Los Angeles shows us how money and organization can fuel criminal justice reform

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Chloe Cockburn

Reimagine Safety
Money can’t buy criminal justice reform. But it can fuel a movement.

(Photo illustration by Danielle Kunitz/The Washington Post; Patrisse Cullors photo by Valerie Macon/AFP via Getty Images; iStock)

By Chloe Cockburn

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Chloe Cockburn directs the criminal justice reform portfolio at Open Philanthropy and directs the Just Impact Fund, which advises donors on philanthropy related to criminal justice reform.

For decades, politicians have favored more prisons, more criminalization and more pervasive uses of law enforcement, despite considerable evidence that incarceration does not reduce crime and that crime survivors strongly support rehabilitation rather than punishment. But over the past few years, the political landscape has begun to change. The communities most affected by incarceration and violence are organizing to elect leaders to shrink the punishment bureaucracy and to invest instead in addressing the root causes of harm by investing in safety and health.

These wins are not easy, and they are not self-executing. But this vision of dynamic, committed leaders gives me hope and clarity. And with enough steady, flexible funding, there is potential for so much more.

To see what's possible when organizers are properly resourced, look to Los Angeles.

Starting in 2017, Patrisse Cullors, a co-founder of Black Lives Matter, led several veteran organizers with direct and painful experiences with the criminal justice system to form the Justice LA and Reform LA Jails coalitions. Years of brutalization by the jail and prison system hardened their resolve, and numerous past organizing campaigns honed their strategy. These organizers have in four years reshaped the trajectory of Los Angeles County, the most populous in the country with more than 10 million residents.

They pushed the county board of supervisors to cancel a multibillion-dollar jail contract and develop housing and health alternatives under the “care first, jails last” model. They launched a massive local ballot measure campaign (Measure R) to secure oversight of the jails and community input into the jail plan, which passed by a wide margin.

Police do not stop cycles of violence. Communities do.

Emboldened and determined, these organizers kept up the pressure on two fronts in November 2020: They worked to secure passage of Measure J, which will allocate 10 percent of L.A. County’s discretionary budget ($360 million to $900 million a year) to housing, mental health, substance abuse treatment and similar upstream interventions to address needs before sufferers land in jail.

They also led the effort to elect a long-shot district attorney candidate against a police-union-backed incumbent. Thanks to strong organizing, channeling the energy unleashed by millions marching for Black Lives Matter, reformer George Gascón won. Immediately after taking office, Gascón issued a breathtaking slate of policy changes, including commitments to stop charging children as adults, to end the use of sentencing enhancements and to not seek the death penalty.

But the type of work that set Los Angeles on a new course has been chronically underfunded, especially the work of formerly incarcerated people and their loved ones, who best understand their local terrain and are the most motivated to win. Leading organizations in other fields such as environmental conservation and reproductive rights have budgets many times the size of groups working for criminal justice reform. While the United States spends $300 billion on courts, prosecutors, jails and prisons a year, philanthropic giving is less than 0.16 percent of that total. Increased funding in recent years has allowed some campaigners to achieve ambitious victories, but most organizers have not seen that investment. Nor are we doing enough to grow our capacity to hold people accountable *without* prisons and jails, such as through the community-led restorative justice movement fostered by the Life Comes From It fund.

Los Angeles's hard-fought advances won't be enough to secure a future for the city that invests in care, not jails. Organizers must keep the pressure on to overcome fierce opposition by wealthy and powerful institutions that do not want this change. The organizers' advantage? Voters are demanding alternatives to brutal, expensive incarceration. With strong leadership and good infrastructure in place thanks to new money in recent years (though more is still needed), Los Angeles organizers have a shot at forging a new political consensus that centers on health and safety and where no one is disposable due to poverty or race.

The L.A. story is not unique. Around the country, powerful leaders are building the strength to reshape the safety agendas in their communities. This group includes strong local organizations such as Voice of the Experienced, which has spearheaded passage of multiple reform bills in deep-red Louisiana thanks to its large base of directly impacted voters, and national ones such as Essie Justice Group, which trains women with incarcerated loved ones to heal and advocate for change. These groups are looking beyond the immediate question of closing jails. As Andrea James of the National Council for Incarcerated & Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls says, “We are reimagining communities” from the ground up.

Money can’t buy a movement. What it can do is add fuel to a fire that is already here.