



From Mass Incarceration to Effective and Sustainable Decarceration

CONFERENCE REPORT

Inaugural Conference of Smart Decarceration Initiative

September 24 to 27, 2015

Washington University in St. Louis



Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK



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Introduction

All signs indicate that the United States is leaving an era of mass incarceration and is on the cusp of an era of decarceration. However, the challenge of decarceration is far greater than simply reducing the use of incarceration; it involves building an array of policy and practice innovations that replace incarceration. We have a unique opportunity to *rethink, redefine, and reimagine* the criminal justice system and shape the emerging decarceration movement. The challenge of decarceration is far greater than simply reducing the use of incarceration; it involves building an array of policy and practice innovations that replace incarceration.

To launch this area of work, Smart Decarceration Initiative (SDI) hosted the first national conference on decarceration, **From Mass Incarceration to Effective and Sustainable Decarceration**, on September 24–27, 2015. More than 150 thought-provoking and inspiring leaders in policy, practice, advocacy, and research joined us at Washington University in St. Louis to present their work, engage in meaningful discussion, and help set an agenda for moving decarceration forward. The conference promoted collaboration across disciplines and sectors and stimulated scientifically driven, practical, and applied policy and community-based social innovations. To ensure effective and sustainable decarceration, we must plan and do the difficult work of developing a “smart” approach—one that is evidence-driven and grounded in a social justice orientation.

What It Means to Host the First National Conference on Decarceration

Mass incarceration is increasingly viewed as socially unacceptable. There is increasing political, fiscal, and moral will for decarceration to occur in the United States. Mass incarceration was fueled by and created a set of complex circumstances; thus, an era of smart decarceration requires a sophisticated approach.

Prior to the conference, SDI co-directors Carrie Pettus-Davis, PhD, and Matthew Epperson, PhD, distributed their seminal work, “Smart Decarceration: Guiding Concepts for an Era of Criminal Justice Transformation,” to conference participants. This concept paper framed the context of the conference—providing valuable background information on the mass incarceration epidemic and the climate that is likely to make decarceration a reality. Additionally, the concept paper articulated the guiding concepts of the smart decarceration movement. Drs. Pettus-Davis and Epperson assert that applying these core concepts at the onset of the decarceration era will help transform the criminal justice system and inform the post-decarceration era.

Guiding Concepts

- Change the narrative on incarceration and the incarcerated.**
- Make criminal justice systemwide innovations.**
- Implement transdisciplinary policy and practice interventions.**
- Employ evidence-driven strategies.**

The Smart Decarceration Guiding Concepts provided a comprehensive conceptual framework to organize the conference in a way that fostered thoughtful conversations, generated innovative solutions, and proposed poignant questions that must be addressed to substantially reduce the overreliance on incarceration and alleviate the social disparities within the criminal justice system.

The overall goal of the conference was to create an opportunity to imagine, develop, and plan for a transformed criminal justice system and cast a vision for what truly successful decarceration will look like. We also aimed to provide guideposts against which we can evaluate the effectiveness of proposed solutions by articulating the Guiding Concepts for smart decarceration. Finally, we wanted to catalyze an organized movement that capitalizes on the moment while avoiding the same pitfalls of our country's previous attempts at deinstitutionalization.

Our focus was social innovation—devising new practices and policies that advance the social good. These goals were realized as conference attendees participated in thought-provoking discussion and transdisciplinary problem solving, and made a commitment to transformation.

This conference resides in an important moment in history. The country is ripe for solutions to dramatically reduce the untenable numbers of adults entangled in our criminal justice system and the lingering damage our incarceration binge has inflicted upon individuals, families, and communities. The convening of the first national conference on decarceration demonstrates that there are those ready to take up the challenge to end hyper-incarceration, redress social disparities in the criminal justice system, and engage in the research and social innovation necessary to lead the way from mass incarceration to effective and sustainable decarceration.

The Report

This report is organized according to the four guiding concepts for decarceration. Included in each section are three parts: The Conversation, The Solutions, and The Questions.

The Conversation

Over the course of the conference, prominent national speakers presented their work in a series of panel discussions, plenary sessions, and keynote addresses. Each presenter shared their research and practice expertise before opening the floor for dialogue with the audience. This report shares the highlights of each presenter's work and draws out key points for reflection. The aim of the panel discussions and plenary talks was to craft a conversation that challenged attendees to rethink their current perspectives on the criminal justice system.

The Solutions

In addition to presenting their individual and organizational work, presenters were asked to present attendees with innovative research, practice, policy, and advocacy solutions. This report details a few of these solutions. Also, presenters and attendees joined together in a half-day working group session to generate social innovations in line with the Guiding Concepts and to create an actionable agenda for criminal justice system reform.

Presenters and attendees were organized into 12 small working groups, each centered on a unique cluster of reform strategies that surfaced from a concept-mapping research study of decarceration priority areas conducted by SDI. These priority areas represent a collection of strategies selected by nearly 120 stakeholders in criminal justice related practice, research, advocacy, funding, and policy.

12 Priority Areas of Decarceration

- 1. Sharing Data and Resource Allocation**
- 2. Incorporating Criminogenic Risks and Needs**
- 3. Implementing Evidence-Driven Innovations**
- 4. Reorienting Responses to Severity of the Crime**
- 5. Resetting Norms and Narratives**
- 6. Incorporating Multiple and New Perspectives**
- 7. Responding to Behavioral and Physical Health Needs**
- 8. Improving Reentry**
- 9. Reducing Collateral Consequences**
- 10. Building Diversionary Systems**
- 11. Curtailing Sentencing**
- 12. Narrowing the Funnel to Incarceration**

The stakeholders identified the 12 clusters as critical areas that need to be addressed to create effective and sustainable decarceration. At the conference, the 12 small working groups worked to operationalize these strategies and assess how they embody the four Guiding Concepts of smart decarceration. We will present several solutions produced during these working group sessions. The aim of generating actionable solutions—social innovations—at the conference was to redefine the way we think of the purpose of the criminal justice system and appropriate responses to public safety and well-being.

“Social innovation has made what we think of as human development, progress, and civilization possible. Social innovation has made possible all of the social systems and institutions that we take for granted. Unfortunately not all human social innovations are successful. Arguably, mass incarceration in the United States today is one of those wayward innovations. Humans created mass incarceration, and we have the ability to uncreate it.”

–Michael Sherraden, director, Center for Social Development

The Question

At the conclusion of each section, we share a question posed by one of the presenters to challenge the audience, spur discussion, and encourage innovation that will drive smart decarceration. Although we present several questions from presenters, there were overarching questions for the conference posed by SDI’s co-directors. The aim of posing such questions was to encourage participants to reimagine our current justice system and envision how such a system functions in a post-decarceration era. The questions moved attendees from “describing” the landscape to “creating a futurescape.”

“Do we need to incarcerate this individual at all? If not, what do we need to do instead?

What if incarceration were not an option?”

–SDI Co-Directors Carrie Pettus-Davis and Matthew Epperson

Change the Narrative on Incarceration and the Incarcerated

A smart decarceration approach will advance a changing narrative on incarceration and the incarcerated. It will require challenging the assumptions that incarceration is necessary for public safety, and that incarceration changes behavior for the better. We must view currently and formerly incarcerated individuals not as objects for intervention, but as key experts in crafting effective solutions.

Keynote address

Glenn E. Martin, JustLeadershipUSA

Vivian Nixon, College and Community Fellowship

“The quality of the solutions depends upon who is impacted by the problem.” –Vivian Nixon

“There has never been a system of oppression in this country that we’ve been able to topple until the very people that are most oppressed by that system are able to rise up into leadership, help define the nature of the problem and help define the direction we’re going in and the solution.” –Glenn E. Martin

The Conversation

In a keynote address, Vivian Nixon, executive director of College and Community Fellowship, and Glenn E. Martin, founder and president of JustLeadershipUSA, addressed the role of formerly incarcerated individuals in the decarceration movement. Following individual comments, Ms. Nixon and Mr. Martin engaged in a back-and-forth discussion, challenging one another with the tough questions that face those who seek to affect change in the criminal justice system.

They illuminated the many disparities that exist in the criminal justice system, particularly the racial disparities. They noted the absence of people of color in leadership positions in the reentry movement and discussed how directly impacted individuals’ unique perspective can inform policy solutions.

Ms. Nixon and Mr. Martin challenged the pervasive narratives about persons with incarceration histories and articulated a narrative in which directly impacted individuals are activists, leaders, and innovators of the movement. They drew upon their own experiences in incarceration to challenge the audience to find ways to open doors for those closest to problem to take leadership roles in its solution—at every level, from data gathering and research to policymaking.



Glenn E. Martin and Vivian Nixon illuminate disparities in the criminal justice system, particularly racial disparities.

Panel: Changing the narrative on incarceration

Jeffrey Draine, School of Social Work, Temple University

Ernest Drucker, Academy on Public Health and Criminal Justice, John Jay College

Azadeh Zohrabi, Ella Baker Center for Human Rights

“Our liberation is tied up in the liberation of everyone. We have to include everyone who has a stake in it.” –Jeffrey Draine

The panelists spoke of ways their own research works to change the narrative on both incarceration and the incarcerated, detailing how it reframes recurrent issues and themes in the criminal justice system and actively incorporates multiple perspectives.

Professor Jeffrey Draine, PhD, opened the panel by discussing the personal experiences of those he had worked alongside who are most impacted by the issue and how it changed his own approach to this work, especially in organizing and holding public agencies accountable. Research Professor Ernest Drucker, PhD, presented his new website on decarceration and noted the importance of providing a space for reform experts to share their ideas. Azadeh Zohrabi, national campaigner, closed the panel by presenting results from “Who Pays?”, a national participatory action research project that details the incredible debt, broken family bonds, and the mental and physical toll that result from mass incarceration.

They noted that there are often much bigger patterns that are at work in creating entanglement in the justice system that can only be identified by opening up to newer and wider viewpoints.

The Solutions

Presenter solutions

Create opportunities for formerly incarcerated adults and their families to lead participatory research activities, assist in interpretation of data, and contribute to writing of research.

Restore right to vote to all returning citizens.

Organize impacted individuals to engage in political action.

Create/use curriculum for justice-involved adults on what policy change looks like and how to engage.

Create participatory budgeting pots of money where directly impacted individuals can vote on how justice reinvestment money is spent.

Create a workforce, such as in schools of social work and psychology and in related fields, that is prepared to do the work necessary to move decarceration.

Working group solutions

Provide opportunities for adults with incarceration histories to testify before legislative bodies.

Permit individuals with criminal records to become police officers and serve in other positions throughout the criminal justice system.

Place leaders with incarceration histories on parole boards.

Use leaders with incarceration histories to serve as peer mentors to supervised individuals.

Use adults with incarceration histories to train positions at all points of the criminal justice system.

Create a truth and reconciliation commission to organize panels/hearings across the country.

Create a protective class for returning citizens so they cannot be systematically excluded from housing, education, and employment.

The Question

“If the year was 2030, and we’ve done a significant job of decarcerating our corrections system, what would the world look like for someone arrested with the same charge as a person arrested today?”

–Glenn E. Martin

Make Criminal Justice Systemwide Innovations

We need to consider how the entire criminal justice system—from law enforcement through the courts, prisons and jails, and community supervision (such as probation and parole)—has evolved into one that supports mass incarceration. Although prisons are the most visible manifestation of mass incarceration, they simply reflect the symptoms of an overall system of policies and practices that support it. Each sector of the criminal justice system has a critical role in smart decarceration. Advancing criminal justice systemwide innovations will require policy shifts and developing a continuum of practice-based interventions.

The Conversation

The panelists challenged the country to rethink how it could spend funds if they were diverted from incarceration.

Panel: Reducing social disparities, and efficient reallocation of resources

Reuben J. Miller, School of Social Work, University of Michigan

Nazgol Ghandnoosh, The Sentencing Project

Marc Schindler, Justice Policy Institute

“We haven’t always been this way, and there are models around the world for how we can scale back our current system.” –Nazgol Ghandnoosh

Marc Schindler, executive director of the Justice Policy Institute, suggested using these funds as a way to provide drug treatment, job training, adequate housing, or providing transportation within challenged communities to obtain employment outside of their neighborhoods. Research analyst Nazgol Ghandnoosh, PhD, of The Sentencing Project, encouraged reduced sentences across the board, from “short”-term, long-term, even life sentences, and she agreed that the resulting savings could be reinvested in effective rehabilitation and improving public safety. University of Michigan Assistant Professor Reuben J. Miller, PhD, introduced the phenomenon of “spaces of concentrated disadvantage,” spaces that are impacted by the ecological issues stemming from where people are arrested, incarcerated, and returned.

Ultimately, the United States could reinvest criminal justice funds into the communities that are most impacted to create the social supports that may stem trajectories into the criminal justice system.



Reuben J. Miller, left, Marc Schindler and Nazgol Ghandnoosh challenge participants to rethink how the United States could spend funds if they were diverted from incarceration.

Panel: Foundations and government

Patrick Griffin, MacArthur Foundation

Marie Garcia, National Institute of Justice

Denise Juliano-Bult, National Institute of Mental Health

Melinda K. McAliney, Lutheran Foundation of St. Louis

“We’ve done enough that we can to Band-Aid. Let’s talk about systematic and transformative change.” –Melinda K. McAliney

The panelists discussed their agencies’ approaches to funding, affirming that the criminal justice system is a place where dramatic change can occur.

Denise Juliano-Bult, chief, systems research program, spoke of the criminal justice system as a place where we can find and help improve outcomes for people with mental illnesses. Melinda K. McAliney, program director, noted that this field is served by many small nonprofit organizations that struggle to amass the resources necessary to adequately address the needs of such a large population. She said this is also a challenge to funders who do not have the resources to fund all of the organizations doing this work.

Marie Garcia, PhD, social science analyst, encouraged conference participants to submit applications to potential funders that focus on innovation. Patrick Griffin, program officer in juvenile justice in U.S. programs, ended the panel by stating that it would take a multitude of funders—especially at the local level—to get involved. Overall, the four panelists agreed that decarceration-focused organizations could have tremendous impact in this area and generate large-scale, sustainable change.

The Solutions

Presenter solutions

Reduce sentence length and use savings to invest in treatment and social services.

Establish a 20-year limit on prison sentences.

Bring family into reentry programming.

Develop a meaningful process for geriatric release.

Build both brokering and bridging models for building social capital for formerly incarcerated adults.

Develop relationships with funders and propose win-win solutions that achieve respective objectives.

Funders can pool money to fund projects that cover a larger swath of the system.

Create media campaign focused on whole system (instead of only incarceration) and systemwide solutions.

Working group solutions

Engage system in redesign of their own jobs from institutional to community-based setting.

Increase number of staff who conduct prerelease planning and make such planning mandatory.

Create community councils to handle low-level/nonviolent cases instead of using criminal courts.

Create alternatives to bail.

Individualize parole conditions and schedule opportunities to review and revise.

Use transitional release processes to include short stays in community before full release.

Eliminate incarceration as response to technical violations.

Training in trauma-informed care for police officers and first responders.

The Question

“We have to question how America thinks about and uses jails. We have to question the acceptance of the idea that incarceration is the solution to a problem.”

–Patrick Griffin

Implement Transdisciplinary Policy and Practice Interventions

The smart decarceration approach must build the capacity to respond to the devolving of jails and prisons by promoting behavioral and primary health, housing, education, employment, and civic opportunities. Transdisciplinary perspectives are necessary to redefine and reconsider what constitutes truly criminal behaviors, what are symptoms of public health crises, what kinds of behaviors policy and practice innovations can prevent, and when it is truly necessary to confine human beings.

Panel: Propelling multisector social innovation to advance smart decarceration

Michael P. Jacobson, CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance

Margaret E. Severson, University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare

George Lombardi, Missouri Department of Corrections

“It’s going to take a combination of practices, policies, and politics to get from mass incarceration to where we want to go.” –Michael P. Jacobson

Plenary: Criminal records post decarceration

Michael Pinard, Francis King Carey School of Law, University of Maryland

“Everyone with a criminal record faces diminished employment possibilities, but for Blacks with criminal records the hurdles are higher and they’re bolted more securely to the gravel.”
–Michael Pinard

The Conversation

The three speakers on the panel encouraged us to look ahead and craft solutions for ending the era of mass incarceration by envisioning the justice system and the future that we want to see.

Michael P. Jacobson, PhD, executive director of CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance, opened the panel by outlining what an end to mass incarceration would look like, stating that mass incarceration would cease to be “mass” at rate of 140-150 per 100,000 individuals. In real numbers, this would mean shrinking the current incarcerated population from 1.5 million to 500,000.

Professor Margaret E. Severson challenged the audience to consider how to incentivize not only wellness but also polices that ensure reentering individuals remain well and out of prison. George Lombardi, director of the Missouri Department of Corrections, concluded the panel with his reflections on where innovations are necessary—such as trauma—to propel decarceration forward. All of the panelists expressed the need for multiple sectors to contribute to decarceration efforts.

Professor Michael Pinard, co-director of the clinical law program, described the disproportionate impact of collateral consequences on communities of color and noted that the criminal justice system preys on impoverished communities—from policing to sentencing to the restrictions and stigma that follow individuals after their release from incarceration.

He asserted that our society has relied on incarceration economically and reflexively to the detriment and deterioration of individuals, families, and whole communities. The expense of the criminal justice system is exorbitant, and paid for mostly on the backs of poor minorities.

Professor Pinard then dug into the harsh realities of living with a criminal record post-release. He noted that more than 70 million individuals in the United States have a criminal record. The prevalence of criminal records on the Internet and few regulations governing who can access them leads to an environment in which people are unable to shed these relics of a criminal past. Criminal records often restrict or eliminate access to critical social resources such as employment and housing, continuing to penalize the individual long after their sentence. Therefore, collateral consequences are attached to the conviction—and by extension, the individual, rather than the sentence.



Panelists George Lombardi, left, Margaret E. Severson, and Michael P. Jacobson say multiple sectors must contribute to decarceration efforts.

The Solutions

Presenter solutions

- Increase funds individuals receive upon release to meet basic needs.
- Incentivize corrections systems that lower recidivism rates.
- Increase transportation access for returning citizens so they may gain/maintain employment.
- Create media guides for how to handle stories of crime and incarceration.
- Address trauma in incarcerated populations.
- Reduce public access to criminal records.
- Inform all defendants, preplea, of potential collateral consequences.
- Review collateral consequences by jurisdiction and eliminate those deemed unnecessary.

Working group solutions

- Partner corrections systems with developers to build affordable housing that fosters a successful reentry environment.
- Increase incentives (e.g., tax breaks) for companies that employ adults with conviction histories.
- Integrate the business community through economic and workforce development.
- Ensure Medicaid coverage for those in prison/jail continues upon release.
- Promote legislation that requires minimum standards of medical healthcare in correctional facilities.
- Pair social service professionals with police officers when first responders.
- Eliminate automatic collateral consequences.

The Question

“What is the one innovation, the one change, that would alter the nature of the criminal justice system? What would it look like if we started over?”

–Margaret E. Severson

Employ Evidence-Driven Strategies

Smart decarceration requires rigorous testing and timely incorporation of emerging evidence. The majority of policies and practices that fostered mass incarceration were implemented and sustained without proper evaluation, and were not subject to discontinuation in spite of poor outcomes. We must be sure not to treat decarceration as a fad, but rather as an era in which we hold ourselves accountable for developing the best approaches. Built into any new intervention should be an expectation that people and systems evolve and therefore approaches must adapt and respond accordingly. Interventions should be expected to undergo needs assessments and evaluations of theory, logic, process, outcomes, and efficiency. In short, science must drive the process of smart decarceration.

The Conversation

Panel: Accelerating research, practice, and policy exchanges to optimize reform

Faye S. Taxman, George Mason University, Center for Advancing Correctional Excellence!

Julian Adler, director of Research-Practice Strategies, Center for Court Innovation

Kathy Saltmarsh, executive director, Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council

“Mass incarceration ends when the criminal justice system is no longer the place of first resort.”

–Faye S. Taxman

The panelists shared their views on key areas where the implementation of evidence-driven practices could accelerate both practice and policy changes. Faye S. Taxman, PhD, director of the Center for Advancing Correctional Excellence!, spoke about the need for increased implementation of evidence-based programming. She asserted that unraveling the criminal justice system would involve building capacity in our communities to interact with people with dignity and in their own support systems. Julian Adler, director of Research-Practice Strategies, encouraged not only the use of evidence-driven assessments but also implementing them with fidelity. He warned that the failure to execute even effective methods with fidelity would fail to yield the results necessary to end mass incarceration.

Kathy Saltmarsh, executive director of the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council, discussed the powerful tool of appropriating money and encouraged participants to obtain seats at the table where the allocation of funds, particularly tax dollars, is decided. The panelists concluded that, to deliver services that are responsive to those who are involved with the criminal justice system, we need to diversify our approach and accept that the current trajectory of the system—from arrest to court to incarceration to community supervision—may not be suitable and effective for all who enter the system.

James E. McLeod Memorial Lecture

Rebecca Ginsburg, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

“Issues related to incarceration and criminal justice are on the forefront of civil rights struggles in the country today. And it’s imperative that universities and institutions of higher learning be at the forefront of civil rights struggles.” –Rebecca Ginsburg

Rebecca Ginsburg, PhD, co-founder and director of the Education Justice Project, delivered a compelling presentation, “Why Universities Should Be in Prisons,” challenging universities and other institutions of higher learning to be at the forefront of social justice by educating those who are incarcerated.

Citing the important connection between higher education opportunities during incarceration and reduced recidivism rates, Dr. Ginsburg offered steps that universities could take to assume a lead role in proving quality education while addressing historic disparities in education attainment—at all levels—in our country.



Faye S. Taxman, left, Kathy Saltmarsh, and Julian Adler discuss optimizing reform.

The Solutions

Presenter solutions

Reclassify certain criminal statutes and determine that some things should no longer be criminal.

Establish common set of trainings for all sectors of criminal justice system within a jurisdiction.

Maximize accuracy and transparency of risk assessments.

Increase access to post-secondary education within correctional institutions.

Provide briefs/information packet to politicians and decision makers so they make informed decisions and have support for decisions.

Find core group of reporters or media members to educate and continue to inform.

Conduct cost-benefit analysis on return of investment for tax dollars spent in criminal justice system.

Use translational tools to determine which services should be provided and evaluate quality of services.

Working group solutions

Conduct an analysis of sentencing enhancements and other factors that extend terms to determine effectiveness.

Conduct research on fundamental drivers of contact with criminal justice system.

Package academic research results in language and concepts that are accessible to decision-makers.

Focus assessments on needs and assets instead of risks and danger.

Devise a standardized process for gathering criminal justice data.

The Question

“How many people are involved in appropriating money at either the state or local level? Tax and spend is our greatest power. We need to have the discussion, ‘What should we raise revenues to pay for and what should we take revenues from?’”

–Kathy Saltmarsh

Redefining Justice

“We have to think about the language of the system and whether we adopt the language of the system or whether we move away from that language because that language is loaded and that language was created for a very specific purpose ... to ‘other’ people in the system.” –Glenn E. Martin



Glenn E. Martin, left, John T. Chisholm and Ronald D. Simpson-Bey challenge the audience to redefine the criminal justice system.

Redefining Justice in America

John T. Chisholm, Milwaukee County District Attorney's Office

Ronald D. Simpson-Bey, JustLeadershipUSA, American Friends Service Committee

Moderated by **Glenn E. Martin**, JustLeadershipUSA

“We have to get away from the concept that all of our problems that exist in a community can somehow be funneled into the criminal justice system and that the system will solve those problems.”

–John T. Chisholm

Conference presenters challenged attendees not only to reimagine a criminal justice system that is humane and socially just, but also to rethink and redefine terms central to the conversation.

Ronald D. Simpson-Bey, a decarceration leader, and John T. Chisholm, district attorney, challenged the audience to rethink how we determine who is an “offender” and who is “victim.” They also encouraged attendees to envision a prosecutorial system that is not adversarial and defined by the number of convictions, but that is defined by justice. From seemingly diametrically opposed positions on the criminal justice continuum, Mr. Chisholm and Mr. Simpson-Bey discussed ways prosecutorial practices could be reformed while upholding principles of accountability and public safety in order to advance criminal justice reform.

In 1985, a prosecutor wrongfully convicted Mr. Simpson-Bey, and he was imprisoned for 27 years. While he was incarcerated, his 20-year-old son was murdered by a 14-year-old boy; Mr. Simpson-Bey, however, advocated that the boy be tried as a juvenile to avoid the harsh adult system. Mr. Simpson-Bey's story is one of restoration and healing, both at the individual level and at the system level, where he works to restore and heal a broken criminal justice system. Mr. Simpson-Bey is now a national decarceration leader.

As district attorney for Milwaukee County, Mr. Chisholm advocates for reform within an often ignored aspect of the criminal justice system—prosecution. He opened his office to an in-depth look at racial disparities. His willingness to tackle this challenge head-on has gained momentum and is opening the door for other jurisdictions to follow suit to redress racial inequity in the justice system. Mr. Chisholm firmly stated that prosecutors have a responsibility to the community and a unique role in the criminal justice system. As such, they must be willing to make the right decision and to execute it in the right way.

Throughout the conference, other terms underwent revisions.

Redefining Victim/Offender: The lines between who is a victim and who is an offender in the criminal justice system is not as stark as many believe. As Mr. Martin says, “I didn’t learn how to pull a gun on someone until someone pulled a gun on me.” The cycle of incarceration and its contributing factors runs so rampant in some communities that the boundaries between “offender” and “victim” are no longer clear.

Redefining Public Safety: A prevalent belief was that incarceration made communities safer. However, 40 years of our nation’s overreliance on incarceration has not increased public safety; in fact, many argue that hyper-incarceration has contributed to the destabilization of some communities, diminishing overall safety and well-being. How we choose to respond to crime will determine public safety, but that response does not necessitate incapacitation.

Redefining Success: We must look beyond recidivism as an outcome for criminal justice system interventions. The opposite of mass incarceration is not mass release. This era of decarceration will not be marked solely by the number of incarcerated individuals but also our ability to redress social disparities within the system and to maximize public safety and well-being.

Finally, presenters and attendees alike cautioned against using terms such as “ex-offender” or focusing on incarceration as the defining characteristic for an individual who has had criminal justice system contact. Instead, presenters and attendees favored terms such as “those most impacted,” “those closest to the issue,” and “returning citizen” for individuals who experienced incarceration.

Moving Forward

The excitement and momentum of the conference continued beyond the days of panels, plenary sessions, and keynote addresses.

Emerging Leaders Training

David Mensah, JustLeadershipUSA

“Leadership is looking at the situation of the moment and understanding that if you are directly impacted then you have an obligation to address those issues.” –Vivan Nixon

SDI partnered with JustLeadershipUSA to provide an Emerging Leaders Training to adults with prior justice system involvement from the Midwest region. The leadership training included communication skills, relationship development, and interviewing and employment skills. The training is designed around three key principles: responsibility, self-reflection, and collective leadership. Ultimately, the training equips those closest to the issue to take a leadership role within the decarceration movement. The group of leaders continues to connect over the ideas shared during the training.

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

One major outcome of the conference is an edited book, forthcoming from Oxford University Press, that details evidence, conceptual frameworks, and an action plan for sustainable and effective decarceration. The volume, tentatively titled *Smart Decarceration: Achieving Criminal Justice Transformation in the 21st Century*, takes up the challenge of transforming America’s approach to criminal justice in a forward-thinking and solutions-focused manner, taking into account the realities of the current sociopolitical context. *Smart Decarceration* grapples with the following questions: What if incarceration were not an option for most? Whose voices are essential in this era of decarceration? What is the state of evidence for solutions? How do we generate and adopt empirically driven reforms? How do we redefine and rethink justice in the United States?

National Decarceration Network

SDI plans to create a national network focused on collaboration and advancing the decarceration agenda. This network will serve to promote new perspectives and approaches with an aim toward creating national impact.

Post-Conference Action Steps

Attendees created their own post-conference action steps. Following the small working groups, participants were instructed to complete a self-addressed postcard with a personal and organizational commitment to continue the decarceration movement. Two weeks after the conference, the postcards were mailed to attendees to remind them of their action steps. Below are selected post-conference action steps from attendees as well as a word cloud depicting the most common terms of all action steps.

Educate public about failures of current system and decarceration.

Incorporate both staff and clients into organizational decision-making.

Hold awareness events on campus.

Organize student tours of prisons and agencies that serve reentering adults.

Institute empirical assessments into our own reentry and diversion programs.

Share data and information our agencies gather with others.

Research evidence-based practices to use in our reentry organization.

Invite a returning citizen onto our board.

Share my personal story of incarceration to influence conversation.

Volunteer with an organization that works toward decarceration.

Add “decarceration” to my vocabulary.

Talk about decarceration with my family and friends.

Build a feature-rich data collection tool and share it with agencies.

Learn more about judges we vote to elect.



About Smart Decarceration Initiative

Smart Decarceration Initiative (SDI) aims to build social capacity to reduce incarceration rates in ways that are effective, sustainable, and socially just. We achieve this through three primary strategies:

- Advancing innovations in policy and practice
- Identifying a continuum of viable exit strategies from the criminal justice system
- Cultivating networks to promote new approaches and perspectives

Smart Decarceration Initiative, based at the Center for Social Development (CSD), is led by Carrie Pettus-Davis, PhD, assistant professor at the Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis, and Matthew Epperson, PhD, associate professor at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. The joining of the Brown School of Social Work and the School of Social Service Administration positions SDI to engage in the type of evidence gathering and social innovation necessary to usher in the era of decarceration.

For more information on SDI and to view video, PowerPoints, and photos from the conference, visit SDI's pages on CSD's website, csd.wustl.edu.

A Special Thank You

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Matt Epperson, left, Bob Fox, Carrie Pettus-Davis, Maxine Clark, Edward F. Lawlor, and Michael Sherraden, at the conference.

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