

REENGAGING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN CIVIL RIGHTS



JCPA | JEWISH COUNCIL
FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Section 1: Call to Action

Section 2: Criminal Justice 101

Section 3: Getting Started

IN THIS GUIDE, WE WILL HELP YOU LEARN:

- What is the impact of mass incarceration in your state and local area?
- What reform efforts, if any, are taking place in your region?
- What other community leaders, organizations, or legislators are already involved in this work?
- Where can your JCRC and Federation system make a difference on these issues?
- How can you jumpstart Jewish community education, advocacy and involvement?

On the cover: Meeting of the Community Coalition for Quality Policing at Milwaukee City Hall. Photo courtesy of Elana Kahn, Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation.

GETTING STARTED

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN YOUR COMMUNITY AND HOW CAN YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

In order to engage in community work centering on racial equality and criminal justice reform, it is important to first understand what is happening in your state and local area. In this guide we will provide some basic questions, tools, and tips to help you begin mapping out reforms in your region and jumpstarting your community's engagement.

The Jewish Community Relations field has a distinguished track record dating back to the early 1930s in fighting for racial equality and civil rights throughout the United States. Such fights included advancing racial equality in education, ending segregation, and in more recent years, ensuring enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. More than 50 years later, we are facing a new crisis that needs our attention: our criminal justice system is not living up to its name and has left a disproportionate impact on communities of color.

The inequities people of color face in the justice system—from the school-to-prison pipeline to reentry and its collateral consequences—constitute one of the most pressing civil rights crises of our time. Regardless of how and why the system was set up, racial disparities are a pernicious and, ultimately, an unacceptable reality of our criminal justice system. It is a problem that can be addressed if communities unite and move forward together.

EDUCATE

EXPLORE available data to get a macro-level sense of the issues in your community. Please note that the absence of data does not necessarily indicate the absence of a problem. Lack of data collection is one of the issues advocates are seeking to address.

As you proceed, it may be helpful to keep the following questions in mind:

- How many people are currently incarcerated in your state and local area?
- How many people are in jail versus state prison?
- Can you break down this data by gender and race and ethnicity (for example, non-Hispanic white, Latino, black, Pacific Islander, Asian)? Can you break the data down by type of offense, or whether the crime was violent or nonviolent?
- What reform efforts, if any, are taking place?
- What other community leaders, organizations, or legislators are already involved in this work?
- Where can your JCRC and Federation system make a difference?

RESOURCES TO GET YOU STARTED:

- Explore the U.S. Bureau of Prison Statistics' website at www.bop.gov/about/statistics.
- Find out your state's imprisonment rate using The Sentencing Project's interactive map at www.sentencingproject.org/the-facts/#map.
- Look up the percentage of crimes your local law enforcement solve using this database from National Public Radio at <http://n.pr/1Nz1HfE>.
- Find out what court fees your state charges using this helpful tool created by National Public Radio at <http://n.pr/2fSDXek>.

REACH OUT to your partners in communities of color to see if this is an issue they are active on and open dialogues to hear about the impact this is having on their communities first-hand. We suggest speaking with:

- Influential state and local leaders of civil rights organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, and black clergy members.
- Relevant local elected or appointed officials—such as mayors, city council members, county executives, state legislators, police chiefs, sheriffs, judges, and prosecutors—to find out if any are already engaged or outspoken on criminal justice reform or racial equality.

LEARN what state and local coalitions and organizations are working on criminal justice reform.

- The Prison Fellowship offers a state advocacy resource guide that may help you get started at <http://bit.ly/2giu6Pk>.
- Who are the active governmental players at the state and local level? What is the position of your governor, state legislators, and attorney general? What reforms, if any, are taking place in your state? What are the areas that need still need attention?

ADVOCATE

Advocacy on criminal justice can be twofold: 1) educating and engaging the mainstream Jewish community to understand the issue and its complexities and then 2) training community relations leaders to be active advocates and, even leaders, on reform efforts.

RAISE awareness in your community.

- Hold dialogues and panels to educate the community on what is happening both nationally and locally. Invite key advocates working at the state level to speak. Consider inviting a Jewish leader in your community who has a history of working to further civil rights and is currently engaged in this issue.
- Write articles and op-eds for your local Jewish paper to educate the community and show Jewish involvement.

ENGAGE the Jewish community.

- Work within Federations, state associations, synagogues, and other local Jewish groups engaged in public policy to take positions on criminal justice in order to make it a mainstream Jewish concern.

BE a convener.

- Help lead on creating networks that bring many stakeholders and key players together to make this a communitywide/statewide issue. You may find that the Jewish community is not currently at the table. JCRCs do not have to be an expert on the topic, but rather bring their expertise at facilitating diverse groups to come together on policy initiatives. We suggest inviting leading local advocates and relevant officials to speak with the community on their engagement efforts to reform our justice system.

BUILD relationships with black and Latino communities.

- Over the past generation, the black and Jewish communities have grown apart. Younger activists and leaders were not present during the civil rights era and may not be as aware of the Jewish community's commitment and involvement. It is time for JCRCs to help the Jewish community rebuild relationships with ascending leaders in black communities, between synagogues and churches, and among young people. Though the Jewish community has not had the same historical partnership with the Latino population, we urge you to begin outreach and relationship building.

MOBILIZE

CONSIDER how your JCRC or Federation can be most helpful.

- For example, one option would be to establish support services for returning citizens who may need assistance, especially in the first six months to a year after their release. Reentering society, even after a short period behind bars, is a real challenge. Many returning citizens find their access to basic necessities, such as gainful employment, food, and shelter limited. Federation-related agencies through Jewish Vocational Services are well-positioned and may be interested to help these people find employment, while Jewish Family Services may encourage social workers to partner with returning citizens to provide holistic support.

PARTICIPATE in JCPA's racial equality and criminal justice initiative.

- We plan to play a strong convening role and hope you will join us for regular conference calls and upcoming webinars. We urge you to take action with JCPA and share our alerts, mobilize your community, and make criminal justice reform a priority when meeting with your representatives.

JCPA is ready to assist.

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