

Promote Smart Decarceration

The Issue

Globally, the United States is the leader in incarceration, which has led to staggering economic, social, and human costs for our society. This social justice and human rights crisis substantially over-incarcerates the most vulnerable in society including historically marginalized groups, communities impacted by economic disadvantage, and people with behavioral health disorders.

Societal Goal

The Promote Smart Decarceration (PSD) Grand Challenge was launched in 2016 to advance innovations inside and outside the criminal legal system to replace the ineffective use of incarceration. This entails a proactive, cross-sector, and evidence-driven approach that addresses existing social, racial, and economic disparities and promotes a philosophical shift in how we think about incarceration and public safety. Ultimately, smart decarceration seeks to build social capacity through robust and community-driven responses to local issues without resorting to the default punitive and carceral approach.

A Decade of Work

- The PSD Grand Challenge addresses factors that directly and immediately impact criminal legal system processes (e.g., implementation of bail reform) and an individual's experience in the criminal legal system, including incarceration, reentry, and community supervision. It also includes an emphasis on factors and circumstances leading up to incarceration (e.g., interactions with police).
- The PSD Grand Challenge is organized around three key outcomes: 1) Substantially reducing the number of people incarcerated in jails and prisons; 2) Redressing racial, economic, and behavioral health disparities among people who are incarcerated; and 3) Maximizing public safety and personal and community well-being. It also aims to:
 - Reverse civic and legal exclusions for persons with criminal charges and convictions.
 - Reduce the overall footprint of the criminal legal system by implementing policies and practices that build social and institutional capacity to support the safety, health, and well-being of communities most impacted by incarceration.
 - Prioritize the reduction of racial, health, and economic disparities as key outcomes in decarceration efforts.
 - Reallocate carceral resources to community-based supports, such as housing, education, health, and employment.
 - Work toward abolishing carceral systems that harm people and communities.

Promote Smart Decarceration

Resources

- Charles, P., Epperson, M., Jackson, A., Lea, C., & Washington, D. (2024). [Meeting the Grand Challenge to Promote Smart Decarceration](#). (2024 Policy Recommendations for Meeting the Grand Challenges for Social Work). American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare.
- Charles, P., Epperson, M., Copeland, P., & Pettus-Davis, C. (2022). Promote smart decarceration. In Barth, R. P., Shanks, T. R., Messing, J. & Herbert Williams, J. (Eds.). *Grand challenges for social work and society*. (2nd Edition). London, Oxford.
- Epperson, M.W., Pettus-Davis, C. (Eds.). (2017). *Smart Decarceration: Achieving Criminal Justice Transformation in the 21st Century*. Oxford University Press.
- Pettus-Davis, C., Epperson, M., & Grier, A. (2017). [Guideposts for the Era of Smart Decarceration](#).
- Pettus-Davis, C. & Epperson, M. (2016, September). [Policy recommendations for meeting the Grand Challenge to Promote Smart Decarceration](#) (Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative Policy Brief No. 9). American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare.
- Pettus-Davis, C., & Epperson, M. W. (2015). [From mass incarceration to smart decarceration](#) (Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative Working Paper No. 4). Cleveland, OH: American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare.
- Pettus-Davis, C., Epperson, M. W., & Grier, A. (2017, March). [Reverse civic and legal exclusions for persons with criminal charges and convictions](#) (Policy Action No. 9.1). American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, Grand Challenges for Social Work.
- Websites:
 - <https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/promote-smart-decarceration/>
 - www.smartdecarceration.org
 - <https://csd.wustl.edu/items/decarceration/>
 - www.familywellbeingandjustice.com

Network Leadership (alphabetical)

Pajarita Charles, PhD, MSW, MPA

Associate Professor; Director, Lab for Family Wellbeing & Justice
University of Wisconsin-Madison
paja.charles@wisc.edu

Ashley Jackson, PhD, MSW

Assistant Professor
Rutgers University
aj1036@ssw.rutgers.edu

Matt Epperson, PhD, MSW

Associate Professor; Director, Smart Decarceration Project
University of Chicago
mepperson@uchicago.edu

Durrell M. Washington Sr., MSW

Doctoral Candidate
The University of Chicago
dWASHINGTON5@uchicago.edu