

OCTOBER 2025

The Importance of Strong Public Defense in Idaho

A well-funded public defense system ensures that all Idahoans—regardless of income—have access to quality legal representation when facing criminal charges. Without enough resources, public defenders are stretched thin and it is more challenging to prepare cases effectively. An underfunded public defense system also strains Idaho’s court system by prolonging case resolutions, overloading court resources, and driving up state expenses. By contrast, a strong public defense system strengthens Idaho by improving community safety, reducing the strain on households, and lowering the overall burden on taxpayers.

Improved Safety for Idaho Communities

A properly funded public defense system strengthens community safety by ensuring fair, timely, and accurate legal outcomes that reduce recidivism. Idaho’s low crime rate—ranking 2nd nationally—reflects strong community values, but its 10th highest recidivism rate shows the costly cycle of repeat offenses driven by poor investment in rehabilitation and reentry supports. Evidence-based alternatives such as substance use and mental health treatment, job training, GED and education programs, and reentry supports like housing and employment assistance are proven to reduce repeat offenses and strengthen community safety.

Well-resourced public defenders can connect individuals to diversion and treatment programs early, addressing underlying issues such as substance use or mental health challenges and reducing the likelihood of reoffending. By promoting equitable representation, public defense increases trust in the justice system and prevents wrongful convictions that destabilize communities. When cases are resolved efficiently and fairly, law enforcement and courts can focus on preventing new crimes rather than managing repeat offenders.

Ultimately, investing in public defense not only reduces long-term incarceration costs but also enhances public safety by supporting successful reintegration after incarceration, protecting families from the financial and emotional hardships of repeated justice system involvement, and breaking cycles of crime that strain state resources.

The Hidden Cost to Idahoans and Their Families

Two out of five families in Idaho cannot afford to hire private legal counsel, and many who don't qualify for public defense still cannot afford private attorneys—leaving a large number of Idahoans dependent on an underfunded system or without adequate representation. When a public defense system is underfunded, these gaps have far-reaching consequences that extend well beyond the courtroom.

For individuals, lack of adequate defense often means longer pretrial detention, harsher sentences, or wrongful convictions. Even a few days in jail can cost someone their job, derail their education, or disrupt medical and mental health treatment.

For families, the effects are severe, and children are often the most vulnerable. When a parent is detained or receives a longer sentence due to inadequate representation, households lose income and stability. Children may be placed in foster care or experience frequent moves, disrupting their schooling, social connections, and sense of safety. Families may face eviction or housing instability, and children can go without basic necessities while parents struggle to provide support. The trauma of parental incarceration, combined with economic hardship, can have long-term effects on children's mental health, educational outcomes, and future opportunities. Recent studies have shown that children with incarcerated parents are three times more likely to be incarcerated at some point in their lives.



Reduced Burden on Idaho Taxpayers

The financial cost of incarceration and pretrial detention places a significant burden on Idaho taxpayers: in 2025, the Idaho Department of Correction's budget totaled over \$372.3 million, with additional millions spent daily to house more than 1,400 incarcerated Idahoans in county and out-of-state facilities at rates between \$55 and \$80 per day.

Underfunding public defense increases costs throughout the justice system. Defendants without timely counsel often remain in jail longer, extending case timelines and requiring additional judicial, administrative, and clerical resources. Ineffective representation can also lead to wrongful convictions, retrials, costly settlements, and lawsuits, all of which demand substantial state expenditure.

When a parent or caregiver is detained or receives a harsher sentence due to inadequate representation, households face immediate financial instability that often results in job loss, housing insecurity, and the need to access public assistance. This financial shock places long-term strain on children and caregivers while also reducing workforce participation and economic productivity across the state.

Fully funding public defense ensures defendants receive competent, timely counsel, allowing faster case resolutions, diversion into treatment or rehabilitation programs, and reduced unnecessary incarceration. These investments save taxpayer dollars, support successful reintegration, strengthen public safety, and help build more stable and resilient communities across Idaho.