

Working within neighborhoods to end mass incarceration

"By building social capacity, communities can respond to their own issues rather than rely on responses from the criminal justice system."

[Elizabeth Palmer](#) interviews [Leon Sawh](#)

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Leon Sawh. Photo by Sean Blackwell.

We know that mass incarceration is fueled by [racism](#), [current criminal justice practices](#), [social circumstances](#), the growth of [private prisons](#), [cultural norms](#), and even [Christian theology](#). We know that it is [incredibly damaging](#) to [individuals](#) and [communities](#). Recently I was captivated by [an article](#) in my alumni magazine about the [Smart Decarceration Project](#), a collaborative initiative that uses research, data, education, and community engagement to try to decrease the prison population. Shortly after the [First Step Act was passed](#) in December, I had a conversation with Leon Sawh, the Smart Decarceration Project's research manager.

How did the term *decarceration* arise, and how did the movement come about?

The term *decarceration* was mentioned in a textbook in the 1980s, and then it disappeared for about 30 years. Matt Epperson, who directs the Smart Decarceration Project at the University of Chicago, came up with the idea of revitalizing the concept of decarceration with the goals of identifying and further developing

effective alternatives to the overuse of mass incarceration.

All of our studies are guided by three core questions: How do we think about other options (beyond incarceration) that are out there so that we might substantially reduce the population in jails and prisons? How do we address existing racial, economic, and mental health disparities? And while we're doing those things, how do we maximize public safety and wellbeing?

When it comes to thinking about legislation like the First Step Act, how do you strike a balance between compromising and pushing for more reform? Is this bill a good thing, or is it not nearly enough?

The First Step Act is a good thing. Many of its ideas—like improving the treatment of pregnant women and juvenile offenders, and retroactively addressing some crack cocaine sentencing disparities—are good. But as the name indicates, it is only a first step. It certainly doesn't cover everything, because of the political compromises that have to be made in order to get a bill passed. But it sets a benchmark for people on both sides of the aisle to work together in coming up with other reforms.

One significant criticism is that this legislation only impacts the federal prison population. There are over 2 million incarcerated people in the U.S., and only 180,000 of those are in federal prisons. So this bill will only impact a small population of folks. But it's a step in the right direction, and it serves as a precedent for action at the state and local levels.

What steps can people take who want to build on this work at the local level?

General awareness is important. Keep up with the news cycle and follow what's going on in your area. Our project, for example, is based in Chicago, where a new prosecutor was elected in 2016. There's also been increasing public awareness of the lens that the police department uses.

At the Smart Decarceration Project, we're currently examining the concept of social capacity, which asks "how do we identify the local strengths in a given community?" We're working with community members in the neighborhoods of Austin and Washington Park, trying to see what resources and supports might already exist in those communities for folks who need substance abuse services, mental health treatment, housing, and other forms of support. Ultimately the goal of this work is to

develop a social capacity measure, a tool that neighborhoods can use to identify which resources they have and which ones they still need. By building social capacity, communities can respond to their own issues rather than rely on responses from the criminal justice system.

What is it like as academics to go into a neighborhood of people living their everyday lives? Are there barriers there because you come from the university, and if so, how do you work around them?

Yes, there are definitely barriers. We can't go into neighborhoods that are deeply affected by mass incarceration and say: "We have all the facts and all the data, and we know the science behind it, and we have all the answers."

Instead, we try to bring together stakeholders from these neighborhoods who wouldn't normally get together. When we convene community advisory boards, we gather a diverse group of people—for example, someone from the local hospital, social workers and case managers from various treatment centers and agencies, and people who have spent time in prison. We're trying to establish a way for community members who don't normally interact with each other to work together on the local issue they all care about. We hope that even beyond the durations of our studies these types of meetings will still take place.

Does decarceration need to be accompanied by investments in other institutions or social structures so as to address the issues that lead people to be incarcerated in the first place?

Yes. People with behavioral health disorders, such as substance abuse problems and mental illnesses, are overrepresented in the system—whether it's in jails, in prisons, or on probation. In the U.S., we rely on law enforcement and courts to make the kinds of decisions that, quite frankly, are treatment decisions. One of our projects involves looking at models for people who are on probation and have a serious mental illness. When probation departments help their clients access and engage with the resources they really need—treatment, case management, and other supports—are they less likely to recidivate?

We're also studying deferred prosecution programs, where instead of charging a person right away the prosecutor will say: "if you get some support or complete certain tasks, we won't process the charge and the case will be dismissed." In our interviews with people who have gone through deferred prosecution programming,

we've found that it's often a wake-up call that prevents future involvement in the system. Younger folks or first-time offenders are particularly good candidates for this type of program. We're currently looking at how this type of programming could also be applied to people who have been more deeply involved with the criminal justice system.

As we study these different types of programs, we're trying to identify the key elements that make them work. Then we're trying to see if we can scale those models to other jurisdictions, to help people envision what it might look like in their own context.

Why not abolish prisons completely? Do some people belong in prison?

The various people working on decarceration efforts would likely answer this question in different ways. But in my opinion, yes, there is a small population of folks for whom prison is likely the best choice—in particular, violent offenders such as serial killers and rapists. From a public safety perspective, that population really does have a negative impact on the overall wellbeing of a community.

However, while the most imminently violent folks may be best suited for prison, they only make up a small fraction of the current incarcerated population. For nonviolent offenders and especially for folks who have behavioral health disorders, I don't think jails and prisons are the right response. These people should be connected to behavioral health treatment and other needed supports.

What kinds of supports do you think are most important?

Mental health treatment is crucial, whether it's seeing a psychiatrist to get the right medication, seeing a therapist regularly, or having an overall case management team in place. Substance abuse treatment is also important. Because a lot of folks who have mental health problems also have substance abuse problems, co-occurring disorder treatment programming is often necessary.

Along with treatment, other supports should be there. These are often categorized as wraparound supports: health care, housing, vocational training, family counseling, those types of resources. Providing folks who are vulnerable or at-risk with the resources they need can ultimately reduce their likelihood for future criminal involvement.

If your project were successful, what do you imagine our prison system would look like? Could a healthy small-scale prison system look like the current system, or would the current system have to be torn down and replaced with something entirely different?

I can't imagine a world where our current system will be torn down. But we can identify plenty of nonviolent offenders whose incarceration isn't positively impacting public safety. Does it make sense to keep them in the system now? Prison systems and probation departments use risk assessments to make these decisions. They use data and history to look for indicators of whether someone is likely or not to reoffend. But it's hard to predict the future from the use of a risk assessment tool, particularly for clients with behavioral health disorders.

In my ideal world, the prison population would be drastically cut, and the prison population would only consist of the most violent offenders who threaten the wellbeing and safety of our communities. The Prison Policy Initiative recently calculated how much the U.S. is spending on the system—policing, staffing, incarceration, etc.—and it's somewhere around \$182 billion a year. That's a huge amount of money. With a smaller system, fewer prisons need to be built in the first place, fewer staff are needed to operate them, and those funds can be redirected toward putting supports in place so that people don't further engage in crime.

Can you tell us about someone you've worked with whose story stays with you and fuels your convictions about the need for decarceration?

I've been with the Smart Decarceration Project for two years, and before that I worked in a variety of settings—for state government, for the federal government, in research settings, and in treatment centers—so I've met a lot of people who are impacted by incarceration. Often when people come out of the system, they want to prevent others from becoming involved in the system. Many of them, after serving their time, want to go back to school or rebuild their lives in other ways.

But there are so many collateral consequences associated with incarceration. I've worked with students and have had colleagues who were previously incarcerated, on probation, or on parole. I remember one day a colleague came into work and seemed shaken up, so I asked what was going on. My colleague said their parole officer had come to their residence at 6 a.m. for an unannounced home visit, accompanied by police officers. My colleague and their partner had to get out of bed

and stand out in the hallway with the police officers while their home was inspected by the parole officer. Imagine what it would feel like to be subjected to that. With your neighbors watching. You may have gotten out of the system and gotten an advanced degree, you may be a professional now with a workplace. But being on parole can overshadow all of that.

How do you have any sense of hope in this kind of work?

There's a lot of hope. As researchers, we get excited by departments (whether probation departments or prosecutors or sheriffs) who change their way of thinking. Deferred prosecution is a particularly exciting movement that is happening right now. Prosecutors like Larry Krasner from Philadelphia and Kim Foxx in Cook County are asking, "How can we think differently about the folks who come before us? Can we delay sentencing? Can we give them some steps to follow to help them get connected to supports they need, and then see whether we need to prosecute them or not?" Frequently, the latter ends up being the case—the people do not need to be prosecuted.

Our community capacity work also provides hope. We're giving people who work for various agencies and people who have experienced criminal justice involvement a seat at the table where they can directly influence local policy. We work with many folks who use their own experiences with incarceration, probation, and parole to educate people in their communities and mentor their at-risk peers. These are the types of things that ultimately lead to fewer people being incarcerated.

To learn more about the Smart Decarceration Project, visit their [website](#) and follow them on [Twitter](#).