

CONFERENCE REPORT



2<sup>nd</sup> National Conference of the Smart Decarceration Initiative  
**TOOLS AND TACTICS:**  
*Promising Solutions to Advance the Era of Smart Decarceration*

November 2-4, 2017

University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration



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## Executive Summary

Smart Decarceration Initiative  
Co-Founders and Co-Directors



Matthew Epperson  
Associate Professor  
University of Chicago  
School of Social Service  
Administration

*"If we are to move from a moment where decarceration is a possibility to a decarceration movement, this movement must be led by individuals who have been most impacted by mass incarceration. When formerly incarcerated individuals have a seat at the table, not as an afterthought or token gesture, but as leaders and partners, then exciting things can happen."*



Carrie Pettus-Davis  
Assistant Professor  
Washington University of  
St. Louis  
Brown School of Social Work

*"We focus on collaborating with practitioners, prosecutors, jails, probation offices, and public defenders—to really think about: How can we become very innovative in our policy, in our practice, at the early stages of criminal justice, so we create as many exit points from the criminal justice system as possible, and create exit points that are redressing racial, economic, and behavioral health disparities, and increasing well-being."*

We are thrilled to present this report on our second national conference: *Tools & Tactics: Promising Solutions to Advance the Era of Smart Decarceration*. The title indicates how much the decarceration landscape has changed in just a few years. At our inaugural conference in 2015, our primary focus was wrestling with guiding concepts and how we might begin to shape the thinking and planning around the emerging era of decarceration. That conference resulted in the 2017 publication of the book "Smart Decarceration: Achieving Criminal Justice Transformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" by Oxford University Press.

How quickly we have moved from ideas to action. Speaking about the need to decarcerate is no longer a radical or idealistic stance, but one that is reasoned, compelling, and strategic. Across the country, diverse groups of stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels are planning and implementing strategies to reduce the exploding populations of prisons and jails. This is a time of innovation, learning from our successes and challenges, and generating evidence to guide future efforts.

What you will find in this report represents some of the most progressive thinking and action at this early stage in the era of decarceration. Over the three days of the conference, a diverse group of national experts, practitioners, policy makers, elected officials, advocates, students, and people with lived experience convened with the unified purpose of identifying and implementing the most effective, sustainable, and socially just decarceration efforts. As emphasized in the conference, the leadership presence of people with incarceration histories is organized, growing, and effective, and it remains an essential component of moving from a decarceration moment to a decarceration *movement*. This conference exemplifies the kinds of cross-sector and transdisciplinary collaborations that must drive the decarceration era.

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### SMART DECARCERATION INITIATIVE CONFERENCE AT A GLANCE

**1,500+**  
attendees

**23**  
presenters

**5**

keynote speakers

**8**

lunch breakout sessions

**5**

expert panels on:

- Implementing Decarceration-Focused Policy Innovations
- Addressing Violence and Criminal Justice Reform in Chicago
- Driving Change: People Most Impacted by Incarceration
- Reducing Behavioral Health Inequities in the Criminal Justice System
- Organizing for Decarceration

**Media coverage on CLTV, WGN, Fox, and WBEZ**

**1**

community-wide event

**18**

session facilitators

## Executive Summary (continued)

If you are new to the term “smart decarceration,” it is best described by its three interrelated outcomes:

- Substantially reduce the population in jails and prisons
- Redress existing racial, economic, and behavioral health disparities in the criminal justice system
- Maximize public safety and well-being

Though simply stated, achieving these three outcomes will take a sincere commitment to reforming practices and policies and utilizing the best evidence available. More than that, we must intentionally address structural issues of racism and inequality; planning for, and assessing the impact of reforms that intentionally reduce racial disparities will be critical. Although there is much to be optimistic about, it would be naïve to think that decarceration is inevitable. It is becoming increasingly clear that decarceration is an idea that will take serious, long-term work to realize.

So, as we move forward with efforts that hold promise for advancing decarceration, we must ensure that our tools and tactics are targeted, grounded, and responsive. Our approaches must move beyond short-sighted outcomes to target meaningful systems change. They must be grounded in guiding concepts that change the narrative about incarceration and incarcerated people, as well as grounded in a commitment to long-term sustained action. Lastly, decarceration tools and tactics will need to be responsive to evidence as it emerges. We cannot blindly plow through new programs and policies without being nimble and adaptable to what we learn as we do. We must also be responsive to often complex political climates to advocate for policies that will help realize the goals of decarceration.

While we all are continuing to change the narrative on incarceration and imagine different forms of justice, we are also rolling up our sleeves and getting into the messy work of making smart decarceration a reality. There are many different ways to approach decarceration – from advocacy and activism angles, working for reform within the system, from policy changes, from research perspectives, and practice innovations. Regardless of the angle, there is room for everyone – and everyone is needed.

We hope that you will be inspired and challenged by some of the tools and tactics highlighted in this report. More than that, we hope that you will build on these ideas as you do your part to advance the era of smart decarceration.



Matthew Epperson and Carrie Pettus-Davis  
Co-Directors, Smart Decarceration Initiative

Podcast available



*Knowledge Applied* is a new podcast series from the University of Chicago that takes you inside the research reshaping everyday life.

In episode 1, Matt Epperson discusses the history of mass incarceration, and the social and political changes that have occurred over the last decade that may make this the ideal time to begin shrinking the U.S. prison population.

Subscribe: [iTunes](#) / [Stitcher](#) / [RSS](#)

**Keynote speaker**  
**Susan Burton: *Becoming Mrs. Burton***



Keynote speaker Susan Burton describes her work in the decarceration movement with moderator Reuben Jonathan Miller, Assistant Professor, University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. An audience member poses a question at the opening session of the Conference.

**M**y son was killed. His name was K.K. He was five years old. Killed by an LAPD detective who accidentally ran him over. But I just could not hold any more pain, trauma, and disappointment. I began to drink heavily. That led to drug use, and the drug use led me into prisons and jails. I just started tumbling from there. I was convicted six times to California state prisons. I never left prison with a safe place to go. So, I went back to prison. And it was just a cycle of pain, hurt, trauma, and disappointment, until one day someone helped me.

Susan Burton, in conversation with Reuben Jonathan Miller, Assistant Professor, University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, opened the Conference describing the circumstances and pain that led her through multiple cycles of incarceration, and ultimately to a career advocating for and helping formerly incarcerated women. "It's as if we incarcer-

ate violence and trauma that people experience in this country, instead of leading them to therapy and violence prevention services and opportunity to rebuild their lives and have a life."

"So, I came back to South L.A. and said if women in South L.A. had a place to go, then perhaps they wouldn't return to prison. Perhaps their lives would get better and they could recover, not only from substance abuse, but from trauma."

**"I found my voice"**

As Burton began speaking out, "something bigger than I ever imagined happened. As we began telling our stories and talking about what was going on, I found my voice. I could no longer shake my head helplessly and ask the same question, over and over. It was time to change the answers. Doing that meant tackling many institutional barriers, laws, policies, and attitudes that created

mass incarceration, and that continue to punish people long after they serve their time."

A vicious cycle involving poverty, trauma, criminalized self-medication, marginalization, and often, tragedy, characterizes the lives of many women and men who are involved with the criminal justice system. But with proper screening diagnosis and pragmatic allocation of resources, many people coping with behavioral health issues can be redirected out of the criminal justice system toward a healthier and sustainable path.

Guided by her own involvement in the criminal justice system, Burton opened a home offering mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and job training for formerly incarcerated women. Her successful efforts highlight the importance of having the formerly incarcerated leading the decarceration movement.

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER** Susan Burton, Founder and Executive Director, A New Way of Life Re-entry Project, is a leader in the criminal justice reform movement. Drawing on her personal experiences, she dedicates her life to helping others break the cycle of incarceration. She is a past Soros Justice Fellow, CNN Top Ten Hero, and was named by the *Los Angeles Times* as one of 18 New Civil Rights Leaders in the nation. In 2017, her book *Becoming Mrs. Burton* won the first Goddard Riverside Stephan Russo Book Prize for Social Justice.



**“We’re organized. We’re energized.  
We’re working a plan  
that everyone understands.  
It’s well-funded.**

**That’s when we start to win.**

**You do not accidentally find  
yourself on this winning path.  
It’s a choice – a series of choices.”**

Writer and activist  
Shaun King



At the campus-wide community event, **Shaun King** energized a capacity audience at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, describing how citizens can mobilize and create change. (bottom row) Shaun King with Smart Decarceration Initiative co-founder and co-director **Matt Epperson**. Audience at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel.



During introductory remarks, **Sheldon Smith**, Founder, The Dovetail Project, describes how his organization changes young men's lives.

To a standing-room-only crowd at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, Sheldon Smith opened the program, describing his struggles growing up in Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood. His organization, The Dovetail Project, promotes alternatives to incarceration, including programming and support, especially to young men. People in poor communities, Smith said, do not grow up wanting to rob people, sell drugs, and go to jail. He implored the audience to promote alternatives because, "jail is not changing these young men."

Shaun King then took the stage, describing his history of involvement in activist causes, the policies that enable police to avoid consequences for violent acts, and the essential strategies needed to effect change. As a student at Morehouse College, Shaun first became an activist against police brutality. After graduation, he entered

the workforce and shifted his focus to supporting his family. Then, in 2014, the death of Eric Garner's death pulled him back into activism against police brutality.

### **"We cannot Facebook our way into justice"**

King believed social media could bring attention to Garner's death and achieve justice for his family, and the other high-profile police killings of Michael Brown and Tamir Rice. But despite the protests against these killings – on the streets and through social media – police violence continues with little perceived accountability. *Why?*

Because police brutality has effectively been legalized in the United States, King explained. He highlighted two Supreme Court cases, *Tennessee v. Garner* and *Graham v. Connor*, which shield officers

from liability when they use deadly force. For any change to happen, King said, these legal precedents must be challenged.

### **Fighting for change: "We're only scratching the surface"**

To be successful, King said, social change depends on four essential elements:

1. An organized group of people
2. People who are energized
3. A plan that is easily understood and communicated
4. Money and resources to support the work

Similar to the movement addressing police brutality, the decarceration movement will achieve meaningful change only when all four of these elements are present. *If people want justice, it takes more than protest.*

Writer and activist Shaun King is a prolific writer about the Black Lives Matter movement, police brutality, the prison industrial complex, and social justice. He is the Writer-in-Residence at Harvard Law School's Fair Punishment Project and a columnist at *The Intercept*. As Senior Justice Writer at the *New York Daily News*, King wrote more than 600 columns. Known for using Twitter and Facebook to tell micro-stories of injustice, King uses social media to highlight and amplify discussions about race, injustice, and social change.



**“Most people believe in a world of second chances.**

**Now it’s up to us.”**

Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL)

Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) spoke about the War on Drugs, its impact on communities of color, and the financial and human costs of incarceration.

**A**s a longtime policy maker, Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) provided a unique perspective about decarceration, noting, “The over-incarceration of poor people is devastating to poor communities of color—fathers, sons, brothers, uncles—all being separated from their families, locked away for years, sometimes decades, for nonviolent offenses.”

Durbin provided data about the financial costs for incarceration. “We’re talking about the primary breadwinners in many families spending their peak earning years behind bars, instead of contributing to their families and society. They end up costing society as prisoners. The price tag is considerable: an average of \$30,000 a year to incarcerate a nonviolent offender. More than tuition, room, and board at many great universities.”

While acknowledging his role as a legislator in voting for tough crime bills, Durbin spoke about the failure of the War on Drugs. “In the 1980s and ‘90s, Congress and state legislatures passed a wave of laws demanding harsher, longer sentences for crimes involving drugs. Today, a growing number of Americans are looking at the results of these ‘get tough’ drug laws and saying: the laws aren’t working. We made mistakes and we need to correct them.”

### **The failed War on Drugs**

“The War on Drugs did not end drug trafficking or addiction or drug death in America,” said Durbin. “All you have to do is look at the current opioid crisis, killing 91 Americans every single day to know that. What it did was fill America’s jails and prisons with people convicted of mostly non-

violent drug crimes....What we have to do is find a way to go into this world of trauma – particularly when it relates to children – with interventions and opportunities for counseling.”

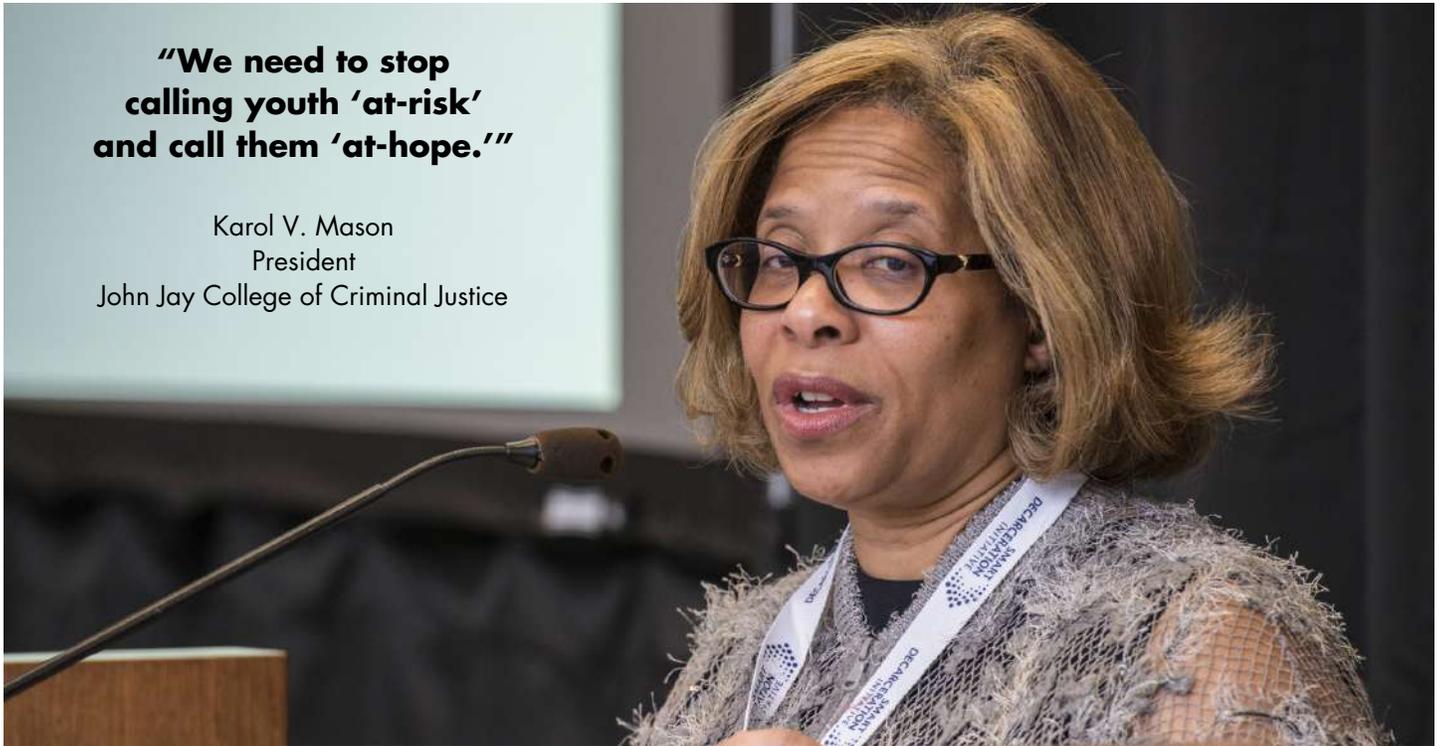
Durbin also noted the high price of mass incarceration in terms of lost human potential, and how those affected by incarceration need to be at the forefront of a smart decarceration movement.

Finding solutions must involve those who have been directly affected by incarceration. “They have important insights to share,” said Durbin, “and their voices must be part of the discussion about how we create a justice system that protects our communities and reflects our most cherished national values – values like ‘equal justice under the law.’”

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER** Dick Durbin, a Democrat from Springfield, is the 47<sup>th</sup> U.S. Senator from Illinois, the state’s senior senator, the convener of Illinois’ bipartisan congressional delegation, and the Democratic Whip, the second highest ranking position among Senate Democrats. Senator Durbin has been elected to this leadership post every two years since 2005. He is the Ranking Member of the Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Immigration and the Appropriations Committee’s Defense Subcommittee.

**“We need to stop calling youth ‘at-risk’ and call them ‘at-hope.’”**

Karol V. Mason  
President  
John Jay College of Criminal Justice



Karol V. Mason, President, John Jay College of Criminal Justice and former U.S. Assistant Attorney General, urged attendees to create alliances.

**K**arol Mason spoke of the need to “change the narrative of decarceration efforts. We’re not benevolent saints just trying to reach down and help people. We are partnering with people who are talented, wonderful, and creative.”

Staying competitive in the world is just one reason to work together with the formerly incarcerated. “It’s not anecdotal to say that there is so much brilliance and talent that’s limited by our criminal justice system,” said Mason. “And we all suffer if we don’t take advantage of that talent, and if we don’t make sure that we provide opportunities and a level playing field for everybody. This is a competitive world, and if we want to succeed as a world, we’ve got to make sure we’re accessing all of our talent.”

Her experience working in the Department of Justice during the Obama Administration reinforced the idea of

creating alliances, collaborating, and working across disciplines.

### **Building community capacity**

“I think one of the biggest successes of the eight years of the Obama Administration,” said Mason, “was breaking down silos, and making people see the relationships and connections, and how we had to work together.”

She described the work of Arne Duncan and Attorney General Holder when they “came to Chicago, and met with folks to figure out, ‘How do we address this violence issue?’ We created networks where we had schools, law enforcement, social service agencies, mental health providers all working together to address the issue. If you’re looking for ways to build that community capacity, you can find examples of resources, tools, and frameworks online at

youth.gov”

In taking on the challenge of smart decarceration, Mason said, “We don’t need federal leadership. We are the leaders. We can show the federal government how it should be done. The benefit of the last eight years was they got us talking and believing and feeling empowered. So, use that power now. Nobody can take that power from you. Use the resources you have. Use the relationships you’ve developed to keep this work moving forward.”

In closing, Mason quoted Nelson Mandela: “It always seems impossible until it’s done.” She urged Conference attendees: “Keep working. Keep pushing. Keep experimenting. This is not impossible. We know what it takes to change the system. The question is: Do we have the will to push our leaders to make the right investment in this work?”

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER** Karol V. Mason, President, John Jay College was a leader in the Obama Administration on juvenile justice issues, bail reform, and re-entry for individuals leaving prison. As U.S. Assistant Attorney General and head of the Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs, Mason oversaw a \$4 billion annual budget to support state and local criminal justice agencies, juvenile justice programs and services for crime victims, and oversaw the National Institute of Justice and the Bureau of Justice Statistics.



**“We have to change the conversation and shift the public and media environment to create social change.”**

Marc Mauer  
Executive Director  
The Sentencing Project

Marc Mauer, Executive Director, The Sentencing Project, discussed the need for a new narrative to advance smart decarceration efforts.

**T**o open his remarks, Mark Mauer began by asking reflective questions about criminal justice change: *What does this changing environment for criminal justice reform look like? What’s changed? What hasn’t changed? Where do we go from here?”*

He underscored such macro-level changes as the 2010 Fair Sentencing Act, the Smart on Crime Initiatives, and the sentences that were commuted during President Obama’s administration. Mauer also highlighted state-level changes, noting that policy makers are becoming more aware, and suggested that this is an important moment to continue smart decarceration, with the understanding and patience that change will not happen overnight.

“Mass incarceration came about because of changes in policy—not crime rates,” Mauer said. “We know that the race and social-class effects of mass

incarceration are profound in affecting families and communities for generations to come.”

Mauer discussed how a consensus has developed around decarceration. For example, California’s Proposition 47, passed in 2014, changed certain low-level crimes from potential felonies to misdemeanors. The savings from reduced incarceration costs will be invested into drug and mental health treatment, programs for students in K-12 schools, and victim services.

Evidence suggests that youth are committing the bulk of crimes, particularly violent crimes, Mauer said. Further, sentences longer than 20 years produce diminishing returns, as individuals incarcerated during youth mature and criminality subsides. Many of those individuals could serve as role models for youth seemingly headed towards incarceration.

There is an abundance of information and research demonstrating the inefficacy and unsustainability of mass incarceration, which legislators can easily reference.

### **Needed: A new narrative**

What is lacking, said Mauer, is a winning narrative about this overwhelming evidence. Smart decarceration advocates need to significantly change the narrative, finding ways to humanize people who have been convicted. The new narrative needs to make a direct connection, causing lawmakers to identify with, empathize with, and relate to the individuals impacted by the criminal justice system.

“Unless we create a new narrative and unless we have a political environment—a public environment—that gives a comfort level to policy makers, it’s going to be very difficult to change.”

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER** Marc Mauer is Executive Director of The Sentencing Project, a national nonprofit organization engaged in research and advocacy on criminal justice policy. Mauer, a recognized expert on sentencing policy, race, and the criminal justice system, has written extensive and testified before Congress and other legislative bodies. His book, *Race to Incarcerate* was a semi-finalist for the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award, and he is the co-editor of *Invisible Punishment*, a collection of essays that examine the social costs of incarceration.



"People make justice happen," said Ronald S. Sullivan, Jr., Clinical Professor of Law and Director, Criminal Justice Institute, Harvard Law School.

**K**eeping innocent people out of jail is an essential component of smart decarceration, said Ronald S. Sullivan, Jr. In his research on wrongful conviction, he noticed that certain cases, like those based on single witness identification, were prone to error. With a long work history as a public defender in the District of Columbia and as an academic teaching criminal law and criminal procedure, Sullivan seemed an unlikely candidate to partner with a district attorney on a project to review and overturn convictions.

But when Brooklyn District Attorney Ken Thompson invited Sullivan to help form their conviction review unit, Sullivan agreed. The project was based on three principles—a non-adversarial norm, establishing a degree of independence, and changing the ethos of the office to focus on a commitment to justice.

### **How to change the ethos**

Changing the ethos of the office required regularly reinforcing the commitment to justice when communicating with staff. It also meant expanding the criteria for overturning convictions to include cases where the conviction process was corrupt in some way. "My strong view is that structure alone is an insufficient scaffolding to support dramatic change in an institution," said Sullivan. "There has to be an ethos that guides the behavior of the actors in the institution."

### **Insisting on justice**

In less than three years, the Brooklyn District Attorney's office has overturned 23 wrongful convictions. Keeping innocent people out of prison may seem self-evident, but it is not. Achieving justice requires intentional commitment and work from individuals. "Without people insisting

that the quality of justice should not be based on the size of your checkbook, then we're always going to have a system that trades on class and race," said Sullivan. "We'll always have it—unless people insist otherwise. People have the power to do that."

### **The dirty little secret**

Thompson's work on the conviction review program was popular among his constituents. People recoil when they hear innocent people are spending 20 or 30 years in jail because it is inconsistent with their notion of fairness and the type of country they want to live in. "The dirty little secret in the criminal justice realm is that we know what works," said Sullivan. "We don't have the political will to do it. The political will, just like justice, is not going to drop from the sky. People have the power to force and insist that their leaders be responsive to the sorts of values that we as a citizenry hold."

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER** Ronald S. Sullivan, Jr. is Clinical Professor of Law and Director of the Criminal Justice Institute and the Trial Advocacy Workshop at Harvard Law School. In 2014, Sullivan was tasked to design and implement a Conviction Review Unit for the Brooklyn District Attorney, which became a national model for a conviction integrity program. Sullivan was Chair of the Criminal Justice Advisory Committee for then-Senator Barack Obama's presidential campaign, a member of the National Legal Advisory Group for the Obama Presidential Campaign, and an Advisor to the Department of Justice Presidential Transition Team.

## Panel discussions 1 and 2



Panel 1—Friday, November 3, 2017

### Implementing Decarceration-Focused Policy Innovations

- Katie Hill, Director of Policy, Research, and Development, Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office
- Marc Levin, Director, Center for Effective Justice & Right on Crime, Texas Public Policy Foundation
- Kristy Pierce Danford, Project Director, Charleston County (South Carolina) Criminal Justice Coordinating Council
- Charles E. Lewis, Jr. (moderator), President, Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy

**Katie Hill** described how Cook County has begun working to reform pre-trial detention and bond court. In the past two years, Cook County has reduced the daily jail population by one-third (from 10,000 to 6,500), and seeks further reductions. To do this, state’s attorneys are encouraged to participate by advocating for an I-bond (recognizance bond) if the defendant does not pose a public safety threat, and a cash bond is used only as a last resort. **Marc Levin** detailed several alternatives used around the country to reduce jail and prison populations without causing increased crime rates, including the use of risk assessments to reduce pre-trial detention, bail reform, jail diversion, civil citation, improved options for indigent defense, and alternatives to court fines and fees. According to **Kristy Pierce Danford**, data is a key tool for understanding the criminal justice system. “When you have the data, you suddenly find common ground among adversarial partners,” she said. In Charleston County, her organization implemented a three-year plan to identify and address gaps in the criminal justice system. Their strategies, created through input from community stakeholders, included the creation of a crisis stabilization center as an alternative to jail, automated court date reminders, and a centralized database that made aggregated data available to the community.

*“There is no one way to accomplish our goal of reducing the use of incarceration....There are many policy options. Some appeal to conservatives and others appeal to progressives. But the goal is the same.”*

Charles E. Lewis, Jr.,  
moderator

Panel 2—Friday, November 3, 2017

### Addressing Violence and Criminal Justice Reform in Chicago

- Curtis Toler, Community Change Leader, Chicago CRED
- Daniel Cooper, Executive Director, Center for Equitable Cities, Adler University
- Toni Preckwinkle, Board President, Cook County, Illinois
- Paula Wolff (moderator), Director, Illinois Justice Project

**Curtis Toler** described the work of the Chicago CRED program, which serves six Chicago violence-prone communities, providing job opportunities and wraparound services for young men. Using a holistic approach, the program hopes to reduce violence and recidivism in Chicago. “We need help from people like you—to believe in these young men, to not demonize them, and to know they can make a positive change and impact,” he said. **Daniel Cooper** dispelled common notions about the value of incarceration by reviewing research demonstrating how incarceration has harmed disadvantaged communities without improving public safety. He urged a change in the narrative about crime and punishment—“smarter messaging for deeper decarceration...The research is clear: mass incarceration is responsible for making neighborhoods



worse.” After assuming office in 2011, **Toni Preckwinkle** wanted to focus resources on violent crimes. This required a hard look at another issue: jails overcrowded by people accused of nonviolent crimes. She helped revise bond court practices so nonviolent offenders would not spend time in jail between their arrest and court appearance. Other state-level initiatives: raising the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 17 years, eliminating mandatory 5-year probation for juveniles, and achieving automatic expungement legislation for all juvenile misdemeanor convictions and most felony convictions. Preckwinkle also described work with Thresholds, a mental health provider, to connect jail detainees to medical insurance, improving access to health services upon release.

*“With passion, our panel members described how they worked in Chicago — in quite different ways — to stop the cycle of racism, violence, arrests, and convictions feeding incarceration.”*

Paula Wolff,  
moderator

## Panel discussions 3 and 4



Panel 3—Friday, November 3, 2017

### Driving Change: People Most Impacted by Incarceration

- Khalil Cumberbatch, Associate Vice President of Policy, The Fortune Society
- Alec Karakatsanis, Founder & Executive Director, Civil Rights Corps
- Aqeela Sherrills, National Training Director, Alliance for Safety and Justice
- Azadeh Zohrabi (moderator), Director of Development, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children/All of Us or None

**Khalil Cumberbatch** described his incarceration experience, and his access to college-level education in prison. He emphasized that people are capable of great things when provided with exceptional opportunities. It's critical to change the narrative about the potential of people who are incarcerated, and improve their access to resources and advocacy opportunities. "If you look at any social justice movement, you see a tipping point only when the folks who have the most to lose are pushed to the front."

**Alec Karakatsanis** emphasized the importance of people having an opportunity to share their stories and cautioned against minimizing the role of people directly impacted. Instead, the work needs to be guided by and accountable to them. "The kind of radical change we need is never going to be led by lawyers or politicians. It will be led by people demanding change in the fundamental balance of power in our society." **Aqeela Sherrills** helped organize a peace treaty between the Crips and Bloods in Watts. The treaty reduced gang homicide, improved the community's quality of life, and created a new narrative about crime and violence reduction. As co-founder of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice, Sherrill's advocacy helped pass California's Prop 47, which reduced prison populations and allocated the savings to victim services, K-12 intervention programs, and mental health services.

*"...this panel captured the decades of experience of people directly impacted by, and at the forefront of the fight to end, mass incarceration. Their stories and strategies are important lessons for the bigger movement to end mass incarceration...."*

Azadeh Zohrabi,  
moderator

Panel 4—Saturday, November 4, 2017

### Reducing Behavioral Health Inequities in the Criminal Justice System

- Nancy Wolff, Distinguished Professor, Rutgers University
- Amy Blank Wilson, Assistant Professor, University of North Carolina School of Social Work
- Jason Jones, Police Officer & Coordinator, Crisis Intervention Team, Portland (Oregon) Police Bureau
- Pam Rodriguez (moderator), President & CEO, Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities (TASC)

Because traumatic histories are prevalent in most incarcerated people, **Nancy Wolff** recommends using a universal precautions approach. She considers the impact that traumatic events and toxic stress have on people over their lifespan. Strategies that promote engagement include building trust through a relaxation approach, showing concern, offering support, and being consistent. Using mindfulness and relaxation response skills also can deescalate stress responses. "If we want people to be good, we have to let them have op-



portunities to do good." **Amy Blank Wilson** described research to reduce recidivism among people with serious mental illness. The solution requires a comprehensive continuum of services that provides for basic needs, proactively helps people reconnect with family, and delivers integrated health care while addressing criminogenic needs. Amy and her colleagues developed a targeted service delivery approach focusing on evidence-based interventions incorporating Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Officer **Jason Jones** described the Crisis Response Model used by the Portland (OR) police bureau. When receiving 911 calls, dispatchers have been trained to recognize signs of a mental illness, use trauma-informed questioning and Motivational Interviewing, and then link to appropriate response systems, including other agencies or crisis lines. In some cases, they may not involve the police at all. Police officers also receive 44 hours of training on mental illness and de-escalation techniques.

*"We need to address some of the root causes of crime and victimization, including trauma, substance abuse, and mental health issues...if decarceration is going to work."*

Pam Rodriguez,  
moderator

## Panel discussion 5



Panel 5—Saturday, November 4, 2017

### Organizing for Decarceration

- Janos Marton, Director of Policy & Campaigns, JustLeadershipUSA
- Stephen Tripodi, Doctoral Program Director & Associate Professor, Florida State University College of Social Work
- Gina Fedock, Assistant Professor, University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration
- Jo-Ann Wallace, President & CEO, National Legal Aid & Defender Association
- Michael Sherraden (moderator), George Warren Brown Distinguished University Professor and Founder & Director of the Center for Social Development, Washington University in St. Louis

**Janos Marton** described JustLeadershipUSA's Close Rikers Campaign, demonstrating how change can happen through organization, strategic alliance building, and consistent political pressure. In keeping with their motto, "Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution," people directly harmed at Rikers became campaign leaders. They are shaping the narrative through protests, op-eds, and media actions. **Stephen Tripodi** spoke about the Education Working Group of the "Promote Smart Decarceration" Grand Challenge, which is using social work education to change the narrative around incarceration. Goals include creating a curriculum and model syllabi, developing field placement opportunities, and promoting dynamic continuing education opportunities. **Gina Fedock** described the goals of the Research Working Group of the "Promote Smart Decarceration" Grand Challenge, including fostering strong research collaborations, building an evidence base of best policies and practices, and synthesizing and connecting effective intervention and prevention strategies. The group seeks to outline knowledge gaps and define new research questions. According to **Jo-Ann Wallace**, "Data and research are really playing a key role in the decarceration movement." Research shows early and effective public defense reduces incarceration, thereby reducing racial disparities, crime, and negative impact on families and tax payers. "Public defenders know that effective public defense reduces unnecessary incarceration."

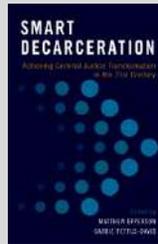
*"...it is clear that Smart Decarceration is happening....(T)he best summary is the observation of Harvard professor Ronald Sullivan, who said justice is not a platonic ideal, high in the sky. It is hammered out, with effort and uncertainty, by people working together."*

Michael Sherraden, moderator

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### Smart Decarceration: Achieving Criminal Justice Transformation in the 21st Century

edited by Matthew Epperson and Carrie Pettus-Davis



This volume is a compilation of presentation and concept papers from the Smart Decarceration Initiative inaugural conference in 2015.

*"Epperson and Pettus-Davis assemble a unique mix of engaged scholars and experienced professionals to provide the intellectual fuel for smart decarceration. A very timely volume indeed!"* Michael G. Vaughn, Ph.D., Professor and Director of the Health Criminology Research Consortium, Saint Louis University

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**Grand Challenges**  
for Social Work  
Promote smart decarceration

### Leading one of the "12 Grand Challenges for Social Work"

Through a peer-selected competition, the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare (AASWSW) selected "Promote Smart Decarceration" as one of the 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work. Smart Decarceration Initiative Co-Founders and Co-Directors Matthew Epperson and Carrie Pettus-Davis are directing this effort — one of the social work profession's most significant initiatives.

This Grand Challenge involves more than 100 individuals who are actively preparing the social work profession to lead the field of decarceration. This effort involves generating evidence on promising practices, implementing practice innovations, advancing policy recommendations, and developing new curriculum and continuing education programs. For more information, visit [www.aaswsw.org](http://www.aaswsw.org)

Just published

### Grand Challenges for Social Work and Society

edited by Rowena Fong, James Lubben, and Richard P. Barth



This book, published with the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW), provides an overview of each of the 12 Grand Challenges, including "Promote Smart Decarceration." It describes the social work profession's unique role in addressing these challenges, including strategies and ways to become involved.

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Top row: An audience member makes a point; **Senator Dick Durbin** (D-IL) and Smart Decarceration Initiative co-founder and co-director **Matt Epperson**; Smart Decarceration Initiative Project Manager **Annie Grier** asks a follow-up question

Middle row: The crowd at the opening Conference program featuring **Susan Burton** and moderator **Reuben Jonathan Miller**, Assistant Professor, University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration

Bottom row: University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration Interim Dean and Emily Klein Gidwitz Professor **Deborah Gorman-Smith** addresses the audience at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel

## Interactive Breakout Sessions



On the first full day of the Conference, participants had an opportunity to gather in small groups during lunch, choosing from among eight different sessions.

Session leaders, including nonprofit leaders, persons directly impacted by incarceration, policy makers, and students, led informal, lively, and interactive discussions about a wide range of decarceration-related topics.

### Reinvesting Resources to Achieve Decarceration

- Lindsey LaPointe, Senior Project Manager for Justice Reform, Business and Professional People for the Public Interest
- Sharlyn Grace, Senior Criminal Justice Policy Analyst and Staff Attorney, Chicago Appleseed Fund for Justice
- Ryan K. Priester, Director, Community Programs, Office of Civic Engagement, University of Chicago

*Summary:* Reinvesting resources was presented as a way to push justice resources further upstream and, ultimately, away from the justice system altogether. Facilitators used the sequential intercept model to identify intervention points and present *reinvestment* as a concept where resources would have a sustained impact vs. a simple reallocation. Participants discussed the need to develop resources to reduce recidivism, such as linkages to case management and other wraparound supports before returning to the community. If reinvestment is initiated, insufficient infrastructure or community capacity could restrict the impact of that funding, resulting in a political chilling effect. Funding to build social capital on the front-end is crucial to help returning citizens reconnect with social networks and establish relationships in their communities.

### Court-Based Innovations for Reform

- MiAngel Cody, Founder & Director, The Decarceration Collective
- Peter Coolsen, Court Administrator, Criminal Division, George N. Leighton Criminal Courthouse, Circuit Court of Cook County

*Summary:* Conversations about incarceration are influenced by society's perception of the people we incarcerate and the purpose of incarceration. These conversations could be deepened by considering the desires of victims and acknowledging that many who commit crimes are victims themselves. Participants focused on the role of judges and their impact. A more just approach would require the judge to consider a defendant's full set of circumstances (e.g., positionality, social and economic resources). Overemphasizing risk assessments, participants said, contributes to a punitive model of justice. A strengths-based assessment may provide people with the resources needed to thrive.

### Advocating for Those Who Have Been Incarcerated

- W. Kendric Berry, Senior Paralegal, Winston & Strawn LLP
- Augie M. Torres, Business Development, Edovo: Unlock Potential

*Summary:* Advocacy work can be challenging because it requires engaging with stakeholders who may know nothing or everything about an issue. Changing the narrative is crucial when advocating for those with lived experience in the criminal justice system. This includes considering the perspectives of individuals who have been incarcerated and sensitivity to the language used to describe them. Stereotypes evoke strong emotions and voters' fears could trigger the resurgence of regressive policy; politicians respond to fear when the general public starts to mobilize. Personal stories demonstrating the humanity of justice-involved persons are essential to changing the narrative, advancing policy, and sustaining successful reform efforts.

### Conducting Research on Decarceration-Focused Criminal Justice Interventions

- Sophia P. Sarantakos, Ph.D. candidate, University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration
- Julian Thompson, Ph.D. candidate, University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration

*Summary:* Despite having large amounts of data, there are critical missing data points that researchers must access to develop a more complete picture of the criminal justice system. When researchers gain access to previously inaccessible data streams, they must work to ensure that they maintain ongoing access to the data. Participants discussed the potential role of researchers in policy formation, weighing the implications of academics as reporters of information or advocates for change. Participants identified the most powerful tactics for disseminating research, including timeliness of material, greater accessibility by highlighting key findings, and connecting with journalists who write about the criminal justice system.

## Interactive Breakout Sessions

### ***From the Classroom to the Real World*** **Student Engagement and Obtaining Marketable Decarceration Work Experience**

- Sav (Savannah) Felix, Mental Health Specialist, Isaac Ray Center of the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center
- Christine Kregg, Clinical Social Worker, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
- Khyrah G. Simpson, 2018 AM candidate, University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration

*Summary:* The complexity of the criminal justice system requires students to develop an interdisciplinary understanding of law, policy, social work, mental health, public health, economics, and education. Participants discussed the need for schools of social work to develop diverse curriculums, programs of study, and internships that are relevant to working in the criminal justice system, giving students valuable opportunities to enhance their understanding of theory, policy, and practice. Critical reflexivity should be an integral part of the education process, making students aware of their personal biases and the societal-level assumptions that shape public opinion and justice policy. Participants discussed elements of self-care that are essential for people working within the criminal justice system, such as developing a strong sense of personal values and strategies to cope with vicarious trauma.

### **Comprehensive Treatment Strategies Pre- and Post-Incarceration**

- Deanne Benos, Founder & Director, The Women's Justice Initiative, National Chair of the American Probation & Parole Association, Women & Girls Committee
- Jill Valbuena, Program Director, Thresholds

*Summary:* Every level of the criminal justice system presents opportunities to provide people who are impacted with additional resources and support. Participants examined SAMHSA's Sequential Intercept Model, which identifies a number of key points for intervention, which could divert someone from further involvement in the criminal justice system. By looking at each stage, participants described what works and what gaps in services currently exist. Included was discussion about such pre-incarceration interventions as

specialty courts, arrest diversion, bail bond reform, and Crisis Intervention Teams. Participants also explored examples of post-incarceration initiatives that increase community stability and reduce recidivism by removing barriers to housing, employment, and access to treatment.

### **Using Data to Inform Policy and Practice**

- April Bernard, Senior Director, Research & Analysis, Safer Foundation
- Bryant Jackson-Green, Strategic Policy Advisor, Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority

*Summary:* Data has the potential to influence systems and improve supports for people with criminal justice involvement. To maximize the power of data, it is important for researchers to consider their methods and messaging. Participants discussed best practices for data collection, analysis, and dissemination methods. Obtaining data can be challenging, requiring partners who are willing to provide access and resources to support data collection. One idea: developing partnerships between organizations and universities to build the capacity for data analysis. Other strategies such as using common language and communicating findings through storytelling can increase the likelihood that data will influence policy.

### **Intersection of Micro and Macro Strategies to Support Smart Decarceration**

- Esther Franco-Payne, Executive Director, Cabrini Green Legal Aid
- Kathryn Saltmarsh, Executive Director, Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council

*Summary:* Bridging the gap between micro- and macro-level solutions, group members agreed, is critical. Prison/jail admissions present a unique opportunity to do that. Restricting the criteria that must be met for an individual to be incarcerated satisfies the macro component of admissions, while working to keep individuals out of the system through mental health work, family support work, and disrupting the school to prison pipeline will attack the problem from the micro level. Members discussed several key initiatives that are dedicated to reducing youth incarceration and recidivism.





Top row: A group shot of some of the Conference participants, speakers, and organizers in front of the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration building

Middle row: University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration Assistant Professor **Reuben Jonathan Miller**; an audience member poses a question; Panelist **Paula Wolff**, Director, Illinois Justice Project responds to comments from a participant



Bottom row: Speaker **Susan Burton** in discussion with a Conference participant after the opening presentation



## Help Us Make Real-World Impact

Smart Decarceration researchers are examining a range of interventions and issues to find new evidence, implement innovative practices, and create programs that will effectively reduce incarceration rates and lead to positive change across the criminal justice system. Help us make real-world impact by supporting these efforts:

### DEVELOPING FRONT-END INTERVENTIONS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- **Examining deferred prosecution programs.** Applying evidence and research, SDI is developing initiatives that are positioned to deliver impact. Deferred prosecution programs are one example. These programs can divert people from being charged with criminal offenses, reduce the number of individuals entering the criminal justice system, and promote public well-being. Thanks to funding from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, SDI researchers are studying the effectiveness of existing programs in Milwaukee County (Wisconsin), Cook County (Illinois), and the City of St. Louis. This project has the potential to influence policy as well as shape the design of uniform deferred prosecution programs across the country.



- **Building social capacity.** In another initiative, SDI is collaborating with community stakeholders in Chicago and St. Louis to develop a framework for building social capacity – including programs, staffing, and resources – that will respond to behavioral health needs in communities while lessening the use of incarceration.
- **Enhancing mental health outcomes.** Persons with serious mental illness are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Criminal justice agencies have struggled to find ways to best serve this population. In response, probation departments have established relationships with local mental health treatment providers and adopted problem-solving approaches. Our team is working with the Cook County (Illinois) Adult Probation Department to develop an intervention to enhance the working relationships between specialized mental health probation officers and clients with serious mental illness —to ultimately improve outcomes such as treatment engagement and reduced criminal justice involvement.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

- **Support expansion of current research.** Your gift can help advance knowledge on new decarceration-focused interventions in Cook County (Illinois) and other metropolitan areas.
- **Support our work leading one of the “12 Grand Challenges for Social Work.”** “Promote Smart Decarceration” is one of the social work profession’s most significant initiatives. Your gift can help develop on-the-ground field placement opportunities, create continuing education programs, and support fellowships to social work students, professionals, and persons impacted by the criminal justice system. (See page 14 for more information about the 12 Grand Challenges.)

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact us at [sdi@ssa.uchicago.edu](mailto:sdi@ssa.uchicago.edu)

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