

## Defeating Harmful Narratives

July 2022

### Setting the record straight about crime and sharing solutions for community safety

Communities across the country are combating reactionary policy proposals aimed at increasing youth incarceration. These proposals are based on misleading rhetoric that frames crime as being “out of control,” without clearly articulating what the data really show. On June 14, 2022, Columbia Justice Lab [hosted a webinar](#) exploring the facts about recent trends in crime and how communities are creating safety without relying on harmful carceral responses. The webinar contextualized recent trends and offered history, data, and real-world insights to counter regressive narratives.

The first panel, moderated by [Vincent Schiraldi](#) (Columbia Justice Lab) featured [Josh Rovner](#) (The Sentencing Project), [Eduardo Ferrer](#) (Georgetown Law Juvenile Justice Initiative), and [Gina Womack](#) (Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children). The discussion began with a high-level overview of the rise and subsequent decline of youth crime and incarceration over the past four decades. It touched on the advent of the “super predator” myth, which was used bluntly to push racist and extremely punitive policies that had devastating impacts on young people, including the increased ability of States to prosecute young people as adults and an explosion in the number of youth incarcerated. As we now know, these harms almost always disproportionately targeted Black and Latinx youth. Pivoting to more recent data, the panel showed a disconnect between what the data showed—youth crime rates at a low—and the policy decisions based on the public’s fears that crime was high. The panel looked closely at trends over the past two years for which data are available, including discussion of a newly released Sentencing Project [report](#), which found that violence by young people under 18 did not increase during the pandemic’s first year. Yet, despite decreases in recorded crime by young people, racial disparities have persisted, with youth of color continuing to be treated more harshly than their white peers. The panel explored how Washington, D.C. is dealing with the problematic narrative of a new youth crime wave and how that comports with what youth crime really looks like there. Youth arrests in D.C. have declined dramatically over the last 15 years, mirroring the nationwide trend. Within this context, there was discussion of an increase in car related offenses and offenses related to guns and the precision needed to address these serious problems, namely by getting to the root of what is causing these offenses to spike. Finally, the panel emphasized the importance of lifting up the expertise of families and young people by creating solutions to safety in communities.

The second panel was moderated by [Vincent Schiraldi](#) (Columbia Justice Lab) and featured [Jeannette Bocanegra](#) (Justice for Families), [Rob DeLeon](#) (The Fortune Society), [Marcus Stubblefield](#) (King County Executive Office: Performance, Strategy and Budget) and [Clinton Lacey](#) (Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement/CM3). The panelists explored lessons learned from historical punitive responses to crime and offered examples of real solutions to keep youth and communities safe in the current landscape. They expressed that creating change required investment in the community—not only in the youth justice system, but in the education, housing and health care systems. The panel explored the importance of young people having access to adults they can relate to, giving them encouraging messages to help them to succeed. Marcus Stubblefield shared King County’s public health approach to youth justice and how they’ve been working to build shared accountability and a vision for shared outcomes, which has taken collaboration between youth justice, education, child welfare, and behavioral health entities, as well as shifting money from systems to the community. Several panelists also spoke about the integral role that credible messengers have played in shifting away from reliance on systems and making communities the default. Love, compassion, and unconditional support are the principles that inform how credible messengers view and practice justice—principles that are already living in communities. The panel discussed the importance of a cultural shift away from viewing impacted communities as places that cause problems to acknowledging that there are people and organizations within these communities who can offer real, more effective solutions to crime when they are given the opportunity and resources.

## Resources

Below are a number of resources mentioned during the panel and/or shared by the panelists:

- > Butts, J. A., & Schiraldi, V. N. (2018). “[Recidivism reconsidered: Preserving the community justice mission of community corrections](#)”.
- > [Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement \(CM3\)](#).
- > Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children. (2022) [Act 1225 Mapping Project](#).
- > Frameworks Institute. (2022). “[Shifting Gears on Juvenile Justice](#)”
- > Grant Opportunity: [FY 2022 Community-Based Alternatives to Youth Incarceration Initiative](#) (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention)
- > Justice for Families. (2012) “[Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice](#)”.
- > King County, WA. [Public Health Approach to the Juvenile Legal System](#).
- > King County, WA. [Roadmap to Zero Youth Detention Objectives](#).
- > King County, WA. [Zero Youth Detention Roadmap](#).
- > King County Executive’s Office of Performance, Strategy and Budget. [Investing in Youth: Zero Detention in Support of Public Safety](#).
- > McNamara, S. (2022). “[What’s Behind the Surge in Youth-Involved Carjacking?](#)”
- > Mendel, R. (2022). “[Data Reveals Violence Among Youth Under 18 Has Not Spiked in the Pandemic](#)”.
- > Rob DeLeon. (2022). “[We Cannot Afford to Play Politics With Young People’s Lives](#)”.
- > Schiraldi, V. N. (2020). “[Can we eliminate the youth prison?\(And what should we replace it with?\)](#)”.

## About Us

The Justice Lab at Columbia University combines original research, policy development, and community engagement to propel the project of justice reform. The Justice Lab’s Youth Justice Initiative (YJI) leverages information and knowledge to support a broad cross-section of leaders and champions nationwide who are working to end reliance on the punitive youth prison model, invest in communities most impacted by incarceration, and create spaces and give power and resources to those most impacted to design and lead efforts to create safety and well-being for themselves. In our vision, justice depends on peaceful and healthy communities that help all their members to flourish in a climate of fairness and respect. For more information, visit [justicelab.columbia.edu](https://justicelab.columbia.edu).

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