

Reducing Racial Inequality in Crime and Justice: Science, Practice and Policy

Community-driven Safety and Reducing Harm

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convened an expert committee to review and assess existing evidence on racial differences in crime and criminal justice involvement and make evidence-driven policy and research recommendations to reduce racial disparities in the criminal justice system. The expert committee authored the report, *Reducing Racial Inequality in Crime and Justice: Science, Practice and Policy*, a comprehensive study to understand how racial inequality is perpetuated by the criminal justice system and interacts with broader societal forces, and what should be done about it.

The committee concluded that policymakers do not have to choose between public safety and racial equity because many of the policies designed to address racial inequalities also make communities safer. Their report identifies two evidence-informed approaches designed to reduce racial inequities and advance public safety: (1) implementing policy reform at every stage of the criminal justice system itself—from policing and courts to corrections, and community supervision; and (2) investing in community-based and social reforms that improve public space, reduce neighborhood inequality, and alleviate concentrated poverty.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

The report defines community as any configuration of individuals, families, and groups whose values, characteristics, interests, geography, and/or social relations unite them in some way. A “community” may also refer to a particular geographic area such as a

village, town, or city. However, within geographic areas, there may be multiple distinct communities.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SAFETY

Although criminal justice policy reforms are necessary to reduce racial inequality, they cannot solve these complex inequalities alone. Community organizations, private firms, and foundations can and should play a role in improving the well-being of communities and reducing racial inequality in the criminal justice system.

Rather than relying solely on the police and the legal system, community-driven efforts to advance safety promote a more prominent role for residents and organizations. By doing so, those residents who are most harmed by violent crime and racial inequality in the criminal justice system become active partners in making their communities safer and more equal.

MODELS OF COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SAFETY

Community members, community-based organizations, and community representatives (formal and informal) can help to minimize the likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system among racial and ethnic minority groups and mitigate the harm of that contact when it does occur. The report highlights opportunities and strategies for strengthening the capacity for community organization, in ways that build collective efficacy while mitigating harms associated with racial inequalities in criminal justice. Although the evidence base from causal research designs is not large, the report identifies

community strategies that hold promise as a means to reduce racial inequality.

Anti-Violence Community outreach, or street outreach, is conducted through violence prevention programs—such as Operation Ceasefire, Advance Peace, and Cure Violence. These programs target individuals at high risk of engaging in violence and seek to prevent it from happening in the first place by steering them towards behavioral and normative changes, social services, and mentoring. While data on this approach is still evolving, an evaluation of the Advance Peace program in Stockton, CA, from 2018 to 2020, for example, showed a 21 percent reduction in gun homicides and assaults compared to the 2015 to 2018 averages.

Accountability Community-driven approaches to police accountability can play an important role in building capacity and trust in government more broadly. In terms of fiscal oversight, community organizations have led successful efforts to analyze police budgets and explore alternative public expenditures to promote safety. The use of civilian oversight boards to reduce police misconduct also has many promising aspects, including fostering better community relations and promoting transparency.

Tribal Justice Systems Indigenous approaches to justice center principles of “restorative justice,” where the offender and victim are joined by other community members and focus on providing supports for the offender and repairing the harm done to the victim and the community. Aspects of tribal justice – including non-adversarial approaches, holistic treatment, and a rejection of punishment in favor of accountability, healing, and repairing harm to the community – may be better suited to ensure safety and justice, rather than top-down approaches from outside the community.

Mental Health To reduce system contact with those amidst a mental health crisis, some communities and jurisdictions have expanded behavioral health diversion efforts to connect people to social services sooner. Community-focused organizations such as Mental Health First: Community First Response Oakland, and the Eugene-based CAHOOTS program are some examples of a community-driven models for non-police response to

mental health episodes. Though more research is needed, diversionary programs have the potential for prevention and can reduce further racial inequalities. For example, the Houston Crisis Call Diversion (CCD) program, in 2020 alone, diverted more than 2,100 calls for law enforcement response, resulting in an estimated savings of more than \$1.5 million.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Data Cities and localities should partner with researchers to implement an ongoing data collection system that provides robust data on the views of resident safety and develop reliable and valid measures of the full range of residents’ viewpoints. Expanding the type of evidence from which we judge the success of community-driven solutions is critically needed to identify promising solutions and approaches to such a complex problem as racial inequality.

Expand Research on Indigenous Models of Justice More research is needed on Indigenous approaches and their transferability to other communities. To better understand the potential for such models to reduce racial inequalities, federal agencies and philanthropic organizations should support research that examines and evaluates tribal models of justice.

Increase Funding for Local and Community Organizations Communities disproportionately harmed by racial inequality in the criminal justice system are critical stakeholders in reducing it. Funding organizations in disproportionately impacted communities and forming public-private partnerships with localities can improve the quality of life in communities and make meaningful changes that can reduce crime and racial inequalities.

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To read the full report, please visit
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