

# Mass Incarceration and the Need for Sentencing Reform

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## *Ben Max (Moderator)*

*Executive Director and Program Director | Center for New York City Law, New York Law School*



Ben Max is a veteran journalist who covers New York City and State politics, government, and public policy. He is Executive Editor and Program Director for the Center for New York City Law at New York Law School, where he edits publications, plans and moderates events, and hosts the Max Politics podcast.

Prior to joining New York Law School in December of last year, Ben was Executive Editor of Gotham Gazette for almost 10 years, leading all aspects of the nonprofit publication covering city and state public affairs. Ben has written for a variety of publications, regularly appears on TV, radio, and podcasts to discuss New York politics and government, and is a frequent moderator of candidate debates, policy forums, and other events.

Before entering journalism in 2012, Ben worked in K-12 education for about 10 years, including six as a high school history teacher.

Ben grew up in Queens and lives in Brooklyn. He's on X at [@TweetBenMax](#).

## *The Honorable Julia Salazar*

*New York State Senator*



Senator Julia Salazar represents New York's 18th State Senate District, which includes the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bushwick and Cypress Hills as well as parts of three other neighborhoods: Williamsburg, Brooklyn, East New York, Brooklyn and Ridgewood, Queens.

Before being elected to the State Senate in 2018, Julia worked as a community organizer with Jews for Racial & Economic Justice (JFREJ), working in coalitions to advance criminal justice reforms and police accountability legislation.

She began her advocacy while a college student at Columbia University, where she advocated for the rights of fellow tenants, domestic workers and service industry workers. Upon her election in 2018, Julia was the youngest woman elected in the history of the New York State Senate.

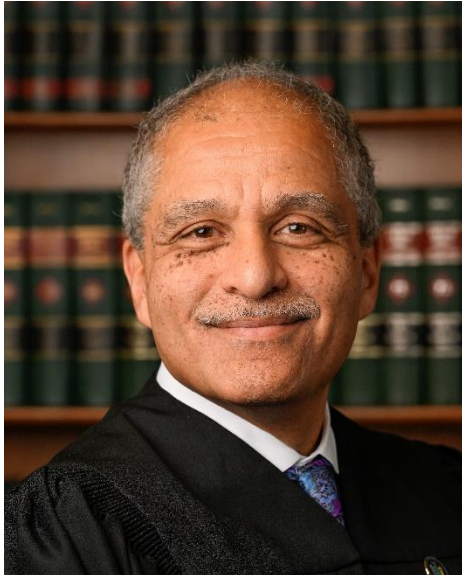
Julia has helped thousands of constituents with casework ranging from connecting to the Department of Labor regarding unemployment benefits throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to assisting renters in organizing with their neighbors to demand better conditions in their buildings. In 2020, Julia and her office led the fight to create a cease and desist zone throughout Brooklyn Community Board 5 to protect homeowners and residents from harassment, and she continues to advocate for the zone to be expanded throughout Brooklyn. Julia has also long been a supporter of the No NBK Pipeline campaign, working with neighbors to successfully fight back against National Grid's expansion of harmful fossil fuel infrastructure in north Brooklyn.

When Julia joined the State Senate, her first bill to pass was the Comprehensive Contraception Coverage Act, which requires health insurance companies to fully cover the cost of all FDA-approved forms of contraception without co-pays. She also played a critical role in passing the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act (HSTPA) of 2019. In 2021, she was the lead sponsor of the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, as well as the bill that finally ended child marriage in New York by increasing the age of consent to eighteen. In 2022, she sponsored a historic bill, now law, to secure additional federal funding for NYCHA and empower public housing residents. She was also the co-prime sponsor of the Build Public Renewables Act, nation-leading climate justice legislation which became law in 2023.

Senator Salazar serves as the Chair of the State Senate's Committee on Crime Victims, Crime & Correction, and previously served as the Chair of the Committee on Women's Issues from 2019 through 2020. She is also an appointed member of the New York State Council of the Interstate Commission for Adult Offender Supervision (ICAOS). She currently serves as the Treasurer for the legislature's Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic & Asian Caucus and is an active member of New York's Puerto Rican & Hispanic Task Force.

*The Honorable Rowan Wilson*

*Chief Judge | New York State Unified Court System*



The Honorable Rowan D. Wilson, Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals, was born in Pomona, California, and grew up in Berkeley, California. He received his A.B. degree from Harvard College in 1981, and his J.D. degree from Harvard Law School in 1984. He was admitted to the bar of the State of California in 1985, and the bar of the State of New York in 1987. From 1984 to 1986, he served as a law clerk to the Honorable James R. Browning, Chief Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, based in San Francisco, California.

In 1986, he joined the firm of Cravath, Swaine & Moore in New York City as an associate, and was elected to partnership there in 1991, in which position he continued until February 2017. His practice encompassed a wide variety of matters, including antitrust, intellectual property, securities and common-law fraud, contract, labor and employment, civil rights and first amendment issues. On January 15, 2017, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo nominated Judge Wilson to serve as an Associate Judge of the Court of Appeals, and the New York State Senate confirmed his nomination on February 6, 2017.

On April 10, 2023, Governor Kathy Hochul nominated Judge Wilson to serve as Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals and the State of New York. The New York State Senate confirmed his nomination on April 18, 2023. While in private practice, Judge Wilson served on the boards of several charitable and not-for-profit organizations and handled numerous pro bono matters.

*Charisse Peace*

*Member Leader | Center for Community Alternatives*



Charisse Peace is a mother of five -- two daughters and three sons -- ages 10 to 22.

Charisse was born and raised in Queens, New York. She has lived in the Bronx for 15 years before relocating to Pennsylvania in 2018.

In addition to her work with CCA, Charisse operates as a volunteer advocate within her community. She is also an ordained minister, avid writer, licensed life insurance agent, and activist.

*Patrick Stephens*

*Youth Services Leadership Fellow | Center for Community Alternatives*



Patrick Stephens is a Leadership Fellow at the Center for Community Alternatives, freelance writer for The Appeal magazine and a board member of Columbia Reentry.

He is also an adjunct member of the New York City Bar Association's Mass Incarceration Task Force and sits on its Corrections and Community Reentry Committee.

As a systems impacted person, he is an avid restorative justice practitioner and advocate for trauma informed care.

As an alumni of both the Bard Prison Initiative, where he earned his BA degree, and New York Theological Seminary, where he earned his Masters degree, he is a public speaker, consultant and advocate for prison abolition.



***Steven Zeidman***

*Professor and Director of Criminal Defense Clinic | CUNY School of Law*



Professor Steven Zeidman is the Co-Director of the Second Look Project: Beyond Guilt and the Defenders Clinic at CUNY School of Law.

A graduate of Duke University School of Law, he is a former staff attorney and supervisor at the Legal Aid Society.

He has taught at Fordham, Pace, and New York University School of Law and was awarded the NYU Alumni Association's Great Teacher Award in 1997 and CUNY's Outstanding Professor of the Year honor in 2011.

Professor Zeidman is a member of the Appellate Division's Indigent Defense Organization Oversight Committee and the American Bar Association's Criminal Justice Section Council, and serves on the Board of Directors of Prisoners' Legal Services and the Parole Preparation Project. He served on several statewide commissions, including the Commission on the Future of Indigent Defense Services and the Jury Project.

Professor Zeidman was a member of the Mayor's Advisory Committee for the Judiciary in the Bloomberg and Giuliani administrations. He has published numerous op-eds and articles and presented on a range of issues, including mass incarceration, judicial selection, evidence, and the ethical dimensions of the effective assistance of counsel.

*Christopher Watler (Moderator)*

*Executive Vice President | Center for Employment Opportunities*



Christopher Watler serves as Executive Vice President for the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), a national nonprofit that helps people leaving incarceration advance their careers in 31 cities. Chris oversees the CEO's national fund development operations, communications initiatives, and various special projects dedicated to advancing the CEO's mission. He previously served as Executive Director of CEO's New York State programs overseeing CEO's flagship New York City program and Upstate New York Offices.

As an executive team member, Chris is involved in the overall organizational strategy development and implementation and provides leadership on CEO's internal DEI initiatives. Chris has over 30 years of nonprofit leadership experience.

Before joining CEO in 2016, Chris worked in several key roles for the Center for Justice Innovation for 20 years. He served as the project director for the Harlem Community Justice Center for 10 years, where he developed nationally recognized, evidence-based reentry programs for youth and adults, diversion programs for juveniles, and eviction-prevention programs for housing court litigants. Chris holds a BS in political science from the State University of New York at Purchase and an MPA from John Jay College.



*Leigh Bates*

*Deputy Commissioner | New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services*



Leigh Bates has 15 years of experience in criminal justice research and policy analysis in New York State.

As Deputy Commissioner in the Division of Criminal Justice Services' Office of Justice Research and Performance, Leigh oversees staff who prepare criminal justice statistics, research and analysis to support policy and inform decision-making, including assessing criminal justice programming to improve alignment with the evidence base, providing research and analytic support for gun violence reduction initiatives, and overseeing the development of the Criminal Justice Knowledge Bank and Research Consortium, as well as DCJS's new Justice Lab.

Leigh currently oversees research and analysis related to youth justice, firearm violence, bail reform, and other criminal justice initiatives. Leigh holds a Master of Public Administration from the University of Arizona and a PhD in Criminal Justice from the University at Albany, SUNY.

**Marta Nelson**

*Director of Sentencing Reform | Vera Institute of Justice*



Marta Nelson is the director of sentencing reform at the Vera Institute of Justice, where she guides efforts to end excessive incarcerative sentences and develop options for community-based accountability. She was previously Vera’s director of government strategy.

Prior to joining Vera, Marta served as the special counselor for criminal justice initiatives in the New York State Governor’s Office, where she worked on a number of reforms, including the 2019 overhaul of the state’s bail laws.

Previously, Marta had an extensive career helping to reduce barriers for people with conviction histories, including as the New York City executive director of the Center for Employment Opportunities, and as a prisoners’ rights lawyer at the Legal Aid Society of New York. She has a JD from the University of Michigan Law School and a BA in religious studies from Brown University.

**Andre Ward**

*Executive Director | Institute for Justice and Opportunity at John Jay College*



Andre Ward serves as the Executive Director of the Institute for Justice and Opportunity at John Jay College, where he leads efforts to dismantle barriers and foster transformation for individuals involved in the criminal legal system.

With a robust background spanning over 15 years in criminal justice reform, Ward brings expertise in advocacy, policy development, program management, and research. Having previously held key positions such as Associate Vice President of Policy at the Fortune Society and leadership roles at Common Justice and The Osborne Association, Ward has

demonstrated a commitment to advancing social justice through education and workforce development.

Ward's educational journey includes a Master's Degree in Social Work from Lehman College and a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work from Medgar Evers College. Complementing his academic achievements, he has pursued executive education certificates in Non-Profit Leadership and Executive Leadership. A prolific speaker, Ward has shared his insights on criminal justice reform and community transformation at various forums nationwide. His dedication to advocacy has garnered recognition, including awards from the New York City Council and the Kings County Court.

Currently pursuing a Doctorate of Social Work at the University of Southern California, Ward continues to drive impactful change through his work, empowering individuals and advocating for their rights to education, housing, employment, healthcare, and other fundamental human rights. Through his leadership, Ward remains committed to shaping a more just and equitable society for all.