

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/justice-in-katrinawake/to-act-justly>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Micah 6:8 states: He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

New Orleans has the persistent dubious distinction of locking up our residents at more than double the national average. While progress has been made in the past 10 years overall crime and local incarceration rates are down the city still does not feel safe for many African American residents. The school to prison pipeline teaches our young people that their lives will include jail, homicide, or both. Sometimes it feels like it's the same ol, same ol, but as recent reforms have shown, there is hope.

As a community of faith leaders and congregational members, we at the Micah Project believe that we are called in this moment to act justly in favor of our loved ones who have found themselves on the margins of justice, battling addiction, untreated mental health issues, unemployment, racism, and poverty. Through the power of collaboration and community mobilization, we were able to cap the size of our local jail Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) at 1,438 beds. This is a significant reduction from the pre-Katrina size of 7,000 beds. In addition, we mobilized community members to support full funding from the city for [pretrial services](#) an innovative solution to our city's mass incarceration addiction.

Before pretrial services, almost everyone in Orleans Parish waited in jail before they went to trial unless they could pay bail regardless of whether they were a flight risk or a danger to the community. This practice costs people their jobs and separates them from their families. In other cities, 50 to 85 percent [of arrestees are released](#) without bail compared to New Orleans rate of 10 to 14 percent and they have better court appearance rates with no increase in violent crime. Pretrial services works, but is underutilized in Orleans Parish. Our current rate of detention cost taxpayers over \$75 million in 2014. If half the people currently awaiting trial in OPP for new, non-violent charges were released, more than 160 people each day would be home with their families and the city would save over \$6 million a year in detention costs alone. Now that would be a fresh new statistic we could celebrate!

Putting more people in jail is not the answer. For too long, the criminal justice system has swept up members of our communities disproportionately African American people and forced us and our families to suffer the collateral consequences that come with disproportionate arrests, unnecessary detention, and harsh penalties.

Today, we are at a new crossroads. As one of 20 cities across the nation to receive a MacArthur Foundation Safety and Justice Challenge planning grant, New Orleans has the unique opportunity to develop and implement reforms that protect public safety and ensure justice for all members of our community.

As a result of a deep call and yearning to do justice and walk humbly with God, the Micah Project organizes our membership to call upon elected officials to serve our communities, honor our values, and work to improve the quality of life for families and our children. We must stand strong together to protect our hard-fought victories; ensure the use of pretrial services and that OPP does not exceed 1,438 beds; and pursue new reforms that offer the people of New Orleans hope for a brighter future.

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now.

Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it. ~ The Talmud (303)

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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