

2026 Public Safety Agenda for State Legislatures



INTRODUCTION

As states prepare for their 2026 legislative sessions, policymakers face a familiar but urgent challenge: how to strengthen public safety in ways that are measurable, sustainable, and grounded in what actually works. That means looking beyond headline-grabbing proposals and investing in systems that help solve crimes, ensure courts function efficiently, and right-size sentences to align accountability with evidence and public safety needs.

The following priorities represent opportunities for states to use practical, bipartisan approaches supported by research and real-world experience to improve safety in their communities.

AGENDA

IMPROVE CASE CLEARANCE

? Why:

- States across the country are grappling with the reality that a growing share of crimes are never solved. Low clearance rates directly impede justice for victims and weaken overall confidence in the system. Thin investigative capacity leads to fewer solved cases, which strains community trust and cooperation—both essential to policing.
- Only [about 44 percent](#) of violent crimes reported to law enforcement nationwide are solved, meaning more than half of victims never receive formal closure. The breakdown by crime type underscores how uneven clearance is, as well: While roughly 61 percent of homicides and 50 percent of aggravated assault cases are solved, clearance rates for other violent offenses are far lower, including 25 to 30 percent for rapes and robberies.

✓ Benefit:

Strengthening investigative capacity and improving follow-through mean more crimes will be solved, victims will receive answers, and communities will gain confidence that the justice system can deliver real accountability. [Improving clearance rates](#) is not just about numbers; it is also about outcomes. When agencies have the tools, staffing, and support to follow leads thoroughly, they are better positioned to hold the right people accountable and prevent future

victimization. States that invest in modern investigative practices—whether through specialized units, data analysts, or improved forensic turnaround times—see gains in both public safety and public trust in law enforcement.

Keep in Mind:

- Efforts to improve clearance rates must prioritize quality over quantity. Rushed or [pressured investigations](#) can compromise due process and increase the risk of wrongful outcomes, which has the inverse effect on public trust in policing.
- Detective shortages and law enforcement burnout remain real barriers. Strengthening case-clearance capacity requires stable investment, not short-term surges in resources.
- Victim and witness engagement is [core to success](#). States should be mindful of witness fatigue, safety concerns, and the need for trauma-informed practices.

Where States Stand:

Some states, including [Michigan](#) and [Pennsylvania](#), have begun exploring legislation to provide new, targeted grants for cold-case work, technology upgrades, or crime lab partnerships. Similar legislation passed in [Texas](#) this last session, but most are still early in the process. There is significant room for states to begin supporting local agencies with statewide standards, best practices training, and performance tracking.

AUTOMATE COURT REMINDERS

Why:

- [Missed court appearances](#), often the result of forgetfulness or logistical barriers, clog court dockets and generate unnecessary warrants and additional, avoidable crimes. People charged with minor or nonviolent offenses—especially traffic violations and other low-level misdemeanors—make up the bulk of missed court appearances. In [North Carolina](#), research found that traffic-related misdemeanors accounted for more than four out of five missed court appearances statewide. [Older research](#) examining how citations are used across the United States showed that people given citations or summonses miss court at much higher rates than those formally arrested.
- States spend significant resources addressing these missed appearances that could be greatly reduced using simple notification tools. Helping courts run more efficiently by reducing bookings into jail that stem from preventable warrants saves taxpayer dollars, as the system cost is about \$1,500 per warrant.

Benefit:

Court reminders are one of the clearest examples of high-impact, low-cost system changes. Using simple, automated notifications to help people keep track of court dates can reduce missed appearances and prevent easily avoidable warrants, making courts more efficient and saving limited law enforcement resources. [Automated notifications](#) reduce missed appearances by 20 to 40 percent on average and cost only around [\\$0.60 to \\$1](#) per case. Furthermore, automated notification systems have around 70 to 90 percent enrollment as opposed to [single-digit enrollment rates](#) for opt-in systems.

Keep in Mind:

- Data collection practices must be transparent and respectful of privacy. Federal regulations dictate that people must be given the opportunity to opt out of the program if they choose. Policies must also include protections against self-incrimination.
- Successful programs either require integration with existing case-management infrastructure or adoption of a program that works on top of the existing infrastructure—a technical and logistical challenge that states should anticipate.

📍 Where States Stand:

While seven states—Colorado, Texas, Indiana, Arizona, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Kentucky—have adopted automated court reminders, they are [still the exception](#) rather than the norm. A number of other states are currently exploring legislation to implement their own automated notification systems.

❓ Why:

State criminal justice systems are increasingly burdened with prison overcrowding and understaffing. Fortunately, reconciling lengthy prison sentences with modern understandings of risk, rehabilitation, trauma, and fairness can provide some relief. Sentence reconsideration laws give courts the authority to reevaluate sentences for various reasons, allowing judges to assess whether continued incarceration is necessary. For many states, it is also a matter of aligning policy with evidence: People who have aged significantly or who have demonstrated sustained rehabilitation often pose minimal risk. And in cases involving long-overlooked trauma, such as [survivors of domestic or sexual violence](#), reconsideration gives courts a way to account for information that may not have been fully understood at sentencing.

✅ Benefit:

Sentence reconsideration strengthens public safety by releasing people who no longer pose a threat, thereby freeing up correctional resources to be used on those who do. It also improves system efficiencies by reducing the high costs associated with [aging incarcerated populations](#) and prison medical care. A structured review process promotes fairness by giving courts a mechanism to update sentences in light of new evidence, changed circumstances, or [better understanding of trauma](#). And the ability to consider history of abuse during both sentencing and resentencing can help ensure survivors are protected rather than simply punished by the justice system.

📌 Keep in Mind:

- Reconsideration laws can take multiple forms including [survivor justice policies](#), medical and geriatric parole, or broad “[second look](#)” opportunities.
- Successful models set clear eligibility standards, ensure courts maintain full discretion, include input from necessary parties (including prosecutors and victims), and have provisions to effectively limit frivolous petitioning to reduce unnecessary court burdens.
- Policymakers should clarify that reconsideration does not equal automatic release. It is a judicial review with public safety as the primary goal.

📍 Where States Stand:

A growing number of states have adopted some form of sentence-review mechanism, whether initiated by judges, prosecutors, or individuals themselves. [Maryland](#), [Tennessee](#), and others have considered or enacted legislation to improve medical and geriatric parole or comprehensive second look processes. Other legislatures have pursued reforms centered on survivors of abuse, adding a dimension of justice that many states have yet to address. Momentum is building, but approaches vary widely, and many states have a long way to go in expanding these mechanisms.

If you need help with further research around these issues, information on implementing these types of initiatives, or anything else, please do not hesitate to reach out.

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