

ABOUT RESTORE JUSTICE | 2024

What we do

Restore Justice works to dismantle our state’s laws that disproportionately punish Black and poor Illinoisans; our main priority is abolishing life without parole sentences for children and young adults. We increase the impact of our policy work by hiring and training people who spent more than 20 years in prison and who want to lead social justice and policy change.

Why we do it

For decades, Illinois has pursued a punishment-centered approach in its criminal legal system. These punitive policies have funneled thousands of young people—some no older than 14 at the time of their convictions—into prison for extreme lengths of time.

These laws disproportionately affect Black people and are largely responsible for over-incarceration in Illinois. Black men arrested in their youth and sentenced to life (or *de facto* life - 40+ years) sentences bear the largest share of over-incarceration in Illinois. While the total Illinois prison population has *decreased* 40% since 2014, there has been an 18% *increase* in the number of Black people under 21 serving life or *de facto* life sentences. We believe reducing this long-term incarceration is a necessary component of a more rational approach to community safety. In Illinois today, people who “age out” of serious crime (which research indicates most do) have no hope of earning early release. In many other states, they could be home earning money to support their families.

In our experience, most people who come home after serving long prison sentences want to be part of a solution to community violence; these people are uniquely qualified to find and implement solutions. But some Illinois communities have lost so many people to decades of incarceration, that the very people who could help create stability and dismantle poverty are still locked up. This leaves the next generation of youth stuck in the same patterns of crime and violence.

What we have accomplished

Since our founding in 2015, we have helped to craft and pass meaningful reforms each year, while engaging hundreds of families, formerly incarcerated people, and allies in support groups and advocacy activities. We have hired and nurtured nine apprentices who work either at Restore Justice or other organizations in our field.

Our policy accomplishments include:

- Abolishing life without parole for all children and most young adults in Illinois,
- Establishing the first new parole opportunities in Illinois since 1978 (when the state abolished the parole system),
- Securing more discretion for judges when sentencing children in adult court, and
- Making positive reforms to Illinois’s overly-broad felony-murder law.

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