



Q&A with Los Angeles County District Attorney Candidates Rachel Rossi and George Gascon

Moderated by Zoe Guttman and Yuki Hebner

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Introductions:

Zoe Guttman: Okay, so I think we'll just get started. Thank you all so much for coming. My name is Zoe Guttman and I'm a PhD student in the neuroscience department and the president of the Science Policy Group at UCLA. This is Yuki Hebner, who will be moderating with me, and she's in the Molecular Biology program.

[00:00:32] The Science Policy Group is a nonpartisan group of over 200 undergraduate and graduate students and postgraduate scholars. We are interested in the intersection of science, policy, communication, and society. We are very member driven – this whole event happened because Yuki went to a debate with the candidates a few months ago. If you'd like to know more about our group, please come speak to us after! Our information and social media handles are on the screen.

[00:00:51] We're very grateful and excited to have former LA public defender Rachel Rossi and former San Francisco D.A. George Gascon take time out of their what I'm sure are insane schedules to come speak with us tonight.

[00:01:11] The LA County D.A. is the head of the largest prosecutorial office in the nation. It has tremendous power to influence LA County and arguably all of California and even set an example for the nation. So thank you so much for coming today to hear from our candidates!

[00:01:31] Just one quick note. There are a lot of resources out there about these candidates and their views. This evening is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of their stances. We are not going to be getting to all - or even most - of the many crucial issues at the hand of the D.A. Instead, our goal is to touch on issues that we think can be most influenced by - or even helped and improved by - science. This is not a debate. It's not meant to be contentious. It's meant to be casual. We are scientists and grad students, so we're not experts in the law or in policy. We want to learn from the candidates about how they view the evolving role of the D.A. and how they can incorporate science, data, scientific literature, and scientists into their decisions.

[00:02:10] So we can get started right away. Both candidates are just going to start with a very short statement and then we can get right into questions. Would you like to start?

George Gascon: Thank you, all of you guys. It was really interesting being here among hard science dudes, cause I was the guy always around math class, that's why I became a lawyer. Very grateful because I'd rather have time for Q and A. You know, I grew up here in LA. I spent a significant part of my career with the LAPD, and very early on engaged in the use of science into our work.

As the district attorney, I really became probably one of the few district attorneys that brought hard science into our work – very data driven, very technologically driven. We used science, we had a lot of research projects. In fact, when I left the San Francisco District Attorney, we had 16 ongoing research projects at the

time, and we'll get through the Q&A and I'll talk about some of those things, but needless to say that I would say that one of the biggest problems we have in LA County today is that we have a prosecutorial office that doesn't necessarily believe in science, doesn't believe in data. And you know, just yesterday we had a forum, the current D.A. indicated that she is the same today as she was in 1986, which I find incredibly scary when you consider how much has occurred between 1986 and now. So with that, I'm gonna stop so we can have the Q&A.

Rachel Rossi: Hi, good evening everyone. Thank you so much for having us. My name is Rachel Rossi and I was formerly in LA County public defender, and then I was an LA federal public defender and then went to work in Washington, D C and criminal justice policy on the Senate side and then on the house judiciary committee. So I have a very different background from someone who would ordinarily run for district attorney. And I think that's the value that I bring to running for this seat.

I'll just say briefly that, you know, we all now know that there are 2.2 million people behind bars in our country and we all know that there's something wrong with that. And a lot of what has driven the mass incarceration in our country has been the lack of data, the lack of information, the lack of relying on the facts and on science and instead relying on fear-mongering. And to just scale back and to move away from that and to decarcerate, focusing on the data and focusing on science is going to be incredibly important. And it is true that our D.A. currently is not interested in this conversation, and we have to be incredibly proactive about making sure that we have a good D.A. in this seat because we need to lead the country in the conversation about incarceration smartly. So thank you so much for having me.

Question 1: Juvenile Justice & Neuroscience

Zoe Guttman: Thank you so much. In line with what you were just saying, the first question we want to focus on is about juvenile justice. Data shows us that children's brains continue developing until around age 24 or 25, and that the parts of the brain that develop first tend to be more related to impulsive behaviors, emotional responses, and a lack of inhibition, while the parts that develop later tend to be involved in assessing options, inhibiting impulses, and things like that. Findings also suggest that children's brains are much more susceptible to peer pressure, and then merely the presence of a peer increases the likelihood of impulsive or risky choices. Luckily, the data shows that our brains have a tremendous capacity to adjust and recuperate if placed in the right environment under the right circumstances. But, environments like incarceration have been shown to exacerbate such issues and lead to poor mental health and aggression outcomes. How would you reconcile the differences between this science and many of the current prosecutorial techniques?

Rachel Rossi

[00:06:13] Sure. That's absolutely the case. It is true that we now know that the juvenile brain is continuing to develop through age 25 and that needs to be considered in our juvenile justice policies and practices in every stage. One of the problems with our current district attorney's office is that the juvenile assignment is seen as just something to get through in order to get to hardcore crimes or to get to sex crimes or to get somewhere else. It's not seen as a place where you can intervene and change lives. One of the things I would do specifically as district attorney is to ensure that the leadership in the juvenile division is aware of this science, and has expertise in the science, and create policies that are driven with an understanding of both the development of the juvenile brain, but also be trauma-informed. Because we also know that there's a high rate of trauma when you look at the juveniles in our juvenile system. And so every stage of the process has to be informed by that.

[00:07:15] I would also say that, you know, one of the things that I've seen in the juvenile system is a lack of understanding of what the system can do to label a child. You'll see oftentimes in the court rooms that a prosecutor will say things in front of a kid like, "well, this kid's going to be a murderer one day." And things like that can really impact a juvenile, so finding ways to not only could change the policies, but to change the approach and how we speak about kids in juvenile court is incredibly important.

George Gascon:

[00:07:49] Absolutely the current administration in LA does not consider the science when they are doing their work. Not only do we need to consider science in terms of brain development, it's just as important to understand that a lot of science tells us that actually being in touch with the criminal justice system has a tendency to increase your criminal factors. And the more that we intervene, sometimes, the worst that it gets. In my case, what we did with juveniles in San Francisco, and what I would bring to the table here, is first of all, we reduce the number of times that we would even intervene. So, for instance, all the lower

offenses, we completely took them out of the system, we diverted it to nonprofits in the community, reducing the likelihood that our young people would be traumatized just simply by the process.

The other thing that we did is we brought a clinical psychologist to run our victims and survivors process. And the reason why we did that is because we wanted to not only talk about trauma informed, but we actually wanted to create practices that actually apply the knowledge that we have today about the impact of trauma. Not only bringing the elements for young people, but just throughout our practice.

[00:09:06] The other thing that we did is we looked around the world and actually landed on the New Zealand-style community conference for restorative justice. The term restorative justice is often use very loosely, but the reality is that there are certain things that are and certain points that are not. Restorative justice is based on the harm reduction model, is based on accepting responsibility, but at the same time, digging deep into the process to make sure that while we're restoring the victim to as close as we can to the place they were before the harm was done, and we have an admission the harm occurred, we're also looking the other way around to the person that is being accused of having causing harm to understand what were the driving forces, what was the trauma perhaps in the development, in order to make sure that the intervention can address not only the person that was harmed, but also the person that caused harm. Because one of the things that we often say is that hurt people hurt other people, and healed people heal other people.

So, we took the science, not only in terms of brain development, we also took the science to look at what we knew about the impact of the criminal justice system in people in general and certainly juveniles, we provided high level intervention that was trauma informed, and then we tracked the data to see what was working and what was not working.

[00:10:35] One of the things that we did when we put our restorative justice model for juveniles, is initially we worked with researchers and we actually used a control group as well. Because, while intuitively we felt that we were heading in the right direction, we wanted to actually be able to show, through science, that our work was in fact a better outcome. And what we found out, after about four years, three and a half years, was that the kids that were run through the traditional criminal justice system for juveniles, their failure rate or recidivism rate was around 40%. The kids that we put through the restorative justice model was about 12%. More importantly, not only were there better results in terms of not reoffending at all, but even when they were reoffending, we found something else that was really interesting – even when they reoffended, the level of reoffense was usually much lower than that of the other kids in the control group. To me that was a win, because we're heading in the right direction.

Question 2: Mass Incarceration & Addiction

Yuki Hebner: Thank you. We would like to ask about the addiction crisis. The war on drugs is increasingly acknowledged to have been politically motivated to turn substance abuse into an incarceration issue rather than a public health issue. Evidence also shows us how harmful incarceration is in terms of the mental health repercussions of imprisonment and in terms of exacerbating mental health or addiction issues, among other problems. Stress and trauma also significantly affect the brain, altering decision-making capabilities later in life. This means that the disproportionately nonwhite incarcerated population is at a substantially higher risk of such issues and therefore substantially disadvantaged due to their incarceration.

You have both spoken extensively on your goals to disrupt policies that drive mass incarceration of minority populations, such as gang enhancements and the three-strikes law. The first part of my question is, can we expect to see an appropriate sense of urgency in reconciling the discrepancy between substance abuse policy and policies that target minority populations? And the second part is what measures will you take to delegate the persisting issue of substance abuse to the appropriate public health, medical, and neuroscience experts?

George Gascon:

[00:13:12] Well, very quickly, the sense of urgency is great. So immediately if I were to be elected D.A., we're going to take steps to address these issues. One of the things that we would do is that we would definitely look to the high number of people that are in the system today that qualify for diversion, but are not being diverted. RAND just did a recent study on the population of the LA County jail. Among roughly 17,000 people, there were 6,000 that qualified for mental health diversion. But they were not being diverted. They need to be diverted.

[00:13:53] I know that the current DA said that if we had a place to divert them we would, but we don't. And the thing that I say to her is, would you take somebody who has cancer and put them in jail because they don't have a place to get cancer treatment? Obviously, the answer to that is no. So why would we take a mentally ill person and put them in a concrete box in order to get a treatment that they are not getting? All right, so, we have to, first of all, start getting those people out of the custody setting and we have to make sure that they are getting the treatment that they need. And for decarceration, we have to shift funding sources in order to provide better services.

[00:14:27] The other thing that we have to do is that we really, again, you know, this is where science comes in. We have to be thoughtful. For every year that you're incarcerated, you have somewhere between a 4-7% chance that you're going to reoffend, so you can see what incarceration does to your rate of recidivism. Again, applying science and understanding that your intervention should be the least harmful intervention that you can in order to achieve the community safety goal is really important. And that's why collecting data, looking at your work, understanding what you're getting or not. For instance, in San Francisco with the recidivism dashboard. We started to understand better what were the interventions that we were doing and were working and the ones that were not.

Rachel Rossi:

[00:15:11] So the war on drugs, I think a lot of people now are starting to see not only that it didn't work, but that the increasing levels of incarceration have no connection to actually reducing drug use or overdoses. And it does not reduce recidivism rates. So now we know that incarceration isn't the answer, treatment is.

[00:15:33] I think the next steps that we are going to be taking in our county and our country, number one, we have to combat the feeling that we need to treat the opioid epidemic with incarceration. Even though we think we learned our lesson, there are still folks out there who are perpetuating this desire to, well now this is a new drug, let's lock people up for opioids. We have to resist that urge.

[00:16:00] It's also incredibly important that we understand that the criminal justice system sometimes just is not the place to be dealing with substance use at all. Diversion is a good thing. I believe in diversion. And what that is, is when someone is arrested for an offense and they are required to complete a program or substance use treatment or classes, and if they complete it successfully, they get the case dismissed or they can ensure that they don't get incarcerated.

[00:16:42] One of the problems with that model, however, is that courts are not equipped to fully understand addiction. So oftentimes you'll have a judge who doesn't understand that part of the road to healing substance use and addiction means messing up, that that is part of the road toward treatment and rehabilitation. And so when you have someone coming into court and the judge says, Oh, you use drugs again, I'm locking you up, that isn't effective. So, we have to increase the use of diversion where we can. We also have to find ways where we can start to not even put people with substance use issues in the criminal justice system in the first place.

Question 3: Addiction & Treatment Centers

Zoe Guttman: Staying on the topic of addiction, like you guys were just talking about, we want to ask you a question about rehabilitation centers and how to hold them accountable, especially seeing as here in LA County we have a huge number of such places. One example is, as I'm sure you guys know, that because of the cap on medical malpractice in California, it's impossible for many people to get justice for themselves or their loved ones through that avenue. One example is a corporation called American Addiction Centers, which owns and operates centers around the country and here in LA. They've been repeatedly involved in patients dying under suspicious or negligent circumstances while in their care. And some of their facilities have the word "hospital" in their title, even though they are not hospitals.

We're wondering how you would approach such issues of fraud and negligence - and even wrongful death - in such facilities, especially in these big corporations that own multiple centers around the country.

Rachel Rossi:

[00:18:22] Over half of the substance use treatment centers in California are in Southern California, in our area, and the majority of those treatment centers are not medically based. They do not use medically assisted treatment. They are based on the AA model. There are problems when we're looking at the effective ways to actually treat addiction, because we know that medically assisted treatment has a much, much higher rate of success.

[00:18:42] One of the real problems that we've seen with the recent investigations and all of the large corporations or substance use treatment centers that have been charged with fraud is because it isn't very regulated. It isn't an area where we have a lot of regulation. We've seen laws passed just in 2018 and 2019 where we're trying in California to start to regulate a lot of these substance abuse treatment providers. I think it's very important that we are careful in how we do that, because some of the proposals out there are to ensure that people operate in substance use treatment centers don't have a prior conviction. That could actually end up being harmful, because a lot of times, having a prior conviction or a substance abuse related issue could be a helpful thing in treating someone else.

[00:19:36] But we do need to carefully increase the oversight and the structure for a lot of these substance use treatment centers that are operating without the backing of medical science. As district attorney, I think it's also important that our D.A. is in this conversation and prosecuting where necessary. A lot of this though is prosecuted federally.

George Gascon:

[00:19:58] So a couple of things. Diversion doesn't always have to be conditional upon any level of success. One of the things that I've gone and we did for a great deal of our cases is simply for getting people out of the system because you recognize that people are addicted and that people have mental health issues. I know that is the definition of diversion in LA County today, but it doesn't have to be the definition that you use. So, it's important the people who are addicted will mess up many, many times.

[00:20:42] The second thing is that for people that are using, what you're saying, people in treatment centers, if it's driven by district attorney directive, it's important that we do quality control. One of the things that we did in San Francisco is we actually had social workers that would monitor and look at their different facilities before we sent anybody, to make sure there were places not only appropriately licensed, and more importantly, that their success rate and the way that they treat people, was going to work properly. And frankly, it's not a one size fit all. Right? So sometimes there are places that are good fit for certain problems, but not for others. So even discerning whether you're going to send someone to a place that's going to provide the appropriate treatment.

[00:21:20] Finally, we as prosecutors have multiple tools. Not only do we have criminal tools, but we have also civil tools in California to go after bad actors. So sometimes we may not necessarily have criminal behavior, but you have behavior that you can go under the consumer protection laws. So we often went off to places of various 7,200 code consumer protection laws so that we could go civil, even though we may not have a criminal violation.

[00:21:45] The District Attorney is the guardian of the system in many different directions, and whether you're talking about environmental justice or you're talking about medical facilities or lawful practices of a profession, we have a role to play and it can be both criminal and civil.

Question 4: Environmental Racism & Classism

Zoe Guttman: You mentioned environmental justice. For our next question, we're going to switch gears a little and talk about the role of the D.A. and the environment. Both of you have platforms that include shifting prosecutorial resources to focus on environmental crimes and pollution. How would you prioritize different communities that are most susceptible to environmental pollution, poor air quality, or toxic waste? For instance, situations like the recent Delta jet fuel dump, where jet fuel was dumped on a low-income neighborhood. How do you view the role of the D.A. in such situations where environmental racism and classism are at play? For instance, what steps can the D.A. take in such situations, in terms of getting justice for the victims, holding companies accountable, and preventing such an event from happening again?

George Gascon:

[00:22:50] Yeah, I think the district attorney plays a major role in this. One of the things that I've done before is a lot for environmental polluters in our community and I will do the same here. Unfortunately, LA County is the epicenter of problems with industrial polluters, mostly focusing in communities that are poor, communities that have less resources. And we have not seen a lot of activity from the current D.A.

[00:23:08] We have many ways to go after environmental polluters. We can go through nuisance lawsuits, which are recently becoming more effective going after fossil fuels industry and going after other polluters. I

think you will see a development of this area if I were to be an elected D.A. Actually, we are already putting together the environmental plan of how we're going to go after existing polluters. We have problems involving the fossil fuel impact. We have problems in the County with fracking, we have problems in Vernon with a battery plant that was polluting the water. Recently we have the problem with Delta airlines in the case when clearly the pilot was given the opportunity to dump fuel over the water and initially he indicated that he was not gonna dump fuel, and then they come there on 2,700 feet above the ground and dumping fuel on 20 kids.

[00:24:14] By the way, that's the community that I grew up, and I can tell you that actually I got calls from there and said, what would you do? And I said, I would go after Delta. Now sometimes you're going to have to look at what the restriction issues are. You know, sometimes there's a lot of conflict between federal law and state law, but there is no question that whether it's through nuisance or through consumer protection, the D.A.s have tools that we could use in order to go after people that are damaging our community, not only today, but are damaging our community for many years to come. Climate change is real. Absolutely.

Rachel Rossi:

Absolutely. We have the resources as the district attorney in LA County, our district attorney has the resources to prosecute where necessary, but is not, and we know that in South LA, South East LA, that is where the majority of environmental injustice exists in LA County. And we don't have a district attorney who's taking steps to prosecute.

[00:25:08] One of the things that I think is also incredibly important just to keep on the landscape. While a lot of these offenses are generally prosecuted federally, I believe that our D.A. needs to get involved when things are happening in her county – and when there is federal jurisdiction, needs to be involved in that conversation as well. And specifically, there is a conversation going on federally about efforts from big corporations to try and make it easier for them to pollute federally by lowering the mens rea standard. And so for those that are scientists and not lawyers in the room – when you are prosecuting a crime, usually there's the act that you do, and then there's the mens rea. The mentality that you had when you did the act.

[00:26:00] On purpose, a lot of environmental crimes are strict liability, meaning that you don't have to think illegally when you do it. If you do it, the crime is committed. And that's on purpose because a lot of times, with big corporations, we can't prove that they had this bad mental intent, right? We can't prove that Delta was thinking, I'm going to do this bad thing. So there is actively a conversation federally about scaling that back and making it a lot harder to prosecute big corporations. And so we need a district attorney that understands the conversation broadly and is in this fight for LA County.

Question 5: Justice & Sexual Violence

Yuki Hebner:

[00:26:41] Thank you. This question is about justice for victims of sexual violence. Numerous studies have demonstrated that law enforcement and justice officials are often inadequately trained to make unbiased decisions on whether to investigate reports of sexual violence. This vulnerability to bias in the justice system results in uninformed practices that are partly due to a lack of comprehensive, written policies based on scientific evidence of how victims respond to trauma.

For a timely example, I am going to ask about the case against Harvey Weinstein, who the L.A. county's district attorney filed criminal charges against just last month. Many witnesses to the Weinstein case have been discounted for continuing positive relationships with him, both superficially or intimately. However, these patterns have been corroborated by scientific literature as well-characterized behaviours of sexual assault victims.

Could you elaborate on how the D.A. can implement trauma-informed practices, which you have both already touched on? How will you incorporate the scientific literature and data to create comprehensive policies to prevent biases? And, I think most importantly, how much of this is truly within your control?

Rachel Rossi:

[00:28:00] I think it is within the D.A.'s control. I think it's very easy for a district attorney to say, well, all we have is this witness's testimony. That's not enough, I'm not going to prosecute this case. Or for a district attorney to develop policies where the D.A.'s are working with experts to present expert testimony at trial to explain the characteristics of abuse and how it can be corroborated and what are the traditional signs and

how victims ordinarily react in situations. I had a case specifically where I actually called an expert witness on the defense side because I had a client who was charged with assaulting her husband, but she was being strangled by her husband and was acting self-defense. And so I called the expert to explain why a woman would act in self-defense in this way, and had to present that evidence from my side of the courtroom. And so we need to expand access to resources like this in our courtroom so that we're educating the jury, so we're not just hiding behind the lack of evidence as an excuse.

[00:29:01] And it is really problematic when victims are used for political game. What we see with the Weinstein prosecution is that it was conveniently timed at a time when our prosecutor needed to show something that she was doing. And so we need a prosecutor who puts victims first or reliance on science and data in order to bring prosecutions that otherwise, in the past, we may have looked past and said, well, this is too difficult to prosecute. There are ways to prosecuted. We need to do that.

George Gascon:

[00:29:36] Absolutely this area requires a complete revamping of what is currently happening in LA. Number one, not only do we have to be victim centered, survivor centered in the way we do our work, which means that sometimes also in my experience, just because the survivor is not ready to prosecute a case today does not mean that she or he may not be ready years down the line. So one of the things that we did in San Francisco is to create multiple on-ramps for survivors to come, tell their story, and make sure that evidence was preserved. At the same time, we also provided survivor victim services without any preconditions to whether there was going to be a cooperation with the prosecution or not. Again, this is a continuum of services that is based on the trauma informed approach to the work.

[00:30:21] Finally, we worked with all of the service providers to ensure that when a survivor was coming for assistance, that they were provided with all the resources in that there was a connection, there was a seamless process so that the survivor is not brought over for the same type of interviews and the same conversations over and over again, because you have a conversation at the rape center and then another conversation in the ER room, and another conversation with the police and the prosecutor, which what you're doing is you're revictimizing the person over and over again.

[00:31:00] Additionally, it's really important to know that when it comes to sexual assault, you can actually use pattern as evidence in your case. So a case like Weinstein is a perfect example. So even if you may have some survivors that are willing to prosecute the case, and there are some whose case may not necessarily have the level of evidence that you can use, even if you work or bring experts to the table, sometimes their story can help work on another case. One of the things that we did is that we put out a policy paper, series of policy papers, and one has to do with this. One of the things we said is that we wanted to make sure that we were allowing the court to allow other survivors, even if their case wasn't being currently prosecuted, to come in and tell their story during the case, which is completely lawful to do. We have to ensure that first and foremost we're going to be survivor-centered. And the prosecution, while important, is secondary. We have to understand that a survivor who is coming through the process, which is rare – very few survivors actually report – but those that do, they have to be provided all the support that they need.

[00:32:13] We also have to ensure that we are culturally and linguistically sensitive because the stories are very different depending on your culture, depending on whether you are a monolingual speaker or use another language. We also have to be sensitive to the LGBTQ community, because especially when you're talking same gender assault, there are a different set of circumstances that come into place and after the system is very insensitive when you're talking about same sex assault. So there's a whole host of things that we need to do, but it has to begin with being survivor-centered.

[00:32:45] And the other thing is we have to look at the whole area of prevention. We started a whole campaign, we signed up and used every single college and university in San Francisco County. How many of you are aware of what the red zone is? My goodness, you guys are graduate students tonight? Okay, so the red zone is the first few weeks in your freshman year, and that's when most of the sexual assaults will occur. Understanding that and working with the incoming class is critically important for reducing the incident of assault as well.

Question 6: Safety & Justice for Commercial Sex Workers

Yuki Hebner:

[00:33:29] Thank you, both of you. The next question pertains to safety for commercial sex workers, who are particularly vulnerable to violence because of the criminalization of sex trade. Work from scientists like Dr. Elizabeth Barnert here at UCLA – whom many of us heard from leading up to this event - led to California state legislation that prevented underage girls from being arrested for, quote, prostitution, and instead, recognized them as victims of sexual child abuse with pressing medical and psychological needs. In this case, systematic decriminalization led to better safety and health outcomes for victims of sexual violence and trafficking. Mr. Gascon, during your time as D.A. in San Francisco, you implemented a policy that the District Attorney's Office will not prosecute people for involvement in sex work for when they are victims or witnesses of violent crimes.

This is a question for both of you - how do you envision the role of the D.A. in terms of their responsibility to ensure justice for commercial sex workers? What challenges to implementing such policies here in Los Angeles do you envision facing?

George Gascon:

Yeah, Not only did we stop prosecuting sex workers, and we were the first County in the state and probably one of the few in the country - we started way back in 2012 - we also established a policy in late 2011, early 2012, that we stopped using condoms as evidence of sex work, because one of the things that occurs in many prosecutorial office is that condoms are used as evidence that there was commercial sex, which leads to really bad public health practices because then it encouraged the sex workers not be used condoms, which creates a whole host of other problems.

The reality is that sex workers are again only going to come in one of two categories. Either they're being forced into sex trade and they are really victims of the system, and we have to treat them as victims -- and most of the time prosecutors don't and certainly LA doesn't. But there may be some that were actually engaging in this practice because that is free will. And we also have to recognize that because there is a union of sex workers in the state and they're men and women that are engaging in this practice and they're telling us at least that they're doing so on their own free will. And understanding that nuance and also being able to address it accordingly.

[00:35:45] The bottom line is if we cannot criminalize sex work, because when we do, not only would we drive human trafficking underground - and we also push the victims and survivors to go to a place where they will never avail themselves of the support they need - but more importantly because when we do that, we also create the unintended consequences sometimes creating a public health role. So the reality is that we need to understand that sex workers, the majority of the time, are going to be really victims of a crime and that we have to provide any on-ramps and we have to be there when they are willing to talk.

[00:36:30] At the same time, we have to provide the service that they need and they cannot be conditioned upon of willingness to prosecute or willingness to be a witness, which is a problem in this county also, where sometimes victims are not only brought in, but they do what is called a body attachment, which is they are held in jail and contempt [of court] if they refuse to cooperate with the prosecution, which often can lead to greater harm because they're going to be then harmed by their pimps or their traffickers.

Rachel Rossi:

[00:37:00] This, the prosecution of sex work, is one of the clearest examples of where the criminal justice system ignores science and data. So much of the prosecution in sex work is based in someone's ideals of morality, but not based on science or fact. And what we actually know is that when we decriminalize sex work, it actually reduces the risk of rape and reduces the risk of STIs. So we need to move as a society in the direction of decriminalizing sex work. And LA County is extremely far behind, not only because of the practices of actually incarcerating victims, but there isn't even a conversation in our district attorney's office right now about fully decriminalizing sex work.

[00:37:51] One of the issues is that a law passed in California that allows that if you had been a victim of sex trafficking, you have a defense to the crime of prostitution. I know that's not the word we use, but that's what the law unfortunately still calls it. And what you would be required to do as a victim in that scenario is to actually come forward and say that you were a victim and talk about your trafficker, who likely is waiting outside and you're placing your life at risk. So when I, as a public defender, would defend clients and I saw their pimp in the courtroom, and I told them, "Look, if you just say that that's your pimp, we can get this

case dismissed. That's what the law says. You are a victim," they would never choose to do that. They would always choose jail. And so we need a district attorney that understands the data and the science that shows them what we are doing and criminalizing sex work is actually harming people and revictimizing people.

Question 7: Green Spaces & Resource Allocation

Zoe Guttman: Thank you. We're going to switch gears a little and go back to the environment -- we skipped a question in case we ran out of time, and now we have time! So, evidence shows that things like green spaces can improve air quality and decrease temperature in neighborhoods, subsequently increasing physical activity and the related health benefits, and even improve mental health, social cohesion, public safety. They have also been shown to help mitigate climate change by eliminating and storing greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and removing air pollutants. But the disparity in abundance and locations of such spaces fit clearly into economic and racial lines.

Evidence seems to suggest the benefits of shifting resources from jails to enhancing such green spaces. How can the office of the D.A. be used to promote these changes? Is the allocation of resources to green spaces directly within the authority of the D.A.? And if not, how can you advocate for that from that office?

Rachel Rossi:

[00:40:02] The D.A. does need to be involved. What we've seen with environmental injustice is that it is a host of issues that is causing this issue. It's our history of red lining. It's a history of racism in our county. And a lot of it may be in the authority or the control of other departments in the county or the district, but the D.A. does have to be actively in this conversation talking about ways to reallocate these resources.

[00:40:44] One of the things that we can do is once we started to decriminalize and start to scale back on how many people we're incarcerating, then we can begin to utilize those resources in ways to rebuild the communities that have been harmed. And I will say with prop 47, a legislation that passed recently, a lot of the funds specifically that were recouped from reducing the incarceration from prop 47 is going toward meditating reentry and other programs of that nature. So there is a direct connection between the racism and the historic economic and environmental injustice in our county, and the D.A. has to be involved in that conversation because the criminal justice system has perpetuated it.

George Gascon:

[00:41:25] The district attorney office can provide leadership for many parts of community life that are beyond the criminal justice system. Certainly, as we're talking about decarceration, we have to push to ensure that the resources that are being saved by not continuing to incarcerate peoples at the same rate are moving into a lot of areas of the community, mental health services, substance abuse, the creation of open space – the increase in the social sustainability of our community, which includes creating open spaces.

[00:42:00] But just as importantly, as a district attorney, you have a role that is a role modeling role that you can work with others to make sure that we push or create a more sustainable community, because a more sustainable community is a safer community, and one of the things that create sustainable community is open spaces and open spaces that are available to everyone. We know that the more that we can get people into public spaces, sharing space with others, it actually creates not only a safer community, but it creates a healthier community as we all engage in your activities that are away from the TVs, away from our computers, and are socializing with one another. The district attorney can play a role in this area by encouraging that all the other partners in the governmental system come together to bring funding and resources to those areas that go towards actually creating safer, long-term solutions to community safety, that denial required a criminal justice system and direction.

Question 8: Immigration

Yuki Hebner:

[00:43:10] This next question is about justice for immigrants. The University of California system appeared before the Supreme court to defend Data recipients and fight against the federal administration's end to DACA. In the justice system, immigrants facing charges for misdemeanors or petty crimes can be faced with deportation, a disproportionately severe consequence, especially for those seeking refuge from violence circumstances back home.

Ms. Rossi, I've heard you speak about your time as a public defender when you would ask the judge to reduce charges in an attempt to mitigate the risk of deportation for the defendee. Can you briefly speak about challenges you may face if your role were to shift from public defender to chief prosecutor? And Mr. Gascon, how do you view the role of the D.A. in such matters?

Rachel Rossi:

Absolutely. So, misdemeanors, a lot of people think, well, misdemeanors are really the big part of the district attorney's office. But our district attorney prosecutes 91,000 misdemeanors a year. It's a big part of the practice and in misdemeanor, particularly when you have a green card or if you're undocumented, or if you're potentially DACA eligible, a misdemeanor can be life changing and can cause you to completely lose your status, be deported, and never come home again. It is incredibly important that we have district attorneys who understand not only the impact of the criminal case before them, but the impact that could it could have for the future.

[00:44:40] So for example, I had a client once who was charged with a case by our district attorney for assault. He was at a concert with his brother and his brother got into a fight with someone and he jumped in to defend him and got charged with a felony assault. He was DACA eligible. He was 27. He had never been arrested before in his life. Someone else in that same circumstance maybe would have never been arrested for that charge. He was not given a disposition offer to plead to something that would allow him to stay in this country.

Unfortunately, the video stopped here. Ms. Rossi went on to tell a heart-wrenching story and Mr. Gascon had an insightful answer as well. Then closing statements were said.

We thanked the candidates for an insightful and exciting night, and for prioritizing students and science. We also thanked everyone who helped this event happen, including the David Geffen School of Medicine for giving us a beautiful room and the Graduate Students Association for funding. We also thanked Keaton from our group, who worked tirelessly to get funding for this, and Regina for giving us a great talk about the relationship between climate and the office of the D.A.

Most importantly, we reminded everyone to please vote on or before March 3rd, because – as we learned this evening - the decisions made by the DA are radically important and affect us every single day. This is an election in which your vote carries a huge weight, so please exercise your power in this way.