

Roundtable on Values and Justice

Catalyzing a new narrative of community safety and reimagining justice in Oklahoma

Co-hosted by The Education and Employment Ministry and the Justice Lab at Columbia University

Roundtable Readings

Introductory Reading Material

- Oklahoma's Criminal Legal System by the Square One Project**

Day Two: Thursday, November 30, 2023

Chickasaw Nation Community Center, 4001 NW 39th St, Oklahoma City, OK 73112

Discussion 1. CREATING A NARRATIVE CHANGE INFRASTRUCTURE

Facilitated by aurelius francisco and Tiffany Crutcher

According to Narrative Initiative, "Narratives reflect shared interpretations of how the world works by embedding themes and ideas in collections of stories. Who holds power and how they use it are both revealed in and supported by dominant narratives. Successful narrative change shifts both power and dominant narratives." Over the past two years, Oklahomans in Square One have identified narratives around punishment and harm that shape the current criminal legal system, in order to develop new narratives that center community safety and healing. What are some of these existing narratives about crime, punishment, and safety in Oklahoma? What are some of the untold, or nondominant narratives, around these topics? What new narratives could we use to promote human dignity and socially integrative responses to harm? What actions could Square One stakeholders take to catalyze narrative change around community safety and violence? How do different types of audiences influence tactics and messaging around narrative change?

- [Voices on the Inside](#) - TEEM Documentary
- Executive Summary: Reclaiming Narrative Truth (pages 8 to 15) by First Nations Development Institute and Echo Hawk Consulting
- A Necessary First Step by Crystal Avilla**
- It's Time for Lawmakers to Give Criminalized Survivors and Our Families a Second Chance by April Wilkens**

Discussion 2. THE ROLE OF VALUES AND FAITH IN OKLAHOMA'S CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM

Facilitated by Clarence Prevost

Oklahoma's criminal legal system disproportionately targets women, people of color, and other marginalized groups of people. Not only does Oklahoma incarcerate women at one of the highest rates in the world, but also, of the 25 people who have been sentenced to death in Oklahoma since 2020, nearly all of them have significant vulnerabilities (mental illness, child neglect and abuse, youthful age at the time of the

alleged crime, etc.), and people of color are disproportionately represented on death row. What roles do faith and values have—or not have—in driving such high rates of incarceration in Oklahoma, especially of marginalized people? What role might faith and values play in decreasing the reach of the criminal legal system in Oklahoma? What role can faith and values play in healing and accountability in the future?

- Repairing the Breach: Faith Based Community Organizing to Dismantle Mass Incarceration by Amy Levad
- Bridging Faith and Social Justice Across Generations by Brittany Koteles
- [“Religious Left” Podcast](#) by DreamRadically Podcast with aurelius francisco, Lori Walke, and Youssef Kamel
- The Role of Values and Faith in Oklahoma’s Criminal Legal System by Sonia Weidenfelder**

Day Three: Friday, December 1, 2023

Chickasaw Nation Community Center, 4001 NW 39th St, Oklahoma City, OK 73112

Discussion 3. ACCOUNTABILITY, PUNISHMENT AND REPAIR

Facilitated by Francie Ekwerekwu and Tyler Fisher

When harm happens, people often seek to hold someone to account. In Oklahoma, accountability is often pursued through police and the courts, which ultimately results in prison sentences, community supervision, or fines and fees. However, Oklahoma locks up a higher percentage of its people than nearly any democracy on earth. Are police, courts, and prisons effective tools for achieving accountability? How do we hold these systems accountable themselves? How is accountability similar or different from punishment? What role do (or don’t) Oklahomans in the broader community have in these accountability processes—in the short-term? In the long-term? What is the role of the governed in holding government and powerful leaders in the community accountable?

- Who Governs? Safety, Governance and the Future of Justice Policy by Katharine Huffman and Robert Rooks
- Accountability and Power Sharing by Michelle Walker**
- [Jimmy’s Story](#) by the Foundation for Liberating Minds 1 in 2 Campaign

Discussion 4. RECKONING IN ACTION AND CREATING A CULTURE OF REPAIR

Facilitated by Cece Jones-Davis and Kym Cravatt

*Reparations and land back movements are gaining momentum as many communities across the country think meaningfully about repairing past harms of chattel slavery, indigenous genocide, and ongoing racial violence through the criminal legal system and beyond. Yet these concepts are far from commonly accepted; for example, in Oklahoma, there is continued resistance to reparation for the harms of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and to compliance with the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2020 ruling in *McGirt v. Oklahoma*. Oklahomans*

have lived with these wounds, and their long-lasting infection continues to cause pain. What are the symptoms? How has this infected other parts of Oklahoma's history and present state? What does justice and healing look like for the Tulsa Massacre survivors and Greenwood community members, or for the millions of indigenous people who experienced mass genocide and forcible removal from their homes? How does reckoning with history connect with reimagining the criminal legal system in Oklahoma? Can we reckon with history to repair past harms and also commit to a future that responds to harm with healing rather than punishment?

- Telling the Truth: Confronting White Supremacy, Period by The Reverend Vivian Nixon
- Exiled to Indian Country: Trail of Tears shaped Oklahoma by Addison Kliever, Miranda Mahmud and Sarah Beth Guevara
- Philanthropy's Role in Reparations and Building a Culture of Racial Repair by Aria Florant, Tonyel Edwards, Cora Daniels, Alexandra (Alex) Williams, Maurice Asare, and Vikas Maturi
- Reckoning in Action and Creating a Culture of Repair by Reggie Cotton**

Discussion 5. IMAGINING NEW SYSTEMS OF SAFETY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Facilitated by Justin Jones and Tina Brown

While Oklahoma ranks as one of the highest incarcerators in the world, it is among the lowest in resourced public services, such as education, housing, food security, and healthcare. How does incarceration impact community safety? What do you need to feel safe and connected to your community? What does it look like? How do social services create community safety and reduce harm? What is the role of philanthropy, government, businesses, faith institutions, and social sectors in fostering community safety and social connection? What are the systems of safety that currently exist in Oklahoma? What new systems are yet to be imagined?

- Reclaiming Safety by Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie
- What Happened when a Brooklyn Neighborhood Policed Itself for Five Days by Maria Cramer
- [One Million Experiments: Projects that Support Thriving Communities](#) (please read through any of the examples of community-based safety projects listed on this website)

Background Report: Oklahoma’s Criminal Legal System

June 2023

Prepared for the Oklahoma Square One Project by Ariana Ali, Aisha X Elliot, Rachel Krul, Jasmin Sandelson, and Iva Stojanovic

Overview

In Oklahoma, the criminal legal system plays a central role in residents’ individual and collective lives. This report offers key summaries and data points about the history and present of the state’s criminal legal system. The report includes the following information:

1. A brief history of Oklahoma’s criminal legal system
2. The state’s current criminal legal landscape
3. How the criminal legal system can trap Oklahomans in cycles of involvement
4. Past and present efforts to enact system-level reform

1. A Brief History of Oklahoma’s Criminal Legal System

Oklahoma’s first prison was established in 1908, just a year after the state’s founding in 1907.¹ Economics played a key role in the development of Oklahoma’s penal system. From their earliest origins, prisons relied on the labor of those they incarcerated. After helping to build the Oklahoma State Penitentiary, incarcerated people worked in prison factories to pay for the costs of their own incarceration. The primary function of the warden, the head of the State Penitentiary, was to earn profit for the state treasury.² As such, prisons were just as concerned with finances as with rehabilitation or social reintegration.³

Oklahoma’s penal and legal systems were also shaped by racism. In fact, the very first Senate bill signed into law in Oklahoma was a “Jim Crow” law,⁴ legalizing the segregation of Black Americans from white Americans, and paving the way for legal discrimination in education, housing, employment, and more.⁵

Alongside this discrimination and disenfranchisement, racist policing practices and vigilantism further harmed Black Oklahomans, perhaps most notably in the Tulsa Race

¹ John A. Conley, “Prisons, Production, and Profit: Reconsidering the Importance of Prison Industries.” *Journal of Social History* 14, no. 2 (1980): 257–75.

² Ibid: 260

³ Ibid: 261

⁴ “The African American Civil Rights Movement in Oklahoma Segregation,” [Oklahoma Historical Society](#).

⁵ “Jim Crow Laws,” [PBS](#).

Massacre of June 1, 1921. White rioters looted and burned Greenwood, a prosperous Black neighborhood known colloquially as “Black Wall Street,” killing up to 300 people. In a 2008 report, the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission found not only that the state failed to protect Black Americans during the riots, but also that police and deputies were responsible for some of the burnings in Greenwood.⁶

Native people also experienced disenfranchisement and discrimination; even with the passage of the 14th Amendment, Native people were still excluded from the right to vote.⁷ Although the 1924 “Indian Citizenship Act” granted Native American people the franchise, subsequent Supreme Court decisions made it harder for Indigenous people to vote and to challenge voter suppression laws.⁸

2. Oklahoma’s Current Criminal Legal Landscape

i. Excessive Punishment

Oklahoma uses the death penalty more than most states, and has the nation’s highest rate of executions per hundred thousand residents.⁹ From 1915 – 2015, Oklahoma executed 200 men and 3 women at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary.¹⁰

Oklahoma also issues harsher prison sentences than many comparable states. Statewide, 2,908 people are serving a life sentence, and 682 people are serving sentences of 50 years or more.¹¹ Together, these groups make up 12.4% of the total prison population.

As Figures 1 and 2 show, life sentences – both with and without parole – have become more common in Oklahoma over recent years than they have in neighboring states.

Figure 1: *Percentage Growth in Life with Parole Sentences: OK Compared to Neighboring States, 2003-2016*¹²

⁶ “Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.” *Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot* from [Tulsa Historical Society and Museum](#), 2008.

⁷ Katie Friel and Emil Mella Pablo, “How Voter Suppression Laws Target Native Americans.” [Brennan Center for Justice](#), 2022.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ “State Execution Rates (through 2020).” n.d. [Death Penalty Information Center](#).

¹⁰ “Death Penalty Information.” [Oklahoma Corrections](#), 2023.

¹¹ “Oklahoma’s Life-Sentenced Population Rising Faster than National Trends.” [The Sentencing Project](#), 2018.

¹² Chart replicated from “Oklahoma’s Life Sentencing Population.”

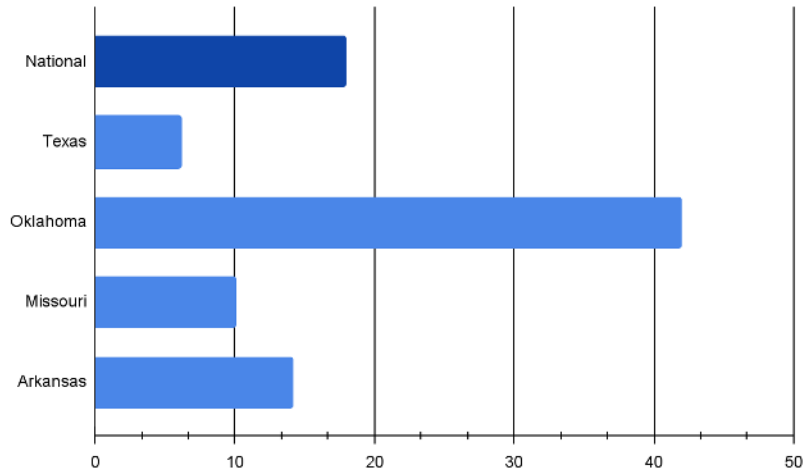
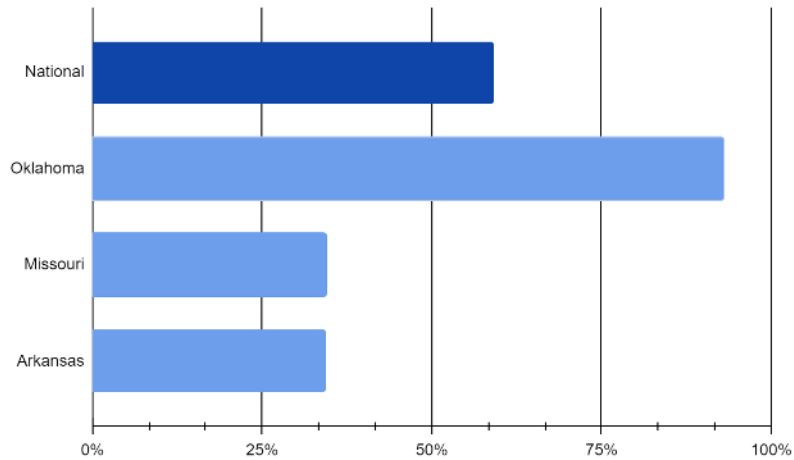


Figure 2: *Percentage Growth in Life without Parole Sentences: OK Compared to Neighboring States, 2003–2016*¹³



ii. Racial Inequality

Racial disparities in punishment have existed throughout Oklahoma’s history. Racial inequities were found in execution rates even before Oklahoma was granted statehood: of the 39 people executed in the mid 1800’s, 31 were Indigenous and 6 were Black men.¹⁴ Racial disparities in capital punishment persisted into the 1900’s and then to the present day, and most people executed in the “modern era” of Oklahoma’s death penalty have been Black.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid

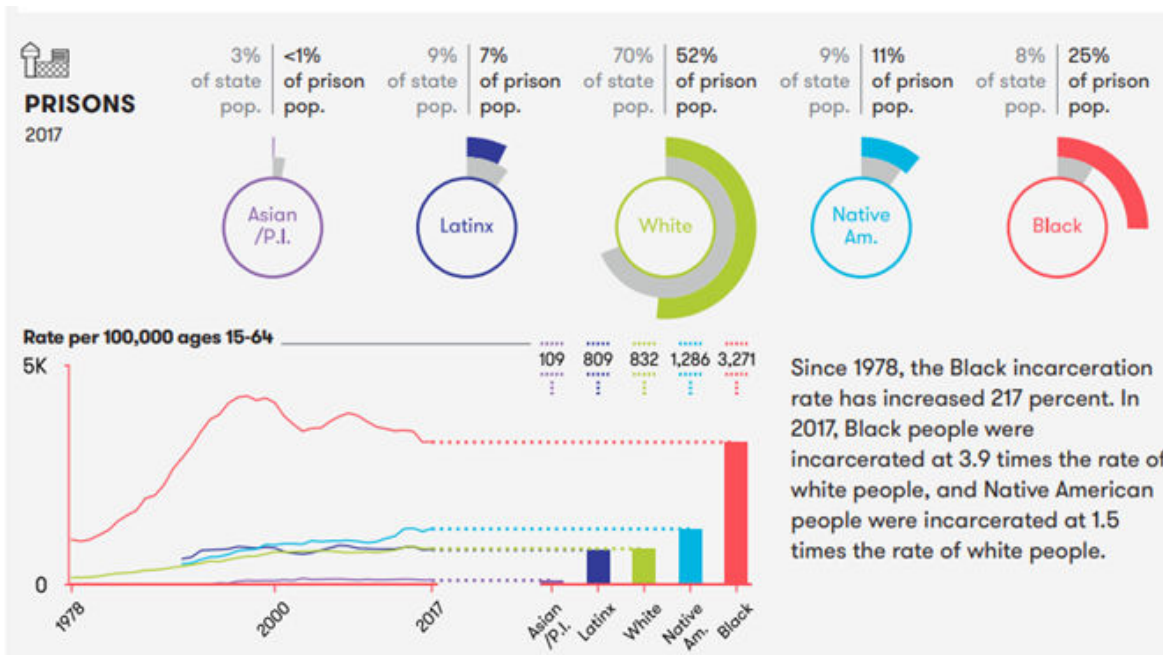
¹⁴ “Deeply Rooted: How Racial History Informs Oklahoma’s Death Penalty,” [Death Penalty Information Center](#). 2022.

¹⁵ Ibid

Historically, Oklahoma also incarcerated Black and Native people at disproportionate rates, a trend that endures today.¹⁶ In 2017, as Figure 3 shows, Black people made up 8% of the state’s population but 25% of the prison population, and Native people made up 9% of the state’s population but 11% of the prison population.¹⁷ Black youth are also more than 6.4 times more likely to be incarcerated than white youth.¹⁸

People of color face more contact with Oklahoma’s criminal legal system than white people. In Tulsa, for instance, Black people represent 17% of the population but make up 35% of all arrests.¹⁹ Black, low-income Tulsans face 100 times more police stops than residents of wealthy, white neighborhoods.²⁰

Figure 3: Oklahoma State Prison Population by Race²¹



iii. Gender-based Inequities

¹⁶“Oklahoma incarcerations by race.” *Oklahoma Department of Corrections* from Ziva Branstetter, Allison Herrera, Harriet Rowan, Eric Sagara and Sinduja Rangarajan, “Let Down and Locked Up: Why Oklahoma’s female incarceration is so high.” [Reveal](#). 2017

¹⁷“Incarceration Trends in Oklahoma,” [The Vera Institute for Justice](#). 2019.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Damion Shade. “Reducing Oklahoma’s court fines and fees is police reform.” [Oklahoma Policy Institute](#). 2020.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

Oklahoma has the third highest female incarceration rate in the United States, with Black and Native women notably overrepresented.²²

Women who are incarcerated in Oklahoma prisons have often experienced high rates of mental illness, drug dependency, and poverty.²³ Most report physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse as both children and adults. Figure 4 shows the percentage of adverse childhood experiences – traumatic events experienced before a child turns 18 – reported by a sample of incarcerated women in Oklahoma.

Figure 4: *Childhood Experiences Reported by Incarcerated Women*²⁴

	N	%
Single parent home	125	34.1%
Raised by grandparents	65	17.7%
Raised by other relatives	52	14.2%
Lived in foster home or with non-relatives	31	8.4%
Mother went to prison	28	7.6%
Father went to prison	80	21.8%
Both parents went to prison	11	3.0%
Someone with alcohol problem in home	229	62.4%
Mother had problem with alcohol	95	25.9%
Father had problem with alcohol	123	33.5%
Someone with drug problem in home	196	53.4%
Mother had problem with drugs	92	24.8%
Father had problem with drugs	71	19.3%
Parents got divorced	254	68.9%
Someone in household with a mental illness	164	44.7%
Father violent in the home	169	46%
Mother violent in the home	95	25.9%
Not enough to eat at least some of the time	101	30.2%
Physically abused	173	47.1%
Sexually abused	210	57.2%
Both physically and sexually abused	127	34.6%
Received services from child welfare	146	40.2%
Removed from home by child welfare services	48	13.2%

Moreover, current laws leave women vulnerable to prosecution for experiencing domestic abuse. “Failure to Protect” laws, which criminalize the failure to protect children from harm, expose women to legal consequences when they are abused by people who also abuse their children. In 2021, 16% of women in Oklahoma prisons were incarcerated for failure

²² “Incarcerated Women and Girls,” [The Sentencing Project](#), 2023

²³ Melissa S. Jones, Stephanie W. Burge, Susan F. Sharp, and David A. McLeod. “Childhood adversity, mental health, and the perpetration of physical violence in the adult intimate relationships of women prisoners: A life course approach.” [Child Abuse & Neglect 101](#), 2020.

²⁴ Ibid

to protect / child abuse / neglect.²⁵ Charging and incarcerating women under these laws not only punishes women for experiencing violence; it also leaves many children displaced and newly vulnerable to harm.²⁶ In this way, incarceration compounds cycles of trauma.

3. Cycles of Criminal Legal System Involvement

Beyond incarceration, further aspects of Oklahoma’s criminal legal system erect barriers to social integration and flourishing. These include extensive systems of probation and parole, as well as fines and fees levied against people charged with crimes.

i. Supervision: Probation and Parole

Outside of prisons and jails, tens of thousands of Oklahomans are “under supervision” on probation or parole.²⁷ Supervision entails extensive surveillance and control by the criminal legal system, creating a “revolving door” between incarceration and parole and probation. Moreover, many people under supervision struggle to access the types of resources and opportunities that can help them avoid contact with the criminal legal system.²⁸ Given the large numbers of Oklahomans on probation or parole, this creates notable ripple effects of economic insecurity on families and communities statewide.

Oklahoma has a higher proportion of residents on probation and parole than neighboring Kansas, as Figures 5 and 6 show. Kansas, whose population is roughly ¾ the size of Oklahoma’s population, has less than half the number of people on probation.²⁹

Figure 5: OK’s Criminal Justice System³⁰

Figure 6: KS’s Criminal Justice System³¹

²⁵ “Failing to Protect, Oklahoma Child Abuse and Neglect Statute Unfairly Punishes Mothers and Endangers Women,” [Turning the Page: Oklahoma’s Criminal Justice Reform Story](#). 2022.

²⁶ Susan F. Sharp and Susan T. Marcus Mendoza, “It’s a Family Affair: Incarcerated Women and Their Families.” [Women and Criminal Justice, The Haworth Press, Inc.](#) 12(4) (2001): 21-49.

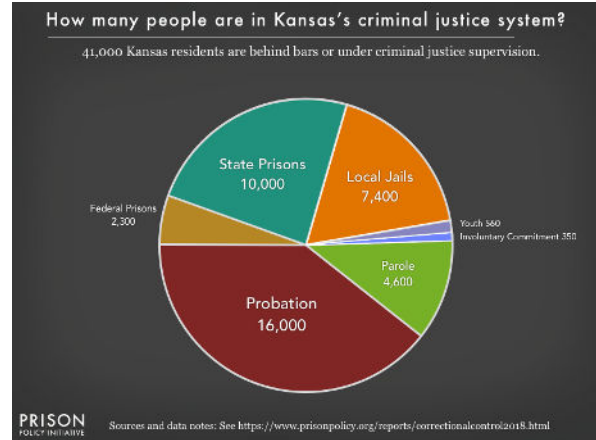
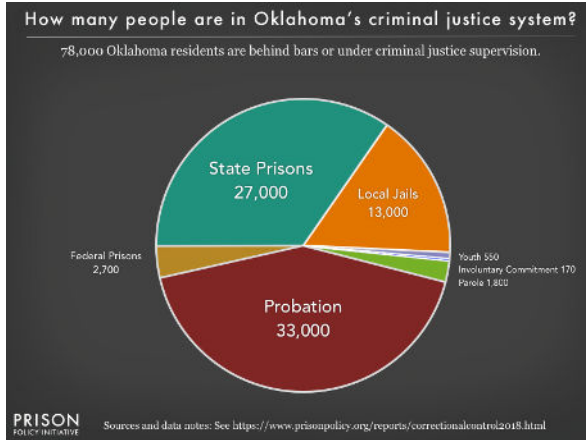
²⁷ The parole rate for Oklahoma is 46 per 100,000 residents while their probation rate is 844 per 100,000 residents. Alexi Jones, “Correctional Control: Incarceration and supervision by state.” [The Prison Policy](#). 2018.

²⁸ David J. Harding, Bruce Western, & Jasmin A. Sandelson, (2022). From Supervision to Opportunity: Reimagining Probation and Parole. [The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science](#), 701(1), 8–25.

²⁹ Jones, 2018.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid



ii. Fines and Fees

Court-related fines and fees are financial obligations levied on defendants, many of whom have limited capacity to pay. The imposition of fines and fees does not improve public safety; a study of fines and fees in Oklahoma found that court debt neither caused nor deterred new crime.³²

Excessive fines and fees can effectively criminalize poverty. When defendants are unable to pay court-ordered costs, they often face new legal sanctions that result not from any criminal activity, but rather from financial hardship. Moreover, millions of dollars of legal debt hang over the heads of residents of some of Oklahoma's poorest neighborhoods. For instance, in Turley, Tulsa County, where 57% of residents are Black and 38% live under the poverty line, court debt amounts to an average of \$701 per person.³³

When financially struggling Oklahomans are unable to make court payments, courts may issue a warrant for their arrest. In Turley, there are 37 failure to pay warrants active for every 100 residents.³⁴ Arrests for failure to pay lead to further legal costs, fines, and fees, trapping people in cycles of debt. Robert Nigh, the former Tulsa County Defender (2015–2017) described court fines, fees, and costs as a “life sentence,” because many people cannot pay them back and so face the constant looming threat of jail.³⁵

Just as early prisons relied on labor by incarcerated people for financial viability, Oklahoma's courts today rely on money extracted from people involved in the criminal legal system. In the early 2000s, the state legislature cut funding for court operations, while

³² Devah Pager et al., “Criminalizing Poverty: The Consequences of Court Fees in a Randomized Experiment,” *American Sociological Review* 87, no. 3 (2022): 529–53.

³³ Shade, 2020.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ John Raphling, “Get on the Ground!': Policing, Poverty, and Racial Inequality in Tulsa, Oklahoma,” *Human Rights Watch*, 2019.

encouraging the imposition of fees to cover lost revenue. As a result, fines and fees are now used to cover basic court functions; roughly half of the budgets for District Attorneys statewide are directly collected from the people they prosecute.³⁶ This approach also leaves court services that can prevent crime and reduce recidivism chronically underfunded.

The widespread use of fines and fees in Oklahoma does little to prevent crime, deepens financial hardship among vulnerable residents, and can prevent people from achieving the type of stability that promotes true community safety.

4. Reform Efforts

Despite the challenges faced by Oklahomans working to bring about criminal legal reform, many recently passed laws aim to limit the harms associated with incarceration.³⁷

Figure 7 lists some of this recent legislation, including nine important laws passed between 2016 and 2022 that: reduce fines and fees; expand opportunities for release from incarceration; and help formerly incarcerated people obtain work and housing.³⁸

Figure 7: *Criminal Legal Reform Legislation in Oklahoma*³⁹

Name of Bill	Targeted Reform	Date Passed
State Question 780	Reclassification of some drug and property crimes from felonies to misdemeanors.	November 8, 2016
State Question 781	Required the money saved by 780 to be reallocated to substance abuse and mental health services.	November 8, 2016
HB1269	Made the 780 reclassification retroactive, leading to the release of 462 incarcerated people.	May 28, 2019
HB1373	Made it easier for people with a	May 14, 2019

³⁶ Shade, 2020.

³⁷ Kaitlin Menza. "In Oklahoma, a Red State Model of Criminal Justice...." [Arnold Ventures](#). 2022.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Information drawn from Menza, 2022.

	criminal record to receive occupational licenses.	
Sarah Stitt Act	Required the DOC to supply individuals leaving custody with REAL ID cards, a resume documenting their trade proficiencies, copies of their work records, and vocational training to secure housing and employment.	May 14, 2020
HB2765	Appropriated \$10 million to expand drug court options and fund diversion programs and substance abuse services.	Pending as of February 2021. ⁴⁰
HB1795	Made it possible for people leaving the system to get a driver's license, and made it harder for the license to be revoked because of failure to pay fines and fees.	May 21, 2021
HB4369	Allowed incarcerated people on supervised parole to earn credits to shorten their period of supervision.	May 16, 2022
HB3316	Automated expungement of records among those who were eligible.	May 16, 2022
HB3205	Single largest reduction in juvenile court fees in state history.	May 16, 2022

Conclusion

⁴⁰ Although HB2765 is still pending as of February 2021, it has enabled the closures of Kate Barnard Community Corrections Center and Cimarron Correctional Facility (Ibid).

From its earliest origins, Oklahoma’s criminal legal system has been marred by racism, exploitation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement. Today, Oklahoma has a legal system that is more punitive than those in neighboring states, and communities of color and women are disproportionately exposed to this harm. Incarceration impacts individuals, but also hurts their families and communities, leading to intergenerational trauma, political disenfranchisement, and economic hardship. Enduring efforts by a group of committed Oklahomans has enabled a set of legislative victories, and work must continue to bring about true community safety and justice.

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Reclaiming Native Truth



A PROJECT TO DISPEL AMERICA'S MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

RESEARCH FINDINGS: COMPILATION OF ALL RESEARCH

JUNE 2018



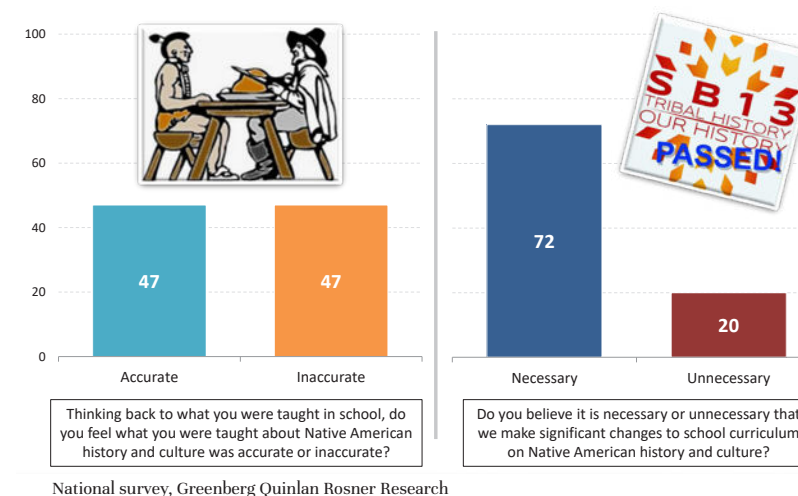


David Rico, Choctaw
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

MAJOR OPPORTUNITY WITH EDUCATION

Across the research, people call for more accurate education about Native Americans.

Nearly half of Americans say that what they were taught in schools about Native Americans was inaccurate; 72 percent say it is necessary to make significant changes to the school curriculum on Native American history and culture. In focus groups with parents and teachers, both groups recognize that the school curriculum covering Native Americans is under-representative and inaccurate. Teachers rate “history of Native American peoples” and “pre-Columbian American history and culture” as two of the worst subjects in terms of coverage and accuracy. People often express disappointment or anger that what they were taught was so sparse or misleading. In discussion groups with Native Americans, some parents talked about teaching their children the “real history of their people” when they get home from school.



HISTORY OPENS HEARTS AND MINDS

Presenting accurate history opens a conversation about current reality.

Americans admit to genocide of Native Americans, though they significantly underappreciate the scale and force of violence that has taken place since 1492. Many believe atrocities done to Native Americans ended in the 19th century and underestimate the current levels of discrimination faced by Native peoples in comparison with other racial and ethnic groups and LGBTQI people. When key experiences in Native history are shared, people find these facts believable

and express an interest in doing more to address current conditions. Hearing this history not only amplifies the impact of positive messaging but diminishes the impact of opposition sentiment. After hearing accurate history, a majority of Americans — spanning major racial and ethnic groups, ages and education levels — believe more should be done to help Native Americans.

CLUES FOR A NEW NARRATIVE

Research illuminates elements of a new story that will spark change.

While more work is needed to craft the final narrative, the research leads us to several possible approaches and some clear elements. The literature scan indicates potential nondeficit narrative styles, including amplifying assets, using a tone of hope, and portraying Native Americans as likable and relatable. Focus groups and social media listening identified aspects of messaging that test well, with the strongest centering on Native culture (especially connections between Native culture and broader American culture), history (especially information about 500 broken treaties and about boarding schools), values and resilience. Messages and images that take the time to introduce — or reintroduce — contemporary Native American people to non-Natives are the most effective.

The research also explored how Native Americans perceive potential messages, ensuring that the resulting campaign feels authentic and respectful, and that they are open to being ambassadors of the new narrative. This revealed the care needed to craft a narrative that recognizes distinctiveness between tribes and does not reinforce the notion that all Indians are the same. The fact that Americans are ignorant of tribal diversity and value unity creates a delicate tension here.

These insights can serve as a strong direction to inspire, develop and test overarching narratives that will shift hearts and minds. For an update on the new narrative, proven through testing to be effective in moving hearts and minds, please see page 42.



Angela Furgeson, Mohawk
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

NATIVE VALUES DEEPLY RESPECTED

Assets assigned to Native Americans are seen as desired and missing in American culture.

Focus group and survey respondents recognize the huge contributions Native Americans have made to American culture. Even in the context of deficit frames, positive associations include spirituality, commitment to family, connection to art and culture, and sense of responsibility to land and the environment — values and assets that many people believe are missing in American society today. In contrast, however, financial assets held by tribes and the economic development generated by tribes as well as other contributions to their local communities did not surface in the research.

Native Americans are perceived to be determined, independent, proud and resilient in the face of extreme challenges. Most online users appreciate and want to know more about Native American culture; some even try to associate themselves genetically, claiming Native American heritage, even if only a small percentage, and demonstrating cultural appropriation.

FAIRNESS, CONNECTION ... AND PATRIOTISM?

The research hints at potential values — some surprising — that might anchor a new narrative.

People make decisions first by instinct, guided by their closely held values, and then by interpreting facts, perceptions and experiences through that values lens. The instinctive process happens thousands of times faster than the cognitive process, making it essential for us to align our new narrative with our audiences' closely held values. From the research we can infer some potential values held across demographic and geographic groups. Each of these values carries a dual meaning, sometimes supporting Native issues, sometimes countering them. The art is to tease out the underlying value and build it into a resonant, positive narrative. This merits further exploration and testing.

One potential value is *fairness*. The research shows that people who have internal motivation to be fair, unbiased and

nonracist are more likely to support Native issues. The dual meaning is strong here, with sentiments that it is unfair both that the United States has broken treaties with Native tribes and that Native Americans receive government benefits that others don't.

Connection and *unity* are strong values, with many Americans seeking sameness and working to find commonalities across cultures. The duality is that this value can open curiosity and exploration, but may also lead to perceived assimilation of tribal identities into the idea of an overall "American culture."

A surprising set of values that emerged are *patriotism* and *masculinity*. These values can predict support for protection of sovereignty, but they stand in the way of some other issues, especially the mascot debate.

MASCOTS CONTROVERSIAL BUT MOVABLE

Mascots hurt Native youth and reinforce bias, but are seen as honoring Native Americans.

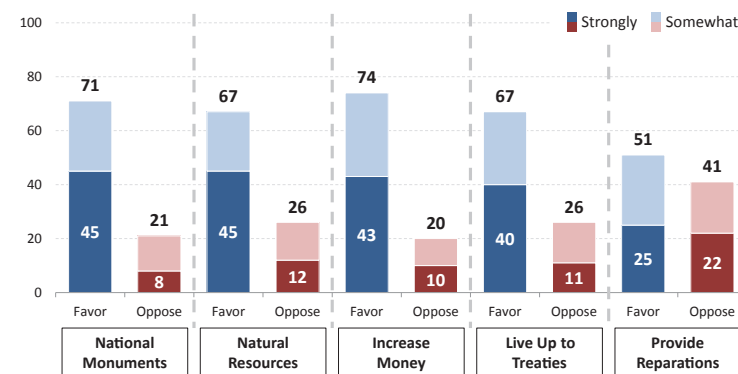
"I am a big sports fanatic. I am in shock they are not in favor [of mascots]. You would think they would be promoting them."

— White college educated woman in focus group, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

A leading representation of the Native American story is through caricatures and dehumanized portrayals associated with mascots for sports teams and schools, which the literature shows are damaging to Native high school and college students, negatively affecting feelings of personal and community worth. Research has also shown that mascots reinforce bias among non-Native people. **In focus groups with Native Americans, four out of five said they are offended by Native-themed mascots.** This is in contrast to two national surveys (conducted independently of our research and highly contested by leaders in Indian Country for their methodology) that found that Native Americans are not offended by Native American mascots.

Currently, among non-Natives, half the country believes that mascots honor Native Americans and a majority oppose a ban on sports teams' using Native-themed mascots. This was the only policy issue that was not supported by a majority of Americans in the national survey. However, there are allies for change. Sixty percent of millennial women, for example, support a ban on mascots, and younger respondents are more aware of the damage induced by mascots. Obtaining support for policies that require changing the names of mascots may be a daunting challenge; however, the literature scan and social listening demonstrate that success may be possible through other pathways to drive this change.

Please tell me whether you FAVOR or OPPOSE the following changes in U.S. law when it comes to Native Americans.



National survey, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

POLICY SUPPORT, UNLIKELY ALLIES

Diverse allies exist across American culture and favor many policies.

Congresspersons interviewed believe tribes have significant political influence. A majority of Americans support the increase of funding to reduce poverty and improve health among Native Americans. Support also exists to expand national monuments to protect sacred Native American lands and to ensure that Native Americans have the final say on matters that affect their natural resources. Just this year, the states of Oregon and California passed bills that revamped the school curriculum to provide a more accurate depiction of Native American culture and history. Both states also codified the participation of Native Americans in writing their own stories. This and other efforts by states to improve school curricula create pathways for other education policy efforts.

Sixty-three percent of people surveyed support "doing more for Native Americans." (Only 5 percent argue for doing less.) There is support for many Native issues and policies. Some of our allies are surprising and unlikely: younger White men who didn't go to college and who value masculinity and patriotism, for example. Millennial women are a strong base; in fact, they are our staunchest allies on the mascot issue. Overall, people of color are more supportive than Whites of Native Americans on many of the individual measures and issues. In addition, people with internal motivation to control prejudice tend to dismiss negative stereotypes and are more supportive of Native American issues.



Detailed Findings

To inform the narrative change strategy that will result from this research, we organized the combined findings into sections that align with the components of that strategy:

- Insights on current narratives
- Potential stakeholders to engage in support of *Reclaiming Native Truth*
- Potential values upon which to build a new narrative
- Messages and elements that may be part of that new narrative
- Channels for engaging and activating the stakeholders most essential to narrative change
- Policy issues and opportunities that draw the strongest support

Throughout this section we cite the work of the four research teams on this project. Those teams, the designations we use in citations, and the page number for a summary of each team's work are as follows:

- Dr. Stephanie Fryberg and Team (Fryberg), summary on page 47.
- Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQRR), summary on page 50.
- Perception Institute (Perception Institute), summary on page 64.
- Pipestem Law (Pipestem), summary on page 66.

Exploring the Current Narratives and Their Roots

INVISIBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE CREATES A VOID THAT IS FILLED WITH STEREOTYPES AND MISPERCEPTIONS.

To most Americans, Native peoples are invisible in contemporary daily life, including in both actual lived experiences and in the world portrayed through pop culture, sports mascots, media, K–12 education and other sources. In the broader society, there is little awareness of the narratives of Native Americans in everyday roles in society, nor is there an accurate narrative about Native culture, history, contemporary life and communities. This finding is front and center across the research.

The lack of visibility, relevance and humanization of Native peoples in modern life erodes support for Native issues and allows media-fueled stereotypes to persist. It also contributes to an underestimation of the discrimination Native Americans face relative to other ethnic and racial groups (GQRR).

EXISTING NEGATIVE NARRATIVES ARE SET AND CONTROLLED BY NON-NATIVES.

Where narratives about Native Americans do exist, they are primarily deficit based and guided by misperceptions, assumptions and stereotypes. Such a narrative is created by messages in the news and pop culture and shaped by narrow experiences that are generalized into broad assumptions. It leads to and reinforces assumptions and judgments, caricatures and stereotypes, and discrimination.

This narrative is primarily created and controlled by non-Natives in media, entertainment, tourist spots and schools ranging from kindergarten to law school. The writers, directors, producers, professors and other influencers who create these representations of Native peoples are mostly non-Native, yet they are shaping how people view and portray Native Americans (GQRR).

The dominant narratives are written in broad strokes, portraying a homogeneous culture, with little recognition of the diversity among Native peoples and tribes. Complicating this portrayal is the fact that among many Whites, assimilation is not a bad word. For many, the mythology of the American “melting pot” is strong, making it challenging to move from homogeneity to diversity in order to rewrite the narrative (GQRR).

The writers, directors, producers, professors and other influencers who create these representations of Native peoples are mostly non-Native, yet they are shaping how people view and portray Native Americans.

THIS NARRATIVE OVERWHELMINGLY USES A DEFICIT FRAME.

Focus on disparities. By emphasizing the economic, health and other disparities experienced by some Native peoples — and generalizing to suggest that these disparities affect all Native Americans — this narrative fails to portray strengths, resilience and contributions, and it does not communicate the complexity of Native histories and current experiences.

This focus is even perpetuated by Native allies and advocates, who often emphasize disparities to make the case for needed change. While this approach can be effective when litigating in court or raising philanthropic dollars, it can backfire in the court of public opinion, where these disparities can lead to a perception that Native peoples have “deficits” or are themselves the cause of the disparities (Perception Institute).

Deficit or disparity narratives often fail to trigger moral urgency among non-Native populations to address oppressive conditions; they can also lead to feelings of hopelessness among the communities such narratives purport to describe. Finding the balance of illuminating disparities and injustices without slipping into a deficit frame is a leading opportunity in this work (Perception Institute). **Some of the prominent deficit narratives revolve around the following:**

- Poverty
- Alcoholism and substance abuse
- Deplorable conditions on reservations: pollution, little commerce, poor-quality education, poor health
- “Underprivileged” or “at risk” language, which undermines the sense of control and self-determination for individuals and groups and ignores systemic discrimination
- Native Americans as problems to be solved (GQRR, Pipestem)

Perceptions of unfairness. Another existing narrative focuses on perceptions of unfairness. The most pervasive and damaging example is the false perception that Native Americans get rich from casino dollars and from government subsidies that are not offered to other ethnic or racial groups. This is one of the most harmful narratives, leading to the following:

- Rationalizing past and current injustices and reinforcing other stereotypes (e.g., lazy, indolent, alcoholic)
- Undermining potential alliances with communities of color by creating a perception of preferential treatment
- Adding to confusion or doubt about how a tribe can be a nation while also “relying on U.S. government checks” or how Native peoples can be both sovereign and “dependent”

- Allowing some government leaders to believe (or say others in government believe) “we are doing enough” (GQRR)

Perceptions of “otherness.” This narrative portrays Native peoples as insular and aloof, old-fashioned, or not of the 21st century. It is reinforced by history curricula that often end in the early 1900s (GQRR).

Perceptions of inferiority or ineffectiveness. Particularly among some in the judicial and legal professions, there is a perception or narrative that Native American professionals are less smart than their non-Native counterparts (Pipestem). Some judicial and legal professionals also believe that tribal leadership is ineffective or uneven, with some tribes perceived to have strong leadership while others are perceived to experience frequent turnover (Pipestem). Exacerbating these perceptions is the turnover among state agency employees and department heads, with each staff transition bringing new people who lack cultural competence and understanding of federal policy and how tribal governments work (GQRR).

Policymakers and leaders in our sample described tribal governments as having a sort of “poverty mentality,” whereby they fail to plan ahead and are often more reactive than proactive; they also criticized tribal governments for not being sufficiently transparent or receptive to constituent feedback. These perceptions may be formed in part because some federal money for tribes is managed by the federal government rather than going directly to the tribe, a process that policy leaders criticize as paternalistic and reinforcing the stereotype of Native Americans as unsophisticated, uneducated and unable to make decisions for themselves (GQRR).

Some states are the exception, however. Montana governors, for example, have appointed tribal members to boards and commissions and have hired Native Americans in their cabinets. Other states have made changes to their laws explicitly putting tribal governments on the same level as local governments (GQRR).

There is a dual perception among the policy leaders we interviewed that tribes lack the political influence of African-American and other communities, because of their small numbers and lack of a cohesive message or coalition, and that tribes have significant influence because of political contributions (Pipestem).

DEEPLY RESPECTED NATIVE VALUES DRIVE POSITIVE NARRATIVES.

Positive narratives advance assets and traits that are assigned to or assumed about Native Americans — traits that the non-Natives we interviewed say they value and see as missing in society today. The appropriation and assimilation apparent across non-Native social media conversations is often built on these values (GQRR). Although positive narratives are less prominent than the deficit narratives, they provide clues and toeholds for a new narrative.

Assets in the positive narratives include perceptions that Native Americans are

- committed to preserving their culture;
- committed to family and community;
- spiritual (mystical);
- resilient in the face of discrimination, oppression and genocide;
- close to the land or stewards of the environment; and
- patriotic Americans, veterans and active military (GQRR).

A note of caution. Many of the asset frames are based upon and advance positive stereotypes. Many non-Natives in our sample believe that these positive stereotypes are acceptable (those who believe this include people who are internally motivated to control prejudice and those who exhibit cultural racism or the idea that Native peoples' position in society is due to a deficiency in their cultures). In reality, however, even positive stereotypes feed into the homogenous, misinformed and inaccurate narrative (Fryberg). **The opportunity for *Reclaiming Native Truth* is to identify the positive attributes that can be reclaimed and built into an authentic asset frame without perpetuating stereotypes.**

CONFLICTING POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE NARRATIVES COEXIST.

Within the range of both positive and negative associations about Native Americans, some individuals in our study hold concurrent yet conflicting views, including that Native peoples are any of the following (GQRR):

- Both poor and flush with casino money
- Both spiritually focused and struggling with alcohol and drugs
- Both resilient and dependent on government benefits
- Both savage warriors and noble savages
- Both caring of the land and living in trash-filled and polluted reservations
- Both separate from and part of U.S. culture

The opportunity for

Reclaiming Native Truth

is to identify the positive

attributes that can be

reclaimed and built into

an authentic asset frame

without perpetuating

stereotypes.

Potential Stakeholders

The research suggests that a wide range of groups of people across the country — including some unlikely allies — are interested in and support Native peoples, issues and rights. The strongest allies emerging from the research include politically progressive groups such as younger people (e.g., millennials and college students), college- and postcollege-educated people, and people of color (GQRR).

In addition, people with internal motivation to control prejudice tend not to accept negative stereotypes and are more open to being supportive of Native issues (Fryberg). Furthermore, the research suggests that when given different types of information about Native Americans, individuals who tend to be resistant to Native causes may become much more receptive to supporting a variety of issues (Fryberg).

The research surfaced some potential priority communication opportunities and policy issues for change, including education, pop culture and mascots (see pages 32–33 for a full description of the opportunities and issues). From those priorities we can infer a set of priority stakeholder groups whose engagement and movement may be essential to shifting perceptions of Native Americans. In most cases, the research was not designed to identify, map and prioritize specific stakeholders; additional exploration will be a critical step in the strategic planning process. However, based on potential levers for change, priority stakeholders will most likely include decision-makers and influencers in entertainment, sports, education, policy and media, among others.

In some cases, the research provides insights about specific stakeholder groups, as described below.

For Native Americans, the new narrative must be authentic, empowering and powerful.

NATIVE AMERICANS

To successfully bring about a narrative change that shifts perceptions, attitudes and behaviors among non-Natives, **Native American people themselves — including tribal, spiritual and grassroots leaders; leaders of Native organizations; youth; artists; and story makers — are priority stakeholders who will carry the new narrative as messengers, ambassadors and storytellers. For them, the new narrative must be authentic, empowering and powerful.**

Native elites in government, business, civil rights, media and entertainment described, in in-depth interviews, the difficult decision of either leaving the reservation for better opportunities or going to college to get training and then coming back to help. Most mentioned a sense of pride and resiliency, as well as the struggle to hold onto their culture and pass it down to younger generations. They also noted cultural differences — in particular, respect for both elders and the environment — and the feeling of trying to maneuver through life in two worlds (GQRR).

In message-testing focus groups, Native Americans emphasized the importance of revising the educational curriculum so their children — and all children — know the true story about Native peoples, past and present. They gravitated toward messages that tell their story and their history and that represent modern Native Americans. They rejected messages about the “American melting pot,” recognizing that this is an existential threat to their cultures and to tribal sovereignty. They wanted to see Native peoples accurately represented visually and rejected any images from a specific tribe used to represent all tribes and Native peoples (GQRR).

STATE AND FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS

Respondents in our interviews said that most policymakers have little knowledge of Native issues and do not understand treaties or trust obligations to tribes, since many do not have tribes in their districts.

Congressional members from both parties in our sample viewed Native issues as fairly nonpartisan and praised tribes for being bipartisan. Respondents indicated that tribes have significant political influence in Congress, particularly with regard to environmental and natural resource issues. They perceived that gaming has generated resources for tribes to protect their political and legal interests (Pipestem).

How the government should respond to tribal needs, however, is more partisan. Across the board, in our research, there was respect for tribal communities and their resilience. However, some saw tribes as being fragile or vulnerable, facing ongoing racism, or existing at the whim of Congress (Pipestem).

Republicans in our sample tended to say that the government's role should be diminished, that the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) should be eliminated, and that tribes should receive resources directly to reduce dependence and to spark innovation and entrepreneurial solutions. At minimum, they said that more assimilated or financially stable tribes should receive less money (Pipestem).

Democrats in our sample, on the other hand, said they wanted to continue funding tribal programs and perceived that the problems are due to ongoing shortages of funding. They said that each tribe should be treated the same unless the treaty says differently (Pipestem).

Spending obligations to tribes, like those to other minorities, were seen by some people we interviewed as “handouts.” Others viewed Indians as “somebody else’s problem.” However, most of the members interviewed said they do not believe stereotyping is an issue in Congress (Pipestem).

This lack of knowledge and experience is also prevalent among the majority of federal policymakers outside the BIA and the Indian Health Service, respondents said (Pipestem). Policy elites said this lack of awareness and empathy may stem from guilt: Americans want to send money to help those in poverty in Africa, and they want to learn about Anne Frank and the Holocaust, but it is harder to own the reality of what happened right here with the First People (GQRR).

Native leaders in federal and state government whom we interviewed noted a mismatch between where the greatest potential for tribal power exists and where government staff knowledge lies. In general, they said, federal agency staff have a better understanding of the issues as they tend to have more consistent interactions with tribal governments and Native organizations; however, they said that the tribes have less power and influence at this level. At the state level, where tribal governments can have more impact, non-Native staff have fewer interactions and are less informed, they said (GQRR).

Across the board, in our research with policymakers, there was respect for tribal communities and their resilience.

FEDERAL JUDGES, LAW CLERKS AND LAW SCHOOLS

Most judges and clerks form perceptions and make decisions based on limited exposure to or knowledge of Native peoples. Their decisions, therefore, are influenced by the public narrative, and the decisions they hand down continue to fuel the negative narrative (Pipestem).

None of the federal judges interviewed had taken an Indian law course in law school; they reported that either their school didn't offer one or they did not recall seeing a course offered. All agreed that Indian law is a highly technical, “complicated” field of law and that, as a result, adjudicating a case involving questions of Indian law requires a good deal of effort to engage in self-education, even apart from and in addition to reading the briefs the parties on both sides submit (Pipestem).

All of the Native law clerks interviewed cited specific examples of occasions when their judge said something incorrect or ignorant regarding tribal nations and tribal citizens. Often, however, they felt they were able to explain to the judge why the statement was inaccurate or harmful (Pipestem).

Non-Native law clerks interviewed shared that the Native law cases they worked on were perceived to be “nonsensical,” “irrational” and inferior in a theoretical sense. They were the cases that law clerks said they did not want to work on (Pipestem).

PEOPLE LIVING IN SPECIFIC GEOGRAPHIES AND IN PROXIMITY TO INDIAN COUNTRY

Attitudes vary widely depending on where people live. For example, according to our research, people in the Deep South were more open to Native issues (GQRR), while people living in the Plains and the Southwest were least likely to support Native issues, were least likely to report recognizing that Native Americans face ongoing discrimination, and ranked as least supportive of issues facing Native peoples (Fryberg).

There is more regional variation in attitudes among college students in our study as compared with the adult sample. College students who have lived the longest in the Far West region were most likely to report recognizing that Native Americans face ongoing discrimination and ranked as being more supportive of Native issues (Fryberg).

Proximity to Indian Country is also an indicator of attitude and perception. In focus groups, people living near Indian Country freely admitted their biases, while outside of Indian Country, the issue was more invisibility than overt racial bias. In states with a relatively high percentage of Native Americans, rural voters showed less respect for tribal sovereignty and rights than did more urban voters. This finding may be, in part, because areas in and around Indian

Country tend to be more rural and politically conservative, as opposed to large, progressive cities. It also may be fueled by resentment among non-Natives who live near reservations in areas of high unemployment and economic stress and who falsely perceive that citizens of tribal nations receive entitlements that they do not (GQRR).

Even within Indian Country, diverse opinions emerged based on the relative prosperity of proximate tribes and reservations (GQRR):

- Discussion in focus groups in Bismarck, North Dakota, was the most extreme, with people freely admitting bias. Their perceptions of poverty on the nearby reservation affected their attitudes and stereotypes about Native Americans in general.
- In Seattle, where people tend to be exposed to or aware of some tribes that are relatively better off financially and that have sound fishing rights and other assets, focus group participants' perceptions of Native Americans were more favorable.

GROUPS DEFINED BY RACE AND ETHNICITY, AGE, IDEOLOGY, AND OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

Several of the research studies allow us to look at responses within specific groups, providing further insights about potential stakeholders. Findings include the following:

- Of the African-Americans surveyed, 71 percent supported reparations. However, 52 percent of African-Americans polled also perceived that Native Americans unfairly receive more from the government than do other groups. This belief was shared by a majority of respondents from all other ethnic and racial groups (GQRR).
- Hispanic adults, especially those who are more conservative, are some of the most supportive of Native issues, in part due to their perceived blood ties with Native peoples; 68 percent of those surveyed are supportive of doing more (GQRR).
- Younger, White, non-college-educated men are allies on some issues. Only 20 percent of those surveyed support a ban on Native-themed mascots, but they do support Native Americans on most other issues — for example, 74 percent support expanding national monuments to protect sacred Native lands (GQRR).
- College students from predominantly White universities tend to lack knowledge about or close personal contact

with Native Americans. The more college students are unaware or in denial of the prejudice, bias and discrimination faced by Native peoples, the less they report supporting Native issues (Fryberg).

- Of millennial women surveyed, 60 percent support a ban on Native-themed mascots (versus 38 percent of millennial men overall and 20 percent of younger, White, non-college-educated men) (GQRR).
- White liberals said they support policies to remedy inequities. They indicated that they may be confused by Native issues, what Native peoples want and what is in Native peoples' best interest, and they often need more information about how to move forward in a pro-Native way (Fryberg). However, the research notes that aligning along partisan or ideological lines carries both risk and reward, enlisting part of the country as allies but potentially creating partisan gridlock and mitigating real progress (GQRR).
- Opponents to Native issues, such as less-educated White respondents, showed the potential to become allies when presented with information about Native issues (Fryberg).

PHILANTHROPY

Research with foundation leaders (GQRR) provides insights into why just under 0.3 percent of total U.S. foundation support explicitly benefits Native Americans. Those leaders in our study who fund Native communities and issues said they appreciated the different long-term vision, the Native perspective on the history of the area or issue, and the growth in cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Although members of this group show some romanticizing and positive stereotyping, they don't reveal negative biases. On the contrary, they perceive threats like alcoholism and cultural erosion as coming from outside the community, fueled by structural racism, rather than from failings within the communities. All of the funders interviewed expressed willingness to increase giving to support Native peoples and issues as long as it falls within their core mission.

To move foundation leaders in this direction, the greatest need is to increase the visibility of Native peoples and tribal nations among foundations. Most foundations are coastal and urban, and they fund projects they see around them. Many in our study perceived that their geographic area does not include a significant Native presence. However, even those who do take a regional focus admitted to a knowledge gap about tribes in their region. Most failed to see the presence of Native Americans living in urban centers.

Other issues include the following:

- **Capacity.** Funders in our study perceived that many tribes lack the technical expertise to fill out a complicated grant application. They perceived that this may be due to the high rate of turnover in tribal governments. For example, one person may have been trained in grant writing and developed a relationship with the funder, but then that person leaves and a new person without that knowledge comes on board. Funders in our study saw nonprofit groups as quite sophisticated and noted that regional nonprofits are working with tribes in their region to help them access funding. Some funders also reported adapting application and reporting processes to be more flexible.
- **Cultural competency.** According to most funders in our study, they have no Native voices in their leadership or board, lack cultural competency, and may not fully understand Native issues. They reported worrying about the risk of inadvertently offending Native Americans. Some assumed to know what's best or to make decisions based on mainstream practices that do not align with Native practices. For example, if a funder makes decisions based on traditional grant evaluation methods that prioritize reaching high numbers of people, it may decline funding opportunities in sparsely populated tribal areas with less quantifiable, but equally important, results.

Those working on behalf of other people of color — especially in the Latino community — noted the shared history of discrimination and were open to strengthening alliances that create mutual benefit.

THOUGHT LEADERS

One component of the research included interviews with leaders in business, faith and civil rights organizations. Findings included the following (GQRR):

- **Business.** According to the business leaders interviewed, doing business in Indian Country poses unique challenges for companies, and sovereignty is seen as a barrier to private business growth on reservations. However, the business leaders in our study also saw significant opportunities for growth. They associated Native Americans with environmentalism and described proximate tribes as stewards and protectors of the land. Some mentioned the close-knit and family-oriented Native communities and noted that they prefer contracting with Native companies, which they said tend to be relatively small and family owned, because of the focus on creating and maintaining close relationships.
- **Faith.** Leaders in our study said that Native spirituality can be misunderstood, romanticized or treated as a New Age fad rather than something ingrained in culture. Christian ministries, they said, experience pushback from non-Natives who cannot reconcile Christianity and Native spirituality, which they view as mutually exclusive. They noted that non-Natives in the faith community may harbor a false sense that the United States is taking adequate care of its Native peoples and that their needs are being met through government programs, subsidies and handouts. Members of the faith community in our study therefore turned their focus and resources to missions in Third World countries, where they believe their philanthropic outreach can have greater impact.
- **Civil rights.** Civil rights leaders in our study perceived Native peoples to be notably absent from the national conversation around race and diversity. Those working on behalf of other people of color — especially in the Latino community — noted the shared history of discrimination and were open to strengthening alliances that create mutual benefit. (To some policy elites, however, viewing Native peoples in primarily racial terms rather than political terms is dangerous, as political recognition as a sovereign nation should give each tribe a stronger voice above and beyond that of other ethnic and racial groups.) Civil rights leaders said they see more power in numbers and thus recommended reducing conflicts among tribes and joining together to increase their visibility.

We gained additional insights on stakeholders in the narrative testing research we completed at the end of this project. Please see page 40 for details.

Clues About the Values upon Which to Build New Narratives

Brain science says that people interpret information and make decisions first through their values lens and then through cognitive processing of facts and evidence. In most cases, they accept facts that align with their values and reject facts that don't. In some cases, receiving facts that conflict with their values may actually make people grasp their existing narrative more tightly (Perception Institute).

Although our research did not specifically identify and test values that could motivate action by specific stakeholders, we can infer some potential value drivers based on findings about current perceptions, messages that test well, and insights about how people came to hold the beliefs they do. Once the new narratives are built, we have an additional opportunity to test them and their underlying values.

VALUES THAT MAY SHAPE HOW NON-NATIVES VIEW NATIVE PEOPLES

- **Strong internal commitment to avoid racism and bias and to control prejudice.** In our study, other racial and ethnic groups and liberals were most likely to have this internal commitment.
- **Fairness.** When people know or learn about the history and continuation of prejudice and discrimination against Native peoples and believe that the United States should remedy those issues, their support for Native issues increases (Fryberg). This is the aspect of fairness with which we want to align. However, the fairness value could lead to other unproductive narratives, such as the following:
 - *The world is fundamentally fair, so we don't need to provide resources to Native peoples, and/or Native peoples must be to blame for the challenges they experience.* For those who believe the world is fair and therefore show low levels of support for Native Americans, learning about systemic oppression may make them amenable to change. However, this group may be particularly resistant to information about contemporary success (Fryberg).
 - *It is not fair that Native peoples receive government benefits that others don't (GQRR).*
- **Patriotism and masculinity.** People holding these values, as well as the value of national glorification, are more likely to hold positive stereotypes and support protection of sovereignty. These values are strong among young, White, non-college-educated men (Fryberg).
- **Inclusiveness, common ground.** Americans are almost instinctively inclusive. They tend to seek sameness and work to find commonalities across cultures. Most want their country to be a melting pot and are proud this nation represents so many different cultures. For example, online, many White people participating in social media are quick to claim Native heritage, even if only a small percentage (GQRR).

Americans are almost instinctively inclusive. They tend to seek sameness and work to find commonalities across cultures.

Pathways Toward New Narratives

Although the research did not lead us to clearly defined overarching meta-narratives, it did provide clues about what may be the most effective approach, component parts and tone. It also defined some strong message points and individual issue narratives. (As a final step in this research we developed and tested a new narrative, based on these findings. Results from a national survey show that the new narrative is effective. Please see page 42 for details.)

MESSAGE THEORY: FOUR POTENTIAL MODELS FOR NEW NARRATIVES

Four alternatives to the deficit/disparity model show promise in the literature. However, none has been fully proven to create narrative transformation. We have an opportunity to shape and test new narratives using these models in order to both advance a new frame and add to the field of evidence on narrative. The four models are as follows:

- Asset framing, which emphasizes qualities of strength within a group
- Efficacy messaging, which emphasizes the possibilities of positive change and hope in solving societal challenges: Some versions of this approach also underscore the role

of self-efficacy and allow readers to visualize themselves as part of the solution to tackle oppressive social structures.

- Likable portrayals, which focus on portraying members of particular groups as “likable” as a means of inspiring empathy and positive regard
- Mutual humanization, which emphasizes the humanity of both the group of concern and the dominant group to engender empathy and a belief in a shared fate (Perception Institute)

EFFECTIVE MESSAGE COMPONENTS OF NEW NARRATIVES

A narrative is the overarching story that shapes the way people feel, process information and act. Messages, on the other hand, are discrete ideas or proof points that are encompassed within and that support the overarching narrative. Our research tested messages. Although these messages do not clearly define overall narratives, they do inform the development of such narratives.

Successful messages and images take the time to introduce — or reintroduce — Native peoples to non-Natives; highlight diversity and humanity; and educate non-Natives about the history, culture and values of Native Americans. History is especially important to opening conversation, hearts and minds. Hearing the history not only amplifies the impact of positive messages but also diminishes the impact of opposition sentiment. The sequence of messaging is important: share accurate history, link that to continuing modern injustice and then knock down stereotypes. The stereotype busting could begin with myths about government benefits and casino money, as these were the most rampant and damaging stereotypes across our focus groups (GQRR).

The strongest messages connect Native American values and culture to broader American values and culture. Many non-Natives do not know Native culture and therefore cannot appreciate the contributions of Native peoples unless these are explicitly spelled out for them. Although messages that focus on Native values (such as respect for family and elders and caring for the earth) and resilience test well, they must be very carefully framed to feel authentic to both non-Natives and Native peoples (GQRR).

There is tension around inclusiveness and distinction. Americans tend to seek inclusiveness, sameness and commonality across cultures. However, the Native peoples in our research tended to push back on messages that seemed “overly” inclusive, because they omit the distinctiveness of and association with their own tribe; they also tended to push back on images of one tribe that are generalized to represent all Native peoples. Therefore, *Reclaiming Native Truth* must present messages that convey the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Native peoples, while also layering in commonalities to unify them with the wider American population (GQRR).

Creating a Narrative Change Infrastructure - A Necessary First Step

By Crystal Avilla

Advocates from all over the United States are demanding change. Members of the public are gathering together to speak about the atrocities occurring every day in jails and prisons, not in whispers but in shouts. No longer are people murmuring in back rooms as if they are scared of being tarred with the "soft on crime" brush. They have made it clear they expect leaders to develop viable solutions, not point fingers and shift blame. Tremors of movement can be felt underfoot for the first time in decades, and it is wonderful.

Hopefully this new mindset can help finally find a solution to our state's broken criminal legal system. Just as history is written by the conquerors, the dominant narrative in Oklahoma has long been driven by lawmakers, the District Attorney's office, and the media. For years, mainstream dialogue has consisted of tough-on-crime rhetoric that demonizes a substantial part of the population, limiting their options and potential. Blatant fear-mongering not only ensures high ratings for nightly news broadcasts, but also guarantees that power will remain in the hands of those who profit from preserving the status quo. They argue that for the good of public safety we should demonstrate zero tolerance for crime. But this lock-them-up-and-throw-away-the-key system has not worked to fix anything in the past and it never will. Perpetuating a corrupt and broken system is not how we are going to fix Oklahoma's crumbling foundation. Community safety and healing can be more readily accomplished by bridging gaps, promoting the importance of rehabilitation and hope, and encouraging difficult conversations.

One way to facilitate this is to construct a venue wherein those affected by violent crime can find closure, so they are not left to suffer for decades with the ramifications of misplaced hurt

and anger. Left untreated, anger will spread unchecked throughout every aspect of a person's life just like any other infection. Eventually it can result in lashing out and a desire to hurt others just as they, themselves, were hurt. Rage consumes, hardening hearts and birthing vengeance and retribution. Victims of violent crime will protest an offender's commutation or parole proceeding for ages, long after the person who has caused harm is physically incapable of committing another crime. They do this for several reasons: they are still hurting, they do not believe the person has changed, or they are ignorant of the remorse felt by the wrongdoer. Unfortunately, no matter how many years have passed in the interim, it is hard for someone who has spent time behind bars to convince someone they are more than the moment when their crime occurred. And even if they wanted to, the means to apologize does not exist for some incarcerated people. The state encourages this dysfunction, limiting public access to those serving time while perpetuating the idea that if someone has been prosecuted by the state of Oklahoma, they deserve to stay behind bars. This cyclical pattern of victimization must be recognized and dealt with if Oklahoma wishes to rise above its current standard.

Some of the most harmful narratives concerning crime and punishment center around the concept that everyone found guilty of a violent crime is a violent, unstable person who should be feared. That they care nothing about those they have impacted with their actions. That they are horrible monsters who need to remain in a cage for the safety of all humanity. In reality, people found guilty of violent crimes are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, wives, and husbands. Many were not serial victimizers before incarceration and would give anything to take back what they did – but they cannot. They made a terrible mistake that can never be erased. They are forever branded by a single act, even though a single act does not indicate a pattern of behavior; by definition, it is an aberration, a deviation from normal behavior.

The narrative of the irredeemable criminal is a prolific one, mainly because it gives an excuse as to why those who have the capacity to influence real change are kept firmly muzzled, far away from the ears of the public. Yet it is these silenced individuals who should be allowed to speak the loudest. They have a lot to say. The lessons learned from hearing the stories of those who have survived the worst moments a person can live through would be invaluable to any community. All levels of society should be exposed to those within the prison system to know them as fellow human beings. This would enable Oklahoma's citizens to use informed viewpoints when they speak, instead of blindly regurgitating words of hate used by those who have something to be gained by keeping people incarcerated.

Those invested in catalyzing new narratives centered on community safety and violence should focus on amplifying these voices. Allowing the public to view life through another's eyes is the best way to help them understand the inherent fallibility of the human condition. Accounts from incarcerated individuals might demystify violence and the various ways it can manifest, in ways that textbooks and legislators cannot. Opening the channel for this empathetic learning experience is the only way a true narrative shift can happen. Hopefully, those listening would not only recognize people in prison as human beings who made mistakes, but also recognize that everyone is capable of making such mistakes under similar circumstances. A pattern may even emerge that would help to identify at-risk youth before they are entangled within the gears of the legal system. If even one child is saved from the trauma of a prison sentence because of narrative change it would be worth it. Every human being is valuable, and a single act should never lower a person's worth.

Ideally, a community should consist of people who lift each other up and encourage growth and change. A community safety paradigm in Oklahoma would entail fostering an

inclusive spirit. It is the responsibility of those in leadership positions to teach and educate; to demonstrate the meaning of humanity; and to offer basic hope to those who have known nothing but hurt and rejection throughout their lives. Resources should be readily available for parents and children to help strengthen emotional bonds both in and out of prison. Men and women currently warehoused in prisons should have greater access to higher education, ensuring their ability to successfully reintegrate into society upon release. Over time, entire communities who welcome home these rehabilitated individuals will develop new mindsets, leaving behind the stigma of the past. Fostering relationships within the community is the first step to healing for a lot of formerly incarcerated people. Growing close to supportive people helps them realize it is safe to care about another person, that getting hurt is not inevitable. Eventually, they will also learn to care about themselves, leading to a catharsis. This change allows them the freedom to overcome a lifetime of guilt and inspires them to become better people. The subsequent pride and development of civic spirit will result in lowered violence and increased safety for the entire community.

The best way to guarantee any sort of community safety is to fan the flame of hope. Hopeless people are driven to commit desperate acts. If they are made to feel part of something greater than themselves, they would want to belong. What the average Oklahoman citizen does not take into account when they consider why others commit crimes is that not everybody is born to loving parents. This is horrible, but true. A lot of people are not raised in a nurturing environment with appropriate, loving relationships. Rather, they are victimized and made to feel they are worthless. They learn from an early age not to trust anyone. Unlike their healthy, well-adjusted counterparts, they turn to destructive substances and behaviors to distract from depression and hopelessness. For some, life is just something to get through with no chance of getting better. To dream of anything greater only leads to heartbreak. Hurting people hurt people; it is unavoidable.

The fact that Oklahomans are willing to participate in a serious discussion about the sad state of our criminal legal system is promising. There will likely never be a solution that pleases everyone, but a balance needs to be found or everybody will suffer. The debates over the ethics of warehousing incarcerated people, over who is deserving of a second chance, or over the best way to keep our community safe affects us all; whether we are directly impacted by the epidemic of prison or not. We need to stop assigning blame and tattooing labels on people and come together to find a solution. If the goal is truly to imagine a community where all people feel safe and valued, rehabilitation should come first before we consider throwing them away. It is time to bring men and women home to their families.

Creating a Narrative Change Infrastructure

“It's Time for Lawmakers to Give Criminalized Survivors and Our Families a Second Chance”

April Wilkins

I am a criminalized survivor who has been incarcerated for over a quarter of a century for fighting back against my ex-fiancé—my rapist and stalker who threatened to murder me and my son, and who repeatedly raped, choked, and beat me.

Sometimes people ask, "Why didn't she just leave?" I did leave, and his violence escalated. One of the most dangerous and deadly times for domestic violence survivors is when they leave an abusive relationship (Blatt; McCarty, Briggs, and Griesbach; Hensley). In my case, the three protective orders I had against my abuser didn't stop him. A warrant for his arrest, issued when he failed to appear in court after being arrested at my home with a loaded gun, didn't stop him. The panic button I wore around my neck to alert police whenever he attacked me at my home didn't stop him. Despite all my attempts to protect myself and my son, my ex-fiancé continued to terrorize me relentlessly (De Vera; Harlow; Law; Lester; McCarty; McCarty and Briggs; Oklahoma Survivor Justice Coalition; Rose, "Lawyers"; The Sentencing Project and Survivors Justice Project 6).

Unfortunately, police and prosecutors are often quick to punish survivors for protecting ourselves (Krehbiel), even after the legal system fails to protect us. As the national advocacy organization *Survived and Punished* explains, "[T]he U.S. judicial system has made it clear that survivors who face life-threatening violence have only two options: to not defend themselves from violence and potentially lose their lives or their children's lives, or to defend themselves and experience the devastating violence of incarceration" (8-10).

Tragically, approximately 1,690 women were killed by intimate partners in America in 2021. What's more, the percentage of women murdered by intimate partners was five times higher than for men (Erica Smith).

The outlook remains especially grim in Oklahoma, for mothers, daughters, sisters, and grandmothers like me. Oklahoma has the highest domestic violence rate and second highest rate of women killed by men in America (Blatt; Peery). At the same time, Oklahoma has one of the highest female incarceration rates on earth (McLeod). Oklahoma locks up women at a rate over two-and-a-half times higher than the national average (The Sentencing Project), even though women in Oklahoma do not commit more crime than women in other states (Harlow, "#AprilsStory"). Moreover, both nationally and in Oklahoma, women of color are incarcerated at significantly higher rates than white women (Sharp 102; The Sentencing Project).

Keabreauna Boyd and Erica Harrison are incarcerated with me at Mabel Bassett Correctional Center in McLoud, Oklahoma. In 2020, Keabreauna's abusive boyfriend stabbed her belly when she was nine months pregnant. She wrestled the knife away and killed him with it, only to have

police arrest her for murder. Keabreauna gave birth to her baby, Angel, while handcuffed to a bed. She is now serving life in prison with all but 20 years suspended for protecting herself and her unborn child (Law; Oklahoma Survivor Justice Coalition).

In 2013, Erica was raped so savagely by someone she knew that she had to have a hysterectomy. The rape occurred in her own apartment while her young children, who are now grown, were present in another room. She called 911 multiple times after her rapist returned, but police drove past her when they finally arrived, leaving her to protect herself and her children on her own. Erica has already served half of a 20-year sentence for fatally shooting her rapist that day (Oklahoma Survivor Justice Coalition).

A 2023 survey of women inside Mabel Bassett Correctional Center showed 89% of respondents were domestic abuse victims, or were physically and/or sexually abused, before being incarcerated. Most reported being victimized as children and adults (Wilkins, "Domestic").

Countless domestic violence survivors are locked up across America (Michaels, "Women's"). Not only are imprisoned survivors typically denied the resources we need to heal, but we continue to be abused behind bars (Goodmark 107-29). Survivors are separated from family, controlled, strip-searched, caged, shaken down, threatened, and degraded in prison. Violence runs rampant. It's dehumanizing and cruel.

In 2023, a bill that could have helped survivors who fight back against abusers receive reduced sentences almost reached the finish line in Oklahoma. The Domestic Abuse Survivorship Act passed the House Judiciary-Criminal Committee unanimously after being introduced by Republican Representative Toni Hasenbeck (Felder, "She"). Afterwards, however, retroactivity was removed from the bill at the request of the District Attorneys Council (Felder, "Oklahoma Bill"; Rose, "Bill"). As Ben Felder reported in *The Oklahoman*, language helping survivors currently in prison was stripped from the bill due to "fierce opposition from state prosecutors not eager to let out women they have put behind bars" (Felder, "Oklahoma Self-Defense").

The stripped-down bill passed the full House unanimously and then passed the Senate 46-1 (McLeod, "Former"). Next, it went to a conference for legislators to agree on its final language. The House Floor Leader, Republican Jon Echols, publicly called for retroactivity to be restored to the bill. "I support retroactive sentencing relief for survivors of domestic violence who were fighting back to protect themselves and their children," Echols told *The Oklahoman* in May 2023. The Domestic Abuse Survivorship Act is "the next right step for domestic violence survivors and for criminal justice reform in Oklahoma," said Echols (qtd. in Felder, "Oklahoma House").

Although advocates implored lawmakers to restore retroactivity and schedule a final vote before the legislative session ended, that didn't happen (Law). Ultimately, even the stripped-down bill failed to become law due to pressure from the District Attorneys Council which, as NPR-KOSU's Hannah France reported, expressed concern that re-litigation hearings would burden "families of the victims," referring to abusers' families.

The District Attorneys Council is a powerful lobbying group (Michaels, "Oklahoma") that also appears to wield significant influence with the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board. In August 2023, after two pardon and parole board members resigned in the wake of the board's controversial denial of clemency for death row prisoner Richard Glossip, Republican Representative Kevin McDugal expressed hope for change: "I hope we get people that will actually look at each case," McDugal told Alex Cash of Fox News. "I would hope that the members of the pardon and parole board would be more accountable to the people that they serve instead of to the DA's council. I want our DA's in the state of Oklahoma to fully recognize that everything's not perfect in the law, people do make mistakes, there are problems with cases we've had in the past," McDugal continued, "Let's recognize those issues and let's move forward, let's correct them instead of continuing to ignore these issues over and over and over again and them saying, 'There's nothing to see here.'"

Notably, Oklahoma has the highest execution rate in the country (Murphy; Weger). The United States Supreme Court has stayed Glossip's execution while considering whether or not to hear his case (Glossip). Like me, criminalized survivors with no prior criminal record are often sentenced to life in prison (Rose, "Groundbreaking"). It is exceedingly difficult for prisoners sentenced to life with the possibility of parole to ever get paroled (Nellis and King). Consequently, life sentences with or without the possibility of parole often mean death by incarceration for survivors. I myself have been denied parole four times and commutation twice.

Remarkably, not only does Oklahoma's top prosecutor, Republican Attorney General Gentner Drummond, support giving Glossip a new trial (Bauman), but he also expressed support for the Domestic Abuse Survivorship Act while it still included retroactivity (Rose, "Very"). "Too often...the batterer inflicts some sort of pain. The reaction from a victim can sometimes be overpowering and then that victim's prosecuted. That's wrong," Drummond told KTUL News Anchor Brenna Rose in February 2023. Those in power need to "bring the victim out and protect her and identify her, and provide services legislatively and legally," said Drummond, calling for action and change.

There is still hope. Advocates are urging lawmakers to pass the Domestic Abuse Survivorship Act with retroactivity in the 2024 legislative session (Blatt; Bunyan; Law; McLeod, "Former"; Teegan Smith). It cannot happen soon enough.

As it stands, all five of Keabreauna's children, including Angel, will be grown before she's released. And like Keabreauna, most imprisoned women are mothers of minor children (Kajstura and Sawyer). We know that children with parents behind bars are more likely to suffer from mental illness, substance abuse, and problems at school (Cipolla, Loza, and Maine). To be sure, incarceration devastates survivors and our families.

The Sentencing Project and *Survivor Justice Project* relate that survivor sentencing reform "holds promise not just for survivors of domestic violence, but for all individuals harmed by extreme sentencing. Survivor resentencing will provide a second chance to many, and by demonstrating

to legislators, judges, and prosecutors the importance of holistic sentencing and the value of a second look, it can open the door to even more" (20).

The Oklahoma Survivor Justice Coalition is working to help make retroactive sentencing reform a reality for survivors like Keabreauna, Erica, myself, and so many others. Join the movement today at oksurvivorjusticecoalition.org.

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Article

Repairing the Breach: Faith-Based Community Organizing to Dismantle Mass Incarceration

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Abstract: Public awareness of the injustices of mass incarceration has grown significantly over the last decade. Many people have learned about mass incarceration in church contexts through book groups, study campaigns, and denominational statements. In recent years, faith-based community organizing (FBCO) networks have increasingly turned their attention to mass incarceration in light of the growing awareness of many Christian individuals, congregations, and denominations. Mass incarceration, however, presents three distinctive challenges to FBCO. First, dismantling mass incarceration requires overtly and conscientiously confronting white supremacy and advancing racial and ethnic equity; faith-based community organizers have avoided this work in the past for fear of dividing their base. Second, streams of Christian theology based in retributivism have provided justifications for increasingly punitive practices and policies, thus contributing to mass incarceration; FBCO networks must construct and uplift alternative theological streams to support alternative practices and policies. Finally, several practices and policies tied to mass incarceration deplete the political power of individuals, families, and communities most deeply impacted by it. Organizing against mass incarceration requires new strategies for building social capital and creating coalitions among groups who have been disenfranchised, marginalized, and undercounted by these practices and policies. Together, these challenges have required FBCO networks to adapt assumptions, strategies, and relationships that had previously been effective in addressing other issues, such as healthcare, employment, education, and transportation. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper explores the insights, struggles, and innovations of ISIAAH, a network in Minnesota, as its members work to dismantle mass incarceration and confront its unique challenges.

Keywords: mass incarceration; faith-based community organizing; white supremacy; racial equity; retribution; social capital

1. Introduction

“A prison society” (Wacquant 2009). “A tenacious carceral state” (Gottschalk 2015). “The new Jim Crow” (Alexander 2010). “Mass incarceration” (Garland 2001).¹ Regardless of how we name the crisis of criminal justice in the United States, these terms point to a social condition marked by historically and comparatively *high rates* of incarceration and *large total populations* in prisons, jails, and other penal facilities. This condition involves what social theorist David Garland describes as “systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population”, especially affecting people of color and

¹ David Garland coined “mass imprisonment”, but “imprisonment” has typically shifted to “incarceration” in order to capture the expansion not only of prison populations, but also the expansion of jail populations, which include both people detained pre-trial, people with short-term sentences (usually less than one year), and people who have been placed in jails because of prison overpopulation. For an overview of the history of the term “mass incarceration”, cf. (Simon 2015).

people lacking socio-economic resources (Garland 2001, pp. 1–3). We are facing now what the editors of *The New York Times* call a “moral, legal, social, and economic disaster” (Editorial Board 2014).²

Awareness of this disaster has grown significantly over the last decade, with many people learning about it in church settings. Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* and Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* quickly became top picks for church book groups, adult education programs, and listening groups (Alexander 2010; Stevenson 2015; Garcia 2013).³ Several mainline Protestant denominations chose these books for national awareness campaigns.⁴ Some denominations have divested from private prisons, issued social statements and resolutions, and constructed their own curricula about mass incarceration.⁵ The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, a network of progressive black churches, designed a companion study guide for *The New Jim Crow* and conducted Justice Commission hearings, resulting in a report, “Bearing Witness: A Nation in Chains” (Birchett et al. 2014; *Bearing Witness: A Nation in Chains* 2013). The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops last wrote collectively about criminal justice in its 2000 statement, (*Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration* 2000), prior to widespread attention to mass incarceration. Nevertheless, the bishops signed a statement against mass incarceration at the annual meeting of Christian Churches Together, an ecumenical dialogue group that focused its work in 2014 on this issue (*Principles on Mass Incarceration* 2014). In 2017, Prison Fellowship, an evangelical Protestant organization, issued “The Justice Declaration”, which states, “The Church has both the unique ability and unparalleled capacity to confront the staggering crisis of crime and incarceration in America and to respond with restorative solutions for communities, victims, and individuals responsible for crime” (*The Justice Declaration* 2017).⁶ Across significant divisions, Christians in the United States increasingly recognize the injustices of mass incarceration, often sharing Alexander’s recognition that, “This is not simply a legal problem, or a political problem, or a policy problem. [It] raises profound moral and spiritual questions about who we are, individually and collectively, who we aim to become, and what we are willing to do now” (Alexander 2016).⁷

It may seem that growing awareness of mass incarceration has contributed to meaningful criminal justice reform, especially with recent reductions of prison populations, which peaked nationally in 2009, dropping 6 percent by 2016 (Ghandnoosh 2018).⁸ Budget cuts following the 2008 recession

² Significantly, this disaster is not the result of unusually high crime rates in the United States compared to other countries or of historically high crime rates since the advent of mass incarceration in the 1970s. Rather, it has resulted from a confluence of political, economic, social, and cultural factors that led to harsher criminal justice policies and practices. For an overview of these factors, cf. (Levad 2014).

³ In order to manage the scope of this paper, I will focus on Christian faith communities, particularly because of my professional identification as a Christian social ethicist and Catholic moral theologian. Many other religious and non-religious communities are also engaged in efforts to learn about and dismantle mass incarceration, and their efforts warrant study as well.

⁴ The Unitarian Universalist Association, for example, selected *The New Jim Crow* for its 2012–2013 “Common Read” and *Just Mercy* for 2015–2016 (*The UU Common Read* 2018). Also, in 2015, the Episcopal Church recommended *The New Jim Crow* as a common text for congregations throughout the United States in its resolution to study mass incarceration as a denomination (*Encourage Study of the Issue of Mass Incarceration* 2015).

⁵ The United Methodist Church, for example, divested from private prisons in 2012 (Mefford 2012). Examples of social statements and denominational resolutions include the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America’s production of a Social Statement, (*The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries* 2013), at its 2013 Churchwide Assembly. Similarly, the United Church of Christ passed two relevant resolutions at its 2017 General Synod: “Dismantling Discriminatory Systems of Mass Incarceration in the United States” and “Dismantling the New Jim Crow”. Several denominations have constructed their own curricula. The United Methodist Women created a webinar on mass incarceration, in conjunction with a national seminar in 2015. The Mennonite Central Committee organized a week-long learning tour through correctional facilities in Pennsylvania in 2015, and in 2018, the MCC created “Pipeline”, a mass incarceration learning tool used to help participants understand challenges and barriers in the “cradle-to-prison pipeline”. The American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) identify mass incarceration as one of their “key issues” and provide many resources for understanding and responding to mass incarceration.

⁶ The National Association of Evangelicals, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Colson Center for Christian Worldview also composed the statement.

⁷ This conclusion led Alexander to join the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York in 2016.

⁸ Some states saw drops beginning as early as 1999, while some states continue to increase numbers of incarcerated people into the present. Between 2009 and 2016, prison populations in the United States decreased over 6 percent. Those states that most aggressively reduced prison populations—New Jersey, Alaska, and New York—also saw drops over 30 percent since

explain some of this decrease; many states could no longer pay for imprisoning large numbers of people. But criminal justice reform also has had an impact as states curbed the War on Drugs, increased use of diversion programs, reduced prison sentences, revised sentencing guidelines, and reduced or eliminated mandatory minimum sentences (Mauer and Ghandnoosh 2014).⁹ Politicians now see avenues to election by being “smart on crime” instead of “tough on crime”, and their elections bolster continued efforts to reduce reliance on prisons state by state, county by county (Harris 2009; *The Attorney General’s Smart on Crime Initiative* 2017).¹⁰ Notwithstanding these advances, the road to dismantling mass incarceration is still a long one, and the destination will not be reached through reform alone. At the current rate of decarceration, it will take seventy-five years—until the end of this century—to reduce U.S. prison populations by half (Ghandnoosh 2018).¹¹ We are still far from the final destination of dismantling mass incarceration.

To continue down this road, some Christians have become politically active in opposition to mass incarceration, especially through the tactic of faith-based community organizing (FBCO). Rooted in Saul Alinsky’s community-organizing model, FBCO grew out of efforts starting in the 1970s to concentrate more intentionally on communities of faith as loci for organizing (Alinsky 1969, 1971; Bretherton 2015; Warren 2001; Warren et al. 2011; Wood and Fulton 2015).¹² Currently, two of the most important national community organizing networks are faith-based: the Gamaliel Foundation and Faith in Action (renamed in 2018 from the People Improving Communities through Organizing National Network, or PICO). Along with concentrating on faith communities, these networks appeal to the wisdom of religious traditions in defining their transformational vision and draw on religious practices such as singing, prayer, liturgy, and preaching in their organizing (Wood and Fulton 2015). This model of political, social, and community engagement has empowered Christians to address numerous injustices: from inequitable educational systems to inadequate wages, from lack of healthcare access to unsustainable transportation grids. In the past few years, FBCO networks have turned their attention to mass incarceration.¹³

their respective peak years; twenty-one states in total have reduced their prison populations by double-digit percentages. The size of the federal prison population has dropped 13 percent since 2011.

- ⁹ Those states that decreased their prison populations the most also saw drops in crime rates that outpaced national averages, reinforcing the recognition that policies and practices—not high crime rates—created mass incarceration, and changes in policies and practices will be necessary to dismantle mass incarceration.
- ¹⁰ Mayors across the country have joined Smart on Crime, a network created by the Center for American Progress with the support of the Safety and Justice Initiative of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. This network promotes moving away from “tough on crime” policies and practices toward “fair laws and enforcement of the laws”, “just and proportional responses”, “comprehensive investments”, and “data- and evidence-driven solutions”. See <https://www.smartoncrime.us/> (accessed on 17 October 2018). While much of the driving force behind Smart on Crime has progressive roots, it is notable that Koch Industries and Right on Crime have significant presence on the steering committee of the network.
- ¹¹ The nation would still have prison populations almost four times larger than those of the mid-1970s. Even with an end to the War on Drugs, large prison populations would remain, as “half of the state prison population is serving time for a violent crime, including assault and robbery, and one out of every seven people in prison is serving a life sentence” (Ghandnoosh 2018). John Pfaff argues for the need for criminal justice reform to go beyond opposition to the War on Drugs to address much more difficult questions about alternative responses to serious violent crime (Pfaff 2017).
- ¹² Mark Warren et al. distinguish community organizing from political advocacy or service provision paradigms in terms of a shift from advocating *for* or providing services *to* individuals, groups, or communities. Rather community organizing emphasizes “building the capacity of community members to create institutional and policy change on their own behalf” (Warren et al. 2011, p. 7). Community organizing differs from activism as well in its insistence on training leaders who are grounded in community and relationship: “One of the hallmarks of contemporary organizing is the distinction made between a leader who is embedded in relationships and an individual activist who speaks out at a meeting but is not connected to the broader community” (Warren et al. 2011, p. 18). Given these differences from advocacy, service provision, and activism, community organizing aims at multifaceted individual, communal, institutional, and cultural transformation to “give voice to the voiceless, build the participation of local people, increase the power of historically marginalized communities, expand citizenship and democracy, address the profound inequalities of American society, and work to transform our public institutions to make them responsive and accountable to poor working families” (Warren et al. 2011, p. 19).
- ¹³ A detailed account of Faith in Action’s national initiatives on mass incarceration can be found in (Wood and Fulton 2015), which describes the creation of the Lifelines to Healing campaign (later renamed the Live Free campaign).

ISIAAH, one of the largest of Faith in Action's forty-four affiliate federations and eight statewide networks, exemplifies how Christians have used FBCO as a tactic for dismantling mass incarceration (History 2018).¹⁴ Based in Minnesota, this network began as an affiliate of the Gamaliel Foundation in 2000, then separated as an independent organization for several years, before joining Faith in Action (at the time, PICO) in 2012. ISIAAH draws membership from Christian congregations in Minneapolis and St. Paul, the surrounding suburbs, and throughout greater Minnesota. This network has organized against mass incarceration for several years, beginning in 2014 with a campaign for moratoria on suspensions and expulsions of elementary-aged students in four Minnesota school districts in order to disrupt the cradle(-to-school)-to-prison pipeline. This work led to advocacy to adopt and fund the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative throughout the state, opposition to re-opening a previously shuttered private prison in rural Minnesota, and then, support for revision of the Minnesota Sentencing Guidelines (Budd 2016; Cook 2016; Coolican 2016; Negstad 2016; Simons 2015). In 2016, ISIAAH received a grant from Live Free, a national campaign of Faith in Action concerned with criminal justice issues, to enhance its work related to mass incarceration. Since then, the Minnesota network has focused on county-level organizing, especially in Hennepin County, home of Minneapolis. ISIAAH has pressured county officials to eliminate cash bail for non-violent, low-level offenses; increase transparency and restraint in charging decisions and sentencing recommendations; strengthen diversion and restorative justice programs; stop collecting country of origin information from people who have been arrested; create legal defense funds for residents fighting deportation; and end cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) through the county jail.

Mass incarceration presents distinctive challenges compared to other issues on ISIAAH's agenda, and the journey of this network indicates how FBCO might address these challenges.¹⁵ First, although housing, healthcare, and education policies and practices, for example, have been built upon the cultural legacy of white supremacy in the United States, criminal justice policies and practices do so in a particularly pernicious way. Mass incarceration not only stems from racial and ethnic disparities in our society; it also exacerbates them in a vicious cycle. Dismantling mass incarceration requires confronting white supremacy and advancing racial and ethnic equity, and ISIAAH has become more intentional about doing so than FBCO networks have typically been in the past. The second challenge is theological: streams of Christian theology based in retributivism provide justifications for punitive practices and policies. These streams have supported interpretations of justice that require ever harsher punishments against people convicted of crime. Moral and spiritual questions must be confronted alongside policy, political, and legal questions in dismantling mass incarceration, and ISIAAH provides an example of how FBCO can address these questions. Finally, several policies and practices tied to mass incarceration deplete the political power of the individuals, families, and communities most directly impacted it. Those people who know mass incarceration from personal experience are also the people who are shut out of systems and processes necessary to bring about change. Yet without attending to their experiences, any responses to mass incarceration will likely fall short. ISIAAH

¹⁴ ISIAAH is not an acronym. It is also not a pseudonym. For some (but not all) people mentioned or quoted, I have used pseudonyms as per their request. Others are so readily identifiable that pseudonyms would not preserve their confidentiality. All people identified by their real names have given permission for this use.

¹⁵ In addition to the typical barriers of partisanship and divisiveness encountered when addressing any major issue at this time in the United States, several additional difficulties are particular to mass incarceration, but go beyond the scope of this paper. As law professor John Pfaff has argued, our criminal justice *systems* (note the plural) are fractured, with each county and each state having its own policies and practices in need of reform: "we are a nation of either 50 or 3144 distinct criminal justice systems" (Pfaff 2017, p. 13). In addition, every component of these systems—from legislation of criminal codes to policing, from courtroom practices to prison administration—requires attention. Another challenge is the comprehensive nature of social and economic change necessary to dismantle mass incarceration. The Children's Defense Fund indicates the ties of mass incarceration to other systems and structures with its phrase "cradle-to-prison pipeline", which suggests that criminal justice reform is necessary, but insufficient. Dismantling mass incarceration will also require, for example, providing access to prenatal care and resources for early childhood development, creating quality educational systems, investing in neglected communities, and improving comprehensive healthcare systems, among other initiatives.

demonstrates how FBCO can generate alternative forms of political power accountable to these people and their experiences. Together, these challenges indicate that dismantling mass incarceration will require confronting enduring legacies of white supremacy in U.S. culture, contesting retributivism in Christian theology, and building political power among and with some of the most marginalized, disenfranchised, and undercounted members of our society. In what follows, an ethnographic case study of ISAIAH demonstrates how Christians might employ FBCO to confront these challenges.

2. Address White Supremacy and Confront Racial and Ethnic Inequity

First, dismantling mass incarceration requires addressing white supremacy and advancing a broad-based agenda for racial and ethnic equity. Mass incarceration is concentrated on socio-economically disadvantaged individuals, families, and communities of color.¹⁶ In 2016, a third of people in prisons and jails in the United States were black, while nearly a quarter were Latinx ([Trends in U.S. Corrections 2016](#)). The rate of incarceration of black men is over six times that of white men, and the rate of incarceration of Latino men is more than twice that of white men ([Trends in U.S. Corrections 2016](#)). Alexander made “mass incarceration” and the “new Jim Crow” household terms with her argument that our criminal justice systems create “a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society” ([Alexander 2010](#), p. 13). The people within this caste are disproportionately black and brown, recreating the previous castes maintained by Jim Crow laws, ideologies, and practices. In addition to challenges faced by African-American individuals, families, and communities, Latinx people often encounter mass incarceration through the mechanisms of immigration enforcement, especially detainment and deportation. Even prior to President Donald Trump’s “zero tolerance” policy (instituted in early 2018), which refers all people who cross the U.S. border without documentation for federal prosecution, increasing prosecution of immigration violations led to Latinx people comprising nearly half of all defendants sentenced in federal court by 2012 ([Light et al. 2014](#)). Marie Gottschalk notes, “These developments have fostered what some are calling a ‘cimmigration’ or ‘immcarceration’ crisis” ([Gottschalk 2015](#), p. 215). Racial and ethnic inequity is a central characteristic of mass incarceration.

This inequity stems from the roots of white supremacy in our culture. Dehumanizing images and narratives, often with racialized tropes, have fueled the growth of our criminal justice systems by supporting retributive policies and practices against people deemed “criminal”. A classic example of the deployment of such tropes is the Willie Horton campaign advertisement used by allies of the George H.W. Bush campaign during the 1988 presidential election against Michael Dukakis. Another example is the term “superpredators”, coined by then-Princeton political science professor John DiIulio in 1995, and popularized in his 1996 book, *Body Count* ([DiIulio et al. 1996](#)).¹⁷ This term, and others such as “wildings” and “wolfpacks”, play upon the animalization and brutalization of young men of color and feed moral panic about crime, thus providing a cultural framework to justify mass incarceration ([Welch et al. 2004](#)). President Trump’s demonization of Latinx immigrants as “drug dealers, criminals, and rapists” or as members of MS-13 or as terrorists evokes the cultural framework supporting cimmigration/immcarceration ([Phillips 2018](#)). Mass incarceration, particularly its disparate impacts

¹⁶ One critique of “mass incarceration” as a term is that it can erase the discrepancies in who is most affected by expanding criminal justice systems. Loïc Wacquant argues that “mass incarceration” tends to imply that this social condition is evenly distributed across the population, when it is clear that it affects non-white individuals, families, and communities much more deeply ([Wacquant 2009](#)). In contrast, Jonathan Simon notes, “However, the term ‘mass imprisonment’ need not be misleading, and it captures an important degree to which incarceration risk has been generalized. While African American and Latino males may be incarcerated at rates many times the level of their white peers, the latter face incarceration rates unprecedented historically or in other countries. Other institutions that have been described as ‘mass’, including the military or higher education, also have distinctive demographic patterns of stratification” ([Simon 2015](#), p. 28).

¹⁷ DiIulio and his co-authors claimed, “America is now home to thickening ranks of juvenile ‘superpredators’—radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more preteenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun toting gangs, and create serious communal disorders” (p. 27).

on individuals, families, and communities of color, grows from white supremacy, further exacerbating racial and ethnic inequities.

Because mass incarceration grows from white supremacy and exacerbates racial and ethnic inequities, any efforts to dismantle mass incarceration without addressing these realities will prove inadequate. The field of community organizing, including FBCO, however, has historically avoided open discussions of race and ethnicity because of assumptions that they would be ideologically driven and divide the organizing base along racial and ethnic lines (Warren 2001; Wood 2002). Sociologists Richard Wood and Brad Fulton observe,

... the structural makeup of [FBCO] was ... an obstacle [to address racial and ethnic equity]. The broader institutional base of the field (mostly Catholic and liberal Protestant in addition to historic black churches, but also synagogues and mosques, and a few evangelical churches) often resisted—and sometimes continues to contest—any explicit focus on race, preferring instead more “race neutral” and “color-blind” approaches to improving the quality of life in poor and middle-class communities (Wood and Fulton 2015, pp. 140–41).

ISIAAH shared this history with the field of FBCO as a whole. Paul Marincel, a founder of ISIAAH and its Director of Strategic Initiatives, explained,

The roots of community organizing come out of a set of organizers, mostly men, and a set of decisions that they made that were, for a variety of reasons, explicitly anti-ideology and opposed to an open conversation about race as inherently divisive. I would argue that the roots of community organizing, including faith-based community organizing, were in opposition to an overt race conversation (Marincel 2016).

Notably, ISIAAH began to enter and facilitate “overt race conversations”—both in its internal operations and in its external engagement—*prior to* beginning its work against mass incarceration. As a result, this organization provides an example of how to build efforts to dismantle mass incarceration upon explicit opposition to white supremacy and ongoing commitment to racial and ethnic equity.

Around 2008, ISIAAH began to bring racial and ethnic equity to the core of its organizing. This shift came about for several reasons, including (but not limited to) growing awareness in the previous decade of dramatic racial disparities in Minnesota; increasing non-white populations in the state, especially with larger immigrant and refugee populations; concern that Latinx communities were becoming isolated from the rest of the organization; and unease about unintended consequences of policies that ISIAAH had advanced that purportedly benefited all Minnesotans, but in reality obscured diverse needs of communities and individuals of color (Schantz 2016).¹⁸ Participants in ISIAAH realized that policies, conversations, and practices often are “racially neutral on their face, but are not

¹⁸ A focus group with ISIAAH organizers on 9 December 2016 in Minneapolis, MN confirmed Schrantz’s conclusions. The final challenge reflects tension between “false universalism” and “targeted universalism”, discussed in (powell 2012). As powell consulted with ISIAAH during this time period, recognition of this tension has become common within analysis among ISIAAH participants in understanding advocacy for racial and ethnic equity. Prior to 2010, ISIAAH operated out of a framework that its participants now recognize as false universalism rooted in post-racialism. powell writes, “Post-racialists ... are reluctant to support ideas that cannot be framed in a universal manner, and an explicit consideration of race is largely off the table. This course of action has the apparent advantage of helping those who have been historically excluded without mentioning a topic seen as ‘divisive’” (pp. 10–11). As a result, post-racialists appeal to seemingly universal norms and programs that actually have disparate effects on different groups precisely because the “universal” obscures those differences and the “universal” programs end up treating all groups of people as if they face the same barriers. In contrast, “A targeted universal strategy is inclusive of the needs of both dominant and marginalized groups, but pays attention to the situation of the marginalized group. For example, if the goal is to open up housing opportunities for low-income whites and non-whites, one would look at the different constraints for each group. Targeted universalism rejects a blanket approach that is likely to be indifferent to the reality that different groups are situated differently relative to the institutions and resources of society. It also rejects the claim of formal equality that would, as a way of denying difference, treat all people the same. Any proposal would be evaluated by the outcome as well as the intent. While the effort would be universal for the poor, it would be especially sensitive to the most marginalized groups” (p. 24). Wood and Fulton’s *A Shared Future* demonstrates that this analysis of “targeted universalism” has become standard throughout Faith in Action federations.

racially neutral in effect” (*Shining the Light: Revealing Our Choice* 2012). A watershed moment came in 2010, when ISALAH partnered with John Powell, who at the time worked at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University, to construct a curriculum, *Shining the Light: Revealing Our Choice*, to guide the organization in explicitly addressing white supremacy, which became the basis for evaluating all of its efforts.¹⁹ As the curriculum states, “If race is not being considered in a plan, conversation, or action around equity, then the plan, conversation, or action is incomplete” (*Shining the Light: Revealing Our Choice* 2012, p. 3). At the same time, ISALAH endeavored to foster relationships with congregations with more diverse racial and ethnic representation, as well as to support the leadership development of people of color in the organization, both as congregational leaders and as staff organizers. More Black churches became members of ISALAH, facilitated in part by shifting practices in the organization to become more welcoming to diverse groups. Reverend Paul Slack, the African-American pastor of New Creation Church in Minneapolis, became the President of ISALAH’s Board of Directors, followed by the current president, Reverend James Alberts of Higher Ground Church of God in Christ in St. Cloud, who is also African-American.

The engagement of ISALAH with issues involving mass incarceration, such as sentencing guidelines and private prisons, was possible because of its *previous* work on racial and ethnic equity, supported by its *Shining the Light* curriculum. The sense among many of the people that I interviewed was that responding to mass incarceration was an obvious and necessary next step. Executive Director Doran Schrantz reflects on the sequence of developments: “I think that’s when [2010] we consolidated the commitment across the organization that race was going to be at the center of what we did. Then, by 2011, we were working on school suspensions and stuff like that. That is how we got into the mass incarceration work” (Schrantz 2016). A sense of inevitability infuses her comments, which is echoed by Sarah Gleason, a leader in ISALAH active since the early days of the organization:

The mass incarceration work came in through specific organizing in African-American churches, but it came into ongoing explicit work on race and racial equity being at the center. [Work on mass incarceration came in] in such a way that I didn’t even actually notice an actual ripple. People who had been part of ISALAH previously, we were pretty easily able to go, “Oh, yeah, and that too. That totally fits everything else we’ve been doing and we’ve been saying, and yes, now we’re on that” (Gleason 2016).

These reflections indicate that for many participants in ISALAH, dismantling mass incarceration fits clearly with an overarching commitment to racial and ethnic equity, which precedes—historically, theologically, and philosophically—the work of ISALAH on criminal justice reform.

ISALAH thus engages the cultural work of confronting white supremacy by adapting previous practices, assumptions, strategies, and relationships. Its case, however, illuminates the difficulties of these adaptations, suggesting how others might follow ISALAH’s lead and what future steps for challenging white supremacy and dismantling mass incarceration might be necessary. Not everyone in ISALAH, for instance, readily committed to racial and ethnic equity or to organizing around criminal justice issues. Resistance arose around two points. First, ISALAH lost some of its base due to its rejection of “racial neutrality”. Schrantz comments somewhat ruefully, “We have lost churches, two really painful ones . . . The other thing that happened [was] . . . that the growth of the base wasn’t going to be in the white denominations, which led to some resentment” (Schrantz 2016). In many ways, the (mostly) men at the roots of FBCO were right: explicitly addressing white supremacy can be divisive. If organizers do so—even if they do it really well—they must be prepared to alienate some members of their base who are not ready for this challenge. Schrantz continues, “The organization had whiteness in it. We’re going to look at our culture, and say, ‘What about our culture is good organizing, and what about our culture is whiteness?’” (Schrantz 2016). Some longtime members of ISALAH

¹⁹ John Powell does not capitalize his name.

left because the organization reevaluated everything that it did in terms of whether it perpetuated whiteness and racial disparities, which “creates a lot of insecurity and fear” (Schrantz 2016). Although organizing in response to mass incarceration may have been an obvious next step of commitment to racial and ethnic equity, the first step of committing to racial and ethnic equity—and doing so over and over again through what Schrantz describes as “an iterative process”—was not obvious, easy, or painless (Schrantz 2016).

Another point of resistance concerns criminal justice and mass incarceration specifically. Many people, especially African Americans, were not as enthusiastic about these issues as the quotes from Schrantz and Gleason above suggest. Middle-class whites were enthusiastic. Schrantz quips, “White liberals are super on board. They have read Michelle Alexander, they gave her a standing ovation, they are game” (Schrantz 2016). African-American individuals and congregations in ISALAH were often more reticent. When asked if she agreed with Gleason’s sense of openness in ISALAH to work on criminal justice reform, Evelyn Williams, an African-American leader, responded,

Nope, I don’t share that observation, and I think it all depends on the audience, quite frankly. I feel that, yes, ISALAH as an organization had been on a journey around race for a very long time. As the result of that, there are certainly some communities inside of ISALAH who would have said, “Yes, it makes perfect sense to talk about [mass incarceration]” . . . Within the black community . . . I don’t know that it necessarily stuck. I think there are just fundamental challenges within the black community in general when it comes to organizing in this work that had to be overcome . . . There have been some black churches who were involved and remain involved, but for every one that there is, there are five that aren’t or more (Williams 2016).

After noticing this contrast, I asked other participants in interviews what they made of these varying responses from Gleason and Williams. At least two observations came to the fore. Based on interviewees’ reflections, on one hand, reticence may stem from a narrative that stresses respectability against the racist narratives that criminalize and dehumanize black (and brown) people in our culture—a narrative growing out of white supremacy. Sonja Flores, a Latina organizer, describes the dynamic she has encountered, which she then verified in conversation with black clergy. Flores observes,

What happens . . . is internalized oppression . . . If you are told all your life that you are a bad person because of your skin or your color, and you see it play out in your community, in your family, you take two different routes. You . . . become this African-American person that tries to do everything right and puts their head down to not be targeted, and you live a very individualized life . . . trying to fight all these odds. Or you become the person that statistics say you’re going to become, whatever. If you don’t become that person, you eat it up, you eat this entire worldview and narrative about yourself, and about your people. You say, “I didn’t go through that, so why did they? I was able to do this.” . . . I see it with Latinos too, this is so true with people of color. I ate it up . . . That is the difference between organizing white people and people of color. That is the main difference, and that is why people don’t jump on their own issues . . . It’s actually one of the most difficult things we face as organizers. (Flores 2016).²⁰

The “internalized oppression” described by Flores fits with what Alexander has identified as a “politics of respectability” within black communities that enables distancing from people caught up in criminal justice systems.²¹

²⁰ Other participants verified Flores’s assessment, for example, in conversation with a focus group from ISALAH on 9 December 2016 in Minneapolis, MN.

²¹ Drawing on Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s phrase, “politics of respectability”, Alexander writes, “[In black communities], while some argue that [mass incarceration] is attributable primarily to racial bias and discrimination, others maintain that it

On the other hand, interviewees suggested that black communities may be particularly reticent to trust white individuals and traditionally white organizations in efforts to dismantle mass incarceration, even if these organizations and individuals have worked to diversify, advance racial equity, and change their culture. Paul Slack observes, “What happens is, there’s a lot of distrust. There’s a lot of distrust for random white people” (Slack 2016). He continues, describing the response of community members in north Minneapolis to some campaigns of ISIAAH in the past,

A lot of people do not believe that there is any hope, that they have any voice about what’s going to happen . . . We were running around telling people about the issues that we cared about, asking them what the issues were that they cared about. *Many* of them said regularly, “Why am I even bothering? Nothing is going to change” (Slack 2016).

In addition to hopelessness and distrust of white individuals and organizations, ISIAAH organizers and leaders also recognize that some of their practices, aspects of their organizing culture, have made it difficult to build relationships in black communities. Schrantz recalls reforming one practice that was more about “whiteness” than “good organizing” at a particular monthly gathering of clergy in which attendees were overwhelmingly white (Schrantz 2016).²² The whiteness of the group demographically and the “whiteness” of its agendas practically made it difficult for new people in general to feel included, but it especially alienated participants who were not white and may not feel comfortable with the commitments, or “asks”, required by the group.

Both of these points of resistance—the risks of alienating white communities and the reticence of black communities of partnering with whites around mass incarceration—suggest that ISIAAH’s work is far from done. No one whom I spoke with expressed a sense that it was. The organization continues to promote racial and ethnic equity, while identifying the distinction between “whiteness” and “good organizing”. This commitment may alienate members of the white base of ISIAAH, who will be forced to acknowledge their own complicity and advantage in a white supremacist culture and change their behaviors and practices accordingly. ISIAAH must also discern how to support and follow the leadership of people of color in an ongoing manner. One aspect of such support will require challenging politics of respectability as they fit within a culture of white supremacy, emphasizing the fundamental dignity of all persons regardless of race, ethnicity, class, or criminal record. While ISIAAH could retreat into a “race neutral” approach given these challenges, the organization instead remains committed to confronting white supremacy, both in our wider society and within its own practices, assumptions, strategies, and relationships. Such a commitment, and the adaptations it requires, will be necessary to dismantle mass incarceration.

is due to poor education, unraveling morals, and a lack of thrift and perseverance among the urban poor . . . The fact that many African Americans endorse aspects of the current caste system and insist that the problems of the urban poor can be best explained by their behavior, culture, and attitude does not, in any meaningful way, distinguish mass incarceration from its predecessors [e.g., slavery or segregation]. To the contrary, these attitudes and arguments have their roots in the struggles to end slavery and Jim Crow. Many African Americans today believe that uplift ideology worked in the past and ought to work again—forgetting that ultimately it took a major movement to end the last caste system, not simply good behavior. Many black people are confused—and the black community itself is divided—about how best to understand and respond to mass incarceration” (Alexander 2010, pp. 212, 214–15). Several other interviewees, both black and white, echoed Flores’s assessment.

²² ISIAAH stopped using these meetings (although they were often effective for organizing around “universal” platforms) and began creating alternative spaces for organizing around “targeted universals”. One example is the “Just Race Table”, which meets twice monthly to discuss racial equity issues over lunch. This gathering differs in part from the monthly clergy meetings because it has a looser agenda, with no “asks.” From these meetings, several African-American clergy members have assumed greater leadership roles in ISIAAH, including Pastor Slack. Another shift from “whiteness” was increasing “relational warmth” in gatherings—making eye contact, greeting each other with hugs, saying “hello” to one another. Focus group participants reflected that an African-American organizer, originally from Georgia, who now works with PICO in another city especially emphasized these practices. Her southern ways of engaging perhaps thawed some of the coolness of “Minnesota nice” folks, often of Scandinavian descent.

3. Elevate Redemption in Christian Theology

Theological justifications for our current social condition present a second challenge to dismantling mass incarceration. The knots that bind Christianity to retributivism in U.S. culture need to be untangled, especially as they are tied to white supremacy as well as to support for punitive practices and policies (Douglas 2015; Gilliard 2018; Gorringer 1996; Hill 2017; Jennings 2010; Levad 2014; Logan 2008; Marshall 2001; Snyder 2000; Taylor 2015). Certain streams of Christian thought draw upon retributivism, an interpretation of justice that requires the state to mete out proportional punishment to guilty parties. While criminal justice systems in the United States prior to the 1970s nominally appealed to rehabilitation as justification for their policies and practices, after the 1970s, retribution became dominant.²³ Some Christians defend retributivism as consonant with their faith. Many cite scripture when describing their attitudes about criminal justice: “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”²⁴ Aspects of Christian tradition, such as Anselm of Canterbury’s satisfaction theory and John Calvin’s penal substitution theory of the atonement, depend on retributive interpretations of justice, where violent punishment is deemed necessary for redemption of sinners (Gilliard 2018; Gorringer 1996). Such theological concepts undergird mass incarceration, as can be seen now, for example, in Christian defenses of imprisonment as necessary for the redemption of the souls of people who have committed crime. Sociologist Tanya Erzen captures justifications of incarceration offered by Christians in her ethnography of evangelical faith-based prison ministries. She observes, “Many faith-based ministries support imprisonment itself because they operate under the assumption that grace and transformation are possible because punishment is ordained by God and manifested in incarceration. Punishment in prison makes sense . . . because God is there to forgive” (Erzen 2017, p. 18). Alternative interpretations of justice and atonement however are viable within Christian tradition; elevating them is an aspect of the moral and spiritual challenge presented by mass incarceration.

Participants in ISIAAH draw on these alternatives by emphasizing “redemption” over retribution, a shift that informs the ethical framing of their organizing work. Reverend Brian Herron, a leader in ISIAAH, for example, opened a meeting, titled “Pain, Power, Politics, and Prosecution,” with Hennepin County officials in May 2018 with an opening “call to action” (Herron 2018). He contrasted endless punishment in criminal justice systems with his hope for “redemption” that could lead to transformation of both criminal justice systems and individuals in prison:

[The criminal justice system has] to be transformed, made new, made different. Did you know that there is nothing redemptive about the criminal justice system? Redemption is not built anywhere into that system. There’s nothing redemptive about prison. As a matter of fact, most of the folk in that place who watch over you, like the COs and the counselors and stuff, their whole mission is to tell you how you’re going to be back.

There’s no redemption, and if there’s no redemption, then what is the hope of change in me as a person . . . There’s a continuum of punishment. And that continuum of punishment is heaped upon a person to keep them so broken that they end up going back. To keep them in such a state of flux that there is no hope that anything is going to be better and anything is going to change for me, so I might as well keep doing what I’m doing and just learn to do it better (Herron 2018).

²³ For a brief history on the transition from rehabilitation to retribution in criminal justice policies and practices in the United States since the 1970s—and the transition back to rehabilitation in the last decade—see (Andrews and Bonta 2010).

²⁴ This phrase is known as the *lex talionis* or law of retaliation (Leviticus 24:19–20; also, Exodus 21:23–25 and Deuteronomy 19:21). For critiques of retributive interpretations of the *lex talionis*, see (Davis 2005; Getek-Soltis 2011; Marshall 2001). These critiques indicate that the *lex talionis* neither requires nor gives permission for equivalent harm inflicted upon wrongdoers. Rather, this law places a limitation on retaliation: take *no more* than an eye, take *no more* than a tooth.

Herron does not seem to understand “redemption” here in a narrowly evangelical way that would equate it with conversion or personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as one’s savior. Nor does redemption focus only on the individual convicted of a crime. Rather, Herron views redemption as a process of building up people broken by pain, chaos, and injustice so that they can return to community. This redemption will only be possible with the redemption, or transformation, or making new, of criminal justice systems as a whole. Herron’s call to action evokes the prophetic imagination of ISAIAH that questions the existing order of retributivism and that summons a different vision of criminal justice in opposition to mass incarceration.

Interviews with ISAIAH’s leaders and organizers indicate that this ethical and theological framing infuses the whole organization. Beyond prepared remarks for public gatherings, conversation with participants in ISAIAH reveals their similar opposition to retributivism and their construction of an alternative Christian worldview. In an interview, Evelyn Williams reflects along lines similar to Rev. Herron:

I think locking people in boxes and treating them as though they’re inhuman is against God’s vision of all of us being a part of His divine creation. I think that [mass incarceration] is something we should care about because God is a God of redemption. He is a God of love; he is a God of forgiveness; he is a God of reconciliation. Those are not values in the criminal justice system. It’s not about restoring people and their dignity. It’s not about helping people be on a path of righteousness. It’s not about love and support and encouragement. It’s about punishment. On the other side of that punishment, you just get a lifetime of additional punishment. There’s no pathway to peace and to wholeness after incarceration (Williams 2016).

Williams contrasts the inhumanity of punishing people through incarceration with God’s redemption brought about through love. Mass incarceration, for Williams, is contrary to God’s plan for humanity, both individually and communally, for ultimate peace, love, and wholeness. Paul Slack also draws on a theological commitment to redemption and the dignity of human persons to contest retributive narratives in our culture, especially as they focus on people of color:

When it comes to this particular issue, what’s key in our faith is the whole thought and value of redemption. Think about the gospel. Most of the gospel is about redemption, is about forgiveness, is about new starts. Mass incarceration is the exact opposite. Redemption talks about the sacred creation of all human beings. I think *God* talks about the sacred creation of all human beings. But when you look at mass incarceration and the people that it is impacting most, the people that it is impacting most are people of color, particularly African Americans, and African-American males (Slack 2016).

Together, Herron, Williams, and Slack offer a coherent theology about human dignity, forgiveness, community, and redemption that calls into question theological justifications for retributive approaches to justice. Their prophetic imagination challenges assumptions that punishment, pain, and imprisonment are ordained by God in order for God to extend forgiveness.

Critiquing retributivism in Christian theology, specifically, and in U.S. practices and ideologies of criminal justice, generally, is not tangential to ISAIAH’s organizing efforts in the halls of the State Capitol or at County Board meetings; participants see this cultural work as imperative to dismantling mass incarceration. As organizer Sonja Flores argues,

When it comes to mass incarceration issues, the biggest thing that we’re fighting is actually a worldview and a narrative . . . So many people have eaten the narrative of, you’re good or you’re bad. This makes you good, and this makes you bad. With mass incarceration, punish this person because they did something bad, and that’s it . . .

We’re fighting a worldview and a narrative of, they did something that was “illegal” [scare quotes], right? Now they should be punished. We are stripping the humanity away from

people, and it's this worldview and narrative that people have eaten up. That is the hardest thing to fight, because once people have this narrative, you have to work to understand, first, why they have this worldview or narrative, and then, you have to work to tell them it's false, and put in what the reality of the matter is (Flores 2016).

According to Flores, transforming narratives about “goodness” and “badness,” as well as interpretations about the necessity of punishment, is crucial to her organizing. These narratives are fundamentally theological, drawing on assumptions about sin and redemption, divine and human justice, and division between the “criminal” and the “righteous.” By questioning these assumptions, participants in ISAI AH challenge the centrality of retributivism in Christianity and break the link between increasingly punitive criminal justice systems and theological justifications for punishment.

An exchange between participants in ISAI AH and a legislator during an April 2017 hearing at the Minnesota State Capitol makes it apparent that these assumptions still need questioning. Several speakers from ISAI AH had testified against a proposal to re-open a private prison, citing their commitment to a theology of redemption based in their faith. Tony Cornish, then a representative from southern Minnesota and a member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, responded, “I can probably two-to-one the Bible passages about throwing people in prison rather than letting them out” (Minnesota Omnibus Judiciary and Public Safety Committee 2017, 3:10:00).²⁵ His assumption that this biblical tit-for-tat would result in his victory points to the need to contest dominant theologies that uphold retributivism in public discourse about criminal justice. Without presenting an alternative narrative or worldview rooted in Christianity, retributivism—such as that supported by Cornish—would remain dominant and continue to feed increasingly punitive criminal justice policies and practices. Upholding redemption as instead central to Christian theology provides the ethical framework for participants in ISAI AH to continue their work to dismantle mass incarceration. With this framework, ISAI AH can present the possibility of criminal justice systems rooted, not in punishment, but in dignity, forgiveness, love, and reconciliation that can foster righteousness, peace, and wholeness—for the redemption of individuals and our society as a whole.

4. Build Power Among Disempowered Communities

A third challenge to dismantling mass incarceration is that this social condition depletes the political power of the individuals, families, and communities most directly impacted by it. One way in which this depletion occurs is through voter disenfranchisement of people with felony convictions. Policies vary by state (Manza and Uggen 2006; Uggen et al. 2016; Robles 2018; Uggen et al. 2006; Uggen and Manza 2002). In only Vermont and Maine can people in prison vote. Thirty-five states bar people in prison or jail and people on felony probation or parole from voting. Eleven states prohibit people with any felony conviction from voting even after completing their sentences—in some cases, for life. As a result, 6.1 million people in the United States are prevented from voting, 77 percent of whom are no longer incarcerated; one in thirteen African-Americans have lost their right to vote due to felony disenfranchisement, in comparison with one in fifty-six non-black voters. Prison-based gerrymandering exacerbates the effects of voter disenfranchisement (Ho 2011; Prison Gerrymandering Project 2018; Sakala 2011; Skocpol 2017; Suber 2014). To uphold the principle of “one person, one vote,” districts are drawn by evenly dividing the population in geographical areas so that each voter has roughly similar access to political power as every other voter. In most states, the U.S. Census counts people in prison at the address of their cells. Districts with prisons may have approximately the same number of *residents* as neighboring districts, but they have significantly fewer *voters*. As a result, people who live in districts with prisons *and* who are *not* incarcerated have more political capital than people in districts without prisons. Prison-based gerrymandering particularly disadvantages

²⁵ Notably, Tony Cornish is no longer a state representative, his tenure coming to an end after numerous sexual harassment complaints were leveled against him, resulting in his resignation (Coolican 2017).

communities *from which* large numbers of people in prison come, as people with home addresses in those communities are counted elsewhere, depleting their political representation even further. Together these policies and practices create significant hurdles to addressing mass incarceration in a way that includes the voices, concerns, and experiences of the people who know the realities of mass incarceration most intimately.

Community organizing in general, and FBCO in particular, can mitigate the impacts of these policies and practices. These fields maintain that adequately responding to any issue depends fundamentally upon cultivating “social capital”—“the resources inherent in the relationships between people that help them achieve collective aims”—among people on the underside of dominant institutional and cultural patterns (Warren et al. 2011, p. 24).²⁶ Progress in advancing living wages, healthcare access, or well-resourced schools—or in dismantling mass incarceration—can be achieved when community organizers build power by fostering relationships within and between communities affected by these issues. Wood and Fulton explain, “Dominant institutional and cultural patterns . . . benefit some societal sectors—and those sectors use their power to resist change . . . All intentional efforts to foster social reform . . . must therefore generate forms of counterhegemonic power” (Wood and Fulton 2015, p. 9).²⁷ Social capital among sectors that need and desire change is the base of power necessary to work against those sectors that prefer the status quo and that benefit from access to financial, political, and human capital. Relationships are the font of social capital. FBCO can help to generate and sustain power by building relationships amongst the people, family, and communities most directly impacted by mass incarceration.

Three public meetings capture ISIAAH’s efforts to cultivate social capital among constituencies affected in different ways by mass incarceration. In August 2017, “Repairing the Breach,” co-hosted by Greater Friendship Missionary Baptist Church and Ascension Catholic Church (respectively African-American and Latinx dominant congregations), brought together over one hundred community members from a variety of denominational, racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. In this meeting with Hennepin County officials, leaders brought forward several proposals that united the interests of diverse communities: eliminate cash bail for non-violent, low-level offenses; increase transparency and restraint in charging decisions and sentencing recommendations; strengthen diversion and restorative justice programs; stop collecting country of origin information from people who have been arrested; and end cooperation with ICE through the county jail. ISIAAH participants reiterated these proposals at a second meeting, “Pain, Power, Politics, and Prosecution,” in May 2018, which focused on charging decisions and sentencing recommendations of the Hennepin County Attorney’s office. While this meeting built more exclusively on black leadership in ISIAAH and the effects of mass incarceration on African-American communities, participants also raised concerns about contact between ICE and county law enforcement agencies, thus reinforcing the coalition apparent at the “Repairing the Breach” meeting. Finally, in September 2018, ISIAAH hosted a forum, also titled “Pain, Power, Politics, and Prosecution,” with county commissioner, attorney, and sheriff candidates for the upcoming election. This meeting again brought together Latinx, African-American, and white communities, demonstrating the continuation of the coalition built more than a year previously for the first meeting.

²⁶ For an overview of the origins, development, and use of “social capital” in social sciences research, see (Schuller et al. 2000, pp. 1–39).

²⁷ Community organizing employs several practices to build power through relationships. Organizers typically start with “one-to-ones” in which they listen to the personal stories of community members, learn about their pressing concerns, and trace connections between those narratives and the broader political context that informs and shapes them. These conversations may be expanded in house meetings and listening campaigns that surface the issues that matter most to communities. Participants learn about overlapping concerns, comparable experiences, and possibilities for mutual support, thus cultivating “bonding social capital”—“connections between people who are alike in significant ways”—that can be leveraged to advance common goals (Warren et al. 2011, p. 25). These gatherings also have the potential to bring together people from diverse communities who may still share some interests despite their differences.

Cultivating social capital through FBCO requires both *strengthening bonds* among people who are alike to advance common goals and *building bridges* across diverse communities that may still share common goals despite their differences. ISIAAH's meetings show the interplay of "bridging" and "bonding" social capital (Paxton 1999, 2002; Putnam 2000).²⁸ For example, the opening reflection of Reverend Billy G. Russell, the African-American pastor of Greater Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, at the "Repairing the Breach" meeting, helps to convey this interplay:

Injustice of any kind disturbs us. It disturbs us when we hear of families that are being torn apart by a system of mass incarceration that is not transparent and accountable to those who live under its threat. It disturbs us when families are being terrorized by the constant threat of deportation under current policies of the federal government. It disturbs us to hear stories of our brothers and sisters who have been harmed by unjust immigration and incarceration policies, and we are going to engage our public officials in a conversation about how they will lead to address these injustices. It disturbs us when we hear that there is no consistency in bail and sentencing recommendations. It disturbs us when we hear of local officials colluding with ICE in separating families. It disturbs us when we hear of bail systems that hold people captive just for being poor. It disturbs us. And as we join together today, I want to tell you that it's together we stand and divided we fall. It's time for us to work together, right now. We need to look out for one another. We are responsible for helping each other, even when it's inconvenient (Russell 2017).

Russell's words reflect an effort to strengthen bonds based upon a common "disturbance" by injustice. He also invites listeners to recognize others as "brothers and sisters," encouraging loyalty and solidarity despite important differences. Russell's list of injustices highlights shared experiences of African-American and Latinx communities of being surveilled, arrested, and incarcerated, often by the same state authorities, although under differing, but overlapping, systems of criminal justice and immigration enforcement. As a result, he creates bridges between communities that may not initially see their experiences of injustice as related. The policy proposals of the meeting, along with Russell's invitation to "work together" and "look out for one another," indicate the effort in this meeting to build power through bonding and bridging social capital.

Following an opening reflection such as Russell's, ISIAAH typically employs storytelling at each meeting to strengthen bonds and build bridges among leaders and organizers.²⁹ The third meeting best demonstrates this use of storytelling for fostering relationships to build power. Three stories held together an agenda that addressed both immigration enforcement and criminal justice concerns. José first told his story as a Mexican immigrant who came to the United States without documentation, worked for eighteen years as a meat cutter, paid taxes for all of those years, and gained legal status four years ago. He emphasized the fear within his community as even people with legal status worry about deportation for themselves, their families, and their neighbors. Jay, an African immigrant without a prior criminal record, then relayed his challenges with the criminal justice system when he was arrested for Driving While Intoxicated even when repeated breathalyzer tests showed he had a blood alcohol level of only 0.001% (the legal limit in Minnesota is 0.08%; the officer insisted the breathalyzer was broken and refused to give Jay a blood or urine test; Jay wondered whether the officer interpreted his accent as slurred speech). After spending three nights in jail because he could not pay his bail,

²⁸ "Bonding social capital" involves the "connections between people who are alike in significant ways" that can be leveraged to advance common goals (Warren et al. 2011, p. 25). Connections among people who are meaningfully dissimilar, but who may still share some interests despite their differences—or, "bridging social capital"—can increase the power generated by bonding. In many circumstances, "Isolated and marginalized, low-income communities may lack the resources to be successful [for multifaceted transformation]" (Warren et al. 2011). Coalitions and partnerships that cross boundaries that frequently divide communities from each other can increase power, but depend upon fostering relationships that uphold connections without erasing important differences.

²⁹ On the use of narrative and storytelling in FBCO, see (Oyakawa 2015).

Jay accepted a plea deal in order to get home and return to work but he now carries the mark of a criminal record. Patsy, a middle-aged white woman, shared the final story, in which she recounted her recovery from addiction brought about through access to treatment. Her story conveyed the need to respond to addiction as a medical, not a criminal, problem, and challenged candidates to divert people with addictions away from incarceration. It also highlighted Patsy's differing encounters with the criminal justice system as a white woman struggling with alcoholism, in contrast with Jay, who drank a single beer over the course of four-hour football game and drove home. Despite the differences of each of these storytellers, their narratives provide concrete encounters with the injustices by which the people gathered ought to be disturbed, to recall Russell's opening reflection at the first meeting. With white, Latino, and black storytellers, participants could see a reflection of themselves in at least one storyteller, while also being called to see a brother or sister in at least the other two storytellers despite important differences—thus, generating both bridging and bonding social capital. The stories invite participants to join in the demand for justice from the candidates at the forum, and based on the relationships strengthened through storytelling, the unified group has more political power than any one constituency would have alone.

While these meetings indicate ISAI AH's success in coalition building, they also reveal some difficulties. The second meeting especially highlights these issues. This gathering was the smallest of the three, with fewer than fifty participants. Most of the participants were black; a handful were white. Representation at this meeting may reflect an intentional choice to build power among African-American leaders in response to mass incarceration, a focus on bonding social capital. This emphasis came to the fore in the opening reflection delivered by Pastor Brian Herron, who stressed the need for African Americans to unite against mass incarceration and take the lead in a new movement following the path of "our ancestors" in the Civil Rights Movement. Doing so might involve partnering with ISAI AH but, in Herron's view, would also require moving beyond ISAI AH to partner with traditionally black organizations:

I can speak for the black community . . . I love ISAI AH, and I appreciate the work of ISAI AH, but we need to be leading in this work. We need to be connected to the NAACP . . . I see my good sister here from the NAACP. We need to be working with you. We need to be supporting y'all's work. We need to use this vehicle called ISAI AH and everything that they have as a resource, but we need to lead it (Herron 2018).

These comments suggest enduring ambiguity about African-American leadership in ISAI AH, as well as the sense that ISAI AH is still a predominantly white organization, in contrast with the NAACP. Later in his call, Herron emphasized the need for shifting leadership roles in a movement for criminal justice reform:

I don't like people who say that they're the voice for the people who don't have a voice, because everybody got a voice, everybody got a voice. It's just that some people's voices aren't listened to and others are, and so how do we not speak for folk, but raise people up to speak for themselves so that they're listened to? . . . And to my white brothers and sisters, you don't have to be an expert. All you do is go back to your groups, and you repeat everything that you hear us say, and you tell them that this is what you learned. I'm saying all this because the movement has to look different now. It has to look very different. And we have to be committed to it, as committed as our ancestors were, we have to be even more committed now (Herron 2018).

White participants in the meeting are instructed to listen and learn from the experiences of African-American participants, to share what they learn in their own communities, and to cede leadership roles to the black descendants of the Civil Rights Movement. But for Herron, these descendants need to step up to their call to action; his comments indicate some disappointment with the turnout for the meeting:

I'm asking you all, talk to your people, talk to your friends. Man [sighs], this place ought to be packed, given the situation and what we're talking about. This place ought to be packed. And see, what folk don't understand is that political systems are moved by one's ability to organize people, because people represent votes. If this place was packed, you'd get a whole different response from Mr. Freeman. If you pack a city council meeting, if you pack a state house meeting, the conversation changes dramatically (Herron 2018).

Herron's conclusion points to the possibilities of FBCO generating social capital among groups often deprived of other forms of political power and of deploying it effectively to "change conversations." Any one community, however, may not be able to generate enough social capital to be effective; members of black communities must pack the meeting, but their strength could be multiplied in collaboration with other communities who share common goals. Herron indicates the need for strong bonds within black communities, as well as building bridges to white and Latinx communities.

This meeting—and moments in the other two—exhibits the effort of ISAI AH to promote diverse leadership in an inclusive coalition, while also revealing that these efforts remain incomplete. Some black participants in ISAI AH still seemed to view it as a white organization, with resources and partners that can further the work for racial equity and dismantling mass incarceration, but needing further transformation so that black (and brown) leaders can speak and organize for themselves. At the same time, these meetings indicate the great strides of ISAI AH in coalition building across race, ethnicity, class, and denomination. Significantly, at the meeting where Herron spoke, leaders raised concerns about contact between ICE and county law enforcement agencies even though this meeting had few Latinx participants. By bringing up immigration issues alongside criminal justice issues, participants exhibited their solidarity across racial and ethnic lines, their effort to "hang on to" the Latinx community, to echo Billy Russell's words. African-American and Latinx communities in ISAI AH therefore remained united in this meeting, although the main focus fell on black experiences of criminal justice systems. The unity of these groups contributed to one of the most important political victories of ISAI AH resulting from these three meetings: Hennepin County dedicated \$250,000 to a legal defense fund for residents fighting deportation beginning in December 2018. Even with depleted political power of people with criminal records or immigrant status, FBCO effectively changed the status quo of "cimmigration" in this community. Thus, fostering relationships in diverse coalitions can build power to change hegemonic systems, even when individuals in those coalitions do not have ready access to the vote.

5. Conclusions

Mass incarceration is a disaster—ethically, legally, socially, and economically. Dismantling it will require imagination and perseverance to move beyond criminal justice reform and to effect cultural, moral, and spiritual transformation of our carceral state. Many Christians from across the theological spectrum have become aware of this disaster in recent years and are looking for tactics to oppose mass incarceration. The case study of ISAI AH reveals the possibilities of FBCO as one such tactic, particularly as participants in this network have confronted white supremacy and advocated for racial and ethnic equity; developed alternative Christian theological narratives and worldviews in contrast with retributivism; and built social capital among the people most directly impacted by mass incarceration, even in the face of policies and practices designed to deplete their political power.

The road to dismantling mass incarceration, however, is a long one, and participants in ISAI AH would readily admit that they have not yet overcome many of the barriers on this journey. They remain resolute in upholding a theology rooted in God's redemptive love that calls not only for individual transformation, but also for transformation of our prison society as a whole. Uplifting this theology in a culture that still promotes punitive interpretations of God's work in the world remains an ongoing task. While participants in ISAI AH have made progress in understanding their own complicity in white supremacy and advancing equity both within the organization and in our wider society, they also recognize, in the words of Doran Schrantz, that their work is "iterative," requiring

long-term, thoughtful commitment even when they make errors. ISAIAH provides a model for how to continue making progress in this direction in terms of being willing to draw on the insights from external experts on race and racism; to change practices, assumptions, relationships, and strategies according to whether they represent “good organizing” versus “whiteness”; and supporting black and brown membership and leadership, even if doing so may alienate some purported white “allies”. The organization continues to strengthen bonds and build bridges, but at times must emphasize bonds over bridges or vice versa—focusing, at turns, on participation, leadership, and representation of particular communities or on connecting communities affected by mass incarceration in different ways. The example of ISAIAH illustrates the need to “raise people up to speak for themselves so that they’re listened to,” in Brian Herron’s words, as well as the need to create coalitions of raised-up people that can speak more loudly and powerfully together than they can apart. The journey of dismantling mass incarceration is far from over. Yet ISAIAH’s case indicates next steps that those who would repair the breach in the face of injustice might take together.

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Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

Advocacy

Bridging Faith and Social Justice Across Generations

How an unlikely alliance between Catholic nuns and young social activists benefits both groups.

By [Brittany Koteles](#) | May 17, 2021



(Illustration by Gracia Lam)

As the crises of climate change, racism, and economic inequality coalesce, many young activists are aware that even the most ambitious policy changes won't, on their own, achieve a sustainable future. These times require a cultural shift away from limitless extraction and consumption. The call to heal our planet and dismantle white supremacy is, above all, a call to evolve and **grow our souls**.

That's a perplexing task, especially for the most religiously unaffiliated generation in the United States. When asked, about 44 percent of millennials, who are 25 to 40 years old, check "none of the above" from a list of religious affiliations. This has earned them the nickname "the nones" at our organization, **Nuns and Nones**—a coalition seeking to create communities of care and contemplation that incite bold social action.



Meeting the Multigenerational Moment

This essay series, presented in partnership with [Encore.org](#) and [The Eisner Foundation](#), explores how fresh thinking and new social arrangements hold the potential to make the most of an increasingly multigenerational society.



FOLLOW THIS SERIES

Millennials and younger generations who are separated from religious institutions lose a wealth of benefits, including organized community, moral backing, and brick-and-mortar spaces that have historically fueled social change. Consider, for example, the Black church's central role in the civil rights movement. Today's young activists who lack religious or spiritual support structures are making it up as they go—often in isolation.

Creating a New Community

At the same time, Catholic nuns—often called women religious or sisters—have spent their lives in a spiritual community to sustain a lifetime of service to the poor and marginalized. Following the Catholic church's renewal movement in the 1960s and 1970s, most sisters shed their traditional habits and cloistered lifestyle, and began serving where they perceived the greatest need, while continuing to live with one another in community. Their work at present-day ministries includes advocating for LGBTQ rights, providing legal counsel to immigrants, running ecojustice farms, and protesting the construction of fossil fuel pipelines.

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Yet today's Catholic sisters face a challenge. In the United States, there are about 30,000 Catholic sisters, or one quarter of the number there were in the late 1960s, and their average age is 80 years old. With many fewer women becoming nuns, these communities are searching for new, creative ways to share their way of life.

To the outsider, an affiliation between young, spiritually diverse activists and Catholic sisters may seem unlikely, even odd. But during a few organized exchanges between about 20 young activists and older sisters in 2016, the two groups recognized that they shared a similar impulse to integrate personal transformation with the lifelong work of pursuing social and ecological justice. Their conversations led to the formation of Nuns and Nones.

Our initial exchanges sparked a network of twelve local groups throughout the United States, in locations such as Boston; Chicago; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Washington, DC; and the San Francisco Bay Area. Local organizers hold ongoing meetups, dialogue circles, retreats, and movement organizing events.

Blending Community, Contemplation, and Social Action

At Nuns and Nones, we seek to create “bridge infrastructure” that allows ideas and resources to flow freely between generations and across religions. We envision a world in which young activists have access to a model for contemplative living, and sisters are supported in imagining futures for their way of life—both inside and outside of religious institutions.

Our national network also continues to experiment with new programs that blend community, contemplation, and action. In 2019, for example, five nones—which we also call seekers—moved in with the Sisters of Mercy in Burlingame, California, for six months as part of a [pilot residency program](#). A different program brought together more than 200 sisters and seekers to take an online course on the [regenerative economy](#) and discuss how to move beyond economic practices that value profit over people and the planet. And last fall, hundreds of people from our network joined together to get out the vote and keep voters safe during the presidential election.

We aren't working alone. An emerging network of national groups is emerging to serve social activists' need for spiritual community outside religious institutions. [The Formation Project](#), for example, designed a year-long, modern adaptation of the novitiate—the training and preparation sisters undergo before taking final vows. [The Mystic Soul Project](#) is a community created for and by people of color to explore activism, healing, and spirituality. And the Faith Matters Network's [Movement Chaplaincy training program](#) offers spiritual support to people engaged in social justice movements.

Over the past five years, we've seen many powerful benefits to combining spiritual community and social justice activism across generations. Here's a look at four:

1. Nourishing and Sustaining Lifelong Commitment to Social Justice

Throughout history, spiritual communities have upheld and reinforced social justice movements. The Quakers, for instance, played a major role in the abolitionist movement in the 18th and 19th centuries. And in the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi relied on his deep Hindu beliefs and practices to sustain the nonviolent campaign for India's independence.

Sisters and seekers share an impulse for a counter-cultural lifestyle, fueled by spiritual longings and justice work. For sisters, these elements are much more structured; they include lifelong vows, a faith tradition, and the radical commitment to share their income, expenses, and belongings.

Through decades of contemplative practice and community life, sisters bring a rootedness to movement spaces that young activists desire but often lack. “I think spiritual life allows you to live and have staying power in places where hard things can burn you out,” said Michigan-based organizer Kendra Avila. “When you are doing it with others in community, struggling with the same questions ... it helps you stay a little bit longer.”

Sisters and seekers in Avila’s group have held podcast discussions and postcard-writing parties to support migrant families at the border. In Minneapolis, members are reading articles about ecological justice between work sessions on sisters’ community gardens. And members in the San Francisco Bay Area are exploring new forms of community in a variety of ways, including taking a field trip to the urban farm and education center **Canticle Farm**, which seeks to “transform trauma across differences” of race, gender, and age.

Often, one encounter sparks bigger experiments. At the outset of COVID-19, for example, the New York City group’s Zoom meetups inspired the Dominican Sisters of Hope to offer **hour-long listening sessions** to the public. The sessions have run for 53 ongoing weeks since the outset of the pandemic, drawing in 270 sisters and seekers of all ages to “hold one another” as they share thoughts, struggles, and experiences.

2. Building Mutually Beneficial Relationships

Intergenerational alliances are most effective when they are mutually beneficial, as other essays **in this series** have discussed. At Nuns and Nones, we aim to engage both sisters and seekers in a shared process of creation.

For example, a team of four sisters, five seekers, and the director of **Mercy Center** joined in a months-long collaborative process to design the aforementioned pilot residency program and propose it to the sisters living at the Mercy Convent. Once the young residents moved in, the same group met regularly to plan events for the broader community, including discussions on topics like gender and sexuality, and weekly ice-cream socials with the community’s eldest sisters. They also took to the streets to protest the separation of migrant families at the border. The residents, several of whom were Jewish or had ties to Judaism, also hosted a weekly Shabbat dinner that was open to their Catholic peers. In addition, sisters regularly dropped off poems or articles for the residents to read, and one even began giving viola lessons.

Through the day-to-day rhythms, residents got a glimpse of the inner workings of community life, from morning meditation to laundry protocols. At the residency's end, Nuns and Nones co-founder Adam Horowitz said, "The lived taste of being in community across age and faith traditions makes me even more keen to orient my life toward making it manifest more often and for more people." Sister Marguerite Buchanan said that sisters felt "a renewed energy" after experiencing residents' curiosity and enthusiasm, adding, "I experienced great hope in the future."

3. Creating New Uses for Sacred Spaces

Social activists need brick-and-mortar spaces in which to gather, contemplate, share experiences, and chart future goals, and declining memberships in some religious communities around the United States means that new spaces for this are opening up.

Nuns and Nones groups usually gather in sisters' convents, motherhouses, or retreat centers designed for community life and functions. As they age, many sister communities are downsizing into smaller settings or divesting from maintenance-heavy properties, leaving an uncertain future for their convents and land.

Some have taken measures to protect their land from development by **creating conservation easements**, **selling it to conservation trusts**, or **reserving it for farming**. Others are creating new programming that connects with the needs of a younger, more diverse crowd. For example, in 2019, Susan Classen, a member of the Sisters of Loretto in Loretto, Kentucky, began to examine the white and privileged nature of the people who use the retreat hermitages on the sisters' property. Through conversations with Nuns and Nones and the Retreat Center Collaborative, Classen helped the Sisters of Loretto create the **Mockingbird Hill House**, which offers free retreat space to social justice activists.

Monasteries are one of the earliest forms of community centers, where monks in the Middle Ages would take in strangers and help the poor. Looking to the future, could it be that the places that first served as Nuns and Nones meetings might see a further renewal as these centers of community life and learning? Might we imagine affordable housing co-ops, Indigenous-stewarded natural areas, or new spiritual organizing spaces in the convents built by these committed women? We have yet to find out, but we are working with a growing number of sisters' communities to explore how their physical assets might contribute to the ongoing need for community and sacred space.

4. Practicing Values Internally

Any group seeking to dismantle systems of oppression should guard against replicating these systems in their own organizations. Practices and policies must reflect and uphold the values of equity, trust, and relationship.

Inspired by the Sustainable Economies Law Center's **example** of compensation principles “outside of the unjust market,” for example, Nuns and Nones’ team policy commits to transparent and equal pay, a living wage, better-than-average benefits, and flexible paid vacation. This aims to address the backward logic of underpay in the nonprofit industry, where the very people most affected by social inequities are the least capable of making ends meet.

Valuing all coworkers’ labor equally is one example of how proactive policies, structures, and cultural practices—when approached intentionally—can begin to create a more equitable world from the inside out. We’ve also implemented democratic, equitable practices in other internal arenas, including feedback and accountability, ongoing political education, advisory structures, conflict engagement, and seasonal, all-team “check-ins” for reflection and assessment.

Conclusion

In 1995, scientists observed the longest-known seed dormancy when a lotus sprouted *after 1,300 years*. Similarly, most innovations are ancient ideas looking for new soil. The real task of social innovators is to learn how to tend old seeds in new ways.

Today’s religious landscape may be changing, but the need for cross-generational communal and spiritual infrastructure will continue. Addressing the climate crisis, white supremacy, and other injustices will require responsive and resilient communities to anchor the long-term work of culture change. Linking arms across lineage and generations, nuns and nones are tending to the aspects of community that social movements need to succeed. They’re planting the ancient seeds of resilience in new soil and inviting all of us to help them grow.

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*Read more stories by **Brittany Koteles**.*



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The Role of Values and Faith in Oklahoma’s Criminal Legal System

By Sonia Weindenfelder

“You say you’re a follower of Jesus, but you’re so nice! If there is a God, I think you might have met Him.” This was the reaction of a community member to Marty Grubbs, senior pastor of Crossings Community Church in Oklahoma City. As a person of faith, I find this quote unsettling; of course a follower of Jesus should be nice! As a citizen of the world in which we live, however, I understand the sentiment. We have probably all experienced judgment, unkindness, or even cruelty at the hand of someone who claimed to be religious, and even though I am a believer, I don’t always treat people the way I should. Unfortunately, it goes further than that.

America’s Puritan roots and “an eye for an eye” philosophy have historically been justifications for harsh punishments and tough-on-crime policies. Even when not explicitly stated, for many of us these ideas form the basis of our concepts of justice. Further, I think we find it comforting to believe that people who commit crimes are somehow essentially different from the rest of us; that there is somehow an “us” and a “them”; that “we” would never do the things “they” do; and the things that happen to “them” could never happen to “us.” That somehow “they” deserve what “they” get.

Unfortunately, while that attitude may feel comforting in the short term, in the long term it just doesn’t work. Oklahoma’s rates of incarceration are unsustainable simply from an economic standpoint. The criminogenic effects of incarceration make reoffending more likely, not less, and the cost to human lives, families, and communities is unconscionable. As stated by political scientist Marie Gottschalk, “The carceral state directly shapes, and in some cases, deforms, the lives of tens of millions of people who have never served a day in jail or prison or been arrested. An estimated eight million minors – or one in ten children – have had an incarcerated parent... Millions of people reside in communities that have been depopulated and upended as so many of their young men and women have been sent away to prison during what should be the prime of their lives” (Goodmark, 2018, p.17).

The picture is just as grim after a person is released from prison. Before serving time, two-thirds of incarcerated men were employed, and half of them were the primary wage earners for their families. After their release, however, 60 percent of formerly incarcerated people experience long-term unemployment. Those who are employed earn 40 percent less than those who were never incarcerated. This affects people of color in an especially detrimental way; “as few as 5 percent of African American applicants for employment with criminal records receive callbacks for interview” (Goodmark, 2018, p.27). Criminologist Elliott Currie put it this way: “The experience of incarceration, especially in a society that already suffers from a hollowed opportunity structure and thin social supports, is often a disabling one that sharply reduces the

number of prospects of a good job and decent earnings – and thus serves in practice to cement great numbers of former offenders into a condition of permanent marginality” (Goodmark, 2018, p.27).

As we are gathered at this Roundtable discussion to think about these problems, we have to decide what our values actually are. What do we value? What do we want to give to each other? What do we want to leave for our children, and how do we want to shape the world for their children?

Decreasing incarceration rates is meaningless if we don’t simultaneously make the world safer, more inclusive, and more supportive. Why should the average person care how many people are locked up if they themselves can’t pay rent or put food on the table? Who has the energy to care about recidivism if your living situation feels or is unsafe, or if you have never recovered from past trauma and are “white-knuckling it” through daily life? There are some of the problems that lead to crime and incarceration in the first place.

I believe that if you belong to a community of faith – any faith, regardless of your belief system – you probably agree that where these problems exist, they should be remedied. My belief system tells me, “If a brother or sister is naked and in lack of daily food, and one of you tells them, ‘Go in peace. Be warmed and filled,’ yet you didn’t give them the things the body needs, what good is it?” (James 2:15-16) This way of thinking is not unique to Christianity; it is shared by major religions around the world. Sometimes the problem just seems too big, and it’s hard to know where to start.

So let’s start with values. At the core of who I want to be is the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” This brings to mind words like “kindness” and “generosity,” words not often associated with criminal justice. At the same time, I am fiercely protective of my loved ones and community, and I would do almost anything to protect them from harm. How can we protect our loved ones and communities while employing kindness and generosity? Is it even possible?

It can’t be done overnight, but here is one place we might begin. Some charges, such as failure to protect and felony murder, should no longer exist. They only serve to incarcerate individuals who did not commit the crime and in many cases were unaware it was even taking place. Relatedly, the current initiative to offer relief to criminalized survivors of domestic violence is not only necessary but also humane – why continue to punish survivors?

Additionally, we should be treating drug addiction as a public health problem, not a criminal legal problem. Author, activist, and MacArthur grant recipient Reginald Dwayne Betts recently stated that drug treatment programs cost \$8,000 per person per year as opposed to the

\$24,000 per person per year that it costs to house a person in prison. With a higher success rate and few to none of the criminogenic effects of prison, the treatment programs are by far the better option. In the case of drugs, I believe prison sentences should be reserved for only the most egregious offenses.

Restorative justice options will be controversial in the beginning. But for some offenses a better result may be achieved by treating the root cause rather than by simply incarcerating people. For example, in some very specific cases of domestic violence, it may be possible to treat both the survivor and the accused person with dignity, and work towards healing and restoring both parties without imprisonment.

The Asha Project/Asha Family Services in Milwaukee, Wisconsin is one such program. Not only does the program work with "... a range of at risk and vulnerable individuals, including victims of domestic violence and sexual assault..." (Rice et.al., 2020, p. 20) to educate and raise awareness, it also incorporates abuser intervention services for "male offenders in jails/prisons and in the community" (Rice et. al., 2020, p.20). By working to educate and heal both parties, the Asha Project works to deal with the root causes of domestic abuse, enabling people to move forward in a healthy way.

One of the general aims of restorative justice is to "define accountability as a form of responsibility to harmed parties as opposed to punishment meted out by the state" (Kim, 2019, p. 316). Portland's Domestic Violence Safe Dialogue is a "...restorative justice initiative in which panels of survivors of domestic violence share their experiences with participants of a 26-week batterer intervention program, none of these in the program being known by the participating panelists" (Kim, 2019, p. 316). This type of community accountability has the potential to be healing for both parties, which would make it far more productive and ultimately more cost effective than "the machinery of mass incarceration" (Kim, 2019, p. 316). Not only that, but programs like these could still "operate within the context of professionalized, law enforcement-involved programs" (Kim, 2019, p. 316), possibly making them more palatable to those who may fear that without incarceration, there may be little or no accountability,

I know these aren't end goals; they're first steps. There will be bumps and roadblocks on the way to an equitable, just, and sustainable criminal legal system. But what better way could there be to prevent new harms tomorrow than to heal past harms today? What better way could there be to restore and strengthen our communities than to heal all parties, both survivors of harm and those who caused that harm, rather than simply removing huge segments of the community? These types of interventions make it possible to love our neighbors – all of our neighbors – as ourselves.

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has never made a sustained public safety commitment to any institution other than the police and the criminal justice system in its current form.

If the police are no longer given the task of dominating public space and regulating violence, we must ensure that someone is watching over every community and taking responsibility for the safety and well-being of everyone within it. With fewer warriors on the street, we need to invest in more guardians. The evidence available suggests that community organizations and residents are qualified to play this role. We must invest in giving them the opportunity to do so.

16

WHO GOVERNS? SAFETY, GOVERNANCE, AND THE FUTURE OF JUSTICE

Katharine Huffman and Robert Rooks

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Over the past several decades, justice reformers have devoted tremendous energy to policy change. They have gathered signatures for initiatives to end three-strikes laws, lobbied for sentencing and bail reforms, called for increased access to diversion programs, and testified in support of marijuana decriminalization. In our advocacy for these policy changes, our arguments refer to saving lives, saving resources, increasing fairness, and giving people second chances. Sometimes, our arguments also talk about safety. We assure our audiences that the policy changes we propose will create—or at least not decrease—safety. Too often, however, we use traditional definitions of safety generated by our current law enforcement-centered approach. In doing so, we accept that safety can be measured entirely by things like reductions in arrest numbers, recidivism rates, and interpersonal violence.

Such advocacy and arguments have helped begin the dismantling of

laws that drive mass incarceration in this country. Ultimately, however, they are insufficient. They fail to address two core aspects of sustained, foundational justice: the creation of robust, equitable, and enduring safety for all; and the establishment of civically accountable governance to implement this safety. We must look beyond policy change to create a new, comprehensive governance system that acknowledges human dignity and meets community needs. We must claim the political and moral authority to redefine "safety," seizing that authority from the punitive and criminalizing actors who have co-opted the concept to keep power for centuries.

Essentially, safety is protection from harm and the opportunity to thrive. Since protection and opportunity are necessarily achieved in relation to others, nobody can achieve safety alone. Formal and informal agreements, which govern how we help and relate to each other, define the shapes that protection and opportunity take. In turn, these agreements depend on values. They depend on who has a seat at the table when policies are developed, and who has the authority to define and secure safety. Historically, people with the most political power have both set and sat at the table. However, we believe that the group of people at the policy-setting and governance table should be much broader. The group should involve not just those whose power comes from traditional structures—such as government and economic resources—but also those with moral authority, namely, those most affected by historic lack of protection and opportunity. Together, these actors can redefine safety and propose holistic policies to ensure it for everyone.

To chart a path forward, we must look back over our journey thus far. Fifty years ago, the American incarceration rate was only marginally higher than that of most other countries. Then as now, the country—and particularly Black and brown communities—faced a set of real issues. These included violence, wealth disparities, lack of treatment for addiction, and insufficient and inequitably available tools to allow people to thrive. Then as now, the stories told about these problems tapped into powerful narratives of racism and fear; they framed Black and brown people, young people, immigrants, and others as a threat to so-called law-abiding citizens. And then as now, mainstream political voices, amplified by the media, used these social problems to conjure an omnipresent sense of danger. This generalized threat was used to justify a large-scale increase

in punishment. At the same time, health-focused and community-strengthening responses—including education and affordable housing—were neglected.

Bipartisan state and federal policy responses to crime and related social problems fueled the exponential growth of the justice system. Politicians defined safety as "freedom from violence at the hands of a dangerous stranger," and insisted it could be achieved through multi-billion-dollar investments in police, prisons, and jails.¹ This narrative, which intentionally tapped into the American public's fear of danger, not to mention its racism, supported the War on Crime launched by President Johnson, the War on Drugs launched by President Nixon (and expanded by Presidents Reagan and Bush), and the 1994 crime bill initiated by President Clinton. As a result, this narrative—and this definition of safety—dominated decades of policy conversations about the government's duty to protect its citizens and keep people safe.

Throughout this time and in the decades since, "departments of public safety" grew significantly. Tiny agencies grew into enormous government bureaucracies that in many states and localities are now the largest budget item.² Yet these agencies, which leave the biggest state footprint in many communities, have continued to rely on a definition of "safety" that reflects the narrative of the violent stranger, and on narrow measures of "success" such as reductions in reported crime, increased arrests, lowered recidivism rates, and the like. Media coverage perpetuated the "dangerous stranger" narrative; the common wisdom, "if it bleeds, it leads," granted extensive coverage to carjackings, mass shootings, and serious acts of violence.³ As a result, the definition of safety remained limited, and law enforcement was positioned at the center of social responses to violence. This bolstered the policy consensus that safety should be measured only using the metrics of the justice system.

Alongside this investment in policing and prisons was mass divestment from systems of community thriving. As governments scaled up the War on Drugs in the 1970s, they closed mental health centers; today, the repercussions of these decisions endure in the vast scale of homelessness, and in people with mental health challenges cycling in and out of jail.⁴ In the 1980s and 1990s, when crack emerged as a pervasive public threat, states and localities failed to build treatment centers or increase health services; today, those failures persist in the struggle to address the challenges of

the opioid crisis. Over and over again, we failed to take opportunities or find political will to build true public health systems, in part because such systems did not fall under our common definition of safety.

Moreover, the belief that “only the justice system can make us safer” cut across communities and the political spectrum. Large and influential African American leadership organizations, including the Congressional Black Caucus and many major civil rights groups, were among those calling for investments in safety that relied on increased police presence and longer sentences.⁵ While such groups also often called for more health-focused responses—mental health treatment, affordable housing, the removal of lead paint from walls—only the justice system requests were fulfilled. Community voices calling for a broader safety agenda were often subsumed into the narrative that safety is exclusively a law enforcement responsibility. Even non-punitive and preventive responses, when they did exist, were typically channeled through the justice system: a child might receive mental health services, but through the juvenile justice system, not from a school counselor or community clinic. A teenager looking for access to the arts or a sports team could find it through the police department’s after-school program, not one run by a school or neighborhood group.

In all these ways, law enforcement received the resources and sole legitimacy to define safety, to determine which policies would secure safety, and to distribute resources. This led directly to our situation today: a country that has the world’s largest prison system yet cannot deliver health and healing to protect people—not only from “dangerous strangers,” but also from more intimate physical violence or the manifestations of poor physical and mental health, substance abuse, lack of access to housing and education, and so much more.⁶ True safety cannot be guaranteed by prisons and police. As people—including members of law enforcement—are increasingly recognizing, “we can’t arrest our way out of this.”⁷ We need, therefore, an urgent change in who leads and participates in our discussions and actions about safety.

A justice reform movement has emerged in recent years, as community members, advocates, and policymakers have all begun to see the negative impacts of over-incarceration. Initially, however, such advocacy did not challenge the core definition of safety. Instead, it often focused on cost containment, or on whether people arrested for “nonviolent crimes”

or “low-level drug offenses” should be sent to prison.⁸ While these arguments helped protect some people from the dehumanizing label of “dangerous,” they did not fundamentally challenge the notion of who or what makes us safer or acknowledge a basic human dignity for all. They did not call for investment in a new kind of social infrastructure, or hold accountable the large health, education, and human services systems that can truly contribute to safety. And they did not question whether the growing reach of the justice system was really making us safe at all.

Gradually, however, a different narrative about safety has started to gain power, thanks to the efforts of people themselves impacted by the over-built justice system (and the under-built social support systems). Nationwide, people across the political spectrum are questioning the status quo, pointing to its harms and costs, and demanding change. They are realizing the need to reckon with our past—with the history of dehumanization, racism, classism, and more—to finally approach true safety for all.

This narrative change reflects the increasing power of people who have long been denied political power but who have the moral authority to change our conversations about safety and justice. Moral authority belongs to those most affected—whether through state action or inaction—by the lack of protection and opportunity to thrive. Who has moral authority by this measure? One group is crime survivors, who have not received from the justice system bureaucracy what they need to heal. Another is people who have been arrested, convicted, and sentenced for crimes, but denied the robust supports and services needed to thrive.

Safety has never been evenly distributed, even by traditional measures. When reported crime rose in the 1980s and 1990s, criminologists found that despite the media image of omnipresent violence, crime trends did not change much outside of big cities. In addition, study after study showed that those most affected by changing rates of violence were poor communities of color.⁹ Today, whether rates of crime and violence rise or fall, the fact remains that people who have higher incomes, are white, and are over twenty-four are less likely to be victimized than those who are not white, have lower incomes, and are young.¹⁰

Under the status quo, our definition of “safety” is failing to meet the needs of crime survivors. Survey research shows that while one in four people has been a victim of crime in the past ten years (half of whom

experienced a violent crime), two out of three victims did not receive help of any kind following the incident. Moreover, the minority who do receive help are more likely to get it from family and friends than the criminal justice system. Nor do the billions spent on the justice system provide victims with more general support; even when mainstream measures of danger (reported crime rates) were at all-time lows, only three in ten victims of crime report feeling very safe in their community.¹¹

Incarcerated people are another large group whose safety needs are not met by the status quo. Incarcerated people face high levels of violence, illness, and chronic health conditions. Many continue to struggle after release owing to a lack of reentry assistance and to nonsensical rules making them ineligible for many jobs, services, and other social supports. This dearth of support puts at risk not only the people returning from incarceration, but also the families and communities that they rejoin.

Importantly, neat boxes cannot be drawn around those impacted by crime and violence, dividing them into separate monolithic groups; many people who have been arrested and convicted of crime are themselves survivors of violence and other harms.¹² This underscores the need to eliminate barriers that prevent people with past convictions from fully participating in our civic life, and to build systems that promote safety by helping people break cycles of crime. To create this supportive social infrastructure, both crime survivors and those convicted of crimes must be at the table to direct meaningful change.

A revitalized future that ensures health and safety for everyone must engage all segments of society. We must center voices that have been historically marginalized. Yet we must also attend to the dignity and healing of those who have been part of the status quo, including law enforcement and corrections officers. Only by addressing the need for stability and recovery from past trauma and harm for everyone—wherever they have stood in relation to the past—can we guarantee true and lasting safety in the future.

When people with moral authority lead in a way that centers human dignity, they can build an agenda for safety that provides everyone with protection and the opportunity to thrive. This work, however, cannot be accomplished only by identifying new solutions or by changing laws or policies. Instead, the power of new voices must extend to the creation of new systems of governance, accountability, and civic involvement. Only

such structural change will bring about a more just form of safety that can withstand backlash from traditionally powerful actors.

Over the past ten to twenty years, many laws and policies governing justice systems have changed. At the same time, overall levels of violence have dropped in many localities. Yet this has not resulted in a general sense of robust and resilient safety. Why? The answer lies in the fact that real safety depends on systems of governance and accountability that turn “on paper” initiatives into enduring social change.

Communities are tied together by shared agreements. Yet these have never meaningfully existed for all members of our society. Moreover, many such agreements appear to be falling apart all around us. For example, what we call “civil rights”—a set of agreements about what we share as community members—are disintegrating because of ongoing efforts to disenfranchise certain voters. And during the COVID-19 pandemic, the basic notion that we—as a community—should prioritize our collective health and well-being buckled under the expectation that we should sacrifice people to sickness and even death to hasten the reopening of businesses.

Ultimately, we need a new set of agreements based on our shared values, and a new social contract to hold our institutions accountable to a holistic redefinition of safety. A new social contract must center new agreements about what it means to be part of the community of our nation and clarify how our representative government can secure values such as equity, protection, safety, and thriving. This new social contract depends on the inextricable connection between accountability and human dignity. An unyielding emphasis on human dignity has a huge operational impact in the agreements and policies we enact. Without a shared concept of dignity, we cannot hold our large institutions responsible for meaningful protection.

When dignity frays, people can no longer rely for their protection and well-being on the social institutions responsible for health and safety. When certain groups—including racial minorities or people with criminal convictions—are systemically dehumanized, they cannot hold to account the public institutions charged with acting on their behalf. Similarly, when other people participate in—or benefit from—this dehumanization, they, too, are denied membership in an equitable society. This explains why large public institutions often operate without

accountability, even in metropolitan areas that otherwise seem “progressive.” Dehumanization leads to the “othering” that blocks accountability. It leads to a situation where thousands of laws exist that have no objective relationship to safety yet prevent people with past convictions from getting jobs, securing housing, and participating in civic life. It leads to a situation where people facing unaddressed trauma and mental health challenges do not receive treatment but instead cycle through our homeless shelters and jails.

Currently, even hard-won and significant policy changes usually depend on existing criminal justice institutions and bureaucracies for their implementation. This limits their transformative power. It is one thing for advocates and elected officials to agree on reforms; it is another to see those reforms carried out on the ground. Our nation’s criminal justice system, while very large, is decentralized. In every town and county, practice is shaped by tradition and inertia—“how we’ve always done things”—and is thus passively resistant to change. In addition, reforms often face active opposition to change from those who most benefit from the status quo. To help bypass these obstacles, advocates and organizers must be well resourced and supported; community-based organizations (outside of government structures) must be elevated; and people with direct justice system experience must be represented within government structures.

An agenda of real safety will be implemented by a mixture of government leaders, government workers, activists, and the public. Our broader definitions of safety must be met by the people and institutions that support people’s physical and mental health; provide housing, education, or employment; and promote economic security. Moreover, as government, philanthropy, and civic institutions reallocate resources according to these new definitions of safety, they must follow the example of community leaders who have already found ways to disrupt cycles of violence, even with limited resources.

Successful implementation will need government leaders who seek to address the root causes of crime, substance abuse, and mental health issues, and to expand restorative justice at scale. Those elected officials should include people who have direct experience with crime and who have personally experienced the shortcomings of our old, limited definition of safety through incarceration. In this way, they will have the moral

authority to guide policy efforts through legislative processes and to navigate bureaucracies invested in the old status quo.

Relatedly, successful implementation will also require building a new workforce. People with direct experience of violence, incarceration, or both, as well as those who have suffered the impacts of inadequate social investments, bring a wealth of experience and capacity to jobs that support the new safety paradigm. Additionally, as resources shift away from traditional justice structures over time, people employed in the current criminal justice system must have the opportunity to shift into jobs within the new structure of safety and thriving.

A community of activists, constituents, and the public will need to make their voices heard. This constituency will support elected officials striving to push for this new safety agenda and will ensure its implementation. Some of these activists are already leading efforts through the small, under-resourced network of nonprofits and community organizations that research shows are best equipped to address community challenges. In order to sustain change over the long term, investments in their efforts should match those dedicated to local enforcement mechanisms in the past.

Finally, along with this newly accountable public sector and engaged public, we need an increasingly responsive private sector. Businesses, philanthropy, private civic organizations, nonprofits, and many other entities can support the development and implementation of robust policies and practices. As employers, service providers, advocates, and more, the private sector can respond to and fuel the building of a new public health and safety infrastructure.

We can look to California for an example of positive change largely driven by, and accountable to, leaders with the moral authority to redefine safety. As some states have worked to reduce their incarcerated populations, California has proven to be a leader: over a little more than a decade, half the total prison population decline across all states took place in California. Several policy changes contributed to this: in 2009, California passed legislation to reduce the number of people entering the state prison system (AB 109, known as “Realignment”), addressing dangerous overcrowding in state prisons; and in 2016, voters approved a ballot initiative to expand rehabilitation services and the use of parole (Proposition 57). The largest driver of change, California’s Proposition

47 (also known as the Safe Neighborhoods and Schools Act), passed in 2014 and significantly reduced incarceration in the state. Importantly, it arose out of advocacy built on a new safety agenda, and it instituted changes in the structures of governance and accountability to support and implement that new understanding of safety.

Proposition 47 intentionally adhered to a new definition of safety through its design, enactment, and implementation. It elevated new leaders with the moral authority to change policy, and ultimately built an enduring movement capable of resisting efforts to return to the status quo. Crime survivors drove the passage of Proposition 47, served as the initiative's lead advocates, and actively challenged prevailing notions of who had the right to define "safety." In passing Proposition 47, California voters changed sentencing for low-level crimes, leading to significantly reduced prison and jail populations. In addition, it allocated the funds that were recovered as savings to local community programs, trauma recovery services for crime survivors, and programs for vulnerable youth.¹³

In the eight years since the initiative passed, Proposition 47 has led to a significant drop in incarceration, with prison and jail populations falling by about twenty thousand. As part of his fiscal year 2022–23 budget proposal, California governor Gavin Newsom announced an additional \$150 million in prison savings attributable to Proposition 47 and available for reallocation.¹⁴ This would bring to almost \$600 million the total funding reallocated to local public safety programs as a result of Proposition 47—services including mental health support, substance abuse treatment, diversion from jail, and housing programs for people who have been arrested, charged, or convicted of crimes.¹⁵ Diverted prison funding has also gone to education programs designed to reduce truancy and support children deemed at risk of dropping out of school or committing crimes.¹⁶ And finally, Proposition 47 has fueled a dramatic expansion in trauma recovery services. Ten percent of prison savings are directed to trauma recovery centers statewide,¹⁷ and eighteen dedicated centers now provide crime survivors with mental health and other services, up from just one prior to the initiative's passage.¹⁸

Yet these positive changes were not simply caused by voters changing a law. They came about because the coalition of voices that helped pass Proposition 47 continued its determined work even after passage of the measure. Members of this coalition worked to secure not only policy

change, but governance change. They built sustainable, impactful community power and advocacy to ensure that bureaucracies followed and effectively implemented the new law. They also became active partners and participants in that implementation.

The leadership of crime survivors was particularly key throughout this process. A new organization, Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice, had formed in 2012 and played a large role in the development, passage, and implementation of Proposition 47. Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice is now leading a nationwide effort to refocus a safety agenda focused on what research demonstrates crime survivors most want: healing, supportive resources, and rehabilitation to break cycles of crime.¹⁹

Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice and its many partners worked to hold bureaucracies and government actors accountable after the passage of Proposition 47. To do this, they pushed lawmakers and those responsible for accurate budgeting to calculate the savings from reduced prison and jail spending, and to appropriately redistribute those funds. Trained, talented advocates demanded that the governor's office, the state Department of Finance, and the Department of Corrections followed the new law. At the same time, small, agile, and culturally competent community-based organizations worked with survivors to push government bureaucracies to reallocate resources to programs that effectively reduce recidivism and promote healing.

A key feature of successful implementation was representation: governmental decision-making bodies were pressed to include input from and representation of crime survivors, people with past convictions, and reentry service providers. Advocacy from these voices ensured that half of all dollars reinvested by the state through Proposition 47 went to community-based organizations. It also ensured that counties and cities were obligated to subcontract with at least one community-based organization through the grant awards.²⁰

These significant changes—which upended decades of rhetoric, spending, and power distribution—met resistance. Some stakeholders saw the initiative as a threat to the status quo and sought to undo its effects. Opponents even organized an effort to repeal Proposition 47 and other state criminal justice reform laws, placing an initiative on the November 2020 ballot to this effect. Reform opponents—including a small number of police, some elected officials, and a crime victims' group historically

funded by the prison guards' union—sought to reclaim their historic role as the exclusive definers of safety. They drew on old narratives of fear and dehumanization. They made false statements, including inaccurate assertions about what the reforms did and false claims that community crime sprees were being fueled by people who would be in prison but for Proposition 47.

All too often, such resistance results in the reversal of progress made through policy change. But thanks to the ongoing work to build a new vision of safety, this opposition did not prevail. Before the repeal vote, state lawmakers convened an informational hearing on Proposition 47 and the repeal effort.²¹ They heard from dozens of people who supported keeping Proposition 47 in place: crime survivors, treatment providers whose services would dry up without the new funding for trauma recovery centers, formerly incarcerated youth and adults who were able to resolve a past conviction because of the law, and community-based providers that worked with people who would be incarcerated without Proposition 47. In contrast to this new, diverse, and vocal safety constituency, nobody at the hearing made the case for repeal.²²

Californians soundly defeated the repeal effort at the polls, by a margin of 62 percent to 38 percent.²³ This demonstrated that meaningful, durable reforms can take place when a new vision for safety is laid out by a constituency with moral authority, and then effectively implemented with that constituency's input. While challenges will continue to arise, over the long term such reforms can even resist the opposition of those who do not want to give up the power assigned to them by the traditional definition of safety. The leadership of crime survivors and others with moral authority helped redefine safety, reallocate resources, and defeat efforts to maintain the status quo. Proposition 47 was a step toward a new vision of safety that centers investment in treatment, interventions, and programs serving people outside of a prison or jail. This new vision of safety also seeks to hold governance institutions accountable for providing true protection for all.

People with moral authority—those who have the most to gain or lose by the government's action or inaction—must lead efforts to redefine safety. They must also be able to hold the government accountable for the implementation of this new approach to protection and social support.

Building power and changing structures can enable reforms to withstand resistance from the status quo, whether that resistance comes from actors seeking to preserve their own power or by a lack of imagination to understand new forms of safety. Going beyond policy change to true governance change will lead to a future of resilient safety, justice, and dignity for all.

Accountability and Power Sharing

Michelle Walker

What does *accountability* mean? If the word is taken back to its root, *account*, then the definition is to make amends for a wrong-doing or accept responsibility for an offense. It can also mean worth or importance, like something being of small or large account. Likewise, an account can be a report, description, or story. All of these are paraphrases of the definitions of account in the Webster's New World dictionary.

Punishment is defined as a penalty imposed on a transgressor for bad behavior. It is further expressed as causing pain, loss, or suffering in payback for wrongdoing. Punishment implies retribution rather than correction, retaliation rather than rehabilitation. Sometimes, punishment aligns with accountability if it is applied reasonably; however, often the punishment meted out by Oklahoma's legal system is in excess of anything required for true justice. Excessive punishment also completely fails to provide the mental health therapies, training, and educational programs to help incarcerated people address their individual needs and traumas, which would in turn allow them to reintegrate back to society as productive citizens.

Too often, the criminal justice system offers something other than true accountability. Remember, once a person is charged, they must attend a bond hearing. Many impoverished persons cannot afford bail, especially if it is for anything labeled as a violent crime. The state cites public safety to justify setting inaccessible bail amounts, or no bail at all, for those accused of violent crimes. If people are really lucky, they will have access to a public defender who comes to see them before they meet in the courtroom. While incarcerated, people are either entirely unable to contribute to their own defense, or able to make only peripheral

contributions. Criminal cases in Oklahoma take months, if not years to work their way through the system. All of this is before people are ever convicted of a crime.

If people are convicted or take a plea bargain, they are often burdened with fines both for court costs and for their stay at the county jail. Sometimes, this can be restitution for out of pocket costs incurred by victims, but mostly these fines and fees are used to fund and perpetuate the status quo legal system and jail facilities. How can a person *be accountable* for financial amends while locked in a jail cell? Instead, the accused loses their job, their home, and usually all of their possessions during a lengthy stay in the county jail. Then, after finally receiving a sentence for crimes and serving that time, the person must find some way to pay these fines and fees, which rarely if ever find their way back to the victims. If, when strapped with the label of 'felon,' they are unable to find a job that allows them to support themselves and abide by a state approved payment plan, they run the possibility of being reincarcerated for failing to pay restitution. This is punishment first for being convicted of a crime and then punishment for being impoverished.

True accountability can mean accepting responsibility for transgressions. Yet plea bargains are the name of the game in most courthouses. Rarely do cases see an actual jury trial. In prison, we have all heard horror stories about when someone didn't accept a plea deal and instead went to jury trial and received sometimes three or four times the offered plea. They couldn't go back in time to accept the deal; instead they were trapped with a lengthy sentence. The fear of maximum sentencing is enough to make many agree to a plea, even if they are not responsible for the crime. After all, five years is more palatable than twenty, and twenty is more acceptable than life. After the trauma of being arrested and held in jail, the fear is tangible

and prosecutors are very aware of it. How many people are willing to play Russian roulette with their lives when they cannot guarantee the outcome? Even when a person is guilty, sometimes the plea bargains come with strings, like getting a better deal if you testify against someone else. The first to the table is the one that gets the best offer, regardless of their responsibility for the crime. How is "bargaining" ever a part of justice? These are standard practices in our legal systems that emphasize punishment rather than accountability.

Part of a plea bargain is an admission of guilt for the crime. The accused must verbally agree that they committed the crime, and have the opportunity to make a statement to the court before sentencing. A legal admission of guilt, however, is not an apology. It is not real accountability. Real accountability would be self-admission of responsibility; acknowledgement of the harm that was caused; expression of regret; and a true, heartfelt apology to the wronged party. Asking forgiveness is healing, both for the person who caused harm and for the wounded, if they are willing to listen. Even if they are not yet ready to forgive, a fully expressed apology and the willingness to make amends will linger in the victim's memory and may eventually help them make peace with the trauma. It also goes a long way to help the transgressor begin to address the base issues that may have caused the offense.

Our legal system emphasizes punishment, not accountability. It gives out long sentences like candy at Halloween. After truth-in-sentencing laws passed in Oklahoma, a person sentenced for a violent crime must serve at least 85% of a sentence. This means there is no possibility of a parole review for a second chance to rejoin society until the 85% has been met. Many of my fellow prisoners are facing sentences of twenty or more years. My personal sentence is thirty-five years, meaning I will not be eligible for parole until I have served almost

thirty years. This trend ages incarcerated people out of any employment viability, separates them from family and friends who provide support, and severs community connections. Prison isolates people from their communities and traps them in a sterile, unnatural environment without many sources of enrichment. It makes them feel less and less of a citizen and even of a human. In other words, punishment makes the incarcerated people out to be of small account. This is a big deal. Incarcerated people are still people, and most will someday be released, without treatment, without adequate job training, and without any community ties.

Finally, an account is a report, description, or story. Every crime has a story, one with three sides: the victim's, the person who caused harm, and the prosecutor's. These points of view are usually fairly one-sided and rarely share much common ground. The state uses their own story to convict and obtain maximum sentencing for an offense in Oklahoma's tough-on-crime legal system. Often the wounded are angry or traumatized. Their story may be tragic, enraged, or wrathful. The person being accused of a crime's story is what is frequently missed in the narrative. Sometimes, it is not only the actual crime that needs to be addressed, but also the roots of the problems that caused the person to act in that way. All angles of the case should be investigated, including trauma or mental health issues that the person who caused harm may have suffered. It is not an excuse, but it is a story. When we are able to tell each other our stories, understanding is born. When understanding and empathy play a part in the legal system, then accountability and punishment are better able to align.

The difference between punishment and accountability should be obvious. Punishment is revenge and retribution. We are not a society of retribution. We are a society of freedom and justice; and justice is not revenge. Justice should be the upholding of what is right, just, and

fair to all parties. This includes forging a pathway for the wrongdoer to make adequate amends, be treated for any mental health issues, be educated on the impact that they had on their victims, be trained to provide for themselves and their families, and have access to a community reintegration program to rejoin society. Accountability should be based in the community, and should involve making active recompense to the victims. There should be mental health treatment for the people who cause harm as well as for the victims. There should be addiction treatment, because usually addiction of one kind or another is a precursor to crime. There should be reconciliation therapy, allowing both parties to heal and move forward in a healthy manner. They say that it takes a village to raise a child. What does it take to rehabilitate someone that has broken the law?

TELLING THE TRUTH: CONFRONTING WHITE SUPREMACY, PERIOD

The Reverend Vivian Nixon

Vivian Nixon is a writer in residence of The Square One Project at the Columbia Justice Lab. Previously, she served as the executive director of College & Community Fellowship (CCF), a nonprofit dedicated to helping women with criminal convictions earn college degrees. As a formerly incarcerated woman and CCF program graduate, she has been a leader in the movement to ensure that justice-involved women and their families have a better future.

America incarcerates people at higher rates than any other country, disproportionately impacting people who are Black, brown, Indigenous, or migrant. Other factors that increase the risk of criminalization and its consequences include socioeconomic status, gender, age, ability, health status, religion, and sexual identity. However, identifying disproportionate criminalization does not reveal the root cause of the disparities. Indeed, the problem is not simply a justice problem. Rather, underlying all social policy—including the details of systems like housing, employment, education, and health care, and decisions about who gets to be rich or poor, sick or well, influential or invisible—is a common denominator rarely examined explicitly: *white supremacy*.

White supremacy is an ideology that posits the superiority of white people over nonwhite people, even though the white/nonwhite distinction itself has been historically variable and contested. At times, white people's purported superiority has been justified with debunked pseudoscientific theories, allegedly endowing whites with higher intelligence,

greater self-control, and superior physical beauty. White supremacy has also pointed to imagined character deficiencies among nonwhite people, including laziness, criminality, and promiscuity. An ideology of dehumanization, white supremacy says that nonwhites do not deserve basic respect or dignity.¹ It believes that institutions must preserve the dominant position of whites. It holds that America, at its core, is a white society, owned and controlled by white people.²

White supremacy does not need to be explicitly or widely shared to have corrosive effects. Its secret life makes its violence all the more dangerous. The ideology of white supremacy is not trapped inside the minds and bodies of self-proclaimed white supremacists. Few Americans would admit to being white supremacists, or to believing in the superiority of white people. Still, cloaked in reasonableness, white supremacy undergirds social policy nationwide. It leads to policies and practices that appear to be in the interest of the “public good” but significantly harm whole segments of society. “Unintended” harm befalls vulnerable populations: nonwhites, poor people, women, sick or disabled people, other marginalized groups, and so on. Concrete examples that relate to mass incarceration are cities that use excessive fines, fees, and cash bail as guaranteed revenue streams; states that disenfranchise voters with felony convictions or that refuse Medicaid expansion; and the damage caused by the infamous 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act.

Therefore, even without explicit endorsement from most—or even many—Americans, white supremacy is a belief system that functions implicitly and systematically across society, causing cultural erasure and extreme economic and social inequity for nonwhite people. Before we can reimagine justice, we must understand the beginnings of white supremacy in the United States of America. Until a critical mass of civically engaged people understand and acknowledge the inextricable links between white supremacy, the economic demand for controlled labor, and injustice, we will not be able to create a social policy that reflects a radically different set of values.

State-sanctioned racialized violence in America—including native genocide, chattel slavery, post-Reconstruction terror, Japanese internment, and abuse of migrant labor—is well documented. Less often discussed—and even less understood—is the precursor: indentured servitude. When Europe first colonized Indigenous land in what would

become the United States between 1607 and 1617, the decade after the settlement of Jamestown, indentured servants and other indigent populations from Europe provided cheap and plentiful labor before the transatlantic slave trade began. Indentured laborers were told that the debts they owed to society could be repaid through uncompensated labor for a set period. At that time in history, this judicial practice was not a reflection of white supremacist ideology in the same way our current justice system is. Indentured servants were not disproportionately Indigenous or of African descent; although racialized in some ways, they were mostly European.

Ultimately, however, indentured servants began to feel that the terms of their sentence infringed on their citizenship rights. They were, after all, “free-born men.”³ At the same time, the slave trade came to replace indentured servitude.⁴ Amid this social and economic upheaval, landowners taught poor whites and displaced laborers—who had, initially, co-organized labor movements with prisoners—that they were superior to the enslaved people now forced to provide free labor. This superiority was owed to their whiteness. Race became economically useful; poor, non-slaveholding white farmers were pacified by the idea that enslaved people would never enjoy full citizenship.

Furthermore, the release of white indentured servants called for more land. With time served, people were owed “forty acres and a musket.”⁵ Released debtors were told that they could take that land, work hard, and have African slaves of their own one day.⁶ This propelled the forced seizure of Indigenous land and perpetuated a cycle of land-grabbing and labor exploitation.

The implications of this brief history are twofold. First, white supremacy was used to justify the immoral seizure and control of native land by white Europeans and the beginnings of chattel slavery. Landholding—the most important marker of social and economic capital at the time—was limited to white people. Moreover, as landholding became a qualifier for the right to vote, access to political power was available only to white landholding men, then women. Second, there was a short period—when chattel slavery was not yet in practice—during which racialized narratives did not permeate national political and economic discourses. Perhaps this brief time in our history offers a sliver of hope that a future not predicated on white supremacy is possible.

To reach this future, we need a sophisticated understanding of how white supremacy functions today. While contemporary white supremacy may often take a more implicit form than forms of explicit racism (such as post-slavery laws that named Black people as targets, or that criminalized being unhoused or unemployed—a common condition of newly emancipated Black people), it continues to shape all spheres of social policy, impacting people's daily lives. For example, modern-day housing markets were formed by decades of racist policymaking, including redlining; racially inequitable access to low-rate mortgages; the use of false charges of eminent domain to rob Black farmers; and the razing of whole Black business districts in the name of gentrification. As a result, proportionately fewer Black people own houses in comparison to white people. For most families, home equity is their largest asset. White supremacy is still at work when stereotypes influence decisions about bank loans or apartment rentals.

Only by acknowledging this history and context can progress be made. Once named, white supremacy loses the superpower of invisibility. Instead of avoiding references to white supremacy, what if we acknowledged it? What if we seriously discussed white supremacy and committed not only to eradicate it but to repair the historic harms the ideology has caused for nonwhite people? We could scrub state laws of arcane statutes that have caused the disparate racial impact. But we can only do this when enough of us, white and nonwhite, agree that white supremacy lies at the root of injustice.

The power of truth—and its connection to community empowerment and better government for all—has been emphasized by nonwhite thought leaders from many ethnicities and backgrounds. Black thought leaders, in particular, have long protested the almost genocidal impact of American criminal legal policy, which was only further compounded by the wholesale slowdown of investments in education.⁷ Instead of supporting access to education, states built massive systems and institutions designed for control and punishment. At the same time, policies including racial profiling, the war on drugs, and stop-and-frisk targeted Black and brown youth to justify investing in, staffing, and filling those punitive systems and institutions.

Some activists, scholars, and practitioners foresaw the backlash that followed the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But hope was kept

alive by a generation's "powerful faith in the decency of white people."⁸ That hope faded when policies that ushered in the era of mass incarceration arrived in 1970.⁹ Recent scholarship by Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Carol Anderson, and Elizabeth Hinton continues to document the repetitive cycle of progress and retrenchment that generations of nonwhites have endured. At the same time, Black Americans continue to ask what more is needed to validate for others what they've witnessed with their eyes, experienced in their flesh, and testified to with their words. Existing research repeatedly confirms that the links between white supremacy and state violence in U.S. systems of justice from slavery to modern-day policing, courts, and corrections have not magically disappeared.

Ten years before the Civil Rights Act, the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* also gave Black people hope. When they've been able to access it (often under the threat of severe punishment), education has proven to be a source of attaining some power over their futures. One way to combat the ongoing harm of white supremacy is to invest in education.

From anti-literacy laws in the antebellum South, through the resistance to the integration of colleges and public schools, up until contemporary fights to eliminate affirmative action policies, white supremacist power structures have long sought to deny Black people access to education. But, as literacy helped enslaved people to navigate the Underground Railroad, spread abolitionist thought, and organize resistance, Black people remained undeterred, pursuing education as an essential pathway to freedom despite the threat of punishment. Education that combines academic and civic knowledge with activist culture is a tradition in the African Diaspora. Activist efforts in diverse spaces such as churches, community centers, and behind prison walls have doubled as education spaces, teaching Black history and critical thinking as a way to build solidarity and form resistance.

Education is critically important. In the context of the justice system, education has proven to predict success for people reentering communities after prison sentences. Since 2004, when the Second Chance Act was passed in response to the growing cost of mass incarceration, a focus on supporting incarcerated people as they return to communities to rebuild their lives has created an entire nonprofit industry called "reentry." Reentry began with a focus on housing, addiction treatment, and

employment as the pillars of success. These pillars, while important in and of themselves, are strengthened in innumerable ways when education is added. Congress recently acknowledged that fact when it passed legislation in 2021 to restore federal financial aid eligibility to qualified incarcerated people who enroll in higher education programs. But subsistent survival and sobriety are not the only reasons to invest in education for those reentering after prison and others who have historically been valued more for their labor than their intellect.

The benefits of education are not just individual, but communal. Increased involvement of these communities in education can help counter white supremacist ideas by offering new ways of learning and different ways of producing knowledge. Robust civic and political education is a self-perpetuating resource in communities whose cultures are steeped in more intuitive forms of learning, whose traditions are oral and not literary. Teaching oppressed people to counter racism by accepting their plight or changing their behavior—without addressing the realities of systemic harm—upholds the structures that permit mass incarceration and other forms of social and legal exclusion.

Rather, we need to democratize education to bring about radical transformation. In the world's most prosperous nation, public schools should be palaces. Teachers should be well trained and receive salaries commensurate with the crucial nature of their responsibility. Diversity should be the pride of every school faculty, assembling people from various geographies, cultures, gender identities, and ethnic backgrounds into one place. Curricula should elevate knowledge produced by Black, brown, Indigenous, and scholars whose native tongue is not English. To combat white supremacy, the scholarship, ideas, and knowledge production of nonwhite people must have a legitimate place in the education system—from preschool to postgraduate studies. People with different ideas need to be welcomed to speak and given the space to learn.

Ultimately, a sustained engagement with different ideas can help produce meaningful social change. To reach common ground, we must explore assumptions and challenge opposition in a way that works through contradictions and gets to solutions. For instance, in order to radically transform the criminal justice system, America must consider the history of white supremacy in shaping current policies and practices. We need sustained conversations at the systemic and structural level; polarizing arguments

about defunding police departments are futile as long as the people who provide the funding believe that any problem lies with individual police. Relatedly, reformers will need to acknowledge that dismantling systems of oppression will take more than demands and a slogan. They will need to embrace a process that does not seek quick and easily reversible solutions. Tinkering with laws and policies will not change the durable and systemic institutions that perpetuate white supremacy. The path to an America where liberty and justice are available to all can emerge only through long, hard discussions about these institutions and our history.

Racial reckoning will begin when a substantial majority consistently affirms that white supremacist ideology has been constructed, strengthened, and codified in the history of American expansionism. Whether or not they are to blame, modern heirs to this legacy are responsible for ending its continuation. For too long, and despite the public and private experiences of people harmed by white supremacy, white people have tended to unite under a banner of denial. Corporate CEOs, elected officials, and religious leaders all appear genuinely shocked and dismayed upon the release of each new video that shows an unarmed Black or brown man, woman, or child being killed by police or by a citizen claiming protection under state "stand your ground" laws. Their public statements decry the horrors of police brutality and denounce racism as if to reassure themselves that "this is not who we are." After a brief period of mourning, everyone can rest easy because it can't possibly happen again.

By contrast, to be Black in America is to be in perpetual mourning. It is to realize that each video is a sign of more to come and proof of those whose names we will never know. Is it any wonder why the reaction of surprise and the accompanying outbursts of vocal allyship begin to fall on deaf ears? This is the conversation as it occurs at millions of kitchen tables and behind the walls of tens of thousands of churches, civic organizations, and prisons. People do not need disciplinary jargon or subscriptions to academic journals to express what is happening to them and what they fear will happen to their children.

Americans across ideological divides seem prepared to relinquish the idea that excessive punishment and incarceration solve social problems, but they have yet to come to grips with what to do about violence. Data confirm that the consequences for nonwhites who kill whites are more frequent and severe than those for whites who kill nonwhites. Also known

are the devastating consequences of violence in impoverished areas where Black, Indigenous, people of color, and poor whites live. These numbers tell a story. American systems of justice are imbalanced. They have routinely persecuted, disenfranchised, and endangered certain populations. However, until white supremacy loses its grip on white Americans and on social policy and institutions, this harm will continue to occur. A sustained effort to be truthful about white supremacist thinking—an effort that would inform organizing around its eradication—would be transformative change. An exhaustive confrontation with the truth will reveal that addressing symptoms by changing laws, providing social support, and defunding police systems is not a cure, but a salve. To untangle the current injustices in the criminal legal system, the underlying toxic ideology is the starting point.

After the murder of George Floyd in the spring of 2020, the most influential people in the country publicly claimed to reject structural racism, implicit bias, and systemic injustice. But to mitigate generations of harm, what has to be paid and to whom? What are people due if they've had centuries of labor, blood, and life taken away? America has both the capacity and the mechanisms to supply relief that is both tangible and symbolic. Could it finally expand the massive direct investments that built a white middle class to Black and brown communities? Reforms will be meaningful when past harms are acknowledged and reconciled.

But reckoning is cheapened when blame is its goal. Rather, a process of setting things right so that everyone is made whole offers the promise hope in a reconciling society. Being a member of any society comes with accountability on both sides, and all must be involved. That's the nature of democracy.

It is powerful and affirming to take an abolitionist stance. But what happens when the label becomes a rigid boundary or narrows vision instead of expanding it? Ideally, abolition rejects all forms of oppression, suppression, and exclusion. It teaches us how to live together without human cages, excessive surveillance, and other forms of state violence. But in the current moment, some reformers who embrace the values of abolition do not openly embrace the label because they either are unsure how to reach the explicit goal of building a world without police and prisons, or do not fully understand the criteria for allyship.

Today, debates about how to bring about a more just America are polarized. Will the law-and-order people break from their dogmatic faith in the police? Will “defund the police” campaigners insist that the solution be all or nothing, instead of helping protect the vulnerable from real violence in an imperfect world filled with imperfect people? Ultimately, no side will win all of their demands. Yet we must all agree on one thing: white supremacy can no longer rule the land. To achieve this transformation, we need to do more than tinker with policy, change org charts, or write new curricula for the police academy. That doesn't mean there won't be any change, accountability, or repair. It means that the process must be a thoughtful one that includes inputs from diverse segments of society. It means that consensus is difficult. It means that reconciliation, not retribution, must be the underlying assumption.

As identity-based hatred and anti-democratic sentiment increase worldwide, I suggest we find the courage to explore new concepts that can bring us toward justice, dignity, and equality. Values such as agape love (unconditional compassionate kindness), present in virtually every world religion, are necessary in movements for social justice. Embracing agape as practice means we acknowledge that even our opponents are human. A commitment to dignity requires the activist to believe that oppressors can change; it also requires the oppressor to see the oppressed as human and as valuable no matter their differences.

Agape is one of four ancient Greek words for love. It refers to unconditional love. Agape requires action beyond theoretical discourse on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Activities that draw on the psychosocial impact of agape love can bring about positive change. Thinkers from disciplines including philosophy, psychology, theology, sociology, and political science might agree that the tenets of agape are similar to the tenets of a just society.

Justice, at the end of the debate, is grounded in individual and collective well-being. Freedom and safety for communities require a moral commitment to the core belief that no human being is more valuable than another. As polarization increases and the threat of violence resonates around a post-pandemic, nuclear-weapon-obsessed, globe, we can no longer afford to mask symptoms with temporary solutions. Attacking harmful disparities and devastating outcomes for communities within

the justice system requires addressing the root causes of the problem. White supremacy is the poison at the root. It, as an idea, informs policy and practice in ways that are both visible and invisible. Let's start that work with a sustained conversation deliberately aimed at eradicating white supremacy and repairing the harm left in its wake. Let's start it seeking reconciliation instead of blame. Let's power it with Agape!

7

THE CHALLENGE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Bruce Western

Bruce Western is director of the Justice Lab and is the Bryce Professor of Sociology and Social Justice at Columbia University. He is the author of Homeward: Life in the Year After Prison.

In a context of low crime rates and renewed criminal justice reform, the United States has seen a sustained decline in the national incarceration rate. While violence has flared in some cities over the past two decades and, strikingly, during the COVID pandemic, the national violent crime rate has generally stabilized at its lowest level since the early 1960s.¹ At the same time, the incarceration rate fell from its 2008 peak of 766 per 100,000 (2.33 million people in prison and jail) to 524 per 100,000 (1.73 million) in the COVID year of 2020.² Black-white racial disparities in imprisonment also declined significantly in these twelve years.

Wide-ranging policy reforms contributed to these drops in crime and incarceration. The federal government, for instance, began supporting local reentry initiatives two decades ago. Litigation relieved prison overcrowding. Legislation and ballot initiatives reduced drug sentences. As terms of community supervision were cut, probation and parole agencies limited revocations of probation and parole for technical violations, along with periods of incarceration for violations. At the entry point to incarceration, some jurisdictions reduced or eliminated the use of money bail; others reexamined the use of court-imposed fees. Prosecutorial reform is being pressed both by district attorneys and at the ballot box through the election of progressive prosecutors.

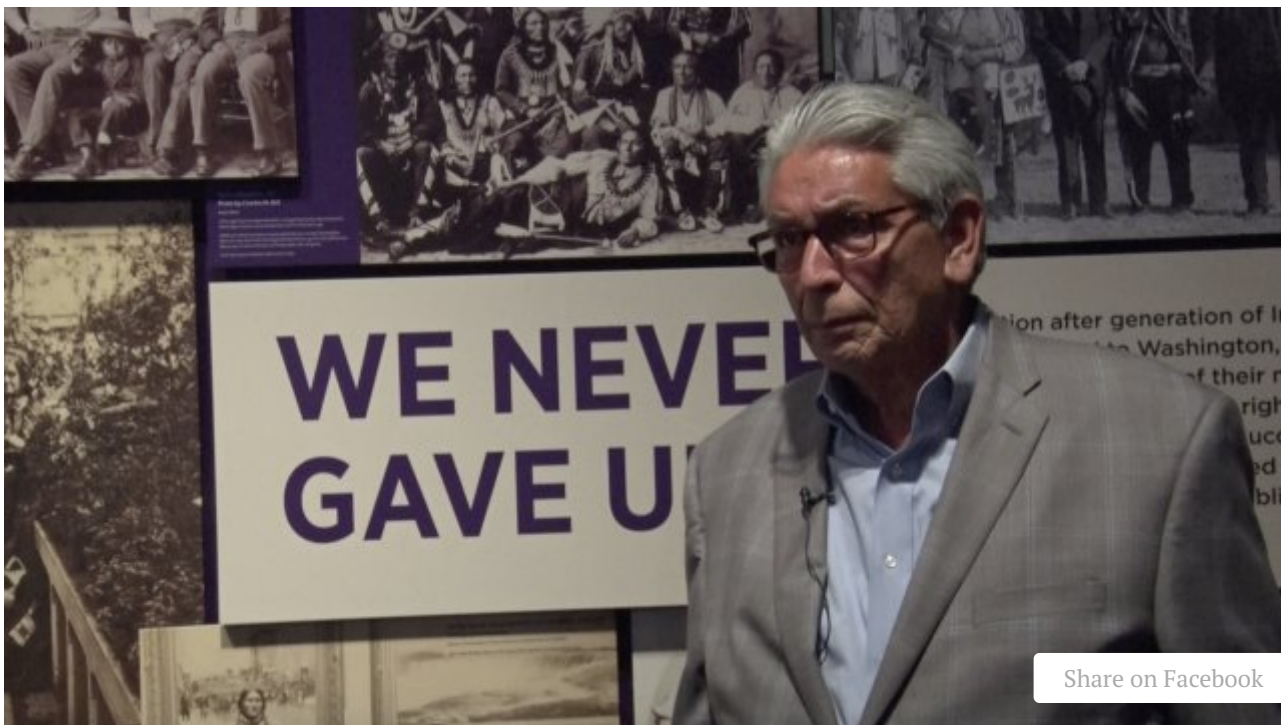
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Exiled to Indian Country: Trail of Tears shaped Oklahoma

By Addison Kliewer, Miranda Mahmud and Sarah Beth Guevara -
Wednesday, March 11, 2020



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Kevin Gover, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, stands in the museum and addresses the treatment of Native Americans throughout history on Sept. 25, 2019. (AP Photo/Chris Wedel)

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WASHINGTON — Known as the Trail of Tears, the forced removal of Native Americans to Oklahoma was one of the most inhumane policy implementations in American history, but it was not an isolated incident.

Nearly 16,000 members of the Cherokee Nation were forced, under armed guard in 1831, to leave their native homeland in the southeastern part of the United States and trek more than 1,000 miles to what would eventually become the state of Oklahoma.



This story was reported by Gaylord News, a Washington reporting project of the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma. This series titled “Exiled to Indian Country” details the stories of how each of Oklahoma’s 39 tribes wound up in the state.

Approximately 4,000 Cherokees died along the way, never making it to the land designated by the U.S. government as Indian Territory.

Removal of the Choctaw Nation commenced even earlier in 1830. Like the Cherokees, they left behind homes and a way of life developed over generations to start over in an alien environment on the edge of the prairie.

But the Cherokee and Choctaw nations are only two of the tribes with a removal story that predates Oklahoma, five native to the state’s boundaries, that have stories to be told — each a chapter in the Trail of Tears.

Long before the removal period, the federal government believed white people could use the land more effectively than the original inhabitants. The labeled “Indian problem” motivated settlers to strip native people of their land and resources, constantly pushing tribal members farther west.

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That pressure often resulted in militant ambushes against Native Americans from settlers. If Indigenous people fought back, it was only proof to whites that they were “savages.”

While the U.S. Constitution established sovereign Indian nations with treaty rights, removing tribes from the Southeast was a growing idea by the time Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828. He proposed the Indian Removal Act as one of his first pieces of legislation.

Era of genocide



The words “We Never Gave Up” are written on a sign in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian’s exhibit Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations. (Addison Kliever / Gaylord News)

Jackson believed that moving the tribes west of the Mississippi River was essential to national security, and he had no qualms about violating existing treaties, according to Jackson biographer Jon Meacham.

“The southern states were anxious for more land, especially to grow cotton, and the Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Seminole tribes held rich acreage — great chunks of which would become modern-day Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee,” Meacham wrote.

Appeals from the tribes that they held the land by treaty fell on deaf ears in 1830. Jackson simply did not believe the tribes had title to the land, and he would not tolerate competing sovereignties in the United States.

Opponents of the Indian Removal Act said the policy was immoral and illegal, but it was approved in 1830 by a wide margin in the U.S. Senate.

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The act passed by only four votes in the House and set 1838 as the date for final removal — the year after Jackson left the White House. To those who argued for Indian rights, Jackson argued that removal would guarantee the survival of the tribes.

Instead, removal launched an era of genocide.

In 1835, the Jackson administration signed the Treaty of New Echota, supposedly with the Cherokee Nation in Georgia, setting terms for the final removal of the tribe west of the Mississippi River.

The treaty had been signed by a small group of Cherokees who did not represent the majority of tribal members. But Jackson insisted they did.

“The people who signed removal treaties were not actually representative of public sentiment in their nations. That is why such a large number of Indians refused the treaties, to the point of hiding out rather than be rounded up by the government for forced removal,” said Barbara Mann, who holds a doctorate in English language and literature and has written several books about the Indian Removal Act.

The federal government dispatched thousands of troops to enforce the ill-negotiated treaties.

“The philanthropist will rejoice that the remnant of that ill-fated race has been at length placed beyond the reach of injury or oppression, and that the paternal care of the general government will hereafter watch over them and protect them,” Jackson said in his farewell address to the nation.

Rather than protecting the tribes, the military was brutal, and one-fourth of the Cherokees died along their journey from disease, starvation, exhaustion and exposure.

“I fought through the Civil War and have seen men shot to pieces and slaughtered by the thousands, but the Cherokee removal was the cruelest work I ever knew,” Meacham quoted one Georgia volunteer as saying years later.

The typical American history book treats the Trail of Tears as an isolated incident, said Kevin Gover, director of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian and Secretary for Indian Affairs in the U.S. Department of the Interior.

“But in fact, that was the policy of the United States for the better part of 100 years, to remove Indians from their homelands and then sell the land that Indians left behind to non-Indian settlers,” said Gover, who is of the Pawnee Nation and grew up in Oklahoma.

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Removal was not solely the result of Andrew Jackson behaving in bad faith, Gover said. Instead, he said it was a national project.

“It was something the United States decided to do, and they did it,” he said. “It’s essential in the telling of the story, in order to make it palatable to Americans today, to say, ‘Well, there weren’t that many Indians, and they were, after all, savages. They weren’t really using the land, and so it was OK.’”

Mann said removal in the first place was “one big, immoral, unethical illegality.”

The wrongdoings of the federal government did not end after the removal period. The government continued for many years to strip tribes of their land and culture in what is now Oklahoma.

‘I would be nervous, were I out in Oklahoma’

The Dawes Act of 1887 was intended to assimilate Native Americans into white society by stripping them of their cultural and social traditions.

The act allowed the federal government to further divide tribal land and granted citizenship only to those who were willing to accept the division.

For tribes in Oklahoma, the removal stories have not been forgotten.

“None of the tribes I know want to live in the past,” said Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK4), a member of the Chickasaw Nation. “But the best way to make sure the mistakes of the past are not repeated is to remember them and make sure it never occurs again.”

As a child, Cole said he never saw his grandmother carry a \$20 bill, which flaunts the face of Andrew Jackson.

“I didn’t even know who Andrew Jackson was, but I knew he was a bad man,” Cole said.

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Cole is one of four Native Americans in the U.S. House, along with by Rep. Markwayne Mullin (R-OK2), Rep. Deb Haaland (D-N.M.) and Rep. Sharice Davids (D-Kan.).

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The ramifications of the Trail of Tears persist today, observers say.

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Tribes are constantly battling to protect their land, their people, the environment and their rights, Gover said. Additionally, tribes address challenges that many communities in the United States face such as opioid addiction, family dysfunction and abuse, he said.

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Because the United States never kept many of the promises made in the treaties, Mann said, “Every nation in the East was the victim of the same predator.”

The Trail of Tears still has open wounds, making it necessary for treaties to continue to be litigated 180 years later.

The Cherokee Nation is still working to uphold provisions of the Treaty of New Echota, the removal treaty that guaranteed the tribe the right to a representative in Congress.

“I don’t think that it serves anyone’s interest to forget the shared history that we have — the black chapter that we have — because we know that Native Americans have experienced plenty of those,” said Kimberly Teehee, who the tribe has named as its delegate-designee for that long-promised seat in Congress.

A case now before the Supreme Court, *Carpenter v. Murphy*, could undercut the tribes’ legal jurisdiction in Oklahoma, as well as legally disestablish reservation boundaries.

“I would be nervous, were I out in Oklahoma,” said Mann about the case.

Oklahoma supported by tribes

This year will mark the 50th anniversary of President Richard Nixon’s speech [advocating](#) for Indian self-determination.

“They kept taking and taking and taking. It was only in the 1970s that the tribes really began to reverse all of that,” Gover said. “We’ve been in what we call a self-determination era, only for the last 50 years.”

Despite these challenges, tribes are responsible for much of the economic growth in the state, especially in rural communities, Cole said.

Oklahoma tribes had a \$12.9 billion impact on the state’s economy in 2017, making them one of the state’s top economic drivers, according to a study on [Oklahoma Native Imj](#)

“Oklahoma tribes support 96,177 jobs in the state, representing \$4.6 billion in economic activity to Oklahoma workers. While direct employment exceeds 50,000 jobs, tribal investment spurs job growth in many different industries,” the report said.

If tribal communities were to leave Oklahoma, Gover said many non-Indians who depend on tribes would suffer.

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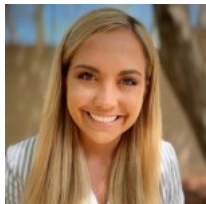


To understand the accomplishments and cultures of tribal nations today requires understanding the merciless removal period, he said.

“The only thing I’m confident about is that the Indians will never give up,” Gover said, “and they will never stop being Indians.”

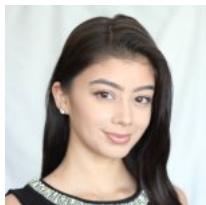
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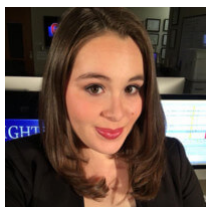
Addison Kliewer

Addison Kliewer is a champion equestrian and a member of the Chickasaw Nation. She hails from Cordell, Oklahoma, and is a student at the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication.



Miranda Mahmud

Miranda Mahmud is an OU senior and follows in the footsteps of her mother, a former television reporter for Bay News 9 in Tampa, Florida.



Sarah Beth Guevara

Sarah Beth Guevara is a graduate student in the Gaylord College at the University of Oklahoma. She earned her undergraduate degree from the same institution. She is part of the Facebook Journalism Project and part of the POLITICO Journalism Institute of 2020. She was previously a multimedia journalist with KSWO in Lawton, Oklahoma, and interned with the Enid News & Eagle. She is from Magnolia, Arkansas.

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September 27, 2023

Philanthropy's Role in Reparations and Building a Culture of Racial Repair

Many in philanthropy have expressed a desire to advance racial equity and a thriving multiracial democracy. This article, written in collaboration with Liberation Ventures, invites philanthropists, foundations, and other funders to see reparations for Black people—and building a culture of repair—as a necessity to reach that goal.

Feedback

By: Aria Florant, Tonyel Edwards, Cora Daniels, Alexandra (Alex) Williams, Maurice Asare, Vikas Maturi



Introduction

In 2021, almost 100 years after local government officials in southern California seized the beachfront land of a Black couple to placate white neighbors complaining about a “Negro invasion,” the tide shifted. Ownership of Bruce's Beach, once home to the couple's thriving resort for Black beachgoers, was transferred back to the Bruce family.

More on Reparations and Building a Culture of Racial Repair

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and Liberation Venture's "Philanthropy's Role in Reparations and Building a Culture of Racial Repair," this [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) article explores three key roles for philanthropy in building a more equitable future.

- [An Invitation from Aria Florant, Co-Founder and CEO, Liberation Ventures](#)
- [What do you see on the "other side" of reparations?](#) Black leaders share their hopes for a more equitable world.
- [Reparations Movement Profiles](#): Four examples of the reparations movement in action.
- [Special Collection on Racial Repair and Reparations —And What Philanthropy Can Do](#): This PDF comprises the entire collection of articles, movement profiles, and inspiration from our research.

Feedback

It meant that descendants of Willa and Charles Bruce were finally able to claim their inheritance.

“It is never too late to right a wrong,” Janice Hahn, chair of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors told the press at the time. “Bruce’s Beach was taken nearly a century ago, but it was an injustice inflicted upon not just Willa and Charles Bruce but generations of their descendants who would, almost certainly, be millionaires today if they had been allowed to keep their beachfront property.”¹

Today in the United States, if the wealth of white households remained stagnant, it would take Black families 228 years to catch up. That is more than 10 generations.²

Make no mistake: That gap is not the result of individual “bad” choices or biased myths that some groups are more hardworking than others. Instead, it is the result of what one historian dubs “[hard histories](#)”—a pattern of race-based policies, fueled and sustained

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decades, and the GI Bill, which, in practice, also excluded nearly two million Black veterans³—all in addition to more than two centuries of enslavement. (See [timeline](#).) That American history of anti-Blackness and discrimination helps explain why Where Is My Land, the organization created by Kavon Ward, a lead organizer in the return of Bruce's Beach, currently has a waiting list of more than 700 Black families with compelling claims for stolen land and lost wealth.

What could a different future for America look like?

Imagine if there were no more American stories framed by such gaps, disparities, and inequities.

Imagine an America that refuses to avert its gaze from the harms caused by systemic racism and instead collectively leans into the hard work of repair and transformation, even if all its benefits may not be seen in this lifetime.

Imagine an America where the fullness of Black creativity, ingenuity, and potential is finally revealed.

Currently, there is a broad ecosystem of grassroots organizations, nonprofits, artists, scholars, multiracial coalitions, leaders of color, and, yes, philanthropists, foundations, and other funders working across the United States who see reparations for Black people and creating a culture of racial repair as the missing piece to get to that better world, for everyone.

“When we ask for donors to support reparations, we are not begging for money for Black people. We’re extending a lifeline into your humanity, into your liberation and freedom, by being a part of this healing journey and process,” says Edgar Villanueva, founder and CEO of the [Decolonizing Wealth Project](#). “When we work to repair as a nation—including ensuring Black folks achieve reparations—we are all going to benefit tremendously, and there are going to be generational impacts.”

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thereafter. Inextricably linked to achieving this is building and sustaining a culture of racial repair. (More on this [below](#).)

One of the big misconceptions about reparations is that it is a discussion stuck in the past—only about history long ago rather than an investment, perhaps the investment, in the future. Reparations and the repair that comes with it are an opening, an invitation, and an opportunity to transform ourselves, our communities, and our nation.

Feedback “When we think about reparations, it is not just paying for past harm. These harms are happening today and will continue to happen if we don’t do something about it,” says Ward. “This is not just a fight for the now, this is a fight for the future, too. I don’t want to pass this fight on to my child, and I don’t want my child to have to pass it on to her child.”

Because of that opportunity for transformation, [Liberation Ventures](#), a reparations field catalyst and intermediary working to accelerate the Black-led movement for racial repair, and The Bridgespan Group, a global nonprofit that advises mission-driven organizations and philanthropists, came together to explore the role philanthropy could play in the movement for reparations and racial repair as a pathway toward a more equitable future. (Although Bridgespan has engaged deeply for more than six years in the work of its racial equity journey, both internally as an organization and externally in our work, it is, admittedly, still in the beginning stages of employing an explicit reparative lens.) For this research, we interviewed more than 45 movement leaders, scholars, and funders, conducted a literature review, and surveyed senior philanthropic leaders, with respondents representing more than \$12 billion in assets.

For funders who believe in racial equity and aspire to a thriving multiracial democracy, we invite you to see reparations for Black people and building a culture of repair as a necessity to reach that goal. Join us in learning from those who are leading the way.

The Racial Wealth Gap and the Opportunity for

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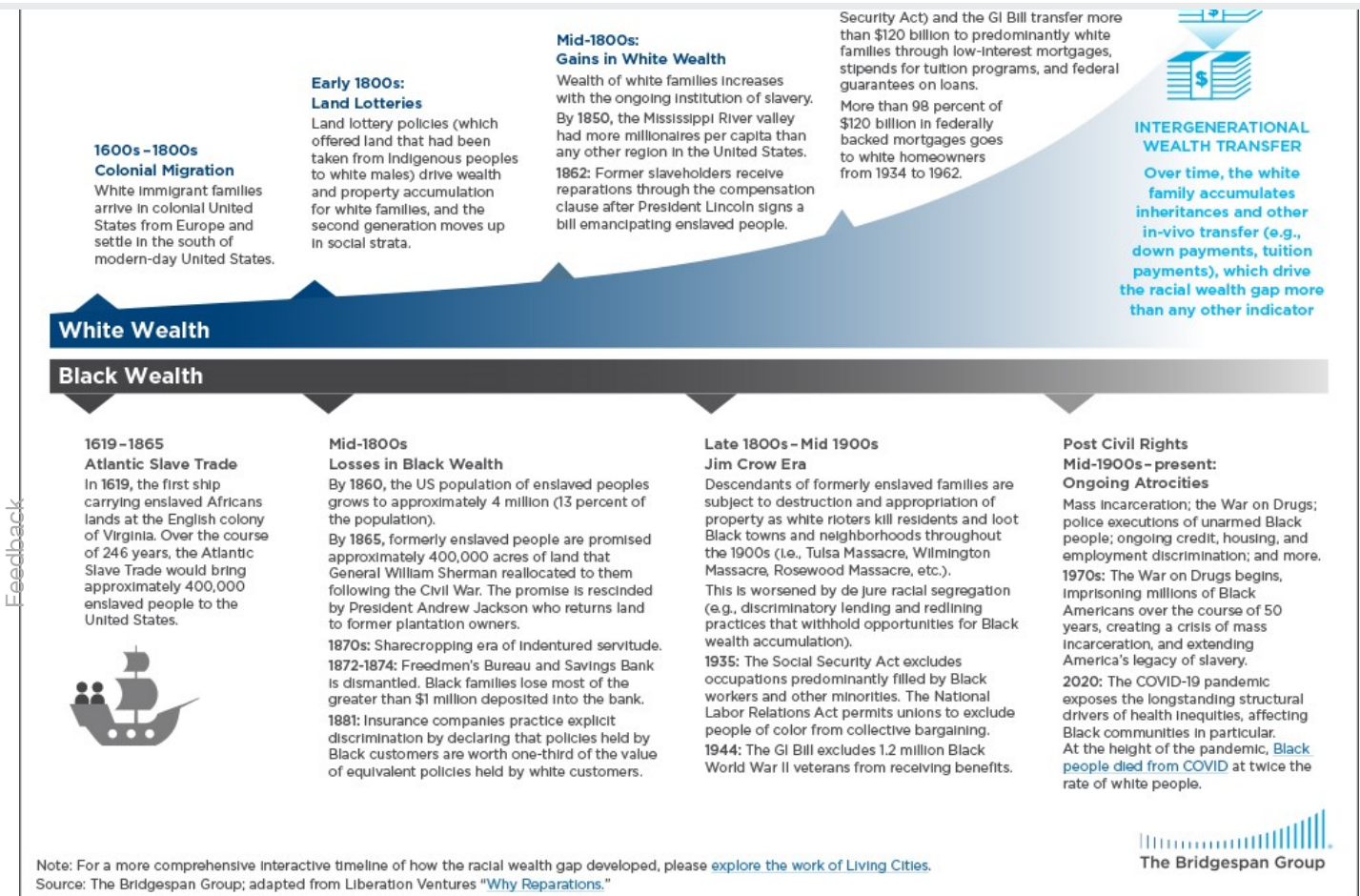


scholars, come to the work of reparations through an interest in addressing the racial wealth gap. The Black-white wealth gap is \$11.2 trillion.⁴ Closing it would add between \$1 trillion and \$1.5 trillion in GDP to the US economy. By 2050, if we eliminated additional racial disparities in health, incarceration, and employment, the nation would gain \$8 trillion in GDP.⁵ There is a \$330 billion disparity in wealth flow between white and Black families every year, and intergenerational wealth transfer drives 60 percent of that disparity. That helps to explain how the disparity in inheritances between Black recipients and their white counterparts is \$200 billion—each year⁶—and how the nation's inequities are further reinforced across generations.

Feedback
Economist William “Sandy” Darity of Duke University, who has researched the racial wealth gap for decades, has long insisted that because of the size of the gap and the race-based national policies that created and sustained it, a federal reparations program is the only way to close it. “My response to philanthropists who resist this idea [of reparations] is, whatever else is proposed, by indirect or universal strategies, is not going to do it,” says Darity. “If you’re serious about closing the racial wealth gap, you have to think about direct mechanisms to get it done.”

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The United States is in the midst of the largest wealth transfer in its history. As the baby boomer generation passes away, an estimated \$84 trillion will be passed down to heirs, with some \$16 trillion transferred in the next decade alone.⁷ To put that in perspective, that wealth transfer over the next 10 years is 43 percent more than what it would take to eliminate the entire Black-white wealth gap. Because of the history of race-based policy and segregation in the United States, the boomers who benefited most from decades of wealth building were primarily white.⁸ Rather than reinforcing the nation's inequity, this immense wealth transfer is a tremendous opportunity to do things differently. Philanthropy could leverage it to create a new path, diverging from the one America has inherited, by seizing the potential that building a culture of racial repair can bring.

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combination of restitution *and* repair.

Reparations are an internationally recognized legal framework for people who have suffered violations of human rights or humanitarian law.⁹ When applied to the history of Black people in the United States, we define reparations as a comprehensive federal program that addresses the legacy of slavery and the centuries of documented race-based policies thereafter.

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acknowledgment, accountability, and redress.

The process of moving toward reparations and creating a culture of repair gives us the opportunity to become a nation where the racial wealth gap narrows; institutions tell the truth about our history; federal, state, and local governments and institutions apologize for harms; and we all enjoy the power of a multiracial democracy, by and for all the people. Critically, raising the issue of repair does not imply that the Black community is broken, damaged, or defined by victimhood. Instead, what is damaged and in need of repair are the policies, systems, and culture that created and sustained the harm and inequity reparations address. Therefore, all people, regardless of race, stand to benefit and have a role to play.

Despite this holistic definition, much of the public discourse around reparations often focuses on specific dollar amounts and who exactly would be paid. In regard to the recent work of the statewide [reparations task force in California](#), one philanthropic leader confided, “What do you think [that price tag] does politically? It hands a weapon to others who want to increase divisions.”

Putting the focus only on the price tag, out of context, is a shock-and-awe approach that paralyzes the broader discussion into a state of impossibility. Daniel Anello, CEO of Kids First Chicago, points out: “The only way we don’t get sticker shock is if people really understand their history, and how we got to where we are, which is one of the pillars of comprehensive reconciliation.”

Movement leaders we spoke with are much more concerned with the racial repair, healing, and opportunity that reparations can bring to the entire nation. Ward is quick to point out that the Bruce’s Beach success is not full reparations because it was not accompanied by additional forms of repair. Indeed, after the land transfer, it took the city of Manhattan Beach two years to formally apologize, an initial step toward repair.¹⁰

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on Black people, all America where all Black people can thrive is one where all Americans must be thriving too.

“It is so important to understand history within the context of the Black-white paradigm because the protocols of anti-Blackness have become the protocols of oppression for the nation. So, understanding that history is important if we want to create a nation that can have a thriving democracy,” explained Angela Glover Blackwell, founder in residence at [PolicyLink](#), when asked about reparations at a *Stanford Social Innovation Review* “Frontiers of Social Innovation” conference in 2023.

Feedback

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Angela Glover Blackwell, Founder in Residence, [PolicyLink](#)

Furthermore, movements for equity and justice are often working in solidarity with one another. (For more on the Land Back movement, which includes Native reparations in addition to Indigenous self-determination, see the work of the [NDN Collective](#) and [Sogorea Te’ land trust](#), as well as [Indigenous-led funding opportunities curated by Neighborhood Funders Group](#).)

It is also critical that we apply an intersectional lens to reparations. For instance, redress for a cis Black man might look different than it would for a queer disabled Black woman or for a trans Black woman, because these individuals are likely to have experienced

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Scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, founder of the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies at Columbia Law School and co-founder the African American Policy Forum, warns that disconnecting the experience of Black women from the history of enslavement and its legacies ensures the dynamics of harm will continue to be repeated. “Until we are able to acknowledge that the wealth disparity came through Black women’s wombs, our effort to advance a reparations frame is going to be incomplete,” says Crenshaw.

Reparations Are Not a Radical Solution, Though the Impact of Repair Will Be

Feedback

“It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’” —Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” August 28, 1963

Reparations for Black people in the United States is not a new idea, although the movement has gained more media attention in recent years, thanks in part to the writing of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Nikole Hannah-Jones, as well as attention raised by Black Lives Matter in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd. The unfulfilled promises of “40 acres and a mule” issued in 1865 after the Civil War anchored the earliest discussions on reparations.¹¹ But the call actually dates back even further, thanks to Black women. Belinda Sutton, an Africa-born woman who was enslaved by landowner Isaac Royall Jr., is considered one of the first people to demand reparations for slavery and win—petitioning the Massachusetts General Court in 1783.¹²

In fact, the United States has even paid reparations for slavery before—not to Black people, but rather to *slaveholders*. In 1862, almost a year before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, President Abraham Lincoln signed a lesser-known bill, the

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World War II and paid \$1.6 billion to survivors. [\[14\]](#)

Reparations are also a global concept. In 2022, New Zealand became the most recent country to implement reparations when it made reparations to the Ngāti Maru, one of its indigenous peoples. [\[15\]](#) Recently, King Charles of Britain has even given the crown's first support for research into the monarchy's slavery ties. [\[16\]](#) After World War II the United States, via the Marshall Plan, also helped to ensure that European Jews received reparations for the Holocaust. [\[17\]](#) Since 1952, to foster societal healing, Germany has paid more than \$80 billion euros [\[18\]](#) to Holocaust survivors and started the journey of ongoing truth-telling and work to preserve the legacy and memory of victims and survivors.

Feedback

Truth and reconciliation commissions have been used in various forms around the world to help nations heal from human rights atrocities. [\[19\]](#) In South Africa, such a commission was spearheaded by Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela and is praised for the public airing of the physical and psychological harms of apartheid inflicted on Black South Africans. To be sure, the approach is also criticized because accountability and redress fell short, in that reparations payments were minimal and no perpetrators were prosecuted, while some received amnesty. [\[20\]](#)

Today, the reparations ecosystem in the United States includes a robust mosaic of Black-led organizations and multiracial coalitions. Grounding the movement are long-time advocates and veteran organizations like [N'COBRA](#) (National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America) that have been doing this work for decades. Building on their legacy are a swath of newer organizations tackling a wide range of work: narrative change (e.g., [Media 2070](#)), policy advocacy (e.g., [Why We Can't Wait](#) coalition), racial healing (e.g., [The Truth Telling Project](#)), and state and local advocacy (e.g., [FirstRepair](#)). Intermediaries, such as [Liberation Ventures](#) (collaborator on this article) and the [Decolonizing Wealth Project](#), are organizing donors and redistributing funding across the movement. The field is also beginning to build out its research infrastructure (e.g., with organizations like the African American Redress Network) such that the movement is

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to create a reparations plan for its Black residents in the form of housing grants.

FirstRepair, founded by Robin Rue Simmons, the former Evanston alderman who led the effort for the bill's passage, is currently in conversations with more than 100 initiatives on the local and state level that have taken some step toward reparations. A consortium of more than 90 universities across the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada are investigating their own institutions' ties to slavery and the legacies of racism in their histories.²² In 2022, the United Nations called on the US government for the first time to begin the process of providing reparations for descendants of enslaved Black people.²³

Feedback And, in 2023, Representative Cori Bush introduced the Reparations Now Resolution, following a decades-long tradition of introducing a federal bill on reparations in every legislative session.²⁴

Philanthropic involvement in the movement is growing, too, with national organizations entering the space. At least 80 national funders, including the Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, among others, are supporting multiple actors in the reparations ecosystem.

"When it comes to reparations, it is not a matter of 'if' it will happen—it is happening right now," says attorney and activist Nkechi Taifa, founder of the [Reparation Education Project](#). Taifa, who has been working on this issue for 40 years, sees the momentum now as at an all-time high. Her message to funders: "The opportunity is here, the opportunity is now. You can either be on the cutting edge to make transformational change happen or regret not doing so later."

Still, despite the long history and precedent to employ reparations, well-funded opposition forces to equity have made the mere word "reparation" toxic, despite its linguistic roots in repair. "We have a hugely asymmetrical situation where hundreds of millions of dollars are basically being spent trying to shift understanding away from the idea that there's still race work that needs to be done," says Crenshaw, "and that there's

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United States, almost half (44%) are now in effect. The topic of reparations was also cut from the required topics in the new AP African American studies curriculum. In addition, in a sign of the symbolism of the word itself, the shooter of the racist massacre in Buffalo, New York, wrote “Here’s your reparations!” on the assault rifle used to steal 10 Black lives.²⁶

Feedback

“We have a hugely asymmetrical situation where hundreds of millions of dollars are basically being spent trying to shift understanding away from the idea that there’s still race work that needs to be done and that there’s still racial repair that needs to happen.”

Kimberlé Crenshaw, Founder, The Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, Columbia Law School and Co-Founder, [African American Policy Forum](#)

At a recent reparations conference, tight security and regular warnings to attendees not to post the location of the conference hotel served as a reminder that some movement leaders in the room receive routine death threats as a result of doing this work. In our own conversations, there were some funders supporting reparations work who purposely don’t use the word publicly. Movement leaders stressed the need for funders to use their influence, voice, and convening power to foster education and collaboration.

Dr. Luke Charles Harris, co-founder of the [African American Policy Forum](#), reminds us to stay focused on what matters: “What we should be afraid of is white supremacy, not reparations.”

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where we could determine our future for ourselves, our children, and our families. —

Mike Milton, founder and executive director of the [Freedom Community Center](#)

Our interviews illustrated that the work of reparations and repair is wide ranging. While philanthropic organizations cannot themselves pay reparations, the abundance of imagination and variety of entry points is a reminder that there is no lack of opportunity for philanthropy. See the table on the next page for examples of what this work can look like. We dig deeper into this topic with funder examples in our companion article for *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, "[A Reparations Roadmap for Philanthropy](#)." In addition, Liberation Ventures is co-creating with movement leaders the Reparations Grantmaking Blueprint, available in early 2024, that will include a full picture of the strategic investments necessary to build momentum over the next 10 years.

We also invite you to take a look at some of the exciting work across the movement in the Reparations Movement Profiles here on our website, which showcases organizations working toward reparations and repair in critical lanes:

- [Land ownership](#). Land theft contributes to the racial wealth gap.
- [Criminal legal system](#). The War on Drugs disproportionately harms Black communities today.
- [Media](#). Anti-Black narratives spread by the media since colonial times help ingrain inequities.
- [Education](#). The erasure of the nation's "hard history" prevents understanding of root causes of inequity.


These efforts to address specific harms can create tangible psychological and material benefits for affected Black communities and serve as valuable pilots of learning and innovation. Such efforts are also critical to building momentum toward the ultimate goal of achieving reparations and building a culture of racial repair.

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Supporting the Reparations Movement and Building a Culture of Racial Repair

ACHIEVING REPARATIONS

	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE INVESTMENTS
 <p>REPARATIONS</p>	<p>A federal program designed to narrow the Black-white wealth gap and engage in the pillars of building a culture of repair</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convening and planning support to design a coordinated movement strategy • Narrative change to build public understanding on reparations • Research to inform reparations program design • Lobbying efforts • Grassroots organizing to mobilize constituencies

BUILDING A CULTURE OF RACIAL REPAIR

	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE INVESTMENTS
 <p>RECKONING</p>	<p>Understanding and grappling with the what, how, and why of actions that have contributed to harm</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytellers, artists, journalists, and scholars creating new ways to unearth and understand racial injustice • Commissions for wealth-origin research and stories for institutions, corporations, and families • Educators and organizations designing curricula that teach truthful US history • Initiatives for open dialogue and advancing racial healing • Movement leaders and efforts pushing back on the anti-critical race theory movement • Creation of and increased access to programming in public memorials, museums, and other institutions that serve to acknowledge harm
 <p>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</p>	<p>Admission that harm has been done</p>	
 <p>ACCOUNTABILITY</p>	<p>Ownership and willingness to take responsibility for harmful actions and commit to non-repetition</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black community land trusts, community investment trusts, and worker cooperatives to rebuild land ownership and economic self-determination • Large, unrestricted grants or endowments to Black-led organizations and institutions to enable greater levels of self-determination • Efforts to help Black families and communities reclaim wrongfully stolen assets and land • Funding staff position(s) and research efforts for local and state initiatives and reparations commissions to explore and create redress for specific, historic harms • Pilot programs in guaranteed income, baby bonds, and other asset-building initiatives for and with Black communities • Debt relief for Black farmers and broader efforts to direct federal funding resulting from recent policies to Black-led and Black-serving organizations and institutions
 <p>REDRESS</p>	<p>Acts of restitution, compensation, and rehabilitation; proactive steps taken to embed racial justice into systems and "heal the wound"</p>	
<p>Intangible investments</p>	<p>Convene conversations on reparations internally with board and with peer funders and other stakeholders; elevate topic of reparations externally and among peers; ensure Black and grantee representation in decision-making bodies on Board and in organizational leadership</p>	

(NOTE: This is not an exhaustive list of reparations and repair investments. These are ideas from conversations with movement leaders meant to showcase the breadth of potential opportunities.)

Source: The Bridgespan Group; adapted from Liberation Ventures "[Why Reparations.](#)"

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thought partnership and critical contributions to this research. We also are deeply grateful for and inspired by the pioneering organizations and movement leaders who were interviewed for and are quoted in this piece. In addition, we recognize that this research stands on the shoulders of the work of so many across time who have been fighting for reparations since before emancipation. We believe that we can win reparations in our lifetime—and we owe that belief to the giants who knew that they likely would not see success in theirs, yet still worked tirelessly to cover so much ground before us.

Feedback

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Reparations

Black leaders share their hopes for the future.

Feedback



Robert Smith III

Senior Program Officer of the Thriving Cultures Program, [Surdna Foundation](#)

“Right now I get to choose a card, but there are only 12 cards. But what if I had all 52 cards, and the jokers, and I could choose whatever I wanted to do or be? I think that’s what the world after reparations looks like for Black people. And I think, for all of us, it means that everyone gets to live in that truth of everyone offered a full deck, and some haven’t been cheating the game the whole time.”

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Feedback



Chi-Ante Singletary-Jones

Founder and Chief Reparations Officer

[Cypress Fund](#)

“I feel like on the other side of reparations, I might not have hair because I would be so free. My hope is that reparations is a step on the pathway to allow Black folks to release the stress and the weight of the world. My post-reparations world looks like community and joy and love—all of those things.”

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Feedback



Kimberlé Crenshaw
Co-founder and Executive Director
[African American Policy Forum](#)

“Race no longer has the predictable outcomes that it has. That is actually not that radical. Ultimately, in the Kingdom of Heaven there would be no bad outcomes, but in this life, it would at least mean that those bad outcomes are not tied to Blackness.”

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Feedback



Richard Wallace

Founder and Executive Director

[Equity and Transformation](#)

“The open container that will exist around Black identity, expression, life, in the US is the greatest benefit that reparations will bring.”

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Feedback



Brea Baker
Chief Equity Officer
[Inspire Justice](#)

“Do you know how it's beautiful to be by a lake and to have access to a slowed-down life, the kind where childhoods are full of roaming? [White people] get to benefit from that kind of slowness and pass that on to their children and their children's children, and to know that generations of their family will have access to that intergenerational level of slowness. That should be something everyone, regardless of race, has access to.”

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Reckoning in Action and Creating a Culture of Repair - Reggie Cotton

Reparations and land back movements may be gaining momentum across the country for the past misdeeds and crimes committed against people of color. However, until the nation sees laws passed, lives changed, and communities of people restored then it is all for nothing. The race massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma represents the power structure instilled in America since the birth of the nation, a power structure that will exist until the repentance of those in power. Only then can the system which gives them their privilege be dismantled and reconstructed on a more equitable premise. But people in power realize their advantage and fear such a new arrangement.

Presently, the system does not allow even the thought of reparations to those who suffered generations of oppression, suppression, and regression. Repentance for America's transgressions would require acknowledgment of wrongdoing, structural change, and a movement toward system change. Without this, the generational curse of poverty, crime, and social disenfranchisement proceeds.

The Tulsa Race Massacre indicates a value system that is rooted in greed, power, and contempt for anyone and anything that rebuffs the dominant system of white supremacy. It robbed American citizens of their livelihood, their ability to compete, and the soul of their future. Homes and businesses burned down, opportunities were denied, and hopes were stolen, furthering a perpetual regression that is still maintained in laws, power, and ideology. Jobs, education, and futures remain put on hold until those in power decide who is worthy to benefit from the current structure.

How does one survive a system that contradicts its own version of the American dream? The American Dream tells us to work hard, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, and enjoy equal rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We must first acknowledge the contradictions of the American Dream and ongoing oppression of marginalized people in order to truly realize what it means to advance and heal from past harms.

What does justice and healing look like for Tulsa Massacre survivors and for generations of exploited Tulsans, Oklahomans, and Americans? First, justice would mean governmental institutions and current power structures confessing the actions of the past, and redeeming these actions through legislation to repair and improve abused communities. Educational and vocational schools beyond the public school system should be mandated and incentivized to place, train, and educate all from past abused communities. Banking and loan institutions should redirect billions of dollars to past abused communities for business startup and expansion. Housing should be fiercely regulated with a tithing system that gives those that live at or below poverty levels the ability to rent and purchase homes in middle class neighborhoods. Employment commissions should be proactive in auditing business to ensure that everyone is being treated fairly during hiring, promotion, dismissals, and in the day-to-day work environment.

The Oklahoma criminal justice system should mimic new philosophies of change that incorporate values that are inclusive of the entire community. It should acknowledge a past system of abuse and demonstrate faithfulness to a new system of change. A reimagined criminal

justice system does not allow those in power to change the rules to benefit themselves. A reimagined criminal justice system does not allow chiefs, sheriffs, district attorneys, city managers, and council people to be promoted, elected, or placed by political party affiliation. A reimagined system does not allow the police union to use their power to support candidates for election or re-election to these appointments or positions. A reimagined criminal justice system has national mandates of training informed by equality, and that focus on discrimination, de-escalation, cultural awareness, and community wellbeing. A reimagined criminal justice system does not allow oppression to be perpetuated through the premise of “might makes right.”

Lastly, a reimagined criminal justice system should be calibrated to individual prosperity when it comes to minor offenses. For example, fines for traffic citations and some other misdemeanor offenses should consider people’s ability to pay. A traffic citation should not destroy a person’s ability to survive, nor should it be so minor that it is not effective. Punishment for minor infractions of the law leave many citizens despondent and feeling adversarial to a system designed to keep us all safe from hurt, harm, or danger. The current system is lined with potential corruption, favoritism, and privilege, leaving the poor and disenfranchised the burden of paying their debts. Or did we think off-duty police officers and their families and friends never get stopped for traffic violations? Do those in power get citations with the same frequency as those that have no power or affiliation with police? How do we reign in police discretion so that all citizens have the same opportunity for a warning versus a hard copy? Finally, sometimes police discretion leaves some further in debt and poverty while those that can afford to pay their citations get free passes.

A reimagined criminal justice system will not be without detractors. But re-imagination is necessary to incorporate a value system that is consistently based on actions of the individual enacting harm not wielded with the prejudiced discretion of fallible men who are in positions of power. A new system that helps those sitting in the seats of privilege to listen to the pain caused by generations of abandonment can help us all move forward. A reimagined criminal justice system favors all and excludes none.

FUTURES

Reclaiming Safety

In our imaginations, we need to break the equation of policing and public safety.

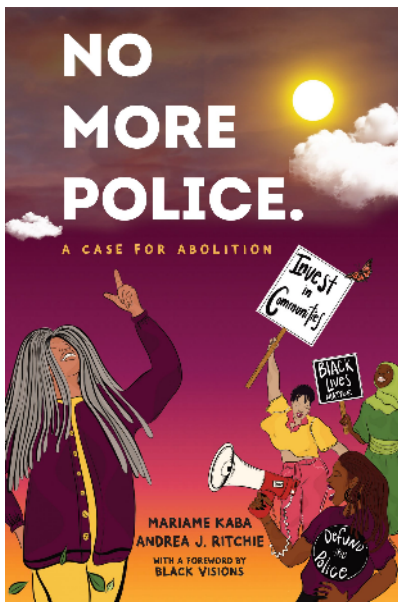
By **Mariame Kaba & Andrea J. Ritchie**

August 30, 2022



Contrary to assumptions that abolitionists don't care about safety, we care a great deal about it. We recognize that safety is a basic human need. We think, talk, and strategize about it constantly in order to bring more of us closer to it. A commitment to creating genuine and lasting safety for all is what drives our desire to remake the world. Our organizing and advocacy toward a world free of policing is rooted in the reality that, for many of us, the cops offer no solution to violence, and in fact *are* the killers, rapists, home invaders and looters, destroyers of lives, families, and communities. *They* are what stands between us and the resources we need to ensure our collective safety and survival.

Ultimately, achieving greater safety requires us to divest financially, ideologically, and emotionally from the violence of policing. That means speaking to and confronting fears arising from the basic human need for safety and survival, which are fueled by propaganda and social policy that offer police and the carceral state as the only possible ways to meet those needs.



As abolitionists, we begin by asking open and generative questions that don't limit our imaginations to policing: *What does safety look like for you and for your communities? What conditions would increase safety for as many people as possible?* We engage individuals and communities on their concrete concerns around what might happen if police no longer exist by asking questions like: *Are you in danger right now? Are you worried about being robbed or assaulted? What have the police done in the past when you or people you love have faced this danger? What do you think the police would do if you faced this danger in the future? If the police were helpful, how were they helpful? If you imagine they would be, what, specifically do you envision them doing? Could that function be performed by someone who could be helpful without posing a danger to you and other people in your community? Who would be part of strengthening rather than destroying communities? Could this danger be prevented by ensuring your material needs are met or by transforming conditions and cultures of violence? Are you worried about what to do in case you are harmed in the future? What happens if someone commits a mass shooting? Are you worried about your own capacity to keep yourself and each other safe? Are you worried about retribution if you try to intervene to prevent harm?*

For the majority of people and communities affected by violence, our sense of safety is often informed by the safety we didn't get — from police, or anyone else — when we did face harm. We hold a wishful hope that next time, cops will get it right. For many

communities, police are the only government resource available to meet any and all needs, conflicts, and harms. The notion of removing police raises fear of further abandonment to violence in the absence of any structures or institutions to ensure safety or meet community needs. We need to hold our communities' fears with care while simultaneously building a shared understanding of violence and harm that includes the violence of police and fellow community members, of how we might go about creating genuine safety together, in ways that recognize the interconnectedness of our existence, without leaving anyone behind.

Abolition also requires us to unpack the notion of safety itself. While safety is a basic and universal human need, it doesn't have a universal and singular definition. No individual or society can be "perfectly safe" at all times and under all conditions. All of us are vulnerable — to the elements, to natural threats like earthquakes or hurricanes, to harm caused by other inhabitants of this planet, to the uncertainty of human existence in a vast universe. Of course, we are not all equally at risk. Our vulnerability to natural disaster, violence, trauma — and our access to opportunities to heal from them — are structured by relations of racial capitalism.

The state's carceral safety robs our communities of the conditions and nutrients that would allow true safety to grow, forcing us into the position of constantly reaching for more security from the very institutions that make us collectively less safe. Police fuel insecurity by constantly reminding us that we are never ever safe, with or without them. They then weaponize this insecurity to enact untold violence, always in the name of producing an impossible and elusive "safety." Their presence represents and announces an absence of safety rather than an embodiment of it.

“The state’s carceral safety robs our communities of the conditions and nutrients that would allow true safety to grow, forcing us into the position of

constantly reaching for more security from the very institutions that make us collectively less safe.”



Ultimately, we need to recognize and break with this obtunded conception of safety, the illusory carceral safety presented as something only the state can produce. To preserve this conception of safety, the state stokes our fear of one another, discouraging and interfering with our ability to care for each other. We see concrete evidence of this in the ways that police critique deescalation training, resist efforts to create nonpolice crisis response teams, and actively interfere with violence prevention and interruption initiatives. We're not usually at our best when we're afraid, and we are made even more afraid of each other through the politics of safety.

We also need to let go of the idea that safety is a state of being that can be personally or permanently achieved. Safety isn't a commodity that can be manufactured and sold to us by the carceral state or private corporations. Nor is safety a static state of being. Safety is dependent on social relations and operates relative to conditions: We are more or less safe depending on our relationship to others and our access to the resources we need to survive. In her short film *The Giverny Document*, Ja'Tovia Gary asks Black women passing a subway station in Harlem whether they feel safe in their bodies, in their communities, in society. Their answers were equivocal and relative: It depends, they said, on conditions like who they are with, whether their health aide is nearby, where they are, what time of day it is, or if they believe God is with them.

If you ask anyone on any given day if they feel more or less safe, their answer will depend on a multitude of things. Did they just get paid and so feel less anxious about rent? Did they go outside or did they stay home all day? Did they log on to the internet and find themselves bombarded by copaganda and stories of violent crime, missing white women, and mass shootings? Do they have people to lean on if some calamity befalls them or will they be left alone to navigate and make sense of it? These conceptions of safety are more nuanced than absolute, more relational than categorical. The more functional and vital question we face is how to create more safety for more people while acknowledging that the concept of safety is contested and its meanings aren't fixed.

More from our decarceral brainstorm

Every week, *Inquest* aims to bring you insights from people thinking through and working for a world without mass incarceration.

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Abolitionists see safety as a set of resources, relationships, skills, and tools that can be developed, disseminated, and deployed to prevent, interrupt, and heal from harm. We want to increase the number of tools that increase safety for as many people as possible; get rid of the tools that don't actually serve us, like policing and punishment; and undermine the

fear driving the politics of safety. Building and strengthening the relationships we need to create collective safety requires us to overcome the fear of and alienation from each other that the state has perpetuated. Collective care is a form of reciprocal community support that Krystle Okafor describes as “how we make each other possible.” Ultimately, there will be no safety that we don’t make through collective care and the relationships it requires.

This view of safety presents a challenge, as carceral systems tell us that solutions to violence are simple, straightforward, and absolute. We have been conditioned to see safety in a form only the state can provide. Abolitionists are therefore often expected to offer alternatives based on what currently exists — to take a job away from the police and reassign it to someone else — often a member of the “soft police.” Responses to violence that don’t rely on police or policing appear to be more complex, exhausting, naïve or impossible. Or, they are simply illegible to us as “safety.” The current approach to “public safety” actually increases risk of premature death, yet we cling to the thing that is failing us. We have to do the work of rejecting the politics of safety, and the carceral and militarized visions of safety, that we have been conditioned to believe are the only path forward.

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What Happened When a Brooklyn Neighborhood Policed Itself for Five Days

On a two-block stretch of Brownsville in April, the police stepped aside and let residents respond to 911 calls. It was a bold experiment that some believe could redefine law enforcement in New York City.

By Maria Cramer Photographs by Amir Hamja

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It had been a quiet April afternoon until about a dozen teenagers began running up Pitkin Avenue in Brownsville, yelling and cursing. They were chasing a girl of about 14 and it was clear they wanted a fight.

Five plainclothes police officers watched warily. Across Pitkin stood about half a dozen men, civilians in jeans and purple-and-gray sweatshirts.

“They got it,” an officer said.

The teenagers slowed as they spotted the men, workers from an organization called Brownsville In Violence Out, who calmly waved them in different directions. They scattered as the girl fled down a side street.

The brief encounter encapsulated a simple yet unorthodox concept that is at the heart of a bold experiment organizers believe could redefine law enforcement in New York: letting neighbors, not the police, respond to low-level street crime.

Several times a year, workers from Brownsville In Violence Out stand sentry on two blocks for five days. The police channel all 911 calls from that area to the civilians. Unless there is a major incident or a victim demands an arrest, officers, always in plainclothes, shadow the workers.

The civilians have no arrest powers. But they have persuaded people to turn in illegal guns, prevented shoplifting, kept a man from robbing a bodega and stopped a pregnant woman from hitting a boyfriend who had not bought a car seat and a stroller as he had promised.

They are part of the Brownsville Safety Alliance, a group of neighborhood and city groups, police officers and members of the Kings County District Attorney’s office that is trying to ensure that fewer people are arrested and entangled in the criminal justice system.





Members of the Brownsville Safety Alliance keep their eyes and ears open for problems that could become conflicts that would otherwise draw the police. As the men and women from Brownsville In Violence Out watch for trouble, agencies offering services like free child care and addiction recovery sit at folding tables, distributing pamphlets and luring passers-by with games, stress balls and pens.

Over the next three years, the city will provide \$2.1 million to help link the local organizations that participate most frequently in the Safety Alliance so that they can work cohesively throughout the year.

The effort mirrors others that have sprung up after demonstrations swept New York and much of the country to protest the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. They are meant to modulate the use of officially sanctioned force, using a neighborhood's innate desire for order as a tool.

Residents have embraced the concept, said Nyron Campbell, 37, an assistant program manager at Brownsville In Violence Out.

"They say, 'We feel more safe. We can walk without feeling anxiety,'" he said. "While they know that we do need police, it's possible that we can police ourselves."

The idea came from Terrell Anderson, who in 2020 took over as commander of the area's 73rd Precinct. Raised in Brownsville, he promised to rebuild the precinct's relationship with a wary community.

Residents had complained that officers had become aggressive, grabbing men off the street to arrest them for minor offenses. The neighborhood was reeling from the 2019 shooting of Kwesi Ashun, a T-shirt vendor with paranoid schizophrenia, killed as he swung at an officer with a chair at a nail salon.

Inspector Anderson asked residents what the department could do to engender trust.



Inspector Terrell Anderson set about rebuilding relationships in the neighborhood where he was reared.
New York City Police Department

Among them was Dushoun Almond, a jocular and self-deprecating man who goes by the nickname Bigga.

Mr. Almond, who runs Brownsville In Violence Out, said Inspector Anderson realized that sometimes all that is needed to keep the peace is a person with credibility — not necessarily a badge — telling someone: "Get out of here. You're bugging."

"Members of the community see themselves in Bigga," said Jeffrey Coots, the director of the From Punishment to Public Health initiative at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The group works closely with the Brownsville Safety Alliance, conducting surveys about the initiative and tracking its progress.

"This is someone who is like me, who understands me and is calling me out on the fact that I'm out of pocket a little bit," Mr. Coots said.

Deputy Inspector Mark A. Vazquez, who was also raised in Brownsville, took over last year after Inspector Anderson was transferred, and said that he continued the project because public safety is "shared responsibility."

Inspector Vazquez said he was 4 when his father was shot and that many family members have been incarcerated.

"I know how it is," Inspector Vazquez said.



Workers from Brownsville In Violence Out give away promotional items and literature about social-service programs.

Not everyone is convinced. Lise Perez, owner of Clara's Beauty Salon on Pitkin Avenue, has 26 cameras around her store and works behind a counter protected by a thick plastic partition. No one can get in or out without her pressing a button.

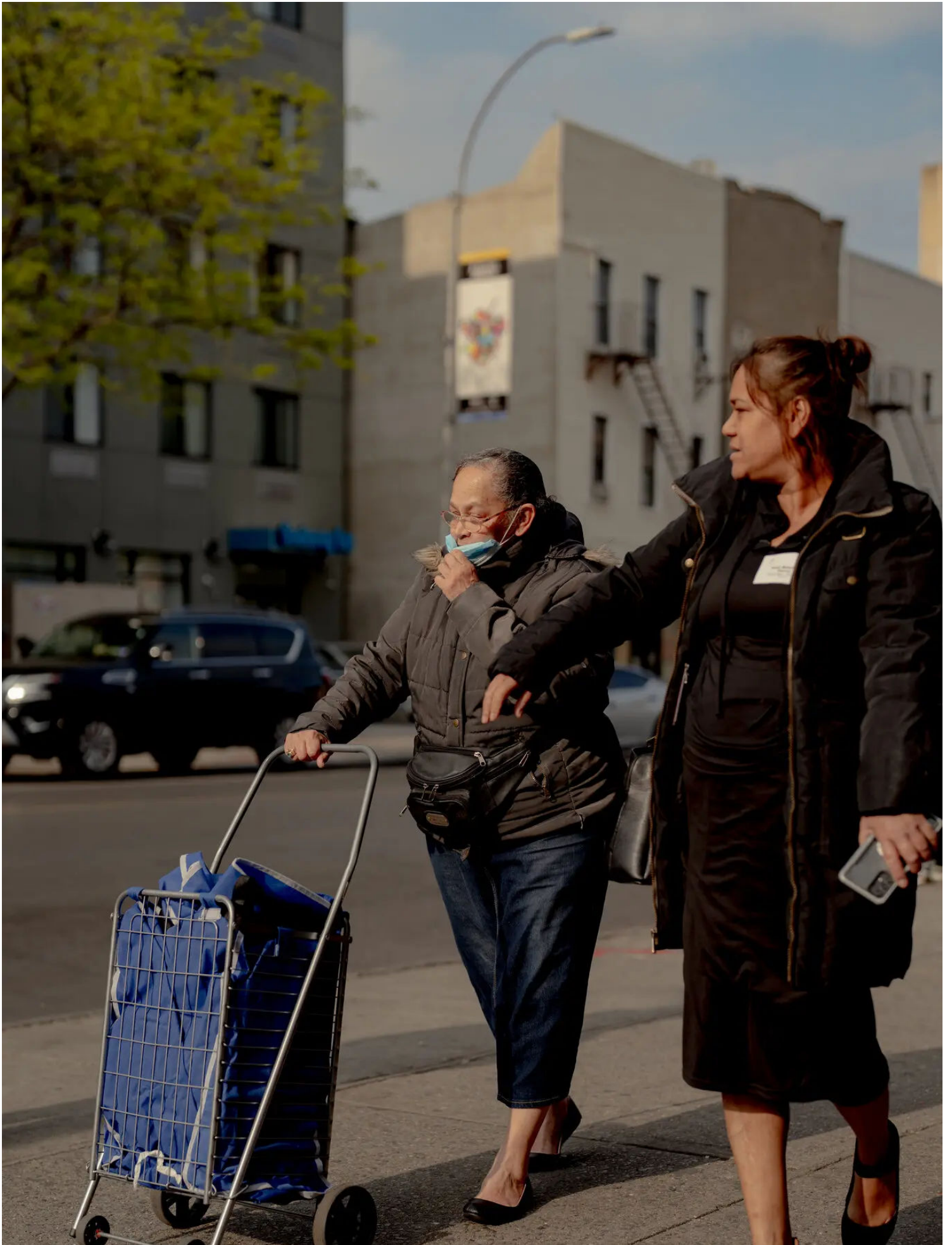
"In this area, nobody feels too safe," she said. "We're all here surviving."

The idea of five days in which the police refer 911 calls unsettles her.

"It's like they left us without protection," she said. "It doesn't give me peace."

But Minerva Vitale, 66, who lives on the avenue, said the effort was "incredibly important."

"We call them and, poof, they come right away," she said. "You think they ain't ready for this? Yes, they are."





Minerva Vitale, left, said she trusts the Brownsville Safety Alliance to respond to crime on the streets. Tiffany Burgess, 42, one of the Brownsville In Violence Out outreach workers, said she was mystified by the skeptics.

“If we can calm them down and get them to walk away, what’s the problem?” she said. “You should want that.”

More people around the country do. The Brownsville initiative is part of a movement called the “community responder model,” which aims to reduce the use of armed officers to handle many calls.

Similar programs are underway in Eugene, Ore.; Denver; and Rochester, N.Y., among other places, according to the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank. The group has estimated that almost 40 percent of calls to police could be handled by community responders.



Police officers are present, but they only shadow civilians who are the primary responders.

In Brownsville, the effort not only gives residents more say over what public safety looks like, but also can deter crime if people know there are more eyes watching, said Eric Gonzalez, the Brooklyn district attorney.

“A lot of people worry that if police systems are not fully active, crime will go up,” he said.

But the Safety Alliance has been thriving amid a positive trend in the 73rd Precinct, Mr. Gonzalez said. In the first half of 2023, homicides fell 50 percent, shootings fell 25 percent and the rate of grand larcenies of automobiles also fell even as it rose in other neighborhoods, he said.

One set of watching eyes belongs to Mr. Almond, 47, a former gang member who spent more than 13 years in prison for a bank robbery. He returned to Brownsville in 2014 and got a tattoo of a smoking gun behind his right ear to hide a small scar left from a bullet wound.





Dushoun Almond, known as Bigga, has the hard-won experience to help him talk people out of decisions they may regret. His past, along with his calm, straightforward approach, helps him navigate conflicts. During one Safety Alliance week, he persuaded a man going into a bodega with a gun to give him his weapon and go home. The next day, that same man returned, but this time to volunteer. He spent the day “squashing beefs,” Mr. Almond said. “He broke up like three fights.”

Just as he told the story, a 911 call came in about a fight at a deli on the corner of Watkins and Pitkin. Mr. Almond slowly walked over to size up the dispute between two men — one of whom had taken out a restraining order against the other, a person named Lala.

Lala had disappeared, but the other man remained outside the deli.

“From now on, so there won’t ever be problem like this in our community, call me,” Mr. Almond told the man, who nodded. “Go in the store. Don’t antagonize each other.”

Mr. Almond then told one of the outreach workers to find Lala and order him to stay away.

Mr. Almond walked toward Sgt. Jared Delaney and Officer Nickita Beckford.

“It’s all good,” he said. “I took care of it.”

The workers take on a heavy load, handling cases that fall into the yawning gap between law enforcement and social services.



Social service groups supply clothing, shoes and hot drinks, an effort to draw in neighborhood residents and tell them about resources in and around Brownsville.

On the second-to-last day of the Safety Alliance week, a chilly, overcast Friday, a car pulled up. The driver pushed a woman onto the street, then drove off. Crying, screaming and intoxicated, she had no money or identification and did not seem to know where she was.

Mr. Almond's team surrounded her. Ms. Burgess, the outreach worker, learned her name was Alicia and it was her 23rd birthday. She told Ms. Burgess she had paranoid schizophrenia and kept insisting on going to Rite-Aid. Ms. Burgess was worried she was planning to steal something.

Dana Rachlin, executive director of We Build the Block, a Brooklyn-based public safety organization that helps run the alliance, bought Alicia Chinese food to calm her. As she ate her meal, Ms. Rachlin called the city's mental health hotline.

She waited while on hold for 10 minutes before someone told her it would be 24 hours before a team could come, and that she could call the police.

Ms. Rachlin rolled her eyes and hung up.

It was getting colder. Ms. Rachlin sat on the bench at the bus stop and Alicia sat next to her, put her head on her shoulder and fell asleep.

Finally, Ms. Rachlin and Mr. Almond and an executive from a social services group drove Alicia to an intake center for a shelter. She could not get a bed until Monday but she could stay at the center through the weekend.

When Ms. Rachlin called the center the next morning to check on her, Alicia was gone.

"We've been looking for her," Ms. Rachlin said. "We have our eyes open."

She said the eventual goal was to close that gap and create a system where someone like Alicia, who might have been arrested for fighting or shoplifting, could get shelter, cash and an identification card immediately.

At least on that Friday, Ms. Rachlin said, the alliance "provided a moment of safety."

Audio produced by Jack D'Isidoro.



Dana Rachlin, left, and Tiffany Burgess, right, try to help Alicia, a 23-year-old woman who was thrown out of a car on Pitkin Avenue.

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What Happened When a Brooklyn Neighborhood Policed Itself for Five Days - The New York Times

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