

# Anti-Criminalization Strategies for Public Health

This document highlights strategies that health departments and other public health agencies serving people who use drugs, engage in sex work, or who otherwise face increased health risks by being marginalized and criminalized, are utilizing to push back on criminalization and its impacts. Public health officials should take the impact of policing and criminalization seriously as a structural determinant of inequity in health outcomes, especially for racial and ethnic minority communities who have been disproportionately targeted by the war on drugs. Addressing the issue of criminalization is foundational to closing health disparities.

*This is the third in a three-document series on the role of public health in addressing the impacts of criminalization and policing.*

Aligned with movements to end the harms of involvement in the criminal legal system, many community organizations have developed strategies to advance public health by ending criminalization.

## From Behavioral Theories to Social and Structural Theories

Public health entities are well-positioned to make significant contributions to anti-criminalization efforts through required education for new practitioners.

**Include the role of structural determinants of health, including criminalization, as required education for public health practitioners.**

- » In 2016, the Council on Education for Public Health updated their accreditation criteria, requiring students to discuss how “structural bias, social inequities, and racism undermine health”. Read the Council’s updated [accreditation criteria](#).
- » Public health literature has begun to actively incorporate theories such as *fundamental cause theory*, *structural violence*, and *critical race theory* to inform pedagogy. Read more about this work in [Pedagogy in Health Promotion](#).

## Meaningful Research Collaboration with Impacted Communities

Relationships between public health and impacted communities are necessary to conduct research that develops a body of knowledge that can inform practices and create widespread change. These relationships also present significant challenges from unequal power dynamics to exploitation.

**Approach research relationships with historically marginalized groups with attention to power dynamics.**

- » Researchers should build connections with community-based organizations which prioritize equal power dynamics at each stage of the research process.
- » Community groups disproportionately targeted by the war on drugs should be engaged in decision-making around research at every stage, from envisioning the initial question to dissemination of results.
- » Researchers should be transparent about their funding for research and include compensation for participation and advising.
- » Public health should anticipate potential unintended consequences of sharing information on criminalized communities and support planning for any harm which results.

The Urban Survivors Union (USU) aims to undo the legacy of exploitative research on people who use drugs with their [Ethical Research Manifesto](#), which outlines principles and guidelines for working with USU and associated community. USU is a national drug users union working to improve the lives and wellbeing of their community and peers.



This project is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of PS 19-1909: National Harm Reduction Technical Assistance and Syringe Services Program Monitoring and Evaluation Funding Opportunity cooperative agreement, a financial assistance award totaling \$6,775,000 with 100 percent funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by CDC/HHS, or the U.S. Government.

# Analyzing Partnerships and Community Engagement

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Public health is not only about interventions, but ongoing relationship-building with impacted communities with the intention of power-sharing.

**See communities as valuable partners with needed expertise and create opportunities for their leadership and advisement, through:**

- » Proactive engagement with historically marginalized communities, ideally before developing programs and interventions which act upon those communities.
- » Documenting equitable practices within your organization for community-building to create institutional memory.
- » Finding and creating compensated opportunities for leadership development and capacity building of community advocates and partners.

- » Finding and creating funded opportunities for programmatic oversight and competency training.

This [article from Human Impact Partners](#) offers guidance on what it means to engage with communities. The article includes examples of successful partnerships with communities experiencing health inequities.

# Changing Structural Determinants Through Policy and Advocacy

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**Public health agencies and institutions should use their positionality to support legislative and administrative policy decisions regarding policing, arrest, and incarceration, by:**

- » Following community directives to support their advocacy in changing criminalization policies.
- » Pursuing recommendations such as decarceration to reduce the spread of infectious diseases within prisons and jails.
- » Using public health data and modeling to inform advocacy efforts, especially with decision-makers who are not receptive to criminalized community voices.

This [article from the New England Journal of Medicine](#) demonstrates how public health data was used to advocate for decarceration during COVID-19 to curb the spread of the virus.

Policing and criminalization have significant impacts on health disparities between communities. Public health practitioners should leverage their role and positionality to challenge criminalization and improve health outcomes for all communities.

# Additional Resources

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- » [Why Is There More Funding for Police than Public Health? Questions & Actions](#), Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine
- » [Alternatives to sharing COVID-19 data with law enforcement: Recommendations for stakeholders](#), Health Policy Journal
- » [Policing is a Threat to Public Health and Human Rights](#), BMJ Global Health
- » [Reparations as a Public Health Priority – A Strategy for Ending Black-White Health Disparities](#), New England Journal of Medicine
- » [To Protect Public Health, Don't Police It](#), PolicyLink
- » [Housing is the Cure: National Briefing](#), Right to the City Alliance
- » [Our Public Health Infrastructure Is Losing a Fight With Capitalism](#), Jacobin Magazine

- » [Advice to New Abolitionists](#), Critical Resistance
- » [Allying Public Health and Abolition: Lessons from the Campaign Against Jail Construction in Los Angeles](#), American Journal of Public Health
- » [Research Across the Walls: A Guide to Participatory Research Projects and Partnerships to Free Criminalized Survivors](#), Survived and Punished
- » [Liberation is Essential: Leveraging Governmental Public Health Tools to Address the Harms of the Criminal Legal System](#), Human Impact Partners
- » [Recommendations for Community Driven Drug Policy Research](#), Urban Survivors Union and Drug Policy Alliance [Video]