

HB 841 by Rep. Ordaz – Improving Judicial Data to Improve Justice for All

Key Takeaways

- Our current county-level, aggregate data collection from trial courts offers a limited view of the court backlog, obscures the realities in rural and urban communities in Texas, and fails to capture important and useful information about the judiciary.
- By requiring the collection of case-level data (as opposed to aggregate data), HB 841 codifies a longstanding goal of the Texas Judicial Council and a recommendation from the most recent interim report of the House Committee on Judiciary & Civil Jurisprudence.
- The base budgets filed in both the House and Senate have already accounted for the necessary IT upgrades reflected in the fiscal note.

Background

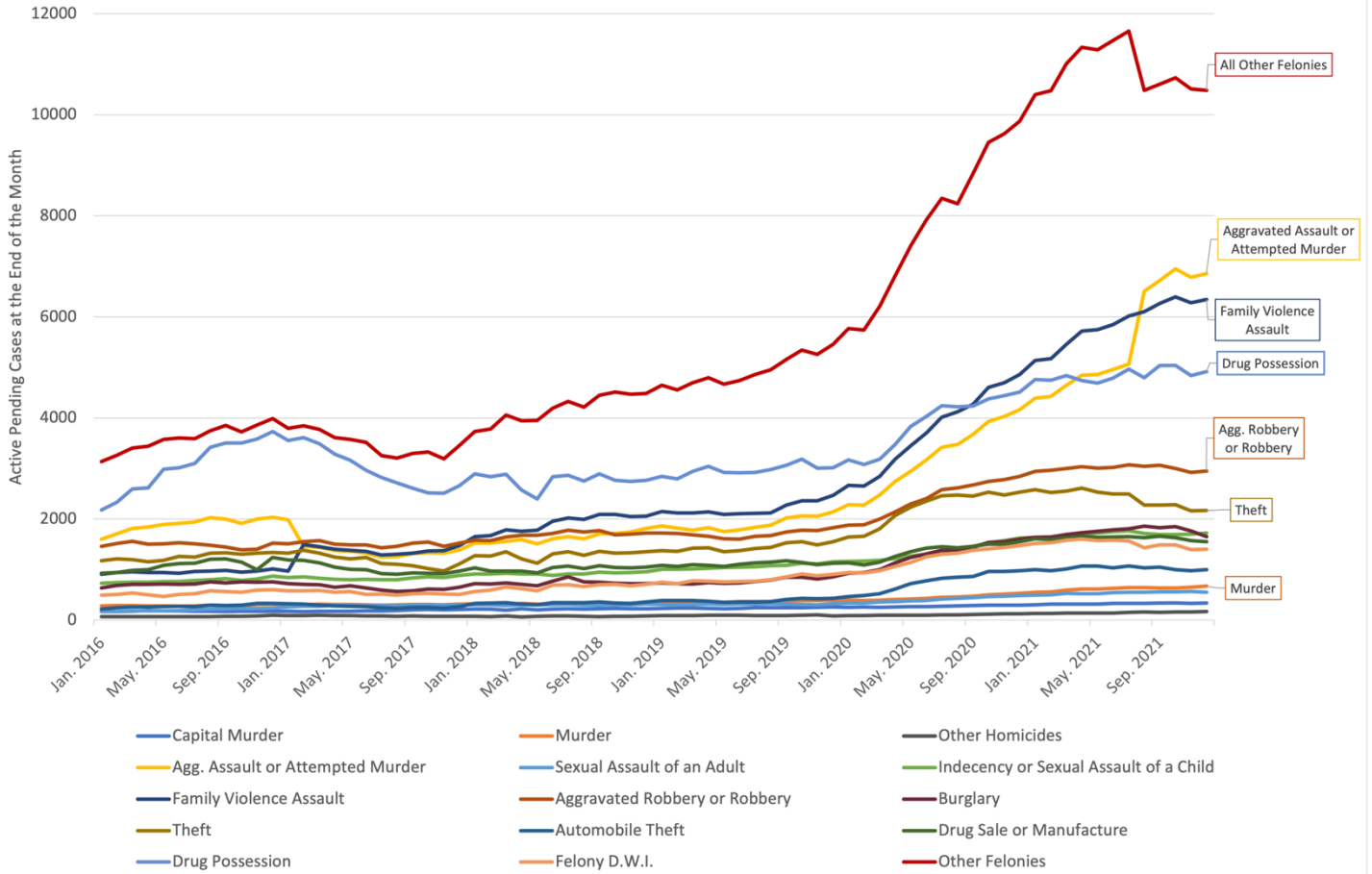
The Texas Judicial Council and Office of Court Administration have offered reports and testimony over the years highlighting the multiple constraints of the state's aggregate county data collected from trial-level district and county courts. For district courts in rural Texas that cover multiple counties with overlapping jurisdictions, data from any one county is an incomplete picture of a court's total caseload. It's worse where the case backlogs are especially severe in more urban counties that can have dozens of district and county courts. There, the aggregate data obscures the efforts of exemplary, hard-working judges as well as those that may be less timely in working through cases on their dockets. The few instances where the state's data actually reflects an individual district court's docket are where the jurisdictional lines of one court happen to coincide with county lines in the right way.

The aggregate data also leaves us without the ability to dig deeper in the substantive policy issues. For example, district courts report criminal cases in 15 high-level categories such as aggravated assault and drug possession — everything from marijuana to methamphetamine — and then report one "other felonies" category of cases that can account for a quarter of a county's criminal docket. In Harris County, "other felonies" were 26% of the district courts' pending caseload in 2020. The vague "other felonies" category has been driving the backlog of pending criminal cases in Harris County more than any one case category.

Lastly the aggregate data prevents us from understanding key metrics or connecting important factors. One metric we can't see is the *age* of the active pending caseload — we only know how old cases are once they're already disposed. Other aggregate data that is reported, such as the number of cases with a court appointed attorney or the number of jury selections, are disconnected from the categories of cases.

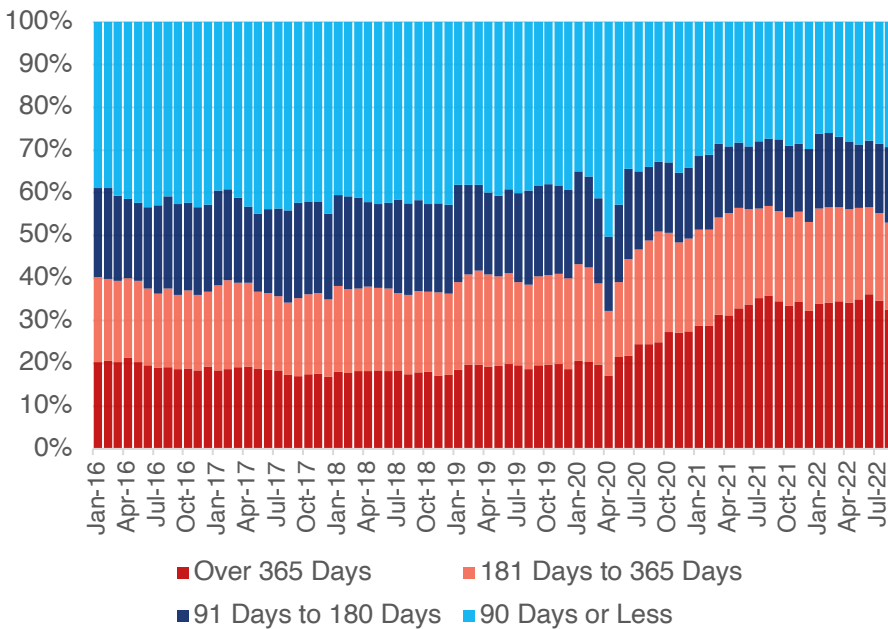
HB 841 will take a necessary step towards resolving our data limitations by requiring the collection of case-level data. It codifies what the Texas Judicial Council has twice recommended in 2018 and 2022, and what this Committee recommended in its interim report to the 88th Legislature — improving our judicial data infrastructure to improve the administration of justice for all Texans.

Cases Pending in Harris County's 22 Criminal District Courts*
Jan. 2016 - Dec. 2021†



* A new district court for Harris County, the 482nd Judicial District, was established by HB 3774 in 2021; judge was appointed in October of that year.
† Data produced by queries run on the Office of Court Administration's **Court Activity Reporting and Directory System** at <https://card.txcourts.gov/>

District Court Criminal Case Age at Disposition:
1/2016 to 8/2022



Model Time Standards for Felony Cases

