

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/justice-in-katrinawake/grassroots-organizers-key-to-rebuilding-new-orleans>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In the wake of any disaster, there are always relief efforts. Ideally, the work is led by local populations to identify their needs and strengthen the base of a community. The rebuilding frenzy of post-Katrina New Orleans is nearly over, and America is likely to move on after a decade of attention. As the dust of destruction and reconstruction settles, many will only know the tale as told from the top.

The truth of New Orleans, however, will always be found in the deafening silence regarding the plight of people forgotten before, during, and after Katrina. Among the unheard and forgotten are the roughly 1,800 New Orleanians who are locked in our local jail almost 90 percent of whom are black.

New Orleans is no stranger to massive upheaval and disjointed rebuilding. In 1860, New Orleans was the largest city in the South, the sixth largest in America, and controlled the mouth of the continent's largest transportation network. The city also had America's largest internal slave market. Thousands of troops, including approximately 1,000 free black people, fought for the power to continue profiting off people through the brutality of slavery. Mass incarceration is slavery's legacy.

As the federal dollars of post-Katrina reconstruction recede, the people left behind continue to fight for the same citizenship and equality we fought for two centuries ago. The criminal justice system continues to disproportionately target black residents, using cages to address social problems. We are pulled from our often fragile life circumstances and returned to society broken in half, facing a lifetime of discrimination in jobs and housing, and losing our right to vote. We are reduced to second-class citizens. The shiny new jail in the middle of the city is a daily reminder of the counterproductive ways our local and federal governments are willing to invest in our young black men.

Fortunately, that jail is only a fourth of the size first proposed and, at 1,800 people, holds only half the number held during the post-Katrina high. When we learned of the sheriff's plan to build a massive new jail with federal reconstruction money, we organized, educated, and agitated. We guided the mayor's office and city council to where they are today, enacting and holding to a cap on the size of a new jail so that it will hold no more than 1,200 people. This victory, which we share with the government allies who took up this cause with us, is the result of a grassroots struggle to seize the debate and develop solutions.

We cannot have people with handcuffs and guns solving the community challenges of mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, and unemployment. There are community-based and professional responses to address these social challenges, and we should be funding them rather than expanding the justice system's reach. We need to keep in mind if your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Not every social problem is a criminal justice problem to be solved by incarceration.

Grassroots leaders have always existed, developed by and taking direction from the community. We help our people, those most impacted by oppression and criminalization during crisis, identify what is needed to rebuild, and continue the conversation to recognize what is, or isn't, working. We find the best people for each job, and prime the pump for when people are ready to collectively create change.

In the wake of the Katrina reconstruction, where low-income people in communities of color were once again left behind, were still standing, were still organizing, and we will continue to lead in the fight to end the over-incarceration of our community.

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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