

# Roundtable on the Future of Justice Policy

The Values of the Justice System: Implications for Justice Policy and Practice

Hosted by the Justice Lab at Columbia University

## CALL FOR STUDENT PAPERS

The Square One Project of the Columbia University Justice Lab is pleased to announce a **student writing competition** as part of the upcoming national Roundtable on the Future of Justice Policy, a multi-day virtual convening taking place on April 16, 23, and 30 in 2021. The convening, *“The Values of the Justice System: Implications for Justice Policy and Practice,”* will bring together scholars, advocates, local community members and leaders from around the country, justice system practitioners, and others participating in a series of facilitated discussions.

The Roundtable is a component of the Columbia Justice Lab’s Square One Project. Square One is focused on conducting a foundational reevaluation of justice policy in this country – imagining a new “square one” that moves toward expanding opportunity, improving true public safety in local communities, and reducing reliance on punishment as a response to social problems that are so often rooted in poverty, violence, and racial discrimination.

**Paper Topics:** Students are invited to think critically and innovatively about the Roundtable agenda topics, and to prepare a paper on any one of them. Topics include the following:

### **The Role of Values**

In recent years, there is increased recognition that the United States’ reliance on mass incarceration to create justice and safety has not achieved those goals, and has actually often created harm - to people, communities, and systems. We have begun to seek ways to increase safety and lessen harms within the system: reentry supports, jail diversion programs, reversals of some long mandatory sentences. Focused on the practical tools available, and working within the political constraints of elections every few years, these efforts are beginning to change the discourse, policy, and practice around justice and justice reform. But conflicts and inconsistencies arise from this narrowly scoped focus. While understandable on a practical or political level, reacting to a narrowly defined problem with a narrowly drawn response has shirked the core task of reckoning with the justice system and with the damage it has wrought.

Without serious consideration of lessons from the past or possibilities for the future, the potential for impact is limited and we risk the repetition of past mistakes and missteps. What is the role of values in breaking out of these constraints? Would a focus on our shared values allow us to foundationally reimagine justice and achieve safety for all?

### **The Values of Justice**

Values can guide decision making for both institutions and individuals—about what policies should be set, what practices are acceptable, what budgets should look like, and more. Square One has identified organizational values that include anti-racism, racial reckoning, human dignity, redemption, parsimony, and healing and recovery. Do these values answer the call? How are they reflected in the day-to-day work of achieving safety and justice?

### **The Irreducible Minimum and Abolition**

The role of government—local, state, and federal—in creating safety and responding to harm in the United States is complex in its history and functioning. Asserting this role, our government has at times designed effective approaches to adjudicating incidents of danger or harm; but it has also used this power for control, racial domination, and maintaining class privilege. This conflict has created enormous tension when considering what civic functions should be maintained as a public good, how

state power should be exercised and how it should be constrained, and whether the illegitimate misuse of the criminal justice system requires its abolition in favor of the institution of something categorically different.

In order to address this conflict and reimagine justice free of racism, classism, and other forms of domination and degradation, we must start with the values that guide us, and *then* determine what functions are legitimate in pursuit of those values. The reimagining process separates the legitimate and illegitimate aspects of the system, and allows us to determine whether or not there is legitimate “irreducible minimum” to the justice system - and if so, what that irreducible minimum is. Is there an irreducible minimum of the criminal justice system? How does this core function sit with the abolitionist mindset? What are the values that help us resolve this tension? What is the role of values in specifying the positive functions of the criminal justice system?

### **Operationalizing the Values of Justice: The Guiding Principles**

We must examine guiding principles—the mechanisms that will put the organizational values of justice into practice. They can guide decision-making for both institutions and individuals such as what policies should be set, what practices are acceptable, what budgets should look like, and more. What are the guiding principles that put the organizational values into practice? How do we measure the success of the implementation of our new values? What are the milestones for success?

### **Aspirations for the Values of Justice**

Promising practices and solutions exist that radically change the values and principles of justice, and have already gained ground in the justice system and in the ways communities create and manage safety. What can we learn from communities that have made headway or already established community safety practices? Who is responsible for putting values into practice? What does success look like and how is it measured? What values and principles are used to organize (eg. inclusion, power sharing)?

**Submission Criteria:** To be considered, the following criteria must be met:

- The author must be a current student enrolled at a college or university in New York at the time of the Roundtable. Students who are currently incarcerated are encouraged to participate.
- Paper length must not exceed 15 double-spaced pages total and must be formatted as a PDF document with 12 point font, 1-inch margins, and include a bibliography.
- The papers must be the individual’s original work and must include citations and other references as needed.

**Deadline:** Students should submit their paper to Sukyi McMahon, Manager of the Roundtable, at [sukyi.mcmahon@columbia.edu](mailto:sukyi.mcmahon@columbia.edu) by 11:59 PM on **Thursday, April 1, 2021.**

**Recognition:** Up to four papers may be selected as winners of the Student Paper Competition. Selected student winners will have their paper included in the Roundtable reading materials and receive an honorarium of \$500.