

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/orleans-parish-prison-why-smaller-means-safer>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

A jail cell covered in blood after an inmate-on-inmate assault. Unsupervised inmates playing with a handgun and injecting themselves with drugs. An inmates suicide caught on surveillance video that no deputy was watching. These are the images and stories captured in an hour-long public television documentary that examines the violence and troubling conditions of detention at Orleans Parish Prison (OPP), New Orleans jail. It is these conditions that led inmates and the U.S. Department of Justice to seek a consent decree that last fall mandated significant changes to bring the facility in line with constitutional standards. This public awareness and the consent decree in turn crystallized the opportunity to transform OPP into a smaller, less expensive, and ultimately safer facility.

Fixing the safety issues at the jail should be among New Orleans top priorities for two reasons. First and foremost, people currently detained in OPP and deputies are at risk of being harmed. Our clients lives are on the line, literally, every day, says Katie Schwartzman of the MacArthur Justice Center which represents OPP inmates in the class action lawsuit seeking improved conditions that led to the decree. All inmates, regardless of their status, have a right to be housed in safe and humane conditions and should not live in fear for their lives. Second, the burden that changes at OPP could have on taxpayers who pay a high price to incarcerate people in these conditions must be considered. Our incarceration bill could double when the improvements mandated by the consent decree are implemented.

One way to rapidly increase safety and avoid additional costs is to reduce the number of people detained in the jail. New Orleans is the nations historical urban leader in local detention rate, and most OPP inmates are detained while awaiting trial, whether for violent charges or minor misdemeanors. Many of these people pose little risk to public safety, but remain in jail because they cannot afford to post bond. Putting in place policies to identify when people are unnecessarily detained and developing non-detention alternatives for non-violent offenses could drastically reduce the jail population without endangering communities. Not only would this allow people to remain productive members of their families and communities when they do not pose a risk, it would improve the detention conditions for those who remain detained without spending the millions of dollars necessary to fix and operate a bigger jail. With fewer inmates to house, the staff-to-inmate ratio would increase across the board, drastically improving services available to inmates and reducing the likelihood of violent incidents erupting because of a lack of supervision. How much money do we have that we are willing to devote to the jail as opposed to substance abuse, mental health treatment, to address homelessness issues, jobs, etc? asks Mary Howell, a civil rights attorney, about the appropriate size of our jail.

Advocates for reform at OPP point to a lack of accountability to explain the slow progress at the jail since implementation of the consent decree. But the issues there are so widespread that they cannot be addressed overnight. This is a unique opportunity for the residents of New Orleans to demand that inmates in the jail be treated humanely and to make clear to elected officials their support for a right-sized jail that only detains people when absolutely necessary. The Mayor and City Council are eager to find ways to increase the safety of all New Orleans residents while saving the city money: this is an opportunity to show city government that a smaller, safer jail is something New Orleans residents support.

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