

Community-Driven Models for Safety and Justice

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Abstract

The justice system writ large has been defined—and largely operated—by foundations and principles that uphold harmful power dynamics, such as white supremacy, further destabilizing communities that face intersecting structural barriers. This paternalistic system is characterized by the imposition of punishment—including fees, fines, penalties, deprivation of freedom—that are meted out disproportionately to people of color and people living in poverty. More often than not, policymakers and justice practitioners fail to solicit the views, expertise, and experiences of community members and justice-involved individuals, leading to policies and practices crafted under the auspices of promoting safety that instead undermine community stability. Consistent with Square One’s vision for disruption and reinvention, this paper describes approaches that have been employed to put the community in the driver’s seat of crafting and leading public safety strategies. The paper will offer examples of crime prevention strategies, reinvestment and divestment efforts, and policy reform initiatives that are developed and guided by people most likely to experience crime and the heavy hammer of the traditional justice system. This paper will explore the promise, strengths, and challenges associated with each approach, with the goal of presenting a range of creative strategies for communities—in partnership with advocates, activists, and researchers—to adapt, own, and implement.

Introduction

Since its inception, the criminal justice system in the United States has been punitive, reactive, and grounded in racism. Our institutional approach to public safety has exacerbated racial inequalities, magnified other social and economic inequities, and yielded costly and destructive outcomes for individuals, families, communities, and the country overall. Indeed, the current justice system is entrenched in self-perpetuating race and class power structures that destabilize communities and undermine safety. The criminal justice system’s negative outcomes have not gone unnoticed by policymakers, with new criminal justice reform measures passed in the [majority of states](#) and local [jail reform](#) and [reentry](#) efforts pursued in jurisdictions throughout the country. Yet for the most part, these reforms chip away at the margins, create unintended consequences, fail to address [racial impacts](#), and rarely include members of communities most likely to experience both crime and the heavy hammer of the criminal justice system.

We can do better. Placing people with lived experience—as survivors of crime, as those who have perpetuated it, and as people who reside in communities where safety is a daily concern and police pose a distinct threat to their civil liberties and their lives—at the center of justice reform and public safety initiatives is essential. Doing so will ensure that the underlying causes of crime and racial injustice are addressed, resulting in public safety solutions that respect humanity, restore dignity, and repair harms. Fortunately, we are not required to start at “square one” to imagine more equitable and just—and less intrusive—strategies to make communities safe and strong. Throughout the country, communities are already redefining the way they approach and advance public safety initiatives.

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This white paper describes ways in which people central to public safety challenges can be central to finding solutions. This community-driven approach represents a dramatic shift from traditional institutional justice system efforts, but promising models and innovations exist all over the country. This paper puts forth several key elements of community-driven public safety. We catalog the data and information that can be used to promote community identification and prioritization of alternative solutions to traditional justice system approaches, discuss strategies for stakeholder engagement, and describe the ways in which efforts can be assessed, adapted, supported, and sustained. We conclude with a call to action, encouraging advocates, activists, philanthropists, public officials, and the research community to promote community-led decisionmaking in all their justice reform activities in the interest of promoting a safer, more just, and more equitable society.

Element 1: The community must be in the driver’s seat

Community-driven public safety efforts center around directly-impacted stakeholders, operating on the principle that the people who are most proximate to the challenges at hand must also be most proximate to the solution. It is essential to define who these key stakeholders are, and doing so requires a careful consideration of context. For example, communities can be based on geography, residency, shared identity, membership in an organization or faith community, or shared experience. In many cases, the people who have the most direct experience with safety challenges are also the most historically disenfranchised, including those residing in communities of color and low-income communities. These essential stakeholders have been largely excluded from mainstream public safety conversations while bearing the brunt of the negative consequences of overpolicing and mass incarceration. Community-driven public safety, or [community justice](#), offers an alternative path that runs contrary to traditional power structures, focusing on generating creative solutions by boosting the political power of the people closest to public safety challenges.

In addition to the ideological and moral case to be made for centering communities in public safety decisionmaking, there are important practical and strategic benefits. First, these communities hold a wealth of information about how to address pressing issues, and ignoring that expertise constitutes a missed opportunity. Indeed, many communities have developed indigenous solutions that have largely gone unrecognized. For example, Mothers Against Senseless Killing members in Chicago have [long watched over their own neighborhoods](#), developing strategic youth engagement tactics to proactively address persistent violence. In addition, a growing body of research documents how community-driven problem-solving processes carry their own benefits that extend beyond the outcome of any given effort. For example, organizations that foster collective efficacy and social cohesion can [contribute to decreased levels of crime](#).

While some community-driven processes are developed and implemented exclusively by community members themselves, others offer opportunities for partnership with organizations, institutions, and governments at the state, local, and even federal levels. Centering community stakeholders in justice reform efforts requires these partnerships to be structured intentionally, following the lead of community players rather than including them as an afterthought. Simply put, a community-driven approach to public safety requires public officials, policymakers, and other leaders to be open and receptive to finding new and creative ways to step back and follow the community’s lead to implement bottom-up solutions.

Element 2: Community-driven efforts must have an organizing structure and process to engage residents and identify priorities

Organizing and Coalition Structure

Community-led justice approaches can be organized through a variety of mechanisms, from organic bottom up movements grounded in community-level advocacy to those facilitated by a third-party intermediary. They can vary considerably based on who is involved, what organizational and management structure is used, the decisionmaking process followed, and the scope and timeline. Community-led approaches may emerge from a specific advocacy goal, or from a broader focus on justice reform or larger public safety goals. Indeed, the impetus for launching such an effort may define the people involved and the timeline for decisionmaking and action.

These characteristics of organizational and management structure and processes may either engender or inhibit inclusivity of diverse membership and a democratic process of input and engagement. Moreover, a tension exists between structuring the organizing process to promote inclusive decisionmaking while also ensuring the decisions are made in a timely manner that is best able to influence the intended outcome. For example, an advocacy effort established to inform the selection of a new police chief is by definition time-bound and requires judicious solicitation of community input in order to influence decisionmaking during the period of recruiting and vetting of prospective candidates.

Such grassroots efforts that emerge from a convening of concerned residents aspiring for political action or change are typically initiated by one or a few passionate and dedicated community members. In Chicago, the [No Cop Academy](#) movement was established by Black youth and youth of color to raise community awareness of the city’s plan to build a \$95 million police academy – money that could instead be dedicated to community priorities like public schools and mental health services. These Chicago organizers used the proposal to spark a broader discussion about resource allocation and community priorities, and have successfully enlisted the support of dozens of local advocacy groups.

Intermediary Facilitation

Third parties, or intermediaries, can also support communities in initiating and organizing community-led efforts. These actors could be local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as community foundations, local nonprofits, or established advocacy groups, or they could be researchers, or even public agencies. [Participatory budgeting](#) is one example of an intermediary-guided model, established with the specific aim of empowering community members to drive decisionmaking on spending priorities. Typically supported through technical assistance from a trained consultant, local community groups can seek guidance and develop strategies to persuade city officials to enable them to have a key role in prioritizing some portion of jurisdiction’s budget. It can be initiated by community members or by public officials interested in a higher level of community engagement. The priorities are identified through a democratic process driven by a steering committee representative of community members who brainstorm priorities, develop proposals, and enable residents to vote on solutions that the government has committed to fund. The City of Vallejo, CA, engaged in such a [process](#) that resulted in street repairs, parks improvements, community gardens, and college scholarships.

[Participatory justice](#), as articulated in a concept paper developed under the auspices of the [US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty](#), has its foundation in participatory budgeting. It aims to support residents of neighborhoods most affected by concentrated poverty, crime and violence, and criminal justice system presence in defining how safety should be delivered in their communities, and to make government systems responsive to that vision. The model involves: engagement with an organization of residents of neighborhoods most affected by crime and by heavy criminal justice system activity; a democratic process of identifying alternative strategies for delivering safety and justice; and the commitment of a government partner to implement the identified community priorities through spending and/or policy changes. Data analysis of both the status quo and proposed new policies, and ongoing evaluation on the process, its implementation, and its impact, are key components of the model.

Process Considerations

Regardless of whether the community-driven process is led by residents on their own or in partnership with an intermediary, issues, challenges, and dynamics exist around how group membership is determined, how their input is solicited, and how decisions are made. Group membership will vary from entity to entity, but runs the risk of being populated by a select few leaders who may not represent the views of the average community member. Older retired women, for example, may have a preference for different types of strategies than young men in their twenties, and mothers with young children may have different views from men who are jobless. This dynamic underscores the importance of recruiting people who represent an array of community interests. Anticipating and addressing issues such as how the effort is advertised (e.g., online or hard copy fliers), where and during what hours of the day convenings will occur, whether food or childcare will be provided, and how language barriers and fear of exposure to system actors (e.g., among undocumented populations) will be navigated, is critical to ensure that all aspects of community interest are represented.

Once the right community members are recruited for participation, similar considerations are required to ensure that they have an equal voice in decisionmaking. Far too often, decisions within democratic processes are overly influenced by those who speak the loudest and have had the most experience participating in community meetings, rendering other critical perspectives—including those with the least political capital or those most likely to have lived experience in the criminal justice system—silent. Overcoming this barrier to participation requires creative strategies to engage all people involved, and may include breaking up into smaller groups, conducting and sharing back results of stakeholder interviews, and taking straw polls or using live polling technology.

Relatedly, decisions about who facilitates group discussions and how decisions are ultimately made can influence group processes and end results. Third party intermediaries may be helpful as neutral and trained facilitators, but they may also introduce power dynamics about who is driving the conversation and whether the community is ultimately truly guiding the process. Moreover, the age, race, and positional power of the person or people facilitating the conversations can influence on the process and outcomes. Similarly, the process of group decisionmaking can introduce biases, depending on how conversations are facilitated and decisions are made, particularly when not all participants agree on the nature of the problem or the best possible solution. While pros and cons exist for any approach to group decisionmaking, processes that are informed by information and evidence give communities a strong foundation from which to reach their own conclusions.

Element 3: They must have the information needed to generate solutions and measure impacts

Regardless of the organizing structure of the community-led approach, all successful efforts need information and processes to guide identification of priorities and inform solutions. Information usually takes one of three forms: expertise based on direct experience with the justice system and public safety challenges, survey data representative of the views of residents, and criminal justice system-generated data measuring where, when, and on whom current practices operate. Critical information can also be generated and gathered through methods that are less traditional to research and policy strategy, such as cultural and spiritual practices or [community arts projects](#) designed to enhance public safety and community well-being.

First-Person Expertise

Personal narratives reflecting the perceptions and experiences of those exposed to safety and justice issues are an important component of any community-led initiative because they represent lived experiences, provide critical contextual insights, and can be persuasive in advocacy efforts. Simply put, soliciting lived experience and community knowledge is a crucial element of authentic and equitable engagement. The Essie Justice Group [report](#) representing the experiences of women with incarcerated loved ones is a shining example of how personal experiences can inform our understanding of the impact of punitive justice policies on families and intimate partners on the outside.

This first-person expertise can be gathered from different stakeholders in a variety of ways, and collecting this often-sensitive information requires careful consideration of methods. To ensure broad representation, narratives can be solicited from a variety of community members representing an array of experiences, whether those are about interactions with law enforcement, fear of crime, personal victimization, or direct experiences with prison or jail. Interviews, focus groups, and community forums are all examples of strategies to solicit and gather perspectives from different stakeholder groups. Across all these approaches, it is important to recognize that people need to feel safe and respected in order to share, as these populations often experience stigma and the experience of sharing their views can be extremely burdensome.

Survey Data

Survey data, by contrast, can be designed to be representative of the entire community. However, selection bias whereby respondents represent just a subpopulation (for example, older, retired women or more affluent, educated residents) is a very real concern and is more likely to skew results when surveys are administered by mail, email, or online. Door-to-door surveys are the best means of soliciting input that represents all residents in a community of interest, and surveys conducted by people residing in the surveyed neighborhoods or in communities that are demographically similar are more likely to yield adequate response rates and candid responses.

In Tucson, staff from the Arizona office of the [American Friends Services Committee](#), a nonprofit dedicated to reducing the footprint of the criminal justice system, worked with youth organizers in the city to field a survey in both English and Spanish to capture residents' perceptions of community safety and preferences for strategies to enhance safety in their neighborhoods. These youth led the survey effort at every stage, collecting and vetting the questions, distributing the survey, and determining how to use results.

While surveys can be an extremely useful means of representing the views of people who are often not represented in other ways, using survey data alone absent engagement with community members to interpret and provide context to this information can generate misleading findings. [Community Data Walks](#) to discuss and interpret data are a good strategy to present the information to residents in a straightforward manner that leaves interpretation to its viewers rather than promoting key takeaways that may or may not be accurate. In Austin, TX, a project called [Community Voices](#), launched by the [Austin Justice Coalition](#) in partnership with the [Urban Institute](#), employed a data walk to interpret the results of in-person interviews conducted by local residents via household canvassing. The survey focused on residents in a heavily-policed predominantly Latinx community, who were asked about their views of, and experiences with, police and public safety. The data walk revealed that younger survey respondents had dramatically different views of the police than those over the age of forty. It also generated policy recommendations around police de-escalation methods and community engagement strategies.

Criminal Justice System Data

Access to and use of data generated by criminal justice system players—including police, the courts, and corrections agencies—is critical to informing and empowering actors from communities most affected by the system’s extensive reach. These data sources can provide useful context regarding current practice, for example, where, when, and how often police engage in use of force. However, the availability of relevant data is highly varied. These data systems are often managed by the same institutions that community-led efforts are aspiring to disrupt or reform. And even when accessed, data can be difficult to clean, analyze, and visualize, particularly on an ongoing basis.

The [National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership](#) (NNIP) is a network of local data intermediaries dedicated to democratizing information to give residents and community organizations a stronger voice in improving their neighborhoods. Local NNIP partners build and operate an information system with recurrently updated data on neighborhood conditions across topics; facilitate and promote the practical use of data by community and government leaders in community building and local policymaking; and use the information to build the capacities of institutions and residents in low-income neighborhoods.

[Rise](#), the local NNIP partner in St. Louis, MO, teamed with [CivTech St. Louis](#) to enable easy access for residents to obtain ticket information in St. Louis County. The [YourSTLCourts.com](#) website and related text tool help residents navigate the court system with the goal of preventing jail time for non-violent traffic offenses. More recently, NNIP has partnered with the Microsoft Cities Team to launch a cross-site initiative on [criminal justice data collection in the advocacy landscape](#). The project will focus on police practices and court systems, which are aspects of the criminal justice system that are typically under-developed in the use of local data to mobilize reform.

Criminal justice system data is not always available – either because agencies are not collecting it routinely or because they are unwilling to share it. Given these challenges, resources such as [Mapping Police Violence](#) and emerging efforts such as [Data for Black Lives](#) are dedicated to increasing transparency and data accessibility. Another innovative approach is the [Courtwatch](#) model, which recruits volunteers from the community to sit in on court proceedings, collect data on decisions, narratives, and context, and share observations to promote oversight, accountability and reform. Courtwatch models may be specific to certain types of cases, such as supporting survivors of [domestic](#)

[violence](#) or [sexual assault](#), or documenting proceedings of [child custody, abuse, and neglect cases](#), or may be more comprehensive in nature.

Regardless of the source of criminal justice system data, this information must be shared back and made available to community-led partnerships for further use so that the effort is not entirely dependent on the accessibility and cooperation of system actors who often are the only ones who hold this information. It can also be valuable to engage in partnership with researchers who can help community-led reform efforts analyze and employ data in support of their advocacy efforts.

Community-Researcher Partnerships

One model for data generation and interpretation in support of community priorities is [community based participatory research](#) (CBPR). CBPR is researcher-guided and community-led data collection, analysis, decisionmaking, and evaluation that brings science to bear on community problems, priorities, and solutions. For example, a [collaboration](#) among academic researchers and community members to develop a youth violence prevention after-school program used focus groups to solicit input, involved pilot testing of the after-school program, and included organizational assessments of candidate after-school program sites. The systematic data collection and analysis approach supported by the research partners led to a revised program to extend its reach, expand its capacity, and promote sustainability. Another example of CBPR is a [project](#) in Miami Gardens and Opa-locka, FL, in which researchers from the local university collaborated with city schools, police, and community-based service providers to develop and use standardized methods of data collection and analysis for problem identification and assessment of interventions. Researchers were able to document that youth who participated in the out-of-school suspension program had improved attitudes about violence and risky behaviors, and that community engagement activities increased adult residents' civic engagement in violence prevention efforts.

Lived experience, diverse community perceptions and opinions, and administrative data can all play key roles in informing solutions. The next step is to ensure that stakeholders have access to the partners and resources they need to advance them.

Element 4: There needs to be space for stakeholder engagement to advance solutions

Community-directed Change Initiatives

People at the heart of community-driven public safety work must be able to access and engage the partners necessary to advance solutions. In some cases, this work is done on the level of a neighborhood or even a single city block among stakeholders who are all proximate to the challenge at hand. Community bail funds like the one in [Brooklyn, NY](#), are one such example in which local organizers work along two tracks to pool resources to free people who are awaiting trial in jail because they cannot afford bail, and simultaneously work for policy change to end cash bail altogether.

Even within communities facing pressing public safety concerns, engagement across different stakeholder groups can be an important step in advancing solutions. The [Boston Ten Point Coalition](#) was formed when local clergy began mobilizing their communities to directly respond to pressing youth violence concerns. While the TenPoint Coalition used a variety of strategies, members' night walks through high-crime neighborhoods to engage residents who were out late, including gang members and people at risk of violent victimization, were perhaps the most well-known. In a [TED talk](#) with well over one million views, TenPoint Coalition leader Rev. Jeffrey Brown described how

the night walks were designed to build trust with community members who had expertise that was essential for developing solutions:

“We said to them, ‘We don’t know our own communities... between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m., but you do. You are the subject matter experts, if you will, of that period of time. So talk to us. Teach us. Help us to see what we’re not seeing. Help us to understand what we’re not understanding.’”

In all these approaches that take place within impacted communities, leaders rely on their social capital and close familiarity with the problem to build and advance collaborative solutions.

Engaging with Traditional Justice System Players

Often, leaders of community-driven strategies engage traditional justice system players to different degrees to advance solutions. In some cases, this engagement primarily constitutes an initial referral from law enforcement to divert people from traditional justice system tracks into more community-centered strategies. A new proposal within this category is the [Neighborhood Opportunity and Accountability Board \(NOAB\) model](#), currently in development with pilot sites in California. Under this model, law enforcement or community members refer youth who have engaged in harmful or destructive behavior to a NOAB composed of a wide range of local residents including youth, community leaders, clergy, business owners, and people who have experienced victimization and prior justice system involvement alike. All NOAB members will receive training and a small stipend. The NOAB will be responsible for ascertaining the details of the incident, and crafting and overseeing a community-based action plan designed to foster accountability and repair harm. With the victim’s consent, this process can include restorative justice and mediation. For programs such as NOABs to succeed, community leaders must build and foster trust with law enforcement, making the case that the community can be in a stronger position to address and repair harm than traditional justice system players and processes.

Other community-driven efforts require more ongoing collaboration between local community leaders and service providers and traditional justice system actors. In 2014, the Colorado legislature created the [Work and Gain Employment and Education Skills Program \(WAGEES\)](#) designed to improve reentry for people coming home from prisons and jails. This program is a partnership between the Colorado Department of Correction (CDOC) and a network of community-based service providers, many of which are led by people with direct experience navigating the criminal justice system and reentry process. CDOC provides the grant funding for the community providers, and an intermediary organization, the [Latino Coalition for Community Leadership \(LCCL\)](#) administers the program by selecting grantees, handling resource allocation, overseeing reporting requirements, and providing technical assistance and support to grant recipients. While anyone in need to reentry services can seek assistance from the WAGEES providers, many referrals come from parole officers, who often work closely with the community providers to engage in case management and troubleshoot challenges that arise together. It took time to build the trust between parole officers and community providers required for close collaboration, and LCCL played a key role in facilitating communication and providing oversight and support as these working relationships were forged and solidified. The success of the WAGEES program has paved the way for several subsequent community-centric public safety programs in Colorado, including [Transforming Safety](#) and the newest Community Crime Victims Grant Program.

Some community-driven public safety efforts that require close collaboration with traditional public safety players have been slower to come to fruition, a testament to the challenges of this work. With broad support from community organizers and activists, the Council of the District of Columbia passed the [Neighborhood Engagement Achieves Results Amendment Act of 2016 \(NEAR Act\)](#) to respond to heightened violence in D.C. with a community health-based approach. The wide-ranging NEAR Act provisions include creating new government offices to staff violence interruption efforts, funding for new community partnerships, increased police transparency and data collection requirements, and an investigation by a new Community Policing Working Group. While the NEAR Act was fully funded in fiscal year 2018, many of the provisions have not yet been fully implemented, particularly the requirements regarding collecting and reporting stop and frisk data. This lack of implementation progress sparked [a lawsuit filed in D.C. Superior Court](#) by the American Civil Liberties Union of the District of Columbia, Black Lives Matter D.C., and the Stop Police Terror Project D.C. The ongoing story of the NEAR Act illustrates the difficulty of adapting entrenched public safety systems to be more transparent and responsive to the communities in which they operate. When the NEAR Act is fully implemented, D.C. residents and community organizers will have better information about public safety and law enforcement practices in their neighborhoods, further empowering them to mobilize on behalf of their communities.

Element 5: Community-driven approaches need to be supported, sustained, and adapted

Communities across the United States have been defining their own public safety priorities and working to advance them for decades, and stakeholders in every sector have a critical role to play in supporting these efforts. Paving the ground for community initiatives, supporting complex, multi-stakeholder processes, undertaking implementation, and sustaining change are all resource- and time-intensive activities. By following the community’s lead and lending support when asked, external and institutional stakeholders—including governments, funders, researchers, and national advocacy organizations—can be instrumental to fueling community-driven change. While there are innumerable ways to support community-driven public safety efforts, three emerge as particularly pressing:

1. Providing and channeling resources, including investment in grassroots leadership
2. Lending support with developing strategic messaging
3. Producing research and evaluation assistance

Resources and Investment in Grassroots Leadership

First, communities need resources to support their change efforts and invest in their grassroots leadership. Many of the communities with pressing public safety concerns have experienced systemic, historical divestment, including housing discrimination, underfunded public education, lack of transportation and other infrastructure, limited access to the social safety net and other public services, and a constrained local economy. Some community-driven public safety projects are entirely volunteer-run or collectively funded by members of the community in which they operate pooling their assets. Even in these cases, though, community engagement and mobilization requires resources, and lack of access to sustained and reliable investment in local solutions can stymie and even starve change initiatives. For communities of color, investment in community-driven public safety initiatives can be part of a broader reparations strategy to begin to undo a long historical legacy of divestment and structural oppression.

Funding sources for community-driven work vary, ranging from small community foundations, to public/private partnerships, to government grants and other public revenue streams. In the private philanthropy world, foundations such as the [North Star Fund](#) have been supporting this work for decades alongside community funds and other smaller-scale funders that support local grassroots leadership. Collaboratives such as [Funders for Justice](#) are making significant, more recent contributions. Public/private partnerships such as Social Impact Bonds, or [Pay for Success](#), constitute another path to community investment, and the [Massachusetts Juvenile Justice Pay for Success Initiative](#) is well-known as a pioneering program to fund a local youth program and employment service provider. Increasingly, stakeholders are finding ways to braid public funding in alongside resources from the private funders and philanthropies that have traditionally been the primary supporters of this kind of work. A new Urban Institute [report](#) found that these public investments typically take one of three forms: upfront investment (a new stream of resources), reinvestment (channeling savings gleaned from reform efforts), and invest/divest (shifting resources away from traditional public safety institutions and towards other local community-identified needs). While such resource strategies require careful planning, a growing number of state and local jurisdictions around the country are developing creative funding models and their local communities are reaping the rewards.

Support with Developing Strategic Messaging

Second, while communities have been engaging in their own safety strategies for decades, the concept of community-driven justice is much newer in the broader political discourse. The time is ripe to test and refine ways to message such efforts to broader audiences. Generally, the public is receptive to the idea of investing in community-based public safety solutions. [Initial polling](#) found that voters identified the lack of programs focused on crime prevention, reentry support, and employment as top public safety issues, and more than three quarters supported shifting some resources from incarceration to community public safety options. The same poll revealed much less support, however, for shifting some law enforcement funding to community alternatives, an area that is ripe for further public opinion investigation. While the public is generally open to the idea of investment in locally-driven solutions, different elements have the potential to resonate with different audiences. Some might find the community empowerment and reparations aspects compelling, while others may be moved by the devolution of decisionmaking to the most local level, the more limited role of government actors in solving community problems, and the potential for increased efficiency in public safety spending. Gaining a better understanding of how to message and explain the concept of community-driven public safety could help recruit a broader base of support and cement this approach as a unique and valuable policy strategy for communities that seek creative public safety solutions.

Research and Evaluation

Finally, knowledge-gathering, research, and evaluation can provide critical information to inform community-driven public safety efforts and documenting successes and lessons learned. While many initiatives have not undergone formal evaluations to assess direct impact on specific public safety outcomes, several have and findings have been positive.² Formal documentation of the strategies,

² Examples include: South Bronx Community Connections for Youth, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, November 2013 (https://cc-fy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/SBCC_Technical), Evaluation of San José’s Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force, Resource Development Associates, February 2017 (<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/250620.pdf>), and Evaluation of Oakland Unite: Year 1 Strategy Report,

progress toward goals, and relevant outcomes of community-driven public safety initiatives can help potential supporters and partners gain confidence in these approaches. However, documentation or assessment must align with communities' self-identified goals and use measurement strategies that are tailored to the context and specifics of a given effort. For example, measurements of recidivism in one community may not be appropriate for a different one that is demographically and geographically distinct, even within the same state. Finally, it bears recognizing that efforts to build the community public safety knowledge base need not be external to the communities in which the work happens; community leaders around the country carry significant experiential wisdom about initiating and sustaining these projects that can be shared with others interested in taking on similar efforts.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, a growing chorus of voices has been calling for changes to the United States justice system. Recognizing the social and fiscal cost of mass incarceration, overpolicing, and the overuse of community supervision, public safety policy has been touted as one of the few areas where nearly everyone agrees that we can do better. Solutions are complex and contextual, though, and there is [no one-size-fits-all solution](#) to fixing the justice system currently in place, much for less reducing the innumerable harms it has caused. But stakeholder seeking to build a better future stand to benefit from the work of the innovators, activists, neighbors, and community leaders who have been developing and advancing their own solutions for decades. Their local-level approaches come from a radical reframing of what public safety is and where it comes from in which police, jails, and prisons are either last resorts or off the table altogether.

As the examples in this paper demonstrate, public safety is inextricably linked to community wellbeing in the broadest sense of the term, including access to healthcare, functional transportation, good jobs, stable housing, safe outdoor spaces, and adequately-resourced community groups and institutions that help forge connections, bring people together, and shape solutions. Community-driven approaches start with the opportunities and challenges present in each neighborhood and build out from there, bringing in or addressing traditional justice system components only if and when they are relevant, and challenging them when they get in the way. Truly changing how we do justice in the United States will require listening to and supporting the communities around the country that are already forging new paths.

Mathematica Policy Research, November 2017 (http://oaklandunite.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Oakland-Unite-Strategy-Evaluation_Final-11172017.pdf).