

Criminal Justice Reform is Not Dead



By Charles E. Lewis, Jr.

With so many issues filling the airwaves, from political polarization, roiling campus protests about the war in Gaza and its antisemitic antecedents, the growing threat of global warming, and threats even to our democratic system, the sad plight of the many thousands languishing behind bars for nonviolent offenses seems to be forgotten. Many are the victims of the War on Drugs and mandatory minimum sentences. They have a champion in Dr. Carrie Pettus, whose work with her newly formed nonprofit, [Wellbeing and Equity Innovations](#) (WEI), seeks to have their voices heard and their lives restored. I am joining forces with her to advance this important work.

According to the [Prison Policy Initiative](#), more than 1.9 million individuals are held in 1,566 state prisons, 98 federal prisons, 3,116 local jails, 1,323 juvenile correctional facilities, 142 immigration detention facilities, and 80 Indian country jails, as well as in military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories — at a system-wide cost of at least \$182 billion each year. Approximately 47 percent of those incarcerated have committed violent crimes. One in five, or 361,000 people, are locked up for drug offenses. Sadly, after their release—95 percent of incarcerated people are eventually released—their lives are usually in shambles. About nine million individuals cycle through jails annually, 70 percent of whom have not been convicted. They are awaiting sentencing or being remanded for other reasons.



The [Safety and Justice Challenge](#) (SJC), of which WEI is a partner organization, released a [report and implementation guide](#) on Achieving Racial Equity and Improving Culture in Jails Using a Community-Engaged Quality Improvement Process last week. Dr. Pettus is the lead author. The work, supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, details a racial equity strategy to enhance the impact of the Safety and Justice Challenge which is making progress in reducing jail populations across the country. Dr. Pettus was the lone social worker at the table during deliberations at the White House that resulted in [The First Step Act](#), signed into law during the Trump

administration. Hailed as a bipartisan effort to ease harsh sentences, promote rehabilitation, and reduce recidivism in the federal prison system, The First Step Act lowered sentences by making the [Fair Sentencing Act of 2010](#) retroactive. That bill reduced the disparity in sentencing for crack cocaine compared to powder cocaine from 100:1 to 18:1, bringing relief to the black community whose residents were more likely to use crack cocaine. Federal prisoners could also earn time credits for good behavior.

My doctoral dissertation, *The Negative Effects of Incarceration on Fathers in Fragile Families*, focused on criminal justice. As President of the Mental Health Association of DC, I advocated for mental services in schools to reduce the probability of youth becoming ensnared by the criminal justice system. I first connected with Dr. Pettus while she was at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis and a co-lead of the Smart Decarceration network of the [Grand Challenges for Social Work](#) initiative. I was a member of the Special Interest Group (SIG) that convened at the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) annual meetings. Dr. Pettus is now chair of the Grand Challenges Leadership Board on which I serve.

On another note, a bill proposed by New York City Councilmember Erik Bottcher (D-Manhattan) would require the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to [place licensed social workers in all 77 New York City police precincts](#). The bill would require at least one social worker to be on staff at all times in every precinct to evaluate arrestees for substance abuse and other mental health disorders, provide directions for follow-up services, and connect them with family. The idea for the program is to address the cycling in and out of precinct lockups of individuals arrested for low-level crimes such as shoplifting and transit fare evasion without addressing the underlying cause for the behavior.

The initiative would complement the [\\$43 million B-HEARD program](#) (Behavioral Health Emergency Assistance Response Division) launched in New York City in 2021 that sends teams of EMTs (Emergency Medical Technicians) and social workers to nonlethal emergency calls. The details of how many social workers will be staffed at precincts and how they operate are still being worked out. The third annual [National Conference on Police Social Work](#) is being held this week, on May 22nd through the 24th, at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven for those interested in learning more about

Connecticut State University in New Haven for those interested in learning more about social work collaboration with law enforcement.



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