

Inside Philanthropy



The State of
American Philanthropy

Giving for
Criminal Justice

ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Giving to criminal justice reform organizations soared to unprecedented levels during the past decade, but more recently underwent a steep decline coming off of 2020's record-breaking highs. The funding upticks were widely associated with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013, followed by a significant additional surge in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. The predominant funder types in justice reform include private foundations, community foundations, individual donors, grassroots networks and collaborative funds. Corporations are beginning to widen their funding footprint, though corporate interest in this funding area is limited.

This paper analyzes current trends in giving to criminal justice reform. Key takeaways include:

Who's Giving

- Private foundations like the MacArthur, Annie E. Casey, and Ford Foundations are longtime funders in this space. Newer organizations piloted by living donors have more recently become key funders, including Arnold Ventures, Ballmer Group, and The Just Trust, a Chan Zuckerberg Initiative spinoff.
- Community foundations, collaborative funds, and grassroots networks are essential givers in justice reform. Increasingly, these groups work with legacy foundations via collaborative funds or joint advocacy campaigns.
- Corporations and individual donors have not historically been big givers, but in 2020 and 2021, mega-pledges and donations came from corporations like Microsoft, Nike, and Universal Music Group, as well as from individual donors, including Michael Jordan and MacKenzie Scott.

Who's Getting

- According to data from Candid, prisoner reentry and prison alternative programs are the most common areas of funding among justice reform funders. These programs are often housed at larger organizations working on services for at-risk youth.
- The Equal Justice Initiative has been a major recipient of philanthropic funding (According to Candid, over \$250 million between 2018–2023). The Center for Employment Opportunities, JustLeadershipUSA, and New Venture Fund are other popular recipients of justice reform funding.
- Several organizations received significant funding for the first time on the heels of the 2020 racial justice protests, including the National Bail Fund (bringing in \$80 million in the spring of 2020 alone), the Movement for Black Lives, the Prison Policy Initiative, and Color of Change.

The Big Issues and Funding Trends

- The biggest issues within criminal justice reform include policing reform, alternatives to incarceration, and bail and pretrial reforms. Other areas of focus include research-driven initiatives, advocacy,

constituent-led leadership development, movement building, and jail/prison population reduction (decarceration) strategies.

- There is growing – albeit continuously underfunded – support for reforms surrounding women and LGBTQ+ communities in jails and prisons, programs for victims of gender-based violence and sexual assault, immigrant detention, healing justice and restorative justice programs.
- Key funder strategies include advocacy campaigns, movement building, and leadership development. These strategies are used to increase public awareness of the consequences of mass incarceration, policing, and the impacts of the justice system on youth and minority populations.

Equity in the Sector

- Issues of equity are central to criminal justice reform. Minority and vulnerable communities are overrepresented among the populations impacted by policing and incarceration.
- Larger funders have stepped up their efforts to fund BIPOC-led and constituent-led organizations.
- Several constituent-led organizations have become influential within justice reform in recent years, including the Formerly Incarcerated Convicted People and Families Movement.
- There remains a lack of funding for mental health and substance abuse programs, and programs focused on women, LGBTQ+, Latinx, Native American and immigrant populations affected by the justice system.

Fundraising Now

- In the Spring of 2020, criminal justice reform organizations experienced fundraising surges on a scale that few could have predicted. The Minnesota Freedom Fund, a once-tiny bail fund, received over \$30 million in contributions after George Floyd's death. The Movement for Black Lives, which raised \$2.7 million in 2019, raised \$90 million in 2020. And in the 2020 fiscal year, the Bail Project brought in \$41 million from 468,000 donors, as compared to \$14.9 million from 5,100 donors in 2019.
- These dramatic surges were followed by a period of uncertainty, as nonprofits wondered if this funding would last. [Recent data](#) from The Bridgespan Group and Candid reveals that funding indeed declined in 2021 and 2022.

Looking to the future, there are many opportunities and challenges facing justice reform funders and grantees. A common concern is that recent funding surges created a false narrative that criminal justice reform is a well-resourced area of philanthropy. At the same time, there is cautious optimism about increased donor understanding of systemic racism, intersectionality, and the relevance of systemic factors –such as housing, education, food security, poverty reduction and community development– within justice reform philanthropy.

Introduction

In May 2020, George Floyd, an unarmed 46-year-old Black man, was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer in broad daylight while onlookers pleaded for Floyd's life. The disturbing footage sparked nationwide protests that stretched through the summer. Support for the Black Lives Matter movement surged while calls to #DefundthePolice drew attention to issues central to criminal justice reform philanthropy, particularly in the areas of policing and police violence.

Amidst all of this, funding to criminal justice reform organizations soared to unprecedented levels. Yet even as the funding poured in, many in the field questioned whether it would last. Criminal justice has long been an overlooked field in philanthropy, and nonprofits are accustomed to times of funding famine.

The years since 2020 have borne out funders' concerns. A 2022 analysis of Candid data by The Bridgespan Group found that funding for criminal justice reform grew to an all-time high of \$632 million in 2020, then declined to \$341 million in 2021 and less than \$400 million in 2022. While Candid data is imperfect and does not capture all funding, the general downward trend seems clear.

This brief examines recent research, news, data, and expert opinion from Inside Philanthropy's discussions with leaders in the field to provide a bird's-eye view of criminal justice reform philanthropy in the U.S.—its priorities, trajectory, and funding landscape. Justice reform

remains an underfunded area of philanthropy, particularly in relation to the behemoth industries of policing and prisons that it seeks to dismantle or reform. Candid data shows that funding totaled \$341 million in 2021, while funding for all topic areas totaled \$219 billion. Justice reform thus comprised about 1.5% of domestic funding. Widening the lens, Candid data from 2021 captured \$7.9 billion in racial equity grants. Criminal justice reform is a small, somewhat overlapping piece of the larger, historically underfunded racial equity sector.

By comparison, the populations that justice reform philanthropy serves—currently and formerly incarcerated individuals and their families, crime survivors, and populations impacted by policing and the legal system—is huge. Research compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative shows that 4.9 million people are booked in jail every year, and 77 million have a criminal record. Nearly half of Americans have a close family member who has been incarcerated. The public investment in this system of mass criminalization is significant. Total annual costs of policing are \$126.4 billion, according to the Prison Policy Initiative. The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that the cost of jails and prisons is \$80 billion per year.

As this report highlights, criminal justice reform organizations and their funders employ a variety of strategies to reform the legal and justice systems. Even conservative-leaning funders like the Charles Koch Institute seek to reduce mass incarceration, and many nonprofits working in this space seek more support for movement building, advocacy, and public education.

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

Prior to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013, justice reform giving was predominated by a handful of legacy private foundations. Today, it is driven by a proliferation of joint funding efforts that often involve collaborations between private or community foundations and smaller, constituent-led organizations. This dynamic relationship between large foundations and grassroots movement building is a newer, unique and evolving aspect of criminal justice reform philanthropy. In recent years, corporations and individual donors have become a more important source of funding.

The top institutional givers to justice reform include the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Other top givers include the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust, and the Public Welfare Foundation.

Some of the newer philanthropic outfits headed by billionaire donors have become major supporters of justice reform. In 2021, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI) spun off its preexisting criminal justice program into a separate organization, [The Just Trust](#), with \$350 million in startup funding. Open Philanthropy (OP), a relative newcomer to this space, is funded primarily by Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz and his spouse Cari Tuna. Similar to CZI's move, OP spun off its criminal justice

10 Criminal Justice Reform Funders to Know

[Arnold Ventures](#)

[Ballmer Group](#)

[John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation](#)

[Open Society Foundations](#)

[Ford Foundation](#)

[Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#)

[Silicon Valley Community Foundation](#)

[The Just Trust](#)

[Public Welfare Foundation](#)

[Annie E. Casey Foundation](#)

program in 2021 with \$50 million in seed funding for a new group, Just Impact Advisors.

Arnold Ventures is another LLC with a distinct interest in criminal justice reform. Funded by hedge fund billionaires John and Laura Arnold, Arnold Ventures counts criminal justice reform as one of its six core funding areas. Yet another LLC, The Ballmer Group, has become a major justice reform and violence prevention funder. Founded by former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer and his spouse Connie, the Ballmer's investments in justice reform have increased astronomically in recent years—as has their personal wealth.

It's notable that most of today's largest contributions come from family foundations or LLCs with living donors that weren't involved in

criminal justice reform a decade ago, whether due to an initial lack of interest or simply because the entity didn't exist yet. Young billionaires prioritizing justice reform is a positive signal for this area of philanthropy.

Collaborative funds, giving circles and grassroots networks are significant drivers of criminal justice reform philanthropy. The Movement for Black Lives, a collective of over 100 groups dispersed nationwide, has created a grant-giving vehicle—the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation — that [granted \\$21.7 million](#) in 2020, its inaugural year. Other important collaborative funds include the Communities Transforming Policing Fund, the National Bail Fund Network, the California Black Freedom Fund, the Spark Justice Fund and the Democracy Frontlines Fund.

The largest corporations in the U.S., which historically avoided justice reform efforts, suddenly entered the scene in 2020. Sony, Universal Music Groups, Microsoft and others pledged millions to racial justice programs, some of them centering criminal justice reform in their work. Apple and Walmart pledged \$100 million apiece. It's unclear how much of these pledges went to criminal justice reform specifically. The majority of racial justice funding tends to support job readiness, education, and housing initiatives. But at least some of these corporate pledges specifically supported justice reform, as we will explore.

The NFL has likewise become a significant contributor to criminal justice reform. The league's Inspire Change Initiative has [granted](#) tens of millions to racial justice and justice

reform organizations since 2018, and it recently announced a 10-year commitment of \$250 million to social justice issues.

Individual and celebrity donors are interested in the cause, with Seth Rogen, Chrissy Teigen, Don Cheadle and others donating to bail funds during the George Floyd protests. Author and philanthropist MacKenzie Scott has [donated](#) an unknown but significant amount to criminal justice reform nonprofits. As we explore below, Scott is likely the single largest supporter of justice reform philanthropy.

An [analysis](#) by Candid found that giving to racial equity causes increased exponentially in 2020. By July of 2020, \$4.2 billion was awarded or pledged in that year alone, a staggering increase over the \$3.3 billion awarded in the eight-year span between 2011 and 2019. Data on the proportion of this racial equity funding going to criminal justice reform specifically won't be available for several years, but the upward trend is clear.

Before 2020, Candid documented that [only 1%](#) of overall foundation funding went to the umbrella category of racial equity. Narrowing the lens, Candid data from 2014–2018 shows that only 0.14% of total domestic philanthropic funding went to criminal justice reform. As we detail throughout this brief, giving has risen since 2018, but even with substantial upticks, justice reform remains a relatively sparsely funded area of philanthropy. Inside Philanthropy's survey of funders and fundraisers working on criminal justice reform shows caution despite upward trends. About half of the 64 respondents felt giving was increasing, while the other half felt it was about the same or losing traction.

Who's Getting

A good place to start thinking about types of nonprofits working within justice reform is direct service organizations versus research or advocacy organizations. Direct service work might include re-entry programs (oftentimes job placement or training) or programs that provide counseling and alternatives to prison (oftentimes for at-risk youth). Research and advocacy organizations include constituent-led organizations that advocate for policy change (such as Families Against Mandatory Minimums) and research institutions that study existing policies and policy alternatives (such as the Urban Institute's crime, justice, and safety program).

In practice, there is often significant overlap between organizations and funds that support justice reform work in general (advocacy, public education, movement building) and direct service programs like bail funds, re-entry programs, and direct service partnerships with local police and social service agencies. For example, the National Bail Fund Network, a project of the Community Justice Exchange, disperses money directly to rapid-response community bail funds, and is also involved with advocacy and coalition work to end or reform the money bail and pretrial detention systems.

Organizations often divide their criminal justice reform efforts according to the timeline of interaction with the system, which can loosely be thought of as before, during, and after arrest or incarceration. Arnold Ventures divides its [substantial criminal justice programming](#) into 11 subcategories. Some of these are "front-end"

prevention programs, such as the Reducing Violent Crime, Gun Policy Research, and Police Response programs. Other programs in the portfolio are targeted at policy reform for those who are already in the system, such as its Bail Reform and Public Defense programs. And finally, a handful of its programs are for the convicted and/or formerly incarcerated, including funding for nonprofits that provide or research probation/parole and reintegration programs.

Strategy Spotlight:



#8cantwait
TAKE ACTION RIGHT NOW.

Campaign Zero's #8cantwait campaign narrows in on eight targeted police reform policies including banning chokeholds and rules for de-escalation. Other targeted reforms include banning no-knock warrants and ending qualified immunity.

#8cantwait reforms can be implemented quickly, as opposed to more comprehensive reforms. These often include city budget overhauls redirecting money from police to alternative programs like substance abuse programs or training mental health professionals to respond to certain types of 911 calls.

Juvenile justice is often folded into programs that also target the adult incarcerated population, but some programs and foundations focus on juvenile justice more exclusively. Key funders and recipients in this area include the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Public Welfare Foundation, the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, The Advancement Project, the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, the Haywood Burns Institute, the Campaign for Youth Justice, and the National Juvenile Justice Network.

Increasingly, the delineation between juvenile justice programs and general justice reform is blurred. The growing preponderance of funds for policing reform, violence prevention, restorative justice and alternatives to incarceration are often targeted to youth populations, even when not specifically earmarked within a “juvenile justice” fund or program. This is largely because youth comprise a significant portion of the individuals impacted by the legal system.

Considerable philanthropic funds are directed to local governments and municipalities (sometimes directly to the “Mayor’s Fund”-type quasi-charitable entities, sometimes to collaborating nonprofits) to reform police departments, courts, legislatures and other publicly funded entities in efforts to reduce jail and prison populations. The MacArthur Foundation’s Safety and Justice Challenge is the biggest giver in this area, though public-private partnerships to reduce mass incarceration represent a popular strategy in general.

Other types of nonprofits receiving substantial investments include bail funds, movement

building and advocacy organizations, and research and educational organizations with data-driven approaches to reducing mass incarceration and supporting public safety. There is a quiet blossoming of coalitions and organizations led by victims of crime, especially in the area of domestic violence and sexual assault. In recent years, funds are increasingly directed to BIPOC-led and constituent-led organizations, as discussed below in the Equity section.

Candid data shows that among recipient nonprofits, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) has drawn in many funders, receiving over \$200 million from a wide array of funders between 2018 and 2022. Fidelity Charitable’s [2021 Giving Report](#) of donor-advised funds found that in 2020, for the first year ever, a criminal justice organization cracked Fidelity’s top 20 list, coming in at No. 20—and EJI was that organization.

EJI is a decades-old nonprofit founded by Bryan Stevenson, based in Montgomery, Alabama, providing legal services to the poor, including death penalty litigation, juvenile justice programs, reentry programs, and advocacy efforts. Its four programming areas are criminal justice reform, racial justice, public education, and anti-poverty work. EJI bankrolled the successful 2020 feature film “Just Mercy,” and in 2018, it opened two national institutions—The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice.

Another major grant recipient is the Center for Employment Opportunities, a national

organization that provides post-incarceration employment and job-readiness programs. Other top recipients include intermediary organizations like Tides Center and the New Venture Fund; Homeboy Industries, a Catholic rehabilitation and reentry program for current and former gang members; and Impact Justice, which advocates for restorative justice programs, expanding opportunities for the formerly incarcerated, and improving living conditions for people in the system.

10 Criminal Justice Grantees to Know

Center for Policing Equity

Impact Justice

Equal Justice Initiative

Everytown for Gun Safety
Support Fund

Homeboy Industries

Center for Employment
Opportunities

The Bail Project

Alliance for Safety and Justice

A New Way of Life
Reentry Project

Anti-Recidivism Coalition

Bail funds have become major recipients of donor support, beginning in 2013 and then reaching a peak in 2020. The Bail Project [received \\$15 million](#) from 200,000 individual donors just in the first weeks of the George Floyd protests.

The National Bail Fund brought in an astonishing \$80 million in the late spring of 2020. Another organization that saw explosive growth was the Minnesota Freedom Fund, a scrappy nonprofit with a pre-2020 annual budget averaging around \$150,000. As [reported by IP](#), in a matter of days, it had a war chest topping \$30 million from 900,000 individual donations. Many of these funds were ultimately directed to outside organizations working on similar issues.

In the years since 2020, The Bail Project has continued to receive significant funding, particularly from Blue Meridian Partners, a funding intermediary.

Other funds and organizations receiving considerable support in recent years include Black Lives Matter, The Vera Institute of Justice (a longstanding research institute), Borealis Philanthropy, the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Prison Policy Initiative, Color of Change, and research initiatives including those at John Jay College, the Research Triangle Institute, the Center for Effective Public Policy, and the Research Foundation of the City University of New York.

The philanthropist MacKenzie Scott has [singled out](#) several criminal justice reform organizations for large, multi-million-dollar gifts, including Blackbird, the Center for Policing Equity, the Collective Future Fund, Futures Without Violence, Groundswell Fund, RAINN, and LatinoJustice. These recipients track with two important trends in criminal justice reform philanthropy, namely, giving to BIPOC-led organizations and organizations that focus on domestic and sexual violence prevention.

The Big Issues and Beyond

Funding priorities within criminal justice reform have shifted in tandem with the increased influence of grassroots, BIPOC-led, and constituent-led organizations. Many associate this shift with the 2014 uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri, following the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager who was fatally shot by a Ferguson police officer. Grassroots movements—which had been ignored or underfunded for decades—demonstrated their ability to affect change in ways that were extraordinarily visceral. They demanded attention, and some of the larger funders were listening.

Issues receiving considerably more funder attention in recent years include policing reform, bail and other pre-trial detention reforms, diversion and alternatives to incarceration programs, parole and probation reform, youth programs disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline, advocacy and policy efforts surrounding defunding the police, and restorative justice programs, as well as a proliferation of education, advocacy, movement building and leadership development programs.

Local Advocacy. In an interview with Inside Philanthropy, Tanya Coke, the former director of the gender, racial, and ethnic justice programs at the Ford Foundation, says that grassroots organizations are more likely to focus on locally determined advocacy issues, like bail reform, whereas foundations had traditionally focused on state-level sentencing reforms. “This is one area where Ford has shifted,” Coke said. “As more constituent organizing came online, these

member-led organizations were interested in changing their local DA, or policy at their local jail. County and municipal fights.”

Coke said the success of these local efforts prompted Ford to invest more heavily in Black-led organizing and programs that “look at the question of freedom and liberation more holistically.”

A Giver and a Getter: The Movement for Black Lives



M4BL brought in a historic \$90 million in 2020, from over 1.1 million individual donors as well as larger givers and institutions. The M4BL sought to use this inflow for grantmaking and directed funds to its Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation. By the end 2020, the BLMGNF granted \$21.7 million, primarily to BIPOC-led and LGBTQ-led organizations. Yet in the 2022 fiscal year, the foundation raised just \$9 million and dispersed \$4 million in grants. This is emblematic of the larger pattern in justice reform philanthropy, which saw a peak of donations in 2020, then a rapid reversal.

More Attention to Women and LGBTQ+ in the System.

There is growing support for reforms surrounding the imprisonment of—and violence experienced by—women, mothers and members of the LGBTQ+ communities, as well as healing and justice programs related to sexual harassment and gender-based violence. There is also growing but continuously underfunded support for policy changes surrounding prostitution in the legal system, human trafficking, hate crimes and the criminalization of trans lives, as well as violence experienced by LGBTQ+ people at all levels of the legal system, from interactions with police to violence in jails. One recent example was the successful effort to repeal New York’s “walking while trans” anti-loitering law that police used to justify targeting trans people. Several national justice reform groups, including Color of Change and LatinoJustice, were involved in this campaign.

Multiple interviewees for this report highlighted that today’s constellation of justice reform priorities is an outgrowth of movement-building predating the George Floyd protests. In the summer of 2020, the movement was ready to meet the moment.

“My fund was created, and our Black-Led Movement Fund was created, following Ferguson [in 2014],” says Jeree Thomas, program director at the Communities Transforming Policing Fund at Borealis Philanthropy. “2020 was unique because we had the intersection of a pandemic and several violent murders by the police, but honestly, there was funding that already created the groundwork and network that made the uprising possible, that made the sustained and coordinated demand possible.”

Immigrant Detention. An intersecting funding area is immigration reform. The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the largest funder here, initially pursued criminal and immigrant justice efforts in tandem, situating them together at FWD.us, the initiative’s advocacy arm. Now, there are two separate programs—The Just Trust for justice reform, and a revamped FWD.us to focus more exclusively on immigrant justice reform. In general, there is growing recognition — among funders, if not the larger public — that immigrant detention is part and parcel of mass incarceration in the U.S.

Attention to Conditions of Confinement and Post-Release.

The COVID-19 pandemic drew funder attention to two areas that have been chronically underfunded: “conditions of confinement,” a term often used for conditions within jails and prisons, and resources for the formerly incarcerated immediately after release. The Circle for Justice Innovations (CJI), a longstanding justice reform grantmaker, responded quickly to the COVID-19 crisis via their participatory grantmaking model. CJI’s partners, many of them constituent-led, quickly understood the immediate needs.

Executive director Aleah Vaughn says that during the first weeks of COVID, jails and prisons saw “lockdowns where people were kept in their cells and solitary all day, so we had a situation where you can’t even call your family. And then people were being released, which is great—but to where? They might be older, sick, not have family. Many of the post-release support services were closed. So we had a crisis.” Vaughn explains that CJI’s emergency funds went toward novel purchases such as tablets to connect former

inmates with post-release caseworkers, or toward protective equipment for inmates, guards and staff.

It's notable that amid the 2020 funding surge, it was "front-end" programs like bail funds and policing reform that saw the majority of increased support. This is likely because the 2020 protests drew attention to topics surrounding policing and violence long neglected by funders. Yet services for the currently and formerly incarcerated didn't see the same level of increased support. It's promising that in the years since 2020, major funders like Ballmer Group, Arnold Ventures, and The Just Trust continue to prioritize constituent-led nonprofits that maintain programs focused on prison conditions and reintegration.

Inside Philanthropy Survey

"Criminal justice reform is gaining traction. People are recognizing the prevalence and effects of racism on systems. People are recognizing the importance of holistic support for youth and young adults across interlocking systems."

—Fundraiser, Napa, California

"For us at Borealis, our two [justice reform] programs are really focused on the front end of the system, on policing and pretrial issues," Thomas says. "But there's still a lot of advocacy around folks' experiences in prison, around trying to close prisons, and that needs a lot of attention."

Funder Strategies and Trends

The strategies pursued by justice reform funders have been influenced by the democratizing trends in philanthropy, with programming increasingly focused on advocacy, coalition-building, research-informed policy initiatives, participatory grantmaking and multi-year grants to constituent-led organizations. This tracks with the huge focus on advocacy within the larger category of racial equity funding. According to an analysis by Candid, 66% of funding for racial equity employs policy, advocacy and systems reform as a listed strategic approach, whereas just 4% of overall U.S.-focused funding does.

That said, while funders often speak about the importance of advocacy and movement building, in practice these approaches aren't funded as generously as direct services and research. A 2022 [Bridgespan Group analysis](#) of criminal justice reform philanthropy found that three "critical areas of the ecosystem ... are most deeply under-resourced: leadership development, organizing, and direct advocacy." The study also found that funding gaps in these areas were more critical in the South and the Midwest. So while the following strategies are gaining momentum, they're also perennially underfunded, despite vocal calls among nonprofit leaders to better-resource movements.

Advocacy and Movement Building.

Responses to Inside Philanthropy's survey of those working in criminal justice reform indicated that advocacy and movement building are viewed as a growing funder focus, with almost half of respondents believing more funding is going to this area, and less than 1 in 10 responding that less funding is.

Funders are also increasingly targeting the “front end” of the system as a way to prevent people from being arrested, sentenced or incarcerated in the first place. The flowering of these strategies comes with a panoply of terms and phrases such as restorative justice, pre-arrest diversion, pretrial reform, community investment, calls to defund or abolish the police and prisons, crime prevention and violence reduction strategies, and alternatives to policing. This is a radically different geography than just 15 years ago, when attorney-led organizations working on prosecutorial and legal reform still dominated the justice reform field.

While prosecutorial reform remains important, newer efforts widen the lens and blur the lines between justice reform and broader economic empowerment and community health initiatives. “There’s more recognition of how the pieces connect,” says Thomas. “We have used the criminal justice system to make up for the fact that we never resourced people’s basic needs. A lot of the advocacy we support is changing budgets, because that’s one way to pressure our cities and counties and states to create safety. Housing creates safety. Employment and food and education create safety.”

Funding and Growing Coalitions. Another major strategy is funding coalition work, where hyper-local grassroots efforts are folded into national movements and advocacy campaigns. This type of movement-building is especially important with justice reform philanthropy, in part because the justice system itself—driven by local law, jails, courts and attorneys—is so fragmented. Examples of coalitions include the Movement for Black Lives, Families Against

Mandatory Minimums, The Formerly Incarcerated People and Families Movement (FIPFM), the Live Free Campaign, and multiple bail collaboratives including National Bail Out and The Bail Project.

Empowering BIPOC-led organizations with multi-year, general operating support grants is a growing strategy, in tandem with cross-sector collaboration with other racial justice issues. One example is the Libra Foundation’s \$36 million [funder collaborative](#), the Democracy Frontlines Fund, aimed at supporting front-line Black activists working to end systemic racism. Many Democracy Frontlines recipients are criminal justice reform organizations, while others focus on free and fair elections.

Linking Voting and Justice. The relationship between voting and justice reform is increasingly recognized by funders, and coalition efforts like Black Voters Matter and State Voices fold justice reform into campaigns to end prison gerrymandering, end the disenfranchisement of currently and formerly incarcerated people, and pass justice reform issues—like drug legalization—via local ballot measures. Coke says that among the work of the 50-plus [organizations comprising FIPFM](#), “What’s interesting is that their through-theme is civic engagement and voting, both ending disenfranchisement and motivating people who have lived experiences with the criminal justice system to help transform it.”

Research Supporting Everything. Research and data-driven solutions is a very popular funder strategy embraced by large donors such as Arnold Ventures, the MacArthur Foundation and The Just Trust. Arnold Ventures in particular

is a major supporter of research, and has granted hundreds of millions to support policy research surrounding the justice system. This includes major grants to the Urban Center, the Vera Institute of Justice, the Research Foundation of the City University of New York, and The Jail Data Initiative. One example of a research venture funded by Arnold is a pretrial tool that attempts to quantify a defendant's likelihood of committing another crime or failing to appear at future hearings. Organizations with data-driven approaches include The Prison Policy Initiative, the Drug Policy Alliance, the Justice Policy Institute, and the Data Driven Justice Initiative, a public-private partnership launched during the Obama era.

Invest/Divest Framing. A newer strategy within criminal justice reform is known as invest/divest, which was formulated during the 2015 Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) convention in Cleveland, resulting in the movement's initial six legislative platforms, including the invest/divest platform calling for divestment from prisons and police and investment in communities. As reported in *Yes!* magazine, this platform focuses on local budget processes and diverting funds to education, public health, housing, and creating long-term safety in communities, as well as decriminalizing poverty, drug use, and sex work. A recent incarnation of this platform is the #DefundthePolice movement, which was promulgated in 2020 by many BLM groups already working on invest-divest strategies.

"At the heart of the invest-divest demand is the recognition that our city, state and federal budgets reflect the dehumanization and the

Grantee Spotlight



The Formerly Incarcerated Convicted People and Families Movement (FICPFM) is "a national network of over 50 civil and human rights organizations led by people who have conviction histories and their family members." FICPFM has received grants from large funders, including the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, which speaks to the growing funder awareness of the importance of constituent-led organizing. Organizations within the FICPFM network include those targeted at constituencies that are too often overlooked, such as Forward Justice, which focuses on the U.S. South; the Bay Area-based Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (LSPC); and the Chicago-based Organized Communities Against Deportations.

degradation of Black life through lack of investment in anything besides Black incarceration or surveillance," Marbre Stahly-Butts, co-author of *Demands from the Invest-Divest Platform*, told *Yes! Magazine* in 2016. Invest-divest funding is prominent in the M4BL network, as well as among members of the Funders for Justice network. The Justice

Reinvestment Initiative—a public-private partnership co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice—likewise deploys an invest/divest strategy in partnership with local governments via local legislative decisions and budgets.

The California Endowment is another sizable funder that focuses its giving within an invest/divest framework. Its justice reform program is called “justice reinvestment,” and grants focus on community reinvestment, prevention and healing.

Tamu Jones, the managing director of justice reinvestment at TCE, said in an interview for this report that reimagining public safety has become a huge priority for justice reform funders. The George Floyd protests, Jones said, prompted larger funders to more seriously consider “alternative ways to deal with violence and

conflict, as well as to redefine public safety and upend the logic that prisons and policing bring us closer to safety. We’re now thinking about strong, responsive systems of care that are outside the criminal justice system.”

Within the invest/divest and restorative justice frameworks, justice reform funders and organizations explore community-based, rather than punitive, approaches to crime and violence. Research organizations like The Brennan Center for Justice and the John Jay College of Criminal Justice [prioritize research](#) into the efficacy of community-based public safety efforts, including violence prevention and interruption programs that provide services to individuals most likely to commit violent crimes.

Invest/divest is similar in some ways to impact investing and boycotting strategies that pressure companies to divest from policing and private prisons. In 2019, the well-publicized [campaigns](#) surrounding divestment from private immigrant detention centers led to an announcement from major U.S. banks that they would cut ties with private prisons and detention centers.

Seeking Bipartisanship. Bipartisan advocacy is another emerging strategy, as conservative-leaning groups, recognizing the detrimental effects of mass incarceration, take up the mantle. The [Clean Slate initiative](#), for example, is [supported](#) by progressive funders such as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Ballmer Group, and CZI, in coalition with Koch-funded organizations like the American Conservative Union Foundation and the Faith and Freedom Coalition.

IMPACT/JUSTICE

Research & Action Center

“We have an obligation and a responsibility to each individual that we incarcerate, and society can decide to do what they want, but we can’t crowd our facilities to the point of breaking, where violence and other issues become almost inevitable. We have to make sure that we fund medical and mental health care inside of facilities for every individual. And we have to understand that public safety and public health doesn’t end at the jailhouse door.”

— Alex Busansky, president and founder, Impact Justice

Perspectives on Equity

Equity issues are vital within justice reform philanthropy because the impacted populations contain a marked overrepresentation of minority or vulnerable people. According to data from the FBI, Black Americans represent 13% of the population, yet made up 27% of arrests [in 2016](#), and Native Americans were arrested at double the rate of white people. A 2014 study showed that nearly half of all Black men will be [arrested by age 23](#). According to the NAACP's criminal justice fact sheet, African Americans and Hispanics comprise 32% of the U.S. population, [but 56%](#) of the U.S. incarcerated population.

In addition to racial disparities, other minority groups and vulnerable people are disproportionately impacted. The incarcerated population is [substantially more likely](#) than the general population to live below the poverty line, have chronic health problems, be unemployed, or have no high school diploma. [Research](#) by the Prison Policy Initiative [found](#) that people with mental health and substance abuse problems are significantly more likely to be arrested and incarcerated. Among people who were not arrested within the past 12 months (the baseline population), the prevalence of substance abuse disorder is 7%. Among those who have been arrested two times or more, the prevalence of substance use disorder is 53%.

Women are by far the fastest-growing incarcerated demographic in the United States. Since 1980, the number of incarcerated women has [risen by 700%](#), in large part because of stiffer drug sentencing laws and because women are less able to afford bail or reintegrate successfully

upon release. Despite this, there is very little data about women in prisons and jails and in the parole system simply because women as a category have been largely excluded from research and tracking data. A 2019 Prison Policy Initiative [report](#) about women's mass incarceration references the difficulty of compiling such a report due to the "frustratingly hard-to-find and altogether missing data on gender."



"While state prison populations are coming down, jail populations in many places are rising. To address the situation, we've been focusing on bail reform. Bail needlessly leads to the incarceration of people who shouldn't be in jail, particularly poor people who don't have the wherewithal to pay cash bail. We're seeing growing awareness of that fact and momentum building across the country to do something about it."

—Tanya Coke, former director, Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Justice, Ford Foundation

The preponderance of minority and vulnerable populations affected by the legal system is part of why calls for constituent-led grantmaking and organizing have been so vocal. In recent years, the calls are, to some degree, being answered, as

BIPOC-led and constituent-led justice organizations are receiving more funding. For the first time, many funders now explicitly track the percentage of grants going to minority-led, community-led or constituent-led organizations.

Borealis Philanthropy, which houses several criminal justice reform funds, cite in their [2020 annual report](#) that 77% of their grants went to BIPOC-led organizations. The philanthropist Mackenzie Scott reported that 91% of her racial equity grant recipients are organizations led by leaders of color. In 2019, Public Welfare Foundation—a longstanding and important funder of criminal justice reform—announced a new approach focusing grants on hyper-local, community-led transformative justice organizations. The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation reported that 23 of its 33 grantees in 2020 were LGBTQ+-led organizations. This newer emphasis on both constituent- and minority-led leadership has uplifted leadership by women within justice reform philanthropy. The M4BL, which was founded by two queer women of color, has deeply prioritized the leadership of marginalized Black people since its founding.

In the past, the larger justice reform foundations and organizations were overwhelmingly helmed by white male attorneys, but this has changed. Women and women of color now hold leadership roles within justice reform programs at the MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Arnold Ventures, The Just Trust, and Just Impact Advisors, among others.

These leadership shifts play a role in long-overdue funder attention to the unique needs of

women in the system. Recent campaigns like #FreeHer, #ClemencyWorks and Black Mama's Bail Out sparked national conversations. There is now more understanding of the needs of incarcerated pregnant women and mothers, and coalitions targeting women's issues are receiving some large-funder support. The National Council for Incarcerated & Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls, for example, has received grants from both the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and Open Philanthropy. Among other efforts, National Council members advocate for bills allowing community-based alternatives to incarceration for primary caretakers. Free Hearts, an organization led by formerly incarcerated women in Tennessee, ran a successful advocacy campaign leading to the passage of this type of bill in [Tennessee](#) in 2019.

Constituent-led organizations and coalitions within criminal justice reform philanthropy include The Formerly Incarcerated Convicted People and Families Movement (FICPM), JustLeadershipUSA, Voice of the Experienced, All of Us or None, Solutions Not Punishment, Dignity and Power Now, The National Council for Incarcerated & Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls, and Essie Justice Group, among others. These constituent-led efforts have received substantial foundation grants in recent years.

The Circle for Justice Innovations, founded in 2000, was one of the earliest justice funders to focus on constituent-led organizing. Vaughn describes how CJI's participatory grantmaking model, in which recipients guide grant decisions, allowed CJI to identify the most pressing issues and fund durable efforts.

“Participatory grantmaking means we’re hearing people who are familiar with the issues because they’re literally living it,” she said. “And that has been the strength of our risk. We have funded organizations where it’s their first grant. And they’re successful, and their success allows them to get into the sight of larger organizations. If we would just let people who are being oppressed tell us what they need, we will go much further. Now you have people power behind it. Now the movement is harder to erode.”

Vaughn says that CJT’s participatory grant model led to early successes in areas ranging from anti-shackling bills for incarcerated pregnant women to changing laws that prevent formerly incarcerated people from obtaining employment. One demographic still largely ignored by funders, Vaughn says, is the Native American community. “Native Americans have higher rates of police shootings in many states

and are more subject to detention for longer periods of time than both Blacks and whites, because of the racism of the system not wanting to send people back to reservations,” says Vaughn. Another overlooked group is Black immigrants, who are targeted with police orders and therefore more likely to be deported. “They’re just not part of the conversation,” Vaughn says.

Despite recent uptrends in giving to BIPOC-led criminal justice reform organizations, Black-led organizations remain substantially underfunded compared to white-led organizations, and those working within justice reform philanthropy are wary of how long the increased interest from funders will last. “When I saw this increase in funding [in 2020], I said, OK, we have a max of five years,” says Vaughn. “An absolute max. We have to do everything we can right now, because whatever is left on the floor, that’s it.”

Strategy Spotlight: Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is a major and growing strategy in justice reform. Related programs often include pre-arrest diversion, or preventing arrest by providing services such as mental health and trauma counseling, help for substance abuse, or opportunities to accept accountability for the harm caused.

These programs are particularly prevalent within juvenile justice and centering survivor-identified needs in intimate partner violence and sexual harm. Advocates highlight the failures of the current criminal justice system to rehabilitate those who cause harm or provide healing or restitution to survivors. Restorative justice programs can be seen as pilot programs for a complete reimagining of the justice system. Organizations involved in this work include the Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice, Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice, and the Transformational Prison Project.

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private Foundations

The largest private foundations in criminal justice reform philanthropy include the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Silicon Valley Community Foundation, and Public Welfare Foundation. Arnold Ventures—previously known as the Laura and John Arnold Foundation—is a major justice reform grantor that became an LLC in 2019, along with changing its name.

The MacArthur Foundation has made over \$380 million in grants since it launched its [Safety and Justice Challenge](#), which targets local jails and the systems that fill them. The foundation collaborates with dozens of “sites” across the country harnessing data-driven solutions to reduce jail populations, including working with local governments and courts.

Ford Foundation’s justice reform program is called “Community Safety” and housed within its larger gender, racial, and ethnic justice strategy. Ford’s criminal justice programs include support for violence prevention programs, restorative justice and pre-arrest diversion programs, crime prevention and coalition building, and narrative change, with a focus on general operating support grants and grants to constituent-led organizations.

George Soros’ Open Society Foundations has been a stalwart supporter of justice issues both in

the U.S. and abroad. In 2020, the Foundations pledged \$150 million as five-year grants to Black-led justice organizations, and [later added another \\$150](#) to the pledge. Grantees have included Circle for Justice Innovations, Repairers of the Breach, and the Equal Justice Initiative. This pledge is [noteworthy](#) because all of the funds provide long-term support to Black-led organizations.

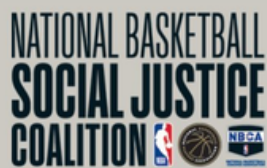
The open-ended nature of the OSF commitment is part of an emerging shift within the sector, says [Lorraine Ramirez](#), senior program manager of Funders for Justice. “What we’re seeing in this moment is philanthropy moving money to movements, for movements to determine what they want to see. And that’s a learning trajectory for OSF, as well as philanthropy overall,” she said.

Many foundations, like OSF, that have long worked in the criminal justice reform space have [doubled down](#) on these commitments as part of larger racial justice initiatives. In 2020, The California Endowment announced a [\\$225 million](#), 10-year commitment to [Black-led organizing](#) in California, including funding for criminal justice reform organizations. Other foundations that increased their previous support in this area include a variety of mid-sized funders including the David Rockefeller Fund, Heising-Simons Foundation, The Overbrook Foundation, the Hill-Snowdon Foundation and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies.

Beginning in 2020, a handful of foundations that were not previously involved in justice reform made first-time pledges to the larger umbrella topic of racial justice, including the William and

Flora Hewlett Foundation, which [announced](#) a 10-year, \$150 million racial justice fund in July 2020. It remains to be seen how much of this racial justice commitment goes to criminal justice reform specifically, but so far many grantees fit the bill, including the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and the Democracy Frontlines Fund.

Advocacy Spotlight



In late 2020, the NBA, the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA), and the NBA Coaches Association joined forces to create the National Basketball Social Justice Coalition. The new entity is unique because it's a 501(c)(4) focused specifically on advancing social justice through advocacy. According to its website, the coalition "leverages the game of basketball's influence to promote policy, build strategic partnerships, and empower action in NBA markets across the nation."

Board members include NBA chairs Steve Ballmer and Clay Bennett; players Tre Jones and Jrue Holiday; and coaches Jamahl Mosley and J.B. Bickerstaff.

Corporate Funders

Justice reform, and racial equity issues in general, have not historically been popular targets for corporate giving. Beginning slowly in 2014 and taking off in 2020, [corporate commitments](#) to the larger issues of racial justice and economic equity deepened. Apple launched a \$100 million Racial Equity and Justice Initiative, which included criminal justice reform as one of its priorities. Amazon and Facebook likewise made mega-dollar commitments, and Sony Pictures Entertainment, Visa, Google, Nike's Jordan Brand [and others](#) launched a variety of programs aimed at racial equity issues, including criminal justice reform.

A few corporate givers stand out for having been interested in justice reform pre-2020. Microsoft created its Justice Reform Initiative in 2017 with programs supporting data and digital technologies that increase transparency and accountability in policing, diversion programs, and the justice system in general. In 2020, in a message from CEO [Satya Nadella](#), Microsoft unveiled a five-year, \$50 million sustained commitment to criminal justice reform as part of additional programs aimed at racial equity issues. [Partnerships](#) within Microsoft's justice initiative include the Urban Institute at the University of Southern California and the Institute for Innovation in Prosecution at John Jay College, among others.

[Google](#) first forayed into criminal justice reform philanthropy in 2015 with a series of grants focused on the San Francisco Bay Area. By 2017, it had expanded that mandate and dispersed \$32 million to justice system reformers across the country, especially those with data-driven

approaches, including the Center for Policing Equity and Measures for Justice. In 2020, it announced \$14.5 million in immediate additional commitments to justice reform organizations as part of its new \$175 million commitment to racial equity initiatives. Another \$8 million in funding was pledged in 2022 as part of a job skills training program for the formerly incarcerated.

Amazon committed \$10 million to racial justice and equity organizations and quickly followed through with grants to the Brennan Center for Justice, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, and others that focus specifically on criminal justice reform.

Universal Music Group (UMG) made a \$25 million commitment to the Black community via its Task Force for Meaningful Change, including grants to justice reform organizations like The Bail Project and Color of Change. UMG was one among several music companies to make pledges to racial justice in 2020, including a ten-year, \$100 million commitment from Warner Music Group and the foundation of its billionaire owner, Len Blavatnik, to create a Social Justice Fund devoted to the intersection of "arts and culture, education, and criminal justice reform." As Mike Scutari wrote at the time in *Inside Philanthropy*, Blavatnik's new fund is "a testament to the lightning speed at which viral protest can translate into a massive gift in a sector with a historically light philanthropic footprint." As of 2024, the fund had already made over \$35 million in grants.

The NFL made large commitments to justice reform via its Inspire Change Fund, which

launched in 2018 and expanded in 2020 with the announcement of a 10-year, \$250 million commitment to social justice issues. The funding categories spelled out by the NFL are education, economic advancement, police and community relations, and criminal justice reform. Social justice grants made as of 2024 exceed \$55 million, with grants to the Center for Policing Equity and A New Way of Life, among others.



"The work that we do now, we talk about breaking isolation all the time. Because of our analysis, our realization, our understanding of the criminal legal system, we know mass incarceration has isolated millions of people, but particularly women. And the impact that isolation has is one that is political, it has an impact on organizing, it has an impact on mental and physical health."

—Gina Clayton-Johnson, founder and executive director, Essie Justice Group

The NBA and its players have likewise become vocal proponents of criminal justice reform. It all began quite noticeably with a three-day, league-wide game boycott following the shooting of Jacob Blake by a police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The boycott prompted efforts within the NBA, which had not previously been involved with racial justice issues like its brother

league, the NFL. The new efforts include the first-ever NBA Foundation as well as a National Basketball Social Justice Coalition, which advocates for reforms in voting access, community safety and the criminal justice system.

In August 2020, the NBA's board of governors committed \$300 million via its new NBA Foundation with grantmaking focused on school-to-career employment opportunities for Black youth. As of 2024, the new foundation had already awarded over \$100 million in grants to over 200 nonprofits. Another new entity as of 2020 is the Players' Justice Fund within the

NBPA Foundation. Much remains to be seen, but the growing involvement of the NBA in justice reform is an interesting development to track.

Community Foundations

Community foundations play an influential role in criminal justice reform philanthropy. The justice system and its sprawling geography of courts, jails and prisons operates according to local laws and mandates. Local successes, particularly in the areas of pretrial detention and bail reform, have spread to other communities as strategies are scaled and replicated.

Efforts spearheaded by several New York foundations and justice coalitions—in concert with national advocacy groups like JustLeadershipUSA—led to the New York City Council's 2019 decision to end many forms of money bail and close the infamous jail on Rikers Island. Community foundations involved in these efforts included the New York Community Trust, the Brooklyn Community Foundation, the North Star Fund and others. [North Star also supports](#) Communities United for Police Reform, and after the death of Eric Garner, it established the Let Us Breathe Fund, which has disbursed nearly \$5 million to local racial justice organizations.

A constellation of California foundations works collaboratively on justice reform. The California Black Freedom Fund, which includes justice reform as one of its three primary concerns, [composed of](#) both national and California funders, launched in October 2020 with the goal of raising \$100 million over five years for Black-led power-building organizations in California. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation and

Fundraising Spotlight



LEAD FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

The California Black Freedom Fund (CBFF) is a five-year initiative aiming to raise \$100 million and investing those funds in Black-led organizations. It was founded by 16 foundation leaders across California, and in partnership with activists Kaci Patterson, Anthony Thigpenn, and Reverend Ben McBride. CBFF's criminal justice-related goals include removing police from schools, redeploying resources from police departments to community services, and closing state prisons and youth detention facilities.

other large funders are involved in this coalition. [Other California foundations](#) funding justice reform include the Rosenberg Foundation and the Sierra Health Foundation.

Demographic community foundations represent a plethora of funds aimed at justice issues affecting women, youth, and those within the Black, Hispanic and LGBTQI communities. These funders include the Spark Justice Fund at Borealis Philanthropy, the Akonadi Foundation, the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, the New York Women's Foundation's Justice Fund, the LGBTQ Freedom Fund and The National Bail Out, which focuses on bail funds and advocacy for Black mothers.

Across the U.S. there are a number of funds at smaller community foundations working on state- or city-wide justice reforms. In many cases, these community funds receive support from larger national funders like the Ford and Public Welfare foundations. Funds include the Michigan Justice Fund at the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, the Oklahoma Justice Fund, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, the Racial Equity Fund at the Central Indiana Community Foundation, and the Meyer Memorial Trust's Justice Oregon for Black Lives fund, which recently committed \$25 million to justice reform in Oregon. This is the largest initiative in the Trust's history.

Major Donors

In the not-so-distant past, criminal justice reform did not receive much support from individual philanthropists or celebrity donors, but this has changed. Beginning around 2013, when protests against Trayvon Martin's killing

in Florida sparked a national conversation, donors without previous involvement pledged funds and even formed alliances around issues like police brutality and mass incarceration. Then again in 2020, several celebrity efforts emerged, particularly with support to bail funds. While celebrity support has again declined, major billionaire donors continue to support justice reform issues.

The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, an LLC piloted by Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan, became hugely influential in this space with the launch of its criminal justice reform program in 2017. In 2021, CZI announced a five-year [\\$350 million commitment](#) to a spin-off entity called The Just Trust. With that, CZI became one of the largest contributors ever to justice reform. This mega-pledge from CZI signaled a significant shift in justice reform philanthropy, as newer foundations and LLCs with living donors have joined longer-standing givers like Ford Foundation in the justice reform and public safety space. [The Just Trust](#) is a major grantmaker that supports both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations. [As of 2023](#), it had already made over \$80 million in grants.

Hedge fund billionaire Michael Novogratz was one of the [earliest supporters](#) of The Bail Project, which launched in 2017, as well as other justice efforts like Civil Rights Corp. Novogratz and Sukey Novogratz founded the LLC Galaxy Gives, which prioritizes justice reform across all four of its funding areas: justice, healing, leadership, and democracy.

Novogratz also backs the REFORM Alliance, a star-studded [effort to reduce](#) the number of

people held under community supervision. REFORM got its start when rapper Meek Mill was re-incarcerated following a 2017 parole violation, kicking off a #FreeMeek social media campaign that led to his release. With CNN host Van Jones at the helm, the REFORM Alliance has secured endorsements and funding from a range of big names, including Michael Rubin, Laura Arnold, Robert Smith, Clara Wu Tsai, Daniel Loeb, Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter and Meek Mill himself. The tech billionaire Jack Dorsey [donated \\$10 million](#) to the REFORM Alliance in 2020.

Steve and Connie Ballmer are major justice reform givers through their philanthropy, Ballmer Group, founded in 2017. They are the most recent among the major donors to enter this space, and tend to give large, flexible, multi-year grants for general operating support. This includes \$20 million in grantmaking to the Alliance for Safety and Justice, \$25 million to the Center for Employment Opportunities, \$10 million to the Center for Policing Equity, \$25 million to Youth Advocate Programs, \$25 million to the Vera Institute of Justice, and \$10 million to Chicago CRED, a gun violence prevention organization.

Michael Jordan [stepped into justice reform](#) philanthropy in 2020, with an announcement that he and Nike’s Jordan Brand plan to give \$100 million over the next decade to organizations that work to advance racial equality, social justice and access to education. Of the amount pledged, Jordan will donate \$50 million personally. It’s noteworthy that [two of the three initial grants went](#) to justice reform organizations: the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the Formerly

Incarcerated and Convicted People and Families Movement.

Philanthropist MacKenzie Scott likely became the largest individual donor ever to criminal justice reform with her [July 2020 announcement](#) that she had donated \$586 million to racial equity organizations, including several focused on justice reform. The exact dollar amount to each recipient is unknown, but reports suggest that many gifts registered in the tens of millions, [including](#) to the emerging justice reform powerhouse Center for Policing Equity. In spring 2024, [Scott again prioritized justice reform](#) issues as part of a massive tranche of grantmaking totaling over \$600 million from her new giving vehicle, Yield Giving.

Inside Philanthropy Survey

“[There is a] New emphasis on racial justice as a lens through which to view the entire criminal legal system and increasing recognition of the links between racism and dysfunctional health and criminal legal systems.”

—Fundraiser, New York, New York

Other major donors [include](#) former hedge fund manager [Bill Ackman](#), and Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz and his spouse Cari Tuna. Moskovitz and Tuna [have supported](#) criminal justice reform philanthropy through their LLC, Open Philanthropy, and its significant justice reform programs. Between 2015 and 2021, Open Philanthropy conducted over \$130 million in

justice reform grantmaking. In 2021, the philanthropy spun off a new organization, Just Impact Advisors, with \$50 million in seed funding.

Instagram co-founder Mike Kreiger and Kaitlyn Krieger have focused their giving primarily on criminal justice reform. They are co-founders of the Future Justice Fund, which has provided grants to Color of Change, the Marshall Project and Californians for Safety and Justice, among others.

Advocacy Spotlight



Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) is a national organization with local and state affiliates around the country. YAP invokes multiple strategies to achieve its overarching goals of preserving families, promoting well being, racial equity, and economic inclusion for those “most harmed by systemic, institutional, community and individual discrimination bias.” YAP offers individualized direct services to justice-involved youth and families, as well as those with behavioral health needs, developmental disabilities and educational challenges. It also promotes public policy reform, training, and continuing education scholarships.

An assortment of celebrities and sports stars donated to bail funds in 2020, including Chrissy Teigen, Seth Rogen and LeBron James. Many celebrities voiced future commitments to policing and justice reform in 2020, but it appears that celebrity interest in this area fell off a cliff beginning in 2021. The married actors Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds were involved before 2020, with a [\\$1 million donation](#) to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in 2019. Rihanna and John Legend have also been involved with justice reform programs.

Intermediaries and Associations

The influence of networked associations and multi-funder efforts within justice reform philanthropy expanded swiftly in recent years, as large donors are networking in new ways with longstanding community groups. In some cases, as with the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), intermediary coalition organizations that once ran on small budgets are now sizable funders.

A significant coalition on the West Coast is the Alliance for Boys and Young Men of Color, [composed](#) of dozens of racial justice organizations initially involved with the Obama administration’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative, and later providing seed funding for the National Youth Alliance for Boys & Men of Color. Alliance members, including the Ford and Nathan Cummings foundations, collaboratively launched the Communities Transforming Policing Fund at Borealis Philanthropy. The alliance was also instrumental in creating the California Funders of Boys and Men of Color, a collective of 16 funders that has invested more

than [\\$149 million](#) with prioritization of participatory grantmaking and funding smaller community organizations in California.

Another California-centric multi-funder effort is the Returning Home Well fund, a public-private partnership with a [\\$30 million investment](#) aimed at reentry programs for the formerly incarcerated. The fund was launched in 2020 by the state of California and a group of private funders, including The California Endowment, the Heising-Simons Foundation and OSF. The [Black Freedom Fund](#) is another major multi-funder effort originating in California, with [\\$100 million](#) in pledges. Funders include the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the California Wellness Foundation, and the Emerson Collective. The fund gives grants to Black-led power-building organizations rooting out systemic racism in California and nationally, and justice reform is one of its main priorities.

Taken together, these multi-donor collaboratives in California represent an emerging ecosystem of California-based funders zeroing in on justice reform and other racial justice issues.

The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) has been a powerful collective of racial justice organizations since it formalized as a nonprofit in 2014, serving as a funding intermediary and policy platform through which small community groups amplified their advocacy campaigns. Today, M4BL consists of over 100 organizations spread throughout the country, often pooling resources and collaborating on political advocacy or public education efforts. The M4BL is a testament to the fact that funding levels do not equate with impact. Many of the M4BL groups

work with small budgets, yet have led successful campaigns. In 2020, the M4BL became a funder within the justice reform space with the establishment of the Black Lives Matter Global Network, which today serves as the M4BL's grantmaking vehicle.



"The recent murders shocked a lot of people into a conscience around what we've been saying the whole time—Black life is in danger, and we need to create alternatives to police and incarceration to take care of our folks."

—Charles Long, manager of resource strategy, Movement for Black Lives

Another key funding intermediary, Funders for Justice (FFJ), is a national organizing platform that coalesced during the Ferguson uprising in 2014. Today, it is a collection of over [500](#) funders that mobilize resources to grassroots groups involved with invest/divest strategies, healing justice initiatives and organizing against police unions, amid other justice work. As previously reported by Inside Philanthropy, the power of FFJ's network became evident in June 2020, when the group organized a [call](#) with nearly [700 participants](#), including the Solidaire Network, the Third Wave Fund and M4BL members. The organizers called on philanthropy to provide the M4BL network with \$50 million in 2020—a transformative goal, given that M4BL had raised \$2.7 million in 2019. By the end of 2020, the M4BL brought in \$90 million.

The Tides Center is an important fiscal sponsor, funding intermediary and “nonprofit accelerator” within justice reform, having helped fund major efforts and organizations, including the Alliance for Safety and Justice and Californians for Safety and Justice, as well as the network Fair and Just Prosecution. Tides and Tides Advocacy have been key funders behind multiple justice reform initiatives in the U.S.

The Justice and Mobility Fund is a key collaborative funded primarily by the Ford Foundation and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies and housed with Blue Meridian Partners. With over \$200 million in grantmaking, this fund has become a significant source of support for nonprofits that work directly with the formerly incarcerated and people impacted by the criminal justice system. This includes funding for the Center for Employment Opportunities, The Clean Slate Initiative, and Jobs for the Future, as well as the Returning Citizens Stimulus program, which gives returning citizens direct payments to help ease back into life on the outside.

As the larger foundations have increased the breadth and depth of funding, new collaborative funds and giving circles are targeting niche areas within justice reform. The Life Comes From It circle, for example, provides grants to organizations focused on restorative justice, transformative justice and indigenous peacemaking organizations led by people of color. The innovative fund [is supported by](#) a variety of donors in justice reform philanthropy, including Just Impact Advisors, Heising-Simons Foundation, and The Patchwork Collective.

Regional Spotlight



According to the DC Justice Lab, in the country's capital, Black people make up 90% of police searches, 93% of people sentenced are Black—with over half being Black men ages 18-30—and close to 90% of the incarcerated population in local jails are Black. The team of law and policy experts want to see large scale changes to those statistics and aims to “fully transform the District's approach to public safety and to make it a leader in national justice reform.” Current DC Justice lab supporters include the Public Welfare Foundation, Borealis Philanthropy, and FWD.us.

Fundraising Now

For many nonprofits working in the criminal justice space, the past several years have been a time of change. Funders are becoming more interested in previously neglected aspects of the work, including advocacy and constituent-led organizing. Funding levels have been unpredictable for many nonprofits, with the spigot flowing in 2020, then slowing to more of a trickle in the following years.

Impact Justice, a national justice reform and research organization founded in 2015, saw new funding opportunities emerge in 2020.

According to Erica Lawson, associate director of development at Impact Justice, the most notable change in 2020 was an increase in contributions from individuals. “Proportionally, we did see a lot more activity with individual donors,” said Lawson. There were also shifts in the organization’s relationship with its existing institutional funders. “There has been a willingness to be more flexible with funding, more flexible with what we need in the moment, and how to direct funds,” Lawson said.

Impact Justice receives the majority of its funding from government contracts, but private support, particularly from foundations, is still central to the fundraising strategy, with each of the organization’s programs pulling funds from a different mix of sources. Its PREA Resource Center, which works with local agencies to advance sexual safety in prisons and jails, is funded by a cooperative agreement with the Department of Justice. Other Impact Justice programs rely more heavily on private support.

Alex Busansky, president and founder of Impact Justice, said in a 2021 interview with *Inside Philanthropy* that funders increasingly understand systemic racism and see justice reform issues through a new lens. “Some of our funders began to realize that what they do, even if they aren’t in the criminal justice space, relates to criminal justice. So philanthropy itself is looking at how these issues like housing, education, food—this all is about criminal justice.... There is a real intentionality around it now, and a much broader, holistic approach.” From a fundraising perspective, this means that Impact Justice is increasingly approaching funders who aren’t typically active in the criminal justice reform space.

Patrice Sulton, founder and executive director of the DC Justice Lab in Washington, D.C., has insight into increased funder focus on smaller organizations that began on the heels of 2020’s racial justice protests. Sulton launched DC Justice in 2020 after receiving a \$200,000, two-year grant from the Public Welfare Foundation, followed by an unrestricted \$500,000 grant from FWD.us, a policy-focused organization funded by the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. Sulton incorporated DC Justice as a nonprofit in 2019 and hadn’t planned to launch until 2021—but plans changed, and she launched in 2020 instead. “Foundations were open to picking [justice] reform proposals at that time,” Sulton said. “After George Floyd’s death, there was a surge of interest in working on policing and racial justice.” Sulton also received encouragement from a key board member, as well as her law students, who would be involved with DC’s programming. It was also a “sense of self-efficacy,” Sulton said, that moved her forward.

“George Floyd’s death affected me in a deeply personal way,” she said. “It took a watershed moment in American history for me to believe that enough people were ready for the change I wanted to see. It was always obvious that the work was needed, but it wasn’t always obvious to me that it was possible.” DC Justice Lab is focused on researching, organizing and advocating for “large-scale changes to the district’s criminal legal system.”

Sulton emphasized that DC Justice Lab’s strategy is to tackle the entire system and advocate for lasting legal changes rather than only a projects-based approach—and increasingly, funders understand that a systemic approach requires unrestricted, multi-year grants. Sulton had also noticed that foundations, in particular, seem interested in funding coalitions, which prompted her to think about opportunities for DC Justice’s partnerships.

The Essie Justice Group is a California-based organization that takes part in multiple justice-focused coalitions, including the Movement for Black Lives and the National Bail Out. Gina Clayton-Johnson, Essie’s founder and executive director, likewise noted increasing funder focus on coalitions and movement-building. “I commend the [philanthropic] organizations that made sure they moved in the direction of coalitions that needed the resources,” she told *Inside Philanthropy* in a 2021 interview.

Essie Justice Group is an organization of women with incarcerated loved ones working in bail reform and gender justice. Its Healing to Advocacy program builds leadership among women who are “enduring a loved one’s

incarceration.” The majority of Essie’s funding has derived from foundations and individual donors, including the Meadow Fund (via the Silicon Valley Community Foundation), the Heising-Simons Foundation, the California Wellness Foundation, the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, and MacKenzie Scott.

Collaborative Fund Spotlight

ART FOR JUSTICE FUND

The Art for Justice Fund launched in 2017 and closed in 2023. It was established by banking heiress Agnes Gund, the Ford Foundation, and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and funded with \$100 million from Gund’s sale of Roy Lichtenstein’s “Masterpiece.” It supported both traditional justice reform efforts and justice activist art initiatives and stood out for supporting unique projects and campaigns. Its initiatives included a campaign to restore voting rights to people with felony convictions in Florida, narrative artworks by prosecutors, and an artist-in-residence program at the Philadelphia Office of the District Attorney.

When this fund closed in, it granted [seed funding](#) to the Center for Art & Advocacy, an organization supporting artists impacted by the criminal justice system that “will in spirit serve as a successor to the Art for Justice Fund.”

In general, Essie's funding comes from longtime justice-funding foundations with which Essie has an established relationship. Clayton-Johnson has noted a "welcome change" with the grant process itself—applications are simpler, and funders are reaching out for feedback about their processes. Funders also now seem more interested in the internal workings at Essie, "particularly with how our staff are treated, and not in a Big Brother, micro-management way, but in a supportive way."

Like other justice reform fundraisers, Clayton-Johnson has observed some growing funder interest in constituent-led organizing, in community organizing, and in theories of change that prioritize people from impacted communities and forging strategic partnerships with these communities. "I'm optimistic that this is a lasting strategic shift," she said. "Many of our philanthropic partners believe in the strategy, and they're doing a lot to bring others with them."

Inside Philanthropy Survey

"Smaller groups are making the most changes with the least amount of funding: groups with almost no money are getting schools and communities to divest from armed police. Bail funds are collecting donations \$3 at a time from people who are unemployed. Meanwhile, larger groups are saying they support social justice issues (BLM, LBGQTI+ issues, etc.) while not reflecting them in their organizations or leadership."

—Fundraiser, Oswego, New York

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

A recent opportunity within justice reform philanthropy has been the deepening focus on policing and police violence—topics that are graphically elevated by high-profile murders by police. In the past several years, large donors have moved funding to programs devoted to policing reform, alternatives to policing, and pre-arrest diversion. “Before George Floyd, police work in particular was not something people were very interested in,” says Jeree Thomas of the Communities Transforming Policing Fund. “Which is interesting, because there are decades upon decades of history around police brutality.”

The front end of the justice system in general is receiving more attention, and grantees have capitalized on this interest with new funds and programs in the areas of bail and pretrial reform, including community-led bail funds and policy campaigns, as well as national efforts surrounding alternatives to incarceration and community development.

“There is more attention now on, how do people end up in jail in the first place? Disparities in how people are treated, who gets arrested. There is a shift toward the front-end stuff, and policing is so inextricably linked to that,” says CJI’s Vaughn. “People are now saying, ‘it’s not just about sentencing.’ They’re asking, ‘why are so many people getting arrested in the first place?’”

Vaughn says that along these lines, community groups are developing alternatives to policing as well as pre-arrest diversion programs. These might include 911 alternatives, funding for

substance abuse and mental health programs, emergency housing for LGBTQ+ people, and reforming the rules surrounding affordable and emergency housing.

While funders and grantees alike welcome these priorities, there is concern that attention may be diverted from programs for people currently and formerly incarcerated, including parole reform and recidivism prevention programs. “Much of the emphasis has recently been on stemming the ‘front end’ of incarceration, which is great, but we still have to help the 70 million-plus people at the ‘back end’ who already have a criminal history, or we will lose generations to poverty and illness,” wrote one respondent to Inside Philanthropy’s survey.

A potentially seismic shift within justice reform philanthropy is increased donor understanding of systemic racism, intersectionality, and the relevance to justice reform of systemic factors such as housing, education, and food security. There is also more attention on what some call “narrative change” vis-à-vis what public safety looks like with fewer police, or what justice looks like with fewer prisons.

There has also been a significant surge in coalition work and joint advocacy campaigns. This is interconnected with the broadening scope of justice philanthropy in general. Asking people to imagine new systems where social workers take on roles now filled by police, or where entire categories of behavior are decriminalized, requires large-scale advocacy and education.

That's exactly what groups like Impact Justice, Color of Change, the Alliance for Safety and Justice, and FICPFM are doing.

While most see advocacy and movement building as central to the work yet continuously under-resourced, some caution that direct services need sustained attention. One respondent to IP's survey wrote, "There has been an over-correction in the direction of increased dollars for advocacy at the expense of direct services for people who are suffering now."

The recent high-profile media exposure of justice reform efforts has presented novel challenges. Tamu Jones at The California Endowment says that funders too often overlook "retrenchment" or backlash, whether that takes the form of reversing policies, co-opting the narrative, or direct attacks on movement leaders. "This can be threats to their public safety, delegitimizing their work, sowing division, targeting folks, doxxing folks," Jones says. "All of these things are the inevitable consequences when you make forward movement against a regime that has held power for a very long time. We in philanthropy need to stick through these storms, to shore up and protect these individuals when they're under attack."

Another growing concern is that institutional funders tend to decrease or remove support after a single policy win, which leaves the victory vulnerable.

Recent examples include the concerted campaign among conservative organizations to [attack the new bail reform laws](#) in New York, or the efforts in Los Angeles to [redirect](#) funds from the LAPD to community organizations. "Sometimes, we as philanthropists are fixated on hopping to the next policy win," Jones says. "But we know it's the implementation of the win where things fall apart. We have to be prepared for the deep leadership work, the intense ongoing work, the political education, the space for people to come together for shared visions, the long-game investment."

The tenuous and transitory nature of funding for criminal justice reform is a concern expressed across the board by justice reform donors and nonprofits. While funding in this area of philanthropy spiked in 2020, research by The Bridgespan Group shows funding totals dropped significantly in 2021 and 2022. Worryingly, [this research concluded](#) that advocacy and movement building are among the most under-resourced areas of justice reform.



"If you want to support folks in this moment, don't just fund now for one year while police violence is at the top of everyone's mind. Fund it next year and the year after that when there's backlash from police unions and white supremacists, or when there's a moment around implementation, that's really critical."

—Jeree Thomas, program director, the Communities Transforming Policing Fund, Borealis Philanthropy

In the research for this brief, several people from both the survey and one-on-one interviews expressed concern that mental health and substance abuse issues aren't receiving enough funding. "There are precious few philanthropies focused on substance use disorder policy, although this issue touches on racial justice, the criminal legal system and healthcare—which are all hot topics," one survey respondent wrote. "Funding for mental health and homelessness is still far below what is needed," another respondent wrote. "It would be important for donors to recognize that funding for treatment could divert future costs for criminal justice and shelters."

There is growing—but underdeveloped—interest in justice reform groups working in closer alliance with immigrant rights groups. In an interview with Inside Philanthropy, Tanya Coke, the former director of Ford Foundation's racial justice team, said that immigrant detention is "an incarceration crisis, too" and she hopes that more funders from "traditional criminal justice" will begin to see the relevance of this issue, particularly regarding the criminalization of migrants.

Programming around sexual, intimate partner and gender-based violence is another emergent priority, and restorative justice, healing justice and rehabilitation programs are part of a growing constellation of strategies.

Organizations involved in this space include the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, Impact Justice's Restorative Justice Project, as well as the Alliance for Safety and Justice, whose Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice initiative advocates for policies that [scale](#)

[back punitive measures](#) in favor of "crime prevention, trauma recovery and rehabilitation." The Black Youth Project 100's (BYP100) She Safe, We Safe campaign likewise advocates for non-punitive approaches to gender-based crime within the Black LGBTQ+ community.

Looking at Candid data, a recent Inside Philanthropy article [characterized](#) funding to domestic violence-related programs as "miniscule." Vaughn says that funding for domestic violence prevention is chronically overlooked, though it's an area that actually needs infinite funding. "We can't put enough money into this," she says. "It's not possible."

A related topic area is programming to improve the justice system's accountability to survivors of rape and sexual violence. The Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) is a leader in this area. Its work includes efforts to eliminate the rape kit backlog. Sexual violence prevention work is one of the most underfunded areas of justice reform philanthropy. (For a detailed analysis, see the [State of American Philanthropy's](#) report on Violence Prevention.)

Recent funding surges in justice reform philanthropy introduced an opportunity to support constituencies that are chronically underfunded, such as the LGBTQ+, Native American, Latino, and Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, as well as women and girls and the U.S. South. While there are a smattering of justice-focused groups out there, such as the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice and LatinoJustice, many organizations supporting these constituencies don't have criminal justice reform programs.

An underappreciated development has been the proliferation of conservative groups interested in justice reform — such as the Nolan Center for Justice — which tend to partner heavily with legal groups (particularly in the area of prosecutorial reform) and public institutions. Some progressive organizations have been resistant to partner with such organizations, but lately, there is movement. The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Ford Foundation, and other large funders are involved with organizations like the Clean Slate Initiative that also receive funding from right-leaning groups. And left-leaning organizations like the Southern Center for Human Rights and The Sentencing Project recently signed on with the conservative Council on Criminal Justice.

In research for this report, the concern expressed most often by funders and grantees alike was the limited resources of justice reform philanthropy compared to the mega-industries that support criminalization and incarceration. This is why advocacy work is so important within justice reform—it's not just about much-needed funding for direct service projects, but about changing laws, institutions, cultures and mindsets.

“It’s a David and Goliath situation,” said Vivek Trivedi, strategic communications officer at Ford Foundation, in an interview for this report. “Our president [at Ford] says we can’t compete with the amount of money that’s poured into corrections. Philanthropy alone can’t be the singular solution. There must be changes from government and policymakers as well.”

Funder Spotlight

CIRCLE
FOR JUSTICE
INNOVATIONS



Circle for Justice Innovations (CJI) supports grassroots campaigns and organizations fighting to end mass incarceration, mass criminalization, and state violence. According to its mission statement, CJI believes the criminal justice reform movement “should be led by those most impacted by the injustices of the current system” and works “in alliances across race, class, faith, gender, gender identity, sexualtiy, immigration status, and age.” CJI is fiscally sponsored by the Solidago Foundation.

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Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project, each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.org.