



# COLLABORATION IN MOBILE, ALABAMA

## The Pathway to Successful Criminal Justice Reform Efforts

BY DEMETRIUS SEMIEN, PH.D.<sup>1</sup>

A lot is happening in Mobile with respect to efforts to improve our criminal justice system, collaborations between community members and all branches of law enforcement in the area, and measures to improve public safety.

When I first arrived in Mobile—almost six years ago—to teach Sociology, Religion, and Criminology at Spring Hill College, I was in awe of what I saw at the first public event I attended. My pastor, Rev. Ellen Sims of Open Table United Church of Christ, had asked me to accompany her to an African American church where the top law enforcement officials in the area had gathered to address community concerns.

The Chief of the Mobile Police Department, the Sheriff of Mobile County, the local liaison for the FBI, and the U.S. Attorney were responding to questions and listening to the concerns of citizens. They expressed how important it was to cooperate with police officers during negative encounters which they may have with them and to wait until a later date to file complaint reports and seek support from law enforcement agencies about any mistreatment they receive. Also, they said they take these mistreatment

reports seriously and will address issues that are reported. I was skeptical about how sincere they were, given that the events in Ferguson, Missouri had happened a couple of weeks earlier. Still, it was refreshing to see their attempt to reach out to the community.

Now, more than five years later, I know much more about the law enforcement officials present that day (most of them are good friends and on my speed dial). They were sincere.

Law enforcement officials at the top of the hierarchy do something here I have never seen anywhere else. They work in tandem regularly. I have witnessed or heard about few territorial disputes. It helps that most of them are from the local area. They just want to make the community safer and respond to people's needs. It is beautiful to see.

Along with the visible cooperation among the leaders of law enforcement, community members are engaged in an array of activities to address criminal justice concerns. These efforts range from measures taken to hold the rank and file police officers accountable when

they go astray, to reduce recidivism and improve public safety, and to support “returning citizens”—people who transition out of jails and prisons as they move back into “L.A.” (Lower Alabama).

## Alabama Arise

Alabama Arise, which counts the Jesuit Social Research Institute (JSRI) as a member, continues to lobby for laws and policies to protect the poor in Alabama. As the Alabama Associate for JSRI, I represent them at meetings and play an active role in the Mobile chapter. We held a successful statewide planning and voting session at our annual meeting in September to decide next year’s agenda. Two key issues we support are death penalty reform measures, such as requiring unanimous agreement from the jury to sentence people to death, and civil asset forfeiture reform. Alabama’s current laws allow police to seize cars, cash, and property without a conviction or criminal charge. In most cases, owners can’t get their property back unless they can prove it was not connected to a crime—a hard task to accomplish when you are poor.

## Faith in Action Alabama

Similarly, Faith in Action Alabama focuses on social justice concerns and empowering citizens. Its main goal is to end mass incarceration. Faith in Action Alabama primarily works through a network of church congregations. Local ministers lead their parishioners to be actively involved in community projects. This past year they generated local support to create a public defender’s office in Mobile. After hosting a community forum where over 200 people attended, including two of the area’s state legislators, they were successful in this endeavor. The City of Mobile is now in motion to find a lawyer to oversee the new public defender’s office. This will allow low-income citizens to begin to receive quality legal representation. Additionally, Faith in Action Alabama members regularly walk in groups through low-income areas, where there are high crime rates and incidents of gun violence. In this way members show their concern and offer support to people who often feel no one cares about them or their interests.

## Project S.C.O.R.E.

Fortunately, community-police relations are fairly positive most of the time. I arrived in Mobile just as the Mobile Police Chief initiated Project S.C.O.R.E. (Second Chance or Else). This project is a community-diversion program that allows low-level drug offenders to receive guidance from community leaders as they attend college or look for

viable employment. At the project’s inception, the Chief of Police invited me to study and participate in this program. Most of the time we see people avail themselves of these opportunities and change their lives, which affects their children, grandchildren, and families in positive ways.

## Mobile Area Interfaith Conference, Reentry Simulations, and Reentry Council Meetings

As I am not an “armchair academic,” I work directly with community partners and my students to implement programs to serve returning citizens as they transition back into society. For the past five years, I have served on the Board of Directors for the Mobile Area Interfaith Conference, including two years as President. This organization sponsors the Metro Chaplaincy Program, GED classes, and The Neighbor Center, which finds housing for returning citizens and connects them with other community partners for services.

One signature activity centers on taking volunteers—including judges from around the state and attorneys in Mobile and Baldwin counties—through reentry simulations in order to understand some of the challenges faced by returning citizens. In these events, participants “re-enter” society with criminal records and limited resources and “walk” through their first month in the community. Usually most people end up back in jail—an important lesson for all of us.

I also host a monthly Reentry Council meeting where a returning citizen shares his or her story and a representative from a community organization informs us about how they support people with criminal records. Then, our committees meet to focus on employment issues, voter restoration, housing needs, and community awareness.

It is a pleasure to be part of those Mobile County and Baldwin County communities working together to change things in a positive way with regard to criminal justice reforms. It is this collaborative process where we build relationships that make the difference.

## ENDNOTES

1 Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Criminology, Spring Hill College.