

Transforming Justice and Safety Ecosystems Through Cross-Sector Collaborations

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Abstract

The Aspen Institute Criminal Justice Reform Initiative's Justice and Governance Partnership (JGP)¹ seeks to reimagine and transform the justice ecosystem in mid-size and micropolitan/rural² regions – places where crime rates per capita are often higher than in larger cities in the United States but receive much less public attention and philanthropic support. Rather than focusing solely on the criminal justice system or on legislative policy change, JGP operates across multiple public sectors, such as housing, education, and health care, in a local ecosystem, connecting services with the public safety and justice system using hyperlocal data. JGP promotes the ways in which a collaborative ecosystem can support discretionary policies on the local level that improve residents' experience of justice, for example, utilizing mental health crisis teams as an alternative to arrests. JGP provides an alternative to 'crisis management governance'—the reactive, emergency response approaches that over-criminalize individuals and communities and overlook the root causes of crime and injustice, which disproportionately impact lower-income residents of color.

The initial lessons shared here explore JGP's project goals, initial learnings, and measures of success in transforming justice: 1) new dispositions toward community-wide collaboration, racial equity, and pluralistic ways of knowing, 2) new practices related to neighborhood-level data and collective governance, and 3) new policies focused on discretionary policies and braided social purpose budgeting.

Introduction

The Aspen Institute Criminal Justice Reform Initiative's Justice and Governance Partnership (JGP)³ seeks to reimagine and transform the justice ecosystem in mid-size and micropolitan/rural⁴ regions – places where crime rates per capita are often higher than in larger cities in the United States but receive much less public attention and philanthropic support. Rather than focusing solely on the criminal justice system or on legislative policy change, JGP operates across multiple public sectors, such as housing, education, and health care, in a local ecosystem, connecting services with the public safety and justice system using hyperlocal data. JGP promotes the ways in which a collaborative ecosystem can support discretionary policies on

the local level that improve residents' experience of justice, for example, utilizing mental health crisis teams as an alternative to arrests. JGP provides an alternative to 'crisis management governance'—the reactive, emergency response approaches that over-criminalize individuals and communities and overlook the root causes of crime and injustice, which disproportionately impact lower-income residents of color.

The initial lessons shared here explore JGP's project goals, initial learnings, and measures of success in transforming justice: 1) new dispositions toward community-wide collaboration, racial equity, and pluralistic ways of knowing, 2) new practices related to neighborhood-level data and collective governance, and 3) new policies focused on discretionary policies and braided social purpose budgeting.

In 2022, JGP launched a planning phase in Grand Rapids, MI, which was selected after strong interest from local leaders. On average, Michigan spends more than \$2 billion a year on its state corrections system, incarcerating nearly 50,000 people and generating an alarmingly high recidivism rate—nearly half of all people released are returned to prison within just a few years.⁵ Grand Rapids co-chairs, a nascent planning group, and national Technical Assistance (TA) partners selected West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT) as the local host organization to coordinate the planning stage, including designated facilitators to coordinate the planning stage and select local project managers, meeting facilitators, and initiative designers. The intentional focus on local decision-making positioned the host organization as a neutral, credible hub for planning group activities.

Innovative Collaborations

New Dispositions Toward Community-Wide Collaboration, Racial Equity, and Pluralistic Ways of Knowing

Throughout the planning stage, conversations with members of the Grand Rapids Leadership Council and other local justice collaborative members evolved to focus more sharply on racial inequity—in addition to the geographic focus on neighborhoods—to get more precise about Black residents as intended beneficiaries for the Grand Rapids JGP. This approach represented a notable change in approach for a collaborative effort in Grand Rapids; previous citywide initiatives often focused on programmatic interventions rather than addressing the overall impact of systemic racism in neighborhoods and on its Black residents.

The membership and representation of various sectors and perspectives in the Grand Rapids justice collaborative changed over the course of the planning period. At the start, most of the initial planning group members represented community-based organizations (CBOs) and public sectors like health care and education; the attendees came in response to the invitation to participate and through existing professional relationships with the co-chairs. As the planning stage progressed, there was increased emphasis on engaging additional public sector players as well as more representatives from the criminal justice sector. The local justice collaborative realized that addressing crisis management practices more broadly would require participation by and the support of criminal justice system actors such as representatives from the Grand Rapids

police department and the Kent County prosecutor's office. The composition of the coalition shifted yet again when the co-chairs expanded from the initial composition as a planning group to the larger local justice collaborative and added an explicit emphasis on recruiting members typically underrepresented in such coalition-building work, such as representatives from neighborhood associations and community members of color.

New practices related to neighborhood-level data and collective governance Momentum ebbed and flowed over the arc of planning activities in Grand Rapids, especially as the planning activities stretched over multiple months and over numerous small and large group meetings. The planning stage in Grand Rapids reflected the nature of local justice collaborative and cross-sector relationship building—one that can be frustratingly resistant to measurement and short on visible early wins, as is frequently the case for collective impact efforts. Yet, there were many moments Grand Rapids local justice collaborative members experienced that were both essential and transformational.

The balance required between momentum and inclusivity has also informed the TA process. One approach is to, instead of bringing the complete set of sector and community actors together, identify a smaller group that can more nimbly focus on new partnerships and data sharing that relate to an overall vision of community safety and justice and develop a prototype for future action. This new approach is intended to build momentum and serve as a precursor and proof of concept of what is possible and what will be explored with a larger set of actors.

New policies focused on discretionary policies and braided social purpose budgeting. While still early in this process to identify specific policies, JGP will help local jurisdictions improve analytic capacity and organize policy improvements focused on ending overdependence on the criminal legal system as a response to structural discrimination and persistent poverty; it will stimulate investment in local institutions and networks most knowledgeable about neighborhood safety and justice. The local sites will use cross-sector data to identify alternative ways of addressing public safety that are not just confined to the criminal justice system; they will use braided social purpose budgeting to identify cross-sector resources to implement those alternative approaches. Four impact areas are:

1. Better Lives for Individuals Through a Reduction in Crisis Management Governance
2. A High Impact, Collaborative Local Justice Ecosystem
3. Justice Policy Self-Determination with Increased Community Involvement and Focus on Equity
4. Expanded Community-Led Violence Prevention and Socio-Economic Mobility

How this approach is different:

The paper “Ending this Place of Torment: A Framework for Transforming the Criminal Justice Continuum”⁶ serves as the guiding resource for the JGP initiative. It focuses on collaborative, community-based efforts, where “communities create their own vibrant and lasting solutions to the social and economic problems that they face.” The paper established a necessary focus on a *broader justice continuum*, including prevention efforts to decrease justice involvement (“the

front”), improvement of conditions and rehabilitation opportunities for those inside prisons and jails (“the middle”), and mechanisms to support successful reentry into communities (“the back”). The focus on all parts of the justice continuum—in partnership with community members while acknowledging the historical and contemporary effects of structural racism—remains a key priority for JGP.

Discussion

As progress and learning continue, we offer the following questions and opportunities for the criminal justice field and for philanthropy that seeks to support this work.

- What are the most effective ways of supporting local reimagination, ownership, and investment toward building wholly new ecosystems of justice?
- What evidence can effectively demonstrate that a focus on shared data, discretionary policy changes, and reinvestment of resources at the local level can transform both systems and lessen the burden of overlapping inequities (housing, education, health, criminal justice system involvement) on low-income residents of color?
- In what ways can this work identify, address, and redress the root causes of systemic racism and inequality that are embedded in our cities’ histories, institutions, and current practices?

Conclusion

The initiative’s planning stage in Grand Rapids reflected the nature of local justice collaborative and cross-sector relationship building—one that can be frustratingly resistant to measurement and short on visible early wins, as is frequently the case for collective impact efforts. And yet there were many moments Grand Rapids local justice collaborative members experienced as both essential and transformational. For instance, the team’s experience during the first convening of the Aspen Justice Network unlocked a more candid and unflinching examination of race, racial disparities, and unspoken power dynamics within the local justice collaborative, which have emerged as an important component of Grand Rapids JGP’s priorities and work. The initiative is expanding to Birmingham, Alabama, and The Corridor of South Carolina to pilot in other jurisdictions where grassroots interest and commitment are strong.

¹While current lessons focus on the last 18 months of work in Grand Rapids, MI, plans exist to expand to Birmingham, AL, and three micropolitan/rural regions comprising “the Corridor” in South Carolina.

²A micropolitan city is defined as a city with 10,000 to 50,000 residents and its surrounding communities: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro.html>.

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⁵<https://cfsem.org/initiative/michigan-justice-fund/>

⁶<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/ending-this-place-of-torment-transforming-the-criminal-justice-continuum/>