

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/justice-in-new-orleans-progress-and-challenges-five-years-after-hurricane-katrina>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Note: This is drawn from a related blog post Jon Wool wrote for the [Open Society Foundations](#). Read a [related article](#) in The Crime Report.

The fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina this week brings into focus the fundamental question of whether New Orleans is going to reinvent its criminal justice system, as we at Vera feel strongly is necessary. In our day-to-day work at the [New Orleans office](#), we see many hopeful signs. There's much more discussion about the need for systemic thinking and collaboration across agency lines; system actors are working together to solve problems rather than simply shifting blame as convenient. There's more recognition that how we practice criminal justice has enormous and far-reaching implications for how the city sees itself and treats its residents.

Yet there's also a long way to go. The system remains hampered by funding structures that produce perverse incentives or pose obstacles to reform. For example, the court systems are funded significantly through fines and fees that flow from convictions, providing an incentive to process as many cases as possible. The jail is still funded through a per diem structure, incentivizing the detention of as many people as possible, in an endless and unreachable effort to adequately fund its operations. And the city still leads the nation in its rate of local jail detention, and the number of arrests per capita is also much higher than in other jurisdictions.

As the city marks this anniversary, its leaders are set to make a final decision about rebuilding the jail, a task necessitated by Katrina damage. The question is starkly posed: Will New Orleans build an enormous new jail that continues a longstanding reliance on unmatched rates of detention or will it redirect a portion of the resources to begin solving some of the city's crushing problems? What is heartening is that a number of civic and government leaders and grassroots groups are coming together in an effort to make a rational decision about the jail. But the jury's still out: will we rebuild the old system or reinvent one that is fairer and more effective?

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