

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/covid-19-1/a-new-vision-for-justice-in-new-orleans>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In the face of adversity, the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated one positive thing that New Orleans can lock up fewer people in jail and still maintain public safety.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, 25 percent of the people in jail have been safely released in Orleans Parish without an increase in crime. Before the coronavirus crisis, the criminal legal system assumed these people had to be locked up despite being incarcerated on low bail amounts and nonviolent charges. But we've seen these assumptions long considered the bedrock of the justice system, invalidated. In fact, public safety does not require the jailing of so many people, and this crisis gives New Orleans the chance for a bold new vision of justice going forward.

As a former public defender, I've seen how routine it is that poor, mostly Black, New Orleanians are unnecessarily detained pretrial when they could safely be released. However, the system is designed to keep you in jail if you don't have money. The keys to the jail should not be the coins in your pocket. Yet we use money to determine who stays or who gets released, when money does nothing to deliver public safety.

No one should be in jail for possession of drugs, offenses that do not involve direct physical harm or direct threats to a person, or technical or supervision violations of probation or parole. It flies in the face of justice and fairness to hold these people in jail when they would be better off at home providing for loved ones or in an environment that is providing care for them.

Vera has had an office in New Orleans since 2006, when the city council invited us to assess the criminal legal system and propose reforms. We focus on lowering the number of people in jail and restoring community and family bonds. Reform is possible through bold evidence-based recommendations. We have seen New Orleans average monthly jail population drop by 80 percent since pre-Katrina. Despite this impressive reduction, New Orleans still incarcerates at a much higher rate than many other cities.

We can be bolder. Our recent [guidance brief](#) outlines immediate actions policymakers can take during the pandemic to urgently decarcerate, many of which should remain in place after the crisis.

These challenging times are causing us all to reflect on the systems that leave people vulnerable. Returning to the status quo after the COVID-19 crisis recedes is unacceptable. We must use this opportunity to create a brighter, more just future.

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