reaching the person's emergency contact (i.e., family or friend) resulted in an appearance rate of 38%, leaving a voicemail resulted in an appearance rate of 76%, and speaking directly with the person resulted in the highest appearance rate, 78%.<sup>30</sup> For text reminder systems that allow people to converse with court representatives, people were more likely to utilize court accommodations, such as rescheduling hearings or organizing a payment plan.<sup>31</sup>

*Court date notification systems that directly connect people to court representatives are shown to produce the largest increase in appearance rates.*

## Key Finding #5: Notifications Have Financial and Nonfinancial Benefits

Some jurisdictions have calculated the added benefit that notifications have on reducing burdens on local criminal legal systems as well as on people accused of a crime. Considering the resources associated with issuing and clearing FTA warrants, police apprehensions, jail bookings and bed stays, and court hearings, Multnomah County, Oregon, calculated a cost avoidance of over \$232,000 within the first six months of implementing court date notifications.<sup>32</sup> Coconino County, Arizona, estimated \$90,000 in increased revenue through fines collected over a period of one year, as well as a savings of \$60,000 per year as a result of using 1,000 fewer jail bed days due to people charged with misdemeanors having fewer failures to appear.<sup>33</sup> In New York City, after finding that a combination of court date reminders and post-FTA text messages reduced the 30-day open warrant rate

by a statistically meaningful 32%, researchers calculated that sending text messages would cost less than \$7,500 over one year and significantly reduce system-related processing costs (e.g., police and court processing time).<sup>34</sup> In the large de-identified jurisdiction previously discussed, text reminders saved the court \$1.14 per person or roughly \$23,420 a year.<sup>35</sup>

Jurisdictions have also acknowledged that notifications have significant nonfinancial benefits, such as avoiding the adverse impacts of being involved in the criminal legal system (e.g., whether or not people were arrested after failing to appear),<sup>36</sup> as well as the procedural fairness<sup>37</sup> impacts of being able to speak with a court representative and receive helpful information.<sup>38</sup>

*Notifications reduce burdens on local criminal legal systems as well as on people accused of a crime.*

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## Key Finding #6: Research Is Needed on Other Interventions that Seek to Improve the Ease of Appearing in Court

The general success of court date notification systems in raising appearance rates suggests that other interventions that aim to improve the ease of complying with criminal legal system requirements should be explored. There are almost no empirical studies testing other interventions, such as childcare, transportation assistance, and so forth. Only one RCT has examined the impact of transportation subsidies on appearance rates. In Seattle, Washington, 458 people were randomly assigned to no transportation subsidy, a \$15 subsidy, or a 2–3-month subsidy. People receiving subsidies used public transportation at significantly higher rates, but their appearance rates did not improve.<sup>39</sup> More research is required to understand whether other support programs are cost-effective in raising appearance rates.

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## Best Practice Recommendations

Professional practice standards are consistent with the findings of the research literature, emphasizing the importance of notifying people about upcoming court appearances.

### 1. American Bar Association (ABA)

Standard 10-1.10 in *ABA Standards for Criminal Justice: Pretrial Release* explains the role of the pretrial services agency and, within, specifies that

agencies should “(k) remind persons released before trial of their court dates and assist them in attending court; and (l) have the means to assist persons who cannot communicate in written or spoken English.”<sup>40</sup>

## **2. The National Association of Pretrial Services Agencies (NAPSA)**

Standard 4.6(a) in *Standards on Pretrial Release* states: “The goal of pretrial monitoring, supervision, and support is to promote court appearance, public safety, and compliance with court-ordered conditions. Monitoring, supervision, and support should include:...(ii) notification of upcoming court appearances” (p. 72). According to the commentary: “Notification to defendants of upcoming court appearances is a proven way to improve court appearance rates. Notification may include telephone calls, email, or text messaging. If an agency employs multiple methods for court notification, the defendant should determine the best method of contact. Regardless of the system used, court notifications should include the date and time of the next scheduled court appearance, the court address and, if available, the Judge’s name and courtroom” (p. 73).<sup>41</sup>

## **3. National Institute of Corrections (NIC)**

*A Framework for Pretrial Justice: Essential Elements of an Effective Pretrial System and Agency* cites court date notifications as an essential element of an effective pretrial system given that they are “highly effective at reducing the risk of failure to appear.”<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

1. Bornstein, B. H., Tomkins, A., Neeley, E., Herian, M., & Hamm, J. A. (2013). Reducing courts' failure-to-appear rate by written reminders. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 19(1), 70–80. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1601&context=psychfacpub>
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3. Bechtel, K., Holsinger, A. M., Lowenkamp, C. T., & Warren, M. J. (2017). A meta-analytic review of pretrial research: Risk assessment, bond type, and interventions. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 42(2), 443–467. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2741635>
4. In RCTs, researchers develop a protocol in which they can *directly manipulate* what happens as part of the random assignment of cases to study conditions (e.g., every other eligible case on a docket receives the intervention). In contrast, certain quasi-experimental designs may apply advanced statistics to leverage how existing policies facilitate the quasi-random assignment of cases to different conditions. If researchers are unable to estimate random assignment, there are other quasi-experimental designs, such as the comparison of the relative change in outcomes for the group affected by the policy against a group unaffected by the policy before and after the policy implementation (this design is also called differences-in-differences). This process helps isolate the effect of the focal policy from other changes that affect both groups over time and help researchers rule out plausible alternative explanations.
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8. Owens, E., & Sloan, C. (2023). Can text messages reduce incarceration in rural and vulnerable populations? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 42(4), 992–1009. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22505>
9. Police officers in New York City sometimes issue “desk appearance tickets” (DATs) instead of booking people into jail. People who are arrested are brought to a precinct for fingerprinting and, if they meet certain criteria, are released with a physical ticket that includes the date and location of their arraignment.
10. Ferri, R. (2022). The benefits of live court date reminder phone calls during pretrial case processing. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 18(1), 149–169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-020-09423-0>
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21. Schnacke et al., 2012
22. Cooke et al., 2018; Fishbane et al., 2020
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28. Schnacke et al., 2012
29. White, W. F. (2006). *Court hearing call notification project*. <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/App/InterimCommittee/REL/Document/15414>. It should be noted that the study referenced in this brief did not conduct inferential statistical analyses or control for potentially confounding variables.
30. Howat et al., 2016. It should be noted that these percentages are descriptive only. Due to a small sample size, researchers were unable to perform more rigorous analyses to identify whether other variables could explain this observed relationship.
31. Emanuel & Ho, 2020
32. Nice, 2006
33. White, 2006
34. Cooke et al., 2018; Fishbane et al., 2020
35. Emanuel et al., 2020
36. Cooke et al., 2018; Fishbane et al., 2020
37. The concept of procedural fairness (also known as procedural justice) refers to the fairness with which citizens are treated by criminal legal system authorities, and how those interactions shape the public's view of the criminal legal system and thus influence crime and public safety. In general, research demonstrates that the way citizens are treated rather than the outcome of their involvement in the system has a greater impact on whether they are likely to perceive authorities as legitimate and, therefore, to obey the law. See: Bennett, S., Hine, L., & Mazerolle, L. (2018). *Procedural justice*. Oxford Bibliographies Online. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195396607/obo-9780195396607-0241.xml>; National Initiative for Building Community Trust & Justice. (n.d.). *Procedural justice*. <https://trustandjustice.org/resources/intervention/procedural-justice>.
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