

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/governors-should-embrace-not-hinder-reform-minded-prosecutors>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Two weeks ago, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan [issued a letter](#) directing state Attorney General Brian Frosh to begin prosecuting more violent crime cases from the city of Baltimore.

This directive which was made to supersede the authority of the city States Attorney, Marilyn Mosby is part of a wider pattern of state governments seeking to undermine the decisions of reform-minded local prosecutors. Similar actions have been taken by Florida Governor Rick Scott [against Aramis Ayala](#), the State Attorney for Florida's Ninth Judicial Circuit, and by Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker [against Suffolk County District Attorney Rachael Rollins](#).

As a Maryland resident and former prosecutor, I was shocked to learn of Governor Hogan's order, which he justified by saying he believed Mosby is too lenient. Although it is true that Baltimore is dealing with a crisis in violent crime—total murders in the city are expected to hit 300 again this year—reverting to previous, failed tough-on-crime policies and refusing to collaborate with city leadership is the wrong approach.

Erricka Bridgeford, a local activist and founder of Baltimore's Ceasefire movement, [penned a powerful response](#) as to why the governor's policy will do nothing to address the underlying causes of violence in the city. As Bridgeford wrote, the state should instead dedicate more resources to address poverty, education, food insecurity, lead poisoning, joblessness, underemployment, homelessness, inadequate housing, [and] incarceration of youth...

We need to contend with violence in Baltimore, but the drivers of violent crime are varied, nuanced, and cannot be addressed merely with the blunt response of prosecution and incarceration. Evidence from other major cities that have dealt with high violent crime rates such as [Chicago](#) and [New York](#) shows that decarceration and criminal justice reform have coincided with drops in violent crime. Yet too many leaders across the country are pushing for more of the same: more arrests, more prosecutions, and more incarceration without considering the devastating effects on the individuals, families, and communities that are most impacted by these policies. And [incarceration isn't what all crime survivors want](#), either.

Decades of these policies failed our communities and our nation. From 1970 onward, decisions made to sharply increase the use of jail and prison throughout the country and to impose harsher sentences for many criminal convictions are now commonly referred to as the era of mass incarceration. Today, [nearly 2.3 million people](#) are behind bars.

Mass incarceration has had the biggest impact on the most vulnerable populations: people who are poor, especially people of color; and those with histories of substance use, mental health disorders, or other behavioral health problems. For many people, incarceration [even for a short period](#) can destabilize their health and economic well-being, jeopardize their bonds with family and community, and increase their chances of future justice system involvement.

The efforts by some political leaders to fight against reform are especially disheartening when we know that the racial disparities in the criminal justice system are real, with a black person in this country [3.6 times more likely to be incarcerated in jail](#) than a white person. As Bridgeford eloquently wrote, rather than taking power from the States Attorney chosen by the people of Baltimore, Governor Hogan should work with the city and its leaders to address systemic racism, social and economic instability, and a historic divestment in resources. It is time to invest in proven solutions such as restorative justice and public health approaches to disrupting violence that promote accountability and collaboration, rather than degradation and isolation.

Bridgeford knows firsthand the incredible sorrow of loss from gun violence: she has experienced the deaths of several family members and friends. But she also knows the hope and potential of the community she serves through her work to disrupt violence. Her voice is a forceful reminder that when those who have been most affected by the failures of our criminal legal system speak, we should listen. And that reform-minded local prosecutors should have the power to pursue the interests of those who elected them.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.