

# Participatory Justice

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What might justice look like if the people most affected by crime and poverty had a much greater say in what safety means to them and how their government delivers it?

## The Problem

Communities in metropolitan areas across the United States are facing a mix of three problems: concentrated poverty; high levels of crime, violence, and victimization; and high rates of incarceration with an unusually large criminal justice presence.

This confluence of factors disproportionately affects people of color and combines to produce these effects:

- **Undermine community autonomy and power.** Residents in stressed communities often lack resources and the trust necessary to work together to solve community problems.

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## The extensive incarceration of black men in the US reduces their total earnings 9 percent

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- **Damage the legitimacy of the law and the criminal justice system.** Many residents of high-crime neighborhoods do not trust the police or believe the police share their values and priorities. Residents may be less likely to help authorities address crime and maintain order.
- **Hamper economic mobility.** Unnecessarily high rates of incarceration reduce employment, wages, and income. For example, incarceration in the US is so extensive it reduces the total earnings of black men by 9 percent.

## The Solution

We propose implementing a participatory justice model for communities to set their own direction for ensuring safety. This community-driven model encourages residents to identify what they want and need from the criminal justice system to feel safe at home and in their neighborhoods. The intervention would be developed in phases:

1. **Establish a formal participatory justice model.** A national coordinating entity would partner with three to five communities as pilot sites for the model. This initial group of communities would include neighborhoods with concentrated poverty that can facilitate resident engagement and access data on justice and community indicators.
2. **Test the model to learn how it works in different communities.** A local organization with experience in community organizing would serve as the “justice intermediary” to engage community members.
3. **Determine the model’s impact.** With local research partners, the national coordinating entity would evaluate the program’s impact, including a robust evaluation of how the process unfolded.
4. **Disseminate the model.** Create the infrastructure for replicating and disseminating the model. This phase would include creating venues to train others to implement participatory justice models

in their communities and a local leadership development institute that would invest in the skills of local leaders, particularly young people.

#### WHAT PHILANTHROPY CAN DO

Philanthropy can provide key support for justice intermediaries and their research partners. Local and regional foundations in particular can convene planning and design meetings and create the infrastructure to support continued peer learning. Philanthropic support could be collaborative, with a national investor or consortium of investors seeding the demonstration and research and technical assistance for sites. Local funders could directly support the justice intermediaries.

#### WHAT GOVERNMENT CAN DO

Participatory justice must be community driven, but local government can play an important role in listening to and acting on the priorities that emerge from the process. Local government can also partner with the community to use data to monitor progress over the long run. State governments can provide corrections and other data to support any data analysis. They can also examine state policies that contribute to high incarceration rates and identify and reinvest cost savings in initiatives that address community priorities.

#### WHAT DOES “MOBILITY” FROM POVERTY MEAN?

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty’s definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community. These principles drive five mutually reinforcing strategies:

- Change the narrative
- Create access to good jobs
- Ensure zip code is not destiny
- Provide support that empowers
- Transform data use

Participatory justice is part of the strategy to ensure zip code is not destiny.

#### HOW PARTICIPATORY JUSTICE CAN IMPROVE MOBILITY

- **Economic success:** We expect reduced justice involvement and victimization to lead to higher labor market participation, lower poverty rates, and increased educational attainment. Communities can save \$4,000–\$20,000 for every year of avoided incarceration.
- **Power and autonomy:** Fewer people will be incarcerated, and the community will show higher collective efficacy.
- **Being valued in community:** We expect increased civic engagement, and people in affected communities will report feeling a higher standing in the community and society.

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This brief summarizes the paper *Participatory Justice*. The paper lists sources for the research summarized here.