

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/justice-in-katrinawake/ten-years-after-katrina-new-orleans-has-changed-course-on-incarceration>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

There is an important course correction happening in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina. The tragedies wreaked by the levee failures on poor communities was paralleled by a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to mitigate another harm those communities suffered repeatedly, a tragic overuse of local incarceration. The people of New Orleans and government leaders are seizing that opportunity. Before Katrina, and for most of the 10 years after, New Orleans incarcerated more people in its local jail than any city in the country by far. That's no longer true. While we still lock up our residents at twice the national average, we now incarcerate less than a third of the number of people than we did on the eve of the storm and one-half the post-Katrina high.

Moreover, encouraged by community groups seeking less punitive and more effective approaches to crime, city leaders have committed to resisting the federal dollars available to replace the once massive jail, which if built would have been filled regardless of the need, incurring even greater spending on operational costs into the future. Instead, the city enacted an ordinance authorizing building only one 1,438-bed jail facility. And the Mayor's office has followed with a comprehensive planning effort, in collaboration with system leaders, to reduce the jail population to a level that can safely and healthily be housed in that single facility.

All this puts New Orleans on par with cities and counties across the country that have begun to address the over-use of jail incarceration. Indeed, in the past few years, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of how we use jails, and not simply prisons, in getting our justice systems back on track. Reflecting that, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation has committed \$75 million over five years to help jurisdictions significantly reduce the number of people they jail and especially to confront the disproportionate negative effects of incarceration on people of color. As we have seen in Ferguson, Staten Island, and Baltimore, among other places, over-policing and over-incarceration of black people is tearing at the roots of black communities (nearly 90 percent of the people jailed in New Orleans are black). The MacArthur Foundation awarded a planning grant of 20 million to the City of New Orleans, which will work in partnership with the Sheriff's office and other criminal justice leaders to reduce our jail population to 1,250.

New Orleans has much yet to achieve to fundamentally and sustainably change its over-use of jail incarceration. We must embrace more fully what many know, that when we over-use the most punitive responses to crime we sow the seeds of more criminal activity; we are using scarce city dollars to invest to some degree in more, not less, crime. We must shift our spending priorities to commit to providing good educational, housing, and health systems for people of lower economic means. Likewise, we must ensure that there are meaningful jobs available for young people who otherwise are most at risk of being enmeshed in the criminal justice cycle that centers around jail.

There have been many changes in the criminal justice system since Katrina which you can read more about [in an essay](#) I co-authored with my Vera colleague, Mathilde Laisne and retired Orleans Parish Judge Calvin Johnson for The Data Centers [New Orleans Index at Ten Collection](#) but the commitment to rein in our overuse of jail incarceration provides the greatest hope and opportunity for setting the city on a better course.

[Jon Wool](#)

Through the voices of those who fought for reform from elected officials to community organizers, advocates to public health experts the [Justice in Katrinawake](#) 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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