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FAIRER REPORTING

IS BETTER REPORTING

A Community Toolkit for Michigan Media



MICHIGANDERS WANT REAL SOLUTIONS TO KEEP OUR COMMUNITIES SAFE

Politicians, prosecutors and police want us to believe that militarizing our streets and throwing more people in prison will make Michigan a safer place to live. The reality is that systems of policing and mass incarceration do not keep us safe and are not an effective deterrent to crime.

Anti-reformers use skewed data about crime rates, especially in Black communities, as a way to generate fear and push their “law and order” agenda and maintain the status quo. These efforts are supported, often unintentionally, by relentless media coverage about crime that sensationalizes individual acts while obscuring systemic oppression. Too often, media coverage lacks the context readers need to fully understand the root causes of violence and crime in our communities, further stoking fear and spreading stereotypes.

The media’s constant fixation on crime — long a fixture of an “if it bleeds, it leads” journalism style — has the effect of stigmatizing entire cities, neighborhoods and communities while simultaneously downplaying root causes of poverty, precarity and prosperity. Overemphasizing crime and ineffective, costly responses like overpolicing, surveillance and mass incarceration come at the expense of focusing on community-led and time-tested solutions, such as divesting from systems of harm and punishment and investing in education, housing, infrastructure and health care.

Public safety is a community responsibility — not a police response. All Michiganders want to live in communities that are safe, support our individual and collective well-being, and provide meaningful opportunities for us and our families. It’s time to reimagine public safety and secure a stronger future for Michigan.

Preventing crime requires a proactive approach to public safety. We can keep our communities safe by investing in the people and neighborhoods that have been neglected for far too long.

We cannot hope to fix our cruel criminal legal system without also addressing the way we talk about crime and public safety in this country.

This toolkit, rooted in the expertise of community advocates, offers guidance on how to accurately report on crime, justice and public safety issues in Michigan.

DID YOU KNOW?

- **Michigan ranks No. 8** in the country for the number of people per capita under correctional control, including imprisonment, probation and parole.¹
- Compared to the rest of the country, **Michigan** spends the **highest percentage** of its budget on incarcerating people.²
- **Michigan incarcerates nearly 600 out of every 100,000 people in the state, which means it locks up a higher percentage of its people than almost any nation on Earth.**³ If Michigan were its own country, it would keep far more people in cages per capita than almost every other country (except for the United States as a whole), including places with high incarceration rates like China, Brazil, Russia, Rwanda and Saudi Arabia.⁴
- More than 32,000 people are currently held in state prisons across Michigan;⁵ an additional 20,000 are locked up in jails, immigration detention and juvenile justice facilities at any given moment.⁶
- Mass incarceration **destabilizes entire communities**. People who experience imprisonment, along with their children and families, suffer many negative physical, psychological and economic outcomes, such as fewer job prospects and lower wages, poor health, food insecurity and housing instability. Mass incarceration also **leads to the deterioration of community connections** that are known to serve as barriers to neighborhood crime.⁷
- Black residents are **disproportionately** represented in the Michigan prison population. While U.S. Department of Justice data affirms that people of **all races commit crimes at similar rates**,⁸ Black people make up over half of the Michigan prison population and 36% of jails, despite representing only 13% of the state population.⁹
- Research over the last 10 years has continuously shown **Michigan prisons** have some of the **longest “average time served” statistics**, despite there being no evidence that these long prison sentences deter crime.¹⁰ In Michigan, 63% of those who have served 10 or more years are Black.¹¹
- Michigan is **one of only six states** that does not have a sentencing credit system that allows time off a prison sentence for good behavior or rehabilitation.¹²
- Michigan still utilizes **mandatory minimum** sentencing, which removes the courts’ ability to tailor sentences to the circumstances of the crime.¹³
- Violent **crime** in Michigan has **decreased by 7.3% since 2021.**¹⁴ While car theft is up in recent years, property crime as a whole has also decreased by 8.8% since 2018.¹⁵

¹Safe & Just Michigan. [Changing the Narrative on Criminal Justice: Michiganders Ready for Reform.](#)

²National Association of State Budget Officers. [2022 State Expenditure Report.](#)

³Prison Policy Initiative. [State Profile: Michigan.](#)

⁴World Population Review. [Incarceration Rates by Country.](#)

⁵Michigan Dept. of Corrections. [Prison Population Projection Report.](#)

⁶Prison Policy Initiative. [State Profile: Michigan.](#)

⁷The Sentencing Project. [Mass Incarceration Trends.](#)

⁸U.S. Dept. of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics. [Race and Ethnicity of Violent Crime Offenders and Arrestees.](#)

⁹Prison Policy Initiative. [State Profile: Michigan.](#)

¹⁰Safe & Just Michigan. [The long haul: why long sentences hurt everyone in Michigan.](#)

¹¹The Sentencing Project. [A Second Look at Long-Term Imprisonment in Michigan.](#)

¹²Safe & Just Michigan. [Changing the Narrative on Criminal Justice: Michiganders Ready for Reform.](#)

¹³Safe & Just Michigan. [Changing the Narrative on Criminal Justice: Michiganders Ready for Reform.](#)

¹⁴Federal Bureau of Investigation. [Crime Data Explorer.](#)

¹⁵Michigan Department of State Police Criminal Justice Information Center. [2022 Crime in Michigan Annual Report.](#)

TIPS FOR FAIRER REPORTING

- **Use person-first language when talking about individuals involved or formerly involved in the criminal legal system.** It's important to use language that centers the individual's identity and humanity. Words like "felon," "murderer" and "offender" label them by their involvement with the criminal legal system rather than their humanity. Instead, we should use terms such as "incarcerated individuals" or "people who were formerly incarcerated." This uses person-first language while acknowledging the individual's involvement with the criminal legal system without biasing the reader.
- **Provide additional context.** Be skeptical of the common narrative about the alleged criminality of Black and brown people and the need for expansive and often unaccountable state surveillance and control of people of color to make white people feel safer. Knowing that this narrative is rooted in discrimination, xenophobia and classism; attempts to fearmonger; and puts undue harm on communities of color is essential to combating these perceptions. As much as possible in their reporting, journalists should include historical context and the motivations that drive crime narratives.
- **Do not overstate crime rates in headlines.** Violent crime overall is down across the country and in Michigan has decreased to pre-pandemic levels. Sensationalizing crime data can lead to more violence and distrust in our communities. Headlines drive the spread of misinformation through search engine optimization and algorithms on social media platforms. Responsible headlines are one of the best ways to curb the spread of falsehoods that are a threat to public safety.
- **Name the issues with crime data.** National, state and local crime data is collected and produced by law enforcement. Law enforcement determines what's collected, how and how it is categorized based on the case it wants to make for its own jobs and public funding. Report the data as such, avoid [generalizing crime statistics](#) and note outliers in the data.
- **Highlight violence-prevention efforts beyond police officers or increased incarceration — neither of which has proven to make communities safer.** Consider covering community-based violence prevention efforts that address the root causes of violence and crime, like poverty, racism and the overpolicing of Black and brown communities. Nuanced reporting highlights a variety of interventions and helps readers expand their understanding of potential solutions to pressing issues.
- **Whom you quote helps frame your story.** The voices of law enforcement, their representatives, and their partners and advocates in academia and at pro-carceral think tanks get disproportionate attention in media reports. For balanced reporting, include community voices as much as possible, and contact criminal justice reform experts in Michigan for more context and potential quotes, such as the contacts listed in this memo.

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES FOR 2024

It's time to enact policies that will make life better, safer, more decent and dignified for all Michiganders. We must invest in initiatives that reflect our values and create a safer and more just Michigan for all of us.

ENACTING SECOND LOOK

- Michigan wastes millions of taxpayer dollars incarcerating people for decades, long past the time they are at risk of reoffending and with no deterrent impact to prevent other crimes. Second Look legislation ([B4556-HB4560](#) | [SB321-SB325](#)) provides a pathway for judges to revisit these long prison sentences to see whether someone should be resentenced. Advocates across Michigan support this legislation.

Learn more [here](#) and [here](#) about why the Michigan justice system needs a Second Look.

IMPLEMENTING GOOD TIME

- Michigan is one of the only states to have completely eliminated disciplinary credits and good time sentencing reductions, requiring all people convicted of a crime to serve the entire minimum sentence in prison prior to even being considered for parole. Reinstating the Good Time policy will allow people with consistent records of good behavior behind bars to have their sentences reduced, saving taxpayer money and reuniting families. Advocates across Michigan support a public referendum to bring Good Time back.

Learn more [here](#) and [here](#) about why Good Time makes good sense.

ELIMINATING CASH BAIL

- No one's freedom should rely on how much money they have in the bank. Yet, this is exactly what the cash bail system demands. Those who can afford it can pay their way out of pretrial detention. Those who can't, however, must stay locked up (despite being convicted of nothing and presumed innocent under the Constitution), find themselves at the mercy of predatory bail bonds agencies or feel pressured to plead guilty before trial to be released. This is not justice. Michiganders' cash bail system must be eliminated.

Learn more [here](#) and [here](#) about efforts to end cash bail in Michigan.

PUBLIC OPINION

Recent polling shows widespread public support for reforming policing and the criminal legal system in Michigan.

92% of Michiganders support policies requiring law enforcement officers to intervene if they see another officer using excessive force or engaging in wrongdoing.

81% of Michiganders support enhancing methods of police accountability.

79% of Michiganders support banning chokeholds and other excessive force.

78% of Michiganders support banning “no-knock warrants.”

56% of Michiganders support Second Look legislation.

Sources: Progress Michigan and Public Policy Polling, [July 2023](#) and [September 2023](#).



TALK TO US

Need more information about criminal legal policy in Michigan or want to connect with an expert on community and public safety? Contact these leaders, and keep their information handy!



ACLU-Michigan

Ann Mullen, communications director — amullen@aclumich.org



AFSC Michigan Criminal Justice Program

Natalie Holbrook, program director — nholbrook@afsc.org

Cozine Welch, organizer for ending life and long sentences — cwelch@afsc.org



Detroit Justice Center

Casey Rocheteau, communications director — crocheteau@detroitjustice.org



Center for Behavioral Health and Justice at the Wayne State University School of Social Work

Jessica Best, information officer — jessica.best@wayne.edu



Michigan Center for Youth Justice

Jason Smith, executive director — jsmith@miyouthjustice.org



Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration

Chuck Warpehoski, program director — chuckw@mi-cemi.org



Michigan Liberation

Marjon Parham, communications director — Marjon@miliberation.org



Safe & Just Michigan

Kate McCracken, chief operating officer — kate@safeandjustmi.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [“Impact Language Glossary For Media And Public Communication”](#) (MI-CEMI, 2023).
- [“Changing the Narrative on Criminal Justice: Michiganders Ready for Reform”](#) (Safe & Just Michigan, 2022).
- [“Overview of the Criminal Legal System in Michigan: Adults and Youth”](#) (Public Welfare Foundation, 2021).
- [“Cops Don’t Stop Violence”](#) (Interrupting Criminalization and Community Resource Hub, 2021).
- [“People First: The Use and Impact of Criminal Justice Labels in Media Coverage”](#) (FWD.us, 2021).
- [“What Words We Use — and Avoid — When Covering People and Incarceration”](#) (The Marshall Project’s [Language Project](#), 2021).
- [“Words Matter: Don’t Call People Felons, Convicts, or Inmates”](#) (Vera Institute of Justice, 2021).
- [“Reducing Violence Without Police: A Review of Research Evidence”](#) (John Jay College of Criminal Justice Research and Evaluation Center, 2020).



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