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What Comes Next? On the Evolution of Community Courts

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Introduction

Since the founding of the Midtown Community Court in 1993, community courts, with their emphasis on problem-solving and community engagement, have provided a model to justice reforms across the world. While the research on these initiatives is still emerging, findings thus far indicate their potential to reduce recidivism and increase confidence in the justice system. In this chapter, we survey the existing research and highlight recent innovative adaptions of the model. We argue that community courts' underlying principles provide a firm foundation for responses to contemporary justice challenges, including over-incarceration and racial disparities in the justice system. We believe that community courts offer lessons for justice system professionals seeking rapprochement and actionable partnership with the community. Moreover, we argue that community courts can inform a range of corrections and sentencing reform efforts in the United States. Noting a gap in the empirical literature, we also underscore the urgent need to better understand and evaluate the efficacy (and pitfalls) of community engagement practices within the justice system context. Further analysis of the impact of community courts on communities and public safety could illuminate how criminal justice agencies, nonprofits, and communities can collaborate to create safer and healthier neighborhoods.

What Is a Community Court?

Community courts can trace their origins to reform efforts in policing and the emergence of specialized problem-solving courts. In the 1980s, the overlapping theories of problem-oriented policing, community policing, and broken-windows policing encouraged policymakers and practitioners to use data to target local issues rather than simply reacting after crimes occurred. In particular, problem-oriented policing emphasized proactively identifying and analyzing underlying problems and measuring the effectiveness of responses (Goldstein, 1979). Broken-windows policing, which posited that disorder negatively impacted the public’s perception of public safety and led to higher rates of serious crimes, prompted a renewed focus on low-level offenses (Kelling & Wilson, 1982).

At the end of the decade, a parallel problem-solving justice movement developed within state courts. This movement was a response to exponential increases in caseloads and a recognition that high rates of recidivism undermined public confidence and indicated that traditional approaches were ineffective at addressing the causes of crime (Belenko, 2000; Fulton Hora, Schma, & Rosenthal,
These courts were “problem-solving” in that they defined a specific goal (e.g., reducing substance use among participating defendants) and then adjusted practice to achieve this outcome. Beginning with the Miami-Dade County Drug Court in 1989, the use of problem-solving courts expanded to address other issues including mental health, domestic violence, and human trafficking. Despite different focus areas, these courts shared several key features: redefining the roles of legal parties and encouraging collaboration; enhancing court stakeholders’ access to information; expanding sentencing options beyond incarceration and fines; using judicial authority to compel engagement in social services; forming partnerships with government agencies and nonprofit organizations; and attempting to produce better outcomes for defendants, victims, and communities (Berman & Feinblatt, 2001).

Unlike other problem-solving courts, community courts do not focus on one particular issue or population, but rather on enhancing public safety and addressing community concerns in a specific geographic area. The first generation of community courts were neighborhood-based courthouses that applied a problem-solving approach to the specific issues of their time and place, seeking to address both the needs of individual defendants (e.g., substance use), and neighborhood conditions related to crime (e.g., public disorder). The first court opened in Midtown Manhattan in 1993. It focused on quality-of-life crimes (such as prostitution, vandalism, and minor drug possession) within the central business district around Times Square. The court coupled punishment with help, ensuring that defendants completed community service mandates and connecting them with individualized social services such as drug treatment and job training.

Since the launch of the Midtown Community Court, there have been nearly 60 replications of the model across the United States and more than 30 internationally (National Institute of Justice, 2013; Henry & Kralstein, 2011). Community courts have demonstrated success at reducing recidivism, as well as improving community perceptions of the justice system. They have gained supporters at all levels of government. In the words of former United States Attorney General Eric Holder, “Community courts have been essential in guiding efforts to reduce crime, empower communities, and create opportunities” (Holder, 2010).

Three decades and dozens of replications later, there remains no single, defining community court model. Each adaptation is based on a jurisdiction’s unique needs. For example, while some community courts focus on criminal offenses, others, like the Red Hook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn, also handle housing and juvenile cases (Lee et al., 2013). Despite these differences, all share a commitment to five key principles: individualized justice, accountability, procedural justice, community engagement, and collaboration (Berman, 2010). Community courts link participants with individually tailored social services, which may be provided in-house or through partnerships with local nonprofits, and may also be available to victims and the community at large. They work to hold defendants accountable to their communities through participation in visible community service projects, or through other activities, like restorative justice circles that seek to repair community relationships (Hynynen Lambson, 2015; Kunichoff, 2017). Community courts place a special emphasis on treating communities and participants with dignity and respect, by promoting dialogue between judges and participants and prioritizing the user experience in their physical design.

Community courts engage residents in the process of identifying (and solving) issues in their neighborhood. They play a crucial intermediary role, bringing together government and non-government actors (community-based organizations, business leaders, resident groups, etc.); in doing so, they seek to build social capital and improve public trust in government. They create community advisory boards that meet with judges and court staff, convene regular community meetings, and conduct resident surveys and focus groups (Lee, 2000; Lang, 2011). Community courts may also, as in Spokane, WA, meet in a public library or other community setting to increase accessibility and decrease the stigma of accessing services.
Measuring Impact

In comparison to other problem-solving courts, such as drug courts, community courts are relatively understudied. This is partly because they are more difficult to evaluate. While drug courts tend to have straightforward goals—e.g., reducing recidivism and substance use—and can be evaluated using readily accessible justice system data, community courts are tailored to meet the needs of their neighborhoods and seek to impact community life beyond case outcomes. This inherent variability makes the model and its goals harder to define (and reduces the generalizability of the findings of any single evaluation). The focus on both individual- and community-level outcomes necessitates challenging methodological questions (e.g., how to define community) and new data sources (e.g., community perceptions of the justice system).

So far, there have been more than 20 evaluations of community court practices, analyzing 11 courts in the US, two in the United Kingdom, and one in Australia (Henry & Kralstein, 2011; Booth, Altoft, Dubourg, Gonçalves, & Mirrlees-Black, 2012; Lee et al., 2013; Westat, 2012; Kilmer & Sussell, 2014; Ross, 2015; Hamilton, Abboud Holbrook, & Kigerl, 2019). These evaluations have largely focused on court processes, individual and community outcomes, cost, and participant and community perceptions.

Court Processes

Community courts have consistently been found to expand the use of social services and to change sentencing practices. A 2008 study of 25 community courts worldwide found that 92% used alternative sanctions, of which 84% used a combination of community and social service mandates, with drug treatment, individual counseling, and job training being the most common services (Karafin, 2008). Community courts have been shown to reduce reliance on traditional sentences (fines, incarceration, and convictions) and expand the use of alternative sanctions, both in pre- and post-implementation comparisons in Philadelphia and the Bronx (Cheesman et al., 2010; Henry & Kralstein, 2011), and in more rigorous comparisons of sentencing practices in community courts and neighboring traditional criminal courts in Manhattan and Brooklyn (Hakuta, Souroushian, & Kralstein, 2008; Lee et al., 2013). For example, the Red Hook Community Justice Center used alternative sanctions in 78% of cases, compared to 22% in the conventional court process, and jail sentences in 11% of cases, as opposed to 17% at Brooklyn’s Criminal Court.

Evaluations have also highlighted an increased emphasis on defendant accountability. Community courts have typically reduced the usage of sentences with no ongoing obligations. For example, far fewer defendants at Red Hook were sentenced to “time served” than at Brooklyn Criminal Court (5% vs. 32%). Community courts have also consistently fostered higher rates of compliance with community and social service sanctions than have traditional criminal courts (Eckberg, 2001; Sviridoff, Rottman, Ostram, & Curtis, 2000). At the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Melbourne, Australia, 77% of participants successfully completed their court mandates, compared to 66% of individuals sentenced at four similar urban court locations. This difference was even starker for participants considered to have a moderate to high probability of reoffending (Ross, 2015).

Individual and Community Outcomes

Although results have been mixed, researchers have found that community courts can reduce the likelihood that defendants will be rearrested for new offenses. For example, a comparison between cases served by the San Francisco Community Justice Center and cases from neighboring areas processed through a traditional criminal court found an 8.9 to 10.3% reduction in the probability of rearrest within one year (Kilmer & Sussell, 2014). Similar results have been found using similar
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approaches at the Red Hook Community Justice Center, the East of the River Community Court, the Spokane Community Court, and the Neighbourhood Justice Center in Melbourne, Australia. (Lee et al., 2013; Westat, 2012; Hamilton et al., 2019; Ross, 2015). Studies of other courts, however, have shown no significant difference in rates of recidivism (Sviridoff et al., 2001; Booth et al., 2012; Nugent-Borakove, 2009).

Although several studies have noted drops in crime rates in community courts’ catchment areas that exceeded those occurring in comparable or neighboring communities (Ross, 2015; Lee et al., 2013; Booth et al., 2012), researchers have struggled to attribute these changes to the presence of a community court. For example, although street prostitution and illegal vending decreased by 56% and 24% respectively in the 18 months after the establishment of the Midtown Community Court, researchers could not disentangle the court’s impact from that of increased economic development and enforcement of quality-of-life crimes (Sviridoff et al., 2001).

Cost

Cost-benefit analyses of community courts have generally found cost savings when compared to standard court processes. While community courts typically require a greater expenditure per case due to increased monitoring and personnel costs, they have been shown to achieve savings through improved case processing, reduced incarceration, victimization, and recidivism, and the value of community service projects (Sviridoff et al., 2001; Mahoney & Carlson, 2007; Lee et al., 2013). A study of the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Melbourne found that for every Aus$1 invested in community court activities, the return on investment would range from Aus$1.09 to Aus$2.23 (Ross, Halsey, Bamford, Cameron, & King, 2009).

Defendant and Community Perceptions

Researchers have also documented community courts’ success at improving perceptions of the court process. For example, defendants at Red Hook Community Justice Center had a higher perception of procedural justice and court legitimacy than those at Brooklyn’s centralized criminal court (Lee et al., 2013), a difference potentially attributable to a more positive perception of Red Hook’s judge (Frazer, 2006). (Despite this positive perception of court actors, defendants at Red Hook were not significantly more likely to report that they had received a fair decision.) (Lee et al., 2013).

Researchers have generally found that local residents have favorable perceptions of community courts. For example, in randomized telephone surveys of community members in Minneapolis and Midtown Manhattan, a majority of respondents were willing to pay higher taxes or transfer money from other criminal justice agencies in order to fund a community court (Eckberg, 2001; Sviridoff et al., 2001). Awareness of specific court activities, however, varies among residents and from court to court, and may not impact broader opinions of the justice system. In a survey of Red Hook residents, awareness of the Justice Center was particularly high among public housing residents, likely due to the court’s assistance with housing disputes (Lee et al., 2013). An evaluation of the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Melbourne found that individuals who lived or worked nearby were most aware of the Centre’s activities (Ross, 2009). In Liverpool, increasing awareness of the North Liverpool Community Justice Center was not found to translate into a significant increase in public confidence in the justice system (McKenna, 2007).

Researchers have not thoroughly examined community courts’ impact on public safety and have instead relied on comparisons of community perceptions over time. When asked to assess neighborhood safety in a pre- and post-survey, Red Hook residents reported feeling safer in public at night after the court’s implementation (Moore, 2004). In North Liverpool, the percentage of residents surveyed who felt that the North Liverpool Community Justice Centre had reduced quality-of-life

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Crimes increased slightly (from 15% to 21%) in the first two years of implementation (Llewellyn-Thomas & Prior, 2007).

**Broadening the Model**

Over the past 30 years, practitioners across the country have adapted the central concepts of the community court model to address new issues in their jurisdictions. This chapter highlights initiatives that apply community justice to some of the most vexing issues facing criminal justice reformers and the communities they serve. These programs respond to the criminalization of poverty in Jersey City, New Jersey; chronic homelessness, substance use, and mental illness in Los Angeles, California; and violence in Brooklyn, New York. While these initiatives do not involve neighborhood-based courts, they all draw upon the core principles of community justice, particularly the fundamental commitment to coupling alternatives to traditional punishment (incarceration, fees and fines, and criminal convictions) with vigorous community engagement. Together, they illustrate the evolution of the community court model over decades of implementation and its enduring relevance to justice reformers.

**Beyond Fees and Fines**

In 2014, street protests in Ferguson, Missouri (and a subsequent Department of Justice report) focused national attention on the widespread use of fines by local courts, their disparate impact on poor and minority communities, and their role in driving up local incarceration rates (Shaw & United States, 2015). According to former Attorney General Loretta Lynch, fees and fines “contribute to an erosion in our faith in government” (“Justice Department Announces Resources to Assist State and Local Reform of Fine and Fee Practices”, 2016). Yet regressive fines remain one of the default responses to lower-level crime across the United States. As Georgetown law professor Peter Edelman (2017) observes, “Ferguson is everywhere” (pp. 3–11).

Located just across the Hudson River from Manhattan, Jersey City Municipal Court is piloting an innovative way to reduce the use of fines and fees. Like most municipal courts across the country, the court is primarily focused on lower-level offenses. Of the 10,000 cases on the court’s docket each year, 75 percent are minor crimes like shoplifting, possession and sale of small amounts of drugs, and unpaid fines (Jackson & Dix-Kielbiowski, 2019). The Municipal Court’s responses to these cases were limited: criminal convictions, fines, and jail. In 2015, 93 percent of sentences involved a fine and 46 percent involved jail. These sentences did little to address underlying issues in defendants’ lives or reduce future offending. Many people returned to court within a few months, either on new charges or on warrants for failing to pay fines from a previous case.

To break this cycle, Jersey City has launched a community court initiative, known as Jersey City Community Solutions, within its municipal court. The initiative enables participants to engage in community service or social services, ranging from job training and adult education to substance use and mental health treatment, in lieu of incarceration and fines. Defendants charged with offenses such as drug possession, disorderly conduct, shoplifting, and trespassing are offered the opportunity to opt in to the program or stay in the conventional court process. They can engage in service mandates pre-plea in return for a dismissal or, less commonly, post-plea as an alternative sentence. The average mandate lasts between seven and eight days. Successful completion enables participants to avoid any fines or court fees.

A key element of this work is eliminating criminal justice debt. Through Jersey City Community Solutions, participants can avoid fines on their current case and convert historical fines to community service. Similarly, the court helps participants resolve other outstanding legal issues, such as suspended driver’s licenses. According to presiding community court Judge Cynthia Jackson, “When
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participants finish their engagement with our court, all of their issues are resolved. It defeats the purpose if people leave with fines” (Jackson & Dix-Kielbiowski, 2019).

The court also advances an innovative approach to community engagement. Judges and court staff attended community meetings throughout the planning process and continue to do so to stay apprised of community concerns. In the coming year, Judge Jackson and staff are planning to “ride circuit,” holding court sessions in several local libraries or community centers. The idea is to diminish the discomfort of coming to the courthouse and to increase the likelihood that court users will take advantage of the resources available. It is also to provide tangible evidence that the court is part of, and working for, the community.

Inspired by the court’s efforts to solve local issues and engage the community, the Jersey City Police Department has launched a pilot community policing initiative. In the city’s West District, Community Outreach officers are building relationships with local nonprofits, conducting proactive street outreach to people experiencing homelessness, and seeking to engage them in voluntary social services. When the police encounter people with an outstanding warrant or criminal justice debt, they seek not to make an arrest, but encourage people to voluntarily go to the community court to resolve the case. Although this effort is still in its infancy, it gestures at a significant new trend: moving upstream to address community issues before they escalate into court actions.

Moving Upstream

Over the past decade, police and prosecutors in King County, Washington have largely stopped arresting and charging people for low-level offenses such as drug possession. Instead, they have collaborated with social service providers to launch LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion), a pre-booking diversion program that steers people into treatment. An evaluation found that LEAD participants are significantly less likely than a control group to be rearrested within six months (Collins, Lonczak, & Clifasefi, 2017). They are also significantly more likely to obtain housing or employment after their contact with LEAD than before (Clifasefi, Lonczak, & Collins, 2017). Based on this evidence, the LEAD model has spread to 37 other jurisdictions. Larry Krasner, Philadelphia’s District Attorney, plans to implement a version, and Rachel Rollins, the newly elected prosecutor in Boston, included it in her campaign platform (Jouvenal, 2019). In Los Angeles, the City Attorney’s Office has taken even more radical steps, moving beyond diversion and into preventative street outreach.

In 2014, a California statewide ballot initiative reclassified some low-level drug and property offenses from felonies to misdemeanors. This created both an opportunity and a challenge for the Los Angeles City Attorney’s Office, the agency responsible for prosecuting misdemeanors: they suddenly had many new cases. The challenges were compounded by another local problem: over the past decade, homelessness in Los Angeles has increased by almost 50 percent (Oreskes & Smith, 2019). Consequently, prosecutors were seeing more defendants with complex histories of homelessness, substance dependence, and mental health needs.

Inspired by LEAD, the City Attorney’s Office decided to launch LA DOOR (Diversion, Outreach, and Opportunities for Recovery), a hybrid initiative that couples pre-booking diversion with street outreach to people with substance use, mental health, and housing needs. Community courts have typically responded after a case has been filed—essentially seeking to rethink sentencing. LEAD had moved the intervention earlier in the process, redirecting cases away from court during an arrest. Both models rely on traditional justice actors: police and court stakeholders. LA DOOR goes one step further, aiming to preempt contact with the justice system entirely. It draws on the principles of community justice, particularly the emphasis on individualized outcomes, procedural justice, and community engagement, but substitutes clinician and peer-led engagement for court- or officer-led diversion. As Jamie Larson, Director of the City Attorney’s Recidivism Reduction and Drug
Diversion Unit, observed, LA DOOR tests the hypothesis that the most effective way to serve high-need populations is to “move upstream,” applying the principles of community justice before an issue reaches the courts. (Larson, 2019).

Rather than waiting for an arrest to occur, LA DOOR delivers peer-led services to five “hotspot” locations in South LA (one for each day of the work week). At 7:00 a.m. each morning, LA DOOR’s mobile service team arrives at one of the hotspots. The team, which includes clinicians as well as case managers with lived experience of justice involvement or recovery, offers crisis support and services. The work focuses on building trust and relationships with potential participants. The team addresses immediate needs first, providing food, water, and personal care items. They also help with obtaining identification and accessing public benefits. As Larson describes, “there’s a lot of driving people where they need to go” (Larson, 2019).

LA DOOR’s model emphasizes motivational interviewing techniques and building bonds with participants. By establishing trust, LA DOOR increases the likelihood that people will access services like residential treatment, shelter placement, or primary care. When participants are ready, the outreach team steers them toward one of LA DOOR’s transitional housing beds and long-term clinical services, including case management, counseling, and treatment.

In many cases, preventing future contact with the system also requires resolving past contact. In an unusual partnership, the City Attorney’s Office connects LA DOOR participants to the Los Angeles County Public Defender’s office, whose attorneys help them clear old warrants, reduce past charges, and apply for expungement of past convictions. LA DOOR also connects participants with another City Attorney initiative that enables people to resolve old fines and fees by participating in community service or social services. By clearing past records and resolving old debts—often amounting to thousands of dollars—the program helps remove obstacles to education, employment, housing, and public benefits.

While LA DOOR has not yet undergone a formal evaluation, early results are promising. In a little over a year, it has engaged about 450 people, 60 percent of whom voluntarily enrolled in case management services and participated for at least two months. Over 25 percent of participants continue to access services, and several have moved out of LA DOOR housing into their own homes and jobs.

Through LA DOOR, the LA City Attorney’s Office is attempting to reconcile the fundamental tension between communities’ interest in addressing quality-of-life issues and their dissatisfaction with the conventional justice system. Across the country, residents seek relief from lower-level offenses. It is also true that many community advocates condemn over-enforcement of low-level crime (particularly in Black communities) and the resulting negative impacts on those who are arrested, convicted, and sentenced. LA DOOR is a way out of this box. It takes quality-of-life concerns seriously while also seeking to avoid or reduce the harms of conventional case processing.

**Focusing on Violence**

Significant decarceration in the United States will inevitably require a new approach to violence. Fifty-three percent of people incarcerated in state prisons have been convicted of violent offenses (Berman & Adler, 2018). According to James Austin, “Violence is contextual—emerging in families, neighborhoods, and institutions in which informal bonds of guardianship are weak” (Austin, Schiraldi, Western, & Dwivedi, 2019). In other words, violence is most common in communities in which informal social connections and the institutions that foster them (churches, businesses, schools, community-based organizations, etc.), are weak. It is also deeply related to past experiences of victimization. One potential path to addressing violent crime is therefore to invest in strengthening social ties and healing past trauma. This hypothesis is being tested in Brownsville, Brooklyn.
Brownsville is characterized by poverty, high rates of violence, and low levels of trust in law enforcement. The neighborhood, which is more than 95 percent nonwhite, is home to more than a dozen public housing developments, the highest concentration in New York City. Thirty-six percent of residents live below the federal poverty line, a rate nearly double the city average, and 44 percent of working-age residents are unemployed. While crime rates in Brownsville have declined significantly over the past two decades, its rate of violent crime continues to be one of the city’s highest.

The criminal justice system is a daily fact of life in Brownsville. The neighborhood is heavily policed. In the age of “stop and frisk”, Brownsville led New York in stops, with a few blocks experiencing nearly one stop per resident each year (Rivera, Baker, & Roberts, 2010). Thousands of residents are on probation or parole. The incarceration rate for young men is the highest in the city. Regular interactions with the justice system have produced neither affection or trust. For example, in 2010, only 16 percent of residents described their relationship with the police as positive (Hynynen, 2011).

Brownsville is a place in need of a new approach to criminal justice and a place in which there is little confidence that the justice system can be part of the solution. To address these issues, the Center for Court Innovation sought to adapt the model of the Red Hook Community Justice Center, a nearby community court that has been documented to reduce recidivism and improve local trust in justice. But, concerned about an overabundance of criminal justice agencies in the neighborhood, some local stakeholders argued that a justice center in Brownsville should not include a criminal court. As a result, the Brownsville Community Justice Center does not have a courtroom. Instead it is a hub for community-based crime prevention efforts and alternative-to-incarceration services. In its storefront office, there are no magnetometers, no court officers, and no judge. There is a team of social workers, case managers, and community organizers, many of whom have deep ties to the neighborhood, who are working to strengthen Brownsville’s social infrastructure, expand opportunities for Brownsville’s young people, and activate its public spaces.

The Brownsville Community Justice Center’s approach to public safety is simple: ask residents where and why they feel unsafe and involve them in addressing these issues. Each of its projects follows the same development process. Residents, often youth, identify an issue, and then study, design, and implement a solution. Justice Center staff help guide this process—gathering data to inform decisions, identifying partners, and coordinating the intervention. This approach ensures that initiatives are highly responsive to community needs. It empowers residents who are often marginalized by criminal justice agencies, giving them a stake in implementation and outcomes.

Recognizing that victims and perpetrators are overlapping categories, the Justice Center does not make hard and fast distinctions among the young people it serves. Some have been mandated by courts or probation and are working to resolve their cases without jail time. Some are walk-ins looking for an after-school activity.

For both mandated and voluntary participants, the Justice Center offers services that address past harms, build on strengths, and prepare them to become community leaders. Counseling sessions and restorative justice groups help young people process their trauma. Paid internships in technology and the arts excite their passions and provide a pathway to potential careers. The Justice Center has helped launch several youth-led social enterprises, such as a virtual reality incubator space that offers training in cutting-edge technologies.

The Justice Center also works to change Brownsville’s physical landscape, revitalizing vacant lots and underutilized spaces that encourage crime. For example, the program has made a significant commitment to improving Belmont Avenue, a struggling shopping corridor. Working with a range of city agencies and local partners—and hundreds of young people—the Justice Center has removed trash and graffiti, installed public art and plantings, improved lighting, created a pedestrian plaza, and attracted new, resident-owned businesses. These placemaking initiatives aim to create a virtuous feedback loop. Inclusive public spaces bring people onto the street. Vibrant public life and strong
social ties reduce crime. And declines in crime drive the cycle onwards by further increasing trust and solidarity and encouraging more people to use public spaces.

**Future Research**

The next generation of community court research must move beyond analyzing participant outcomes and community perceptions. As the case studies of from New Jersey, Los Angeles, and New York suggest, community justice programs continue to mutate and adapt to changing conditions. Research needs to keep pace with these new developments. In particular, there is a need to explore community-level impacts, asking how safe and healthy neighborhoods are created and whether community justice programs can help facilitate this process.

New research suggests that Brownsville-like initiatives may have an important role to play in reducing violence and improving neighborhood safety. Analyzing data from 264 US cities over 20 years, Patrick Sharkey and his collaborators found a 9 percent decline in the murder rate and a 6 percent decline in the violent crime rate per 100,000 residents for every 10 additional nonprofits that focused on violence prevention and community building (Sharkey, Torrarats-Espinosa, & Takyar, 2017). This study did not, however, identify the specific mechanisms that create safety at the neighborhood level.

Researchers and policymakers have struggled to understand the community-level impacts of community justice programs for two reasons. First, it is difficult to isolate the effects of any one intervention on a given neighborhood. Second, it is not clear what changes to look for. Which aspects of a safe and healthy neighborhood are most important? Is it the “eyes on the street” identified by Jane Jacobs, the trust among residents highlighted by Robert Sampson, or some other variable?

Efforts to measure and analyze the impact of community justice should start by defining the community to be served. For example, is the target community a specific neighborhood, a police precinct, or a group of people, e.g., young adults? Before attempting to measure impact, a thorough process evaluation can help document the community’s role in the development and implementation of a community justice intervention, including residents’ contribution to planning and their role in the daily provision of services. It can also focus on access and equity, analyzing which community members use services and what factors seem to facilitate or limit participation. A process evaluation can also investigate if and how community justice programs work with neighborhood-level organizations, including whether they increase other organizations’ capacity.

The next step is to determine if and how community justice initiatives create safer and more vibrant communities. To do so, researchers could journey out into the neighborhoods and, in the process, amplify the voices and experiences of residents and community leaders themselves. They could apply ethnographic methods, interviewing residents, attending community events, and observing sociocultural dynamics. They could also embrace participatory research, incorporating residents into research teams and empowering them to set research questions and gather data. Through these methods, researchers could address fundamental questions about the impact of community justice programs on civic infrastructure and collective efficacy and identify the factors that are most important in building trust and strengthening ties among residents.

**Conclusion**

In 1993, at the genesis of the community court model, policymakers and practitioners were responding to urban neighborhoods that seemed ungovernable. Today, many of our major cities are thriving, and crime, particularly violent crime, has declined dramatically. In this moment, reformers’ goals have shifted. Many now seek to reduce the use of incarceration, fines, and other punitive practices, and to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities. The goal is to bring down crime even further and ensure that safety is experienced widely and equally across our cities.
Community justice continues to provide an expansive framework and set of potential strategies for achieving these goals. By treating people who encounter the justice system with respect, and offering innovative solutions to individuals’ and communities’ issues, the original community courts demonstrated how to reduce crime and build legitimacy one case and one street at a time. The community justice initiatives highlighted in this article are pushing the model further. They are changing practices in a high-volume municipal court, connecting high-need individuals with preventive health care and social services before they reach the court system, and developing community-based responses to violent crime. In the days ahead, we expect to see more and more varied applications of community justice principles across the country.

Notes
1. The authors wish to acknowledge Joy Ming King for research support and assistance with the manuscript and Rachel Swaner for comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.
2. When defendants did receive a jail sentence—typically as a secondary sanction after noncompliance with an initial alternative sanction—their sentences tended to be longer (81 days vs. 40 days on average) (Lee et al., 2013).
3. The Yarra Neighborhood Justice Center defined recidivism as a conviction for a new offense, not a new arrest.
4. “Violence” here refers to both those crimes that involve physical violence, and those that may not involve a physically violent act, but are legally classified as violent offenses, such as burglary and gun possession.
5. The researchers defined these nonprofits to include five specific focuses: crime prevention, neighborhood development, substance abuse prevention, job training and workforce development, and recreational and social activities for children and youth.

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