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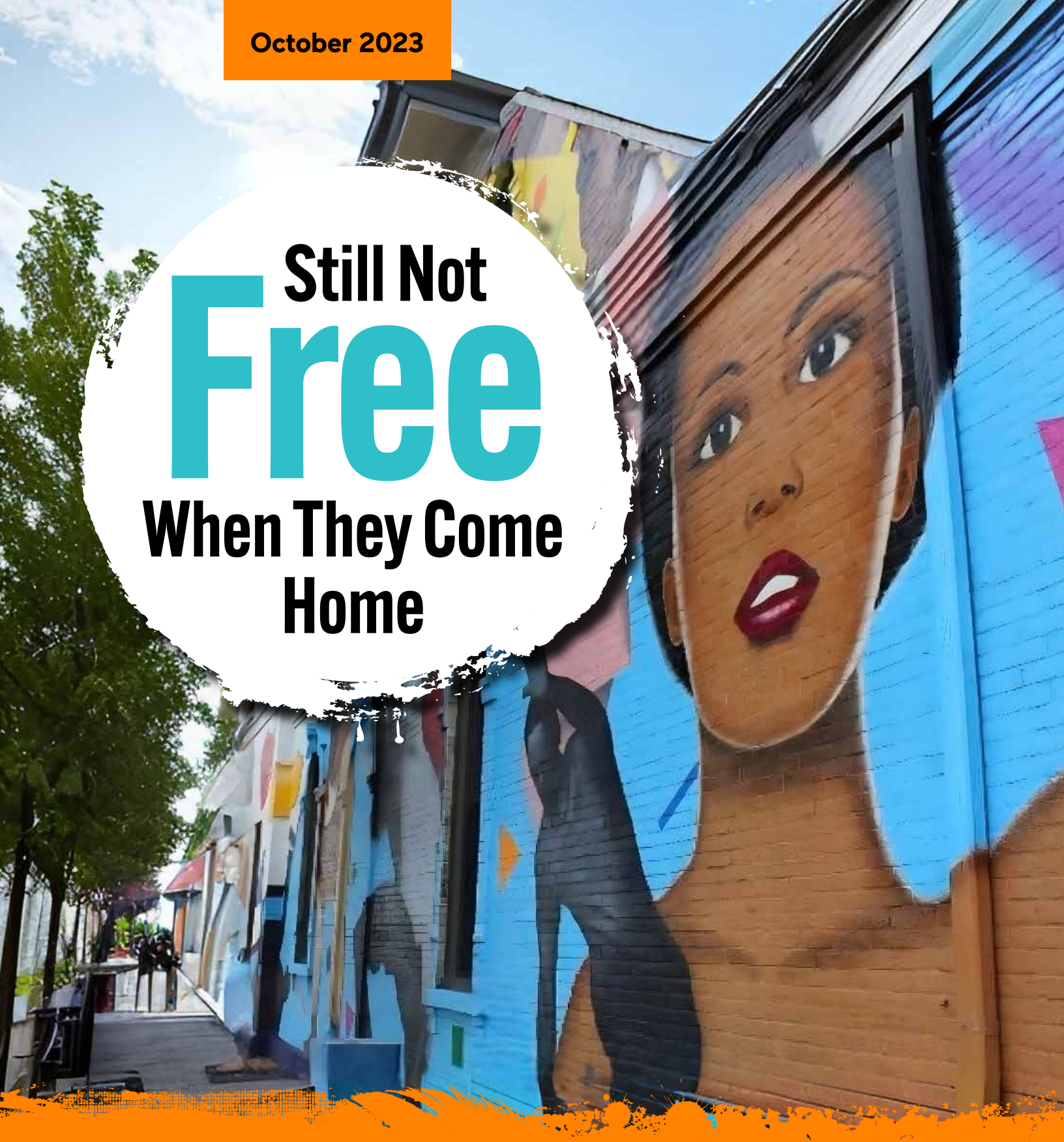

Still Not Free When They Come Home

A COMMUNITY REPORT:

How Wisconsin's Criminal Legal System Harms Democracy and the Black Community on Milwaukee's North Side

POPULAR DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

BLOC
Black Leaders Organizing for COMMUNITIES

Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Amari Rucker, Anita Winston, Broshea Jackson, Dawn Holt, Kenneth Ezell, and Tamer Malone (from BLOC) and Eli Vitulli with project organizing by Matthew Tran (from the Center for Popular Democracy). We want to thank the community members that we interviewed and acknowledge all those who have gone through the criminal legal system and are currently in the system—those that we spoke with and those whose stories we didn't receive.

Popular Democracy in Action and its affiliates know that everyday people have the power to change the world. We upend politics as usual to forge a representative, multiracial government and society where we all thrive, no exceptions. **www.populardemocracyinaction.org**

BLOC works to ensure a high quality of life and access to opportunities for members of the Black community in Milwaukee and throughout Wisconsin. **www.blocbybloc.org**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DURING THE FIRST HALF OF 2023, Black Leaders Organizing Communities (BLOC), a Black-led community-based organization in Milwaukee, and the Center for Popular Democracy conducted a participatory action research project where six of BLOC's member leaders from the North Side of Milwaukee interviewed their family members, neighbors, and other residents of the community about how policing and incarceration impacted their community's ability to participate in our democracy.

Community members living on the northside of Milwaukee, where a large share of Wisconsin's Black residents live, have long experienced racism and state violence, criminalization and incarceration, poverty, and disenfranchisement (having their rights, especially voting rights, taken away). The community also has a long history of civic and political involvement—from civil rights era demonstrations against racial segregation to more recent protests against police violence. Today, its residents are among the most incarcerated in the US—and people often describe one of its zip codes, 53206, as among the most incarcerated zip codes in the country. This horrible status is the result of deeply entrenched historic and ongoing racial segregation, economic exclusion, and targeted policing that have torn at the fabric of North Side families and community for decades.

Drawing from interviews with community members, the BLOC researchers' long-term observations from their community, and their own and their family members' personal experiences, this report discusses the impact of Wisconsin's criminal legal system on the Black community on the northside of Milwaukee.

"This is so deep and is touching every household. I don't think there is a household on the North Side of Milwaukee that does not experience the trauma and backlash of a person they love who has been in prison. I don't think there is a family that hasn't experienced that and hasn't experienced this trauma."

Key Findings

- Milwaukee and Wisconsin's criminal legal systems are a collective source of trauma for incarcerated people and their loved ones, causing social, financial, and additional upheaval.
- The targeted policing of North Side neighborhoods and incarceration deeply harms the mental and physical health of residents.
- Incarceration breaks families apart, causing particularly detrimental side effects on incarcerated people's children, including mental health issues and behavioral difficulties.
- Both criminal legal systems undermine the political power of this mostly Black community, not only because many lost their right to vote due to a felony conviction (felony disenfranchisement)

but also because people released from prison did not know that their voting rights are restored after completing their sentences, received disinformation telling them they were ineligible to vote, or were too overwhelmed with heavier life concerns to figure out voting right away.

Drawing from their interviews, discussions conducted with their community, and personal experience, our researchers argue that pervasive policing and incarceration in the North Side Milwaukee are incredibly destructive and detrimental to residents, their families, and the greater North Side community—and Wisconsin's criminal legal system is a significant barrier to full democratic participation.

Key Recommendations

Support incarcerated people, the formerly incarcerated, and those with criminal convictions (and their loved ones) to foster healing and progress so these families can thrive instead of struggling to survive. Including:

- Support contact between people who are incarcerated and their loved ones by providing free phone calls and transportation for in-person visits and creating an environment suitable for children to see their parents.
- Provide quality physical and mental healthcare in jails and prisons, including therapy with Black mental health providers and other professionals with relevant cultural competency and lived experiences.
- Invest in programs that provide free mental health care for loved ones of people currently and formerly incarcerated, especially for their children.

Expand access to the vote and democracy. Including:

- Restore voting rights to all people, including those currently serving sentences for felony convictions.
- Automatically register residents to vote and maintain registration lists in ways that recognize the circumstances of people impacted by prisons, such as address changes and not having typical documents.

Invest in resources that help the community thrive, reduce violence, support public health, and build true public safety without police, criminalization, or incarceration. Including:

- Enact policies and invest in programs that guarantee basic needs with a focus on mental health, living wages, and affordable housing.
- Expand and establish non-police violence interruption and prevention programs and restorative justice programs.
- Improve mental health care access in Black neighborhoods.

Shift power and money away from police and the criminal legal system and hold police accountable for wrongdoing:

- Hire more public defenders, especially Black attorneys, and increase their pay rate.
- Abolish the use of cash bail, fines for low-level offenses, and all administrative fees for people on parole, probation, or community supervision.
- Strengthen the capacity of the Milwaukee Fire & Police Commission to hold police officers accountable for the use of force.

INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY, the northside of Milwaukee has been home to a large share of Wisconsin's Black residents. The community has a long history of civic and political involvement. However, its residents have also long experienced racist state violence, criminalization and incarceration, poverty, and disenfranchisement (having their rights, especially voting rights, taken away). Today, its residents are among the most incarcerated in the US—and people often describe one of its zip codes, 53206, as among the most incarcerated zip codes in the country.[1] This status is the result of deeply entrenched historic and ongoing racial segregation, economic exclusion, and targeted policing that have torn at the fabric of North Side families and community for decades.

For many Black families on the northside of Milwaukee, the criminal legal system is a source of trauma alongside social, financial, and familial upheaval and harm. The targeted, often violent policing and high rate of incarceration that community members experience deeply harms the mental and physical health of residents—both those incarcerated and their loved ones—and makes it hard for community members to keep their families together, make a good living, keep stable and good housing, and participate in civic life.

This report discusses the impact of Wisconsin's criminal legal system on the Black community on the northside of Milwaukee.

During the first half of 2023, Black Leaders Organizing Communities (BLOC), with the help of the Center for Popular Democracy, conducted a participatory action research project with six of their member leaders from the northside of Milwaukee about how policing and incarceration impacted their community's ability to participate in our democracy. These member leaders designed the project and conducted 21 interviews with their family members, neighbors, and other community residents. The findings described in this report draw from those interviews and the member leaders' long-term community observations, their family members' experiences, and personal recollections.

BLACK LEADERS ORGANIZING COMMUNITIES (BLOC) is a Black-led community-based organization that works to build economic and political power in the Black community in Milwaukee and throughout Wisconsin.

For more on BLOC, their vision, and the work they do, see their website and the BLOC Agenda.

Our Project Design: Participatory Action Research

This report is the product of a participatory action research (PAR) project that was a collaboration between Black Leaders Organizing Communities (BLOC) and the Center for Popular Democracy (CPD). Participatory action research is a type of research design where the community members who are being researched design and conduct the research project. A core principle of PAR is that people most impacted by the research should be at the center of designing, conducting, and analyzing research, especially when the subjects of research are communities whose knowledge and perspectives have been historically de-legitimized (such as members of low-income Black communities, like those on the northside of Milwaukee).

For our project, CPD staff members worked with BLOC member leaders to design a research project about how the experiences of community members on the northside of Milwaukee with the criminal legal system impacted their lives and their participation in our democracy. The BLOC member leaders are all from the northside of Milwaukee and have been impacted by the criminal legal system—through their own experiences with police and incarceration or multiple loved ones' experiences. They also regularly canvas their neighborhoods as part of their work with BLOC, talking to community members about the issues they face, including with the criminal legal system.

BLOC member leaders decided what methods to use (interviews with community members), conducted 21 interviews, offered their own experiences and insights, and collaborated with a CPD researcher on analyzing the research. The report was written by the CPD researcher, with BLOC member leaders reviewing and providing feedback on it multiple times.

Everyone we talked to described incarceration as traumatic in some way to themselves and their loved ones. Many previously incarcerated people described how harmful it was to their mental health and their relationships with their families. They detailed consistent difficulties finding good jobs and good, affordable housing. Moreover, almost everyone expressed concerns about the effects on their loved ones, especially children. Most of our interviewees who were incarcerated had children and saw how their imprisonment was destructive to their kids' mental health and behavior. Finally, while some voted, many either remained disenfranchised, didn't know that their rights had been reinstated, had been misled that they still could not vote, or were too overwhelmed with other life matters to navigate voting.

The interviews and discussions conducted by community researchers revealed unequivocal findings that **policing and incarceration on the North Side of Milwaukee are incredibly destructive for individuals, families, and the entire community for generations:**

- breaking up families,
- worsening people's health and shortening their lives,
- reinforcing residential segregation,
- keeping families and communities in poverty, and
- undermining their community's political power and voices.

In other words, **the Wisconsin criminal legal system is a significant barrier to community safety and full democratic participation.**

Our research with the community made clear that to build true safety for the North Side of Milwaukee (and all communities like it), we must fundamentally transform our understanding of public safety at all levels, including shifting resources away from the punitive, racist criminal legal system and investing in resources, programs, and solutions that build safety, accountability, and healing. Creating this future will require a fundamental shift in how our society currently operates. Communities across the country will need to create alternative, community-centered models as the government ends its reliance on policing and incarceration as the end-all solution to any and all social problems. The below recommendations provide concrete ways to begin that process.

"This is so deep and is touching every household. I don't think there is a household on the northside of Milwaukee that does not experience the trauma and backlash of a person they love that has been in prison. I don't think there is a family that hasn't experienced that and hasn't experienced this trauma."

Key Recommendations

(See more detailed recommendations throughout the report and in the Recommendations section at the end):

- Support people who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and have criminal convictions and their loved ones, so that they can heal, move on with their lives, and thrive, such as supporting contact between people who are incarcerated and their loved ones and providing good physical and mental healthcare in jails and prisons.

- Expand access to the vote and democracy, including restoring voting rights to all people, including people currently serving sentences for felony convictions.
- Invest in resources that help the community thrive, reduce violence, support public health, and build true public safety without police, criminalization, or incarceration, such as non-police violence interruption and prevention programs, expanded mental healthcare, and affordable housing.
- Shift power and money away from police and the criminal legal system and hold police accountable for wrongdoing, including abolishing cash bail, fines for low-level offenses, and all administrative fees for people on parole, probation, or community supervision.

For this report, and drawing from BLOC's definition of these terms, defined through their years of electoral and community organizing, we offer the following definitions:

DEMOCRACY: People having agency and power in the decisions that affect their lives. This includes full access to our voting system but also is much broader and includes being engaged in one's community, easy access to polls, the right to bodily autonomy, fair and equal treatment, not being racially discriminated against or profiled, freedom from racist police treatment, affordable housing, affordable healthcare, high-quality public education, work and economic stability, transportation, not being closed out of businesses or spaces that are predominantly white-owned, and more. All of these elements are necessary for people to have agency and power in the decisions that affect their lives and to allow for an equitable and participatory democracy.

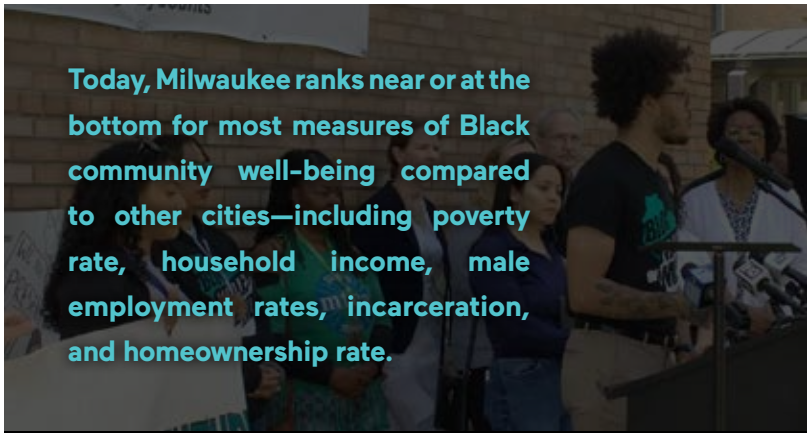
CARCERAL SYSTEM OR CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM: The interconnected systems of criminalization that target Black, Latine, Indigenous, low-income, and other communities often marginalized in the US. This includes but is not limited to incarceration, policing, surveillance, parole, probation, community supervision, and immigration detention. These systems are inherently punitive and are viewed by many, particularly government officials and corporations, as the main solution to economic, social, and political problems. The carceral system/criminal legal system in the US has its roots in US chattel slavery and has always been defined by anti-Blackness. Today, this includes, for example, the "war on drugs"; racist police profiling, harassment, and violence; and racist sentencing disparities, such as Black people getting sentenced to prison for drug convictions at significantly higher rates than white people.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK MILWAUKEE

WHILE BLACK PEOPLE HAVE LIVED IN MILWAUKEE since its earliest settlement, the city's Black community significantly grew in the mid-twentieth century with what is called the Great Migration: when many Black people in the South moved north to find good, industrial jobs and get away from Jim Crow, Southern racist terror, violence, and share-cropping. However, when they arrived in Milwaukee, Black migrants encountered racist violence alongside economic and residential segregation, and they were only able to live in an area on the northside of Milwaukee, where they built a culturally, politically, and economically vibrant community.[2]

In the 1970s and 1980s, Milwaukee's industrial sector significantly declined, and the city lost a large portion of its good, industrial jobs. Due to past and ongoing racism (for example, Black workers had only started to be welcomed into the industry the decade before and were often the first laid off), the city's "deindustrialization" hit the Black community particularly hard. Cities across the nation experienced similar deindustrialization during this time, and Milwaukee and Milwaukee's Black community were among the hardest hit in the country. Black unemployment and poverty skyrocketed as jobs disappeared (and notably, these were most of the city's jobs that paid more livable wages).[3] During this same period, the federal government and many state and local governments, including Wisconsin, implemented economic austerity reforms, including significant reductions to social safety net programs and other supports, such as education. They also shifted more and more resources into police and incarceration while passing harsher laws that further criminalized communities and required longer jail and prison sentences. These reforms once again hit Black communities especially hard, worsening the economic devastation of deindustrialization, including for residents living on the northside of Milwaukee.[4]

Today, Milwaukee ranks near or at the bottom for most measures of Black community well-being compared to other cities—including poverty rate, household income, male employment rates, incarceration, and homeownership rate—Black people in Milwaukee are *worse off* today than fifty years ago.[5]



Milwaukee has the lowest Black median household income (adjusted for cost of living differences) and the highest Black poverty rate of any of the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the US. Black median household income has declined by 30 percent since 1979. Milwaukee also has the largest Black-white racial disparity among the largest metropolitan areas in the US; the Black median household income is only 42 percent of the white median household income.[6] The Black-white income disparity has also worsened in the past 40 or so years.

For at least the last 50 years, Milwaukee has ranked among the country's most racially segregated metropolitan areas. Schools are as segregated as they were 50 years ago and significantly more segregated than 30 years ago.[7] Black students are 52.1 percent of students but 83.6 percent of students referred to law enforcement in schools.[8] Milwaukee is also among the most incarcerated cities in the US for Black people: It ranks third highest for the Black incarceration rate in state prisons among the largest metropolitan areas. **That rate is ten times the white incarceration rate.**[9]

Through all these challenges, the Black community on Milwaukee's north side remains vibrant. As our researchers noted, "We're like one big family around here." Many people have lived in the neighborhood all their lives and created a family-oriented culture where people look out for each other as much as possible. They also regularly hold community events, such as barbeques and block parties. Under often difficult circumstances, they try to take care of each other—including protecting each other and holding each other accountable outside of the police and criminal legal system.

"As a whole our communities are beautiful, we just need more support."

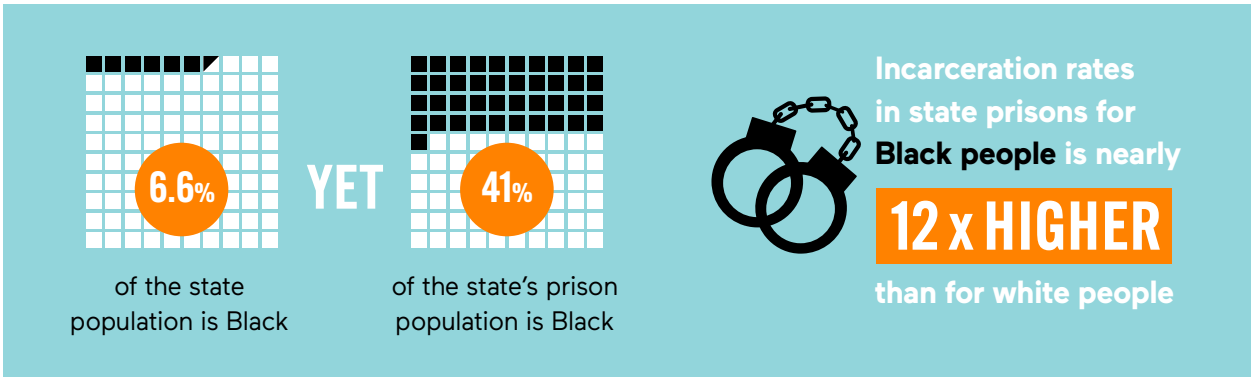
WISCONSIN'S CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM

FROM POLICING TO INCARCERATION, Wisconsin's criminal legal system is one of the most racially unequal in the US.

For most residents on the northside of Milwaukee, police are sources of trauma and violence, not safety. Our BLOC community researchers described how "normal" it was to be harassed by police when they were growing up. For example, during at least one summer in the early 2010s, two researchers remembered being stopped, searched, and harassed by police almost every night, often when they were hanging out with friends in front of the houses of people they knew. Police would jump out of their cars or off their bikes to search them, make them take off their shoes, open their mouths, take their money, and verbally and physically harass them before moving on.

As these experiences illustrate, the Milwaukee Police Department has a long history of racist, targeted policing and harassment of Black residents. In the late 2000s to mid-2010s, the department dramatically increased its traffic and pedestrian stops, conducting nearly 200,000 annually at its height—when the city's entire population was less than 600,000.[10] The department targeted Black and Latine neighborhoods and people, and the racial disparity in traffic stops was among the worst for major cities in the US.[11] In 2018, the department settled a lawsuit alleging its stop-and-frisk practices were unlawful and racially biased.[12] Recent data shows that Black and Latine residents are still significantly more likely to be stopped by police. The department was 9.5 times more likely to conduct traffic stops on Black residents than white residents and ten times more likely to frisk Black residents than white residents. They were also 2.9 times more likely to conduct traffic stops on Latine residents than white residents.[13]

Wisconsin also has the highest rate of imprisonment for Black people of any state by far: One in every 36 Black adults in Wisconsin is in state prison. (Nationally, one in 81 Black adults are in state prison.)[14] About 41 percent of the state's prison population is Black, even though only 6.6 percent of the total state population is Black.[15] The incarceration rate in state prisons for Black people is nearly 12 times higher than for white people (the second highest disparity of any state in the US, second only to New Jersey).[16] Moreover, because Wisconsin is also very racially segregated, the effects of targeted policing and incarceration are concentrated in a few communities, including on the northside of Milwaukee.



Wisconsin state prisons currently hold over 21,500 people, including over 8,800 Black people (41%). Over 6,600 of those incarcerated were convicted in Milwaukee County.[17]

Over 63,300 people in Wisconsin are on probation, parole, or extended supervision, including about 17,200 Black people (27%). In Milwaukee County, there are nearly 12,900 people on probation, parole, or extended supervision, including nearly 8,500 Black people (66%).[18]

Black/white disparity in Wisconsin:

11.9 x HIGHER

2nd worst, nationally

Black/white disparity national state average:

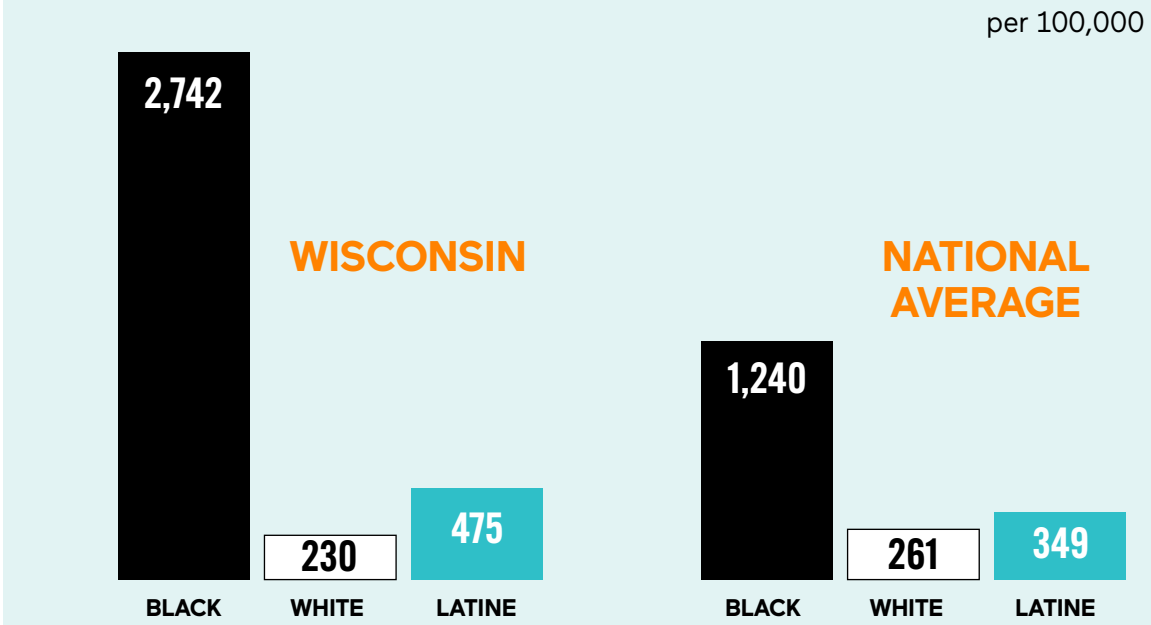
4.8 x HIGHER

Latine/white disparity in Wisconsin:

2.1 x HIGHER

7th worst, nationally

Rates of imprisonment in state prisons, by race (2019)[19]



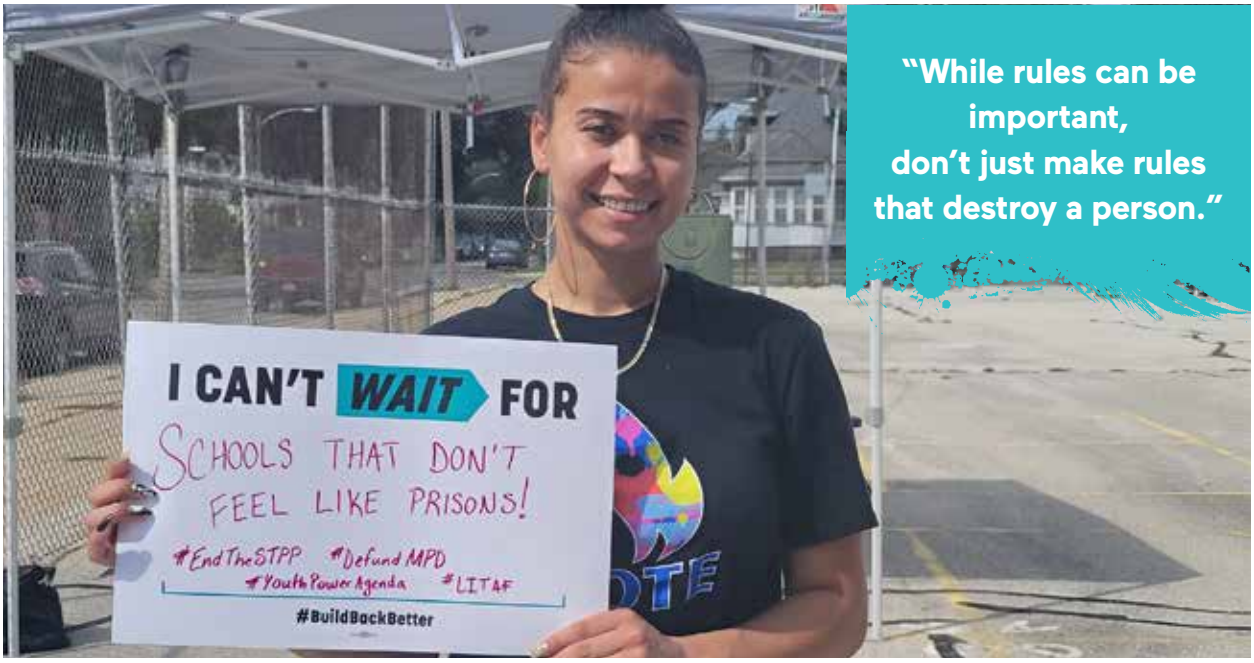
Once it releases people from prison, the Wisconsin Department of Corrections continues to surveil most people through various forms of community supervision, such as parole (also referred to as being "on paper"). The amount of time people spend on paper in Wisconsin is far higher than the national average. One study found that nationally, the average time someone convicted of a nonviolent offense is on paper is three years, while in Wisconsin, the average is 15 years. The national average time on paper for a violent conviction is five years, but 20 to 25 years in Wisconsin.[20]

When someone is on parole or probation, they must follow very strict rules, many of which are vague or extremely difficult to meet. If they break any rules, they will likely go back to prison.[21] Research has found that parole and probation often set up people to fail, delivering harsh punishments for minor rule violations (such as consuming alcohol or failing to report an address change) and that many violations stem from an inability to meet requirements because of poverty, lack of support for mental illness or substance abuse disorders, and racist policing. These are all significant problems in Wisconsin.[22]

One person described her time on probation: She would get in trouble for things beyond her control and end up jailed for several days. (For example, if she was late for an appointment because of unforeseen circumstances or needed to change an appointment because she unexpectedly had to go to the doctor.) Even if the violation was eventually overturned, she was still locked up initially.

Parole officers wield a lot of power over the lives of the people they supervise. One person we talked to described feeling like his parole officer was trying to destroy his life after citing him for a violation he didn't commit. He said it seemed like the parole officer decided he had to be up to something because he was doing well.

People released from prison reenter their communities with little or no support. This reality is especially true for women because the vast majority of reentry programs are designed for men.[23] Most revealing, the state spends about $1.35 billion each year on incarcerating people and only $30 million on training and reentry programs for newly released people.[24]



"While rules can be important, don't just make rules that destroy a person."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Shift power and money away from police and the criminal legal system, hold police accountable for their wrongdoings, and invest in programs that reduce violence and promote accountability and healing outside the criminal legal system:

- Hire more public defenders, especially Black public defenders, and increase their pay rate.
- Strengthen the capacity of the Milwaukee Fire & Police Commission to hold police officers accountable for the use of force.
- Legalize and regulate marijuana, expunge criminal records for related charges, and ensure that Black people can grow marijuana and own dispensaries.
- Decriminalize sex work.
- Abolish fines for low-level offenses (and all other fees in the penal system, including administrative fees for people on probation, parole, or community supervision).
- Abolish the use of cash bail.
- Expand non-police violence interruption and prevention programs, such as 414Life, to more neighborhoods.
- Support and expand restorative justice programs in the community and its schools.
- Implement crime prevention through environmental design (CEPTED) improvements, such as LED street lighting and landscaping.

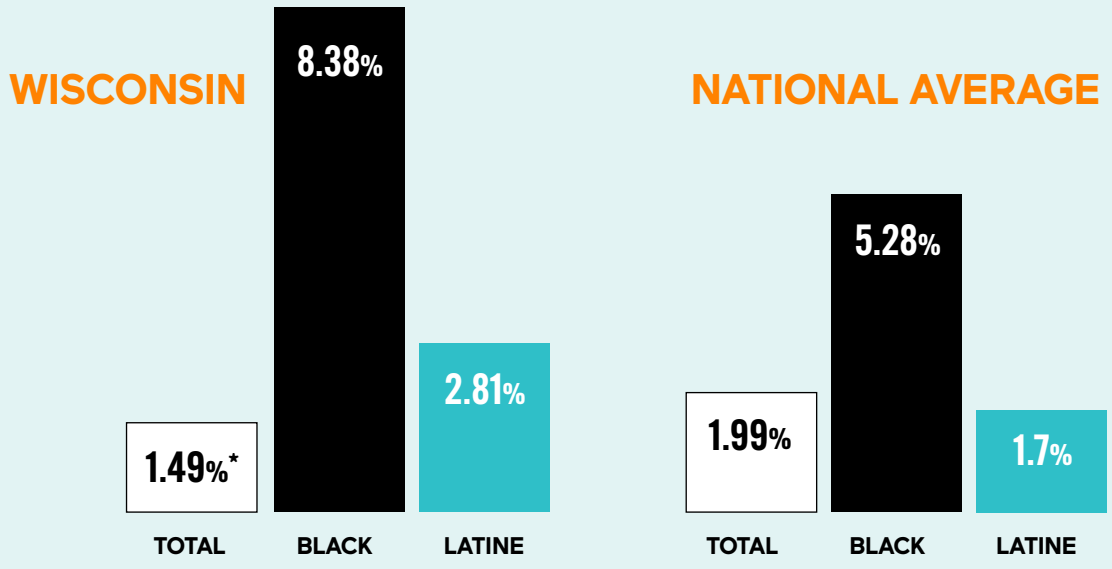
VOTING RIGHTS

IN WISCONSIN, anyone convicted of a felony and still serving any part of their sentence—including while incarcerated in jail or prison and on parole or probation (often called "on papers")—is barred from voting. **More than 65,000 Wisconsinites (or about 1.5% of the voting-eligible population) are disenfranchised (had their voting rights taken away) because of felony convictions.** This statistic includes nearly 44,000 people who are living in their communities but still on papers.[25]

Because of the anti-Blackness and racism that permeates the Wisconsin criminal legal system and the criminal legal systems throughout the US—where Black people are targeted for policing and criminalization and often given longer sentences than white people[26]—Black people are significantly more likely to be disenfranchised because of a felony conviction than any other racial group. **One in every twelve Black people (or nearly 8.4%), who would be otherwise eligible to vote, are disenfranchised in Wisconsin due to a felony conviction.**[27]

Felony disenfranchisement is part of a long history of the criminal legal system helping to disenfranchise and undermine the political power of Black communities across the US.[28]

Felony Disenfranchisement (of voting-eligible population)[29]



*20,298 people in prison, 23,174 on parole, 20,589 on probation, and 1,334 in jail

Voting is a fundamental part of civic engagement. Nevertheless, Wisconsin's voting laws are among the most restrictive in the country. A 2022 study found that Wisconsin ranked 47th among states for how easy it is for residents to vote.[30] In particular, Wisconsin has one of the strictest voter identification laws in the US.[31] Obtaining a valid state identification card can be difficult, especially for formerly incarcerated people.[32] Research indicates that Black people in Wisconsin are significantly less likely to have a state ID. One study found that 55% of Black men and 49% of Black women in the state did not have a valid driver's license. Another study found that only 4% of formerly incarcerated 53206 residents have valid driver's licenses, naming the main challenge as the failure or inability to pay for municipal and misdemeanor citations and court costs.[33]

Wisconsin state law allows people to apply for state identification before being released from prison[34]—but in practice, people in prison often do not receive guidance telling them they can do this and do not get the help they need. For example, one person we talked to described how it took him months to get the necessary documentation. He was frustrated to later find out that he could have done all of this while still in prison, which would have set him up better when he was released.

The people we interviewed described getting inadequate or no support to understand their voting rights—until their family members or people who worked with BLOC helped them. Some interviewees were "off papers" (i.e., no longer under state surveillance through probation or parole) and did not know their rights had been restored. The community researchers had talked to many others in their community who did not know they could vote. Some even thought that their felony record permanently disenfranchised them. This awareness gap seems like a common experience in the northside Milwaukee community. In Wisconsin and around the country, people with felony records are often confused about whether or not they are eligible—as are many parole officers and even election workers, who should be able to help.[35]

Moreover, a number of the interviewees said that they didn't care about voting because they didn't think it mattered or would not change anything. Others said they hadn't thought about voting because they had too many other things to deal with following their

"They set us up for failure."

"I never thought about going to vote due to all the things that were going on [with my health, housing, and jobs]. I felt that no one else was going to help me so I dedicated all my time to getting back to my family and trying to repair all the lost time."

incarceration: trying to find a job and housing, reconnect with their children and family, manage mental and physical health concerns, and other more immediate life concerns.

While these experiences and comments indicate that people with felony convictions are discouraged from civic participation much more broadly than just felony disenfranchisement, restoring voting rights for people with felony convictions remains very important. Research indicates that restoring voting rights can reduce recidivism, improve public safety, and make people feel like they are a positive part of their community.[36]

RECOMMENDATIONS

Expand access to the vote and democracy:

- Fully restore voting rights so that people with felony records and who are incarcerated are never stripped of their right to vote.
  While the law continues to disenfranchise people with felony convictions, require Department of Corrections officials—both inside jails and prisons and those monitoring people serving their sentence in the community—to educate people about their voting rights, explain when their voting rights will be restored, and help them register to vote, when eligible. Fund community organizations that are already doing this work.
- Improve access to voting in jails for people who are still eligible to vote, including helping people understand their eligibility and register, if necessary.
- Count the people who are incarcerated as residents of their homes before incarceration, not as residents of prisons, for the Census and redistricting process.
- Automatically register residents to vote and maintain registration lists in ways that recognize the circumstances of people impacted by prisons, such as address changes and not having typical documents.
- Make election days local, state, and federal holidays.
- Ensure a sufficient number of accessible polling locations, including during early voting periods, taking into account factors such as public transportation.
- Reduce the influence of big money spenders in politics and shift power to voters, including through publicly funded small donor programs.
- Empower neighborhood associations with decision-making authority for their neighborhoods, including establishing participatory policy-making and participatory budgeting programs.

Can I Vote?

Under Wisconsin law, you are not allowed to vote if you have been convicted of a felony (or misdemeanor treason or bribery) **and** are currently serving any portion of your sentence, including being incarcerated in jail or prison, or are "on papers," including extended supervision, probation, or parole.[37]

Once you have completed your sentence, you are allowed to vote again. But you must re-register to vote. See MyVote Wisconsin for more information about registering online, including checking whether or not you are registered.

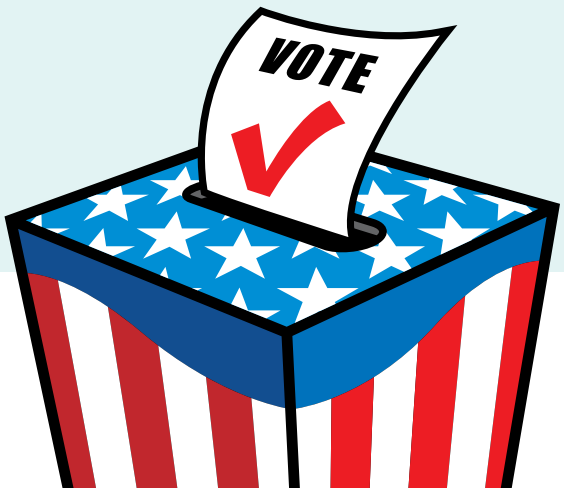
You are STILL allowed to vote if:[38]

- You are charged with a felony and are awaiting trial, whether or not you are in jail.
- You have been convicted of a misdemeanor and are still serving your sentence in jail or on community supervision.
- You have been convicted of a felony and have finished serving your sentence (are "off papers").

How to register to vote:[39]

- You can register **online** up to 20 days before the election at MyVote Wisconsin if you have a valid Wisconsin Driver's License or State of Wisconsin ID.
  Note: If your address has changed, update your address on the Department of Motor Vehicles website before you register.
- You can register **by mail** up to 20 days before the election. You can find the voter registration application to print and fill out here.
- You can register in person at the Municipal Clerk's office or your early voting site until the Friday before an election or at the polls on Election Day.

For additional information, including ID requirements, see the ACLU of Wisconsin website or the Wisconsin Elections Commission's Voter Information Center website.



MENTAL HEALTH

BEING ARRESTED AND IMPRISONED IS TRAUMATIC. By design, incarceration rips people out of their communities, isolates them from their loved ones, and removes their autonomy. Jails and prisons are generally designed to subject people to violence, unhealthy conditions, and inhumane treatment.

Research has long shown that incarceration can cause severe mental distress and illness—potentially for the long-term—including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mood disorders, especially depression.[40] These are the experiences faced by some of our interviewees and many people on the northside of Milwaukee.

Many described how their experiences with police and incarceration harmed their mental health. They described experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, PTSD, and other mental distress and illness. Many of the people we talked to who had been incarcerated said that the hardest part of their incarceration was being cut off from their loved ones. They felt disconnected and alone. Even when they could communicate and visit with their loved ones, watching how they were treated was stressful. Social support and positive family and other relationships are essential to everyone's psychological well-being.

"You aren't treated as human, you're a number. I did something wrong, but I'm still a man, a human, not a number. [Being treated like a number] causes depression and stress."

"[Jail and prison are] meant to strip you, not help you."

One person said he was a totally different person before he was incarcerated and thought the main reason for the changes was being disconnected from his loved ones and community while in prison.

They also described how their experiences of police presence in their communities and the police harassment they experienced, both before and especially after they were incarcerated, were stressful and traumatic. So is meeting the conditions of their release. Parole and probation have strict rules and guidelines that can be extremely difficult to meet and that continue to restrict their freedom and self-determination severely.

"Your family isn't really your family anymore if you've been on the inside for decades. You don't really know anyone; you don't really know your mom anymore, even."

Our researchers and interviewees also described how their incarcerated family members would change. Incarceration often made them distant from their loved ones while imprisoned and once they were out, even if they were previously close. They became more closed off and didn't trust people. They wouldn't let people close to them and didn't like to be hugged or touched. Many didn't like going outside, often seeing it as dangerous because of the police. They believed they would be targeted for harassment and arrest because they were in the system. As one person described, people's minds get stuck in the system and survival mode, and they lose the ability to trust anyone, including their family members.

Some described how the stress and mental distress manifested in physical symptoms or worsened physical health, such as high blood pressure, and how physical and mental health problems are deeply connected.

For example, one person's family member was incarcerated for over twenty years. His experiences in prison caused PTSD, and he developed serious seizures while inside. Because of the poor

"When I first got out of prison I was depressed, felt alone like everyone turned their back on me. I had no money, no place to stay. My kids' mother moved out of state; my father passed. I couldn't sleep at night thinking someone would try and run down on me so I slept through the day when I could. I get anxiety every time I see a cop or flashing lights. You develop a sense of behavior where you have to survive, so you have to be tough, you have to be mean. But before going to prison, I was a cool kid, who liked to play basketball but being in there will turn you into someone you're not."

health care in prison, he often could not get medication for those seizures, which may have worsened the condition. Because of the mental and physical health challenges he developed while in prison, he cannot live alone or drive. He needs significant support and care, which has fallen on a few of his family members, especially his daughter and granddaughter. Even three years after his release, he is still significantly struggling with his mental health and with learning to live on the outside. For example, he forgets to eat.

The northside Milwaukee community members we talked to described widely shared experiences of incarceration throughout Wisconsin and the US.[41] Trauma and mental illness are widespread problems ubiquitous in US jails and prisons. More than 70% of people incarcerated in jails and prisons have been diagnosed with a mental illness or substance use disorder, and as many as a third have a serious mental illness. Women are even more likely than men to experience "serious psychological distress" while incarcerated.[42] Many people already have a mental illness before being incarcerated—and once they are in jail or prison, they are especially vulnerable to the difficult, isolating, often horrible and violent conditions.[43]

The Wisconsin Department of Corrections says that 45.1% of incarcerated people in state prisons have a mental illness, including 8.6% with a serious mental illness.[44] The percentage is likely much higher because many people remain undiagnosed and untreated.

"It's been a real tough time for me over the years. Because I was incarcerated for such a long time, I got sick and got mental health challenges. While I was doing the time, I saw my family struggle, kids confused, and no one cared. My life today is much different and much harder because I was incarcerated."

"A lot of people don't feel free when they come home."

"There is a way to get back to yourself, but it's a tough road."

Prison health care, especially mental health care, is poor at best, and many who need it do not receive treatment.[45] If they receive treatment, it's generally only medication, and even that is often poorly monitored and managed. Once someone is released, there is rarely meaningful help to find mental health support services in their communities.[46] Black and Latine people are less likely than white people to receive mental health treatment while incarcerated. They are also more likely to receive solitary confinement, which has long been recognized as highly harmful to mental health, especially if someone is already experiencing mental illness.[47]

In general, Black and Latine people are less likely to receive supportive mental health treatment, whether in or out of jail or prison. **In other words, the very communities, like those on the northside of Milwaukee, that experience targeted policing, police violence, and incarceration that harms their mental health also struggle to find good, supportive mental health treatment, which further exacerbates the harms they experience by the criminal legal system.**[48]

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support people who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and/or have criminal convictions and their loved ones, so that they can heal, move on with their lives, and thrive. Invest in resources that support public health.

- Support contact between people who are incarcerated and their loved ones, including free phone calls, free and accessible transportation for loved ones to visit in person, and visitation options in a child-friendly environment. Transportation needs to also be available for people whose loved ones are incarcerated over 200 miles away or out of state.
- Provide good physical and mental healthcare in jails and prisons, including therapy with Black mental health providers and other providers with relevant cultural competency and lived experience.
- Invest in programs that provide counseling, job training, and rehabilitation for people who are released from jail or prison.
- Pass policies and invest in programs that ensure that basic needs are met with a special focus on mental health, living wages, and affordable housing.
- Expand access to mental health care in Black neighborhoods, including providing free options.

JOBS AND HOUSING

A CRIMINAL CONVICTION, especially a felony conviction, has reverberating, long-lasting consequences far beyond someone's time in jail or prison. In addition to disenfranchisement, formerly incarcerated people experience significant barriers to finding good employment and safe, stable, affordable housing.[49] Many of the people we talked to said it was very hard for them to get stable housing and good employment after they were released from prison. Yet, stable, affordable housing and good employment that provides a living wage and health insurance are vital to everyone's physical and mental health. They also help people stay out of prison.[50]

People leaving prison face huge challenges when trying to find a home. Federal, state, and local laws and regulations promote discrimination against or explicitly ban people with certain criminal convictions. Public Housing Authorities often bar people with certain criminal records from living in public housing, which can also mean that people with criminal records cannot live with their families who are already living in public housing. Most landlords run background checks, and many will not rent to people with felony records.[51] For example, one person described how he was able to get a housing voucher after he was released from prison but could not find housing because he had a felony drug conviction.

The conditions and experience of community supervision can be barriers to getting stable housing and employment—or even disrupt the stability that someone has achieved. For example, parole and probation conditions can restrict who someone can associate with (such as someone with a felony record or gang affiliation), even if they are family. This condition can block people from moving in with family or friends, especially if the community experiences targeted policing and high incarceration rates, as on the northside of Milwaukee.[52] In addition, when someone violates a condition of their parole or probation, they are often thrown into jail, even if the violation was beyond their control, which means they may miss work and get fired.[53] Wisconsin law requires that people on community supervision pay for part of the cost of that supervision, and many people also have to pay other fines and fees as part of their sentences, which can mean they do not have enough money to pay for stable housing, education, or job training. Unpaid fines and fees can result in debt and bad credit, which can also make it more difficult to get housing or employment.[54]

Moreover, Milwaukee is experiencing an affordable housing crisis, with high rates of substandard or unsafe housing, and has a high eviction rate, all of which disproportionately affect Black communities like those on the northside.[55] Milwaukee has long been one of the most racially segregated and unequal cities in the US,[56] which significantly compounds the difficulties that northside community members with criminal convictions experience trying to get good, stable housing.

Another person described how her family member who was incarcerated had to sleep on people's couches for a long time until he got remarried and finally had stable housing again because of his wife.

Even if they don't experience housing discrimination, because of the affordable housing crisis, it is unlikely that someone recently (or even not so recently) released from prison will have a high

"Career jobs are limited [for me because] I am a felon. I get turned away without the option to explain my background and the maturity I have gained from those experiences."

enough income to easily find good housing. Like with housing, people with criminal convictions often experience discrimination when trying to find employment, even though Wisconsin law bans discrimination against a person because of a criminal record, unless the crime they were convicted of is "substantially related" to the job. Numerous federal, state, and local laws and regulations bar people with certain criminal convictions from being employed or certified for certain jobs, and many jobs run criminal background checks.[57] Often, the only jobs available to people with criminal convictions are low-paying jobs that don't offer benefits and don't pay enough money to live off of, especially if they have children or others under their care. Finding good employment can be especially hard for formerly incarcerated Black women.[58]

Housing and employment challenges can have long-term effects and can be mutually reinforcing. People with histories of incarceration are significantly more likely than those who haven't to experience homelessness (ten times more likely, according to one study).[59] Many people end up caught in a cycle of homelessness and the criminal legal system, as being houseless or housing insecure increases the likelihood of being arrested and incarcerated.[60] Research has also shown that people incarcerated in their youth earn about half as much money as those with similar socioeconomic backgrounds but no history of incarceration.[61]

Incarceration and the collateral consequences of it—including difficulty finding good, stable housing and employment—destabilize people's lives and make it difficult for them to put their lives back together once they are released, often with long-term consequences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest in programs that provide counseling, job training, and rehabilitation for people who are released from jail or prison.
- Pass "Ban the Box" legislation to prevent discrimination against people with criminal convictions.
- Require that jails and prisons provide support for people to get identification and other relevant resources and documentation before they are released.
- Invest in homeownership programs for community members, including providing support for buying homes, getting good loans, and supporting homeowners to keep their homes, such as ensuring that taxes do not become unaffordable.
- Use a housing-first model to provide affordable housing for formerly incarcerated people and other community members. A housing-first approach prioritizes providing housing, food, and support services without conditions.

IMPACTS ON LOVED ONES

WHEN SOMEONE IS LOCKED UP IN JAIL OR PRISON, it impacts their lives and often devastates their families, other loved ones, and communities. Everyone who is incarcerated comes from a family and a community; many have children.

The people we talked to described how difficult it was to have a family member incarcerated, especially if they were a co-parent. Incarceration can tear families apart as a family member is removed and isolated from the family's day-to-day life. They are often housed far away from their families, and communicating with them is difficult and expensive. This dynamic often causes emotional and financial stress and instability.

Thus, incarceration is not only punishment for a person convicted of a crime but also for their children, entire family, and community.

"A lot of time, [incarceration causes] generational stress, generational anxiety, generational PTSD."

"[Incarceration] affects your family as a whole, from your kids down to your dog. It's rough. Everyone feels a loss of connection. It's tough... Things aren't ever going to be the same; it can't get back to normal."

"Prison destroys family."

Impact on Kids

Having a parent imprisoned can be devastating for children, as their family and homelife are interrupted, and they lose their parent's emotional and financial support, even if they didn't live together before. The stigma of having an incarcerated parent can also be distressing for children. It can have lasting effects on their development, health, and well-being.

Tens of thousands of children in Wisconsin have incarcerated parents.[62] About 8% of children in Wisconsin (or over 100,000) have at least one formerly or currently incarcerated parent.[63]

Most of the people we interviewed were parents who consistently described the detrimental effects of their incarceration on their relationships with their children and their children's mental health. Many saw their children develop behavior problems once they were incarcerated.

For example, during one person's time in prison, his children's mother moved her and their children out of state. Before going to prison, he was close with his kids. Once he was released, he was still on papers and could not leave the state without explicit permission from his parole officer, which was extremely difficult. When we talked to him, it had been years since he was released, but he was still on papers and unable to visit his children. This situation severely impacted his children's mental health, which also worsened his mental health.

"It was really hard for my kids at this time. They were young and we were close, and all they wanted was their Dad but I couldn't be there because I couldn't leave the state. That was a really depressing time for me and a lot of stress on my kids. My kids didn't understand I was forced to stay in Milwaukee, and sometimes I think they thought I didn't want to come see them."

"Being away from my children caused them to gain behavioral issues. My daughter is now in and out of the juvenile system. That makes it hard for mom. She doesn't know how to handle our child and constantly worries about getting the wrong call."

Another person described how one family member's incarceration caused harmful effects on his family and, especially, his children. Before his incarceration, he "was the one keeping the family together," but when he was in prison, his marriage broke up, and he all but lost his relationship with his children. His daughter's behavior also worsened over the years, at least partly because of his incarceration and the break up of their family, and she has been involved in violence, including harming her own family, and has been arrested and incarcerated. With the support of his new wife and step-family, he has been able to reconnect with his children and is working on repairing their relationship, but it is challenging.

Another mother from the community struggled to take care of her daughter both during and after her incarceration. Imprisoned for three years while her daughter was young, she missed crucial time in her daughter's development. While her daughter's grandparents were able to take care of her, her daughter developed emotional and behavioral problems. Once she was released, she worked hard to get her daughter mental health support but encountered many obstacles in her daughter's schools and at the hospitals they visited. She struggled for years to get a good job with health insurance for her and her daughter. Eventually, she obtained decent housing and a good job, but her daughter has long-term mental health repercussions because of her mother's incarceration.

Children with incarcerated parents often develop mental health and behavioral challenges, with consequences that can continue into adulthood. Incarceration significantly disrupts a child's attachment to their parent, and early life attachment to one's parents is often very important to later healthy social and emotional lives.[64] Children often express guilt, anger, and confusion about their parent's incarceration.[65]

Children with incarcerated parents are more likely to live in poverty and experience food insecurity, homelessness, family conflict and instability, ADHD, learning disabilities, depression and anxiety, developmental delays, and poor health. They are more likely to get into fights, skip school, perform poorly, get suspended or expelled, be placed in special education, and have difficulty concentrating. They are also more at risk of incarceration, substance abuse, and mental illness throughout their lives.[66] It is devastating for children when either parent is incarcerated, but it is often much worse if it is their mother. If a child's mother is incarcerated, they are especially at risk of being placed in foster care and dropping out of school, along with many other adverse experiences and harms.[67]

Incarcerated parents being able to stay in touch with their children, especially through in-person visitation, is incredibly important for both themselves and their children. Studies have found that the most important way to mitigate the harmful effects of having a parent incarcerated is maintaining good contact between the parent and child, including visits in safe, supportive, child-friendly environments.[68] However, prisons and jails usually make communication extremely difficult.[69]

"It hurt me and my children because I was not able to do the things a man should do for their children. When I came home, I tried to do everything I could to mend the relationship but it didn't work at first. But in time it got better, and they were able to tell me more about how my not being there [affected them]. They were kicked out of regular schools because of behavior problems and fights."

Impacts on other family members and loved ones

Incarceration interrupts and usually seriously harms family and other relationships. Like children, adults also lose the everyday emotional, social, and financial support of a loved one when they are incarcerated. This loss is tough on co-parents, who must now take care of their children alone. Many of our interviewees and the community researchers described the stress, sadness, and other harms of having family members incarcerated.

A recent study found that people whose family members have been incarcerated rate their health and well-being as lower and have a shorter life expectancy than those who do not have a family member with a history of incarceration, even after adjusting for differences like race, income, gender, and age.[70] Other studies have shown that women with incarcerated partners are at increased risk of depression, high blood pressure, and diabetes.[71]

Financial stress on family members is not only from the loss of income from the incarcerated person but also increased costs, such as exorbitant costs for phone calls and transportation costs for visits.

While having a family member released can be a joyous occasion that eases many of the challenges incarceration causes, taking care of loved ones who were formerly incarcerated can be very stressful, especially when their incarceration causes serious mental and physical health problems. For example, one person describes her family's experience caring for a loved one who was incarcerated for twenty years and developed significant mental and physical health problems while inside. He cannot drive or live alone and needs care and support because of his mental and physical health challenges and his ongoing adjustment to freedom. That care work largely falls on a few family members, mainly women. This care work not only helps him live but has also allowed them to get to know him and helped rebuild family relationships, including with his children and grandchildren.

As this story illustrates, while women are significantly less likely to be incarcerated than men, most of the care work—both for formerly incarcerated family members and keeping their families and community together while loved ones are incarcerated—falls on them. While caring for loved ones can be a joy, it can also be stressful, draining, and have negative mental and physical health consequences.

Navigating relationships with people who are incarcerated can be challenging and stressful, and families also establish new dynamics while someone is incarcerated. Once they get out, those dynamics must change again. For example, if a father is incarcerated, the mother gets used to parenting alone, and their children get used to a specific routine without him in their daily lives. Once he returns, it can be difficult for him to reestablish his daily parenting role and for everyone in the family to shift their routine.

"Love may not change, but people and routines change."

Nationally, about one in every two adults has an immediate family member who has been incarcerated for at least one night in jail or prison. **One in seven has an immediate family member with a history of incarceration for at least one year, and one in every 34 has an immediate family member with a history of incarceration for at least 10 years.**[72] Black people are 50 percent more likely than white people to have a family member with a history of incarceration (63 vs. 42 percent) and three times more likely for that family member to have been incarcerated for a year or longer (31 vs. 10 percent).[73] Since Wisconsin's incarceration rate is at about the national average, but its racial disparities are far higher than the national average, Black Wisconsinites are probably significantly more likely than the national averages described above to have family members with histories of incarceration.

In other words, millions of people in Wisconsin are harmed by the criminal legal system, whether or not they have been incarcerated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support the loved ones of people who are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated:

- Invest in programs that provide free mental health care for loved ones of people currently and formerly incarcerated, especially for their children.
- Expand access to mental health care in Black neighborhoods, including providing free options, programs, and providers with knowledge and resources to support the particular needs of loved ones of currently and formerly incarcerated people.
- Fund neighborhood schools and community-based programs for youth. Ensure these programs and other resources are accessible and located in neighborhoods on the northside.
- Expand after-school programs and grants for neighborhood groups to support community events, block parties, safety initiatives, and other revitalization projects.
- Expedite the removal of lead paint and materials in homes and schools.
- Fund community-based organizations, like BLOC, and support them in hiring additional staff from the communities they organize.
- Provide reparations for descendants of slavery in the United States that results in a transfer of wealth from institutions that benefited from slavery.

CONCLUSION

THE BLACK COMMUNITY of the northside of Milwaukee faces challenges and violence and is full of love, support, brilliance, and community. The people who live there build families, contribute to their community, and participate in civic and political life. **But Wisconsin and Milwaukee's criminal legal systems are extremely damaging and create significant barriers to residents' agency and power over the decisions that affect their lives and ability to build a thriving community.** The targeted policing and high rates of incarceration harm community members' families, relationships, mental and physical health, well-being, housing, finances, and ability and desire to participate in democracy, including voting. They make the community less safe.

For all of these reasons, **the carceral system is a barrier to full democracy for the Black community on the northside of Milwaukee**—as it is in many similar communities around the US. There is a long history in the US of the criminal legal system helping to disenfranchise and suppress Black political voices through violence, criminal convictions, and targeted policing—from Black Codes and Jim Crow laws in the South that explicitly made it illegal to do certain things as a Black person to stop and frisk programs and the war on drugs that targeted Black people and communities, and more.[74]

While felony disenfranchisement laws are a significant problem and must be repealed, the harm to the northside Milwaukee community's political power goes far beyond them. Drawing on the research they did for the project as well as their own personal, familial, and community experiences, **the researchers argue that the criminal legal system's effects on mental health are centrally important to understanding how it has devastated their community for generations**: breaking up families, worsening people's health and shortening their lives, reinforcing residential segregation, keeping families and communities in poverty, and undermining their community's political power and voices. All of these adverse effects impact the community's experience of and participation in US democracy.

"It is no wonder we have so many mental health issues today. It didn't start 20 years ago. Now we are the second, third, fourth generations, and we can see the mental health problems that are so widespread. Looking at the history of our society, you can see why mental illness is so deep and hard and such an epidemic today. It has long been this way, but it is only being recognized today."

Community members on the northside of Milwaukee deserve to be safe in their homes and neighborhoods without fear of harm, including from police. That safety is best ensured when residents have their physical, mental, and emotional needs met—and when they have sustainable, resilient, and family-supporting environments to call home.

Moreover, curtailing the Black community's political power and voices impacts Milwaukee and Wisconsin considerably, especially because the state is so politically divided, making it even harder for the community to advocate for what community members need to thrive.

The following are recommendations that will help create this vision of a safe and thriving northside Milwaukee community:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support people who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, or have criminal convictions and their loved ones so that they can heal, move on with their lives, and thrive:

- Support contact between people who are incarcerated and their loved ones, including free phone calls, free and accessible transportation for loved ones to visit in person, and visitation options in a child-friendly environment. Transportation must also be available for people whose loved ones are incarcerated over 200 miles away or out of state.
- Provide good physical and mental healthcare in jails and prisons, including therapy with Black mental health providers and other providers with relevant cultural competency and lived experience.
- Invest in programs that provide counseling, job training, and rehabilitation for people who are released from jail or prison.
- Invest in programs that provide free mental health care for loved ones of people currently and formerly incarcerated, especially for their children.
- Pass "Ban the Box" legislation to prevent discrimination against people with criminal convictions.
- Require that jails and prisons provide support for people to get identification and other relevant resources and documentation before they are released.

Expand access to the vote and democracy:

- Fully restore voting rights so that people with felony records and who are incarcerated are never stripped of their right to vote.
  While the law continues to disenfranchise people with felony convictions, require Department of Corrections officials—both inside jails and prisons and those monitoring people serving their sentence in the community—to educate people about their voting rights, explain when their voting rights will be restored, and help them register to vote, when eligible. Fund community organizations that are already doing this work.

- Improve access to voting in jails for people who are still eligible to vote, including helping people understand their eligibility and register, if necessary.

- Count the people who are incarcerated as residents of their homes before incarceration, not as residents of prisons, for the Census and redistricting process.

- Automatically register residents to vote and maintain registration lists in ways that recognize the circumstances of people impacted by prisons, such as address changes and not having typical documents.

- Make election days local, state, and federal holidays.

- Ensure a sufficient number of accessible polling locations, including during early voting periods, taking into account factors such as public transportation.

- Reduce the influence of big money spenders in politics and =shift power to voters, including through publicly funded small donor programs.

- Empower neighborhood associations with decision-making authority for their neighborhoods, including establishing participatory policy-making and participatory budgeting programs.

Invest in resources that help the community thrive, reduce violence, support public health, and build true public safety without police, criminalization, or incarceration:

- Pass policies and invest in programs that ensure that basic needs are met with a special focus on mental health, living wages, and affordable housing.
- Expand non-police violence interruption and prevention programs, such as 414Life, to more neighborhoods.
- Support and expand restorative justice programs, both in the community and in schools.
- Expand access to mental health care in Black neighborhoods, including providing free options.
- Fund neighborhood schools and community-based programs for youth. Ensure that these programs and other resources are accessible and located in neighborhoods on the northside.
- Expand after-school programs and grants for neighborhood groups to support community events, block parties, safety initiatives, and other revitalization projects.
- Expedite the removal of lead paint and materials in homes and schools.
- Implement crime prevention through environmental design (CEPTED) improvements, such as LED street lighting and landscaping.
- Redesign streets for safety & speed reduction, including but not limited to curb bump outs, protected bike lanes, speed humps, and roundabouts.
- Fund community-based organizations, like BLOC, and support them in hiring additional staff from the communities in which they organize.
- Invest in homeownership programs for community members, including providing support for buying homes, getting good loans, and supporting homeowners to keep their homes, such as ensuring that taxes do not become unaffordable.
- Provide affordable housing for formerly incarcerated people and other community members, using a housing first model. A housing-first approach prioritizes providing housing, food, and support services without conditions.
- Provide reparations for descendants of slavery in the United States that result in a transfer of wealth from institutions that benefited from slavery.

Shift power and money away from police and the criminal legal system and hold police accountable for wrongdoing:

- Hire more public defenders, especially Black public defenders, and increase their pay rate.
- Strengthen the capacity of the Milwaukee Fire & Police Commission to hold police officers accountable for use of force.
- Legalize and regulate marijuana, expunge records, and ensure that Black people can grow marijuana and own dispensaries.
- Decriminalize sex work.
- Abolish fines for low-level offenses and all other fees in the penal system and administrative fees for people on probation, parole, or community supervision.
- Abolish the use of cash bail.

For more, see the BLOC Agenda, a platform BLOC created after a multi-year community engagement process to understand what their community needed to thrive.

These recommendations are actionable steps to a much-needed shift reimagining what public safety means at every level. In general, we need to divest and move away from the punitive, racist criminal legal system and mass incarceration, which harms the community on Milwaukee's northside, and invest in programs and other solutions that foster safety, accountability, and healing.

BLOC's practical, community-built definition of democracy states that affordable housing, freedom from discrimination, and economic stability are all necessary prerequisites to genuinely participate in the ongoing process of creating one's community. Returning to this idea from the introduction, it becomes clear that democracy as a living practice cannot function as long as the crisis of policing and mass incarceration continues touching nearly every Black household in Milwaukee and elsewhere. In order to build a true and inclusive democracy, we must start with a right to be safe at home and the freedom to thrive in every community.

Endnotes

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