

Latinx Communities and the Criminal Legal System

Speakers

Karol V. Mason (President, [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#))



John Jay College President Karol V. Mason is a legal pioneer and powerful voice for student success, equality and criminal justice reform.

At John Jay, Mason has raised over \$33 million to support her vision for student success, which has substantially increased graduation rates and generated record fundraising. Her student success initiatives fuel academic achievement and career preparation and include MBK Connect, a partnership with the Obama Foundation that

supports men of color through college prep, mentorship and brotherhood, and the Completion for Upper-Division Student Program, which marries data-driven science with responsive personal advising.

Mason also launched the Future of Public Safety Initiative, which helps communities reshape safety policy, programs and budgets, and led robust strategic planning efforts, a successful re-accreditation process and creation of the Seven Principles for a Culturally Responsive, Inclusive and Anti-Racist Curriculum.

Prior to joining John Jay, Mason served as assistant attorney general at the US Department of Justice, where she led the Obama Administration's juvenile justice, bail reform and re-entry programs, with responsibility for a \$4 billion annual budget. As partner at Alston & Bird, LLP, Mason chaired the Public Finance Group and was the first African American woman to chair a management committee at a major law firm.

Mason served on the University of North Carolina (UNC) Board of Trustees from 2001 to 2009 and as vice chair from 2007 to 2009. She earned a BA in mathematics from UNC and a JD from the University of Michigan Law School.

Rossana Rosado (Commissioner, [New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services](#))



Rossana Rosado is the first Latina and third woman to lead the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services since its creation in 1972. During her nearly three-year tenure, the agency has expanded its focus on public safety to encompass community justice. The agency's current budget is the largest in its history and this record-level funding has allowed DCJS to provide significant resources to its partners in law enforcement, community corrections, alternatives to incarceration, and re-entry, among others. DCJS also has increased funding for community-based programs working to address the causes and consequences of crime and improve criminal justice practices in historically underserved neighborhoods.

Rosado served as New York's Secretary of State for nearly six years before joining DCJS. As Secretary, she advanced a commitment to social justice reform, community revitalization, and re-entry. She launched the Liberty Defense Project, a public-private initiative to bring critical legal services to immigrants; and led the Strategic Implementation Assessment Team, a multi-agency review of the Regional Economic Development Council competition, which informed the state's investments. Rosado also chaired the Council on Community Re-entry and Reintegration, which worked to remove obstacles that justice-involved people face when returning home.

She joined state service after a 30-year career as a journalist, media executive and award-winning producer. As a journalist, Rosado heard and told stories of society's most vulnerable, which inspired her to earn a master's degree in criminal justice from John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Through the college, she has also served as a Distinguished Lecturer and taught courses in several of New York's prisons.

Together with her DCJS team, Commissioner Rosado remains focused on improving public safety, advancing the fairness of the criminal justice system, and building and healing communities so all New Yorkers have opportunities to thrive.

Krystal Rodriguez (Policy Director, [Data Collaborative for Justice](#))



Krystal Rodriguez is Policy Director of the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Focusing on the criminal legal system and the overuse of jails, she develops policy recommendations to support evidence-based criminal justice reforms and provides legal analysis and interpretation to inform DCJ's research.

Rodriguez received her Juris Doctorate from the City University of New York (CUNY) School of Law. She previously served as the Director of Law and Justice Policy, Jail Reform at the Center for Court Innovation, where she focused on the harms caused by the jails in New York City. Her work included planning and piloting initiatives to reduce jail populations and divert individuals away from pretrial detention, including supporting the expansion of NYC's supervised release program. She also offered training and technical assistance to municipalities throughout the country seeking to institute reforms.

Rodriguez draws on her years as a public defender with Brooklyn Defender Services, where she represented clients charged with misdemeanor and felony matters, from arraignment to disposition. During law school, she represented non-citizen clients in deportation proceedings, and advised on law enforcement interactions as a part of Main Street Legal Services and CLEAR Project. She also served on the Law Review Editorial Board.

Rodriguez offers expertise on bail reform efforts, the criminal legal system, and court practices and policies.

Juan Cartagena (Former President and General Counsel, [LatinoJustice PRLDEF](#))



Juan Cartagena, formerly the President & General Counsel of LatinoJustice PRLDEF, has used the law to effectuate systems change for the benefit of marginalized communities. He now teaches law at Columbia Law School and recently at Rutgers Law - Newark and consults with lawyers litigating in the public interest.

A graduate of Dartmouth College and Columbia University School of Law, Cartagena's current research interests include the effects of mass imprisonment, U.S. drug policies, and the criminal legal system on Latinx communities.

Previously, he has litigated civil rights claims against excessive and abusive police departments in New York City and Suffolk County, testified on marijuana legalization and the elimination of employment discrimination against justice-impacted persons, and led national efforts to elevate criminal justice reform as a Latinx issue.

Cartagena lives with his family in Jersey City, New Jersey where he has been active in many issues affecting Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican diaspora.

Ana Bermudez (Former Commissioner, [NYC Probation](#))



Ana M. Bermúdez served as the Commissioner for the NYC Department of Probation (DOP) from 2014 to 2022, becoming the first openly gay person, first Latina, and second woman in this role. A graduate of Brown University and Yale Law School, she began her career advocating for children in family court with the Legal Aid Society.

With over two decades of experience, she has focused on developing strengths-based interventions and restorative practices for youth in the justice system. As DOP's Deputy Commissioner of Juvenile Operations (2010-2014), she led initiatives to improve outcomes for court-involved youth.

As Commissioner, she furthered efforts to enhance public safety through individualized, community-based interventions. Before joining the DOP, Bermúdez directed juvenile justice programs at the Children's Aid Society and held key roles at CASES. Currently, she consults in leadership, restorative justice, and juvenile justice reform.

Leigh Bates (Deputy Commissioner, [New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services](#))



Leigh Bates has 20 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, Bates 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.

Bates currently oversees research and analysis related to youth justice, firearm violence, pretrial 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.

Michael Rempel (Executive Director, [Data Collaborative for Justice](#))



Michael Rempel is executive director of the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. His current and recent work includes leading a multiyear study of New York’s bail reform law; identifying data-driven strategies to reduce New York City’s jail population; and examining the enforcement of minor offenses since the City’s implementation of a major police reform initiative in 2021.

Over the past three years, Rempel has also overseen a series of studies examining racial disparities across New York’s criminal legal continuum (from the point of arrest to pretrial decision-making to sentencing). Until 2022, Rempel worked at the Center for Court Innovation, serving as the agency’s founding director of jail reform starting in 2017 and, before that, serving for 16 years as research director. Towards the end of his tenure, he served as lead author of a roadmap for reducing New York City’s use of jail; studied racial disparities in misdemeanor arrest practices; and co-created and helped evaluate a pilot project to reduce case processing delays in Brooklyn.

In the past, he led numerous studies examining risk and needs assessment tools, drug courts, and court responses to intimate partner violence. Rempel has long been interested in bridging the gap between the worlds of research and policy and, in his earlier research work, participated in evidence-based training and technical assistance initiatives in New York, nationally, and internationally (the latter in partnership with the Organization of American States).

Ashley Rodriguez (Director of Finance and Operations, Institute for Justice and Opportunity)



Ashley Rodriguez joined the Institute as the Director of Finance and Operations in January 2023. Prior to this role, she was the Senior Director of Operations at East Harlem Scholars Academies, where she managed business operations for a network of five charter schools serving over 2,000 students from grades K-12.

Her career in nonprofit organizations spans operations, finance, grants management, compliance, education programming, and community engagement. She has consistently demonstrated success in crafting strategic program visions, achieving program objectives, and managing multi-million-dollar budgets, all while building and maintaining relationships with key partners.

Rodriguez's dedication to quality education is deeply informed by anti-racist principles and rigorous, data-driven evaluation of program outcomes. Her expertise includes identifying operational gaps and implementing effective solutions. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Forensic Psychology with a minor in Law from John Jay College and a Master of Science in Business Management and Leadership from the School of Professional Studies. Currently, she is attending Brooklyn College to pursue a Master of Science in Accounting, aspiring to qualify for the CPA exam in the near future.

Talia Peleg (Co-Director, [Immigrant and Non-Citizen Rights Clinic, CUNY School of Law](#))



Professor Talia Peleg and her students represent non-citizens in all areas of the immigration system. Her scholarship and practice focus on combating the entanglement of the immigration and criminal legal systems, which has led to the devastating detention and deportation of hundreds of thousands of non-citizens.

Professor Peleg and her students creatively advocate for their clients to be released from the grips of both the immigration and criminal legal systems so that they can live their lives free from governmental control and surveillance.

Prior to teaching at CUNY, she was a Supervising Attorney in the Immigration Practice at Brooklyn Defender Services. Professor Peleg is a proud graduate of the Immigrant and Non-Citizen Rights Clinic and CUNY School of Law.

[Read Talia Peleg's full bio.](#)

**Zenaida Mendez (Director, [Manhattan Neighborhood Network El Barrio](#)
[Firehouse Community Media Center](#))**



Ms. Mendez holds the esteemed position of Director of Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN) El Barrio Firehouse Community Media Center. MNN is a media learning, production, and distribution hub that promotes creative expression, independent voices and community engagement.

Ms. Mendez has over 25 years of experience working on issues affecting women, and African descendant people as well as LGBTQ communities. She has also spoken about the role of the media in perpetuating violence against women and fueling negative stereotypes, electoral politics, and parenting and immigration issues. You can watch her weekly segment on YouTube LevantateNY Zenaida's Vision 360.

Zenaida is the Founder and President of the National Dominican Women's Caucus. (NDWC). She currently, sits on the board of the New York Women in Film & Television (NYWIFT) and Harlem SGL

- LGBTQ Center "The Harlem Center".

Born in the Dominican Republic, Ms. Mendez earned a BA in Government and Public Administration from John Jay College of Criminal Justice and an MA in Public Administration from the City University of New York, Graduate School of Public Affairs.

Ismael Diaz (Downstate Community Organizer, [Center for Community Alternatives](#))



Ismael Diaz Jr. is a formerly incarcerated individual who served nine and a half years of a twelve-year sentence.

While incarcerated, he earned his GED and a Bachelor's degree and started his own laundry service business when he came home.

Today, Diaz is the Downstate Community Organizer at the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA).

Ismael is so proud to have played a part in passing the Clean Slate Act.

Rob DeLeon (Deputy CEO, [Fortune Society](#))



Rob DeLeon serves as the Deputy Chief Executive Officer at The Fortune Society, where they employ over 500 staff in multiple locations, and manage an annual agency budget of over \$80 million. Each year, the Fortune Society serves over 13 thousand people involved in the criminal legal system, providing wrap-around clinical and social services to support community reintegration. Fortune also advocates for policy and legislation that will impact the people they serve via the David Rothenberg Center for Public Policy, named in honor of Fortune's founder.

Mr. DeLeon is an Afro-Latino active leader in the juvenile justice and criminal justice reform landscape. He has spent his career of over 20 years serving New York City communities most impacted by the criminal legal system. He began his career as a youth counselor leveraging his own personal experience with the streets and prison, as an example to help youth and young adults avoid incarceration. As a service provider, Mr. DeLeon has established Alternative to Detention (ATD) programs for court involved juveniles, and Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) programs for adults and young adults, including Gun Diversion programs for first time gun possession cases in Queens, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. In partnership with the New York City Department of Probation, he created longstanding mentoring programs in the Bushwick and Tompkins Houses in Brooklyn and has helped to connect hundreds of young people and adults to paid internships and jobs.

As an advocate and spokesperson, Mr. DeLeon has supported and advised on many social justice issues, including prison and parole reform, fairness in policing practices, access to appropriate health care for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, and youth and community justice. He has collaborated with community partners, service providers and government stakeholders on a number of successful legislative campaigns, including *Raise the Age*, the *Less is More Act*, the *Fair Chance for Housing Act*, and the *Close Rikers* campaign. He has spoken throughout the country on the issue of the criminal legal system's disproportionate impact on communities of color and on the need for reforms.

In his advisory capacity, Mr. DeLeon has served on a number of boards and commissions, including as Board Member of the New York Civil Liberties Union, (NYCLU), Board Chair of the People's Advocacy Institute of Jackson Mississippi, Board Member of the Independent Professionals' Association, (IPA), Advisory Board Member of the Alliance of Families for Justice, (AFJ) member of the Rikers Island Young Adult Task Force, and as a member of the New York State Council on Community Justice.

Honorable Catalina Cruz ([New York State Assembly, District 39](#))



Catalina Cruz represents New York State Assembly District 39, one of the most diverse districts in the nation, encompassing the neighborhoods of Corona, Elmhurst, and Jackson Heights, as well as parts of Middle Village and Rego Park. She currently serves as the Chair of the New York State Assembly Commission on Federal & State Affairs.

Cruz was born in Colombia and came to Queens at the age of 9. She grew up as a DREAMer, living in the United States for more than 10 years as an undocumented American. Cruz was raised by a single mother who, like many immigrants, had to work multiple and menial jobs to support her family. As a single mother of four children, she worked long hours during the week as a nanny, cleaned offices at night, and sold tamales and empanadas at the soccer fields on the weekends. Inspired by her mother's perseverance, Cruz has committed her career to fighting for our community to ensure our neighbors not only survive, but thrive.

Cruz is an experienced attorney with nearly 15 years of experience, as well as a leader in worker protections, the rights of survivors of sexual assault, and criminal justice reform. Prior to becoming an Assemblywoman, she served in several significant roles in city and state government. She worked as Chief of Staff to former Council Member Julissa Ferreras-Copeland and as Director of the Governor's Exploited Workers Task Force, where she fought for the rights of workers and vulnerable communities. At the New York State Department of Labor, she established the first Anti-Human Trafficking initiative and developed protocols to endorse T & U Visas for victims of severe crimes and human trafficking.

Cruz also served as counsel to the New York City Council's Committee on Immigration, where she played a vital role in drafting city laws that protect individuals from immigration services fraud. She was instrumental in the development of the landmark "Detainer Law," which safeguards the Constitutional rights of immigrants in New York City, and she contributed to the implementation of the IDNYC Program, which provides all New Yorkers, regardless of immigration status, access to identification and city services.

Since taking office in 2019, Cruz has successfully passed over 60 pieces of legislation aimed at combating food insecurity, reducing the high cost of healthcare, protecting aging New Yorkers, and more. Of these, 33 have been signed into law by the Governor. She has passed several landmark laws including the Clean Slate Act and the Wage Theft Accountability Act, as well as the Nourish New York and the Lorena Borjas TGNB initiatives. Cruz has also been a

strong advocate for immigrant rights. Drawing from her own experiences as a former undocumented immigrant, she provided a powerful voice in the effort to expand driver's license access, assisting with the passage of the Drivers License for All Act, as well as playing a pivotal role in passing the José Peralta DREAM Act, which expands access to state-administered scholarships and grants for undocumented students. Additionally, Cruz helped lead the efforts to pass both the Child Victims Act and the Adult Survivors Act, conducting national outreach to ensure survivors of sexual abuse could seek justice, regardless of when the abuse occurred.

Cruz has also helped secure billions of dollars for schools, hospitals, non-profit organizations and libraries within her district through historic state budgets and annual member allocations. Cruz lives in Jackson Heights, Queens. She holds a Bachelor's Degree from John Jay College of Criminal Justice and a Juris Doctor from the City University of New York's School of Law. She is admitted to practice law in the State of New York.

Andrea Nieves (Supervising Attorney, Policy Team, [New York County Defenders](#))



Andrea Nieves (she/her) is the Supervising Attorney, Policy and Community Engagement Unit at New York County Defender Services (NYCDS).

She graduated from Occidental College and New York University School of Law.

Nieves previously worked as a capital defense attorney in North Carolina where she represented people accused of capital murder at trial and in their post-conviction appeals.

Before joining NYCDS she was the Senior Policy Attorney at Brooklyn Defender Services and Senior Legal Counsel at The Justice Collaborative.

Gisele Castro (CEO, [Exalt Youth](#))



Gisele Castro is the CEO of **exalt**, a non-profit dedicated to elevating the expectations of personal success of court-involved youth ages 15-9 using a cross-sectoral approach that combines a rigorous, culturally responsive curriculum with paid internships and career development.

With 20+ years of experience in the juvenile justice field, Gisele has been widely recognized for her contributions, most notably when **exalt**, under her leadership, received Brooklyn Org's

Spark Prize in 2018, recognizing the organization's commitment to racial and social justice. This accolade is one of many, including a recognition from Brooklyn DA Eric Gonzalez in September 2023 for **exalt's** significant contributions to juvenile justice. In October 2023, Gisele received the Community Impact Award from SparkYouth NYC, and a NYC Imagine Award in the leadership category for nonprofit innovation and excellence. The beginning of 2024 marked her inclusion in EdLoC's 2024 Boulder Fund Cohort.

Beyond awards, Gisele Castro's real impact is seen in the policy changes and practices she has influenced. Collaborating with judges and district attorneys across NYC's five boroughs, Gisele has been instrumental in securing more equitable sentences for hundreds of youths. Her advocacy also played a key role in the endorsement of NYC's Raise the Age policy by the Governor, a testament to her commitment to juvenile justice.

Currently, as she pursues an Ed.D at NYU Steinhardt, Gisele engages with a diverse range of leaders at all governmental levels to further her mission. Her work at **exalt**, which began in Brooklyn, has now expanded its influence throughout NYC and is poised for replication across New York State and the nation. This trajectory from incubation to a recognized, replicable model exemplifies Gisele's dedication to enhancing our criminal justice system's focus on fairness, equity, and rehabilitation.

For more details, please visit **exalt's** [website](#), Gisele's LinkedIn [here](#) or her recent profile in CIO Views [here](#).