

# Opinion Editorial

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## **Criminal Justice Reform: Backtracking Will Not Move Us Forward**

It's frustrating to realize how far we have come in the struggle to balance the playing field with police reforms and ending mass incarceration of people of color in New Jersey, yet still have so very far to go. We, "the advocates", have worked aggressively together with the Legislature and executive agencies in New Jersey government to advance policies which are effective yet more humane.

New Jersey has emerged as a national leader in attacking the ills of structural and institutional injustice. We have laws which require racial justice impact studies as a part of all criminal justice bills crafted by the NJ Legislature. We fought for and achieved genuine bail reform (a national model!) that is proven successful, years later, by data with clear demonstration of no increase in crime as its result. We have directives put forth by the Attorney General's office to reform internal affairs procedures, we've created portal systems for police to document use of force incidents, mandatory training on de-escalation techniques, and improved active bystander policies. Mental health professionals will soon be accompanying police on calls where individuals are experiencing extreme stress with the hope of preventing unnecessary use of force by responding officers. The Attorney General has established a new Office of Integrity & Accountability to pursue official misconduct, while they continue to struggle to conduct timely investigations of police-involved civilian deaths.

The COVID public emergency reduced the NJ prison population by nearly half in 2020, again with no increase in crime three years later. Cruel isolated confinement as punishment has been outlawed for juveniles and adults. We have created reentry resources where there were none twenty years ago.

Yet, with all of these successful steps forward, why are communities of color still facing imbalances in our interactions with law enforcement and the justice system? What's with all of the backsliding in the legislature to chip away and reverse the progress New Jersey has made?

The Legislature is moving quickly to pass laws further criminalizing auto theft despite every expert, and even the Governor, testifying that car theft is going DOWN in the state. We continue to see incidents of police resorting to shooting people who are in obvious mental distress. In New Jersey, an officer must show they are under an immediate threat and have considered and used alternatives prior to deadly force.

With all of the global uproar around criminal justice reform and police brutality, including the horrific display of outright police murder, how is it that this kind of brutality from law enforcement goes on still, simply as "business as usual"? Since 2019, New Jersey has seen 75 police-involved civilian deaths, according to a study by nj.com. A majority of cases were police shooting suspects dead. People of color are over-represented among those killed by police. Many of those shot did not have firearms.

The Latino Action Network has proposed several additional policies for New Jersey to consider on our path to reach the goal of equal justice for all. Among these are more thorough screening of police recruits, better supervision of officers in the field, greater deployment and use of non-lethal methods for subduing suspects, research and development of more effective non-lethal resources for law enforcement, and increased funding to accelerate the investigations of police-involved deaths of civilians. In spite of all the steps we have taken in New Jersey, in terms of results and accountability to our communities, we still have so far to go. The Latino Action Network is proud to partner with over a dozen other groups, working cooperatively with the New Jersey Attorney General's office and legislators to prevent more tragedies and make the reforms we have built, truly work. No human life is expendable... We say we've progressed? Let's continue to work together to prove it.