

Community Foundations Tackle Criminal Justice Issues

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April 17, 2023



National Criminal Justice Month may be over, but community foundations' support of initiatives to reform our criminal justice system are a year-round commitment.

There is much work to be done. The U.S. has the second largest prison population in the world, as well as the sixth highest per-capita incarceration rate. As of 2021, America employed 3 million criminal justice professionals and supervised over 5 million adults on probation or parole.

Here are three of the many examples of community foundations that are taking the lead in criminal justice reforms.

Seeking Justice Reform in Michigan

Earlier this year, the **Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan** announced more than \$2.8 million in grants from [The Michigan Justice Fund](#) to improve the economic mobility of individuals with criminal convictions and support grassroots organizations

working to advance justice reform throughout the state.

The challenges that the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan are trying to address with these actions are significant, and indicative of predicaments faced by the country as a whole. For instance, Black people make up 14.1% of Michigan's population, but about 46% of the state's prison population, and 64% of Michigan's population serving life or long sentences.

Barriers persist upon release, where formerly incarcerated people must contend with new challenges that include employer bias, housing discrimination, and lack of adequate, accessible health and mental health supports, making the pursuit of economic mobility even more challenging.

A statewide initiative, The Michigan Justice Fund supports a range of initiatives including the ACLU Fund of Michigan's Prosecutor Transparency Project to examine prosecutorial decision-making impact on racial Minorities; the Michigan Prison Doula Initiative to grow childbirth preparation and doula support programs for incarcerated pregnant people; and Citizens for Racial Equity in Washtenaw to address racial disparities across Washtenaw County's juvenile and adult criminal legal systems.

Lowering Recidivism Rates in Florida

In Florida, **The Gulf Coast Community Foundation** has taken steps to aid formerly incarcerated individuals in facing these challenges. The foundation awarded a total of \$214,000 to a program called Transitions, which provides formerly incarcerated individuals who have a mental health condition with safe, supportive housing while they continue to overcome barriers upon release from incarceration.

The program has had a positive impact. The recidivism rate, or rate at which a convicted criminal reoffends, of those within the Transitions program is just 20%, down significantly from the average recidivism rate of 65%.

Since its launch in 2019, the foundation has also supported Community Care Court, a first-of-its-kind initiative in Florida designed to help individuals arrested for non-violent crimes related to their homelessness find a path to housing instead of jail.

A case manager whose position was supported by the foundation works with about 25 people at a time, and as of July 2022 had a 56% success rate of individuals achieving permanent housing or enrolling in a rapid rehousing program and having their charges dropped. All of those individuals had misdemeanors or city ordinance violations rather than felonies.

Rethinking School Discipline in New York City

In America's largest city, **The New York Community Trust** is tackling issues surrounding young people and the justice system by focusing on three key areas: prevention, systemic reform, and support services.

The Trust has led efforts to rethink school discipline, after determining that too often conflicts in school lead to escalating punishments, including arrests. With the Trust's support, the New York Civil Liberties Union, Advocates for Children of New York, and Make the Road New York have worked for years to improve school discipline procedures by advocating for decriminalizing student behavior, reducing the number of police officers and metal detectors in schools, and creating educational environments that support youth development.

The Trust has also been an early and consistent supporter of the statewide Raise the Age advocacy campaign to raise the presumptive age of criminal responsibility to 18 so that 16 and 17-year-olds would no longer be incarcerated with adults, but rather would be eligible for support services to help them get back to school and on track. Ultimately, after a protracted legal battle, the state in 2017 decided to direct 16 and 17-year-olds to Family Court or a special section of criminal court where judges receive special training. And as part of that decision, young people were no longer placed in adult facilities such as Rikers Island.

Additionally, the Trust supports several programs that help young New Yorkers who were involved with the justice system pave a positive way forward, including the "Opportunity Youth Part" in the New Rochelle City Court, which diverts offenders ages 18 to 24 out of the court system and connects them with community-based services, including academic support, job training, mental-health counseling, and mentoring.

The Trust recently gave a grant to the Women's Community Justice Association to push to permanently close the women's jail on Rikers Island and open a stand-alone women's facility that makes a genuine attempt at rehabilitation and is centrally located, making it easier for families to visit.

Women make up only 4% of those behind bars on Rikers Island, the city's main jail complex. But they often spend a year or more on the island before being tried in court. Complaints of sexual violence perpetrated by staff on Rikers are more than double the national average for prisons.

Despite the fact that 85% of the women have young children, the facility is difficult for families to visit, and its nursery has been closed for more than two years.

Health and mental health care are inadequate, yet two-thirds of women on Rikers have been diagnosed with a mental illness, and most have suffered sexual or other physical violence.

No doubt, the challenges within America's criminal justice system are complex.

Yet during National Criminal Justice Month and beyond, community foundations have inserted themselves as key players in efforts to ensure that there is justice for all.