



NEW ORLEANS & THE SAFETY AND JUSTICE CHALLENGE

OVERVIEW

In 2016, when New Orleans joined the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC), it held the highest per capita jail population in the nation. At that time, despite a significant drop from 7,500 to 2,000 in the prior decade, the city still struggled with deep-rooted challenges of mass incarceration. Since joining the SJC, New Orleans has sustained a jail population reduction of over 17% and now ranks among the top ten sites nationally for jail population reduction. At its lowest point, the jail population fell to 760– a more than 55% reduction from the 2010 baseline. This progress has been driven by a collaborative, equity-centered, community-informed approach that includes initiatives like Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion, Pretrial Services, Prosecutorial Diversion, Jail Release Navigators, and Warrant Reduction Clinics– each designed to break the cycle between poverty and incarceration and support safer, thriving communities.

SUPPORTING A MORE SAFE AND JUST SYSTEM IN NEW ORLEANS

In 2015, the New Orleans Safety and Justice Challenge Team wrote the following reason to join the Network, committing to addressing the misuse and overuse of jail detention,

We must stop detaining people who do not pose a threat to public safety, and we must improve our system to resolve cases faster so that people may return to their jobs, families, and communities. The deeply negative impact on communities, particularly those of color, is the primary reason New Orleans is prioritizing jail population reduction.

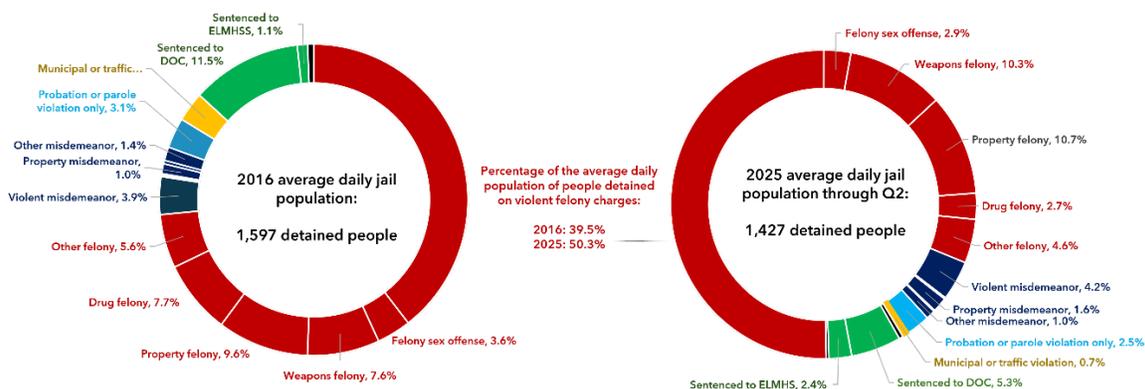
In 2024, the median length of stay for all individuals released from the Orleans Justice Center was two days, due to a sustained investment in advocacy, deflection, and developing infrastructure dedicated to jail population reduction, including:

- **Public Defenders at First Appearance:** Seeded by an initial investment of two public defenders dedicated to advocating for clients at First Appearance, there are now three full-time public defenders, dedicated to advocating for a safe release back to jobs, families, and communities at a person's first court appearance. This investment is now sustained in the Orleans Public Defenders' general fund budget.
- **Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion Program (LEAD):** Initially operating only in the 8th Police District, LEAD New Orleans offers a compassionate alternative to arrest by providing personalized support instead of punishment. LEAD has since expanded to the 6th, 7th, and 8th Police Districts and boasts an 88% decrease in recidivism among enrolled clients.

- **Pretrial Services:** New Orleans was selected by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation to implement the Public Safety Assessment (PSA), a validated pretrial risk assessment tool used to guide judicial decisions about releasing individuals who do not pose a risk to public safety. In addition to conducting the PSA, the Pretrial Services team provides supportive services to defendants awaiting trial. As a result of Pretrial Services and CourtNotify– a system that alerts defendants of upcoming court dates– the court appearance and non-rearrest success rate was over 93% in 2024.

From 2015 to 2025, the proportion of people detained on drug charges as their most serious offense has decreased by nearly two-thirds, driven by targeted investments in programs supporting individuals with behavioral health and substance use needs– issues often linked and exacerbated by incarceration rather than resolved through it. These investments include:

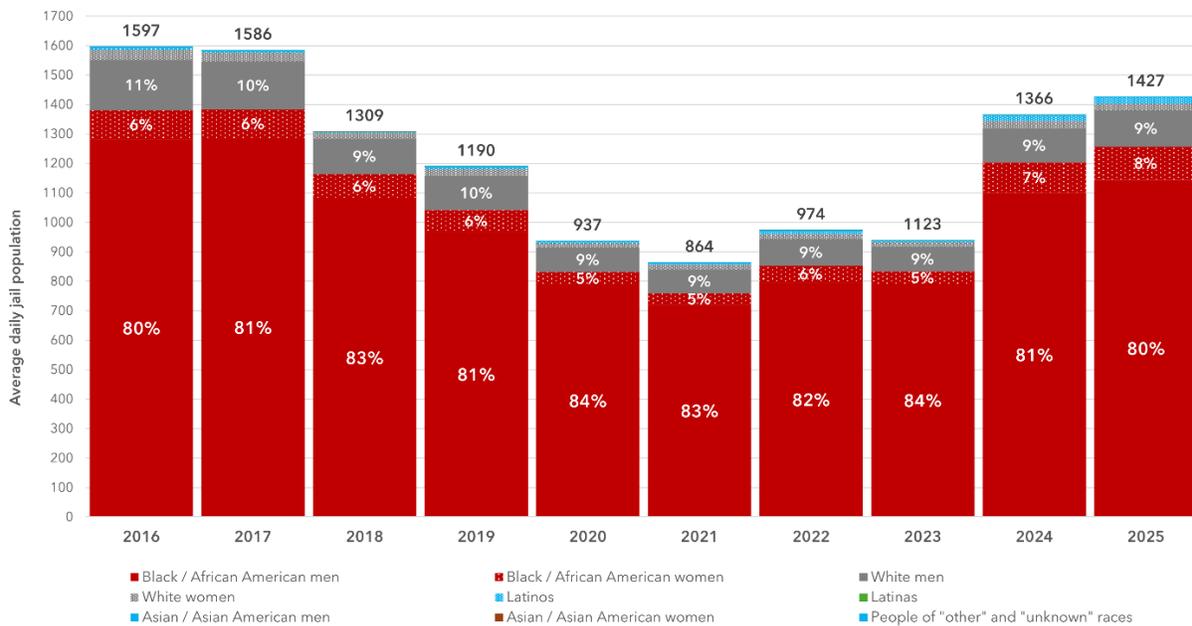
- **Prosecutorial Diversion:** Over the course of the Safety and Justice Challenge, the Prosecutorial Diversion Program expanded intentionally by increasing accessibility and ensuring that eligibility is no longer determined by an individual’s ability to pay.
- **Sequential Intercept Mapping:** Since 2015, more than 100 stakeholders from across the community, healthcare, and criminal legal systems have participated in two Sequential Intercept Model mapping sessions, which are collaborative efforts identified opportunities to divert individuals with mental health and substance use disorders away from incarceration and into treatment. As a result of these sessions, the Jail Release Navigator position was created and is now embedded within the jail’s healthcare infrastructure to develop individualized transition plans and support access to community-based services upon release.



Average Daily Jail Population by Most Serious Charge 2015 vs 2025

In the *New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander writes, “Mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race.” New Orleans is a majority Black city that detains Black New Orleanians in the Orleans Justice Center at a rate of almost five to one. While New Orleans has not shifted the numerical inequities in our criminal legal system, the Safety and Justice Challenge has helped us disentangle this complicated, intentional web of conditions that perpetuate these inequities– primarily through community engagement. Our team defines community engagement as both the process and practice of making sure all people, especially those most harmed by intentional disinvestment and erasure, are valued, and specifically are empowered to not only participate, but lead, in decision-making spaces.

Over the course of the Safety and Justice Challenge, New Orleans has pursued multiple community engagement strategies, including developing the New Orleans Voices for Accountability & Safety (NOVAS), establishing the [Ethnic and Racial Disparity Working Group](#), engaging over 700 community members in community engagement events, hosting two successful [warrant reduction clinics](#), and in partnership with Total Community Action empowered a group of Agents of Change to design a framework to develop a [Blueprint for Reimagining Justice in New Orleans](#).



Average Daily Jail Population by Race and Gender 2015 - 2025

SUSTAINING AND BUILDING ON PROGRESS:

Through the lessons learned of the Safety and Justice Challenge and consistent analysis of [jail population data reports](#), the New Orleans Team has shifted our focus to prevention, meaning an intentional investment in root cause of criminalized behavior, as a core strategy to address the misuse and overuse of detention as well as disparities in accessing safety and justice in New Orleans. Currently, the city is expanding its initial community outreach and engagement efforts into a broader collective: the New Orleans Empowerment Network. The overarching objectives of the New Orleans Empowerment Network are to facilitate the identification and cultivation of community leadership, support community empowerment, and sustain a reimagined, equitable public safety ecosystem.

As New Orleans continues to approach jail population reduction through an equity lens, we are excited to host a **Women’s Justice Pathways Mapping Session** to generate collaborative solutions centered on lived expertise and community experience. With the contributions of our partners across sectors, including Operation Restoration, VOTE, and Women With A Vision, we aim to share ideas and identify opportunities to improve the well-being and outcomes of women, children, families, and communities before, during, and after incarceration. This effort responds to the emerging trend of increased detention of women in the Orleans Justice Center.

New Orleans is also proud to announce a \$35 million investment in criminal legal system technology, which will overhaul the outdated data infrastructure of six criminal justice agencies. This initiative will also standardize data across agencies, enabling more informed, data-driven decisions about the jail population.

The Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice Coordination thanks the following local partners who have helped lead the initiatives described in this fact sheet:

