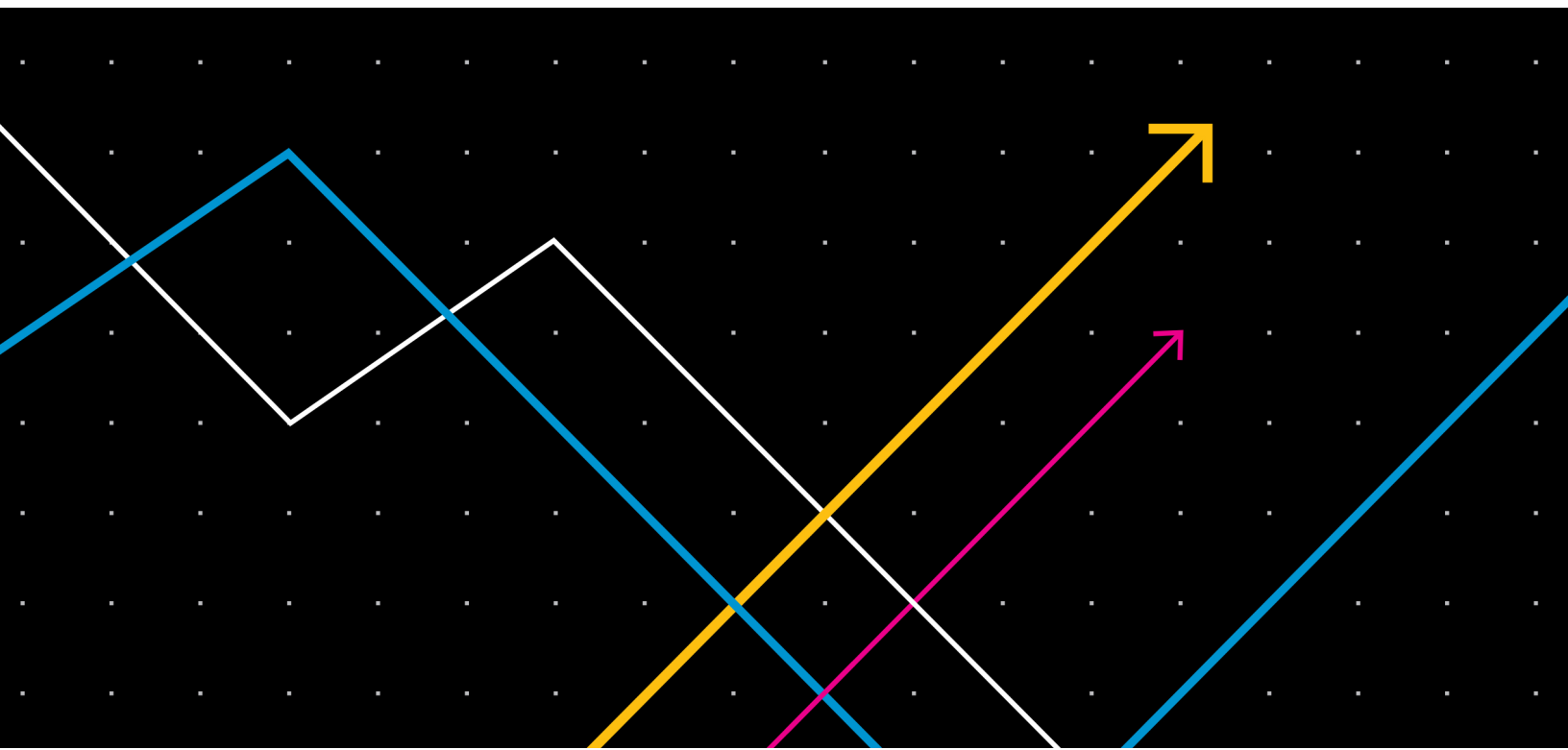




SAFETY AND JUSTICE CHALLENGE CASE STUDY

Addressing Racial Equity in Jail Population Reduction

Implementation Lessons from Lake County, Illinois, and the City and County of
San Francisco

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February 2025

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Addressing Racial Equity in Jail Population Reduction

In the ongoing pursuit of criminal legal system reform, the concept of equity has emerged as a powerful catalyst for reshaping policies and practices. Inequity across racial and ethnic groups is characteristic in all aspects of the criminal legal system, including who is arrested, charged, detained, convicted, supervised, and incarcerated (Nembhard and Robin 2021). Addressing systemic inequities and creating a fair and just society are increasingly recognized not only as moral imperatives but as strategic paths toward more effective, humane, and economically sound criminal legal systems.

Racial inequities in the US criminal legal system are reflected in the jail population. The jail incarceration rate for Black people is nearly 3.5 times that for White people and for Native Americans is more than 2 times that for White people (Zeng 2023). Such disparities reflect historical structural factors such as residential segregation and current dynamics such as unequal application of police surveillance and enforcement activities. Disparate rates of jail incarceration also contribute to the reproduction of inequity, as jail incarceration has numerous negative effects on people's well-being (Subramanian et al. 2015).

With this reality in mind, the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) made the elimination of racial inequities a goal of its efforts to change the way jails are used in the United States, alongside its target of safely reducing jail populations by 50 percent (box 1). However, jurisdictions that have received SJC grant funding to realize these goals (referred to here as SJC sites) have been much more successful in reducing their jail populations than in reducing inequities in those populations, at least as measured in terms of racial disparities (Low-Weiner, Spencer, and Estep 2022). In many sites this has owed to disparities in the benefits of decarceration—while the Black, Indigenous, and Latinx jail populations have declined, the White jail population has declined even more (Low-Weiner, Spencer, and Estep 2022). This result—a smaller jail population, reduced jail incarceration rates across demographic groups, yet an unchanged or even worsened degree of disproportionality in the remaining jail population—indicates the complexity of realizing equity goals in jail decarceration efforts.

This case study shares the experiences of two SJC sites—Lake County, Illinois, and the City and County of San Francisco—that sought to improve equity in their local criminal legal systems alongside efforts to reduce their jail populations. By understanding the link between equity and local jail decarceration, we hoped to gain and share actionable insights into how jurisdictions can reevaluate

and reshape their practices to reduce inequity in local incarceration. The efforts in Lake County and San Francisco highlight the importance of addressing the root causes of inequities that lead to the overrepresentation of certain groups in justice involvement.

This case study offers insights into how prioritizing equity paves the way for more effective crime-prevention, rehabilitation, and community-reintegration strategies. The findings are intended to help jurisdictions better understand the challenges and opportunities of integrating equity in justice reform efforts.

BOX 1

The Safety and Justice Challenge Implementation Case Studies

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation launched the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) in 2015 to address the misuse and overuse of jails, a main driver of incarceration in America. The network of cities, counties, and states participating in the SJC are working to rethink local justice systems with strategies that are intended to be data-driven, equity-focused, and community-informed, and that safely reduce jail populations, eliminate ineffective and unfair practices, and reduce racial disparities. This case study is part of a series that examines how SJC network jurisdictions that received significant, sustained grant investment in comprehensive system reform worked to change the way that they use jails, in order to provide practical insights to other localities seeking to realize similar reform ambitions.

Methodology

To develop this case study, the research team relied on three data sources: semistructured interviews with Lake County and San Francisco stakeholders; analysis of relevant materials (such as SJC progress reports and publicly available documents); and Institute for State and Local Governance analysis of jail population trends.

The research team conducted the semistructured interviews between March 2023 and January 2024. These included 17 one-on-one interviews across the two sites, with stakeholders representing a range of justice agencies involved in each site's SJC work (the sheriff's office, district attorney's office, state's attorney's office, public defender's office, adult probation department, and the courts), as well as community partners engaged in equity-related SJC efforts.

In our interviews, we collected information on the stakeholders' professional backgrounds and roles in the SJC work generally as well as equity-focused SJC activities specifically. Interviews also addressed the local reform landscape in each jurisdiction, specific equity strategies and policies, the design and implementation of those strategies, and challenges, successes, and impacts. After data collection, we coded the interviews and analyzed them using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, for trends using a codebook developed for this case study.

Attending to Equity in Lake County's SJC Reform Work

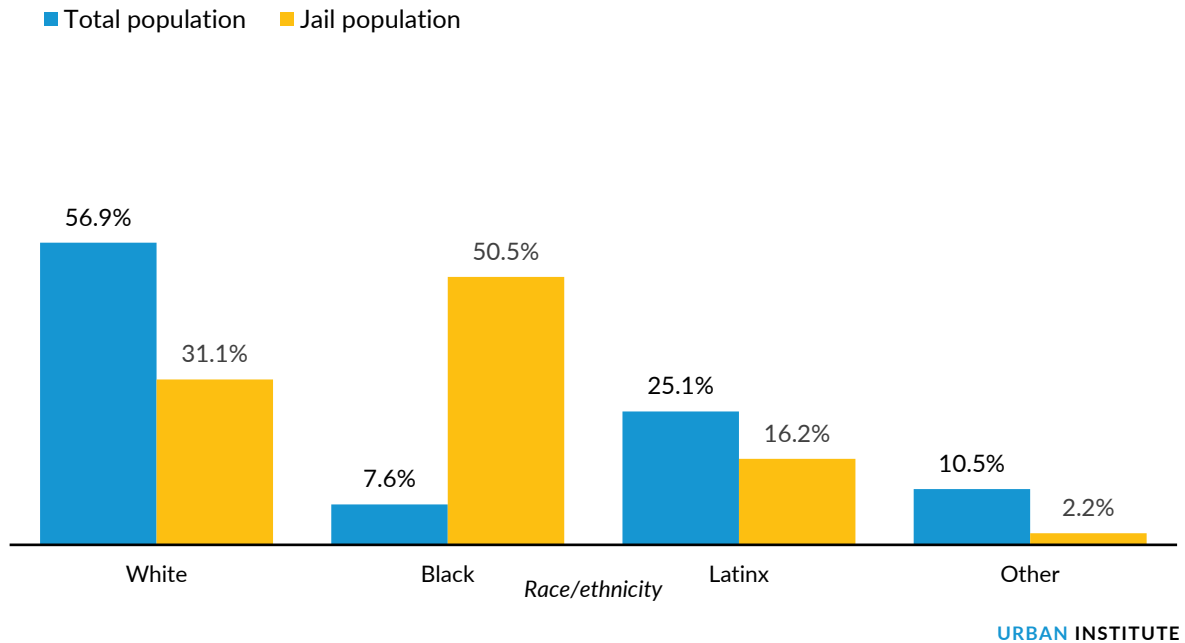
Lake County is located in northeastern Illinois, just north of Cook County. According to the US Census Bureau, Lake County has an estimated population of 708,760.¹ The county is about 58 percent White alone, 24 percent Hispanic or Latino, 9 percent Asian alone, 8 percent Black, and the remaining population is a mix of people who are American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander and people of two or more races. Approximately 8.2 percent of Lake County residents live below the poverty level. Waukegan is the county seat and the county's most populous city. The Lake County government is run by a board of 19 elected members who represent geographic districts. The county contains 43 law enforcement agencies.

Lake County began its SJC-supported jail population reduction work as a relatively low-incarceration jurisdiction. At its pre-SJC baseline (defined by ISLG as the six months before May 2018), the county's jail incarceration rate was 103 per 100,000 adults,² significantly below the national rate of 226 per 100,000 adults (Zeng 2023).

The racial and ethnic disparities in Lake County's jail population were very large, however, particularly to the disadvantage of Black people: at baseline, Black people made up half of the county's jail population (figure 1) but only 7.6 percent of its adult population. At baseline, the county's jail incarceration rates by race/ethnicity were 50 per 100,000 adults for White people, 88 per 100,000 adults for Latinx people, and 796 per 100,000 adults for Black people.

FIGURE 1

Racial/Ethnic Composition of Total Adult Population versus Jail Population in Lake County, Illinois, at the Outset of Safety and Justice Challenge Work



Source: CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance analysis of site data.

Joining the Safety and Justice Challenge Network

Lake County joined the Safety and Justice Challenge Network in 2016 upon receiving a \$50,000 Innovation Fund grant for intensive case management services for people who were frequently returning to jail. In 2018, it was awarded a much larger SJC grant to implement more varied and robust strategies intended to reduce the jail population and racial and ethnic disparities in it (box 2). The county's SJC work is led by the Lake County Sheriff's Office in partnership with the Lake County State's Attorney's Office, the 19th Judicial Circuit Court's adult probation and pretrial divisions, the Lake County Public Defender, the Lake County Health Department, Nicasa Behavioral Health Services, the Healthcare Foundation of Northern Lake County, the Lake County Workforce Development Board, Independence Center, local universities, and the Northern Illinois Recovery Community Organization.

BOX 2

Lake County's Six Safety and Justice Challenge Strategies

The Living Room Wellness Center at Independence Center diverts people experiencing mental health and co-occurring substance use crises from the criminal legal system.

The Crisis Outreach and Support Team (COAST) has expanded on a mobile coresponder program that dispatches a social worker and sheriff's deputy to follow up with people who have had encounters with law enforcement while suffering mental health or substance use crises.

Improvements to pretrial-release decisionmaking have been made to provide more comprehensive information at people's first court appearances, including assessments and pretrial services reports.

An Equity Team of community members and system actors was created to use data analysis to better understand disparities in Lake County's justice system, develop a plan to reduce them, incorporate community voices, and increase trust and communication between the justice system and the community.

A Criminal Justice Community Council (CJCC) including community members and system actors collaboratively reviewed data trends in the jail population and identified areas for potential system intervention (e.g., pretrial reform, domestic violence, overdoses).

A public-facing jail data dashboard was launched by the sheriff's office and includes admissions and release data broken down by categories including race and ethnicity, gender, age, and offense type. The Lake County State's Attorney's Office also worked to build a public-facing dashboard.

Source: "Background," Safety and Justice Challenge, last updated October 7, 2024, <https://safetyandjusticechallenge.org/our-network/lake-county-il/>.

Local Reform Initiatives Preceding the SJC

Lake County's SJC work built on some key local jail population reform initiatives that predated SJC grant funding, such as the county's long-standing jail review committee. That committee reviewed cases of people who might not need to be in jail custody, such as those with low bond amounts, minor offenses, or no prior convictions. It also examined cases of people nearing the end of their sentences to determine whether they could be released early. Lake County had also been focusing on behavioral health and alternative approaches to address issues driving contact with the legal system and built on this through the SJC; initiatives included increasing mental health services and offering medication-assisted treatment in jail.

Perceived Drivers of Racial Disparities in the Jail Population

When asked what was driving racial disparities in the jail population, Lake County stakeholders discussed a wide variety of national and local drivers, with some cross-cutting themes. These were a mix of broad structural dynamics and systemic factors that stakeholders felt the SJC partners could address. Among the structural factors were the multifaceted nature of poverty, particularly its connection to a lack of opportunities and fragmented family support. Stakeholders delved into the generational aspect of inequity, highlighting the challenge of understanding and preventing successive family members from entering the criminal legal system. Interviewees also zoomed out to discuss a more holistic perspective, including the need to address societal issues and invest in public education and social services and also to reevaluate assumptions of guilt in the criminal legal system.

I think racial disparities themselves are a driver of crime. –Lake County stakeholder

In terms of factors specific to the work of agencies that contribute to the jail population, stakeholders named implicit bias and racial profiling in policing and sentencing rules as contributing to disparities. They also discussed court procedures, highlighting disparities in warrants issued for failure to appear and the use of cash bonds, referencing internal data indicating that White people are more likely to post cash bonds. The importance of community engagement and the erosion of public trust because of policing issues were also discussed. The responses underscore the importance of acknowledging historical forces of racism, sexism, and classism, especially in the criminal legal system. Overall, Lake County SJC stakeholders emphasized the need for systemic change and for a comprehensive approach to addressing racial disparities.

Racial Equity–Focused Work in Lake County’s SJC Collaborative

Early in their SJC discussions, Lake County partners recognized the imperative to address racial disparities in the local jail population, and establishing an Equity Team focused on this issue was one of the county’s six SJC strategies (see box 2). This urgent imperative was underscored by the disproportionate representation of people of color in the jail relative to the county’s population. Data provided by the Lake County Sheriff’s Office on the demographics of people booked into the jail substantiated this issue. Analysis of these data done by Loyola University’s Center for Criminal Justice and presented publicly on the Lake County Criminal Justice Community Council (CJCC) website

illustrates the extent of the disparity, showing that while Black residents made up 7 percent of the county's population in 2018, in 2019 35 percent of people admitted to the jail were Black.

System Partner Collaboration and the Criminal Justice Community Council

The size and composition of the jail population are shaped by decisions and practices across the entire front end of the criminal legal system and affected by other systems handling issues that intersect with system involvement, such as behavioral health and housing. Efforts to increase equity in this population therefore require a high degree of collaboration. The Criminal Justice Community Council, which was relaunched in fall 2019 as a public-facing collaboration led by the Lake County Sheriff's Office, was intended to enhance collaboration among local justice stakeholders. Our stakeholder interviews provided insights into the complexities of addressing racial disparities in the criminal legal system and navigating conversations about the topic among partners.

The collaboration challenges that interviewees described centered on philosophical and strategy disagreements. Interviewees also noted the challenge of managing stakeholders' concerns about being perceived as the source of racial disparities. In addition, leadership changes could present both challenges and opportunities depending on how the incoming person's agenda meshed with the SJC strategies. CJCC meetings provided an opportunity for stakeholders to discuss their differing perspectives and at times develop new perspectives on how a different system stakeholder group viewed a situation.

Centering data was one way stakeholders dealt with collaboration challenges. One interviewee noted that stakeholder buy-in increased because of data sharing. Additionally, collaboration improved as stakeholders gained a deeper appreciation for joint efforts in implementing SJC strategies, such as the COAST program, which pairs a mental health worker with a deputy from the sheriff's office.

Forming the Equity Team and Defining Equity

Shortly after the sheriff's office's Criminal Justice Community Council first convened in September 2019, a group of Lake County justice system stakeholders, including agency leaders and community advocates, convened in October 2019 to form an Equity Team and define racial equity for the county. Lake County sought inspiration from other organizations and local governments and received guidance from its technical assistance provider, Justice System Partners, to formulate its definition of equity. Interviewees described this process as challenging and lengthy and said it led to disagreements, but stakeholders recognized the importance of establishing a shared understanding to prevent conflicts in later stages of the project.

“Lake County cannot reduce its jail population effectively without directly addressing issues of disparity and equity in the criminal justice system.” –Lake County CJCC website

The stakeholders who established the Equity Team defined racial equity as “a community approach to provide equitable treatment and opportunities to criminal-justice-involved persons regardless of race and ethnicity.” Further, the “Equity” page on the Lake County CJCC’s website states, in bold letters, “Lake County cannot reduce its jail population effectively without directly addressing issues of disparity and equity in the criminal justice system.”³ While some stakeholders were unaware of the county’s specific definition of racial equity at the time of our interviews, they described a collective understanding that the county aimed to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the jail population. Stakeholders believed that a unifying definition proved beneficial for Lake County, enabling system stakeholders to take a cohesive stance when engaging with the community.

The Equity Team and Community Engagement

One of the goals for the Equity Team was to build trust and improve communication between system actors and community members. The team began with focus groups to engage community members, revealing gaps in criminal legal literacy and the need for equity strategies. To select team members, the SJC lead reached out to department heads to designate participants, and some departments were described as more proactively engaged. According to interviewees, stakeholders considered the involvement of judges and community members to be critical and said it facilitated candid discussions and policy requests, albeit with challenges owing to turnover and staffing shortages. Stakeholders noted that the events of 2020, including the mass protests after the murder of George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic, further emphasized the importance of equity conversations.

Stakeholders adopted a foundational approach to training Equity Team members, starting with elected officials and participants designated by departments. Training sessions were led by the W. Haywood Burns Institute, the primary SJC technical assistance provider on the county’s equity work. Lake County worked with the Burns Institute until early 2022. The institute provided guidance for engaging in trainings that promoted informality and personalization, aiming to encourage openness and foster relationship-building between system and community stakeholders. In addition to training members, one of the Equity Team’s key charges was to collect data on racial and ethnic disparities with which to inform the team’s strategies.

Lake County SJC stakeholders had mixed views on the combination of data analysis and training as initial equity activities. Respondents described some tension between the urge for immediate action and the need for comprehensive education. The concern was that they were “stuck” in education and looking at data rather than advancing changes to mitigate disparity; at the same time, some stakeholders could cite data findings from memory, which suggests the data analysis had staying power. In addition, some stakeholders noted that getting to a shared understanding of the issues underlying disparity involved challenges. For example, one described going beyond implicit bias training to engage with institutional and structural racism as “a struggle.” In general, setting actionable goals and data-driven objectives for the equity work proved challenging. Participation in the equity activities was an initial primary metric for the equity work.

Data-Driven Approaches and Transparency

Lake County stakeholders viewed data transparency as closely aligned with the equity goals of their SJC work. The sheriff’s office’s jail population dashboard (available at <https://www.lakecountycjcc.org/dashboard-lakecounty-jail>) enables the public to view the jail population as a whole and by race and ethnicity. The importance of these data was articulated by one stakeholder: “The jail dashboard is a game-changer, it may be worth this whole thing.” The Lake County State’s Attorney’s Office likewise launched a data dashboard (available at https://data.lcsao.org/restorative_justice/) in September 2021. That dashboard focuses on the Felony Alternative Prosecution Program and demonstrates that the program served a majority of participants of color for the first time in 2021 and again in 2023 (from 2015 through 2020 the majority of participants every year were White). This critical role of data was challenged by turnover as analysts left for other positions.

The Equity Team chose to focus on failures to appear in court (FTAs) and improvements to the warrant process, based in part on the racial equity data analyses done by the Burns Institute. Its initiative on this topic involved examining and improving the warrant process and understanding why people do not appear in court. Justice System Partners, Lake County’s lead SJC technical assistance provider, collaborated with the public defender’s office to look at 50 clients who were in jail only because of FTAs, helping the county better understand the dynamics of FTAs. The resulting report, *Understanding Court Absence and Reframing “Failure to Appear”* (Magnuson et al. 2023), substantiated that issues including a lack of transportation were driving many of those failures, not disengagement from the court process or defiance of the court. The Equity Team drafted a policy change improving the warrant process to present to the chief judge. County stakeholders described this proposal as generating pushback from the judiciary, who felt that it involved dictating policy to their branch of

government. Additionally, they argued that it conflicted with the need to make decisions on a case-by-case basis. Some policy changes addressing warrants and FTAs were made; for example, the state's attorney instituted an internal policy that warrants were not to be sought for first-time FTAs on nonviolent/non-DUI misdemeanors.

Collaboration and Community-Engagement Efforts and Challenges

Despite what respondents described as community members' and stakeholders' shared intention of reducing the jail population, tackling disparities produced discord among SJC partners. Interviewees shared that when the sheriff provided data on the demographics of people booked into the jail, court stakeholders were resistant, perceiving the data as an indictment of their practices as perpetuating disparities. Consequently, some members of the judiciary withdrew from SJC meetings on equity, posing a setback to the collaborative efforts.

A strong theme that emerged from the interviews was the need for greater engagement from the judiciary. Respondents said that early in the SJC work there was some participation from judges, particularly in equity-related discussions. But judicial administrators increasingly represented the bench in meetings rather than judges, and while their engagement was appreciated, having judges directly and productively engaged clearly mattered to other stakeholders. Some of the reduction in judicial engagement resulted from administrative causes, such as scheduling conflicts and changes to assignments of judges who had been participating, which affected their involvement in the project. Some interviewees interpreted the absence of judges in critical discussions as indicating disinterest or reluctance to engage with systemic issues. In general, frustration with the lack of engagement from judges has led to a more critical assessment of their actions and decisions.

Lake County also encountered challenges determining how best to structure its work. It had to make decisions such as whether to continue working with an external SJC partner that assisted with work on racial disparities and how often to convene the project teams, both decisions that affected capacity and project momentum. Moreover, an SJC leadership change and revisions to the overall SJC structure in Lake County resulted in the Equity Team ceasing operations in 2023 (Lake County stakeholders appreciated the team's commitment to addressing disparities). Responsibility for advancing SJC equity work shifted to the CJCC.

We also asked interviewees about community-engagement efforts because they are deeply intertwined with racial equity. Lake County initially envisioned using town hall-style forums for dialogue as a primary community-engagement strategy. But the county's approach evolved to include

focus groups and circles, fostering inclusive discussions among community members and leaders. Despite initial hesitancy from some system actors, many interviewees saw the integration of community members as invaluable, offering diverse perspectives and informing meaningful areas for change. For example, Lake County hired independent consultants to engage the community on the topic of bail reform through a series of interviews and focus groups, publishing the findings in a September 2020 report.⁴ Key findings included that healing was needed between the Lake County government and community members, who conveyed they did not have a positive relationship with the government and had experienced trauma because of their experiences with the criminal legal system. The report also included recommendations for the Equity Team, including that it bolster its process for building authentic relationships with communities that have been affected by the criminal legal system and providing them with more resources.

Challenges with community engagement arose because community members experienced frustration with system stakeholders and because of internal feedback that the county's community-engagement strategy was not as strong as system stakeholders desired. One interviewee reported that sustaining community engagement amid resistance from the courts was a challenge. Some stakeholders reported being discouraged when their attempts to engage with the judiciary were met with dismissal. Stakeholders perceived that the slow pace of government led some community members to disengage from the SJC work, a sentiment shared by other SJC jurisdictions highlighted in an Urban Institute case study on community-engagement strategies for advancing justice reform (Reginal et al. 2023). One of the suggestions from an interviewee that arose for Lake County's work is that community engagement should be part of every strategy and that the public-communications component of SJC efforts should be stronger, both on equity and in general.

Equity-Focused Approaches in Lake County's Broader SJC Strategies

In addition to its work explicitly focused on racial equity, Lake County paid attention to disparity in all of its other SJC strategies. Interviewees spoke particularly positively of the **Living Room Wellness Center** and the **Crisis Outreach and Support Team (COAST)** because of their tangible effects on how the criminal legal system operates and treats people experiencing behavioral health crises. These two programs intersect with equity in the county's outreach to communities of color and in the work to improve interactions between law enforcement and people in crisis, some of whom are people of color.

Opened in August 2021, the Living Room Wellness Center is a police drop-off center intended to redirect people experiencing mental health or co-occurring substance use crises away from

involvement in the criminal legal system. The establishment of the center represented an expansion of an earlier initiative to offer a supportive transition for people leaving jail, thereby addressing a gap in upstream diversion opportunities. The center functions as a central location for various community partners to collaborate on enhancing health, equity, and health literacy in the community.

COAST collaborates with the Wellness Center. In 2022 it expanded to include six municipal police departments participating in the county's preexisting mobile coresponder initiative (an initiative of the sheriff's office established in 2018). The coresponder initiative deploys a social worker and a sheriff's deputy (or municipal police officer) to assist individuals and their families who have encountered law enforcement during mental health or substance use crises. These corresponders offer a supportive transition to the Wellness Center, where people can access services they need. Corresponders also maintain contact with clients for 60 to 90 days to ensure they receive continued support and follow-up care. The COAST program reached its five thousandth referral in 2023.

The implementation and perceived success of these alternatives to incarceration made who was being served an important equity question. According to interviewees, stakeholders believed that these two programs were primarily benefiting wealthier and whiter individuals. This perception was partly because of differences in how different communities and their law enforcement agencies engaged with and used the interventions. This led partners to push for data on the demographics of who was being served. In response, the state's attorney's office and other partners began collecting that information. Stakeholders noted that this was an important step to understand and improve racial equity in terms of who benefits from strategies to reduce the jail population, and that it created an opportunity for community members to respond when their police departments do not use, or underuse, the Living Room Wellness Center.

Relatedly, stakeholders mentioned the sheriff's office had made a push to reduce racial disparities in who gets opportunities to participate in **diversion and deflection programs** (such as the [A Way Out program](#)), such as by encouraging police departments serving more diverse communities to participate. Stakeholders believed these efforts had changed the demographics of the people served by those programs in ways that had improved equity.

Other efforts connected to Lake County's SJC work that stakeholders mentioned for their connection to equity outcomes included the adoption of the **Public Safety Assessment pretrial risk assessment** and **text reminders** intended to ensure people were aware of their court dates. Regarding the PSA tool, the county was trying to make the information collected using the tool to set bond more objective. Several stakeholders mentioned that the PSA was being used, but raised concerns about its

consistency. They questioned whether modifications to the criteria were undermining its intended goal of ensuring consistent decisionmaking. (For a discussion of pretrial risk assessment and equity, see our 2022 SJC case study on pretrial risk assessment and structured decisionmaking, available at <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/risk-assessment-and-structured-decisionmaking-pretrial-release>.) The court date text reminders were implemented by the public defender and pretrial services as an outgrowth of discussions about disproportionality in rates of failure to appear. Stakeholders expressed that the SJC-funded court reminder system was an improvement on Lake County's previous reminder system and identified that the program could be expanded further. For example, there was some evidence that Latinx clients were less likely to sign up for reminders because of distrust around providing their numbers to a government agency, especially those who did not have legal resident status. Such distrust can limit the reminder system's impacts for certain subgroups. Stakeholders identified educating clients on the types of information the reminder system collects and how to navigate the court system as potential solutions.

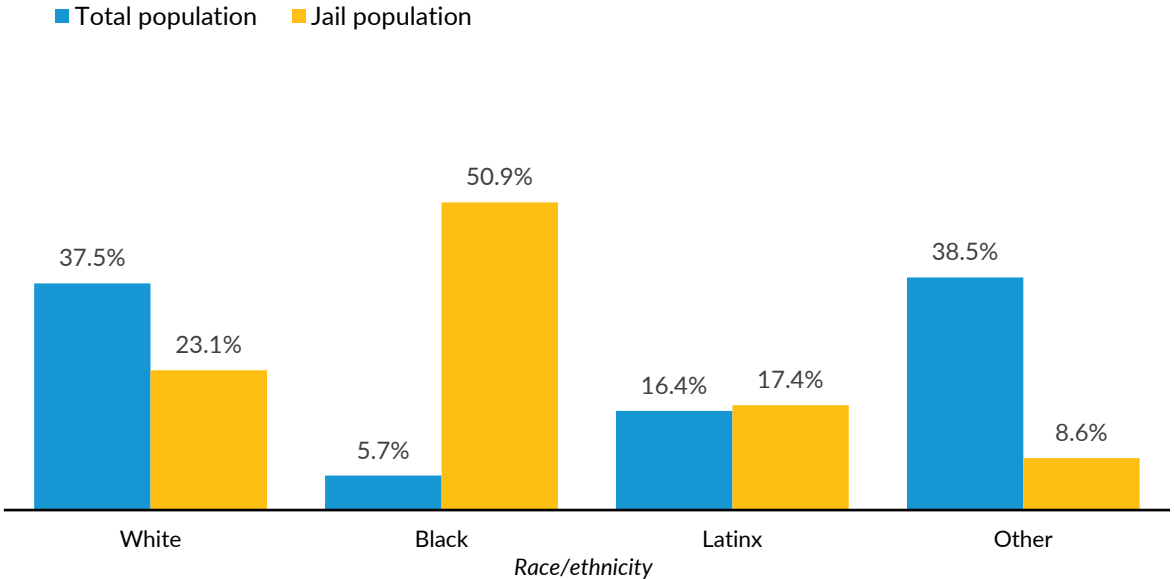
Attending to Equity in San Francisco's SJC Reform Work

Located in the Bay Area of northern California, San Francisco operates under a unified government structure where the functions of both a city and a county are combined in a single entity. This arrangement was created to allow for a more integrated approach to governance and service provision. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2023 San Francisco had an estimated population of 808,988.⁵ Ten percent of people in San Francisco live under the poverty level. Its population is about 38 percent White alone, 37 percent Asian, 16 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 6 percent Black; the remaining population is American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or two or more races.

Like Lake County, San Francisco began its SJC-supported jail population reduction work as a relatively low-incarceration jurisdiction. At pre-SJC baseline, the jail incarceration rate in San Francisco was 158 per 100,000 adults, significantly below the national jail incarceration rate of 226 per 100,000 adults (Zeng 2023). Some interview participants noted that San Francisco had worked for years before becoming an SJC site to avoid incarcerating people for lower-level offenses, and as a result the jail population in San Francisco comprises people with serious or violent alleged offenses or warrants/holds. Further, they noted that this meant that work to reduce the jail population and disparities in that population during the SJC period required grappling with more challenging issues than in many other jurisdictions where more people are held in jail for less serious alleged offenses.

But stark racial and ethnic disparities were evident in San Francisco’s jail population, particularly to the disadvantage of Black people, who made up half the jail population (figure 2) despite representing only 6 percent of San Francisco’s total adult population. Before San Francisco began its SJC work, the jail incarceration rate for White people was 88 per 100,000 adults, compared with 197 per 100,000 Latinx adults and an astonishing 1,588 per 100,000 Black adults. An important caveat to using jail incarceration rate as a metric in San Francisco is that its SJC data analysis showed that as of October 2023, 17 percent of people in its jail population were out-of-county residents and another 41 percent were unsheltered/transient.

FIGURE 2
Racial/Ethnic Composition of Total Adult Population versus Jail Population in San Francisco at the Outset of Safety and Justice Challenge Work



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Source: CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance analysis of site data.

Recognizing these disparities as serious problems and motivated by the SJC’s focus on addressing racial inequity, San Francisco’s SJC partners committed to focusing on reducing disparities in all their SJC strategies. This work occurred as San Francisco worked to improve equity in its criminal legal system more broadly, work that was similarly based on data and involved robust community engagement.

Joining the Safety and Justice Challenge Network

San Francisco was selected to join the SJC network as an implementation site in 2017 and received a \$2 million grant award. It initially joined the Safety and Justice Challenge Network as an Innovation Fund site in 2016, using a \$50,000 Innovation Grant to develop a justice system dashboard integrating data from the San Francisco District Attorney's Office and the San Francisco Sheriff's Office, initially focusing on a cohort analysis of recidivism. San Francisco's SJC work is led by the district attorney's office, in collaboration with an array of partners. The collaborative SJC work was initially coordinated by a subcommittee of the [San Francisco Sentencing Commission](#), which is operated by the district attorney's office. Farther into the SJC grant period, the SJC working group became a freestanding committee separate from the Sentencing Commission structure.

Perceived Drivers of Racial Disparity in San Francisco's Jail Population

Racial disparities in jail populations are a nationwide issue, reflecting a complex interplay of social, economic, and institutional factors. Overall, interview participants emphasized the need for comprehensive and systemic solutions, aligning their observations with national trends. Across the country, drivers of these disparities documented in studies have included higher rates of police-initiated contact in predominantly Black neighborhoods, irrespective of local crime rates, and inequities in pretrial and sentencing decisions (ACLU and the Sentencing Project 2018; Berdejó 2018; Fagan et al. 2010; Haldipur 2018; Hinton, Henderson, and Reed 2018). These disparities underscore the need to examine both local contexts and systemic inequities that transcend individual jurisdictions.

San Francisco stakeholders shared diverse perspectives regarding what factors are driving disparities in their jail population and identified potential levers to address them. It is important to note that these represent the perspectives of the interviewees and may not reflect a consensus view among all of the people involved in San Francisco's SJC work. When asked what was causing racial and ethnic disparities in the jail system, interview participants pointed to a range of factors, including systemic inequities and national and local trends. Interviewees emphasized factors outside the criminal legal system, such as poverty, limited access to high-quality education, undiagnosed mental health issues, and a lack of affordable housing, all of which disproportionately affect communities of color. This sense that systemic inequities manifest in disparities in justice system involvement was captured by an interviewee: "We have to recognize that in many communities the people that are getting arrested today were victims of something else yesterday."

Interviewees also discussed drivers of disparities stemming from the criminal legal system. These included that more people of color are taken into custody for public safety reasons, that people of color have disproportionate lengths of stay, and that warrants are disproportionately used for people of color. Interviewees also mentioned overpolicing, changes in how lower-level offenses are enforced, court issues, and challenges in connecting people to timely and appropriate community resources. They also shared that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these disparities (a trend observed nationwide) and that San Francisco is analyzing data to better understand this.

Racial Equity–Focused SJC Work and Key Strategies

When asked how San Francisco’s SJC team defined racial equity, multiple interviewees referred to the Criminal Justice Racial Equity Statement (box 3), a 2018 statement on racial equity unanimously approved by several San Francisco criminal justice bodies.

BOX 3

San Francisco’s Criminal Justice Racial Equity Statement

In September 2018, the San Francisco Community Corrections Partnership, Police Commission, Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council, Reentry Council, and Sentencing Commission, in collaboration with the SJC team, approved a Criminal Justice Racial Equity Statement. This statement was intended to create a springboard for eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in San Francisco’s criminal justice system:

The San Francisco CCP, Police Commission, Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council, Reentry Council, and Sentencing Commission prioritize racial equity so that all people may thrive. San Francisco’s criminal justice policy bodies collectively acknowledge that communities of color have borne the burdens of inequitable social, environmental, economic, and criminal justice policies, practices, and investments. The legacy of these government actions has caused deep racial disparities throughout San Francisco’s juvenile justice and criminal justice system. We must further recognize that racial equity is realized when race can no longer be used to predict life outcomes. We commit to the elimination of racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

The statement was complemented by a draft agenda for action for San Francisco’s justice and social services agencies. The items on this agenda were as follows:

1. “Expressly commit to the elimination of racial disparities in the criminal justice system in legislation and/or resolution;
2. Require racial impact statements prior to the implementation of criminal justice policies and in reviewing the enforcement of existing policies. This includes but is not limited to Budgeting, Request for Proposals, Request for Qualifications, and all grant making mechanisms;

3. Mandate regular racial equity and implicit bias trainings for all criminal justice stakeholders;
4. Mandate regular procedural justice trainings for all criminal justice stakeholders.
5. Require disaggregated data collection, using agreed upon standard measures, on the race and ethnicity of individuals who come into contact with the criminal justice system; and
6. Incentivize the elimination of racial disparities in the criminal justice system by requiring annual budgets to include racial disparity impact statements;
7. Ensure parallel justice; meaning that any of the investments in the criminal justice system that focuses on the rights, punishment, and sometimes rehabilitation of the perpetrator include a comparable set of responses to victims.
8. Participate in San Francisco's Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) Initiative."

Sources: "Community Corrections Partnership Plan: Fiscal Year 2021–22 Report," City and County of San Francisco, modified March 15, 2022, https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-06/SanFrancisco_CommunityCorrectionsPartnership_UpdatedPlan_12-14-2021.pdf; "SFAPD Racial Equity Action Plan," San Francisco Adult Probation Department, accessed January 9, 2025, <https://www.sf.gov/information/sfapd-racial-equity-action-plan>; Agenda and full materials, meeting of the San Francisco Sentencing Commission, September 12, 2018, https://sfdistrictattorney.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/SC-Full-Meeting-Packet-9.12.18_FINAL.pdf.

Activities that followed the creation of the shared racial equity statement included the district attorney's office requiring charging attorneys to take steps to mitigate bias in charging before making charging decisions, such as the SFDAO engaging the Stanford Computational Policy Lab to algorithmically redact race-related information from case narratives to support race-neutral charging (Chohlas-Wood et al. 2021).

Interviewees also said San Francisco's ongoing participation in the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) influenced its definition of racial equity and their local racial equity work. GARE is a national network of governments working toward racial equity and supports governments through training, events, and resources. GARE's approach of leading with race was included in San Francisco's SJC strategies to ensure attention was paid to racial and ethnic disparities in all SJC activities.

San Francisco's SJC equity work occurred alongside a larger citywide equity effort that included the establishment in July 2019 of the Office of Racial Equity in the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, as directed by Ordinance No. 188-19. At the direction of the Office of Racial Equity, all San Francisco government departments had to develop racial equity action plans by the end of 2020. The plans, as described by interview participants and details in San Francisco's "Citywide Racial Equity

Framework” (San Francisco Office of Racial Equity, n.d.), focused primarily on government workforce development. This complemented the focus of the SJC equity work, which is centered on the impacts on the public of criminal legal system practices and jail use, particularly people directly affected by the system. San Francisco’s racial equity action plan, as published online, outlines seven citywide priorities: hiring and recruitment, retention and promotion, discipline and separation, diverse and equitable leadership, mobility and professional development, organizational culture of inclusion and belonging, and boards and commissions.⁶

LEADING WITH RACE

Central to San Francisco’s SJC work was the principle and strategy of “leading with race,” which was intended to ensure that racial equity remained central in all key activities. The strategy makes reducing disparities in the criminal legal system a deliberate focus, acknowledging the need for proactive measures that address racial inequities. The focus on leading with race was furthered through the creation of the Criminal Justice Racial Equity Workgroup in 2018. This group did foundational work on San Francisco’s SJC strategies, but at the time of our interviews it was not actively meeting.

CONDUCTING JAIL POPULATION REVIEWS

To sustain a focus on reducing the jail population and drivers of racial disparities, San Francisco created the **jail population review team**, a multidisciplinary team that convenes regularly to review cases of people detained in the jail pretrial and determine whether alternatives to incarceration are appropriate.⁷ The team collaborates to focus on specific populations in the jail and addresses inequities by prioritizing detainees of color generally or young black men specifically. As one stakeholder described the relationship between racial equity goals and the jail population review process, “It [the review process] definitely prioritizes race. But it also just generally ends up being that the clients we discuss, because we’re looking at people who are frequent users coming in and out, those are folks who tend to be Black or Hispanic.”

DRIVING WITH DATA

Through the **driving with data** strategy, data on the composition and drivers of the jail population guide all of San Francisco’s SJC efforts, including jail population review. This strategy builds on pre-SJC efforts to use data and researcher partnerships to better understand disparities. For example, the W. Haywood Burns Institute analyzed disparities at key criminal legal system decision points to inform San Francisco’s Justice Reinvestment Initiative work (W. Haywood Burns Institute 2015), and subsequently the district attorney’s office partnered with researchers to examine disparities in case

dispositions and sentencing outcomes (MacDonald and Raphael 2017). Responding to data limitations identified in that effort, the San Francisco Reentry Council called on justice agency partners to conduct further analysis, and several agencies did so. Interviewees noted that this agency-specific work increased knowledge about disparity dynamics across the San Francisco criminal legal system, but that knowledge was somewhat fragmentary since it arose from independently designed efforts, and some decision points were missing because agencies did not secure the resources to support disparity analyses.

San Francisco's use of data in its SJC work has significant public-facing components. These include the regular reviews of jail population data in SJC committee meetings and in other San Francisco policy body meetings, such as those of the Sentencing Commission, where population data are broken down by race and ethnicity to enable monitoring of equity trends. In addition, SJC partners described being able to request and receive specific data relevant to equity considerations, such as data on trans people in the jail. The provision of data to the SJC partnership has enabled partners to see how practice changes might be contributing to recent increases in the jail population.

Other public-facing data efforts include dashboards produced by the district attorney's office (available at <https://sfdistrictattorney.org/policy/data-dashboards/#outcomes-and-desistance>) and the sheriff's office (available at <https://www.sfsheriff.com/services/jail-services/current-and-historical-jail-data/current-jail-data-and-trends>). The dashboards cover topics including actions on arrests, cases prosecuted, case resolutions, the jail population, jail lengths of stay, system contact after release, and victim service utilization.

At the time of our interviews, the San Francisco SJC partnership was undertaking a data analysis of jail population trends over the previous five years. Interviewees expected this to complement the monthly data trends they had been routinely monitoring through the SJC process and allow them to better understand the drivers of population trends, including those related to disparities.

From a jail population perspective, we definitely have way more information than we had before, and on a regular basis. We wouldn't even be having a conversation about the types of stuff that we don't have if we hadn't gotten so used to all the rich data we currently have. —City and County of San Francisco stakeholder

INCREASING HEALTHY CONNECTIONS

San Francisco's "**healthy connections**" SJC strategy seeks to expand access to community-based supports for people with behavioral health challenges to promote stability in their lives when they leave jail. One of its partnerships in this area is with the **Just Home Project**,⁸ through which San Francisco was selected as one of four initial sites to increase access to housing. The Just Home Project combines grant funding and access to program-related investment capital (both from the MacArthur Foundation) to pilot housing solutions to prevent jail incarceration and reduce inequities at the intersection of housing instability and jail incarceration. Racial and ethnic disparities in access to behavioral health services and housing instability can affect jail stays, making these valuable areas to focus on as potential mitigators of disparities.

IMPROVING CASE PROCESSING

Lastly, **case processing** has been an area of emphasis for San Francisco because lengthy case processing can lengthen people's stays in the jail. San Francisco, like many other jurisdictions, experienced large disruptions to court case flow because of COVID-19. In addition, there are disparities in how long different groups are held in the jail pretrial, and San Francisco sees improving its case processing as a way to mitigate those disparities.

Stakeholder Perceptions of Collaboration and Community Engagement

San Francisco brought years of experience implementing collaborative jail population reforms to its SJC work, which helped build rapport among stakeholders that interviewees believed benefited the SJC equity work. Interviewees spoke about bringing their partners together around equity and decarceration objectives during their entire SJC participation, with some sharing that everyone's philosophies were generally aligned, whereas others highlighted disagreements in partners' approaches and perspectives.

Interviewees noted that increasing public pressure during the pandemic to address issues of public safety and order such as public drug use and unsheltered homelessness, coupled with national attention to these issues spotlighting San Francisco, put stress on the SJC partnership. Various partners had to calibrate their responses to this pressure and balance those responses with making progress on SJC goals. As a stakeholder summarized a common sentiment, "We're in a backlash moment right now. So we're on defense a lot in San Francisco."

Stakeholders consistently raised the recall of former district attorney Chesa Boudin in June 2022 as a significant development in how SJC collaboration functioned. As the district attorney's office was the lead agency coordinating the SJC work, some interviewees noted the leadership change disrupted that work, including by creating turnover among some senior staffers who had been involved in it. At the time of the interviews, more than a year after the recall, this disruption was still being managed, with multiple interviewees describing a "relaunch" of the SJC work in progress.

Some interviewees believed the fundamental commitment to the SJC goals remained unchanged, although work needed to be done to build trust and relationships in the SJC partnership now that different individuals were in some key positions. Others, however, expressed concerns and questions regarding whether the current leadership of the district attorney's office was as supportive of the SJC goals as previous administrations. Nonetheless, interviewees recognized the value of building and maintaining relationships across agencies. As one stakeholder put it, "You get a sense for those people who are your secret allies in different departments."

SJC Fellowship Program

A central component of San Francisco's SJC community engagement and equity work was its SJC fellowship program, an innovative program that brought in community members with lived experience to work on criminal legal system problems. Interviewees discussed how the program provided an opportunity for mutual learning and was intended to give people with lived experience meaningful roles in decisionmaking rather than advisory roles.⁹

The fellowship, which had two cohorts, was operated by [Bright Research Group](#), a community-centered design and research firm based in Oakland, in partnership with the San Francisco District Attorney's Office. Interviewees noted the critical role Bright Research Group played in supporting the fellows as they navigated partnership with a justice agency that was learning, from a position of institutional power, how to make the relationship with the fellows work and listen to what they were saying. Some interviewees reported that stakeholders were not always receptive to the fellows, whether it was to their insights or the community perspectives they gathered through their research. Bright Research Group also engaged potential fellows at the recruitment stage to discuss trepidation they might have about engaging with the district attorney's office.

Each fellow was paired with a staffer at the district attorney's office in a role one interviewee described as "an ally that was within the district attorney's office that allowed us to learn more about the landscape of the office itself." As the same participant further described the partnership,

It was a colearning experience between someone who has been successful in this arena and then you're bringing someone with lived experience who holds a set of values and a set of information.... We can learn together. I can learn more about the ins and outs of the way the system functions, and then for the ally it gives them an opportunity to learn what it feels like to experience the policies and how the policies are applied.

Fellows were part of a cohort and were provided with skill-building training, such as in conducting participatory action research. The fellows employed a participatory research approach and, with system partners, conducted focus groups and interviews with key informants (community members) to gauge their sentiments on issues like restorative justice and access to nontraditional alternatives to prosecution. These insights were presented to system stakeholders to shape policies and initiatives to better serve the community's needs. As an example, findings from fellows' research on restorative practice, a strong focus of their work, suggested restorative practice in San Francisco was tailored around the person who did harm, and they recommended more of a focus on the person who was harmed.

The SJC fellowship program concluded in December 2022, but it served as a model for subsequent work. With different partnerships and a different structure, San Francisco also engaged fellows (including some who were former equity fellows) in the community engagement in planning for the Just Home Project. Some of the dynamics described in the SJC fellowship program—how system agencies (the housing system in this case) learned to work with and be receptive to people with lived experience—emerged in the Just Home Project. Interviewees familiar with this effort described being undeterred by those challenges; as one put it, “If anything, [the challenges] made me want to get more engaged, there are so many things to work on, so many issues that need to be addressed. Folks who have been directly impacted have so much to contribute on this.”

Interviewees expressed a strong desire for people with lived experience to be included in SJC work to improve their equity work on all fronts. Many interviewees, particularly community members and most, though not all, system partners, strongly valued the equity fellows program. System partners' opinions on the value of the fellows program differed, with some believing it should be continued and made more robust and others unsure that the fellows' work was strongly additive to the SJC work, at least relative to the cost of the program. Other interviewees noted that people with lived experience had been included in ways other than the fellows program; agencies like the probation department had hired people with lived experience of justice system involvement into full-time civil service staff positions, and interviewees felt that more justice agencies should do so.

Other SJC Community Engagement

The equity fellows program and the fellows' participatory research was San Francisco's primary SJC-funded community-engagement effort, but there were also other such efforts. Collaboration with community partners (such as the San Francisco Latino Task Force), quarterly meetings between the sheriff and the San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition, community advisory boards launched by the district attorney's office in January 2024, and the revitalization of the probation department's community advisory board all strengthened justice agencies' community-engagement efforts. The San Francisco Reentry Council and Sentencing Commission include voting members with lived experience of incarceration or other justice system involvement. In addition, the establishment of the Human Rights Commission by the San Francisco Mayor's Office has provided a platform for dialogue between the community and law enforcement, most notably in response to the murder of George Floyd. Law enforcement has participated in community events and initiatives, such as Juneteenth celebrations and Domestic Violence Awareness Month engagements, to demonstrate a commitment to building rapport with the community. Law enforcement also provided food to people in need during the pandemic.

The relationship between community efforts and system changemaking (related to equity and more generally) was a key theme in interviews. Interviewees highlighted the critical role of community pressure in challenging the status quo and driving changes, with collaborative spaces like SJC meetings serving as venues to communicate and refine the implementation of those changes. For instance, closing County Jail 4, a signature accomplishment of San Francisco's jail population reduction efforts, was pushed for by community organizers and advocates. Following the momentum generated by those efforts, the SJC played a pivotal role in reducing incarceration in the jail and guiding the implementation of the closure.

In considering the drivers of change, some partners questioned whether funding justice system agencies like the district attorney's and sheriff's offices to reduce jail populations and racial disparities in them could produce those results, regardless of how aligned their leadership was with those goals. This question resonates beyond San Francisco, as local government practitioners and criminologists nationwide continue to grapple with similar tensions.

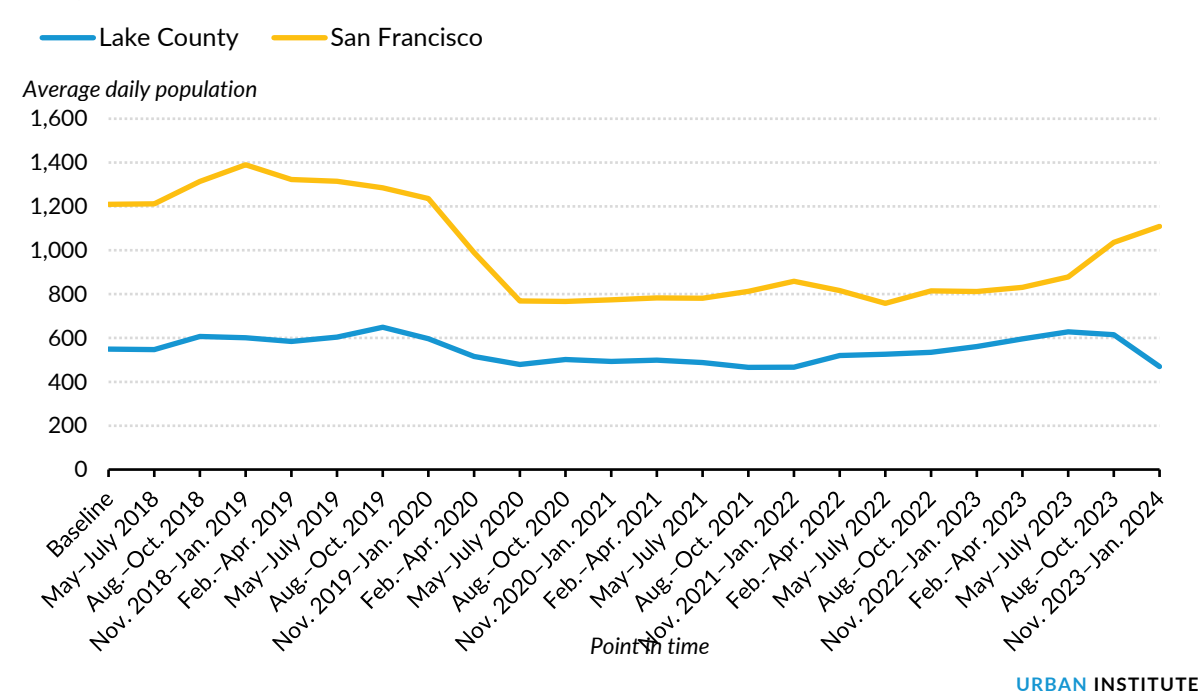
Interviewees had some recommendations for how community engagement could be expanded so community members can more robustly contribute to the SJC work and its equity enhancement efforts. One respondent noted that while some community members, such as voting members of San Francisco's Reentry Council and Sentencing Commission, receive regular training and education on justice issues, others who are not part of such organizations often lack the same opportunities. Providing similar

training and education to these individuals is crucial to ensuring they can effectively understand and engage with the issues. Stakeholders also cited the need to push information collected from people with lived experience back to them, perhaps through informational campaigns, so that their provision of data is not extractive. Lastly, for deep community-engagement initiatives like the equity fellows program, multiple interviewees suggested that better pay and full-time employment would enable people with lived experience to shape the direction of San Francisco’s system-change efforts.

Equity and Jail Population Trends in Lake County and San Francisco

During the period of SJC work described in this case study, trends in the overall jail populations and disparities in Lake County and San Francisco show how complex gauging progress on equity can be. In line with national trends, both jurisdictions saw sharp declines in their jail populations with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (figure 3).

FIGURE 3
Average Daily Jail Population in Lake County, Illinois, and San Francisco



Trends in the two sites then diverged: San Francisco’s jail population reductions were largely maintained through mid-2023, while Lake County’s jail population steadily increased until reaching its pre-COVID level by mid-2023. From August 2023 through April 2024, these trends reversed: San Francisco’s jail population climbed steeply whereas Lake County’s declined sharply, coinciding with the implementation of Illinois’ Pretrial Fairness Act (box 4).

BOX 4

Illinois’ Pretrial Fairness Act

In 2021 the Illinois legislature passed the Pretrial Fairness Act, which took effect in September 2023. The act did two things likely to significantly affect jail populations: it eliminated the use of cash bail as a condition of release, and it imposed limits on the use of pretrial detention. The Loyola University of Chicago Center for Criminal Justice is conducting a long-term evaluation of the act’s implementation and impact; while implementation is in its early stages at the time of writing, researchers have found early indications that jail bookings and average daily population decreased more than expected based on historical trends in the period after the act took effect.

Source: David Olson and Don Stemen, *Short-Term Trends in Jail Bookings & Populations After the Pretrial Fairness Act* (Loyola University of Chicago Center for Criminal Justice, 2024).

As the jurisdictions’ jail populations changed, so too did the racial and ethnic composition of their jail populations (table 1).

TABLE 1

Average Daily Jail Population in Lake County, Illinois, and San Francisco by Race and Ethnicity, 2018–2024

	August–October 2018	May–July 2020	November 2023–January 2024
Lake County			
White	31.1%	24.6%	25.3%
Black	50.5%	50.7%	43.4%
Latinx	16.2%	22.3%	27.9%
San Francisco			
White	23.1%	22.1%	20.3%
Black	50.9%	46.7%	41.2%
Latinx	17.4%	20.4%	27.3%

Source: CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance analysis of site data.

In Lake County, the share of White people in the jail population dropped from baseline to the COVID-era low point, whereas the share of Black people remained the same but then decreased by

January 2024; during this period, the share of Latinx people increased steadily.¹⁰ During this period San Francisco also saw the share of Latinx people in the jail population increase, while the shares of Black and White people declined.

Data on differential incarceration rates by race provide another avenue to examine disparities in the two sites. Notably, the data reveal stark racial and ethnic disparities in incarceration rates (table 2).

TABLE 2
Jail Incarceration Rates per 100,000 Adults in Lake County, Illinois, and San Francisco, from Baseline to January 2024

	November 2017–April 2018 (baseline)	May– July 2020	November 2023– January 2024
Lake County			
White	50	35	35
Black	796	695	614
Latinx	88	105	119
Overall	103	90	86
San Francisco			
White	88	54	83
Black	1,588	873	1,275
Latinx	197	147	300
Overall	158	101	158

Source: CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance analysis of site data.

In Lake County, Black people are consistently incarcerated at the highest rates, followed by Latinx people and White people. By January 2024, jail incarceration rates had decreased substantially for White and Black Lake County residents and increased for Latinx residents. While Black and White Lake County residents both benefited from lower jail incarceration rates, racially disparate incarceration increased: from SJC baseline to January 2024, the jail incarceration rate among Black adults in Lake County increased from 16 to 17.5 times that among White adults.

In San Francisco, from SJC baseline to January 2024 the jail incarceration rates for White and Black people declined, though they were larger than at the onset of COVID-19. The jail incarceration rate for Latinx people, however, increased during that period. Unlike in Lake County, in San Francisco, the jail incarceration rate among Black people fell from 18 to 15 times that of White people.

The question of whether progress on equity was observed in the jail populations is nuanced and multifaceted. Incarceration rates declined for Black and White people but increased for Latinx people in both jurisdictions. A discussion point within the SJC network has been the deepening of racial disparities in jail population reduction efforts. These data raise an additional point for consideration: in

jurisdictions like Lake County and San Francisco, changes in racial disparities appear to be emerging. High rates of disparity remain, although in some cases disparity is not as high as when the SJC work began.

Perceived Successes

In this section we discuss successes that SJC stakeholders in Lake County and San Francisco perceived in their equity efforts. Interviewees were proud of their accomplishments while recognizing there was much more work to be done to determine how to deliberately and sustainably deliver more equitable outcomes in local justice systems. (Some of the work that remains is covered in the Perceived Challenges section below.)

Increased Availability and Use of Data

Stakeholders in both jurisdictions pointed to the increased availability of data and its use in decisionmaking as a success. Stakeholders may have differing interpretations of the data, but they agreed that the data provided a valuable foundation for focusing and guiding conversations. The internal demand for more data and external calls for data from community members and external parties helped make increased data a reality. One Lake County stakeholder highlighted an external push from the MacArthur Foundation that helped increase the availability of data broken down by race and ethnicity, saying they did not think they would have achieved this absent MacArthur's guidance. Stakeholders cited having staff dedicated to working on the data as a benefit.

Interviewees saw increased data availability as an important accomplishment furthering understanding and transparency, a perspective shared even by those who were otherwise somewhat skeptical about the SJC theory of change. Both jurisdictions produced data dashboards, which stakeholders found helpful and tangible products of their efforts. For San Francisco, data are featured prominently in its jail population review, which several interviewees cited as a success.

One important benefit of having better data is understanding where gaps exist and providing better collective insight into how processes work. As an example of going beyond data to other forms of information collection, Lake County underwent sequential intercept mapping that highlighted opportunities to divert people from the criminal legal pipeline before individuals reach jail, prompting collaborative training sessions and public conversations with community partners.

Inclusion of People with Lived Experience

In San Francisco in particular, stakeholders thought the SJC fellowship program had introduced an innovative approach to include people with lived experience in systems-change efforts, complementing an array of previous and concurrent work. Doing similar engagement in the Just Home Project suggests a continuing legacy for the SJC fellowship program work. While the effort had its difficulties, it was an important source of lessons, and the fact that most fellows were people of color and were paid for the work was seen as a meaningful precedent. As one San Francisco stakeholder responded when asked to name the most important successes in the SJC equity work, “Implementation of people with lived experience into this work. This never happened before and it’s new to systems and to folks like us as well who may have trepidation about these systems.” Also, as previously mentioned, some agencies, like the San Francisco Adult Probation Department, had hired people with former justice system involvement into staff positions, and while this had occurred before and separate from the SJC work, it is a practice that can be more broadly recognized as a success and adopted in other agencies.

Open Discussions on Race

Another common success was creating and expanding spaces to discuss race openly, which led to increased community awareness and collaboration. Although racial disparities and racism have long been documented in America, there has been an unwillingness and a nervousness in government to discuss how race shows up in its systems (Gooden 2015). Thus, both sites, according to stakeholders we interviewed, had to deal with internal hesitancy to discuss race. The ability to discuss race openly was expanded by their SJC strategies focused on addressing racial disparities and by external events that highlighted disparities, such as protests stemming from police killings of people of color, and those that exacerbated disparities, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perceived Challenges

This section explores the challenges Lake County and San Francisco encountered and navigated as they implemented their strategies to reduce racial and ethnic disparities.

Resistance and Implementation Challenges

Talking about race is hard, even in places like San Francisco that have been discussing racism for a while and are committed to addressing it. One notable challenge a San Francisco interviewee highlighted is a sense of paralysis from indecision, whether from receiving pushback or struggling with one's own racial identity while doing racial equity work. One interviewee acknowledged a difficulty in getting people to confront bias. Some individuals grapple with feelings of guilt and shame, hindering efforts to confront bias effectively. This paralysis was echoed in Lake County, where stakeholders experienced indecision regarding how to navigate the complicated nature of racial inequities.

Relatedly, a number of stakeholders in both communities discussed the challenge of balancing analysis to understand the dynamics of inequity, education to get partners understanding and productively engaging in the issue, and concrete action to produce more equitable outcomes. Taking the time to build and maintain trusting relationships to confront difficult issues, and rebuilding them when agency leadership or key personnel change, were acknowledged as important. At the same time, there was frustration as stakeholders felt efforts stayed in the analysis, education, and relationship-building stage too long; these stakeholders were concerned that action was being delayed, a concern that was sharpened by the recognition that momentum toward increasing equity was difficult to maintain indefinitely and could be interrupted by factors like leadership changes in key agencies.

In fact, turnover in staff and leadership positions did affect the work of both sites. For example, twice Lake County stakeholders had to navigate the loss of a dedicated data analyst. San Francisco had turnover in some of its senior leadership. In addition to turnover, the sites had to deal with staffing shortages for key government positions, a challenge that has affected a number of local jurisdictions.

Identifying Progress

Progress in reducing disparities was difficult to identify for stakeholders in both sites. Although efforts were ongoing, many participants felt they lacked clear, tangible successes to point to. This sentiment was echoed by a San Francisco stakeholder who remarked, "I feel like we don't have anything to really rest our laurels on right now." The challenge of measuring success in this complex and long-term work is compounded by the difficulty in directly linking specific initiatives to concrete outcomes, especially when racial and ethnic disparities persist. As a result, many stakeholders continue to grapple with the question of whether their efforts have led to meaningful, measurable change in the justice system.

Decisionmaking and Stakeholder Learning

Lake County and San Francisco also encountered challenges in decisionmaking and stakeholder learning. For example, interviewees described knowing how and when to take race into account in decisionmaking as a challenge. Some stakeholders described feeling discomfort when they felt discussions about revising practices to mitigate disparity might be asking them to explicitly consider race in decisionmaking. Some said that they or other stakeholders were more comfortable with race-neutral interventions (for example, the district attorney office's algorithmic removal of information on race from case narratives) than with considering race directly, as San Francisco does in its jail population review process. Taking explicit consideration of race off the table could make mitigating the current racial disparities in jail incarceration even more difficult. A middle-ground strategy could be to use analysis to identify system-level dynamics that drive racial disparity and to focus efforts on changing them, as Lake County did by recruiting law enforcement agencies serving areas with larger communities of color to participate in diversion efforts.

Another challenge was around the appropriate depth and focus of stakeholder learning. Some stakeholders in San Francisco saw trainings around racial equity as duplicative of other trainings they have undertaken or too surface-level to make a meaningful impact. Conversely, in Lake County, despite regular trainings on implicit bias, some stakeholders still struggled to grasp the concept of institutional racism. This highlights the need for tailored, ongoing education efforts that address gaps in understanding and build deeper awareness of systemic inequities.

External Factors

Stakeholders in both sites reported challenges external to the criminal legal system that affect their work. Most notably, there is a lack of affordable housing for people who are system-involved and insufficient behavioral health services, which exacerbate recidivism and jail overcrowding. San Francisco has a staggering homelessness crisis and has been hit hard by the fentanyl crisis. Interventions addressing housing shortages and expanding substance abuse treatment could impact the jail population by providing stable housing and recovery options for people transitioning out of the criminal legal system. Stakeholders acknowledged the limitations they face in driving change in the criminal legal system, particularly regarding disparities. Interviewees across departments emphasized their limited control over jail populations and highlighted the influence of court decisions and law enforcement practices.

External factors can cut in different directions. In both Lake County and San Francisco, the COVID-19 pandemic, for all the broader damage it caused, led to jail population reductions larger than had been seen to that point. The murder of George Floyd and the mass movement against police violence in the summer of 2020 added attention and energy to efforts to address racial inequity. More recently, national and local attention to increases (real and perceived) in crime have made local justice reform more difficult.

Community Involvement

Both sites struggled with maximizing community involvement. System stakeholders recognize that community voice can help move some strategies forward that have lost momentum. Integrating community members in government meetings was a challenge, both in terms of accessibility and in terms of community members fully understanding the discussions. Stakeholders said that to meet this challenge, community members needed to be compensated and trained. Public perceptions of crime also affect the implementation of justice reform strategies. For example, San Francisco, like many jurisdictions, had to navigate the dual challenges of addressing backlash to reforms while responding to both perceived and real spikes in crime.

Common Themes and Lessons Learned

Lake County and San Francisco interviewees shared several common themes and lessons learned in their reform efforts to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in their jails.

1. Data Play a Pivotal Role in Efforts toward Equity

Lake County observed a difference in its capacity when it lost a dedicated data analyst, who received many requests from system stakeholders to dive deeper into the jail data from an equity perspective. Data analysis enabled stakeholders in both sites to identify trends, disparities, and areas needing improvement. For example, San Francisco noticed through a data review that drug crimes were driving its growing jail population. Such data can be incorporated in meetings, such as those of the sentencing commission or jail population review team. At the same time, both sites learned that data alone do not accomplish everything. Other strategies to get buy-in from stakeholders who are not swayed by data will still be needed. Lastly, data analysis can be used to investigate concerns, such as whether and to what extent a jurisdiction's approach to warrants contributes to disparities.

2. Racial Equity Efforts Led to Openness to Discussing Race

Stakeholders in both sites mentioned the progress in being able to openly discuss race and share disaggregated data by race with the community, thereby fostering transparency and awareness. Mandates from organizations like the MacArthur Foundation have pushed for the collection and sharing of data on race and ethnicity, leading to a deeper understanding of racial dynamics in the criminal legal system. Stakeholders from both sites said awareness of racial disparities had increased but would like to see certain structural changes around equity, such as changes in how criminal legal system stakeholders engage with communities of color.

3. Institutionalizing Equity Work Is a Multilayered Process

In Lake County and San Francisco, challenges institutionalizing this work beyond grant periods and amid personnel changes remain. Without institutionalizing the work and implementing proper succession plans, there is a risk of regression when external support diminishes. Both sites saw their momentum slowing, either because capacity was being lost with staff changes or the work was being structured in a way that created fewer touch points for stakeholders. Maintaining continuity and commitment to equity efforts, possibly by dedicating staff members to focus on them rather than adding responsibilities to existing positions, is crucial for sustaining progress reducing racial and ethnic disparities.

4. Behavioral Health and Housing Matter for Equity

The availability of community-based supports is important for the outcomes of people who are system-involved. Particular areas of emphasis among Lake County and San Francisco stakeholders were behavioral health supports and housing. Research indicates that the majority of people incarcerated are navigating a behavioral health challenge. Stakeholders in both sites mentioned that housing was a need for people who were currently incarcerated; in some instances, people continued to be held in jail because they did not have access to housing.

5. Cross-System Partnerships Are Needed to Reduce Disparities

Stakeholders identified several common drivers of racial and ethnic disparities, many of which were rooted in structural inequities across key systems, such as education, housing, health care, and the criminal legal system. Their responses underscore how these systems collectively contribute to the

creation of racial disparities through policies and practices that perpetuate inequity. Addressing these disparities will require a coordinated, cross-system approach that aligns efforts across these sectors to dismantle structural barriers and promote equity.

6. Community Engagement Continues to Be a Challenging Area for Government

Both sites have identified ways they want to improve community engagement and increase community awareness of their SJC work. Deciding when and how to bring in the community in meaningful ways is important for building community trust and buy-in. It is also important to have supports and a structure to facilitate the participation of community members (particularly those with lived experience) and help them navigate partnerships with system actors and agencies, and to have a toolkit for balancing relationships between stakeholders with different amounts of power.

7. People Have Diverse Philosophies on Racial Equity

Everyone has their own story when it comes to racial equity. The criminal legal system brings together people with differing philosophies, which creates tension regarding what is the best path forward in addressing racial disparities. For example, a jail review committee may look only at charges and not race, whereas for other groups, race is more central to the discussion. Furthermore, there are circumstances that make it easier for some and harder for others to address racial inequities. Thus, strategy and emotional intelligence are key when navigating a topic that can lead some stakeholders to pull back when offended. Given the complexity of the relationships internal to the criminal legal system, there is also the delicate balance of having the right fit in terms of bringing on external partners as facilitators or consultants.

Conclusion

This case study explores the paths Lake County and San Francisco took to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in their jail populations. Reducing jail populations (which both communities have done) is difficult work, but a broad lesson from the Safety and Justice Challenge is that moving the needle on racial equity is even more difficult. In both communities, progress made on jail decarceration since joining the SJC is complicated by mixed progress at best in reducing disparity in the jail population. Both communities have made meaningful system progress in areas including acquiring a data-driven understanding of inequities shaping the jail population, making public commitments to recognizing and

addressing racial inequity, and adjusting some system and agency-specific practices to improve equity. Yet they have also seen how fragile this collaborative work can be, with both communities experiencing periods of frustration and interruption in their collaborative efforts. Working to have government systems and community partners recognize, acknowledge, and take coordinated action to reduce the deep and pervasive racial inequities in the criminal legal system is difficult work. Lake County and San Francisco have and are struggling with it, and they were willing to share their accomplishments but also those struggles. We need to learn what we can from their experiences so we can continue to persevere toward a more equitable society. Without doing that, we cannot have lasting and shared safety, or true justice.

Notes

- ¹ “QuickFacts: Lake County, Illinois,” US Census Bureau, December 2, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/lakecountyllinois/PST045223>.
- ² All SJC site data were provided by ISLG unless indicated otherwise.
- ³ “Equity,” Lake County Criminal Justice Community Council, December 2, 2024, <https://www.lakecountycjcc.org/equity>.
- ⁴ The report is available at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/604814d8d43bf91be1bfadf8/t/6091a78ed0b2123903853285/1620158350964/9.29.2020+Bail+Reform+Community+Outreach+Report_FINAL+%281%29.pdf.
- ⁵ “QuickFacts: San Francisco City, California; San Francisco County, California,” US Census Bureau, December 2, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sanfranciscocitycalifornia,sanfranciscocountycalifornia/PST045222>.
- ⁶ “Our Racial Equity Action Plan | San Francisco,” City and County of San Francisco, November 27, 2024, <https://www.sf.gov/our-racial-equity-action-plan>.
- ⁷ More insights about the work of San Francisco’s Jail Population Review team can be found in Storm Ervin and Azhar Gulaid, *Using Cross-System Collaboration to Reduce the Use of Jails: Implementation Lessons from East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana, the City and County of San Francisco, and St. Louis County, Missouri* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2022).
- ⁸ For more information on the Just Home Project, see “Breaking the Links between Housing Instability and Jail Incarceration through the Just Home Project,” Urban Institute, last updated October 17, 2024, <https://www.urban.org/projects/breaking-links-between-housing-instability-and-jail-incarceration-through-just-home>.
- ⁹ For more information on the fellowship program, see Aminah Elster, “Deepening Partnerships between People with Lived Experiences of Incarceration and System Leaders,” Safety and Justice Challenge, September 22, 2021, <https://safetyandjusticechallenge.org/blog/deepening-partnerships-between-people-with-lived-experiences-of-incarceration-and-system-leaders/>.
- ¹⁰ Data on Latinx jail population trends should be interpreted cautiously because of issues accurately capturing data on Latinx identity among justice-involved populations. See Nancy Rodriguez and Rebecca Tublitz, *Exploring Latino/a Representation in Local Criminal Justice Systems: A Review of Data Collection Practices and Systems-Involvement* (Irvine: University of California, Irvine School of Social Ecology, 2023).

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