



New Member Spotlight: Anita Raj's Academic Research Helps Shape Louisiana's Juvenile Justice Reform

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Wendy Chow

In early 2024, Tulane Professor Anita Raj and Louisiana State Senator Gary Carter connected to discuss their mutual interest in the impact of gender and race on the sentencing of individuals convicted of violent crimes in Louisiana. Amidst these discussions, the state once again became one of only four states in which 17-year-olds are treated as adults in the criminal justice system. In response to this development, Raj and Senator Carter shifted focus to identify ways to help incarcerated youths in the state. Drawing on research conducted by Raj at Tulane University's Newcomb Institute, Senator Carter drafted a bill that would provide inmates under age 21 with age-appropriate vocational training upon release, in addition to existing educational, health, and mental health services. In May, the Louisiana Senate unanimously approved the bill, followed by the House, leading to the bill's signing into law.

"During these past legislative sessions, Prof. Raj and I worked together to develop bipartisan legislation based on empirical data and research to protect, educate, and support the citizens of Louisiana," said Senator Carter. "With strong bipartisan backing, Senate Bill 183 was passed, providing youth committed to the Department of Public Safety and Corrections with vocational training—this training assists with rehabilitating our incarcerated youth back into the community and improving our workforce. I am proud of our work and look forward to future work with our researchers and experts to develop legislation that will improve everyday life in Louisiana."

Their successful efforts on this legislation demonstrate the powerful potential for collaboration between academics and policymakers in developing legislation informed by research. Below is a conversation with Professor Raj on what led to this collaboration, drawing on her [guest column](#) in *The Advocate* in New Orleans about this effort. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q&A with Anita Raj

What was your initial connection to Senator Carter and how did you build that relationship?

I met Senator Carter at an event at a law school where we were both invited as speakers. The event was designed to be a dialogue around gun rights and gun safety. I was there presenting data we had been collecting on the issues around guns in Louisiana, and victimization from gun violence for a statewide sample of people in Louisiana. Senator Carter was there to talk about the types of legislation he has worked towards to address gun safety issues, emphasizing his perspective as a gun owner who believes in the right to own guns.

We started talking and had a really good conversation, so I offered to help by providing data for any future legislation.

What led to the idea for Senate Bill 183 (now Act 124)?

We got a new governor in January who had concerns about crime management due to many vacancies in police departments. There was a special session called on crime management for the state, and the legislation moved very quickly. Senator Carter reached out to me, recalling my interest in providing data. We started working on legislation to manage gun access for people convicted of domestic violence.

But when he sent me a list of all the issues, I was surprised by how young some convictions could be. I didn't realize that kids could be treated as adults in Louisiana. At this time, some of the juvenile offenders were placed into Angola, which is the state penitentiary. We were having something called a heat dome over that region. I think the youngest person incarcerated in Angola was maybe 15 and all I could think about was their brain development. When he showed me this info, I started doing some more research. He affected how I was thinking, and I actually wrote an [op-ed](#) in the *Louisiana Illuminator*. I was really, really shaken by the idea of what's happening with these children.

So then I offered to share data on issues concerning kids treated as adults in correctional facilities, which led to a conversation about ensuring education, vocational training, and psychosocial counseling for such kids.

Based on this research, Senator Carter put together an initial amendment, which gained some ground but hit a wall on appropriations. But then Senator Carter managed to get a bill passed without an appropriations attachment. The bill ensured age-appropriate education, health referrals, and added vocational training for kids coming out of juvenile justice or adult correctional facilities. This was important, especially during COVID-19, as kids interfacing with the juvenile justice system are more likely to lose out on education. Vocational training offers them an opportunity for gainful employment. Under Louisiana law, a child is defined up to age 21, so these protections extend to 21, including vocational training.

I learned a lot going through this process with him. As a public health researcher, you don't get a lot of wins in this world, right? Meeting Senator Carter in an unexpected way, fostering a conversation, and building a relationship led to this successful outcome and that's been incredible to see.

Can you describe the process of collaborating with Senator Carter and his office on this bill?

He engaged me in the process in two ways: one, to get information from me, and two, to bring me into the process by providing testimony.

So to start, I provided the data in two ways. One way was I had data that I had collected, so I was able to pull it together and say these are the things we know about people who have experienced incarceration. They're more likely to report violence perpetration in the past year, more likely to have economic issues, and more likely to have substance use and mental health issues. If we could support them better, we could potentially forestall these things, and that all relates back to recidivism. And then in response, he would ask me questions, and I would see what additional data I could find that spoke to those questions.

And then when I provide testimony, I present the data. It's not my story. It's not someone else's story. These are the data. I can tell you that these conditions are compromising our state's young population from being an employed, productive population.

Senator Carter is very busy, so we often communicate about these things through texts, at night. I look at policies and research, and he sends me texts about Louisiana laws. This work is unpaid but incredibly valuable. It's one of the reasons I wanted to write the op-ed for *The Advocate*.

As researchers, having policymakers interested in our data and fostering dialogue is crucial. This wasn't based on a single issue but multiple issues he was focused on. I was able to pull data together, and any one of those issues could have succeeded. I am grateful for Senator Carter's openness.

The bill passed unanimously. What was the role of research in building bipartisan support for this bill?

I think there's a lot of cynicism about government and the legislative process, and I understand why. There are many reasons people can feel that way, but I think it was a bit of "don't give up hope." There are politicians who genuinely want to produce legislation that can improve lives. We may not agree on the best approach, but many are there for that reason. I found out that there are people in politics who care about data and want it. That's something worth sharing with people.

I hope to have more relationships like this with policymakers across the aisle. There's no reason to be partisan on these issues. The unanimous bipartisan vote was special. I was invited to the Governor's mansion for the bill signing, but I was traveling and couldn't go. Hopefully that's not the last time I get that kind of an opportunity.

Overall, it's incredibly rewarding to move from research to policy, especially with such bipartisan support. It's a feel-good story.

What lessons learned or advice would you give to other researchers who want to do this type of work, who might see this story and say, "That's amazing. I would love to be involved in the legislative process in this way."

I think it's definitely about maintaining communication. It's about relationship building, because there has to be a trust, but there also has to be a certain level of availability. That's really hard because the legislative process can move very slowly, but it can also move very rapidly.

I was really frustrated that I wasn't able to be present in the process to testify. I think that if you are living in the state capital, for example, it's going to be easier because you can be on call and be available. In order for me to testify, I have to drive in all the way and just be there for the whole day because you don't know when it's going to come up. For example, you thought you were going to testify at 10, but now you're not going to go until 2. That's super hard when you don't live there.

So overall, I would say to maintain lines of communication with policymakers that care about the issues and are working on the legislation related to the issues that you have data for. Maintain an open line of communication, periodically checking in with each other, I think that's really important. Lastly, if your offices are in that area or if you are living in the state capital, you are in a better position to do this work.

Looking forward, are there any things you're already working on or hoping to get involved in?

At Newcomb Institute, we work a lot on issues like maternal health equity and reproductive health access. Those are key issues that we want to be building relationships with legislators, and again, in a bipartisan way. We just really want to be able to share data so that there can be data-informed decision making. There are important policies related to domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment, and childcare that are very meaningful to me.

We hope that legislators might be open to having conversations with us using our data. A lot of the work we do is pretty standard for public health. We give it to organizations, service organizations, and advocacy groups to use as they think best. We make it publicly available. I hope that we're able to build more relationships with more legislators who want data and expert testimonials.

I think we're not alone in that. I'm sure you get this a lot—so many professors, so many researchers are hitting their heads against a brick wall. I was really lucky because I happened to be involved early in my career in being able to have my data influence policy and we saw the policy change. There is nothing more deeply satisfying than feeling like what you do has the ability to affect society positively.

ANITA RAJ

Tulane University of Louisiana



Raj is a research scientist trained in developmental psychology and public health with a multi-disciplinary research focus on gender equity in global health and development. She has led federal grant and foundation-funded studies on gender theory and measurement science, sexual and reproductive health, maternal and adolescent health, women's empowerment, and gender inequalities, including gender-based violence and child marriage. She has approximately 300 peer-reviewed publications and is recognized as one of the most cited social scientists globally.