

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/justice-in-katrinawake/what-will-be-different-for-new-orleans-in-the-years-to-come>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

What is different? That question rested on the lips of the many people—policymakers, journalists, and funders—who visited New Orleans to survey the city's progress 10 years after Hurricane Katrina. Some [described](#) the physical rebuilding of the city—stronger, better, safer—or the spirit of the people: [resilient](#). Others [challenged](#) these depictions, which they considered a revisionist retelling of the hurricane's impact.

The truth remains somewhere in between.

New Orleans is a city that's starting to think differently about how we treat our people, especially if they have become involved with the criminal justice system.

So what is different? We can confidently answer that our problem-solving framework is changing. We believe in engaging multiple stakeholders in a collaborative process of sharing best practices, implementing strategies, and learning as much from our successes as our failures. We're seeing this shift in expanded opportunities to [engage in decarceration](#). Our city's participation in the [MacArthur Foundation's Safety and Justice Challenge](#) signals an adoption of the problem-solving framework implemented after Hurricane Katrina.

These changes occurred because [multiple stakeholders](#)—community members, educators, practitioners, policymakers, and formerly incarcerated people—were invited into the same rooms to acknowledge what has and hasn't made our community safe. Our thinking shifted because we engaged in time-intensive shared learning about best practices that have been implemented across the country. It shifted because there was evidence that we could do things in a [different way](#) and that our community could be safer.

6,300 people were [jailed](#) in Orleans Parish Prison the day before Hurricane Katrina made landfall. Forty-four people have [died](#) as a result of being in Orleans Parish Prison over the last 10 years. Three hundred people and organizations working under the umbrella of the Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition [amplified the voices and experiences](#) of those involved in and working to reform our criminal justice system. [Grassroots advocates](#) were heard by [government allies](#) and, 10 years later, fewer than [1,900 people are housed in Orleans Parish Prison](#). While that is a great accomplishment brought on by the work of advocates, allies, and decision-makers, it's still twice the national average.

We have more work to do.

Philanthropy has a role to play in helping to sustain change and momentum. The problems exacerbated by jail overuse as a tool to reduce crime are well documented. It contributes to economic disparities, disproportionately affects [people of color and their families](#), and [strains local economies](#) with its high cost and low return. It is a critical time to stand up with and join those who are working for change.

We are a community at [crossroads](#). Despite the startling statistics, New Orleans is at the forefront of reducing mass incarceration, because our problem-solving framework is changing. Continued progress requires a commitment to engaging those involved in the criminal justice system to help solve the system's problems. That commitment to inclusiveness will be tested as New Orleans prepares to celebrate its [tricentennial in 2018](#).

We hope that the question on everyone's lips will then be, What will be different?

Through the voices of those who fought for reform—from elected officials to community organizers, advocates to public health experts—the [Justice in Katrina's Wake](#) blog series reflects on local incarceration practices, the movement to foster fairness in the criminal justice system, and efforts to increase safety for all communities.

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