



[Begin clip]

**Reporter:** *“Good evening, and welcome to the second of three presidential debates between the major candidates for president of the United States. The candidates are the Republican nominee, President George Bush, the independent Ross Perot, and Governor Bill Clinton, the Democratic nominee.”*

[End clip]

**Josie Duffy Rice:** It’s October of 1992, two years before the signing of the '94 Crime Bill, and the three candidates for president are on the debate stage, talking about issues. If you didn’t know better, you could think that parts of the conversation were happening today. Much of the back and forth—the talk about healthcare, the national debt, gun control—sounds pretty much the same then as it does now. But then they turn to crime. Here’s former President Bill Clinton:

[Begin clip]

**Bill Clinton:** *“There is a crime bill which would put more police on the street, which was killed for this session by a filibuster in the Senate, mostly by Republican Senators. And I think it’s a shame it didn’t pass. 30 years ago, there were three police officers on the street for every crime. Today, there are three crimes for every police officer. In the communities which have had real success putting police officers near schools where kids carry weapons, to get the weapons out of the schools, or on the same blocks, you’ve seen crime go down.”*

[End clip]

**Josie:** And here’s former President George H.W. Bush:

[Begin clip]

**George H.W. Bush:** *“I have been fighting for very strong anti-crime legislation. Habeas corpus reform so you don’t have these endless appeals, so when somebody gets sentenced, hey, this is for real. I’ve been fighting for changes in the exclusionary rule so if an honest cop stops somebody and makes a technical mistake, the criminal doesn’t—doesn’t go away. I’ll probably get into a fight in this room with some, but I happen to think that we need stronger death penalties for those that kill police officers ... I’m very pleased that the fraternal order of police in Little Rock, Arkansas endorsed me because I think they see I’m trying to strengthen the anti-crime legislation.”*

[End clip]

**Josie:** More cops. Fewer consequences for officers that make, quote, “mistakes”. More punishment. A “stronger death penalty” with fewer appeals. Now, fast-forward 27 years. Summer of 2019, the Democratic primary debates, and things sound very different.

[Begin clip]

**Julián Castro:** “When we talk about criminal justice reform, there are a lot of things that we can talk about—sentencing reform, cash bail reform, investing in public defenders, diversion programs...”

**Tulsi Gabbard:** “I want to bring the conversation back to the broken criminal justice system that is disproportionately negatively impacting Black and brown people all across this country today.”

**Joe Biden:** “We made sure we reduced the federal prison population by 38,000 people.”

**Jay Inslee:** “When people come out of the legal system, and they've done their responsibility to the citizens, we need to make sure they can get a job.”

**Julián Castro:** “We need to ensure we have a national use of force standard and that we end qualified immunity for police officers so that we can hold them accountable for using excessive force.”

**Bill de Blasio:** “We're changing fundamentally how we police.”

**Kamala Harris:** “My entire career, I have been opposed—personally opposed to the death penalty, and that has never changed.”

**Julián Castro:** “We have a police system that is broken, and we need to fix it.”

**Kamala Harris:** “I did the work of significantly reforming the criminal justice system of a state of 40 million people.”

**Joe Biden:** “We, in fact, insisted that we change the rules that police engage in. They had to have—we provided for body cameras.”

**Jay Inslee:** “I'm proud that I was the first governor to offer pardons to thousands of people with drug crimes. We've eliminated the death penalty.”

[End clip]

**Josie:** The shift in tone, at least, was undeniable. So what happened? We spent our first three episodes talking about the truth, myths, and harms of the '94 Crime Bill and also about mass incarceration more broadly. On our last episode, we talk about the fight against the carceral system and take a look into the future.

[Music]

**Josie:** On the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1994 Crime Bill, we take a brief look back on where we are, where we've been, and most importantly, what comes next. I'm your host Josie Duffy Rice, and from the Vera Institute of Justice; this is *The 30 Year Project*. Episode 4: Progress.

[Music]

**Josie:** In my work as a journalist, I've interviewed hundreds of people about reforms tiny to large, marginal to transformational, people advocating everything from police body cams to prison abolition—some fighting for what they imagine to be a better system, some fighting for a smaller system, and some fighting for a future with no system at all. But back in 1994, the fight against mass incarceration was very different. Here's Nkechi Taifa, who worked at the ACLU at the time that the '94 Crime Bill was passed:

**Nkechi Taifa:** You must understand that this was a time when there was not much distinction at all between Republicans and Democrats when it came to criminal justice issues. And even the civil rights community was not always right up there in front on the most progressive stances. Yes, they were there, they were there in opposition to the various death penalty provisions, but it was primarily the issue of racism in the application of the death penalty. During those early days, even the issue of the crack versus powder cocaine in the 100:1 disparity ratio between those two forms of the same drug, we had to, kind of like, pull the NAACP, the largest civil rights organization at the time, into that issue basically kicking and screaming. They did come, ultimately, but in those early days, there wasn't a whole lot of love out there for justice reform, and they did absolutely and completely come around full throttle to support many of these provisions, but at the beginning, it was like tiptoeing through these issues as opposed to confronting them, you know, frontally.

**Josie:** Eventually, though, that shifted—especially in the last fifteen years. From the publishing of Michelle Alexander's 2009 book, *The New Jim Crow*, to cell phone videos that showed police killing Black people without remorse or consequence, to the summer of 2020, when police killed George Floyd in Minneapolis—this flawed system has shifted in and out of center stage, as people see more clearly its failures. Here's Jocelyn Fontaine, Vice President of Strategic Program Development at the Urban Institute:

**Jocelyn Fontaine:** There's much more awareness and attention to this issue by a broader base of people. And so what I mean by that is that you have policy folks, so stakeholders, who are interested in the issue of mass incarceration and not having

entirely punitive responses to violence, to crime and, you know, incarcerating people for really long sentences. You of course, have policy advocates and activists who are really motivated to reduce mass incarceration and really focused on the experience of incarceration and what that means to individuals, families, and communities.

**Josie:** And as the system has gotten more attention, the conversation about solutions has also evolved. As Nkechi mentioned, in those days in the early '90s, the focus—when there was attention at all—was on racial disparities. Of course, racial disparities were and remain a fundamental facet of this system—a reflection of the white supremacist power structure that created it. But in those days, this conversation often led to policies that, at least in theory, tried to make the system “fair” by ratcheting up punishments for other groups instead of lowering punishments for Black people. This is part of how we ended up with mandatory minimums, policies that tried to guarantee an excessive sentence for everyone. As a reform effort, the exclusive focus on racial disparities was ultimately insufficient. Because in the end, punishments increased, and racial disparity remained.

[Music]

**Josie:** For years, the conversation about criminal justice reform was narrowly focused on certain categories of people—the innocent or those accused of non-violent crimes. These categorical carve-outs were, in some ways, a rhetorical tool—meant to introduce the idea of reform to people who were fearful of those “violent criminals.” But this approach, too, had shortcomings. Politician after politician promised to be less harsh on non-violent drug offenders and tougher on everyone else. But like we discussed on a previous episode, these exceptions are misleading. They’re inaccurate, and they center the focus on the worthiness of incarcerated individuals rather than the broad failures of the system. In some ways, this approach echoes the limitations of the “bad apple” frame of police violence—to isolate the individual is myopic. The failures are broad, and the solutions must be, too.

Overall, for much of the past 30 years, the reform conversation has taken approaches that could be described as “rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.” These tactics reinforced the very issues that we hoped to solve. Prison overcrowding? We’ll just build more prisons. Police behaving badly? The police need more money. In other words—to fix the system, we need to grow the system. These “non-reformist” reforms often create more problems instead of solving them. And they reinforce a reliance on the system—more surveillance, more punishment, more money. Now, though, the conversation is shifting in unprecedented ways. We’re finally seeing a decoupling of the concepts of “public safety” and the “criminal legal system.” There’s increasing consensus that prisons and police are not guarantees of safety—that they actually often exacerbate the very conditions that they’re supposed to solve. And after years of just trying to make this massive system better, we’ve seen a new shift towards making it smaller. Decarceration has become a priority.

This may be the most important thing to note about the movement for reform. The idea that we should move resources out of punishment on the back end—and into preventing harm and the involvement of the system on the front end—is a crucial one, and it has the potential to guide all of our futures. Here is Vivian Nixon, writer in residence at the Columbia Justice Lab Square One Project:

**Vivian Nixon:** Decarceration is, even amongst the threads of those who are trying to improve conditions, even amongst those of us who, like, for me, I wanted education back in the prisons. But I didn't want education back in the prisons so that we could sustain the prisons. I wanted education back in the prisons so people would get out and never come back, but also the education is infectious. It literally goes back to the community with you, and more and more people get educated. And that's a huge deterrent for even getting caught up in the criminal justice system. But it was always about decarceration for me is always about less people in prisons. And I think we're on board with that. I don't know anybody who I'm working with now who would say their sole goal is to make prisons better places and keep them full.

[Music]

**Josie:** When we asked our guests what they've noticed over the last thirty years in this movement, we got all kinds of responses. Many of the answers were not about policy but about practice—about how the movement itself has shifted in how it operates and organizes. For example, one common response was the importance of directly impacted leadership. Here's David Ayala, the Executive Director of the Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People & Families Movement:

**David Ayala:** I believe, I mean, it's definitely important for those that, you know, have been impacted, have gone through the system, to play a huge part in creating the solutions to basically to help create safer and healthier communities because we've gone through it. We have experienced it.

**Josie:** And here's Terrell Blount, Executive Director of the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network:

**Terrell Blount:** I see hope in the movement that is currently happening with people, with lived experience who are growing into leaders. What you see now is people actually leading the discussions and no longer just being offered a seat on a panel or at the table, as we usually say, like just to be there and share our experience of incarceration. It's no longer that. We're actually talking about real policy. We're introducing policy, we're, you know, focusing on solutions, and it's less about, like, me telling my story of what I went through and reliving that pain, rehashing the trauma or whatever it is, and then it's like, goodbye. Like, no, we're actually being brought to the table for our expertise.

**Josie:** Gina Clayton-Johnson, the Executive Director of Essie Justice Group, also noted the importance of that leadership, especially for directly impacted women.

**Gina Clayton-Johnson:** There has been a tremendous amount of positive organizing and criminal justice reform that's happened because incarcerated women have taken it upon themselves to get together inside and organize, whether that be programs or campaigns to write letters. Leading to women who are formerly incarcerated, running and starting organizations and really leading the way in terms of the way that we are thinking about what we are doing in our, kind of, punishment bureaucracy. And so, it's a travesty and a human rights catastrophe what's been happening to women inside. But there's also that other piece that I really want to uplift, which is that, you know, the leadership of women who are incarcerated and women who are formerly incarcerated is some of the most important, if not the most important, leadership that we see and come out of kind of our criminal justice reform movement.

[Music]

**Josie:** Another change from the last 30 years that people mentioned is the political shift of both parties, from being in a cruelty contest to be the most “tough-on-crime,” to being open, and sometimes even encouraging, of change. At one point, there was basically no acknowledgement that the criminal legal system was a failure. But slowly, that perspective became more common—among the left, and then liberals, before it trickled across the political spectrum. Here’s Holly Harris, President of The Network:

**Holly Harris:** Well, I think initially criminal justice reform was viewed as a liberal issue, or a progressive issue and then, you know, states across the country led by Republican governors, deep red states, beginning with Texas but also stretching across the south, began to implement “smart-on-crime” policies in a bipartisan way that decreased incarceration, but also led to improved public safety outcomes and saved, you know, billions of dollars in the process. And so, you know, the issue became very bipartisan in the states and then that translated to great success at the federal level. We started seeing groups like the ACLU and the Center for American Progress working with the Faith and Freedom Coalition, the American conservative conservative union. All of these individuals came to the table who otherwise didn't agree on very much.

**Josie:** And here’s Jason Pye of the Due Process Institute:

**Jason Pye:** There's also been good bipartisanship in the context of criminal justice, and that's, that is what I'm proud of, and we, I think we've gotten away from that a little bit, but I've seen us getting more and more, sort of getting the band back together and that good bipartisanship, the good bipartisanship that has support from the American public, and when we work on something together and pass something has credibility with the American public and at the end of the day, takes bipartisanship, both sides, ideological sides, or even, people who are libertarians

and, and more working with conservatives and progressives to pass something. That—criminal justice is a space where we can do that. We have done that, and we can continue to do that. And I view it as a way to bridge the partisan divide in a time where we are so divided along hyper-partisan lines, and we're at days where it feels, where I wake up and feel like we're hopelessly divided.

**Josie:** That there's any bipartisan agreement on this issue at all is honestly a testament to organizers, especially directly impacted people, who, for years, have pushed tirelessly to gain support for changes in policy. And while it certainly hasn't always been enough or perfect, it has led to real wins. Here's Nick Turner, the President of The Vera Institute of Justice:

**Nick Turner:** I see a record that our field has of beginning to win. Since 2009, the incarcerated population in this country has been reduced about 20 percent. Arrests have been reduced in this country about 30–33 percent, and racial disparities have diminished substantially in the past 15 years.

**Josie:** Here's Adam Gelb, president and CEO of the Council on Criminal Justice:

**Adam Gelb:** I think it's essential to recognize that the footprint of the justice system has shrunk, and substantially so. We've had a drop in crime now of about 60 percent from the peaks around 1990 in that Crime Bill environment. We had that drop in arrests and that's pretty clearly what's been behind the significant drop in the incarceration rate and the rate of overall correctional control that we've seen, both of which are down about a third from the peaks in 2007, 2008.

**Josie:** And here's Jeremy Travis, Senior Fellow at the Columbia Justice Lab. In 1994, he was serving in the Clinton Administration as the Director of the National Institute of Justice:

**Jeremy Travis:** We have seen that the rates of incarceration have started to decline, rates of parole and probation supervision have started to decline, and that the crime rate is as low as it's been in a long time. So today, we have a very different environment when we talk about our crime policies, our criminal justice policies, very different from the mid-'90s. And the public's opinion and concern about crime has dropped significantly. It's not to say that crime is not important; it's still important and always will be. But the level of panic and the need to do something about crime that was very intense in the late eighties and early '90s, that has receded. That is not today's reality. So, today's reality gives us much more room to initiate reform strategies to do something very different about crime, and we've learned a lot. And now's the time to put that—those learnings and some of those lessons and put them into practice so that we never, never again engage in a period of excessive punishment where we decide that the best response to crime is more punishment.

[Music]

**Josie:** Some policy reforms have also begun to take hold, from expanded re-entry support for people recently returned from prison to ending cash bail, which has long fed what are effectively “debtors' jails.” Places like Washington, D.C., Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, Arizona, Alaska, Colorado, Kentucky, and Maryland have ended or limited cash bail, and many municipalities have done the same. Now, all of these new policies are not created equal. But in many places, we’ve seen public officials and community members interested in ending this poverty trap. We’ve seen wins on the local, state, and federal level. We’ve seen more organized pushback against legislators who continue to support failed “tough-on-crime” policies, regardless of party. There’s been a national movement of less carceral prosecutors winning elections in cities across the country. And as we noted, in some places, public safety responsibilities are shifting to health, or community-based, or other non-enforcement services. Services that are trying to alleviate the spiraling consequences of what it means to be unhoused or suffer from addiction, among other things. And on the federal level, things are certainly improved from 1994. President Obama, President Trump, and President Biden all signed some form of criminal justice reform legislation. And we’ve even seen some movement in red states. Here’s Zoë Towns, Executive Director of FWD.us:

**Zoë Towns:** Just this year, lawmakers in Mississippi voted to reauthorize parole eligibility for three-quarters of their prison population. This is a state with supermajority Republican control in the House and in the Senate and a Republican governor that came together in 2024 to say we absolutely want to continue to allow for second chances for most people who are incarcerated. That's a massive switch from their practice prior, which was that only a third of the prison population was allowed an opportunity to come before a parole board.

So, extraordinary, showing of consensus on that really important issue, and people are coming home who wouldn't have come home otherwise from decades-long sentences to be able to rejoin their communities on the outside. In places like Oklahoma, that were the top incarcerating states in the country, that had just grown and grown and grown every year. More and more prisons reforms to cold about now, seven years ago, big ballot initiatives, big clemency campaigns, sentencing reforms chipping away year after year at the legislature, led by Republicans, led by Democrats, led by teachers, led by health care professionals, drug treatment providers who wanted different solutions for Oklahoma and now a few years on, you can see the prison population has come down more than 20% in the state.

[Music]

**Josie:** But it is very important to note that we have not at all won this battle. We still incarcerate millions of people every year; we spend billions of dollars doing it. We still invest in this system at the expense of others. Mass incarceration is not dead. It is not a relic of our past. It’s not even close to over. It is, in fact, very much alive. It’s swallowing people as we speak. It’s separating families. We have a long, long way to go, and we face countless challenges. And those challenges have been more clear these past few years, after a spike in crime during the early pandemic led to increased fear, which led, as always, to reactionary



policy. This is an issue that this broad movement has always had to battle—the easy transition back to the old rhetoric and “tough-on-crime” politics that seduces so many across the political spectrum. Here’s Holly Harris again:

**Holly Harris:** Look, criminal justice reform, like any issue, is going to face challenges that really have nothing to do with the criminal justice system. I mean, you know, most recently, you know, we’ve seen a lot of the terribly partisan, the ugly rhetoric in our political environment impact how we can pass legislation or how swiftly we can pass legislation. And so anytime crime rates, you know, spike or go up in this country, there are those who will say, Oh, that’s the fault of criminal justice reform. And in fact, the data shows that’s just the opposite. Criminal justice reform leads to lower crime and recidivism rates.

**Josie:** It’s true that the post-pandemic retraction has had an impact—the insidious nature of “tough-on-crime” policy is that it’s such an easy fallback. But it’s also true that the movement is increasingly resilient. And public attitudes are starting to shift. Here’s Nick Turner again:

**Nick Turner:** One of the things that we’ve done at Vera is a significant amount of public opinion research that looks at public attitudes around responses to crime. If you want to be safe, what kind of policies do you need? We had largely been in a “tough-on-crime” binge for the past few decades when politicians would promise safety with more police, more prisons, more jails, longer sentences, things of that nature.

And we’ve conducted over 20 rounds of research over the course of the past two years and have discovered that, actually, what Americans want is something quite different than the “tough-on-crime” promises. That, in fact, when you ask people, what do you prefer? Do you prefer, if people are serious about safety, so to, you know, to fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities and to improve people’s lives, like good schools, a living wage, affordable housing, and to do more to prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street. Across the board, nationally, Americans prefer that like 56 percent to 43 percent, the 43 percent being the old “tough-on-crime,” promises of more cops locking people up more and longer, and even independents and moderates feel the same way. And then, if you look at young voters and people of color, the preference for this comprehensive, solutions-oriented approach is much higher. That’s stunningly different than it was in the mid-’90s. And so I think we have a smarter population. I think we have a population that understands the harms of the system that are caused, and are seeking something different, and the political apparatus is what needs to do some catching up.

[Music]

**Josie:** Of course, as this perspective has shifted into the overton window, there’s also been pushback. And the number one thing people ask is, what if a new way fails? This is a fair question. People want to feel safe, and they’ve come to rely on this system to give them that

sense of security despite its abject failure of ensuring it. The idea of shrinking or eliminating their dependence on it, it can feel overwhelming. So—what if a new way fails? The answer to this question requires a different idea how our society addresses harm and violence. We want a world where we prevent harm rather than just punish it. From gun violence to drug overdoses, from gender violence to property crime—the goal of any society should be to prevent what we can on the front end rather than focus solely on punishment after the harm is done. But our society has, in many ways, abdicated its responsibility for prevention. It has relied on prisons and police to “keep us safe.” Public safety requires investment on the front end—in schools, childcare, mental health treatment. It requires a livable minimum wage, and affordable housing, and gun control. It requires clean parks and clean streets. In other words, it demands a society that invests in the people rather than invests in penalizing the people. And for decades, our society has often done the opposite. And even with all the investment in the world, we can’t completely eradicate harm or wrongdoing. That means it’s also crucial to invest in community-based intervention to try to limit the impact of harm that does occur and help stop it from occurring in the future. But here’s what we know—our criminal legal system will not be replaced by one thing. There’s no magic solution to harm, trauma, violence. There’s no magical cure to the problems the system has exacerbated.

But there are better paths to a safe future that don’t rely on handcuffs or cages. We’ve spent many years, many years, and many, many, billions of dollars creating a behemoth of a system that has generated harm, after harm, after harm. And it’s going to take many years and a lot of money to create something new. This is a generational project. Here’s Nick Turner again:

**Nick Turner:** The thing that I will say, that is really important, is that we are nowhere near done and a system that is rooted in centuries of white supremacist thinking in this country, and then decades of a growth of the modern system of mass incarceration will take decades to undo, and it’s incredibly important that people stay with it and that people don’t see it as something, well, we gave it our best effort in the 2010s and, you know, the wind is, you know, perhaps blowing in a different way. So, let’s move on to something else. I mean, this is a generational exercise. It is, some people describe it, you know, evergreen. So we have to be at it for decades, and we have to be patient. But I have a lot of a lot when I look around; that gives me great hope that we’re going to continue to make progress.

**Josie:** Perhaps in the end, the problems with the '94 Crime Bill were inevitable, regardless of what the policies even included. The powerful are often good salesmen, and in 1994, they were selling a one-size-fits-all solution to deeply rooted societal harms. But one bill is not ever going to be the one true solution to violence, to conflict. The problem, as always, is in reaching distance—varying from place to place, community to community, town to town. Here’s John Pfaff, professor of law at Fordham Law School:

**John Pfaff:** We thought about prison as like our one-size-fits-all solution for crime. And I think it’s encouraged reformers to think about sort of a one-size-fits-all fix, right?

Like, what do we replace prisons with? Well, it might depend, right? But I think we sort of keep asking ourselves, like, what is prison's replacement? Like, there is one, we, we focus on one solution in the '80s and '90s, what's the one thing to replace it? When, oftentimes, the solution, what works in Chicago won't work in L.A., isn't gonna work in, like, you know, rural Pennsylvania. And I think it sort of blinkered our visions to try to figure out like, what's that next one big thing to do. And I think we sort of hope that maybe there's this one, it's like that, every like meme, this one trick solves mass incarceration, right? If the feds can just pass the one right bill, they caused it with one bill. Let's reverse it with another, right? But that they didn't cause it, and they can't reverse it. We're not going to be able to solve this with some big fancy signing ceremony in some gilded D.C senate room. We have to solve this, you know, sort of dingy fluorescent-lit county-level office building by dingy fluorescent-lit county office building. That's the solution.

[Music]

**Josie:** People often ask why I work in a system like this—one that can feel so depressing, full of so much tragedy and suffering. But the truth is that this is also a system rife with hope. There are pockets of hope everywhere you look—hope for a new beginning, hope for a different future. And not just for the people in the system, but for the people out of it, too. So we asked the people we interviewed, what gives them hope? And why? Here's Nick Turner again:

**Nick Turner:** I see hope for ending mass incarceration going forward everywhere. I see it in the changed political incentives that people have. I see it in the increased knowledge of the and recognition of the harms that the system of mass incarceration has created. I see it in the greater embrace of evidence to drive policy. I see it in the rejection of “tough-on-crime” rhetoric and political salesmanship in favor of a comprehensive approach that advances real safety, accountability and justice. I see a tremendous evolution in that regard in the past 15 years. None of it's enough to be clear, there is much, much more work to do. We are still operating in a reality of mass incarceration, but we've made real progress, and that means that millions of people have avoided being touched by a system that largely harms them. Millions of people have been able to sit at home at the dinner table with their kids and help out with homework, and not lose a job because of harm, not lose an apartment, not even lose their kids. So there's greater stability that we're seeing and lots of human benefit as a result of that.

**Josie:** Here's Kim Foxx, the State's Attorney of Cook County, Illinois:

**SA Kim Foxx:** I do have hope, because in one of the biggest systems in the country, who has been reckoning with violence since I came into this world, we abolished cash bail in 20. And it felt, just anywhere it would feel an impossible task, not court

mandated to do it, not like—it was, we can do this. And the coalition to do that wasn't just legislators, or it wasn't just me and one other prosecutor out of 102. It was impacted communities, like that coalition, that were people who were impacted by this system making a demand on the system, the system hearing the demand and saying, what can we do together? And it was impossible. Like, I honestly, there are days where I do; I scratch my head and be like, how did that get done? And I think of Nelson Mandela, it's only impossible until it's done.

**Josie:** Here is Vivian Nixon:

**Vivian Nixon:** All my hope is in the people. My hope is in all of us who followed the call of critical resistance. All of us who got on board with a simple idea called “ban the box” when all of us or none put that idea out there. All of us who are behind reinstating voting rights across this country.

People who've come out of prison and become lawyers so that they can change the laws in their states like Daryl Atkinson's. You know, women who after many, many arrests and, and periods of incarceration have come out and started organizations to build up women and end the incarceration of women and girls. My hope is in all of that. That's where my hope is. It's in the people because the people are educated about this stuff. Now they know what's happening to them. They know that there's a reckoning that needs to happen here.

**Josie:** Daryl, the Co-Director of Forward Justice, said his hope came from people who, like him, had been through the system—millions of people who knew first-hand its harms and were together building political power:

**Daryl Atkinson:** The very thing that they did, and when I say “they,” the state and the punitive access of the state, they created an army. One in three Americans, 77 million people, got criminal records. They're probably, I saw some data where they're estimating upwards to 20 million Americans have a felony conviction, right? For me, that's an untapped army because all of us have a common experience. All of us face common challenges. And just imagine, I think in North Carolina, we have about—almost 500,000 people who have a felony conviction, who aren't in prison, who aren't on probation or parole, that we're trying to get registered to vote, if we can get 10% of that, that's a huge voting block. We're trying to build the AARP for formerly incarcerated people where we have a million-plus member organization that can demand change at both the state and federal level where we can have a different trajectory, not just for criminal legal reform, but ultimately creating that true multiracial democracy that this country has been in this tug of war over.

**Josie:** People are beginning to imagine a new world of possibility. They are open to new ideas—to a conception of safety that isn't dependent on cages and torture—to the idea that justice that isn't synonymous with vengeance—that humiliation is not an effective solution for harm—that individual safety necessitates collective safety.

[Music]

**Josie:** And this willingness to imagine is a reason to be hopeful. The tunnel is very, very long, but if we keep trudging, there's a light at the end of it. *The 30 Year Project* is a production of the Vera Institute of Justice. I'm writer and host, Josie Duffy-Rice. Ed Chung and I are the Executive Producers. Florence Barrau-Adams is the Producer. Trendel Lightburn is the Associate Producer. Vera's Director of Marketing is Chris Choi, and their Director of Digital Engagement is Megan Diamondstein. Special thanks to all our guests. For more information about each episode and to find full transcripts visit [vera.org/thirtyyearproject](https://vera.org/thirtyyearproject). That's T-H-I-R-T-Y year project. And follow @verainstitute on Instagram. Please take a minute to follow us and rate us five stars on Apple Podcasts and Spotify and let us know what you think. More reviews help more people find us. Thank you for listening.