

OUR DREAMS WON'T BE DEFERRED:

Reclaiming Progress for Black Men and Boys in an Age of Retreat

JUSTICE, RIGHTS,
RESPONSIBILITIES, AND OPPORTUNITIES



Perhaps no other system better exemplifies the dehumanization of Black boys and young men than the criminal legal system.¹

Since the publication of the original We Dream A World 2025 (WDAW) report, robust scholarship has entered the national conversation detailing how, from enslavement to sharecropping to incarceration, the very roots of modern-day law enforcement and the criminal legal system, particularly in the South, have functioned to extract labor and suppress autonomy in service of maintaining racial hierarchies and protecting wealth accumulation for white elites.

What is referred to as the “justice” system has, for Black communities, operated as a mechanism of exclusion and punishment, undermining hard-won rights and perpetuating injustices against them, particularly for Black boys and men.

¹Throughout this report, we use the term “criminal legal system” rather than “justice system” to more accurately describe the system’s function and impact on Black communities. While “justice” suggests fairness and equality, the criminal legal system has historically and presently operated as a mechanism of racial control, surveillance, and punishment, particularly for Black boys and men.



Areas of Progress

Between 2000 and 2022, **youth incarceration declined by 75%.**

Between 2005 and 2022, **delinquency cases involving Black youth fell 63%.**

Although incarceration rates for Black residents remain excessively high and disproportionate, sentencing and corrections reforms over the past two decades have contributed to **a 37% decline in their imprisonment rate.**

Between 2016 and 2022, **violent offenses committed by Black youth decreased** by about 20%, while property crimes fell by nearly 40% (Lantz & Knapp, 2024).

Black boys are incarcerated at a rate more than 5 times the rate of white males (2021).

Race/Ethnicity	Male Incarceration Rate (per 100,000)
Black	400
Latino	97
White	77

Source: OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, Juvenile Residential Placement Rates by Race and Ethnicity, 2021.

A Call to Action:

We must address the root causes of criminalization and mass incarceration: dehumanization. Racism exacerbates the challenges and dangers Black youth face in the U.S. criminal-legal system. The criminalization of Black boys and men has not only fueled mass incarceration, it has in too many instances robbed Black men of their freedom and ability to function in society on a level playing field. To remedy this, we must start with policies and programs that invest in prevention, early intervention, and re-entry.

Fully implement the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP)

Expand community-based violence prevention

Scale restorative justice practices

Reform policing and reduce militarization

Eliminate discriminatory sentencing practices

Advance pretrial justice

Invest in reentry and restoration

Address cross-system drivers of criminalization

Ensure financial inclusion and economic security

Enact racially just wealth-building investments and policy

Areas of Concern

Public pressure to address police violence and mass incarceration has waned in the last few years and may continue to decline without sustained policy change and structural transformation.

Despite reductions in incarceration, the U.S. prison population in 2022 remained nearly six times larger than it was 50 years ago.

While the number of people incarcerated has decreased, **deep racial disparities persist**. Black Americans remain imprisoned at nearly five times the rate of white Americans, making the racial injustice of mass incarceration undeniable (Ghandnoosh & Barry, 2023).



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