

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/divesting-from-policing-and-investing-in-new-orleans-youth>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

City budgets are a moral statement of our priorities. Based on its 2020 budget, New Orleans prioritizes the policing and criminalization of its residents. Currently, more than 35 established [police and security patrols](#) are granted law enforcement powers by Louisiana law. In 2020, New Orleans residents paid for all these policing agencies to the tune of \$336 million. And that's not even the full amount; their budgets are supplemented by federal grants and private donations.

Imagine if some of the money spent on policing was instead invested in New Orleans youth, their families, and their neighborhoods. Youth are supposed to be our future, so ensuring their healthy development into thriving, educated, and engaged New Orleanians should be our priority.

A native New Orleanian, I went to Benjamin Franklin High School, where we had access to Advanced Placement courses, academic extracurriculars, textbooks for each student, and veteran teachers. When Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, I was attending college in Baton Rouge. I spent most of my senior year co-teaching high school English to kids who had evacuated there from New Orleans. We wrote poetry and made zines dedicated to their experiences growing up in New Orleans and with the storm, as we called it.

After graduating, I moved back home and became a teacher at Walter Cohen High School. It's just eight miles away from the school I attended, but they were completely different worlds. At Cohen, the only extracurriculars were sports and band, no opportunities for advanced learning. Textbooks were shared by multiple classes, and the teachers were mostly novices like me. I lost students to gun violence, the criminal legal system, gentrification, and a general lack of support for their full development. After two years, I was so angry at the school district and almost every other system for failing my students, and I felt powerless to do more myself.

So I went to law school and worked on developing initiatives, passing legislation, and providing technical assistance to educators, all of which focused on ending zero tolerance policies and other harmful practices, like outsourcing school discipline to school police officers. These policies and practices disproportionately harm Black and brown youth. They're the beginning of the [school-to-prison pipeline](#), in which increased contact with law enforcement often leads to contact with the juvenile and/or adult criminal legal systems, which further leads to stifled opportunities, cycles of imprisonment, and intergenerational harm.

We spend a lot of time talking about juvenile crime in New Orleans, but we don't have many services for youth after they're arrested, let alone to prevent their arrest. In 2018, I set up a reentry program providing multifaceted support to young people leaving juvenile detention centers and adult jails and prisons. During the program, we spoke to young people who'd been caught in both juvenile and adult systems about their goals, dreams, and needs. They all gave variations of the same answer: I want to stay out of trouble, but I wish I had something fun to do.

One young man I spoke with suggested a bumper car venue, something adults wouldn't necessarily consider a crime reduction strategy, but an obvious choice for thrill-seeking teenagers: We get to drive fast, we get to run into each other, and we wouldn't get hurt. [Youth development research](#) shows that young people need excitement. They're supposed to be thrill-seeking, so we need to give them positive thrill-seeking things to do.

Before the storm, we had an amusement park, a fun place for young people and their families. After Katrina, it was abandoned. The main activity option now is the New Orleans Recreation Department and its parks and gymnasiums. However, youth often can't access those services because their families don't have cars or can't afford public transportation, which isn't the most reliable anyway.

Yet we're spending \$336 million on police. Even though the jail population in the city [has decreased significantly](#) since Katrina, our mayor and city council members have steadily increased the number of taxpayer dollars supporting policing. Increasing opportunities for youth to engage in safe activities with friends and family will reduce more crime than rubber bullets and tear gas.

We shouldn't be allowed to talk about crime or lay blame for it if we're not prepared to put as much funding into direct [investments supporting youth development](#) as we do into law enforcement. If we put our money where our stated morals are, we would move funding away from policing and incarceration and reinvest those funds in the community. We could fund things like mentorships, job and internship development, after-school activities, and community health centers. We could fund free transportation for residents, youth and family social supports, and housing assistance. We could provide that bumper car track. By prioritizing the needs of our youth and families, we can have a safer, more vibrant community.

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