

Advancing Public Safety in New York

In the wake of the economic and social upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, many jurisdictions, Republican and Democratic alike, have grappled with higher rates of gun violence. New York is no exception. And while [New York's homicide rate remains lower than the national average](#), and [New York City has seen a smaller increase in homicides than other cities](#) like Omaha, Phoenix, Austin, Seattle, Chicago, and Madison, we must meet this moment with real, evidence-based solutions that will make New Yorkers safer.

A robust body of research, built over decades, has proven that jail stays and long prison sentences do not reduce crime. At the same time, the harms of mass incarceration are clear: it breaks families apart, destabilizes communities, and aggravates the very types of racial and economic inequality that make communities more vulnerable to gun violence. Fortunately, we also have powerful evidence about what *does* work to reduce crime and, in particular, gun violence. Achieving public safety for all New Yorkers means avoiding the failed policies of the past and, instead, choosing proven solutions, supported by data, that strengthen and protect communities.

Mass Incarceration Doesn't Make New York Safer

NEW YORK'S HISTORY DEMONSTRATES THAT POLICYMAKERS CAN KEEP COMMUNITIES SAFE WITHOUT INCREASING MASS INCARCERATION.

After 25 years of mostly declining violent crime, New York, like a lot of jurisdictions across the U.S., experienced a [concerning spike in gun homicides](#) in the first year of the pandemic. The best available [evidence suggests](#) that the increase was driven by the massive social disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and a [65% increase in gun sales](#) from 2019 to 2020. While, thankfully, [trends show homicide rates are no longer increasing](#), too many communities are still suffering from gun violence, [particularly Black and Brown](#) communities.

As the Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) testified in January 2023, despite this increase, [New York remains the safest](#)

[large state in the country](#). The experience of New York shows that safety and justice can, and must, go hand in hand. Data compiled at the national level shows that 37 states, including New York, reduced incarceration while simultaneously achieving steeper declines in crime than states that did not reduce imprisonment over the decade preceding the pandemic: [Crime fell by 28% on average in states that reduced imprisonment, compared to only 18% in states that increased imprisonment](#). In New York, from 2009 to 2019 the [crime and imprisonment rates both fell by 25%](#).

New York must continue to build on this progress, rather than revert to the "tough on crime" policies from the 80's and 90's that led to a [dramatic expansion of the number of people in the state's jails and prisons](#). Advancing public safety in New York requires targeted investments that prevent gun violence, rather than responding to harm after the fact.

DECADES OF RESEARCH HAVE SHOWN THAT INCARCERATION IS AMONG THE LEAST EFFECTIVE AND MOST EXPENSIVE APPROACHES TO CRIME PREVENTION.

There is a growing consensus among researchers that [incarceration cannot be justified on the grounds that it improves public safety by reducing recidivism](#), and that in many cases it is, in fact, criminogenic—i.e., [it actually increases a person's likelihood of ending up back in the criminal justice system](#). And it is costly. In 2019, the 57 counties outside New York City [spent more than \\$1.3 billion running local jails](#). Two years later, [New York City spent over \\$2.7 billion on its jail system](#). The state spends another almost [\\$3 billion on the prison system](#), bringing New York's total incarceration expenditures to approximately \$7 billion annually.

Beyond the cost and the limited, or even negative, impact incarceration has on recidivism, New York's overreliance on incarceration as its principal response to crime results in devastating consequences for individuals and their families. These consequences reverberate across entire communities—Black and Brown communities, in particular. People who have experienced incarceration have [reduced earnings over their lifetime](#) and a [shortened life expectancy](#). Moreover, The Office of Children and Family Services estimates that [there are more than 105,000 children with a parent incarcerated in a New York jail or prison](#). The children and family members of incarcerated people experience [financial instability](#) and [negative physical and emotional health repercussions](#). These compounding consequences of mass incarceration only serve to undermine public safety in the future.

What Would Work to Make New Yorkers Safer?

All New Yorkers deserve to be safe. We do a disservice to victims of crime, their families, and communities, however, when we make policy in reaction to newspaper headlines and nightly news stories rather than pursuing data-driven solutions to crime and violence. [There is a compelling and growing body of evidence](#) showing that investments in community-based supports—including stable and affordable housing and access to mental health care—along with targeted community violence interventions, can effectively reduce crime and violence while simultaneously strengthening the social infrastructure that allows communities to thrive.

HOUSING

Access to safe and affordable housing is a precondition for community health, economic development, and stability. It is also a key component of crime prevention and public safety. Indeed, when asked in a [recent survey](#) about how the government might make neighborhoods safer, the top selection of respondents was to build more affordable housing and reduce homelessness. These sentiments are supported by data, which show reductions in crime associated with [access to affordable housing](#). A study in Denver demonstrated that [providing supportive housing for people with frequent justice system contact resulted in a 40% reduction in arrests](#). Another multi-year study in Philadelphia found a [nearly 22% reduction in homicides associated with city housing repair for low-income homeowners and community clean-up projects](#).

These results have been shown in local programs as well. In New York City, an evaluation of the [Frequent Users Systems Engagement \(FUSE\) program](#) showed that 86% of program participants remained housed and spent 40% less time in jail compared to the comparison group which did not receive supportive housing services. [Sixty-seven percent of the cost of this program was offset](#) by reductions in jail, shelter, and healthcare spending. As the FUSE program shows, investment in supportive housing, particularly for people with justice system involvement, not only enhances public safety, but also reduces reliance on jails and prisons for mental health treatment.

MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

A decades-long [lack of investment in community-based mental health resources](#) has made New York's jails and prisons the primary providers of services for people living with mental illness. Incarceration has been shown to have a [destabilizing effect on the lives of people with mental illness](#), and experts believe that [community-based mental health care is the "foundation of effective treatment"](#) for these individuals. According to a [report by the Vera Institute](#), 1 in 5 women and 1 in 10 men entering New York jails has a serious mental illness. Investing in policies that support people living with mental illness, rather than arresting or incarcerating them, advances public safety, including by increasing [local access to office-based mental health care and access to government funded mental health care](#). Indeed, one recent study found that [Medicaid expansion, which increased access to behavioral health care, produced a 20-32% reduction in overall arrest rates](#) in the first three years.

VIOLENCE INTERRUPTION PROGRAMS

By viewing violence as a [public health issue rather than a criminal one](#), communities have been able to develop evidence-based solutions to improve public safety. For example, [Hospital-Based Intervention Programs](#) (HVIPS) have been shown to reduce rates of violence. Individuals that participated in a [Baltimore HVIP program](#) saw a 83% reduction in repeat hospitalization due to violent injury, a 75% reduction in violent criminal activity, and an employment rate that was 62% higher than non-program participants. Participants in a [Chicago community violence interruption program](#) had 63% fewer arrests and 19% less likely to be victims of shootings or homicides, and a violence interruption program in Stockton, CA resulted in a [20% reduction in gun homicides](#). In New York City an evaluation of the ["Cure Violence" violence](#) interruption program found that neighborhoods that implemented the cure violence programs tended to have greater declines in homicides. Research also has shown that investing in [urban renewal](#) or [youth employment programs](#) can also help reduce rates of violence. For example, in New York City, [youth participation in a summer jobs program decreased young people's chance of any arrest during the program summer by 17%, and the chance of a felony arrest by 23%](#).



SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

in Denver, CO led to a 40% reduction in arrests for people with frequent justice contact.



EXPANDING MEDICAID

led to a 20-32% reduction in arrest rates in three years.



A VIOLENCE INTERVENTION PROGRAM

in Chicago had 63% fewer arrests and 19% less likely to be victims of shooting or homicides.



YOUTH SUMMER JOBS

in New York City led to a 23% reduction in felony arrests.

Advancing public safety in New York requires addressing root causes of crime such as housing insecurity, unemployment, lack of access to mental health treatment, and cycles of violence. Evidence and public opinion are clear: policymakers should invest in long-neglected communities and take a holistic and public health approach to public safety, rather than relying on punitive policies that have been proven to be ineffective, costly, and harmful.