

Criminal Justice

Our work on criminal justice focuses on ending a racially discriminatory era of mass incarceration that has become a defining feature of American life for too many communities. We support a myriad of criminal justice reforms, particularly at the state and local level, that reduce prison populations and redirect savings from prison budgets to investments that will reduce crime and improve the well-being of communities across the United States.

Portfolio Snapshot

Budget
\$7.5 million

Number of Grantees
26

BUILD Budget
\$17.2 million

BUILD Grantees
6

The Challenge

The United States incarcerates more people than any other country, peaking in 2008 with more than 2.3 million people behind bars. Today, America's criminal justice system incarcerates black Americans at a rate six times higher and LatinX individuals at a rate three times higher than whites. There is also a growing number of incarcerated women—[1.2 million](#), the majority mothers of children, in prison for mainly nonviolent crimes.

Every year, more than [\\$81 billion](#) is poured into the corrections industry, diverting funds from the social and economic development of communities most affected by crime and violence. For example, over the past two decades, state and local spending on corrections increased by 44 percent, while spending on higher education fell by 28 percent.

The results are stark: depressed high school graduation rates, deepening poverty within families broken apart by incarceration, and millions of people unable to obtain jobs or housing because of felony convictions. These by-products of incarceration are themselves drivers of crime, violence, and inequality.

The Opportunity

After decades of tough-on-crime rhetoric from political leaders, strategic organizing has shifted the narrative spurring a new recognition of and bipartisan consensus on the need for change. Although the bipartisan consensus doesn't fully recognize the inhumanity and institutional violence within the criminal justice system, there is now a widely shared view that the current system is untenable: costly, ineffective, and a waste of human potential.

Since we launched this program in 2014, the overall prison and jail population has dropped by seven percent, with some states such as California, New Jersey, and New York dropping their prison populations by more than 30 percent. Even conservative states such as Louisiana and Oklahoma have passed measures that downgrade penalties for drug and other offenses and funnel prison savings to community-based rehabilitation, substance abuse, and mental health programs.

Behind these policy changes are committed advocates and allies redefining notions of public safety and taking on the poverty, racism, trauma, and inequality that lie at the root of mass incarceration.

Our Aim and Approach

Our approach supports efforts to address racial profiling and over-policing, and reform bail and excessive prison sentences. We support campaigns that advance the redirection of prison savings into tangible support, including crime prevention, economic development, and public health initiatives targeted at communities hardest hit by crime and incarceration. We also work to increase the

voice and influence of those directly affected by the justice system. We take four integrated approaches:

- **Demanding more just policies.** We advocate for sentencing and parole reforms at the state level, given that 90 percent of incarcerated people reside in state or local custody, and work to end “poverty jailing,” in which bail is required as a condition of pretrial release. We also replicate high-value alternatives to incarceration, such as restorative justice and pre-arrest diversion for both violent and nonviolent offenses.
- **Amplifying voices and building coalitions.** We support organizations led by formerly incarcerated or convicted people, so those most affected shape advocacy agendas and policies. We invest in grassroots efforts that build broad support for decarceration, including people with convictions, crime survivors, law enforcement, and business leaders. We support initiatives that challenge the public’s perception that tough-on-crime policies, such as stiff criminal codes and long prison sentences, are effective, and make the case for community-centered initiatives that support people hardest hit by crime and incarceration.
- **Strengthening organizations and fostering collaboration.** We provide key grantees with flexible funding through our BUILD program to strengthen their operational capacity.
- **Increasing philanthropy’s role in reform.** We work with other donors to increase the collective impact of philanthropy in the sector.

Our Impact

By advancing decarceration reform, our overall objective is to end the era of mass incarceration and replace it with less punitive approaches that foster rehabilitation, accountability and healing for individuals, and greater health and safety for communities. We work toward four outcomes:

- **Decreased prison populations.** Five states—Colorado, Louisiana, Michigan, Ohio and Oklahoma—with high incarceration rates will reduce their prison populations by at least 35 percent by 2030.
- **Effective alternatives to incarceration.** There will be an increase in government funding for high-quality alternatives to incarceration and other initiatives that address the underlying causes of crime and violence.
- **Formerly incarcerated people will have a stronger voice.** A larger, stronger and more vocal base of constituents, particularly those directly affected by the justice system, will help advance decarceration efforts.
- **Reduced racial disparity.** The adoption of new policies and practices will reduce the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on people of color.

By the Numbers

Since launching this program in 2014, the courageous individuals and organizations we support have been at the forefront of significant impact across the United States.

In California, prison populations **decreased by 25%** and more than **\$100 million** spent on incarceration was reinvested in community efforts.

In New York City, jail populations **decreased by 50%** and the city has committed to closing Rikers Island by 2026.

In New York State, jail populations **decreased by 25%** the first month of 2020.

1000 people released from New York state prisons at start of coronavirus outbreak.

Ford’s Gender, Racial and Ethnic Justice program supports courageous people and organizations addressing critical issues that exacerbate inequality in the United States and Global South: the over-policing and mass incarceration of people of color, the demonization of immigrants and migrants, alarming levels of violence targeting women and girls, and the dramatic increase in laws curtailing reproductive rights.

Grantee Snapshot

Putting safety first

Alliance for Safety and Justice (ASJ) is a national organization that aims to reduce incarceration and win majority support for a balanced approach to public safety that emphasizes prevention, rehabilitation, and support for crime survivors. Ford supports ASJ to reduce the total number of people incarcerated at the state level, replace mass incarceration with racially just safety priorities that protect and invest in communities most affected by incarceration and concentrated cycles of crime, and build lasting advocacy capacity in states to win and sustain reforms.