

Impacts of Judicial Reform in Criminal Case Procedures on Court Congestion in the Philippines



The Supreme Court of the Philippines has introduced several reforms to address the longstanding issues of high volume of pending cases and severe delays in case disposition, which consequently deny citizens the ability to access swift and fair justice. A key reform is the Revised Guidelines for Continuous Trial of Criminal Cases (CT), which aims to expedite trials and resolutions by imposing strict timelines on existing rules for court action and introducing best practices for speedy disposition of criminal cases. Researchers assessed the effect of CT on court efficiency by comparing changes in outcomes two years before and two years after the implementation of the reform. They found that while the reform increased court efficiency, it did not significantly reduce backlog.

Policy Issue

Efficient, fair, and accessible justice systems are thought to promote peace and security, encourage private investment and growth, and provide fundamental protections to citizens. A handful of recent studies have shown that improvements in judicial efficiency can have strong effects down the line, with attention paid both to case-flow management and procedural reforms, yet there is little rigorous empirical research on the effects of justice system reform in developing countries. The recent introduction of digital case-level data in some contexts, like the Philippines, makes the ability to access data and generate high quality evidence more possible. This research aims to shed light on the types of reforms that can effectively improve efficiencies in judicial systems, without reducing the quality of justice. The findings of the study may inform the wider and long-term efficiency plan that the Supreme Court of the Philippines is executing and may also be relevant for other developing countries that are addressing similar challenges in the functioning of their judicial systems.

Evaluation Context

The Philippine judiciary has long faced the challenge of court congestion, leading to severe delays in case resolution and high levels of backlog. In response, the Judiciary has implemented several reforms in recent years, in line with the current government's goal of providing "swift and fair administration of justice" to gain the trust of its citizens and the confidence of the international community.[1] A central

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PROGRAM AREA

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TOPIC

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goal of these reforms is to improve court efficiency, thereby speeding up cases and reducing court congestion. A key reform is the Revised Guidelines for Continuous Trial of Criminal Cases (CT) implemented nationwide since September 1, 2017. The CT reform aims to expedite trials and resolutions by imposing strict timelines on existing rules for court action and introducing best practices for speedy disposition of criminal cases. Although the CT pilot underwent an end of project assessment and the monitoring data from each court is regularly submitted to the Supreme Court, the impacts of the CT reform have yet to be rigorously evaluated.

Details of the Intervention

[Note: This study is not a randomized controlled trial.]

Researchers used high-frequency case data captured in electronic administrative records across first- and second- level trial courts to measure the average impacts of the CT reform. They assessed the effect of CT on court efficiency by comparing changes in outcomes two years before and two years after the implementation of the reform. Court efficiency is measured by case duration,² proportion of cases disposed within 180 and 330 days,³ annual clearance rates,⁴ and annual disposition rates.⁵ They analyzed administrative records from 336 courts using the eCourt case management system and 1,635 courts using the Continuous Trial Monitoring System (CTMS). They also conducted interviews with 58 judicial stakeholders and online surveys with 1,579 judges and clerks of court to gather more insights on their experiences and perceptions of the CT reform.

Results and Policy Lessons

Researchers found that the CT reform increased clearance rates by between 35-36 percentage points. In contrast, they found no movement in disposition rates, suggesting that while the reform increased court efficiency, it did not significantly reduce backlog. They also found that CT effectively reduced case duration by 55-61 days (10-14 percent), increasing the proportion of cases disposed in 180 days by eight percentage points (54 percent) and in 330 days by nine percentage points (41 percent), respectively. The reform affected all phases of the trial until submission of the decision.

Researchers concluded that the CT reform has been an effective means of improving court efficiency for criminal cases. However, a surge in the inflow of cases can affect the impact of the reform measure. It is important to consider complementary interventions such as relieving personnel constraints, addressing physical infrastructure needs, and creating new court branches in order to enable the judicial system to fully realize the benefits of this reform.

A rigorous evaluation of the intervention is needed to measure impact on efficiencies in judicial systems.

Sources

[1] National and Economic and Development Authority, 2017

[2] number of days from the date of filing to the date of court decision

[3] number of cases disposed within the 330-day cut-off period from filing, which is calculated based on the total maximum period allotted for regular cases of non-detained accused

[4] court's case outflow divided by the total case inflow

[5] court's total case outflow divided by the sum of pending cases and total case inflow

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