



Access to Justice Lab at Harvard Law School

Who we are

Based at Harvard Law School and founded in 2016, the Access to Justice Lab is a team of researchers who use a multi-phase approach to improve access to justice by transforming law into a profession based in empirical data. We build coalitions to ask hard questions, identify barriers to access, and propose solutions; design and field randomized experiments to learn which interventions succeed; share results transparently; and create actionable lessons about how to improve the justice system. Under the leadership of Jim Greiner, the Honorable S. William Green Professor of Public Law at Harvard Law School, the A2J Lab is transforming the justice system to make it work better for everyone.

How we work

By fielding randomized control trials (RCTs), the A2J Lab works with legal professionals to create gold-standard research to answer critical questions in access to justice, such as:

- *How effective are self-help materials compared to representation from a lawyer in debt collection cases?*
- *Is expungement of criminal records effective as a reentry device for justice-involved individuals?*
- *Can risk assessment scores make pretrial bail decisions more rational and less racially biased?*

This approach generates the data that legal professionals and policymakers require to evaluate proposed solutions and shows them the value of utilizing that information.

What we study

Our research is collaborative. We respond to the interests of those on the ground (legal service providers, judges, court administrators, and innovators in the field) to design and test interventions to improve the justice system, both civil and criminal. We also work with law school students to identify areas of high access to justice need and design our own reforms to test.

16 **States in which
A2J Lab has
projects**

11 **Projects
completed**

13 **Projects in
the field**

5 **Projects in
development**



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Randomized Control Trials (RCTs)

What is an RCT?

The same type of studies used to test new drugs and treatments in medicine, randomized control trials (RCTs) are often referred to as the “gold standard” of empirical research methods. An RCT tries to remove, as much as possible, the effects of countless background factors—things like gender, age, motivation, education, etc.—that might also drive the outcomes in question.

A good study design removes all other factors by randomly selecting some people into one group that encounters the intervention while the rest of the study population experiences the status quo (no intervention). By creating two randomly selected groups this way, researchers can reliably test whether the intervention, as opposed to some background factor, caused any difference in results.

Are RCTs ethical?

Our RCTs follow some of the same ethical principles applied in medicine. There are three primary reasons why legal RCTs can, ordinarily, be administered ethically:

1. **Resource scarcity and over-enrollment**

When there is not enough to go around, it is fair to use a lottery for resource allocation. In fact, many people prefer a lottery to a professional judgment when a resource is scarce.

2. **Equipoise**

Equipoise is a state of uncertainty, in which we lack credible evidence of whether option A or option B is better or more cost-effective. Because of the lack of evidence-based thinking in the law, we are in equipoise as to most questions about the justice system.

3. **No harm, no foul**

In almost all A2J Lab studies, one group receives the status quo/normal treatment, and the other group receives something that we all hope (but aren't sure) is better. No one is harmed because no one receives anything known to be worse than the current practice.

RCTs have already transformed medicine and some other professions into evidence-based fields. The A2J Lab works to assure that law also becomes an evidence-based field.