



THE RESTORATION PROJECT



The economic and social impact of our flawed criminal justice system on society, communities and families is enormous and long lasting. Mass incarceration and what has been called the “school-to-prison pipeline” have emerged as among the most pressing civil rights issues facing our communities. As our country continues to put some of our most vulnerable residents behind bars—those with mental health challenges, people of color, the economically disenfranchised—policies and practices have in fact deviated from the stated goals of rehabilitation and justice.

Numerous factors indicate a need for reform.

Dozens of research studies, for example, document racial bias in all areas of the criminal justice system. These studies illustrate that African Americans are targeted and punished more aggressively than their white peers.

Black Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites. If African Americans and Latinos were incarcerated at the same rate as the white population, the prison and jail population in the country would decline by nearly 40%.

Another leading issue is financial; fines, monetary bail and bonds disproportionately impact poor people. There is also a large percentage of inmates in need of health care interventions rather than incarceration. The disability awareness and advocacy organization RespectAbility estimates that more than 750,000 people with disabilities are behind bars in America today, with the largest group—which includes more than half a million people—consisting of those with cognitive impairments.

Also, children and youth involved with the justice system too often must navigate the process without adequate support and guidance. While they have a right to legal counsel, many young people fail to receive the representation they need. Many of the cases were school-based referrals that serve as the starting point for the school-to-prison pipeline.

National studies have found that acting-out behavior in schools is often a symptom of mental or emotional health needs. There is evidence that nearly 70% of youth involved in the juvenile justice system have at least one mental health issue, compared to 22% of youth in the general population. Many districts and schools have put resources into law enforcement, or “school resource officers,” instead of mental health professionals and connections to important community supports. The vast majority of students who are excluded from classrooms or referred to the juvenile justice system have not engaged in violence.

In the Pittsburgh region, mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline mirror national trends. For example, when local

**A HEINZ ENDOWMENTS
INITIATIVE TO PROMOTE
CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM
IS A RESPONSE TO
THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS
OF A BROKEN SYSTEM ON
THE LIVES OF MANY.
BY CARMEN ANDERSON**

crime peaked in 1995, the Allegheny County Jail’s daily population was about 1,450. Today the average population is 2,321, with about 60% African Americans, even though black people represent 13.4% of county residents. And among the jail population, 75% of inmates have a substance abuse issue or an undiagnosed or untreated mental health issue.

What this means for local families is about 8,500 children in Allegheny County currently have a parent behind bars.

Last year, there were more than 3,300 youth referred to the county’s juvenile probation system. Of those referred, 74% were African American and 69% were male, and most of the youth, 73%, were referred for non-violent crimes.

Black students in Allegheny County also are much more likely to be suspended than their white peers. In the 2015–16 school year,

70% of suspensions in Allegheny County were for “conduct.” That same year, 41 per 100 black students were suspended compared to 5.6 non-black students; a black student in the county is 7.3 times more likely to be suspended than a white student, decreasing the likelihood of graduation to about 54%.

The Heinz Endowments is committed to improving the lives of people who are affected by the criminal justice system. One year ago, the board approved a three-year, \$10 million initiative known as the Restoration Project to promote reform in both the Allegheny County adult and juvenile justice systems, and to increase community engagement and supports.

We believe we can impact work intended to decrease the jail population, expand opportunities for mental health and substance abuse treatment, and drastically reduce the number of youth removed from their classrooms by providing opportunities for early intervention and addressing policy in the education code. We are working toward restoring viable options for formerly incarcerated people to return as contributing members to their families, schools, jobs and communities, prepared to pursue opportunities to live healthy and productive lives.

Issues of justice and equity are central to the mission of the Endowments. In a region that already struggles with underserving African American and low-resource members of our communities, mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline undermine our work to create what our foundation refers to as a Just Pittsburgh.

Our goal is to build on community strengths and the resilience and determination of families who aspire to live happy, productive, healthy lives in thriving communities. We are investing in a different trajectory for our children—those who are nurtured and given opportunity from birth and those who languish in the system for early missteps or systemic bias.

It is a trajectory that is built on fairness and hope for a future, and that captures the dreams and imagination of what could be. **h**