



**SOUTHERN
CENTER FOR
HUMAN
RIGHTS**

THE **HUMAN RIGHTS** REPORT

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SOUTHERN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
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FROM THE DIRECTOR STILL, LIKE DUST, WE RISE.



Terrica Redfield Ganzy

Executive Director

Some days, it feels like the world is coming apart at the seams. The institutions we were taught to trust are cracking. Cruelty, heartache, and repression creep toward becoming ordinary. And in those moments—when it feels like throwing up our hands is the only thing left—we must remember who we are. We must remember our brilliance, our creativity, our compassion. We must remember our power.

Because what we are witnessing across this country is nothing less than the weaponization of the criminal legal system. People are being punished not for what they've done, but for who they are. For what they believe. For the simple act of caring for someone who is suffering. And layered on top of that is the criminalization of dissent itself—an effort to silence us so thoroughly that the truth cannot find air.

So many people look at this landscape and say, “*Someone should do something.*” At the Southern Center for Human Rights, **we** are that someone.

We know cruelty—intimately. And we know how to confront it and win. We also know repression—and how to beat it. From our First Amendment Law Bridge that is helping to defend against efforts to criminalize protest to our Project Freedom that is freeing people from extreme and often illegal sentences, the stories that you read in this newsletter are not just cases or campaigns. They are lives. And they remind us that we can fight and win.

For nearly 50 years, SCHR has confronted the darkest corners of state power—abuse, dehumanization, and the criminalization of vulnerability. We have never looked away. We cannot start now.

We do not get the option to retreat. Our ancestors did not fight and bleed and die for us to shrink in this moment. We are the generation that must stand, protect, and push forward.

As Maya Angelou wrote: *Still, like dust, we rise.*

As we approach SCHR's 50th anniversary, we honor all the victories behind us—and we plot the course for the human rights and human dignity-centered future that we will create together. Thank you for rising for equality, dignity, and justice.

With gratitude,



PROJECT FREEDOM

TEN YEARS OF HOMECOMING & HOPE



Atteeyah Hollie
Deputy Director



Patrick Mulvaney
Director, Capital Litigation



Michael Admirand
Senior Attorney, Capital Litigation

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Southern Center for Human Rights' (SCHR) resentencing project, now known as Project Freedom. What began in 2015 with a single resentencing case in Evans County, Georgia, has now grown into a transformative campaign for freedom. Over the past decade, more than 90 SCHR clients—most of whom were serving life or life with parole sentences—have been resentenced and released from prison across the Deep South.

The project's origin is rooted in the remarkable case of Wilmart Martin, a Black man sentenced to life without parole for possessing just 3.4 grams of cocaine—less than the weight of a nickel.

The sentence, imposed in 1991 under a harsh recidivist sentencing scheme mandating such a sentence based on prior offenses, did not account for the fact that none of Mr. Martin's prior offenses involved violence of any kind. By 2015, Mr. Martin had served 24 years in prison without a single disciplinary infraction. Fortunately, the district attorney agreed that the life without parole sentence was excessive, and he joined SCHR and co-counsel in requesting a sentencing modification. The court granted the parties' request, and on February 18, 2015, Mr. Martin was resentenced to time served. He walked free that day.

Shortly after, SCHR took on the case of Charlie Scandrett, who had served 18 years of a 30-year sentence without parole for a drug offense in Clayton County, Georgia. Like Mr. Martin, Mr. Scandrett had an exemplary prison record. With the district attorney's consent, the court in Clayton County resentenced Mr. Scandrett to time served on July 7, 2015.

As he walked out of jail hours later, a local reporter captured his story for the evening news, and by the next morning, SCHR's phone lines were flooded with calls. Trish Hale, who has managed SCHR's front desk for decades, reported, "The phones are ringing off the hook." Families across Georgia had seen Mr. Scandrett on the news and many of them had loved ones incarcerated in similar situations.

The barrage of calls made it clear: Mr. Martin and Mr. Scandrett were not isolated cases. An initial review identified 14 additional people—each of them Black—serving life without parole sentences for non-trafficking drug convictions. Dozens more were serving long, parole-ineligible sentences for low-level drug offenses. SCHR quickly mobilized, taking on a series of new resentencing cases in late 2015 focused on excessive sentences for drug offenses in Georgia.

Over the following two years, 15 more clients were resentenced and released. Among them was James Dennard, a north Georgia native who was sentenced to life without parole under the same mandatory scheme as Mr. Martin. In 2017, after 23 years of incarceration, he was resentenced and immediately released. Mr. Dennard has maintained steady employment ever since and even helped a fellow SCHR resentencing client secure a job.

Many of these excessive sentences were the result of mandatory minimums, which stripped judges of the discretion to consider the individual circumstances of each case. This prompted SCHR to expand its focus beyond drug offenses. Take the case of Christopher Williams, sentenced to life without parole in 2000 for his involvement in an armed robbery.

Mr. Williams was unarmed, and no one was physically injured. SCHR took on the representation of Mr. Williams, and he was resentenced and released in 2018.

From there, SCHR tackled several more cases with similar circumstances. Recognizing that release was only part of the solution, SCHR also established a reentry program to provide support and assistance to clients as they transitioned back into society.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020, SCHR adapted. In addition to ongoing resentencing efforts, SCHR sought and obtained release for people with health conditions that made them especially vulnerable to the virus, including those with cancer, breathing conditions, and other health issues.

In 2021, SCHR expanded Project Freedom into Louisiana—historically the nation’s leader in incarceration rates. Several local organizations like the Louisiana Parole Project and the Promise of Justice Initiative had been advocating for justice reform, especially for individuals serving life without parole. Over the next three years, SCHR represented dozens of people in Louisiana—nearly all serving life without parole—whose convictions stemmed from ineffective legal representation, prosecutorial misconduct, or other unconstitutional errors. Working with local prosecutors, SCHR successfully obtained the release of 45 people.

Since winning their freedom, these clients have had a profound impact on their communities. Charles Amos, after nearly 30 years in prison, now advocates for criminal legal reform as a community organizer. Terry Pierce, who served more than four decades in prison, now works as a peer mentor with the Orleans Public Defenders, assisting the office’s clients as they navigate the criminal legal system. Donald Ford, after 45 years of incarceration, moved back to California to care for his sister and fulfill his dream of earning his Commercial Driver’s License.

In Georgia, SCHR has tackled new categories of resentencing cases —those involving people given illegal sentences that exceed statutory maximums. One such case involved Henry Dixon, who pled guilty to armed robbery in 1996 without legal counsel and was sentenced to 30 years in prison—exceeding the statutory limit. SCHR filed a motion to vacate the sentence, and Mr. Dixon was finally released after serving 27 years—seven more than legally permissible.

Now, ten years into Project Freedom, SCHR has helped more than 90 people to reclaim their freedom. Many continue to stay in close contact with SCHR and now mentor and offer support to others who are being released from prison after many years. The work is far from over. The phones at SCHR still ring with the voices of families searching for justice—just as they did after Charlie Scandrett’s release in 2015. And SCHR continues to respond, committed to transforming lives and dismantling systems that perpetuate extreme and unjust punishment throughout the Deep South.

—



SUSTAIN JUSTICE ALL YEAR LONG

JOIN THE PILLARS OF JUSTICE SOCIETY

WHY JOIN THE PILLARS OF JUSTICE SOCIETY?

BENEFITS TO **SCHR**

Plan Strategically: A predictable funding stream enables us to dedicate resources to essential legal representation, long-term litigation, and policy advocacy to achieve systemic change.

Respond Swiftly: Sustained funding ensures we can mobilize quickly without delay whenever and wherever injustice strikes.

Maximize Impact: Consistent support means we can spend less time on continuous fundraising and more time defending the rights of impacted people and their families.

BENEFITS TO **YOU**

It's Easy, Automatic & Flexible: Set your monthly gift amount once, and know you're making a difference every day. You can increase, decrease, pause, or stop your donation at any time.

Convenient Tax Reporting: Receive one consolidated tax receipt for all your donations each year.

The Satisfaction of knowing you are a foundational supporter, ensuring justice for those who need it most.

JOINING IS SIMPLE

ONLINE AT **WWW.SCHR.ORG/DONATE**

When you make a contribution on our website, simply select the option to make it a recurring donation. You choose the dollar amount that fits your budget—every gift, no matter the size, helps sustain our critical work.



VIA MAIL

Make a contribution via check on a monthly, quarterly, or annual frequency to:

Southern Center for Human Rights
60 Walton St SW
Atlanta, GA 30303



A LANDMARK VICTORY

INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY AND THE DEATH PENALTY GEORGIA



Blake Feldman

Senior Policy Counsel

After years of tireless advocacy, legislation protecting people with intellectual disability from being sentenced to death

in Georgia was signed into law on May 13, 2025. For two decades, the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR), alongside the broader capital defense and disability rights communities, has worked relentlessly to change a Georgia law that placed people with intellectual disability at greater risk of execution than in any other state.

Until this legislative victory, Georgia was the lone state in the country that forced people to prove intellectual disability beyond a reasonable doubt—the most difficult legal standard—in order to avoid execution.

Georgia was also the only state that required a jury to decide both guilt and intellectual disability simultaneously, making it more difficult and confusing for jurors to fairly and accurately evaluate each issue. Now, under the new law, the standard of proof has been lowered to preponderance of the evidence, and the determination of intellectual disability is separated from the determination of guilt. This long-overdue reform ensures a more just process.

In February, as he has done in previous sessions, Michael Admirand, a senior attorney in our Capital Litigation Unit, testified before the House Judiciary Non-Civil Committee.

He excellently corrected the record following hyperbolic and inaccurate testimony presented by a prosecutor speaking on behalf of the District Attorneys Association. The committee voted unanimously to advance the bill.

On March 5, 2025, the House Rules Committee placed the bill on the calendar for the full House to debate and vote on the bill, where it passed unanimously. This was a major milestone—similar versions of the bill had never made it out of the House in prior legislative sessions.

We knew the Senate Judiciary Committee’s review of the bill would be a matter of first impression. On March 26, an amended version of the bill passed out of the Senate Judiciary Committee. The District Attorneys Association, which had refused to negotiate with us and the bill’s author prior to the legislative session, lobbied for several changes that would have fundamentally weakened one crucial aspect of the bill: separating the determination of intellectual disability from the determination of guilt or innocence. While this was a frustrating development, we understood that policy is the realm of compromise, and the Senate Judiciary Chairman was inclined to make some changes requested by the prosecutors. After immediate consultation with our partners, we identified which amendments would be acceptable and which would require us to withdraw our support.

In a sudden change, the District Attorneys Association ultimately did not object to lowering the standard of proof, but they were adamantly opposed to changing when a determination of intellectual disability should occur during trial. Fortunately, we were able to preserve a front-end, pretrial mechanism and a back-end, presentencing mechanism for determining intellectual disability in the bill—an essential safeguard.

Two substantive changes to the bill emerged from the Senate that, while not ideal, were acceptable to us.

First, under the amended bill, if a person with intellectual disability is found guilty, they may be sentenced to life or life without parole (LWOP). Previously, under both existing law and the House version of HB 123, such person charged in a capital case and found guilty would receive a life sentence. While we categorically oppose LWOP—especially for people with diminished culpability due to age or intellectual disability—we continued to support HB 123 because the amended bill would still significantly reduce the risk of and better protect people with intellectual disability from being sentenced to death.

Second, the amended bill added a discovery provision: the defense must provide the prosecution with any evidence it intends to present at the pretrial hearing on intellectual disability, and the prosecution must provide the defense with any evidence it intends to use in opposition. The added discovery provision was a much easier change to swallow, as such, we welcomed this addition.

On March 31, the full Senate passed the amended version of HB 123, and the House agreed to the Senate changes the same day. On April 8, the bill was sent to the Governor, who signed it into law on May 13.

We are incredibly proud of this victory, which reflects years of dedicated advocacy and effort by current and past members of SCHR’s Public Policy and Capital Litigation Units, as well as our indispensable partners at the Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (GACDL), the Georgia Resource Center, and Georgia Capital Defenders. This law marks a major step forward in making Georgia’s criminal legal system more humane.



GEORGIA'S FREE SPEECH UNDER FIRE

PROPOSED LEGISLATION THAT COULD CHANGE YOUR RIGHTS



Legislative efforts in Georgia are raising concerns over First Amendment rights. Several proposed bills aim to regulate speech, protest, and public expression, with potential implications for privacy, activism, and artistic freedom. Georgia's legislative sessions last two years; this legislation being introduced in the first year of the biennial. SCHR will continue to monitor these bills and any new legislation that attack First Amendment rights in 2026.

SB 27: CREATES THE OFFENSES OF DOXING AND AGGRAVATED DOXING

01

Doxing involves posting someone else's information online with a reckless disregard for whether they will experience fear, mental anguish, or economic injury. Aggravated doxing involves posting someone's personal information with the intent that they experience fear, mental anguish, or economic injury and is a felony punishable by 3 years in prison and up to \$10,000 in fines.

CONCERN Doxing is broadly defined and would allow for the prosecution of protected free speech.

STATUS: SB 27 did not move forward because it was not placed on the House Rules Committee calendar. At the start of the 2026 session, SB 27 will be recommitted to the House Judiciary Non-Civil Committee.

SB 268: CREATES A 25-FOOT BUFFER ZONE AROUND "FIRST RESPONDERS"

02

This bill seeks to create a 25-foot ring around "first responders." This law attacks the constitutionally protected right to film police officers and would enable discriminatory arrests and prosecutions of those filming or making remarks towards law enforcement. Such laws are unnecessary as it is already a crime to "obstruct" first responders.

CONCERN SB 268 seeks to impede the first amendment right to film police officers, weakening police transparency and accountability.

STATUS: SB 268 did not move forward because it was not placed on the House Rules Committee calendar. At the start of the 2026 session, SB 268 will be recommitted to the House Judiciary Non-Civil Committee.

HB 602: PENALIZES STUDENT PROTESTERS

03

HB 602 would strip state funding from any student convicted of a crime while engaging in "materially and substantially disruptive" conduct on campus.

CONCERN This bill is an attack on the right to protest directed towards Georgia Students.

STATUS: HB 602 did not pass the house but could be brought again during the 2026 session.

HB 675: EXPANDS MATERIAL SUPPORT OF 'TERRORIST' ORGANIZATIONS

04

This bill would create a state level crime for providing support to 'terrorist' organizations. A terrorist organization is broadly defined and would include domestic organizations. The bill steps beyond the boundaries of the federal statute already in place and threatens the ability to support nonprofit organizations.

CONCERN This bill attacks the ability to support organizations with broad discretion.

STATUS : HB 675 did not pass the house but could be brought again during the 2026 session.

HB 161: EXPANDS CRIMES FOR WHICH THE GBI CAN ISSUE SUBPOENAS

05

This bill would expand the list of crimes for which the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) could issue subpoenas. This would greatly expand the GBI's authority to investigate and access personal and private information.

CONCERN Increases the GBI's investigation powers and scope.

STATUS: HB 161 passed by both the house and the Senate. Not yet signed into law.



GUILTY BY GUESSWORK

FIGHTING JUNK SCIENCE IN THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM



Mark Loudon-Brown

Senior Attorney, Capital Litigation

In 2009, as unreliable forensic science was increasingly exposed as a leading cause of wrongful convictions, the National Academy of Sciences published a watershed report which found that—aside from nuclear DNA analysis—“no forensic method has been rigorously shown to have the capacity to consistently, and with a high degree of certainty, demonstrate a connection between evidence and a specific individual or source.” In other words, many forensic methods long believed to be a reliable metric for guilt were, in fact, deeply flawed.

Since then, the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR) has been investigating criminal convictions in Georgia and Alabama that were based on now-discredited forensic evidence. Two disciplines, in particular, have emerged as especially problematic and ripe for attack: bitemark analysis and shaken baby syndrome (SBS).

In *State of Georgia v. Sheila Denton*, SCHR successfully challenged Ms. Denton’s murder conviction, which relied on now defunct bitemark evidence. In reversing the conviction, the Chief Judge of Ware County wrote, “Proven unreliable scientific evidence should never serve as the basis of a conviction and should be dealt with by the Courts if and when it is found.”

SCHR has since challenged bitemark-based murder convictions in two additional cases, including that of Charles McCrory. In 1985, Mr. McCrory was convicted of murder in Covington County, Alabama, after forensic dentist Richard Souviron—fresh off testifying in the high-profile trial of Ted Bundy—claimed that an injury on the decedent matched Mr. McCrory’s teeth. In 2020, SCHR filed a habeas petition on behalf of Mr. McCrory, supported by an affidavit in which Dr. Souviron recanted his testimony.

As recent studies have revealed, even the most experienced forensic dentists cannot agree on whether a given injury is a human bitemark. The prosecution then offered Mr. McCrory—who is serving a life sentence—a plea to time-served. He declined, refusing to admit to a crime he did not commit.

At the ensuing hearing on his habeas petition, two additional forensic dentists testified that not only could the injury on the decedent not be matched to Mr. McCrory’s teeth, but that the injury was not even a bitemark *in the first place*. Nevertheless, Alabama courts upheld the conviction, reasoning that a jury “had the ability to compare the physical evidence of the photographs of the injury to the victim’s arm and the mold of the defendant’s teeth for themselves and thus conclude that the defendant’s teeth matched the marks of the injury.” In other words, jurors could reliably engage in junk science that actual scientists disavowed as unreliable. Although the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the case, Justice Sonia Sotomayor penned a lengthy statement acknowledging that Mr. McCrory’s case “raises difficult questions about the adequacy of current postconviction remedies to correct a conviction secured by what we now know was faulty science.” Mr. McCrory’s federal habeas petition is now pending. (You can read more about Mr. McCrory’s fight for freedom at *The Intercept* or listen to his story on the Podcast *Wrongful Conviction*.)

Justice Sotomayor’s concern is applicable to other SCHR cases. Through the early 2000s, “shaken baby syndrome” (SBS) was frequently diagnosed when an infant presented with a specific constellation of symptoms, absent an explanation of a multi-story fall or high-speed accident. In recent years, that diagnostic approach—and the diagnosis itself—has changed.

Today, in order to diagnose “abusive head trauma,” doctors must rule out other possible causes before diagnosing abuse. The outdated diagnostic approach to SBS has resulted in an ever-increasing number of wrongful convictions, and it motivated SCHR to take on three such cases thus far. Danyel Smith’s is one such case. Convicted in 2003 of murdering his 2-month-old son, Chandler, in Gwinnett County, Georgia, Mr. Smith was sentenced to life in prison after doctors testified that Chandler had the constellation of findings presumptive of SBS. Despite having two other healthy children, despite testimony that Mr. Smith was a doting father to Chandler, despite evidence that when Mr. Smith saw Chandler stop breathing, he immediately started CPR and called emergency, and despite no evidence whatsoever suggesting that Mr. Smith ever harmed his son, Mr. Smith was convicted and sentenced to life in prison based on the SBS diagnosis.

In 2021, SCHR filed an Extraordinary Motion for New Trial, arguing that new medical evidence showed that Chandler died of a natural process dating back to his premature birth via Caesarian section, not abuse. Although the trial court initially denied the motion without a hearing, the Supreme Court of Georgia granted discretionary review and reversed. As happened in Mr. McCrory’s case, faced with the evidence to come, the prosecution offered Mr. Smith a plea to time served. He rejected the offer, refusing to admit guilt for a crime he did not commit.

At the 2024 evidentiary hearing, SCHR presented the testimony of a pediatric and epilepsy neurosurgeon from Mount Sinai in New York, a medical examiner from Florida, a pathologist with a specialty in ophthalmology from North Carolina, a pathologist with a specialty in hematology from Texas, a radiologist from Pennsylvania, a biomechanical engineer from Utah, a cognitive psychologist from Maryland, and a law professor from Wisconsin who has been involved in most of the SBS exonerations in the United States. The witnesses—many of whom worked entirely pro bono—agreed that new evidence demonstrated that Chandler died following a seizure that caused him to stop breathing, which then led to ischemia and stroke.

The prosecution responded with testimony from a radiologist and a retained child abuse pediatrician—both of whom had previously testified against other people who have since been exonerated due to their faulty SBS diagnoses.

Despite this new evidence, the trial court signed an order that was drafted—verbatim—by the prosecution, denying a new trial. Mr. Smith again sought discretionary review, this time supported by amicus briefs from the Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and from forty-eight forensic evidence scholars nationwide. The Supreme Court of Georgia again granted review. Oral argument was heard on April 15, 2025.

According to the National Registry of Exonerations, there have been 1,094 exonerations in the United States of people convicted based on false or misleading forensic evidence. Since Mr. Smith filed his motion in 2021, there have been *fourteen* documented SBS-related exonerations in the United States. Meanwhile, there have been thirty-nine wrongful convictions and indictments due to unreliable bitemark evidence. SCHR believes both Danyel Smith and Charles McCrory should be added to those growing lists of exonerees. Their cases are stark reminders of the enduring harm unreliable science inflicts on our criminal legal system—and the urgent need to correct those wrongs.

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Big Picture

See how Fulton County courts are tied to policing, jail overcrowding, and diversion programs. **Together, we can understand why it all matters for our community and push for change.**

 [Learn More](#)

 bit.ly/JusticeWatchFulton

SIGN UP AND BRING A FRIEND





THE PEOPLE'S PROCESS

IMAGINING THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SAFETY IN ATLANTA



Devin Franklin

Senior Movement Policy Counsel



Kannette King

Movement Policy Associate



Tiffany Roberts

Director, Public Policy

In the heart of Atlanta, where the shadow of injustice looms heavily over the Fulton County Jail, the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR) has led a courageous initiative to reimagine public safety and hold power to account. In response to a long-overdue investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice and their findings released in November 2024, SCHR launched The People’s Process—an innovative, community-led model for public engagement, transparency, and systemic reform. This initiative not only informed communities about the DOJ’s findings but also empowered them to demand meaningful accountability and change within the criminal legal system.

THE GENESIS OF THE PEOPLE’S PROCESS

The People’s Process was born from necessity. After local officials dismissed community input in the wake of the DOJ’s investigation into the Fulton County Jail, SCHR stepped in—not as a grass tops authority, but as a facilitator of grassroots leadership. SCHR recognized that the people closest to the problem are also closest to the solution. Through a four-phase program, SCHR provided a platform for those directly impacted by state-sanctioned violence and their families to speak, be heard, and lead.

A BLUEPRINT FOR COMMUNITY-LED REFORM

Phase I: The People’s Webinar

On December 16, 2024, SCHR hosted a webinar moderated by Public Policy Director Tiffany Roberts. It featured voices such as attorney C.K. Hoffler, representing the family of Leonard Fortner—who was killed at the Fulton County Jail in April—along with experts at SCHR and grassroots partners.

The panel—Atteeyah Hollie, Deputy Director, Devin Franklin, Sr. Movement Policy Counsel, and Robyn Hasan, Executive Director of Women on the Rise Georgia—unpacked the DOJ report, contextualized the systemic abuse taking place at the Fulton County Jail, and introduced The People’s Process to the broader public.

Phase II: The People’s Assemblies

Three assemblies provided space for formerly incarcerated individuals and families of currently incarcerated people to share their experiences and inform future advocacy. These gatherings not only surfaced stories of abuse and neglect but also collected vital data to inform policy solutions grounded in lived reality.

Phase III: The People’s Day in Court

Community members took part in “justice watching,” attending court proceedings as observers to monitor the fairness of the legal process. This transparent, non-intrusive practice allowed participants, known as court-watchers, to witness how justice is—or is not—served in real time, providing insight into judicial processes and creating a culture of accountability from the outside in.

THE PEOPLE’S DAY OF REPORTING

Modeled after an April 2023 listening session of the United Nations Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement co-hosted by SCHR, this final phase brought community members and lawmakers face-to-face. Testimonies illustrated the human toll of the crisis in the Fulton County Jail, emphasizing that this is not just a policy failure but a human rights emergency.

INSIGHTS AND KEY FINDINGS

Across all phases, clear themes emerged from community input:

1. **Lack of Transparency:** People overwhelmingly believed Fulton County officials have not been honest or forthcoming about human rights abuses within the jail.
2. **Overemphasis on Force:** Concerns about use of force by jail staff overshadowed complaints about unsafe building conditions.
3. **Informed Service Providers:** Those offering support services demonstrated deep understanding of the crisis, reinforcing their potential role in solutions.
4. **Insufficient Remedies:** There was a consensus that Fulton County's actions have fallen far short of meaningful change and must go beyond minimum remedial measures.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: A VISION FOR TRUE SAFETY

Based on the findings of the People's Process, SCHR proposed several, practical policy recommendations to reshape public safety:

- **Invest in Community-Based Alternatives:** Shift public funding away from carceral systems toward community-led initiatives that address root causes—mental health, housing insecurity, education, and restorative justice.
- **Ensure Transparency and Accountability:** Implement independent oversight of law enforcement and corrections, ensure comprehensive body camera usage, and mandate public reporting of misconduct.
- **Legislative Reform:** Advocate for legislative changes that restrict excessive police powers and authority while encouraging de-escalation strategies and non-carceral crisis responses.
- **Educate the Public:** Launch education campaigns to increase awareness of community-centered safety models and the advantages while highlighting the drawbacks of over-reliance on incarceration.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The People's Process represents more than a response to a crisis—it is a framework for transformation. By placing the power of narrative, analysis, and vision into the hands of those most affected, SCHR has catalyzed a shift in how public safety can and should function. But this is only the beginning.

Resistance to change is real. Institutions entrenched in punitive traditions do not dismantle easily. Yet, SCHR remains committed to:

- **Expanding Community Engagement:** Continuously listening to and adapting based on community needs.
- **Monitoring Implementation:** Holding stakeholders accountable through sustained public oversight.
- **Building Coalitions:** Partnering with other organizations and movements to amplify collective demands for systemic reform.

CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING SAFETY THROUGH SOLIDARITY

The final report of the People's Process stands as a testament to the resilience of communities and a blueprint for systemic change. It challenges prevailing notions of public safety and offers a vision where justice is restorative, inclusive, and centered on human dignity. As Atlanta and Fulton County stand at a crossroads, the roadmap provided by this initiative offers a compelling alternative: a future where safety is achieved not through punishment, but through empowerment and community solidarity.

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A pair of hands, one appearing to be from an older person, gently cradles a small green seedling with several leaves and a mound of dark soil. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

Planned Giving

GROW A LEGACY WITH THE SOUTHERN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

We know how busy life can be, and sometimes we can lose sight of some of the bigger to-do items. **You may be surprised to learn that only 30% of U.S. adults have a will.** You don't have to see your name on a Forbes list to need a will. A will allows you to share your gifts and resources with your family, friends, and the causes you care about. What you leave behind can impact people for generations to come, and it can help ease the burden for your loved ones and give them peace of mind.

If you are looking to take that next step, the good news is that we can help. SCHR is partnering with FreeWill to offer our supporters a new easy-to-use tool, which provides you the opportunity to create a legacy plan for free. This tool is open to anyone, whether you include a gift to SCHR or not.

Visit www.freewill.com/schr to begin the process!

If you would like to talk with us more about your planned giving and how an estate gift can help us deepen our fight for equality, dignity, and justice throughout the Deep South, please feel free to reach out to our **Development Team at development@schr.org or (404) 688-1202.**



WEALTH IS NOT JUSTICE

SCHR SUES GEORGIA OVER UNJUST BAIL LAW



Lachlan Althanasou
Legal Fellow (2024-2025)

The Southern Center for Human Right has long fought the criminalization of poverty in Georgia, and that fight continues today.

Last year, the Georgia legislature passed a law mandating that judges impose money bonds for people charged with certain offenses. The new law, Senate Bill 63 (“SB63”), requires money bonds for 30 criminal offenses, mostly misdemeanors, for which people could previously be released pretrial without paying money. The new list includes charges such as possession of less than one ounce of marijuana, criminal trespass, obstruction, and failure to appear.

Before SB63, when a person was charged with one of these offenses, judges could release them based on a signed promise to return to court without forcing them to post money bond. Moreover, judges held hearings at which they considered a range of factors such as a person’s ties to the community, financial resources, and criminal record before deciding if and how a person could be released pre-trial. Now, judges are forced to impose money bond on every person charged with a bail restricted offense even when they believe that person can be safely released from jail without it.

Simultaneously, SB63 effectively banned charitable bail funds by making it illegal for them to post bond for more than three people per year (these provisions were enjoined after a lawsuit filed last year).

The Southern Center for Human Rights, along with the ACLU of Georgia and the ACLU Criminal Law Reform Project, filed a lawsuit challenging SB63’s additions to the bail restricted offenses list.

We represent Women on the Rise, an organization that provides direct services to women who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated in Georgia state prisons and jails, as well as two women, Sierrah Coronell and Diane Holsey, who were held in jail because of SB63. We are asking the Fulton County Superior Court to treat this case as a class action as there are likely thousands of Georgians like Ms. Coronell and Ms. Holsey who are or will be denied consideration for release without money bond, and to declare that the additions SB 63 made to the bail restricted offenses list violate the due process clause of the Georgia Constitution.

At the time the case was filed, Sierrah Coronell had been in jail for 77 days because she could not afford to pay her \$600 cash bond, which had been reduced from \$3,000. As directed by SB 63, the judge was not permitted to consider whether any release conditions other than cash bond would reasonably ensure her appearance in court and the safety of the public. Prior to her arrest, Ms. Coronell was the primary caregiver of her five children, ages three, five, seven, ten, and fifteen. As a result of her incarceration, Ms. Coronell was unable to care for her children, leaving her mother and her children’s father to be their sole caretakers in her absence. Ms. Coronell’s incarceration has also forced her to miss her oldest daughter’s fifteenth birthday.

Diane Holsey, a 54-year-old grandmother, was also held for weeks because she could not afford to pay the bond imposed by the judge. Due to her incarceration, she was at risk of losing her stable employment at Burger King, where she had been working for two years. Further, she was unable to provide childcare for her grandchildren, which she had been doing to help her daughter.

SB63 is not only unconstitutional; it's bad policy too. In theory, the purpose of money bond is to ensure that people charged with criminal offenses return to court and are not a danger to the community. But studies have found that using money bond instead of less restrictive conditions of release may actually have the opposite of the intended effect.¹ And even within the context of the theory that purportedly justifies our current system of money bond, SB63 doesn't make sense. Rather than allowing judges to consider whether less restrictive conditions of release are sufficient to ensure that people return to court, judges are forced to impose money bond—one of the most restrictive conditions of release—as a blanket policy without individualized determination as to whether it is necessary.

The effects of SB63 are as disturbing as they are predictable. Many more people across the state are held in jail for weeks or months merely because they cannot afford to post bond. What is more, the people charged with the sorts of offenses listed in SB63 are particularly likely to struggle with housing insecurity or a substance use disorder—precisely the group least likely to be able to afford money bond.

Often, people charged with bail restricted offenses are stuck in a nightmarish paradox: either their bonds are too large for them to be able to afford the 10% fee charged by bonding companies, or their bonds are below the minimum amount bonding companies require to offer their services. In other cases, people held in jail on particularly low bonds—sometimes as low as ten or even one dollar—do have enough money but have no family or friends on the outside to post the bond and secure their release.

Further, because of the racial disparities that infect every step of the legal process from arrest to prosecution, the harms of SB63 fall on a jail population that is vastly disproportionately Black. In Fulton County, for example, the jail population is 90% Black while the county population is 42% Black.

People in Georgia's jails are subjected to dangerous and inhumane conditions. At the Fulton County Jail, in the four years before the Department of Justice released its November 2024 report finding that conditions in the jail are unconstitutional, there were six deaths due to violence and four due to suicide. In 2023 alone, there were more than 300 stabbings. In addition to such conditions, people held in jail are separated from their families and at risk of losing their jobs and housing. Based on conversations we have had with numerous people held at the Fulton County Jail, many people with minor charges choose to accept time-served plea deals to avoid conditions at the jail and the collateral consequences of prolonged incarceration rather than wait in jail for additional weeks or months to fight their charges.

In short, by denying people their constitutional right to a hearing at which judges can consider whether to impose money bond, SB63 punishes people for being unable to pay for their freedom, exacerbates jail overcrowding, further perpetuates the harms of a racist legal system, and has no plausible connection to community safety. With the filing of this lawsuit against SB63, the Southern Center for Human Rights reaffirms our commitment to the long-term goal of eliminating wealth-based detention in Georgia.

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¹ See, e.g., Paul Heaton et al., *The Downstream Consequences of Misdemeanor Pretrial Detention*, 69 STAN. L. REV. 711, 786–87 (2017) (estimating that if Harris County, Texas had allowed defendants who were detained on a \$500 monetary bond to instead be released on personal bond, there would have been 1,600 fewer felonies and 2,400 fewer misdemeanors within the following eighteen months); Arpit Gupta et al., *The Heavy Costs of High Bail: Evidence from Judge Randomization*, 45 J. LEGAL STUDIES 473 (2016), <https://perma.cc/KJ6W-EAR3> (“Our results suggest that money bail has a negligible effect or, if anything, increases failures to appear.”).



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