

# **The Blueprint to Reimagine Safety and Justice in New Orleans**

## **Background**

In August 2021, New Orleans applied to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Racial Equity Cohort, which was a targeted investment in up to four partnerships, between sites in the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) Network and community groups or organizations that are poised to go deeper on eliminating racial and ethnic inequities of the criminal justice system.

Prior to joining the Racial Equity Cohort, the Office of Criminal Justice Coordination (OCJC) successfully relaunched the Ethnic and Racial Disparity Working Group, fiscally sponsored by Total Community Action (TCA). In just seven months, OCJC was able to cultivate authentic, trusting, and long-standing relationships with the 34 Working Group members, who ranged from non-profit executives, public health advocates, formerly incarcerated criminal legal system advocates to system actors. The product of that collaboration was an initial [Recommendation Report](#), which outlined recommendations to embed a racial equity lens into current criminal legal system reform initiatives, as well as addressed mechanisms for system transformation by utilizing a [structural well-being approach](#) and shifting the criminal legal system paradigm from punishment to true accountability and support.

The work of the Racial Equity Cohort builds on the Ethnic and Racial Disparity Working Group's foundation, to further center community, community engagement, and dismantle systemic barriers that perpetuate criminal legal system entrenchment. Furthermore, the Racial Equity Cohort leadership team recognized the importance of moving beyond "traditional" structures of community engagement, such as inviting community members to participate in decision-making processes at the table with government stakeholders, and shifted our goal to [create space for community](#), particularly those disproportionately affected by the criminal legal system, particularly Black, Indigenous, People of Color, to raise concerns, connect, and build power. We believe that this approach will begin to dismantle mass incarceration through an equity lens, as defined by Michelle Alexander in the New Jim Crow, "mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race."

The New Orleans Racial Equity Cohort Leadership Team has identified five strategies to advance their goal of developing a community-designed blueprint for advancing racial justice and reimagining criminal legal system reform:

1. Collect data across the community and criminal legal system to identify leverage points to advance equity within criminal legal system transformation.
2. Identify, engage, and empower a broad contingent of community members, Agents of Change, to develop and implement a Blueprint to Advance Safety and Justice.

3. Led by the Agents of Change, facilitate community engagement events to develop and implement the Blueprint to Advance Safety and Justice.

### **Community Engagement**

On January 13<sup>th</sup> 2024, the New Orleans Team launched its first Open Studio, in partnership with the Civic Design Studio at the Dryades YMCA as part of the Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Celebration. The Open Studio invited people in to learn about the system through the perspective of a directly impacted individual. From arrest to booking to screening to trial, we created a visually rich environment for exploring each step in the process that leads to incarceration, so that participants walk away with a deeper understanding of how the system works and the key actors in the system. Throughout the Civic Studio, participants engaged with invited experts, also known as Agents of Change, and participated in hands-on activities that deepened their knowledge and asked them to share their thoughts and suggestions on how the system can be improved.

### **Strategic Pivot**

After the Open Studio, the change in Governor had drastic effects on New Orleans and criminal legal system reform. In February 2024, Governor Landry held a Second Extraordinary Session of the Louisiana Legislature, which purportedly addressed crime and public safety. Advocates project that the measures passed in the Extraordinary Session will add, at a minimum, \$32 million, to the Louisiana Prison Industrial Complex, while stripping funding for community-based programming to support people most impacted by violence and mass incarceration.

Therefore, the New Orleans Racial Equity Cohort Leadership Team focused on a Strategic Pivot, to account for the rollbacks to criminal legal system reform legislation in Louisiana. On May 29<sup>th</sup> 2024, the Team hosted “The State of Criminal Justice Reform: Where Do We Go From Here?” Strategy Session at City Park. The target group for this conversation was individuals who have been involved with the Safety and Justice Challenge at each phase from inception to the Racial Equity Cohort. The Session was opened by the Chief Policy Officer at Voice of the Experienced and discussion was framed by two panels:

1. Impacts of the Current State of Criminal Justice Reform on the Criminal Legal System
2. Impacts of the Current State of Criminal Justice Reform on Community

The panels featured decision-makers at criminal legal system agencies, thought leaders, and community advocates. The feedback our team received was incredibly positive, with many attendees stating that this was the first conversation that had taken place with both system actors and community members around the rollbacks to criminal legal system reform legislation.

The Racial Equity Cohort Team also held a community conversation with the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, collecting feedback on community priorities relative to public safety and the state of criminal legal system reform. The Racial Equity Cohort Team also held solutions-building engagement sessions at the 2024 and 2025 Mayoral Public Safety Summits, as well as an Economic Mobility Summit with a focused lens on decarceration.

### **Building the Blueprint to Reimagine Safety and Justice in New Orleans**

When asked, “What should justice look like?” community members responded with the following themes:

- **Justice as Collective Responsibility:** Rooted in community, justice involves victims, perpetrators, and neighbors working together to repair harm, resolve conflict, and promote safety through care, accountability, and connection.
- **Justice as Fairness and Equity:** It demands equitable access to resources and consistent application of fairness- addressing systemic inequities to level the playing field and advance equity for all.
- **Justice as Restoration and Humanity:** True justice centers dignity, compassion, and personal responsibility- prioritizing healing over punishment utilizing evidence-based approaches.

When asked, “What should a blueprint to safety and justice include?” community members responded with the following themes:

- **Build Safe, Informed, and Engaged Communities:** Foster transparency, accountability, and community ownership through regular engagement, place-based initiatives, and accessible information. Prioritize respect for elders, youth engagement, and collective participation to create safe, connected, and empowered communities.
- **Advance Equity and Address Root Causes:** Tackle structural inequities and systemic violence by investing in education, employment, housing, and reentry supports. Center trauma-informed, culturally grounded approaches that address poverty, homelessness, and economic injustice- putting people over profit and ensuring resources reach those most impacted by structural disinvestments.
- **Promote Healing, Restoration, and Shared Well-Being:** Ground public safety in care, compassion, and opportunity. Expand restorative justice, violence prevention, and community well-being efforts that leverage and invest in schools, parks, and local spaces. Reconcile structural racism and ensure every resident- especially the most vulnerable- has access to safety, dignity, and opportunity.

Through the lessons learned of the Safety and Justice Challenge, consistent analysis of jail population data reports, and community engagement efforts, the New Orleans Team has shifted our focus to prevention, meaning an intentional investment in root cause of criminalized behavior, as a core strategy to address the misuse and overuse of detention as well as disparities in accessing safety and justice in New Orleans. Currently, the city is expanding its initial community outreach and engagement efforts into a broader collective: the New Orleans Empowerment Network, which includes NOLA 360, a focused collective impact initiative to prevent and reduce violence. The overarching objectives of the New Orleans Empowerment Network are to facilitate the identification and cultivation of community leadership, support community empowerment, and sustain a reimagined, equitable public safety ecosystem.

### **What does the Blueprint to Safety and Justice in New Orleans include?**

The following identified themes should be seen as intertwined and interdependent, as opposed to factors identified in isolation.

## **1. Comprehensive Collaboration and Collective Impact**

- a. Power Shifting and Power Sharing: Centering people most impacted by violence and incarceration in decision-making.
- b. Organizations aligning and integrating their actions to achieve systems-level change.
- c. Funding, policies, and structures incentivize collaboration, not competition.
- d. The Blueprint to Safety and Justice is adopted by cross-sector agencies and organizations.
- e. Outcomes are measured collectively, as an accountability mechanism to the shared vision, and to measure the ecosystems progress towards systems change.

## **2. Prevention – Shifting from economic stability to economic mobility, by advancing the following factors:**

- a. Rewarding Work
- b. Quality Education
- c. Opportunity Rich and Inclusive Neighborhoods
- d. Healthy Environment and Access to Healthcare
- e. Responsive and Justice Government
- f. Support youth-led solutions, including, but not limited to, the [Youth Master Plan](#).
- g. Invest in place-based solutions to infuse funding in areas that have faced historic and current disinvestment.

## **3. Intervention – Provide sustainable and scaled alternatives to incarceration.**

- a. Supportive services are fully funded and appropriately leveraged by case management services.
- b. Funding infusions from the [Safety and Justice Challenge](#), including, but not limited to, Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion, Pretrial Services, Public Defenders at First Appearance, and Jail Release Navigators, are sustained and scaled.
- c. Community-based off-ramps to detention and incarceration are scaled and expanded- including deflection, diversion, and community-based violence intervention programs.
- d. Expand and standardized trauma-informed and restorative approaches, including training opportunities.

## **4. Community Engagement and Education**

- a. Advance transparency of criminal legal system practices and democratize knowledge through data and policy literacy workshops.
- b. Community engagement initiatives are standardized as defined by the “process and practice of making sure all people, especially those most harmed by intentional disinvestment and erasure, are valued, and specifically are empowered to not only participate, but lead, in decision-making spaces.”
- c. Publish and disseminate criminal legal system data to inform data-driven decision-making.
- d. Engage in targeted and responsive education and training around the realities of the criminal legal system and procedural justice, as well as push back on false narratives and myths that pose a threat to reforms.
- e. Engage in proactive education, messaging, and relationship-building to sustain criminal legal system transformation momentum, a decades-long movement in New Orleans, seeded by recent infusions by the Safety and Justice Challenge.