

Challenge

Cook County Jail in Chicago is the largest single-site jail in the United States. The jail has long been overcrowded, at times housing over 10,000 people. The problems with overcrowding were due in large part to unaffordable money bonds that made individuals sit in jail while awaiting trial. Pressure from community organizations forced Cook County officials to seek solutions to its overcrowded jails. Starting in 2013, the county implemented decarceration efforts to expedite the number of people approved for pretrial release. The new measures heavily relied on expanding the county's electronic monitoring program. Cook County has a long history of using electronic monitoring for pretrial release, with over 300,000 usages since 1989.

By the close of 2017, Cook County Jail's population fell below 6,000, its lowest in decades. While at a glance, this looks like success, advocates such as the Chicago Community Bond Fund took a closer look at the conditions of those released on pretrial.

Action

In a report titled "Punishment Is Not A Service," the Chicago Community Bond Fund set out to better understand how Cook County's efforts to decarcerate their jail were actually affecting the people who were released. By documenting their stories, the report found that the impact of the conditions faced by people who were released often resembled the conditions of people actually in jail. Because of curfews and restrictions imposed by electronic monitoring, people lost their jobs and were unable to seek needed medical help or care for their children. Some individuals had the option of being taken off monitoring if they could afford to pay a specific amount. This mimicked the inequality of the money bail system which Cook County's reforms were supposed to address.

The Chicago Community Bond Fund's report included a set of recommendations for changes to Cook County's pretrial release conditions. These recommendations were largely informed by the #ChallengingEcarceration guidelines and are being used to pressure officials in Cook County to make changes.

Insights

Mobilization by the community to monitor the decarceration process in Cook County highlighted key shortcomings. While jail populations fell, the conditions for those released, especially electronic monitoring, were often extremely punitive. Investigative work by #Challenging Ecarceration helped sharpen the analysis of the Chicago Community Bond Fund.

About Us

#ChallengingEcarceration is a project led by James Kilgore of the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center in partnership with the Center for Media Justice. #ChallengingEcarceration aims to change the story and policies that affect the lives of people living under electronic monitoring. This project will put advocates of criminal justice and immigration reform in a better position to restrict and abolish the use of electronic monitors.

Contact Us

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