

# Promote Smart Decarceration

*A Grand Challenge for Social Work*



The United States has the largest incarcerated population in the world, and people of color, low-income people, and people with disabilities are substantially overrepresented. The Grand Challenge to **Promote Smart Decarceration** aims to reduce the prison and jail population by one million people by 2025. In doing so, it intends to redress these disparities and maximize public safety and well-being.

During the past five years, members of the Grand Challenge have published, presented, and spoken out on these issues, both within the field of social work and more broadly. The decarceration movement has gained considerable traction recently, as criminal justice reform featured prominently in the Presidential election. Following the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black men and women, the Black Lives Matter movement powerfully amplified calls for bail reform as well as police and prison abolition.

## ACHIEVING GOALS TOWARDS SMART DECARCERATION

*Smart decarceration is the development of effective, sustainable, and socially just solutions to achieve criminal justice transformation. To achieve this, three interrelated goals must be accomplished:*



**1**

Substantially reduce the incarcerated population in jails and prisons.



**2**

Redress the existing social disparities — racial, economic and behavioral health disparities — among the incarcerated.



**3**

Maximize public safety and well-being.

## Network Leadership

### NETWORK CO-LEADS

#### Pajarita Charles, PhD

Assistant Professor  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
[paja.charles@wisc.edu](mailto:paja.charles@wisc.edu)

#### Phillipe Copeland, PhD

Clinical Assistant Professor  
Boston University  
[copelanp@bu.edu](mailto:copelanp@bu.edu)

#### Matt Epperson, PhD

Associate Professor  
The University of Chicago  
[mepperson@uchicago.edu](mailto:mepperson@uchicago.edu)

#### Carrie Pettus-Davis, PhD

Associate Professor  
Florida State University  
[cpettusdavis@fsu.edu](mailto:cpettusdavis@fsu.edu)

### WORKING GROUPS

#### Abolition

**Sophia Sarantakos, PhD, MSW**

#### Antiracism

**Aaron Gottlieb, PhD, MSW**

#### Behavioral Health

**Michael Fendrich, PhD**

#### Policing

**Caroline Harmon-Darrow, MSW**

**Jenny Afknich, MSW**

#### Reentry

**Peter Treitler, MSW**

#### Social Work Profession

**Erin Kerrison, PhD**

**Leah Jacobs, PhD, MSW**

### AFFILIATED INSTITUTIONS

#### [Institute for Justice Research & Development](#)

Florida State University

#### [Smart Decarceration Project](#)

University of Chicago

#### [Center for Social Development](#)

Washington University in St. Louis

## LOOKING BACK

During the past five years, members of the **Promote Smart Decarceration** network and their colleagues have:

- **Published** numerous [book chapters](#) and [peer-reviewed articles](#), such as “Improving the Evaluation of Adult Mental Disorders in the Criminal Justice System With Computerized Adaptive Testing,” co-authored by network co-lead Matt Epperson, in the *Psychiatric Services Journal*
- **Edited** a [book](#), *Smart Decarceration: Achieving Criminal Justice Transformation in the 21st Century*. Co-edited by network co-leads, Matt Epperson and Carrie Pettus-Davis, the book contains 15 chapters by researchers, practitioners, and advocates providing context, concepts, and strategies for achieving decarceration
- **Developed** a [curriculum guide](#), “Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors for Social Work Competencies,” for teachers and students of social work. The document presents Smart Decarceration practices within the framework of the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) nine core competencies
- **Advocated** for bail and prison reform at the local, state, and federal levels, including at the White House, where network co-lead Carrie Pettus-Davis participated in a [Prison Reform Summit](#)
- **Delivered** a [Congressional briefing](#) on “Black Lives Matter: Social Work and the Future of Policing,” along with the Grand Challenges to **Achieve Equal Opportunity and Justice** and **Eliminate Racism**
- **Convened** two national conferences, “From Mass Incarceration to Effective and Sustainable Decarceration” in St. Louis in 2015 and “Tools & Tactics: Promising Solutions to Advance the Era of Smart Decarceration” in Chicago in 2017
- **Responded** to COVID-19 by [surveying prisoners](#) about their reactions to the communication and containment strategies employed by prison officials in relation to the pandemic
- **Participated** in numerous virtual events, including a [both/and or either/or exercise](#) around social work and policing, hosted by The Social Work Podcast, as well as a [virtual convening](#) of the Prosecutors Research Network, a [virtual summit](#) on the State of Incarceration at Arizona State University, and a [virtual panel discussion](#) on “The Role of Prosecutorial Discretion in Driving Mass Imprisonment,” hosted by the University of Utah
- **Created** new courses at schools including the University of Maryland School of Social Work and the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration

## LOOKING AHEAD

Network members have articulated the following objectives for the next five years:

- **Assemble** a [special issue](#) of *Criminal Justice and Behavior on Smart Decarceration*
- **Formulate** plans for more explicitly addressing racial equity in their work
- **Continue** to advocate for their policy recommendations to:
  1. **Restrict** the use of incarceration whenever possible
  2. **Reduce** racial and economic disparities through decarceration efforts
  3. **Remove** civic and legal exclusions for people with criminal charges and convictions
  4. **Reallocate** resources to community-based supports

## Join Us

[grandchallengesforsocialwork.org](https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org)

[GCSocialwork@ssw.umaryland.edu](mailto:GCSocialwork@ssw.umaryland.edu)

[Join Our Mailing List](#)

[grandchallengesforsocialwork](#)

[@GCSocialWork](#) | [#Up4theChallenge](#)

[GCSocialWork](#)

[Grand Challenges for Social Work](#)

[Give](#)