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# Criminal Justice Playbook

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National Latino Evangelical Coalition



**“He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.”  
(Luke 4:18)**

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# Letter from our President & CJR Director

Friends,

As people of faith, we know that there are a great many sources of concern that we face in our society. As we seek both peace and justice in our cities, we are particularly concerned about the levels of violence that we are seeing in our country as well as the alarming rates with which we imprison the most vulnerable among us. Here are a couple of quick facts that help illustrate what we believe to be a national crisis:

- There are close to 12,000 gun murders a year (more than the annual death toll of U.S. soldiers during the Vietnam War) and gun violence is the second leading cause of death for Latino males, ages 18-34.
- The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world (higher than China, higher than Iran, even higher than South Africa during its apartheid regime) and it is overwhelmingly the poor who populate our jails and prisons.

We don't know about you, but these realities are unacceptable to us. It troubles us deeply that, in the nation with the largest number of Christians in the world, we resolve so many issues with violence and feel the need to lock up so many of our people.

The good news is that there are proven solutions to these problems which we believe the Church can and *should* play a role in promoting. This “Criminal Justice Playbook” is meant to serve as a resource for clergy and lay leaders who feel called to put their faith into action. Many of us are unaware of just how many of us have been directly impacted by issues of gun violence, incarceration, and the general dysfunction of our criminal justice system. We ourselves are the sons of what many of us refer to as a “returning citizen”—someone who has been locked up but given a second chance to return to society—and we can assure you that there are many others who live in the shadows within your congregations, afraid or ashamed to speak up about how these issues have shaped their lives.

Please take a few minutes to review the Playbook and join us and the growing number of congregations throughout the country as we seek both peace and justice in our cities.

Peace & Blessings,

Rev. Dr. Gabriel Salguero  
President

Rev. Dr. Michael Carrión  
National Director, Criminal Justice Reform Initiatives

# BACKGROUND

## *Gun Violence*

**“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Mt. 5:9)**

Despite having more Christians than any country on earth, the U.S. has evidenced a disproportionate amount of gun violence. There are over 300 million guns in the U.S.—enough guns for every man, woman, and child—and over 30,000 people die each year from gun murders and gun suicides. Violence is routinely celebrated and glorified on TV and in the movies, and we have become a country almost numbed to the reality of constant mass shootings in our schools, offices, streets, and even houses of worship.

As we consider our own roles as peacemakers in a violent world, it is helpful to know that there are proven strategies for significantly reducing gun violence in some of our most dangerous neighborhoods. While politicians on the right and left may continue to argue about issues of gun rights and gun control, there are some non-partisan solutions that are right at our fingertips.

In the early 1990s, the city of Boston had an extremely high homicide rate, but over the course of the decade, a partnership between local clergy, law enforcement officials, and criminologists, produced a dramatic decline in violence often referred to as the “Boston Miracle.” In this [TED Talk](#), a Boston pastor, one of the architects of this work, vividly describes the ways that his ministry had to change in order for him to become a true peacemaker in his community.

Since then, variations of the strategy have been replicated in cities across the country with impressive results. Clergy and lay leaders took on similar leadership roles in the successful work in Oakland, CA which is on track to have one of its lowest homicide rates in over 30 years; and similar efforts in the city of Richmond, CA have resulted in more than a 70% decrease in homicides since 2007 when Richmond was identified as one of the deadliest cities in the state.

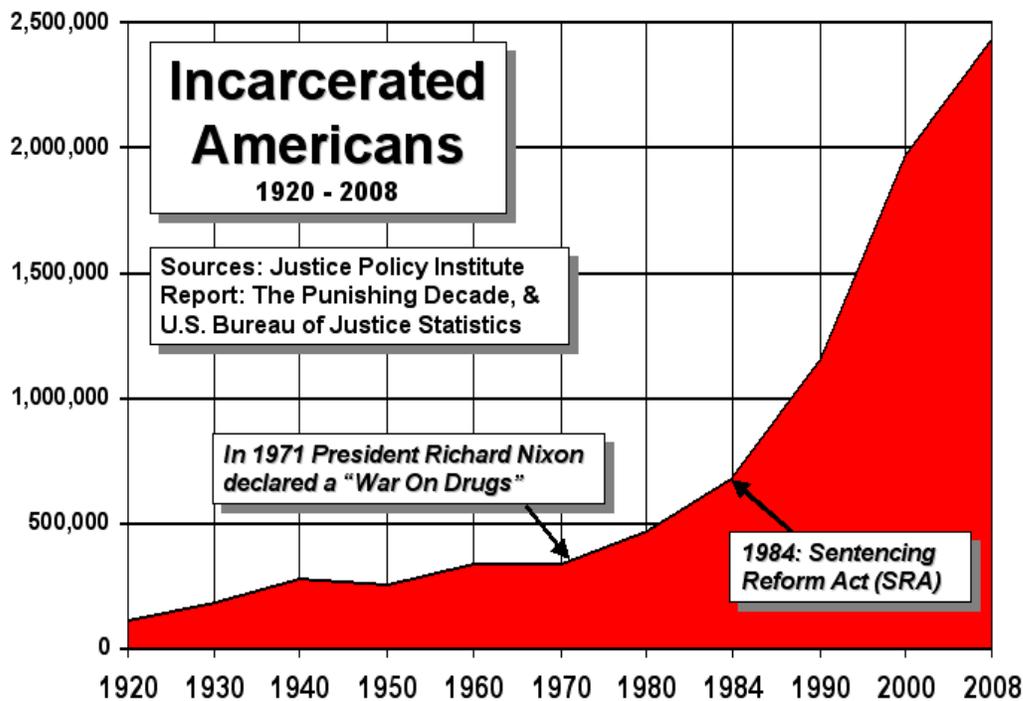
In all of these cases, the solution has not been to simply flood vulnerable neighborhoods with police or to start locking up people in droves. Rather, it comes down to identifying the tiny number of individuals in any given city who are most at risk for shooting or being shot, and providing them with targeted support in order to help them turn their lives around. This [“fellowship” model](#) of street outreach has been a cornerstone of many successful efforts and benefits greatly from the involvement of people of faith.

# Mass Incarceration

**“He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.” (Luke 4:18)**

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Currently, there are over 2.2 million people in U.S. jails and prisons, plus another 5 million on probation or parole (in addition to tens of thousands locked up in immigrant detention facilities). As people of faith, we must ask why this is. Is it that we are inherently the most evil and least redeemable people in the world and must simply be locked up, or is there something wrong with the policies that govern our criminal justice system?

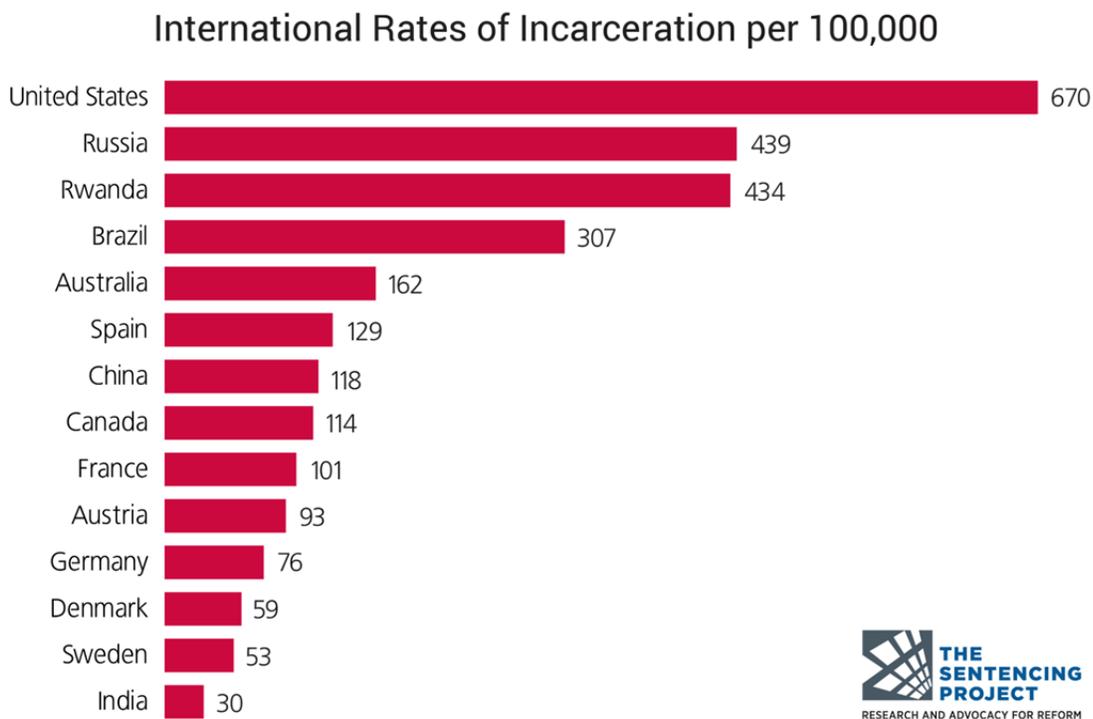
The fact is that it hasn't always been this way. The incarceration rate has increased by over 500% during the last 40 years and is the product of an increasingly punitive set of government policies that have been set in motion since the end of the Civil Rights Movement.



Poverty and lack of opportunity combined with institutionalized discrimination based on race and income within our justice system have driven these increases. In recent years, a growing body of research has uncovered systemic racial discrimination at all levels of the criminal justice system. In fact, not only are the poor and people of color victims of discriminatory policing, prosecution, and sentencing, but even the *formerly* incarcerated must contend with a wide range of legalized discrimination in relation to employment, housing, education, and voting (all of which blocks successful re-entry to society and fuels never-ending cycles of incarceration).

A significant source of the dramatic increase in incarceration rates can be traced back to our nation's "War on Drugs" which was first declared back in 1971. Since then, both Democratic and Republican administrations have ramped up increasingly punitive criminal justice policies—even during periods of *declining* crime—which have made the U.S. the world's leading jailer.

In response to this mass incarceration, a whole set of private industries have emerged in order to capitalize off of the phenomenon. Private prison companies have seen soaring profits in recent years (the two largest, Geo Group and CoreCivic, have both seen 2500% stock price increases since 2000) and now regularly sign contracts with state and local governments which require guaranteed numbers of inmates. These same companies build and manage the growing number of immigration detention facilities that are now overflowing across the country. At the same time, many well-known corporations profit from cheap prison labor in both public and private prisons in order to manufacture their goods. Lobbyists representing these interests then go on to advocate for policies that help promote and expand the incarceration boom.



Source: Walmsley, R. (2016). *World Prison Brief*. London: Institute for Criminal Policy Research. Available online: <http://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief>.

# KEY ISSUES

Issues of public safety and criminal justice reform can seem overwhelming and, in some cases, people will argue that these issues are beyond the Church's purview. However, we believe that the Church not only has the capacity, but the *responsibility* to promote both peace and justice in the public sphere in order to help heal a broken world.

Thanks to faith partners working on these issues all over the country, we have access to quite a bit of research as well as a number of proven strategies for helping to address the problems we face. Below are some key issues that NaLEC congregations should pay attention to. If you are interested in getting involved in any of these issues, NaLEC leaders can put you and your congregation in touch with other churches that are already involved in this work and looking for more support.

## **Violence Reduction**

As mentioned above, proven strategies exist for reducing gun violence in our most dangerous neighborhoods. The strategy developed in Boston—often referred to as *Operation Ceasefire*—is actually the Department of Justice's most highly rated gun violence reduction strategy. The challenge is that the federal government has not historically funded these types of strategies on a large scale and it is often difficult to convince local governments to make it a priority. Typically, it has required sustained community organizing from faith and community leaders in order to get city and county governments to allocate funds and to support implementation. At this very moment, there are communities throughout the country attempting to get effective strategies implemented and they are in need of NaLEC congregations to help lend their voices and influence in order to make this happen.

## **Bail Reform**

Currently, over 500,000 people across the country are sitting in jail waiting for their court date because they are too poor to pay for bail. Those awaiting court dates may wait weeks, months, or even years and, during that time, they will often lose their jobs, get evicted from their homes, lose custody of their children, or fall into bankruptcy (even if they end up being innocent). The system of cash bail is so ingrained into the fabric of our criminal justice system that few question it. However, in most cases, it does not help ensure that the accused attend their trials (they usually do so anyway); instead, it merely has the effect of further penalizing the poor who, unable to afford expensive legal counsel, are already at a huge disadvantage in court proceedings. This 3-minute [video](#) provides a quick overview of the problems of the current money bail system.

## **Barriers to Re-Entry**

About 75% of incarcerated individuals return to prison. Beyond the normal challenges involved in turning one's life around after incarceration, these high rates of recidivism are fueled by legalized forms of discrimination against the formerly incarcerated that make re-entry into society even more difficult: 1) they are often denied job interviews if they check a box on the employment application indicating they have a felony conviction; 2) they are often barred from both private and public housing; 3) they are

denied education grants in order to go back to school; and 4) in certain states, they are denied the right to vote.

People of faith in cities and states throughout the country are currently working to break down barriers to successful re-entry. One example is Florida which is one of only three states that not only bars convicted felons from voting while incarcerated, but bars them from voting *for life* (unless they can successfully petition the governor to have their rights restored). A non-partisan grassroots effort is currently underway in which the formerly incarcerated, faith leaders, and others are working to pass a 2018 ballot measure which would change the Florida constitution in order to automatically restore voting rights once individuals have completed their sentences. If you are in the state of Florida, the "Second Chances" Campaign needs your support!

### **County Prosecutors & Sheriffs**

Between 60-90% of those who are arrested require a public defender because they cannot afford an attorney. Afraid of the risks of going to trial with limited legal counsel, the vast majority of criminal defendants opt for a plea bargain (even when they would have been found innocent in court). While many of us imagine criminals being locked up only after a lengthy and comprehensive legal battle—like what we see on TV dramas—the reality is that over 90% of criminal convictions are the result of plea bargains. This means that local prosecutors (district or state attorneys) wield an incredible amount of influence on who will be indicted, what the charges will be, and what type of sentencing recommendations will be made. That said, most people have no idea who their local county prosecutor is or where they stand on issues and, as a result, prosecutors often run for their positions unopposed and stay in their positions for many years. More recently, however, there has been a surge of attention being paid to county prosecutor elections throughout the country in an effort to address the source of much of the over-incarceration problem. There will be many important prosecutor races in 2018.

Similarly, few people know who their local county sheriff is or think about how much influence sheriffs have over what types of crimes and what types of people will be targeted by law enforcement. For example, a number of county sheriffs across the country have decided to aggressively target undocumented immigrants and essentially operate as extensions of ICE in their local communities. Broadly speaking, all law enforcement agencies make decisions about where to prioritize their time and resources and it's important for the general public to understand what types of choices they are making. There will be many important sheriff races in 2018 and we encourage you to learn more about your local sheriff.

# WHAT YOU CAN DO

## *Educate Yourself & Others*

If you see any particular issues that resonate with you here—or other ones that you are already aware of—take the time to further educate yourself about them. At the end of this document, there is a “Resources” section with a whole list of readings and videos/films which can provide you with good background information.

Make an effort to share what you’ve learned with others. Host a screening of one of the films, or use some of the shorter videos or articles and incorporate them into small group meetings, Bible studies, or other venues in which you are linking social justice issues to Biblical text. Ask yourself and others what the Biblical implications are of some of these issues and what an appropriate Christian response would be.

## *Lend Your Moral Voice*

It is important that people in your community know that, as people of faith, we are not afraid to lend our moral voices to critical issues. Many would-be believers never heed God’s call because the only Christians they know seem insincere in their commitments to defend the poor and the oppressed. One idea is to host a “Peacemaker” or “Freedom” Sabbath during one of your Sunday services. Take time to incorporate some of the Playbook issues into your sermon and/or take time for collective prayer for those who are being directly impacted by violence or the criminal justice system. You can also pen an Op-Ed in your local paper in order to present a prophetic voice on issues of peace and justice to your community. Feel free to use the Op-Ed in the Playbook’s Resource section as a template for this.

## *Identify an Advocate Leader*

You may or may not already have an Advocate Leader within your congregation—someone who is taking the lead on the social justice ministry within your church. Maybe that person is you. Either way, we encourage you to designate someone who can be a point person for your church in order to coordinate efforts with the larger NaLEC network. We will be planning some national calls, webinars, and other coordinating events in order to help us mobilize around some of the issues outlined in this Playbook.

## *Join Local Efforts*

There are churches all over the country who are working diligently on the issues outlined in this Playbook. For example, the PICO National Network, the largest faith-based community organizing network in the country, has affiliated congregations in over 20 states and their LIVE FREE Campaign focuses specifically on issues of criminal justice reform. Similarly, there are many faith and non-faith-based institutions around the country who desperately need for the Church to join their efforts. Through NaLEC’s

wide network of member churches and partners, we can help you get plugged into existing partners near you.

While most of the national media will be focused on high-profile elections in 2018, take the time to learn about your local elections. Getting involved with local elections does not necessarily mean advocating for a particular candidate, but can simply mean helping to host candidate forums or helping your community learn more about candidates and issues that may have a direct impact on their lives.

# RESOURCES

## Reducing Gun Violence

***Don't Shoot: One Man, A Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America*** (by David Kennedy) is a book written by one of the architects of Operation Ceasefire and tells how it dramatically decreased homicides in Boston and other cities.

***“Why Do We Ignore Initiatives That Reduce Gun Violence?”*** is a NYT Op-Ed that can be used as a template for local op-eds in your community. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/opinion/reducing-gun-violence.html?\\_r=3](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/opinion/reducing-gun-violence.html?_r=3)

***“How the Gun Control Debate Ignores Black Lives”*** is a ProPublica article that profiles faith leaders struggling to get federal support for proven strategies that can dramatically reduce homicides in urban communities. <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-the-gun-control-debate-ignores-black-lives>

***TED Talk by Rev. Jeffrey Brown***, one of the architects of Operation Ceasefire in Boston, who talks about the transformation of his ministry in order to become a true peacemaker. [https://www.ted.com/talks/jeffrey\\_brown\\_how\\_we\\_cut\\_youth\\_violence\\_in\\_boston\\_by\\_79\\_percent](https://www.ted.com/talks/jeffrey_brown_how_we_cut_youth_violence_in_boston_by_79_percent)

***The Interrupters*** is an award-winning documentary that chronicles the street outreach workers in Chicago who put their lives on the line to prevent homicides. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/interrupters/>

***Nationswell Video*** (6 minutes) profiling the **“Fellowship” model of street outreach** work in Richmond, CA which has dramatically reduced homicides (good introductory video). <http://nationswell.com/devone-boggan-ons-reduce-murder-rate/>

## Ending Mass Incarceration

***The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-Blindness*** (by Michelle Alexander) is a bestselling and must-read book for understanding the history and current realities of mass incarceration in the U.S. (Also available in Spanish).

***13<sup>th</sup>*** is an Oscar-nominated documentary about mass incarceration which is available on Netflix.

***Films for Action Video*** (3 minutes) on the need for **Bail Reform**. <http://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/breaking-down-bail-debunking-common-bail-myths-brave-new-films/>

***Policing the Police*** is a Frontline documentary about the Newark Police Department and the efforts to reign in abusive policing practices in the U.S. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/policing-the-police/>

***Gideon's Army*** is a documentary about the under-funded and under-resourced public defenders whose job it is to provide the poor with fair legal representation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fOkigKz9Zg>

***The Central Park Five*** is a documentary about the case of five Black and Latino teenagers in New York who were unjustly convicted of raping a white woman and who spent between 6 and 13 years in prison before their convictions were overturned. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUfwUgRwKq4>