COMMUNITY POWER BUILDING & ORGANIZING:

Advocacy In & Out of the Courtroom

La Defensa
La Defensa is a leader in the movement to decarcerate the largest jail population in the United States—the LA County jail system. We’re working to reduce the power and scope of the judiciary, law enforcement, and the legal injustice system. We’re also fighting for a fair & transparent pretrial process, for state & local budgets that reflect community values, and for life-affirming alternatives to incarceration. Our work is informed by the power of the communities we belong to: Latinx, Black, Indigenous, AAPI, Queer, Immigrant, Undocumented, and Working-class communities.

Our co-founders saw a gap in the movement when it came to checking judicial power, and wanted to ensure that accountability measures on the judiciary would maintain an abolitionist lens. We know that judges are agents for mass incarceration and that by developing ways for communities to share their experiences with judges and document judicial behavior are integral to increasing judicial transparency.

CourtWatchLA

Our community power building model, Court Watch LA, promotes accountability and transparency in the judicial system. We train and empower Court Watchers to observe judicial behavior in courtrooms by collecting data and reporting their findings to the public. Additionally, Court Watch seeks to raise awareness about the criminalization of poverty and homelessness, including fines, fees, and predatory bail-setting practices.

Rate My Judge

RateMyJudge.LA is an anonymous and free-to-use website for community members, practitioners, public defenders, and others to provide honest reviews of their interactions with Los Angeles County Judges. It’s like a yelp, but for judges.
Superior Court level judges oversee trials across Los Angeles County. There are over 400 active judges spread across 38 courthouses that cover family law (child custody), civil, criminal, and other disputes. Judges determine the fines and fees people pay, which can create debilitating debt. Judges also decide the conditions under which a person does time, how long they are on probation, or whether they have access to parole.

Judges have the discretion and authority to label someone as a threat or risk. They are the sole determining body as to whether a person is charged or sentenced, the sentence length, and whether they are charged with sentencing enhancements.
Exposing Disparate Treatment and Punishment of Marginalized Communities

*How can we measure a judge’s carcerality if the judicial system is based on racially biased data?*

Judges tend to over-sentence communities of color not because these communities have more “criminals” but because the judicial system has been designed to work hand-in-hand with law enforcement to oppress Black, brown, and indigenous peoples.

This is why it is integral for community members to observe and report judicial behavior. Our approach to collecting data recognizes that racial bias factors into how someone gets treated in court. This data should also be available to the public.
Creating Accountability & Transparency

Los Angeles County has 38 unique courthouses that cover a range of legal disputes. By providing community members with the tools to observe their local judges, we demonstrate the importance of court transparency and building accountability practices so that judges understand that, as public figures, Angelenos will keep a record of their behavior and treatment of all parties involved.

We must be the ones to collect data and report our findings to the general public. This collection will translate into fuller profiles of local judges.
Supporting Organizing Efforts Outside the Courtroom

Our response to judicial discretion is to supply community members with tools like the website ratemyjudge.la and Court Watch training so that people can be present outside and inside our local courthouses.

By spending time outside courthouses interacting with local community members, we provide real-time review opportunities for loved ones, legal practitioners, and anyone else who has interacted with a judge. We ensure that all ratings and reviews left on the website are anonymous to add a layer of protection for users.
Harm reduction lies at the core of La Defensa's mission. It recognizes that traditional punitive approaches often perpetuate cycles of harm, disproportionately affecting marginalized individuals. Instead, we adopt a compassionate and pragmatic approach to minimize harm by providing support, resources, and alternatives.

We believe in dismantling systems that perpetuate inequity and oppression, envisioning a society free from mass incarceration. We strive to create a more just system that later generations will not have to dismantle.
We must acknowledge that systems of oppression intersect and compound, resulting in disproportionate harm for marginalized individuals. Recognizing the interconnectedness of race, gender identity, and class.

Gender-based violence and discrimination often disproportionately affect marginalized communities, particularly transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. We must continue to amplify their voices and fight for their rights within the criminal legal system.

These values guide every action and interaction of Court Watch LA & Rate My Judge. By being present, we ensure accountability, transparency, and fairness, challenging the system to be more responsive to the needs of marginalized individuals.
Definitions/Glossary

Abolition: Refers to the complete dismantling and elimination of systems of oppression, particularly those that perpetuate mass incarceration, racial injustice, and inequality. It goes beyond seeking reform and envisions a fundamentally transformed society where designs are reimagined to prioritize community well-being, rehabilitation, and restorative justice.

Abolition vs. Reform: Abolition and reform are distinctly different approaches to addressing societal issues. While reform seeks to make incremental changes within existing systems and structures, abolition challenges the very foundations of those systems. Abolitionists argue that reforms often reinforce and perpetuate oppressive structures. In contrast, abolition aims to dismantle those structures entirely, reimagining justice, social services, and community support in more equitable and transformative ways.

Alternatives to Incarceration: Alternatives to incarceration challenge relying on imprisonment as the default response to harm. These alternatives prioritize rehabilitation, restoration, and community-driven support instead of punitive approaches. They encompass restorative justice practices, community-based programs, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and social services that address the root causes of harm and promote healing and reintegration.
**Community-Power Building:** Community power building empowers communities affected by systemic oppression to collectively challenge and transform existing power structures. It involves developing leadership, fostering grassroots organizing, and promoting community-led initiatives to address social, economic, and political issues. La Defensa's community power building centers the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, recognizing that they hold the knowledge and agency to shape the policies and practices that impact their lives.

**Pretrial Detention:** Pretrial detention refers to incarcerating individuals awaiting trial due to not paying bail. Pretrial detention is critically examined as it often criminalizes poverty, disproportionately impacting marginalized communities.

**Recidivism:** Recidivism refers to the relapse into the criminal legal system by individuals previously incarcerated or involved in the criminal legal system. Recidivism is seen as a consequence of the punitive nature of the system that fails to address the root causes of harm and provide adequate support after release. La Defensa advocates for comprehensive and community-based support systems that prioritize healing, rehabilitation, and managing the structural inequalities that contribute to cycles of harm and re-incarceration.