**Why Jail Diversion is the Future of Policing**

There’s no question that the political climate right now is complex. The number of police-related shootings is problematic, and the number of minorities that are in prison compared to non-minorities is astounding. There are ways to change this, though. The future of policing should be, and hopefully will be, in diverting people to proper community resources. It’s important for the police to strategically and successfully deal with people suffering from addiction and/or mental health issues.

The large numbers of mentally ill and addicted people arrested for low-level drug crimes are not making our communities safer. It gives the public the illusion that things are safer, but that’s simply not the case. Police are also consistently arresting people with mental health issues. If they end up in jail while they are awaiting trial or get convicted and go to jail, they will get very little meaningful treatment or care.

**Who Benefits From Diverting People from Jail?**

Simply put, everyone does. Having another option besides arresting people helps everyone involved. The police will have better resources and better knowledge to help people, especially someone suffering from addiction or mental health issues. Not arresting people unnecessarily saves time, money, and supports what are generally the most marginalized and underserved populations, such as minorities and people suffering from mental health issues or addiction. Offering people treatment and care as opposed to jail is critical.

Diverting offenders away from jail would also be incredibly beneficial for the juvenile population. At any given time, there are around [60,000 people under 18](https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/youth-incarceration/americas-addiction-juvenile-incarceration-state-state) incarcerated in juvenile jails in the United States. The consequences of taking adults away from their families and their support systems are dire. Imagine how hard it is for a child. Juveniles are locked up every day for minor offenses directly related to acute mental health crises. That can and should change immediately. Connecting juvenile offenders with proper treatment, mentors, and people who actually care about their well-being would not only help them, but would benefit the community as well. Instead of focusing on turning children into prisoners, we should be spending time and energy helping them become healthy and productive members of society.

**Treatment In Jail is Subpar, If It Even Exists**

Many arrests deal with people suffering from mental illness and/or addiction. Arresting people for selling drugs isn’t always automatically going to make our communities much safer. The people selling on the streets are often low-level dealers selling drugs to feed their own habits. They are not the kingpins running large drug empires. Putting these people in jail may make some people feel better, but it doesn’t actually create a safer community. It often won’t rehabilitate the person who’s sitting in jail without adequate care and treatment. Even if they get drug or mental health treatment in jail, it’s almost always subpar. Incarceration often makes low-level “criminals” worse, not better. Then they get out of jail and inevitably commit more severe crimes than before because now they may have lost whatever job, housing, or family support that they had before they were incarcerated.

Aside from there being inadequate substance abuse and mental health treatment in jails and prisons, the overall conditions of many jails and prisons are abysmal. They’re tremendously overcrowded, and prisoners are often deprived of basic fundamental human rights. Physical attacks and sexual assaults are rampant in jails and prisons. Prisoners are often underfed and are treated worse than many of us could ever imagine. Disease runs rampant in the prisons due to inadequate medical treatment as well as severe overcrowding in such small spaces. Some of the conditions in jails and prisons in the United States are so bad that it puts people’s lives in danger every day. Most people don’t even give it a second thought.

**They Broke The Law – Shouldn’t There Be Consequences?**

Sure, but the consequences don’t have to be jail or prison as the go-to solution. People sometimes make serious mistakes, but is it helpful if the consequences cause them to lose their job because they are stuck in jail because they can’t afford bail? This doesn’t help the offender or the community. Locking someone in jail doesn’t rehabilitate them. If jails and prisons had better human services, it might be a different conversation, but they simply don’t. If the conditions in jails were more oriented towards rehabilitation rather than punishment, or if we as a society could find a better alternative to prison, shouldn’t we try to do that?

Being incarcerated and torn away from your friends, family, job, home, and any community support you have is not only counterproductive, but it’s also very traumatic. If there’s a way to help someone while also making the community safer, that’s what we should be aiming for. There’s no reason for everything to be punitive if there can be a better way. We don’t live in a world where an eye for an eye makes sense in all situations. It’s time to start treating people like human beings, even if they’ve committed a crime. When someone has committed a non-violent, low-level offense, jail is not always the best answer. When a mentally ill person is in crisis, prison is not the answer. We need to make mental health and addiction resources more readily available.

It’s also important to note that incarcerating people in the United States is exorbitantly expensive. If we as a country spent some of that money on creating proper resources and then connecting people in need with those programs, our money would be better spent. If we used some of that money on education and increased funding for public schools and other community services, people might get the help they need before they wind up in jail.

When we imprison people and don’t help them deal with any of the underlying issues that may have contributed to them committing a crime, we are just delaying the inevitable. Eventually, most people get out of jail. When they do, they have often lost so much, especially that feeling of connection with their communities. It can feel almost impossible to pick up the pieces and put their lives back together. Unsurprisingly, they continue to suffer from addiction or mental health issues and then commit more crimes. The cycle starts all over again.

**Reframe The Conversation**

We as a society often fail each other. We put people down and want to lock them up because they made a mistake. Instead, we should figure out what would be best for them and society as a whole. For too long, there has been the narrative that drug addicts and mentally ill people are bad people, worthless, and dangerous. They can’t be rehabilitated, and we should lock them all up. This just isn’t true. The criminal justice system has to change, but as a society, we all have to change as well. Instead of asking what punishment is appropriate for someone who actually needs help, we should be trying to figure out how we can help them. The change starts with all of us. Learning to treat people with dignity and respect, even if they’ve committed a crime, has to be part of that change.

**So What Should The Police Do Instead?**

The entire policing system needs an overhaul in many ways, but there are things that specific police districts could do easily and right away to start making changes. Instead of automatically arresting people who commit low-level, non-violent offenses and struggling with addiction and mental illness, the police should be trained to connect them with the resources that can help. If they have a mental illness, the police should connect them with community resources that can help address those mental health concerns. If the person is suffering from addiction, the police should connect them with drug treatment services. In many cases, jail can be the last resort, not the first option.

One way to implement these ideas into real-life change is to take advantage of the systems, programs, and software that already exist. For example, there is software called Julota that enables communities to better address mental health issues, substance abuse, and emergency interventions. At the same time, this software can help expand the impact of limited community resources by connecting people to the right service, with the right resources, at the right time. Software like this allows police officers to quickly check and see if space is available at a local mental health clinic or substance abuse center. If there is space available, the officers can alert the facility that they are on the way, and this is all done electronically. An arrest can be avoided.

 Additionally, the officers can see if the individual is already working with other community services when they encounter them on the scene. If they are, the police will be able to reach out to someone – a counselor, for instance - who works at that place and let them know what’s going on. This is helpful because then the police officers know exactly where they can bring someone instead of arresting them. If there is no arrest, much less damage is also done to a person’s life, allowing them to recover and reintegrate into society much more quickly.