

Criminal Justice Reform in New Orleans

This session will explore the complex factors and challenges facing advocates and community leaders fighting for reform of the criminal justice system in New Orleans, Louisiana. Over the past twenty years there has been intense criticism of every facet of the justice system in New Orleans -- overcrowded and brutal juvenile detention facilities, corrupt and abusive policing, and severely underfunded public defender services. The capacity of advocates to address these efforts has steadily grown over the past decade, with resulting victories large and small. The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina both pushed the already fragile criminal justice system to the brink of collapse, and exposed the magnitude of the crisis to the nation. Locally, policy makers were forced to confront a broken jail system that lost thousands of detainees, the collapse of a public defender office funded on parking ticket revenue, rising violence and a decimated police department. The continuing challenge for the city is how best to reconstruct its criminal justice system to ensure fairness and public safety.

Moderator: Dana Kaplan, Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana

Panelists: James Carter, New Orleans City Council
Derwyn Bunton, Orleans Public Defender Office
Gina Womack, Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children

Questions to frame the discussion:

How do the criminal justice issues we see today fit within the broader context of the history of New Orleans and Louisiana?

What has OSI's impact been in the reform efforts of the past decade?

How has the exposure of these problems post-Katrina affected reform efforts?

What challenges to the New Orleans criminal justice system are consistent with challenges in other cities and states, and what challenges are unique to the city?

How do questions of transparency and government accountability fit into the criminal justice reform movement?

Going forward, what is the role for national funders, advocacy groups, and policy organizations?