

## **A Call to Stop Publicizing the Personal Information of Everyone Incarcerated in the United States**

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All fifty U.S. states maintain searchable online databases that provide information about incarcerated individuals. These Prison and Jail Lookup Tools (PJLTs) make personally identifying information available to the public without the consent of those being identified. While these databases are ostensibly intended to keep the public informed about potentially dangerous individuals, they also serve to stigmatize and shame people with criminal convictions: during and after incarceration, public exposure becomes an additional, enduring form of punishment that goes beyond the formal sanctions of the criminal legal system.

In this study, I explore the origins of PJLTs, examine the types of data different states publish on these websites, reflect on harm done by the public portrayal of people as criminals, and what might be done to address the damage inflicted by these sites.

The rise of the Internet coincided with the expansion of mass incarceration in the United States. A key figure in the rise of PJLTs was John Walsh, the long-time host of *America's Most Wanted* (1988–2012), which often aired alongside *COPS* (1989–2013) on FOX. These programs popularized the spectacle of capturing suspects of violent crimes. Walsh often cited the tragic abduction of his son Adam when calling for states to publicize information about suspects. His efforts culminated in the passage of the Adam Walsh Act (H.R. 4472, 2006), which mandated the widespread dissemination of such data.

Today, PJLTs provide information typically found on “wanted” posters: mugshots, physical characteristics like scars & tattoos and where they occur on the suspect’s body, the suspect’s age, height, weight, eye color, legal name, nicknames, and last known whereabouts. But PJLTs are not “wanted” posters: they only post this data *after* a person has been apprehended. Rather than aid in capture, PJLTs reinforce criminal identity and stigma of those already in custody.

For this study, I examined the PJLTs of all fifty U.S. states, cataloging the types of data provided by each. Of the 50 states, 49 (98%) provide the birthday or age of incarcerated individuals, 36 (72%) include information about crimes/convictions, 29 (58%) provide mugshots, and 25 (50%) include physical characteristics. In total, I identified at least 31 distinct data variables across the PJLTs, although some of these were composite (e.g., I counted “physical characteristics” as one variable though many states provide multiple physical characteristics). I also made meta-observations about the PJLT data, for instance: 10 states (20%) continue to share information about formerly incarcerated individuals for more than 10 years after their release, sometimes even after the person is deceased, even if their reported crime was relatively minor.

Data from PJLTs are harvested by third parties and re-posted to other internet websites; the data is often bundled with other personal information and sold for profit. Misattribution errors are common, oversight and regulation are minimal, and the data will apparently be available online indefinitely unless people act to curtail these practices. This would be a starting point for a discussion of epistemic reparations at the scale of the problem.