National Open Court Data Standards
NODS

LEADERSHIP GUIDE

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Executive Summary

Requests for court data are on the rise. These requests come from the media, policy makers, researchers, law firms, parties to a case, and data aggregation companies. Despite the ability to more easily fulfill these data requests through electronic records, courts still share concern over data consistency, data quality, and the potential for misinterpretation of court data once released.

The development of National Open Court Data Standards (NODS) addressed these concerns by developing both logical standards (common data definitions) and technical standards (data relationship models) for court data. Adopting standard data definitions will decrease the risk of misinterpretation of data by individuals and entities outside of the court. Courts will be able to produce valuable performance-based data to assess and enhance productivity and perform evaluations of programs and services.

NODS was created with the understanding that data are complex, and definitions and rules vary widely across and within state courts. Within the context of this variation, data standards facilitate the sharing of data, increase transparency, provide for consistency in data interpretation, allow for meaningful comparisons across data sets, and reduce the cost of producing or extracting individual data sets.

Purpose

The Conference of State Court Administrators (COSCA) and the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) through the National Open Court Data Standards (NODS) developed business and technical court data standards to support the creation, sharing, and integration of court data. The Joint Technology Committee (JTC), comprised of members of COSCA, the National Association for Court Management (NACM), Court Information Technology Officers Consortium (CITOC), and NCSC identified NODS as a priority topic.[1]

The NODS project is not a data collection effort on the part of NCSC and is not intended to replace the Court Statistics Project. Rather, these data standards are intended for state and local courts to be able to develop standardized reporting protocols to extract data for regular reports and for ad hoc reports. The purposes of the NODS project are:

- Making case-level data available to researchers, policymakers, legislators, the media, and the public from state and local courts.
- Providing transparency in court operations to improve public confidence.
- Making data available for public and court system use in a consistent manner that can improve public policy and reduce the possibility of error and misinterpretation.
- Reducing the burden on court system staff in responding to data requests.

Project Scope

NODS includes technical standards and logical standards. Logical standards are business definitions in non-technical English. The data definitions contained in the NCSC's Court Statistics Project's **State Court Guide to Statistical Reporting** are examples of logical standards. Technical standards are programming models that describe how data elements are related to one another. Technical standards that many courts already use include the National Information Exchange Model (NIEM) and the OASIS Electronic Court Filing (ECF) Standards.

NODS encompasses over 300 data elements in seven major case categories: criminal, civil, family/domestic relations, juvenile delinquency, dependency, probate, and traffic/parking/local ordinance. It does not include all data elements that are, or should be, collected by courts. The focus of the project is on the subset of court data that is useful to both the courts themselves for internal business reasons and to non-court data requestors.

For state and local courts, adopting NODS is voluntary. No court is required to adopt NODS, in part or in full. Second, national data standards are aspirational. No court currently collects all of the NODS data elements, though the NODS working groups identified data elements that many courts already collect in addition to what they considered best practice to collect for everyday business processes. The data elements are separable. A local or state court can opt to start small and adopt certain standards across all case categories or adopt all of the data standards for a specific case category, such as juvenile or criminal.

Participating in NODS does not place any obligation on a court to collect or provide any particular data element. Each court must abide by its own state laws and court rules regarding the availability of data. Inclusion of data elements in the NODS project does not guarantee that they will be available from all courts. The standards do not cover court-related data collected by other entities such as jails, departments of correction, probation departments, or criminal history repositories, except to the extent that the court system already obtains and stores data from these sources for internal business purposes and has the ability to share them.

While NODS is not intended to guide development of case management systems (CMS), vendors and developers should be aware of NODS. Courts may find it easier to produce datasets consistent with NODS if their CMS is compliant with NODS.

NODS and the Court Statistics Project

The Court Statistics Project (CSP) has been a long-time foundational effort of the NCSC to better understand the state courts' caseloads. It began the task of creating a national model for data collection by the courts in 1975. However, unlike the NODS project which defines case-level data elements, the CSP defines and collects summary caseload statistics by case type. NODS, using the CSP's Statistical Guide to State Court Reporting as its starting point, expands on the logical definitions provided by the CSP and defines a more nuanced level of data definitions.

There is no plan at this time to expand the scope of CSP to collect and analyze data collected using NODS; however, greater standardization of data definitions through NODS will enhance the quality of CSP data. As more courts adopt NODS data standards, it will make it easier for the CSP team to analyze questions of national interest.

NODS Development

COSCA prioritized the solution of how to confidently collect, analyze, and share court data and agreed to have NCSC pursue a solution based on creating national data standards. In May 2018, the COSCA Board passed a motion formally supporting the NODS Standards project as proposed by NCSC. In a 2019 policy paper entitled "Open Data – the New Frontier for Access to Court Records," COSCA endorsed making "court case data open and accessible to the maximum practical degree when balanced with legal restrictions, protection of privacy interests, and within resource constraints" (2019 COSCA Policy paper).

The NODS project team convened an advisory board to determine the scope and nature of the project. Following the advisory board meeting, seven focus groups of experts and stakeholders (see acknowledgements) negotiated sets of logical court business standards for data elements in the major case categories (criminal, juvenile delinquency, dependency, family, civil, probate, and traffic). After the focus groups identified draft data standards, NCSC welcomed public commentary through the NCSC website and targeted outreach to targeted stakeholder groups. Finally, the NODS team incorporated public comments and reconciled the various standards and definitions within and across case categories. A technology workgroup developed technical standards and data models to be used by court IT professionals. The technology group created the NODS Technical Notes as a guide to the data models and related files.

Implementation

Implementing NODS will be an involved process for most courts who choose to adopt the data standards. This process will likely include representatives from IT, the office that responds to data requests, and data users. If the court has a **data governance committee**, that is an excellent place to begin this project.

The first step will be to review the data standards with the following considerations:

1. Is a court working independently or in conjunction with other courts?
2. Which data elements does the court(s) already collect?
    a. Are there consistent definitions for data elements?
3. Are the definitions substantially similar to the NODS definitions? If so, they can be mapped to the NODS data elements.
4. For NODS data elements not currently captured, determine which ones the court would find useful to add.
5. Determine strategy for adding new data elements, both to the case management system and to business processes.

In addition to this Leadership Guide, the NODS project has produced the following products that will be helpful to the data governance or NODS committee:

Product	Description
Data Elements Spreadsheet	A description of all data elements with definitions and value lists
NODS User Guide	Discussion of the data elements listed in the spreadsheet, their use, and mapping guidance
Technical Notes	Brief technical document explaining the NODS logical data models and contents of the ZIP file with technical artifacts
Technical Data Models	Illustrations of the relationships between entities and the logical groupings of attributes

As always, the NCSC is available to advise and provide technical assistance on this and other projects. Other useful information can be found on the NCSC website: **National Standards**, the **Joint Technology Committee**, and the **Court Statistics Project, including the Data Governance Policy Guide.**