



Justice System Narrative Guide

Our Quest

To dramatically reduce the jail and prison population and end mass criminalization in New York State.

The Problem

If New York were a country, it would have the sixth highest incarceration rate in the world. The crisis of mass incarceration and criminalization has devastated families and communities across New York State. Since the very beginning, the justice system has trapped people on the margins of society in an endless cycle of punishment. Each stage of the justice system has been designed to inflict the maximum punishment on the most vulnerable members of our society: people of color, queer and transgender people, immigrants, people with mental health issues and disabilities. When our friends, neighbors and family members are being targeted by law enforcement and locked in cages, it becomes impossible for us to build the strong, resilient and inclusive communities we all want to see.

- The “justice” system isn’t broken. It’s working exactly the way it was intended: to punish Black, Brown and low-income people. Instead of repairing harm, creating accountability and restoring relationships, the system multiplies harm, breaks apart families, and creates lasting trauma. The system fails to address the root causes of harm in our society: widespread poverty and a lack of access to services, treatment, education, employment, healthcare and affordable housing.
- The deep underinvestment in Black, Brown and low-income communities has forced more and more people into an underground economy. Neighborhoods are overpoliced and underresourced, which results in mass criminalization and systemic police abuses.

- The underinvestment in rural Upstate communities has forced towns and counties to build their local economies around jails and prisons, which pressures elected leaders to keep beds full at all costs.
- Formerly incarcerated people struggle to access jobs, housing, and basic services. Saddling people with a permanent record hurts our communities and weakens our economy by pushing families to the margins of society and keeping them stuck in perpetual poverty.

Our Solution

Mass incarceration and mass criminalization are not the answer to problems created by underinvestment and structural racism. We need to fundamentally transform the justice system and repair the harm done to our communities by investing in quality public schools, living wage jobs, affordable housing, mental health and substance use services, transportation, health care and affordable child care. Jails and prisons are not social safety nets.

How We Get There

We need a justice system that lives up to its name and promise. Anyone who encounters the justice system should know that they will be treated with fairness and dignity, no matter the color of their skin or the size of their wallet. Perpetual punishment is not the same as “justice.”

- We must end the racist “War on Drugs” and reinvest in the communities most harmed by marijuana prohibition. People with marijuana convictions should have their records cleared and be allowed to fully rejoin their communities.
 - Substance use should be treated as a medical concern, not a legal issue. People struggling with drug addiction should have easy access to medication-assisted treatments and support services.
- Communities should have a vital voice in deciding how they are policed. We need to put an end to discriminatory and abusive policing practices and hold law enforcement accountable when they break the community’s trust.
 - We must invest in restorative approaches to justice, so conflicts in our communities can be resolved without the involvement of law enforcement.

- We must fully eliminate money bail and stop jailing people based on race and wealth. Money bail creates a two-tiered justice system. While the wealthy can pay bail and walk free, working class and low-income New Yorkers are left to suffer behind bars while they wait for their day in court.
- Solitary confinement is torture and a human rights violation. People should not be held in isolation for extended periods of time. We need humane alternatives to solitary confinement that address the underlying causes of behavioral problems.
- People wait decades for the opportunity for parole release. Many lose contact with family members and loved ones. People who have served their time should have a fair chance to rejoin their communities.
 - “Life without parole” is a death sentence by another name. Aging people in prison should have the opportunity to reunite with their families.
- Big corporations should not be profiting from the crisis of mass incarceration. We need to end the privatization of the prison system and stop corporations from profiting on the backs of Black and Brown people.
- We must end punitive discipline and zero tolerance policies that push kids out of school and fuel the school-to-prison pipeline. The presence of metal detectors, surveillance cameras and armed officers creates a prison-like environment that chips away at children’s self-esteem from an early age.
- People who have served their time should have their rights fully restored. People who have been incarcerated should have the same ability as their friends and neighbors to access housing, apply for student loans, and participate in their democracy.

Call to Action

Together we can transform the justice system and rebuild communities devastated by mass incarceration. Partial reforms won’t fix the problem. We must have the courage to reimagine justice in New York and break the cycle of harm.

Notes on Phrasing

✓ Eliminate the word “criminal” when referencing the system. Use the phrase “justice system.” When referring to how the system currently functions, “mass incarceration system” is appropriate.

✓ Avoid words like “offender,” “convict,” or “felon.” These words are diminishing and dehumanizing. When referring to people in prison or jail, use the terms “incarcerated people” or “incarcerated New Yorkers.” When referring to people who have been released, use the term “formerly incarcerated person.”

✓ Replace the word “crime” with “harm.” To change the way we think about the justice system, we need to understand that crime is not synonymous with harm.