Just Connect Us: A Community Oriented Civil Justice Data Commons

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The Problem
10's of millions of people –
most of them debtors or tenants
without legal representation –
cycle through the civil justice system.

There are few available data to produce knowledge about the function of civil justice, the impact of representation, the fairness of civil justice, and the antecedents and consequences of civil justice involvement. Communities are left with no knowledge about their courts or legal services providers.

Intellectual Merit
Addressing data gaps that have hobbled social scientific knowledge about the civil justice system and extending the data commons framework from natural sciences to aggregate, harmonize, and provide controlled access to data from communities' civil justice institutions.

Activities We conducted interviews with stakeholders in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, Washington, DC, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin, the four civil justice communities identified in this grant, as well as dozens of courts, legal service providers, and policy institutes. We also convened experts in developing data commons in other fields. Our findings:
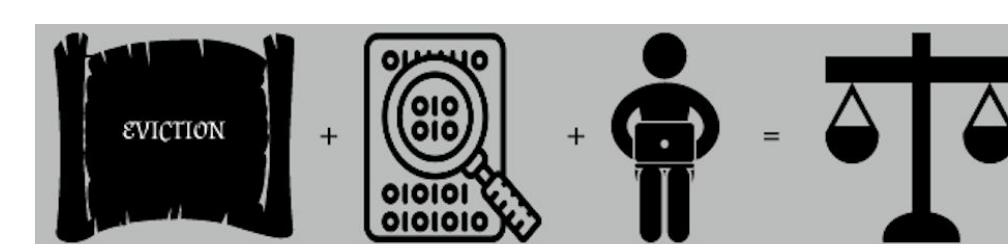- that incentives among courts to share data vary, with some courts hesitant to do so, and others eager to use their data to understand the functioning of the civil justice system;
- legal services providers were eager to use their data to understand their impact for the people they serve, but were concerned about the ethical use of data;
- principles from data commons in other areas could be applied to develop a civil justice data commons.

Broader Impact A civil justice data commons will facilitate access by researchers to data to produce knowledge about the civil justice system and enable research about which groups experience different justice systems, and the causes, and consequences of civil justice involvement.

Broader Impact Communities will have actionable knowledge about the fairness and equity of their civil justice institutions and the roles these institutions play in the lives of community members.

Next Steps
Build a civil justice data commons prototype; develop processes for data harmonization; link court and Census data to identify demographic characteristics; enlist civil justice stakeholders in particular communities to participate in the data commons.