2027
Tennessee Office of Criminal Justice Programs
Statewide Five-Year Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Tennessee Office of Criminal Justice Programs (OCJP) continues to lead statewide efforts to improve public safety and justice system effectiveness through data-driven, collaborative, and evidence-based strategies. Building on the foundation laid in previous years, the 2027 Strategic Plan reflects Tennessee's evolving criminal justice landscape and outlines targeted initiatives to address persistent and emerging challenges.

Despite a recent decline in violent crime rates, Tennessee faces systemic issues including high incarceration rates, jail overcrowding, and untreated behavioral health needs. OCJP's strategic response includes the establishment of Criminal Justice Coordinating Councils to unify stakeholders, align resources, and promote regional planning.

To combat drug and human trafficking, OCJP will maintain multi-jurisdictional task forces that integrate intelligence sharing, joint operations, and coordinated prosecution. These efforts aim to dismantle trafficking networks and improve conviction rates through enhanced collaboration.

Recognizing the barriers to successful reentry, OCJP will invest in evidence-based reentry services that begin in custody and extend into the community. This includes trauma-informed programming, transitional housing, and vocational support, with performance metrics embedded to ensure accountability and impact.

OCJP will also strengthen and expand Family Justice Centers (FJCs) to serve as multidisciplinary hubs that provide coordinated, victim-centered services for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. These centers will operate under standardized protocols and state guidelines to ensure consistent, trauma-informed care.

To reduce incarceration and improve justice outcomes, OCJP will support Public Defender/Social Worker partnerships that deliver holistic, legal, and social services to justice-involved individuals, addressing root causes such as substance use, housing instability, and mental health.

In response to Tennessee's sustained elevated violent crime rates, OCJP will scale Project Safe Neighborhoods initiatives, empowering local jurisdictions to implement targeted enforcement and prevention strategies with measurable outcomes.

OCJP will modernize forensic investigations through the Rapid DNA Project, reducing evidence processing times and accelerating case resolutions. This initiative positions Tennessee as a leader in technology-driven justice reform.

All initiatives are aligned with federal priorities and Tennessee's Office of Evidence and Impact standards, ensuring transparency, performance tracking, and sustainable impact. Through strategic investment and statewide collaboration, OCJP is committed to advancing justice and public safety across Tennessee.

INTRODUCTION

The Office of Criminal Justice Programs (OCJP), which is located within the Tennessee Department of Finance and Administration, continues to serve as the State Administrative Agency (SAA) for Tennessee. OCJP provides grant funding to both state agencies and local communities to improve both Criminal Justice and Victim Service response through the implementation of evidence-based programming. Currently, OCJP manages federal awards which include but are not limited to:

- Edward Byrne Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program
- Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Program
- Office of Violence Against Women (OVW) Program
- Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) Program
- Sexual Assault Services Program (SASP)
- National Criminal History Improvement Program (NCHIP)
- Residential Substance Abuse Treatment Program for State Prisoners (RSAT)
- Project Safe Neighborhood (PSN)
- Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Program (Coverdell)
- Byrne State Crisis Intervention Program (SCIP)

For more than two decades, these programs have provided a vehicle for seeding and pioneering new projects as well as sustaining victim services across the state. This federal funding is complemented by various state fees, fines, and appropriations that further the initiatives of this office. Tennessee's implementation of these programs continues to evolve along with its criminal justice system. With this multi-year statewide strategy, the state of Tennessee continues its commitment to reduce the incidence of drug use, drug trafficking, and violent crime within the state's boundaries while working to increase victim safety and reduce the impact of crime on victims. At the close of the previous five-year plan, the Office of Criminal Justice Programs was at an all-time high for the amount of obligations and number of subrecipients.

As an extension of our focus on evidence-based programming and support of coordinated community responses to solve criminal justice issues, OCJP works collaboratively with the Tennessee Office of Evidence and Impact (OEI) to further incorporate evidence-based decision making into our budgeting process, evaluating the programs we support through logic model project development and requiring strong data collection of outputs and outcomes to demonstrate the impact of our funded projects and our work.

This document will provide an overview of the day-to-day and annual structure of OCJP strategic planning, provide the recent data that has informed this multi-year strategic plan, and outline the goals, strategies, outputs, and outcomes of the plan. It is anticipated that OCJP will continue to provide an Annual Report highlighting the work of the past year as well as an annual addendum to this strategic plan document, as has been the standard for the past five years. It is anticipated that the output and outcome sections will be enhanced through the future addenda as this is an area of ongoing improvement for OCJP.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Tennessee OCJP has developed a sophisticated ongoing process for involving state and local officials as well as local practitioners in criminal justice planning. The problems and needs OCJP gathers from these and other sources are translated into priorities for action, which are later linked to one or more of Tennessee's grant program areas. OCJP has regular and frequent communication with the Tennessee associations and professional organizations representing various components of the criminal justice system. These contacts provide an important source of data and feedback for the planning process. Much of the information on problems and needs contained in the next sections come from OCJP's direct link with criminal justice system practitioners.

In the fall of each year, OCJP conducts a Roundtable Forum comprising two to three local representatives from each region and each component of the criminal justice system (judicial, prosecution, defense; chiefs and sheriffs; corrections and re-entry programs; and victim services). Each member is asked to serve a staggered three-year term. Annually, this group meets to discuss continuing and emerging needs and gaps, reviews the ongoing initiatives from past planning sessions, and assists to identify what is working in other communities that could be replicated, often with a focus on evidence-based programs.

Additionally, OCJP has worked with the Tennessee Voices for Victims to convene and facilitate a series of focus groups consisting of criminal justice professionals, victim advocates, and crime victims to engage in guided discussions around what is working well in the fields of criminal justice and victim service and to identify opportunities for enhancements. The Executive Summary from those meetings identifies successful practices and opportunities for enhancements in the areas of victim support and safety, ongoing professional development for the criminal justice system, offender support and education, and system coordination.

OCJP is committed to gathering information from any individual who impacts or is impacted by the criminal justice system. As a part of our strategic planning process, we routinely interview employees performing the work at our grant-funded agencies to better understand the work they do, the needs of those they work with, and where resources could be allocated to improve the work that practitioners are doing in the field.

TENNESSEE'S STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING NEEDS AND GAPS

Goal: Improve public safety and justice system effectiveness through coordinated, regional, and evidence-based collaboration.

JAG Program Area: Planning, evaluation, and technology improvement

OEI Priority: Investigations and Law Enforcement Support

Problem Statement:

Although violent crime rates have declined, it remains a pressing issue. Tennessee faces a growing crisis in its criminal justice system, marked by rising incarceration rates, severe jail overcrowding, and a surge in untreated mental health and substance use disorders (SUD). [1]

Tennessee had the 2nd and 3rd highest jail and prison admissions in the country in 2015.[1] More recently, according to Tennessee Department of Correction Monthly Jail Population Report in February 2025, 55.2% of jails in Tennessee were at 90% or more capacity and 36.6% of Tennessean jails were at 100% or more capacity.

To further complicate the issue of untreated mental health and SUDs, according to the TDOC FY25 Statistical Abstract, 60.5% of prison inmates had at least one DSM Diagnosis and about two thirds of those have comorbidities.[2]

These systemic issues, compounded by high recidivism and fragmented interagency coordination, underscore the urgent need for a unified, data-driven approach to justice reform. Absent a coordinated, regional framework to unify law enforcement, prosecution, and community stakeholders, the state lacks the systematic structure needed to align policy, resources, and data-driven responses across local boundaries.

Solution:

To address this gap, OCJP will allocate grant funds to establish CJCCs in the state. These CJCCs will serve as cross-disciplinary forums, bringing together district attorneys, police chiefs, sheriffs, mayors, public defenders and community partners to examine local crime-data trends, identify service gaps, and align multi-jurisdictional strategies for prevention, intervention and enforcement. This model aligns with federal policy priorities by promoting collaboration, system modernization and evidence-based practices across the justice continuum, thereby

[1] https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR39202.v1

[2] https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/correction/documents/reports/StatisticalAbstract2025.pdf

reinforcing compliance with federal grant-making standards and the priorities of the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA).

OCJP grant funding will support the launch of each CJCC: developing governance charters, establishing shared data dashboards, providing training in performance management and enhancing local capacity for regional planning. In keeping with the state's oversight framework disseminated through OEI, each CJCC will commit to public reporting of key metrics, transparent budget oversight, and regular review of outcomes (e.g., reductions in regional violent crime, improved clearance rates, increased inter-agency referrals). By aligning funding, governance and performance management in this way, Tennessee can establish a sustainable infrastructure for justice system collaboration that advances both state and federal priorities.

GOAL: Enhance public safety by strengthening coordinated task force responses to violent crime and drug trafficking.

JAG Program Area: Drug treatment and enforcement

OEI Priority: Investigations and Law Enforcement Support

Problem Statement:

Across Tennessee, illegal drug trafficking, encompassing manufacturing, sales, and transportation, remains a significant driver of violent crime and destabilization of communities. Concurrently, research shows a clear nexus between drug and human trafficking networks: in one recent federal report, the South region, which includes Tennessee, exhibited more than 57 drug offenses per 100 human-trafficking incidents, which was the highest rate of the four US regions.[3]

Without adequately resourced multi-jurisdictional drug and violent-crime task forces, these intertwined criminal enterprises continue to exploit jurisdictional gaps, undermine public safety, and evade coordinated law enforcement efforts.

Solution:

OCJP will deploy targeted grant funding to support multi-jurisdictional drug and violent-crime task forces across the state of Tennessee, enabling local, state and federal partners to operate in unified enforcement networks. These task forces will integrate intelligence sharing, advanced analytics, coordinated operations, and joint prosecution strategies to dismantle trafficking networks at their source. This includes interrupting the flow of illicit drugs while simultaneously identifying and disrupting human trafficking operations. The funding will comply with federal policy frameworks, including multi-agency collaboration, performance measurement, evidence-based practices, and align with the state's oversight standards under OEI to ensure transparency and accountability.

By establishing clear protocols and interagency governance structures, the initiative will strengthen statewide coordination, enhance resource allocation to high-need regions, and achieve measurable outcomes such as increased major trafficking indictments, drug seizures, and improved conviction rates. OCJP will also provide technical assistance and training so that participating task forces can monitor

[3] https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/fbi-releases-human-trafficking-and-drug-offenses-20132022-special-report

performance, adjust strategies, and report outcomes in accordance with OEI guidance. This strategic investment positions Tennessee to effectively combat the dual threat of illicit drugs through sustained, cross-jurisdictional enforcement and collaboration.

Goal: Reduce recidivism by strengthening evidence-based reentry services from incarceration to community.

JAG Program Area: Corrections and community corrections

OEI Priority: Innovation with Justice-Involved Individuals

Problem Statement:

Tennessee continues to face significant reentry challenges. While long-term trends show improvement, a substantial portion of people released from incarceration still return to custody within three years indicating persistent reintegration barriers statewide.[4]

The Tennessee Department of Correction recently reported a three-year recidivism rate of 29.6% while other state sources report that nearly half of formerly incarcerated individuals historically returned within three years.[5] These facts reflect both progress and remaining needs. Many local jails lack the staffing and resources to provide evidence-based programs and post-release services, limiting their ability to support successful reentry. Returning residents often face compounded obstacles such as unstable housing, untreated behavioral health and substance use disorders, limited access to vocational training and employment, and fragmented case management. These barriers hinder safe and stable community re-entry. Without targeted grant funding to expand evidence-based in-custody programs and coordinated, post-release services, Tennessee risks continued cycles of recidivism, increasing system costs, and worsening public safety and public-health outcomes.

Solution:

OCJP will implement a statewide reentry grant initiative that braids state Evidence-Based Programming (EBP) investments with JAG and other allowable federal and state funding to reinforce a jail-to-community model that begins with evidence-based programming inside facilities and extends through reentry. This approach will expand evidence-based programming capacity in local jails and ensure continuity of services after release and aligns with Tennessee's approach to RSAT funding. Grants will fund implementation of proven, trauma-informed interventions

[4] https://www.tn.gov/workforce/reentrytn.html
[5] https://www.tn.gov/correction/news/2023/10/9/tdoc-recidivism-drops-to-lowest-level-in-decade.html

(e.g., CBT, MRT, Seeking Safety, EMDR), dedicated case management positions, pre-release reentry planning, transitional housing supports, and vocational/education services linked to community employers. JAG Reentry funds will support continued case management during the first six months after release, ensuring individuals receive consistent support during the critical transition period.

OCJP will prioritize jurisdictions demonstrating high need, readiness to implement evidence-based programming, and established community partnerships (behavioral health providers, workforce agencies, housing authorities, and faith/community organizations) essential for delivering comprehensive program components. Technical assistance, workforce training, and fidelity monitoring will be provided to ensure programs produce intended outcomes and can be sustained beyond initial grant periods. Together, these efforts will increase access to interventions that reduce recidivism and improve stability outcomes, ensuring a seamless transition from incarceration to the community.

The program aims to achieve several key outputs that strengthen reentry efforts and community integration. Core performance indicators include the number of jails implementing EBP, participant enrollments, and program completion rates. To ensure accountability and continuous improvement, both quantitative and qualitative data will be collected to support robust program evaluation and inform future strategies.

OCJP will use the data provided to refine grant targeting, document cost-benefit outcomes, and publish periodic program evaluations through a partnership with the Office of Evidence and Impact. Through this partnership, OEI will provide guidance on evidence-based budgeting and program evaluation. This partnership with OEI will focus on examining re-entry holistically, expanding beyond just the simple measure of recidivating within a certain timeframe. It should be noted that initially, the scope is limited to measuring the rate of recidivating back to state prisons. Once the process of collecting this type of data has been established, OCJP and OEI will look to include measures that are known to impact the success of reentry. By aligning braided funding with rigorous implementation support and OEI reporting standards, Tennessee can scale sustainable reentry services that reduce recidivism, improve public safety, and deliver measurable return on investment.

GOAL: Expand and sustain Family Justice Centers (FJCs) to deliver coordinated, victim-centered responses to interpersonal violence statewide.

JAG Program Area: Crime Victim & Witness Initiatives

OEI Priority: Victim Services

Problem Statement:

Tennessee continues to experience high rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, and related family crimes, illustrating the persistent and pervasive nature of interpersonal violence that spans intimate-partner abuse, elder and child victimization, and human trafficking that strain local justice and social service systems. While the multi-agency "one-stop shop" model of a Family Justice Center Alliance has been identified as a best practice by the United States Department of Justice for improving victim safety and reducing recantation, only 13 Tennessee communities have established such centers to date.[6]

Without further expansion and sustainable support of FJCs, many victims across the State continue to face fragmented service delivery, repeated storytelling, and delayed access to justice.

Solution:

To address this urgent need, OCJP will provide grant funding to strengthen and expand Tennessee's FJCs as multidisciplinary hubs that unite victim service providers, criminal justice partners, law enforcement and legal aid partners, and community organizations under one coordinated framework. Each FJC will implement structured coordination through shared protocols, memoranda of understanding (MOUs), and coordinated community response teams to ensure consistent communication, enhance victim safety, and improve offender accountability. This integrated approach will deliver trauma-informed and accessible services to survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, intimate partner violence, elder abuse, and human trafficking.

OCJP will provide statewide technical assistance to existing and emerging FJCs, supporting community development, sustainability, and adherence to Tennessee's

[6] https://www.tn.gov/finance/office-of-criminal-justice-programs/ocjp/fa-ocjp-best-practices/fa-ocjp-fjc.html?utm

Family Justice Center Statewide Guidelines. Through state and federal grant funding, OCJP will promote interagency collaboration, facilitate peer learning among FJCs, and ensure ongoing training and compliance monitoring. These efforts will foster a unified network of Family Justice Centers that share best practices, strengthen wraparound victim services, and achieve measurable outcomes such as perceived increased survivor safety and improved service accessibility.

OCJP seeks to reduce lethality related to crime victimization across Tennessee by embedding multidisciplinary fatality review into coordinated community response initiatives statewide. In addition, OCJP will continue the rollout and implementation of the statewide lethality assessment protocol to strengthen early identification of high-risk victims and improve cross-system intervention.

Furthermore, each project will be implemented in alignment with the state oversight framework under OEI, ensuring transparent governance, clear MOUs among partner agencies, and publicly reported outcome metrics (such as clients served, assessments completed, and safety plans developed).

GOAL: Reduce incarceration and improve justice outcomes through public defense and social service integration.

JAG Program Area: Prosecution & Courts

OEI Priority: Innovation with Justice-Involved Individuals

Problem Statement:

Tennessee's incarceration rate is among the highest in the nation, with a rate of 853 per 100,000 people when accounting for prisons, jails, and other facilities. This puts Tennessee's incarceration rate at the 10th highest in the United States.[7]

The jail population with serious mental health illnesses comprises of 14.5% men and 31% of women. The jail population struggles with substance use disorders (SUD) at a rate of 67% compared to 38% of the general population. As much as 90% of jailed Tennesseans are indigent, further complicating access to much-needed social services. Incarceration effects on health outcomes extend beyond the individual, destabilizing the health of children and the family system. In Tennessee, about 1 in 10 children have an incarcerated parent, with 19,198 children separated from a parent.

Solution:

To address these intertwined challenges, OCJP will allocate grant funding to support Public Defender/Social Worker programs across Tennessee. These programs will pair public defenders with licensed social workers to deliver coordinated legal representation and trauma-informed support services to survivors and affected families, while enhancing system responsiveness to offender accountability issues. This client-centered, holistic representation assists clients in achieving maximum self-sufficiency that is defined for the individual client by addressing client's needs and priorities for SUD treatment, housing, healthcare, employment, education, life skills, and family reunification.

Grant funding will build capacity through workforce training, joint protocols between legal and social-service teams, and outcome-driven performance tracking (e.g., jail diversion and reduced recidivism), while OCJP provides statewide technical assistance and promotes best-practice dissemination among participating FJCs and public defense partners. Complementing this integrated model, OCJP will also

[7] https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/governorsoffice/CJInvestmentTaskForceReport.pdf

leverage a Tennessee Opioid Abatement Council grant to strengthen the Tennessee Alliance for Drug Endangered Children and its local anti-drug coalitions, ensuring coordinated prevention efforts that further the state's commitment to support children from family systems with substance use disorders, including those connected to the justice system.

By leveraging state and federal grant funds, this initiative ensures full compliance with federal policy expectations, such as multi-disciplinary collaboration, evidence-based practices, and transparent performance metrics, while aligning with Tennessee's governance framework under the Office of Evidence and Impact (OEI).

GOAL: Empower local jurisdictions to reduce violent crime through collaborative, evidence-based strategies.

JAG Program Area: Crime Prevention & Education

OEI Priority: Investigations and Law Enforcement Support

Problem Statement:

Despite recent efforts to curb violence, Tennessee Bureau of Investigation data show that Tennessee's violent crime rate remains dramatically elevated, approximately 628 incidents per 100,000 residents in 2023, some 68% above the national average.[8]

This sustained high level of violent crime threatens public safety, undermines community trust, and underscores the need for a strategic statewide response to empower local jurisdictions in targeted enforcement and prevention efforts aligned with the Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) framework.

Solution:

To address this challenge through regional strategic planning with the United States Attorney's offices, OCJP will utilize grant funding to expand Project Safe Neighborhoods-style initiatives across Tennessee, supporting multi-agency coordination among law enforcement and local governments to disrupt violent crime networks and dismantle gangs. This approach aligns with federal priorities under the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program's focus on law enforcement, prosecution, and crime prevention.

In addition, the initiative will operate under the governance and transparency standards outlined by OEI for state-level oversight—ensuring performance metrics (e.g., reductions in homicides, robberies, aggravated assaults committed using a gun; enhanced inter-agency information sharing) are tracked and publicly reported. This structure will ensure grant funds are directed to high-need jurisdictions, support sustainable community-law enforcement partnerships, and reinforce accountability and measurable outcomes in line with both state and federal priorities.

[8] https://www.wsmv.com/2025/02/10/tn-among-states-with-highest-violent-crime-rate-us-data-shows/

GOAL: Modernize forensic investigations to reduce backlogs and deliver timely justice.

JAG Priority: Planning, Evaluation, & Technology Improvement

OEI Priority: Investigations and Law Enforcement Support

Problem Statement:

The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI) is experiencing significant delays in forensic processing, with turnaround times for violent forensic biology and firearms analysis exceeding 38 weeks and 67 weeks respectively which is far beyond its target of 8–12 weeks.[9]

Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has documented that the fully automated "rapid DNA" process, capable of generating a Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) eligible profile in 1–2 hours, can generate investigative leads while an arrestee is still in custody. Without widespread adoption of rapid DNA technology in Tennessee's criminal justice system, law enforcement, prosecutors, and public safety agencies risk protracted investigations, preventable backlogs, and delayed justice for victims.

Solution:

The Office of Criminal Justice Programs (OCJP), in partnership with the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI), will implement the Rapid DNA Project to modernize forensic investigations and reduce case processing delays statewide. By deploying rapid DNA instruments to strategically selected law enforcement agencies, Tennessee will reduce evidence processing times from months to hours, generating investigative leads while suspects are still in custody. This accelerated turnaround will improve clearance rates for property and violent crimes, strengthen prosecutions, and deter repeat offenses through faster identification and integration with the CODIS.

To support effective implementation, Tennessee will participate in the National Governors Association's Policy Academy to Improve Crime Clearance Rates in 2026. The academy will provide technical assistance and national best practices to guide

[9] https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/tacir/commission-meetings/2025june/2025June_Tab9CrimeLabs_DraftReport.pdf

policy development, interagency coordination, and performance measurement as the state scales rapid DNA technology.

Aligned with the JAG program areas law enforcement, technology improvement, and prosecution support this initiative promotes data-driven policing and measurable system improvement. JAG funding will support equipment procurement, training, quality assurance, and evaluation to ensure operational consistency, accountability, and long-term sustainability. By reducing forensic backlogs and accelerating investigative timelines, the Rapid DNA Project will significantly strengthen public safety outcomes across Tennessee.