

SAFETY AND JUSTICE CHALLENGE CASE STUDY

Community Engagement Strategies to Advance Justice Reform

Implementation Lessons from Buncombe County, North Carolina, Cook County, Illinois, and New Orleans

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March 2023



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Supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

This report was created with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over-incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails.

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Acknowledgments

This case study was funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge and developed in collaboration with the CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

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We thank the SJC partners in Buncombe County, Cook County, and New Orleans for their partnership in developing this case study. We are grateful to everyone who participated in the interviews. The authors appreciate the partnership from the CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance, from the early stages of conceptualizing this work through assistance with relevant system data and review and advice on the case study. We would also like to extend our special thanks to Jesse Jannetta for providing review and feedback on this case study.

Community Engagement Strategies to Advance Justice Reform

Strategies that both engage community residents and criminal legal system stakeholders and build relationships between those groups are essential to advancing practical and impactful justice reform. The MacArthur Foundation's Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) initiative to reduce the use of jails prioritized authentic engagement with community members across its grantees to build trust, enhance problem solving, and promote mutual accountability for justice reform. This report explores the concepts of community and community engagement and examines the community engagement strategies of three SJC sites and those strategies' impacts (as perceived by stakeholders) on the sites' efforts to engage community members, reduce jail use, and advance other system reforms. We also discuss common themes in the sites' experiences implementing those strategies and recommendations for other communities.

Communities across the nation are wrestling with how to identify and implement effective reforms that reduce structural inequities in the criminal legal system, promote community safety, and right-size operations of the criminal legal system to achieve more equitable outcomes and increased safety. Research suggests the most inspired solutions to such intractable problems come from collaborative partnerships between policymakers, criminal legal system leaders, and community members (Viswanathan et al. 2004, as cited in NIH 2011). Defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as "the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people" (1997, 9), community engagement offers the transformative potential to "change the way problems are solved and resources invested" because policy and practice recommendations are informed by the experiences and perspectives of impacted communities (Nexus Community Partners 2015, 1).

How community engagement occurs varies by place and issue. In addition, what constitutes "community" is context specific. Likewise, "engagement" exists on a continuum characterized by increasing levels of communication, trust, and power sharing: outreach, which is more consultative in nature, anchors one end of the continuum while collaborative partnerships and shared leadership in which the "community" has final or coequal decisionmaking responsibility, caps the other end (CDC 2011).

Many SJC sites have struggled with community engagement because of the strained relationships between the criminal legal system and communities that have historically been criminalized by that system or alienated by civic leaders. Yet some sites have made marked progress. This report, which is part of a series of case studies (box 1) highlighting the work of the SJC initiative, examines the community engagement strategies developed and implemented by three SJC communities: Buncombe County, North Carolina; Cook County, Illinois; and New Orleans. It documents how these sites navigated the types of challenges mentioned above and advanced tangible reform efforts; it also explores perceived impacts of these strategies on the sites' efforts to engage community members, reduce local jail use, and implement system reforms that advance equity. We begin the report with a brief overview of community engagement, its potential for meaningful reform efforts, and its role in the SJC. We then describe the three SJC communities and their community engagement strategies, including their structures and objectives. Then, we explore the sites' successes and challenges and common themes in the implementation of their strategies. We conclude by reflecting on the perceived impacts of the strategies and offering recommendations for other communities interested in pursuing authentic community engagement.

BOX 1

The Safety and Justice Challenge Implementation Case Studies

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation launched the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) in 2015 to address the misuse and overuse of jails, a main driver of incarceration in America. The network of cities, counties, and states participating in the SJC are working to rethink local justice systems with strategies that are intended to be data-driven, equity-focused, and community-informed, and that safely reduce jail populations, eliminate ineffective and unfair practices, and reduce racial disparities. This case study is part of a series that examines how SJC network jurisdictions, which received significant, sustained financial investment in comprehensive system reform, worked to change the way that they use jails, to provide practical insights to other localities seeking to realize similar reform ambitions.

Community Engagement and Policy Reform

Communities of color have disproportionately borne the brunt of both the American carceral state and the punitive bend of the criminal legal system (Bobo and Thompson 2010; Hernández, Muhammad, and Thompson 2015; LeMasters et al. 2022). Meaningful community engagement, particularly with

communities most directly impacted by the criminal legal system, is necessary for effective intervention strategies and policies. In this section, we describe the historical significance of and need for incorporating community engagement into broader criminal justice reform efforts.

As a broad strategy and approach, community engagement emerges from a historical and ongoing need to center the communities, groups, and people most directly impacted by specific forms of structural inequality, which was created by exclusionary (or predatory) policy, research, and practice. During the 1990s, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention institutionalized the practice of community engagement in addressing health inequalities by creating the Committee for Community Engagement (CDC 2011, xv). As part of its work, that committee published a seminal report that delineated an approach to community engagement in the realm of public health (CDC 2011). The value of community engagement in working with marginalized communities, including those most directly impacted by the criminal legal system, can be seen more pointedly in the field of public health. Research has shown that community engagement benefits the health of people in structurally marginalized communities across several health indicators and metrics and various levels of analysis (Cyril et al. 2015). This research also highlights, among several factors, close collaboration, mutual learning, power sharing, engaging directly impacted people in the research process, and enlisting racially diverse groups to administer interventions as critical components of successful community engagement models (Cyril et al. 2015, 7).

In recent years, the United States has begun to reckon with the historical and global peculiarities of imprisoning more people than any other country (NRC 2014; Western 2006). Many have called for using community engagement to reform the US criminal legal system and to engage the people and communities most directly impacted by that system (Jacobson 2015). But community engagement in neighborhoods that have been criminalized involves a heightened challenge: building trust in communities that have had mostly negative experiences with the criminal legal system and its various components (Weaver and Lerman 2010).

Nonetheless, engaging with community members is vital for meaningful reform (Center for Court Innovation 2010). It is crucial to tailor reforms or intervention strategies to communities' needs and to learn from their members. When engaging community members, it is also essential to include them early on in the process, get to know their communities from their standpoint through qualitative methods, conduct outreach to other stakeholders, co-develop smaller events and activities that more immediately benefit the community, and define and articulate clear roles and responsibilities (Center for Court Innovation 2010). Community engagement can be defined and measured in many ways; Werth and colleagues (2020) describe authenticity, coherence, and power shifts as essential

components to examine. In measuring these three areas, the authors argue, community engagement can be an effective strategy for gains in legitimacy. Researchers including Payne (2017) and Payne and Bryant (2018) engage community members using Street Participatory Action Research, an approach to research that includes “street-associated” people or people with criminal legal system contact throughout multiple phases of the research. Participatory Action Research is a departure from traditional models of research which often exclude and marginalize vulnerable populations from the research process or treat them mainly as data sources. It views people from particular communities or with particular experiences as experts who should co-lead the research process because they have intimate knowledge and insights. One of the main goals of Participatory Action Research is to translate research into actionable policy, practice, or broader social change.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to reform the criminal legal system, engaging with communities of color is increasingly urgent, especially Black communities, which are most vulnerable to health inequities and the harm of criminalization rooted in historical and present forms of anti-Black racism (Akintobi et al. 2020; Hinton and Cook 2021; Pirtle 2020). In the next sections, we detail the efforts undertaken through the Safety and Justice Challenge to both define and deploy community engagement as a strategy to reduce the use of jail and disparities in the criminal legal system and to advance racial equity.

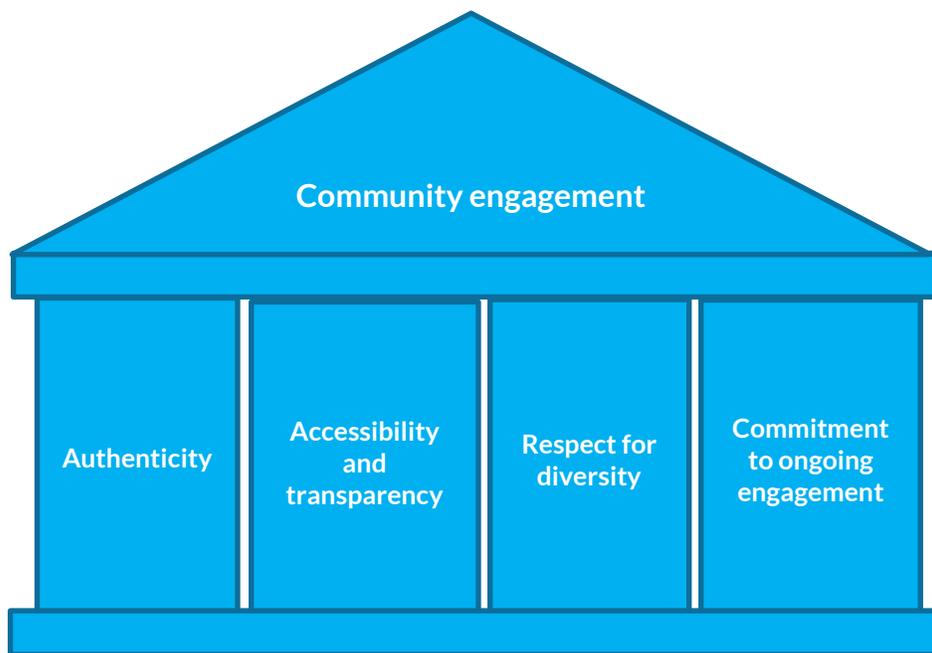
SJC Community Engagement Efforts

Community engagement has been a key component of the Safety and Justice Challenge since the initiative’s inception in 2015, though the focus on such engagement has increased as the SJC network has grown.¹ The SJC’s focus on community engagement is closely connected with an increased emphasis on addressing racial and ethnic disparities in the criminal legal system. The SJC views community engagement as an ongoing process that builds trust, enhances problem solving, and promotes mutual accountability.

The SJC created a primer featuring four pillars that support genuine community engagement efforts: (1) authenticity, (2) accessibility and transparency, (3) respect for diversity, and (4) commitment to ongoing engagement (figure 1). First, *authenticity* means acknowledging that everyone has valuable insights, particularly those who have often been excluded from the policy process, that can inform policy. Second, community engagement processes must be fully *accessible* to communities; this means removing common barriers around language and terminology, hosting meetings at accessible locations and times (which may be after “regular” business hours), and providing child care. Communities also

need *transparency* on how their contributions will be incorporated in the reform process. Transparency also includes government informing community members about their role, authority, and contributions. Third, a *respect for diversity* means acknowledging that a community is not monolithic and has a multiplicity of opinions. Community engagement work should also be culturally informed (that is, strategies should be relevant and respond to the needs of different cultures). The last pillar, *commitment to ongoing engagement*, underscores the continued partnership that successful and effective community engagement requires; true community engagement requires continual partnership—it is not a “one and done” event. The issues that SJC sites face with the criminal legal system are complex, and ongoing conversations and actions, which community engagement can facilitate, are needed to create and sustain meaningful change.

FIGURE 1
Safety and Justice Challenge Community Engagement Pillars



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Source: Safety and Justice Challenge’s model of community engagement since 2017.

Every SJC implementation grantee was encouraged to incorporate community engagement into its reform strategies and was required to demonstrate, in its grant renewal application, how it engaged its local communities in efforts to make their justice system fairer. The way sites engaged their communities varied and included establishing community-staffed workgroups, holding town hall meetings, and conducting community surveys. To facilitate this work, the MacArthur Foundation engaged two organizations—Nexus Community Partners and Everyday Democracy—to work with sites in the SJC network. Nexus Community Partners was founded in 2004 with a focus on community engagement efforts in St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, and has since expanded its work to communities nationwide. It focuses on enabling community members to have *authorship* over their lives, cultivating power and *leadership* in community members, and building community wealth through *ownership*. Everyday Democracy was founded over 30 years ago to bring communities together, facilitate community discussions, and train people to use a racial equity lens. The two have served the SJC network sites through three key methods: tailored, hands-on training and technical assistance engagements to selected SJC sites focused on developing the sites' community engagement strategies; workshops for the SJC network at its twice-annual convenings; and light-touch training and technical assistance on an ad hoc basis. Nexus has also facilitated an advanced series of sessions on community engagement using the Intercultural Development Inventory,² which is a validated assessment with a companion training that helps people understand their assessment score and cultivate cultural competence. Many sites have used it to build cultural competency and strengthen racial equity practices. Some sites leveraged this subject matter expertise, whereas others independently cultivated their community engagement strategies.

Urban, in partnership with the MacArthur Foundation, identified three SJC communities that had advanced meaningful community engagement for justice reform. How these sites approached community engagement and to what end were key questions that guided our research. Buncombe County, Cook County, and New Orleans employed community engagement approaches that differed with respect to group composition, structures, and objectives. Box 2 highlights the approach Urban took to explore and examine these sites' community engagement efforts.

BOX 2

Case Study Methodology

To develop this case study, Urban relied on three data sources: (1) semistructured interviews with stakeholders from each site; (2) program materials, SJC progress reports, and publicly available documents; and (3) jail population trends generated by the Institute for State and Local Governance. Between April 2021 and February 2022, the research team conducted 19 one-hour virtual interviews with 24 stakeholders in Cook County ($n=5$), New Orleans ($n=5$), and Buncombe County ($n=14$). Buncombe County's community engagement structures were large and included many system actors; in that site we interviewed both system actors and community members. Respondents were identified in partnership with site project directors and those we interviewed. In the interviews, we asked stakeholders about their professional backgrounds and roles in the SJC community engagement work, local justice reform, the design and implementation of their sites' engagement strategies, efforts to address racial and ethnic disparities, and challenges, achievements, and lessons learned. Most had been involved in their sites' community engagement efforts for several years, some since their SJC engagements began. We spoke to both leaders and members of the sites' community engagement workgroups; these people worked in the legal system, behavioral health, advocacy and community engagement, housing, and information technology. After data collection, we coded and analyzed our interview notes for key themes derived from the case study's interview protocol.

How Three SJC Communities Advanced Community Engagement

We found that each site used different mechanisms to engage community members, established unique structures that served diverse purposes, and cultivated community engagement to accomplish a mix of objectives. The sections below cover the sites' SJC strategies and goals, how they formed their community engagement strategies, the work of their community engagement workgroups, and successes and challenges.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN BUNCOMBE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

Buncombe County (box 3) became an SJC site in October 2018 with a \$1.75 million award from the MacArthur Foundation to reduce the population of the county jail. Buncombe County previously participated in the SJC network through the Innovation Fund, which provided a small pool of funds to test innovative ideas for safely reducing the county's jail population. Buncombe County's SJC work has three key goals: sustain reductions in the jail population, advance racial equity, and build community engagement and trust. Its four main SJC strategies for accomplishing these goals from 2018 through 2020 focused on (1) reducing jail admissions by deflecting people at arrest and booking; (2) diverting

people to behavioral health and substance abuse treatment; (3) enhancing pretrial services; and (4) increasing case processing efficiencies.³

BOX 3

Site Profile: Buncombe County

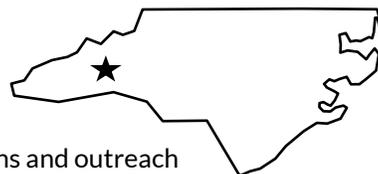
Location: Western North Carolina

Community engagement strategy: Public education campaigns and outreach

Population: 271,534, of which 89 percent is white, 7 percent Latinx, and 6 percent is Black

Jail capacity: 604

Source: “QuickFacts: Buncombe County, North Carolina,” US Census Bureau, accessed December 19, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/buncombecountynorthcarolina>.



The county’s 2021–2023 SJC implementation renewal grant, which was intended to help it build on its initial work, focused on five strategies: (1) enhancing pretrial release strategies, (2) increasing efficiencies in case processing, (3) building collaborative racial equity, (4) increasing community engagement, and (5) advancing community safety and violence prevention. Racial equity and community engagement were especially important goals given the disparate impact jail has had on Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color. Buncombe County has experienced a trend many other counties have encountered: while the overall jail population has decreased, the proportion of Black people held in the jail has increased, exacerbating already large disparities. (We discuss racial disparities in the three case study sites more in the Perceived Impacts section.) Buncombe County was awarded an additional \$1.75 million in February 2021 to sustain its jail-population-reduction efforts and advance racial equity as well as community engagement intended to build trust.

The Buncombe County Community Engagement Workgroup spearheads the county’s community engagement work. It has a multifaceted mission that includes (1) giving a voice to people impacted by the criminal legal system, (2) creating opportunities for community members to be involved in systems change, (3) educating the public on the criminal legal system, and (4) raising awareness about resources for people involved in the criminal legal system. The workgroup’s members also inform each of Buncombe County’s SJC strategies by serving on other SJC workgroups.

The Community Engagement Workgroup consists of system stakeholders (e.g., representatives from the public defender’s office, district attorney’s office, and the sheriff’s office) and community

members (business leaders, formerly justice-involved people, service providers). Recruitment for the workgroup is done by representatives of a recruitment workgroup. Positions on the workgroup are posted publicly, and the recruitment team then filters applications and selects people to interview. In addition to scoring interviewees, they look for diverse directional representation (that is, representation from north, south, east, and west Buncombe County). Reaching each corner is important as geography, racial makeup, and perspectives on the criminal legal system vary across the county. According to internal county documents, 31 people applied to be Community Engagement Workgroup members and only 7 were chosen. Opportunities to participate in the workgroup and the site's other community engagement efforts are shared through the local news and social media, as well as through word of mouth. Workgroup members sign an agreement which lists the activities and compensation for participation. The latest version of the agreement (from 2021) lists three primary activities: (1) planning and facilitating outreach events such as town halls and focus groups, (2) reviewing materials for public education campaigns, and (3) developing communication strategies between community members and criminal legal system groups. For 2021–2023, members of the workgroup are being compensated for an average of 10 hours a month at \$35 an hour. The structure and frequency of its meetings have changed: it initially met twice a month but switched to meeting monthly; its subcommittees meet in between the monthly meetings.

The county organized its community engagement efforts through the Community Engagement Workgroup into several smaller subcommittees focused on specific topics: failure to appear, information sharing, power sharing, and recruitment. The failure-to-appear subcommittee worked with Code for Asheville on a court-date-reminder system. That subcommittee reportedly formed after analysis indicated that one of the main drivers of racial disparities in the criminal legal system, particularly for Black people, was “failure to appear” for a court summons. The information-sharing subcommittee developed a video—“Criminal Justice 101,”⁴ which explains the various components of the criminal legal system—in response to community feedback that the criminal legal system is confusing.⁵ The power-sharing subcommittee is the newest subcommittee proposed and was just beginning during our data collection. According to one stakeholder, this subcommittee is a “liaison” between the community and criminal legal system stakeholders that originated from larger discussions around representation. It is tasked with ensuring that the community is well represented and being “intentional with not being so agency heavy,” as one stakeholder put it.

The Community Engagement Workgroup and the county's racial equity workgroup collaborated to launch the Community Safety Initiative, which has two goals: to provide services in the community to prevent system involvement and to advance a community-led strategic planning effort. These goals

revolve around engaging communities that are most vulnerable to gun violence and designing a thorough action plan. For example, in Asheville, the county seat of Buncombe County, Black people are disproportionately impacted by violent crime. According to Asheville Police Department data, whereas Black people make up only 11.1 percent of Asheville's total population, they represent 64.5 percent of gunshot victims and 31.7 percent of aggravated assault victims. Key aspects of the Community Safety Initiative's engagement with communities most vulnerable to gun violence included investments in community-based approaches to violence, the creation of safe spaces for sharing concerns and issues, and following best practices around the issues raised. The planning aspect involved co-developing a plan with stakeholders to prevent gun violence and an intervention for when it does occur, and establishing partnerships between Jordan Peer Recovery and the Prevention Institute in the creation of this plan (Buncombe County Justice Services Department 2021). Another aspect of the gun violence intervention work is the implementation of CHASM, a violence interruption model. The Community Safety Initiative is supported through Buncombe County's latest grant (awarded in 2021) from the MacArthur Foundation. At the time of Urban's interviews, the Community Safety Initiative was in its beginning stages and stakeholders were seeking to leverage funds from additional sources to maximize its impact.

Another step the county took through its Community Engagement Workgroup was to engage several community-based organizations to craft a response to a funding opportunity within the Safety and Justice Challenge network to advance racial equity. This was a departure from its standard practice of relying on criminal justice leaders to respond to such opportunities. By many accounts, this approach helped identify several innovative ways to advance reform including new features and interventions, such as implementing court navigators, a role that enables people from the community to help others learn how the court system works. At the time of this writing, Buncombe County was in the final stages of contracting a local community-based organization to house the court navigator position. The Community Engagement Workgroup also identified a need for driver's license restoration, which has been implemented with Pisgah Legal, a local legal aid organization.

The Community Engagement Workgroup also held a series of listening sessions called "Let's Talk Justice" to provide space for community members to share their experiences with the criminal legal system and present solutions to persisting issues. This series consisted of two sessions held within a few weeks of each other held in two different locations. In the first session, held on November 5, 2019, participants identified key issues and visions of safety. Community members shared their experiences with the criminal legal system, identified challenges with the system, and brainstormed solutions for safer communities. The second session, held on November 19, 2019, focused on prioritizing the

problems identified in the first session and generating solutions. Participants had also identified a list of improvement areas in the first session that were refined into three top priorities in the second session. Those three were police mindset and behaviors, lack of jobs and resources, and the need for more positive role models. Participants identified several potential solutions to these, such as training police officers on racial equity issues; making policy changes to increase police accountability; increasing access to job coaches; destigmatizing criminal legal system involvement among employers; and making efforts that support adults at being positive role models. The Community Engagement Workgroup created infographics and a written report that shared the takeaways from the listening sessions; these materials were shared back with the community, SJC workgroups, and the Buncombe County Justice Resource Advisory Council (a collaborative body focused on improving the criminal legal system).

Lastly, to support the Community Engagement Workgroup's work, Buncombe County used portions of its SJC grant for food for community groups, child care, transportation and incentives for community focus group participants, stipends for Community Engagement Workgroup participants, and printing and marketing for community outreach. These expenditures were intended to remove barriers to community member participation.

While discussing these community engagement initiatives, stakeholders reported challenges and successes (successes are discussed in the Perceived Impacts section). The common challenges they reported primarily involved recruitment and retention of community members in the Community Engagement Workgroup. Buncombe County faced a challenge common in engagement efforts: the potential mismatch between the interests of the community and the red tape that can impede change efforts. Community members would join the Community Engagement Workgroup's efforts excited to contribute, but some became disengaged once they realized the change process was much slower than anticipated. Regarding retention, the move to virtual events during the pandemic led some community members to experience Zoom fatigue, which led to a drop-off in attendance of virtual events.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Cook County (box 4) became a Safety and Justice Challenge site in October 2017 with a \$1.85 million award from the MacArthur Foundation to reduce the county's jail population. Cook County's four main SJC strategies for 2017–2019 were: (1) the Automated Court Reminder System, (2) comprehensive bond reform, (3) community engagement, and (4) diversion and deflection. Cook County received a renewal award in 2020 for \$2.5 million, which prompted the county to expand its key strategies by adding a population review team and a focus on enhanced data and racial equity.

BOX 4**Site Profile: Cook County, Illinois****Location:** Northern Illinois**Community engagement strategy:** Dialogue groups and action summits**Population:** 5,173,146, of which 65 percent is white, 26 percent is Latinx, and 24 percent is Black**Jail capacity:** 9,600**Source:** “QuickFacts: Cook County, Illinois,” US Census Bureau, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cookcountyillinois/PST045221>.

The objectives of Cook County's community engagement work were to promote authenticity and transparency to strengthen the relationship between government and community stakeholders and to address racial and ethnic disparities. Cook County focused its community engagement strategy on education and awareness; interactive dialogue sessions, using Everyday Democracy's Dialogue to Change Model (described below) in neighborhoods identified as most impacted by the criminal legal system; communications; and data.

To achieve its community engagement goals, Cook County hired a community engagement coordinator and three part-time community liaison workers, and enlisted Everyday Democracy to implement the Dialogue to Change Model. That model features a five-week series of dialogue circles with community members that ends in an action summit that brings together community members, local elected officials, and criminal legal system leaders to discuss the community's pressing needs. The county's community liaison workers worked closely with Everyday Democracy to lead the dialogue sessions and to enlist community members to participate in them. The community liaisons bring key insights and credibility to this work through their lived experience with the criminal legal system. These dialogue sessions provided a space for open conversation and honest input from community members. These two strategies (the use of community liaisons and the dialogue sessions) were intended to sustain criminal justice reform, address racial and socioeconomic disparities, and create a space for divergent groups to collaborate toward a more equitable system.

Logistically, the community liaisons conducted many of the community engagement activities and were supported by the community engagement coordinator. Community liaisons met regularly to share resources and reflect on their community engagement efforts. They also met regularly with the community engagement coordinator to discuss goals and maintain momentum. Each community liaison

was responsible for a certain target area (neighborhood). Cook County chose target areas with the highest rates of people returning from incarceration, arrests, homicides, and shootings. The county's community engagement efforts first targeted the Chicago neighborhoods of Austin, North Lawndale, and Roseland. It then expanded the dialogue sessions into East/West Garfield Park, Englewood, and the South Suburbs (Dolton, Ford Heights, and Harvey).

The community liaisons engaged these target areas by disseminating educational materials on reform efforts and inviting community members to the dialogue sessions and the action summits that built on the dialogue sessions. The dialogue sessions in the target areas were organized to reach certain groups, such as emerging adults. There were also intergenerational dialogue sessions to bring together community members across age groups. To further engage participants, action teams were created to work at subsequent dialogue sessions on the priority areas identified in the initial sessions. Those action teams worked on five to seven priority areas taken from each dialogue session.

Stakeholders often said the dialogue sessions were one of the county's biggest successes. They perceived that attendees appreciated having the space to voice their concerns and share solutions. In 2019, Cook County engaged 144 community residents who participated in 24 small group dialogues. Small group dialogues were also held in 2020 and 2021, reaching 264 community residents over 31 sessions. Those sessions were capped off by an action summit that brought system stakeholders to the table to hear the issues and solutions that community members proposed. Everyday Democracy trained the community liaisons and other Cook County stakeholders to prepare them for the dialogue sessions and action summit. Cook County also continued outreach and engagement in these communities through its liaisons after the action summit to further strengthen partnerships and build momentum for reform.

Challenges stakeholders shared involved the historical mistrust between community members and the criminal legal system owing to a well-known history of corruption in that system. According to stakeholders, the community liaisons often had to confront this mistrust and leverage their lived experience to build the credibility of Cook County's SJC strategies in the eyes of community members. Although there is no cure-all for that mistrust, community liaisons shared that, even if the situation initially appears hopeless, starting the conversation is important for building relationships that could increase trust and lead to authentic dialogue.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans became a Safety and Justice Challenge site in 2015 and received an initial award of \$1.5 million with a renewal award of \$2 million in 2019. In 2018, it received a supplemental grant of \$300,000 specifically for community engagement. The city has advanced six strategies to reduce its jail

population: (1) increase access to defense counsel, (2) improve pretrial services, (3) community engagement, (4) divert people to services, (5) center racial equity, and (6) establish an Ethnic and Racial Disparity Working Group. New Orleans received an additional \$1.165 million in 2021 to implement a comprehensive plan focused on building a more equitable criminal legal system by sustaining efforts such as the Pretrial Services Program and the Community Advisory Group (its community engagement workgroup), expanding the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion Program to additional police districts, and creating a jail release navigator position.

BOX 5

Site Profile: New Orleans

Location: Southeast Louisiana

Community engagement strategy: Independent group of community members that engage the broader community and hold public officials accountable to criminal justice reform goals

Population: 376,971, of which 59 percent is Black, 33 percent is white, and 6 percent is Latinx

Jail capacity: 1,438

Source: “QuickFacts: New Orleans City, Louisiana,” US Census Bureau, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/neworleanscitylouisiana>.



New Orleans's community engagement strategy evolved. Community engagement was a component of the original MacArthur Foundation implementation grant and initially under the city's domain. The Community Advisory Group, which formed through the city's initial efforts, quickly became a separate entity that functioned outside the municipal government and criminal legal system. In 2021, the group changed its name to New Orleans Voices for Accountability and Safety (NOVAS) to better reflect its mission. NOVAS functions independently of local elected officials but is still part of the overall SJC work. Its mission is to hold officials accountable for implementing New Orleans's SJC plan to reduce its jail population and increase equity in the criminal legal system. To support this mission, NOVAS creates space for public input and informing the community about SJC strategies through nongovernmental channels that may be more accessible to certain communities. Concerning sustainability, group members also debated whether it would be best to gain 501(c)(3) status. The group has decided to forgo nonprofit status and to partner with another organization, Foundation for Louisiana, which serves as an umbrella for NOVAS and handles its fiduciary responsibilities. NOVAS also hopes to have at least one of its members named to the city's criminal justice committee.

New Orleans recruited community members through multiple venues, such as press releases and neighborhood discussion boards. A few interviewees mentioned Nextdoor as the platform through which they submitted their applications to become members of the Community Advisory Group (NOVAS) or found out about the opportunity. Others learned of the opportunity through word of mouth or local media. New Orleans had up to 60 community members express interest in or attend a NOVAS meeting as the group was initially forming. A smaller group of 10 to 15 people regularly attended those meetings. New members attend an orientation which during the pandemic was held virtually (on Zoom). The group also taps into the larger body of community members who have expressed interest by sending them ad hoc requests. NOVAS is made up entirely of volunteers, though the SJC grant supported the hiring of a part-time program coordinator in January 2020. NOVAS members reported using their meetings to discuss updates from the Ethnic and Racial Disparity Working Group (which several NOVAS members sit on), revamping communications, and efforts to work with community partners.

The work of NOVAS has been guided by the group's strategic plan. NOVAS advanced four strategies as part of its 2019–2020 strategic plan: (1) improve NOVAS operations, (2) make the criminal legal system more accountable to the community, (3) educate and inform residents about the criminal legal system, and (4) engage and empower the community to reduce racial disparities in the criminal legal system.

The first strategy was intended to make NOVAS more sustainable and help it better achieve its goals. The program coordinator hired using SJC funding relieved the pressure the group's volunteer leaders felt running the group. NOVAS also took time to develop a leadership transition plan and specified that the initial leadership team would serve a two-year term. It also adapted during the pandemic by implementing strategies to support and engage its members; these included having dinner delivered to members for workgroup meetings and providing Wi-Fi hot spots.

Under the second strategy, NOVAS participated in advocacy and organizing efforts. Its members reported being particularly concerned with how COVID was impacting the local jail. Thus, members sought to raise their concerns to the sheriff and seek clarity on the jail's response to COVID. NOVAS has three representatives on the city's jail population management subcommittee, which votes on important decisions relevant to the concerns raised by community members. Those representatives report back to NOVAS as part of a regular agenda item at the group's monthly meetings. Examples of these updates include breakdowns of the size and racial composition of the jail population, discussion of the jail data management system, case backlog, and when to bring other members of the jail population management subcommittee to NOVAS meetings.

NOVAS members also reported using social media to apprise community members of pressing justice issues and the city's responses to them, including COVID conditions in the jail and efforts to release people during the height of the pandemic. Several members also mentioned a new interview project designed to capture the voices and experiences of formerly incarcerated people.

In 2021, NOVAS used the development of a new strategic plan as an opportunity to discuss sustainability and determine activities to focus on for 2022–2024. It completed a 2022–2024 strategic plan that outlines its latest community engagement strategies. The first is to advocate for the humanity of people detained or otherwise impacted by the criminal legal system in Orleans Parish. The second is to hold the city accountable for implementing legal system reform initiatives. The third is to inform, engage, and empower community members. The fourth is to advocate for alternatives to arrest.

NOVAS experienced challenges and successes in its work. According to members, the #WhatMakesMeFeelSafe project was a key success (we discuss this success in more detail in the Perceived Impacts section below). A challenge discussed by stakeholders and in New Orleans's 2020 activities report was the 19-month delay obtaining access to NOVAS's 2018 supplemental community engagement funds, a delay that owed to issues with fiscal sponsorship (that is, the group needed an agency to serve as its fiduciary). Group members often had to cover costs themselves during that period and use professional and personal connections to secure meeting spaces. The group reached a solution and finalized an agreement that enabled it to access the funds in July 2020. Despite that challenge, community engagement efforts were advanced from the inception of the initial Community Advisory Group.

Common Themes

Our analysis identified common themes from the sites' implementation experiences that span collaboration and partnerships, community engagement activities, and navigating COVID-19. These themes offer lessons for other communities.

COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

The characteristics and composition of the sites' community engagement partnerships differed in important ways, as did the collaborative structures, mechanisms, and perceived impacts of those partnerships.

Most notably, the sites' community engagement work varied in form and function. Two sites, Buncombe County and Cook County, engaged system stakeholders, serving in their professional

capacity (role) in their community engagement efforts, in addition to community members. Buncombe County did so through various workgroups, whereas Cook County directly engaged community members and system stakeholders primarily through formal facilitated dialogue sessions and action summits where community members could present their needs to system stakeholders. In contrast, New Orleans established an independent body that operated largely outside the formal criminal legal system.

These differences reflected the missions of the sites' community engagement partnerships: in New Orleans, NOVAS's mission was to hold the criminal legal system accountable for making meaningful reforms and advancing equity; operating outside the criminal legal system—meaning with no members who worked in the criminal legal system in the group—prevented conflicts of interest and allowed the group to stay true to its mission. That said, NOVAS did engage with system actors in strategic ways (by holding election forums and being represented on the city's jail population management subcommittee) but with the community and its needs in mind. Both Buncombe County and New Orleans used application processes to recruit community members for their formal community engagement structures. In contrast, Cook County relied on its community liaisons—people with community engagement expertise who often had direct experience with the criminal legal system—to engage neighborhood residents in selected communities to participate in the dialogue circles and related activities and structures, such as the action summits and community engagement council.

Additionally, the sites' community engagement work evolved in important ways, as did their partnerships. In New Orleans, NOVAS developed and formalized its leadership and governance structure and acquired its own funding, which positioned it for sustainability and future work. The group included people from across the city's wards and people with and without personal and professional criminal justice experience; members included people in their twenties to those in their seventies. New Orleans stakeholders reported that NOVAS's membership had been relatively stable. In contrast, several Buncombe County stakeholders said their Community Engagement Workgroup had experienced turnover, which they considered both a challenge and strength. That workgroup consisted of stakeholders from across the criminal justice system—judges, prosecutors, public defenders, law enforcement, jail administrators—as well as city and county administrators, business leaders, service providers, and people with lived experience in the criminal legal system. Stakeholders in all three sites reported forging effective partnerships with community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and the business community—illustrating how other key aspects of the “community” were engaged.

Safety and Justice Challenge training and technical assistance liaisons and organizations were also viewed as key partners. Several New Orleans stakeholders credited the site's training and technical

assistance liaison with providing key guidance and resources to NOVAS, which helped the group solidify its structure and set direction, including by forming its strategic plan. Likewise, Cook County stakeholders engaged Everyday Democracy to implement its Dialogue to Change Model with community members in designated neighborhoods. The ongoing support and assistance of Everyday Democracy was instrumental to implementing the site's dialogue circles and action summits and helping community stakeholders and system leaders connect on critical issues and identify paths forward.

In summary, the three sites used different structures and strategies to engage their communities, and the composition of their community engagement partnerships varied consistent with the groups' primary missions. In New Orleans, NOVAS, which functioned independent of the City and with the charge of holding system actors accountable for advancing meaningful criminal legal system reform, consisted entirely of people from the broader community; no elected officials or criminal justice actors were involved in the group. In contrast, Cook and Buncombe Counties' community engagement structures both worked closely with the criminal justice system and employed partnerships that included city and county officials and criminal justice stakeholders, as well as community members with no formal system roles. All three sites included their training and technical assistance providers as key partners and collaborators who strengthened the sites' work and helped the sites navigate uncharted or murky waters and find a path forward.

IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Study participants, overall, cited a myriad of action-oriented activities that they employed in engaging the community and often discussed the importance of building strong, reliable, and trusting relationships with the community and across stakeholders. In all three sites, stakeholders identified multiple ways they became aware of the opportunity to participate in their site's community engagement efforts: some learned about this opportunity through the local news, some through word of mouth, and others through their jobs. Building strong relationships often involved frequent communication and outreach with stakeholders and communities. Across the three sites, community listening sessions were a key method of community engagement, and stakeholders viewed sharing information with the community and across stakeholders as important. Stakeholders in all three sites also emphasized the importance of acting after community input is gathered. Following through on agreed-upon action steps helped build trusting relationships.

The dialogue sessions are pretty successful here. I continue to build relationships and engage the community and build trust. That's what it's all about.

—Cook County stakeholder

Buncombe County relied heavily on the use of community learning sessions and an informational video that explains the sequences of events in the criminal legal system and the responsibilities of each system actor. The Community Engagement Workgroup was described as key, and it organized many activities around engagement, including the community listening sessions and events. The informational video was also created through the Community Engagement Workgroup. Another stakeholder described the need to adapt and use various social media that would be more attractive to young people, including TikTok, on which they released a series of informational videos. Educating the community about the criminal legal system was also viewed as critical.

We created an eight-minute video that graphically explains every part of the system we've done in CE [community engagement], people come together in the community and Zoom, and we would show two minutes of the video and have people from court, prosecutors, PD [public defender] system, present and they could ask questions. So it's all a part of trying to hear what the community is saying, needs, and wants, and be responsive.

—Buncombe County stakeholder

Though this was done by all three sites, Cook County stakeholders especially emphasized the importance of building rapport with local communities and strong partnerships with community organizations to create connections and trust. One Cook County stakeholder described this:

My job is I go out and touch base with those orgs and residents within the community that have survived some of the things Cook County is doing and trying to get them engaged with different initiatives. The dialogue sessions are pretty successful here. I continue to build relationships and engage the community and build trust—that's what it's all about.

Cook County stakeholders also discussed the importance of using these relationships to bring people together. For example, a key part of their engagement work involved the action summits, which

brought system stakeholders and community members together to address the issues community members had identified in dialogue groups, which employed Everyday Democracy’s engagement model. One Cook County stakeholder described the engagement model:

The Dialogue to Change Model brings the same small group of community members together over time to discuss and respond to a set of questions. The notes are used to identify themes. The themes are presented at an action summit. The community members, individuals from the community, and system actors, those that make up the SJC, attend the action summit and work out actions.

New Orleans relied extensively on NOVAS for community engagement. NOVAS members, according to stakeholders, have diverse identities, roles, and experiences and represent and have reached key groups across the city. NOVAS conducted activities that gathered community-designed solutions and sought to hold elected officials accountable. Educating the public on the platforms of elected officials was one way to raise awareness of the levers that impact the criminal legal system.

One event CAG [the Community Advisory Group] had was working with a bunch of nonprofits to do the candidate forums for judicial races. They included local judges for criminal court cases as we wanted people to understand who you elect to sit on the bench plays a big part in how the CJ [criminal justice] system is shaped. A lot of local people linked to our forums. Another big project is the “what makes me feel safe” chalkboards. Allowing space for people is important—felt a lot of times people talk to them instead of with them.
—New Orleans stakeholder

The aforementioned implementation activities were supported by different types of resources. Stakeholders in all three sites spoke to the importance of resources that support robust community engagement efforts and make meetings accessible. New Orleans stakeholders emphasized the importance of having MacArthur Foundation funding for a position designed to keep everything moving instead of being a wholly volunteer effort. Though community members in New Orleans continued to conduct activities while funding was held up, receiving the resources they needed helped them amplify their reach and impact. Likewise, the resources made available for stipends for Buncombe County’s Community Engagement Workgroup enabled more community members to participate. In addition to financial resources, sites needed meeting spaces and training and technical assistance. Cook County's

dialogue sessions and action summits required adequate meeting spaces, food, and miscellaneous materials for capturing participants' feedback. Everyday Democracy helped Cook County navigate challenging community conversations, drawing upon Everyday Democracy's deep expertise with community engagement. In New Orleans, training and technical assistance support from Justice Management Institute helped NOVAS establish its charter and strategic plan.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Across sites, stakeholders mentioned several pandemic-related shifts and challenges. First, many acknowledged the sharp decrease in the number of people in jail. According to interviewees, this owed primarily to the convergence of the public urgency of releasing people and the foundation they had laid out through implementing their overall SJC strategies to reduce the jail population. Interviewees reported that the relationships built with different stakeholders (e.g., prosecutors, public defenders, and judges) before COVID-19 helped them quickly develop a strategy to get cases resolved and people released. Yet, racial disparities persisted.

It's an ever-shifting thing. I think it's better there was—partly the pandemic was a learning opportunity, where jail population dropped dramatically which was just a, "Oh look turns out you cannot keep people in jail," who knew? That's inevitable, as expected, that it's beginning to rise again. Also highlighted the issue that as the numbers dropped they didn't drop uniformly across races so digging into why.

—Buncombe County stakeholder

The general sentiment among stakeholders was that COVID-19 brought many challenges, including the slowing of processing and shift to virtual activities (which lowered engagement among some stakeholders). The loss in momentum stemmed from their limited capacity and fatigue during the pandemic. One Buncombe County stakeholder described this:

With COVID, there is a lot of fatigue and overwhelm from everyone. Everyone is over capacity. We do have champions in some respects across the justice system, then we have folks who have been hard to engage in some areas of the justice system or are overly fatigued and overspent and can't participate because of that. We've made a lot of progress as far as advancing coordination around CJ [criminal justice] reform issues and collaboration, and there are some areas that we are still working for that have been very slow, and we are struggling to make progress, or there

are areas that we made progress with [safely reducing the jail population] and others that SJC stakeholders tried to put in place pre-COVID and then hit barriers, but then could put them in place because of the pandemic.

Some stakeholders reported that technology-related challenges also slowed things. They also reported grieving the loss of the more intimate connection of in-person gatherings.

In contrast, some Cook County stakeholders reported some benefits related to the shift to virtual activities, including meetings. This was mainly because they had established good rapport with the community, which led to larger virtual gatherings that allowed more people to engage more directly.

Process elimination is what happens with virtual. When you're around each other there is a different energy, connection, vibration. A different shared connection. The virtual meetings went well also because we were creative and kept them engaged.

—Cook County stakeholder

New Orleans stakeholders noted many of the same changes and challenges. They also spoke to how quickly NOVAS was able to mobilize to try to meet the needs of the most vulnerable during the pandemic. They convened early during the pandemic and developed the goal of ensuring that people incarcerated in jail received the care and attention they needed, and the goal of reducing the number of people in jail. They also launched a social media campaign to hold the sheriff's office accountable for its lack of transparency around COVID jail data. One stakeholder shared,

Another thing in terms of accountability and COVID was getting basic info from the sheriff on COVID cases and its spread in the jail. CAG [the Community Advisory Group] has representatives on the Jail Pop [Population] Management Committee, which is also supposed to have a sheriff office representative. This [effort to get COVID information] culminated in a social media campaign, because the sheriff never responded. The point is that not all CAG efforts are tied to the strategic plan, some emerge organically.

Perceived Impacts

Stakeholders across the three sites perceived their community engagement strategies to have several impacts on their SJC reform work. These included strengthening partnerships, increasing trust and soliciting community input (i.e., engaging the broader community), and reducing the jail population.

Buncombe County stakeholders, for example, credited their SJC community engagement work with strengthening partnerships among traditionally adversarial criminal legal system actors, such as prosecutors and public defenders, as well as engaging disparate sectors of their community. The sense was not only that the site's community engagement work provided a unifying purpose, but that its workgroups were a unique space for focusing on a common objective. Though judges were perceived to be on board with this work; their relative independence from other stakeholders and therefore from the initiative resulted in varying levels of awareness and involvement. The county's community engagement strategy also recognized the nuances of community as a concept and worked to engage various groups—residents, business, nonprofits—in a variety of forums, such as informational town hall meetings, formal requests for proposals/development of community violence interventions, and workgroups to shape policy and practice. Stakeholders credited this approach with effectively engaging people from both the county's rural and urban areas, whose residents reportedly held very different views. The county's Criminal Justice 101 video, which was intended to educate community members on the criminal legal system, its various committee structures, and request-for-proposal process (for selecting community-based organizations to advance a community violence prevention initiative), was viewed by many stakeholders as influential for meaningfully engaging the community and shaping the direction of justice reform.

Regarding successes in Buncombe County, the Community Engagement Workgroup reported having reached at least 500 participants across 10 community engagement events (e.g., listening sessions and town halls) as of May 2021. This included the series of listening sessions (“Let's Talk Justice”) detailed earlier. Those sessions were held in the community and in the detention facility, and one focused on youth. The workgroup also hosted a virtual town hall called “Let's Talk Justice in the Time of COVID-19” which drew an audience of 434 people and gathered 4,250 views after the event. The event was translated into Spanish.

In Cook County, stakeholders credited the site's community engagement approach with building critical trust between community members and system stakeholders. Stakeholders we interviewed perceived this trust as foundational for identifying and advancing potential changes in system practices. The site's community liaisons, who worked to engage community members in the dialogue circles and community engagement coalitions, were credited with helping bridge language barriers, build common knowledge, and enhance community trust and transparency.

Stakeholders in New Orleans also reported several impacts stemming from the site's community engagement strategy. Beyond creating and formalizing a totally new and functional community advisory group (NOVAS) with its own bylaws and governing structure, stakeholders pointed to the

city's reduced jail population, the group's strategic plan, and its proactive efforts to engage and educate the broader community on criminal justice issues as key outcomes that also impacted local reform efforts. Several stakeholders cited NOVAS members' participation in the city's jail population management subcommittee, which provided the chance to examine key data alongside criminal justice decisionmakers, as key to helping reduce the jail population. These same stakeholders also credited their community engagement work with advancing bail reform in the city and drawing critical attention to COVID conditions in the jail during the first year of the pandemic.

NOVAS also engaged the community in several innovative ways, which stakeholders identified as impacting reform efforts. For example, the group's chalkboard initiative was routinely identified as one of the most impactful strategies for engaging a wide range of community voices, capturing diverse community concerns, and shedding light on various definitions of community safety.

To varying degrees, stakeholders also highlighted the impact of their community engagement efforts on criminal legal system reform. Stakeholders in Cook County and New Orleans cited their communities' reduced jail populations as key indicators of success. But they also spoke to the slow pace of the process and the challenges of collaborating to achieve their broader reform goals.

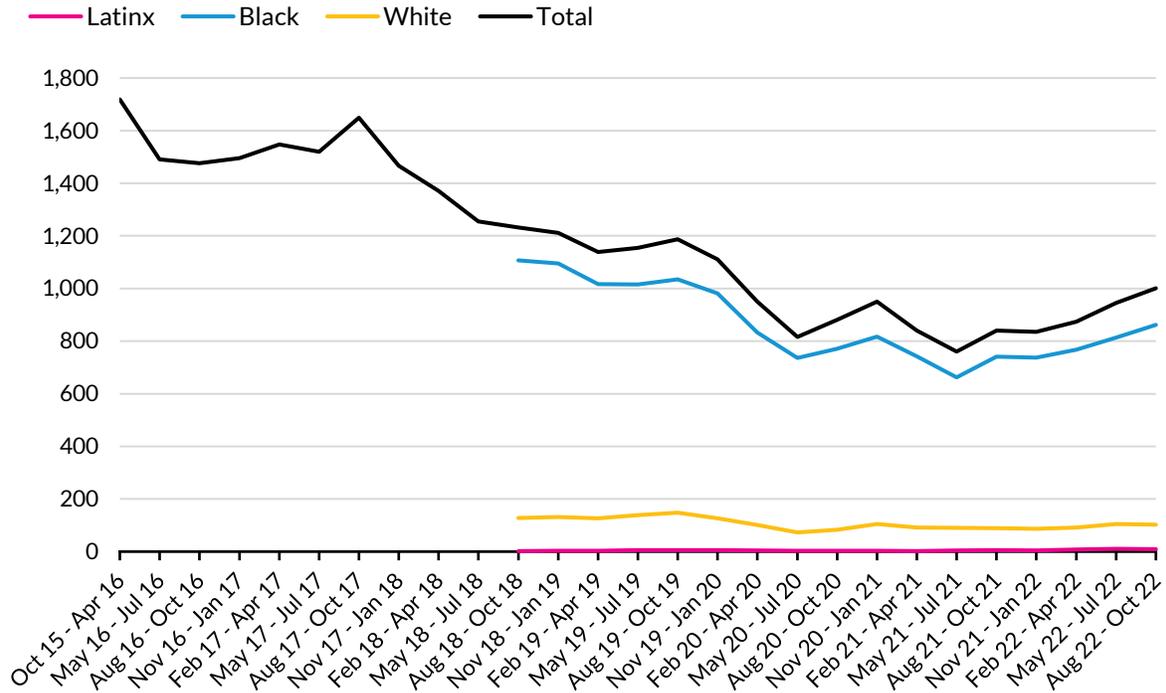
JAIL POPULATION REDUCTIONS

In New Orleans, stakeholders frequently spoke of the decrease in the jail population as a key success. Though that decrease cannot be directly attributed to NOVAS, stakeholders believed their work to hold criminal legal system leaders accountable had an impact. Since joining the SJC, New Orleans has reduced the average daily population (ADP) in the jail by 42 percent (figure 3). Furthermore, stakeholders described how their SJC strategy work before the COVID-19 pandemic was instrumental to reducing the jail population, such as efforts to release defendants on their own recognizance (i.e., without cash bail) in New Orleans. In contrast, many stakeholders across the three sites reported being frustrated by the persistence of racial disparities in the legal system despite their efforts to address them.

In New Orleans, from baseline in 2016 to the latest quarter for which data were available in 2022, the ADP of Black and white people in the jail decreased while the Latinx ADP increased from 9 to 10. The ADP of white people decreased 55 percent (from 226 to 102), compared with 43 percent for Black people (from 1,521 to 862). Despite these significant decreases, Black are overrepresented in the jail population at a rate of 1.5 times their share of the New Orleans population—New Orleans's population is 59 percent Black, whereas the jail population is 86 percent Black. In contrast, white people make up

31 percent of the New Orleans population yet only 10 percent of the jail population, and Latinx people make up 5.5 percent of the population and 1 percent of the jail population.

FIGURE 3
Average Daily Jail Population in New Orleans, by Race and Ethnicity, 2016–2022



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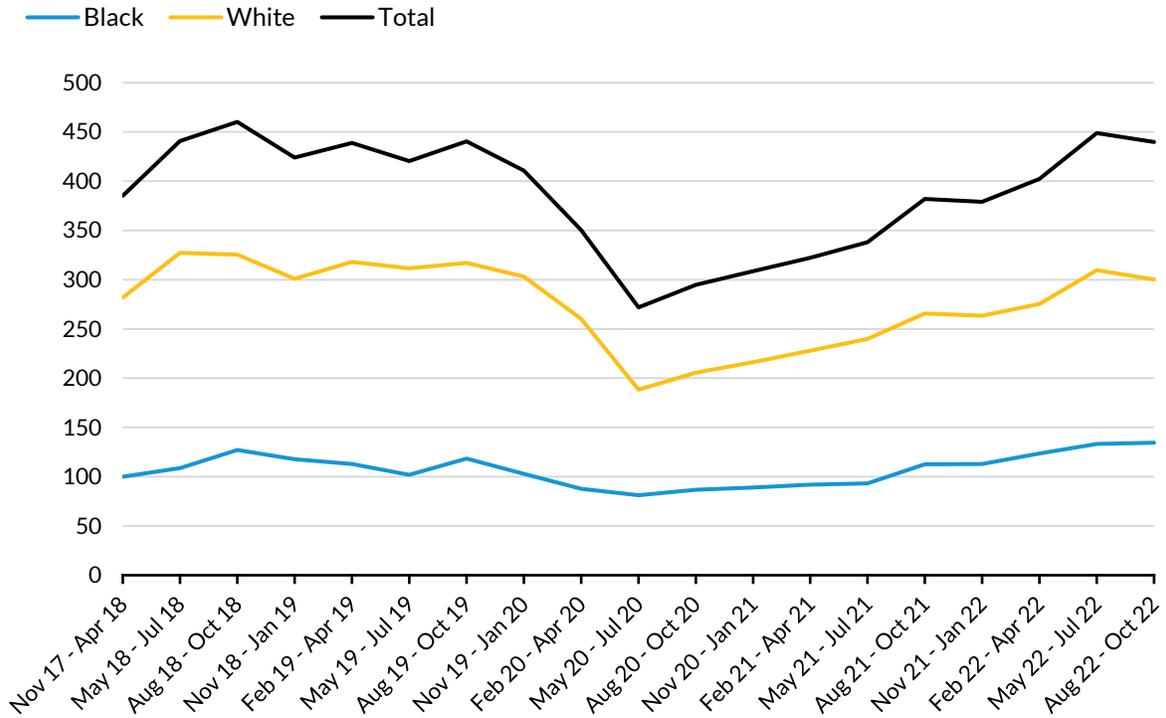
Source: Analysis by CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance, 2022.

Notes: Black 2016 baseline = 1,521. Latinx 2016 baseline = 9. White 2016 baseline = 226. Data on the average daily populations of Black, Latinx, and white people are not available for New Orleans’s entire Safety and Justice Challenge period, but they are available from August 2018 onward. The jail populations counts are rounded to the nearest number as we are dealing with individual people.

Buncombe County’s jail data (figure 4) show a similar struggle to reduce racial disparities. Since joining the SJC, Buncombe County’s ADP increased slightly from a baseline of 385 in 2018 to 440 in October 2022, a 14 percent increase. Though the ADP dipped to 272 in July 2020, it has since increased over pre-COVID levels.

FIGURE 4

Average Daily Jail Population in Buncombe County, North Carolina, by Race and Ethnicity, 2018–2022



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Analysis by CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance, 2022.

Note: The jail populations counts are rounded to the nearest number as we are dealing with individual people.

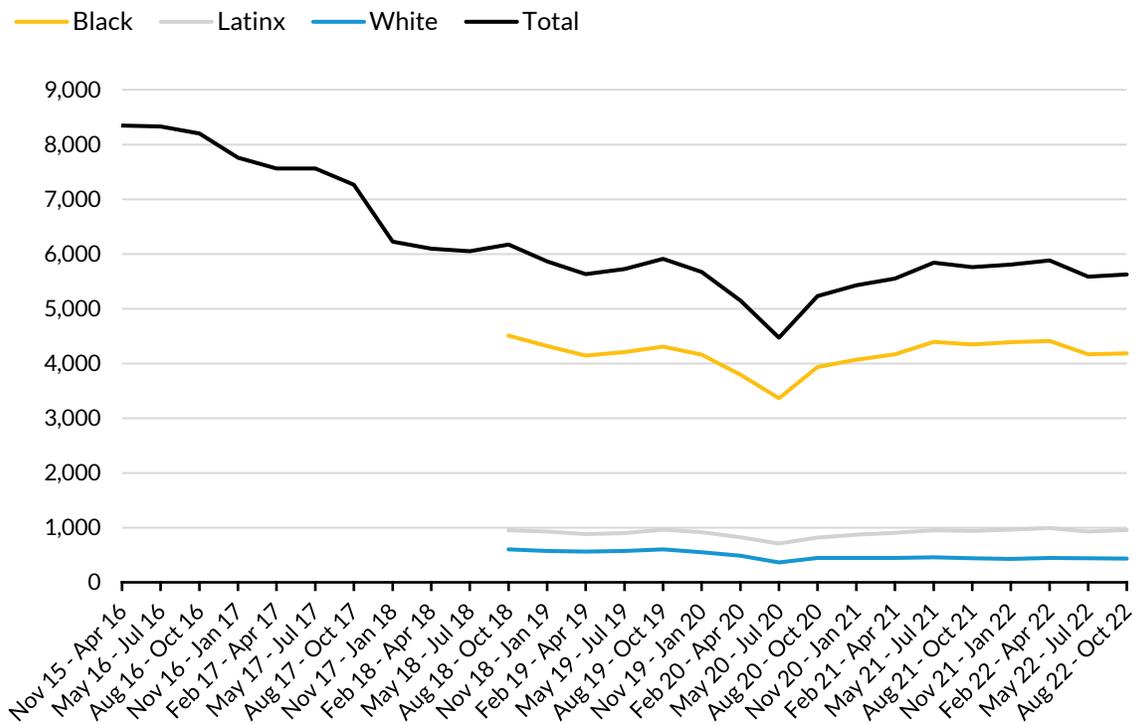
The ADP for Black people increased 35 percent, from 100 in 2018 to 135 in 2022; in contrast, the ADP for white people increased 6 percent, from 282 to 300. Although they constitute a smaller share of the jail population than white people, Black people are vastly overrepresented in the jail and white people are underrepresented: Black people account for 31 percent of the ADP but only 6 percent of the county’s population, an overrepresentation of 5.0 times as of the latest quarter for which data were available; white people make up 83 percent of the county population but only 68 percent of the ADP. These figures offer important context in which the county’s SJC strategies are occurring. Stakeholders we interviewed communicated a commitment to addressing racial and ethnic disparities. After the pandemic hit the United States and in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, Buncombe County joined the list of localities that declared racism a public safety emergency.

Like New Orleans, Cook County has made progress reducing its jail population since joining the SJC in 2016. Since then, Cook County has reduced its jail population by 33 percent, from 8,346 to 5,625

(figure 5); this reduction is almost twice the site’s original goal of reducing the jail population by 17.6 percent. Further, this decrease in ADP occurred across Black, Latinx, and white people, although some decreases were larger: the ADP decreased 51 percent for white people (from 877 to 434), 29 percent for Latinx people (from 1,344 to 960), and 31 percent for Black people (from 6,062 to 4,185).

Although the decreasing ADP is promising, these numbers display glaring racial and ethnic disparities and a vast overrepresentation of Black people in the jail. White people currently make up 42 percent of Cook County’s population but only 8 percent of the ADP. On the other hand, Latinx people make up approximately 26 percent of the population and 17 percent of the ADP, and Black people make up only 24 percent of the county’s population but 74 percent of the ADP. Stated differently, Black people are overrepresented by three times.

FIGURE 5
Average Daily Jail Population in Cook County, Illinois, by Race and Ethnicity, 2016–2022



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Analysis by CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance, 2022.

Notes: Black 2016 baseline = 6,062. Latinx 2016 baseline = 1,344. White 2016 baseline = 877. The jail populations counts are rounded to the nearest number as we are dealing with individual people.

Stakeholders across the three sites noted these disparities are deeply entrenched, highlighting the disparities' structural nature. In Buncombe County, there was shared frustration with the inability to curb racial and ethnic disparities in the jail even after reducing the overall jail population. As one stakeholder shared,

There's a frustration that we all share that, like during COVID we were able in a short time to do a 40 percent reduction of jail pop [population]. [That] wouldn't have happened if the relationships had not been developed in the previous years. Prosecutors, PDs [public defenders], judges were able to work together quickly to get a lot of cases resolved and for people to be released. So, during that, even with a major reduction in numbers, there was no reduction in the racial disparity. That showed that some of what is happening within the system is so deeply ingrained and the root causes are not easy to get to.

In New Orleans, stakeholders indicated that criminal justice reform is a relatively new development that departs from previous draconian policies which acutely targeted people of color. One stakeholder there reflected, *"It is super encouraging to see how things have changed over time. When CAG [the Community Advisory Group] started there was strong pulse for locking everyone up and that's how you solve crime."* This person was also excited that New Orleans had just elected a district attorney who wanted to reexamine old Jim Crow verdicts and who was working hard to get rid of cash bail and getting people out of jail. As this stakeholder noted, "Cash bail was a big part of SJC work and to see the shift of the city in how we think about crime was great." According to stakeholders in New Orleans, this focus is also spearheaded by new political leadership and local community activists.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The experiences of the three sites profiled in this report underscore the critical role communities can play in meaningful criminal justice reform. They also underscore that there are myriad ways to effectively engage community members and offer the following lessons and recommendations for other communities seeking to advance authentic community engagement.

Ensure proper resources (financial, technical assistance, in-kind) are available to support these efforts. New Orleans's NOVAS, for example, initially struggled to find a meeting location, copy and distribute materials, and perform other basic business tasks because it lacked an administrative "home" to operate in. At least one member of the group covered the group's early operating costs and was able to leverage meeting space through their employer until the group was able to secure funding and hire a part-time coordinator.

Identify a clear “ask” and communicate expectations including the likely pace of progress. As in Buncombe County, community engagement efforts often require community members to work within formal system structures that are bogged down in bureaucracy. This can slow the pace of progress and create frustration. As one stakeholder noted, “The biggest challenge is finding community members who have the time and orientation to be consistently engaged in work groups ... to participate in what is essentially an attempt to reform a bureaucratic process.” The pace is slow and often frustrating. Care should be taken to communicate expectations and to consider how best to engage community members in critical discussion and action steps that result in meaningful change. Cook County’s community engagement strategy offers a potential alternative: there, community members were engaged in the community and system stakeholders came to the community to directly hear concerns and issues, as shared during the site’s action summits.

Consider accessibility. Several stakeholders remarked on the need to meet community members “where they are.” At minimum, community members’ availability should be considered when setting meeting times and locations. This may mean holding meetings after traditional business hours (such as at night and on weekends) and providing meals and child care to ensure a broad cross-section of the community can regularly participate.

Elevate the voices of people of color directly impacted by the criminal legal system. Given that persistent racial and ethnic disparities are a common challenge for SJC sites and other communities across the country, focusing on engaging people of color with lived experience in the criminal legal system may yield more insights into root causes, methods of harm reduction, and how to address the structural roots of inequality. Furthermore, a community engagement group can increase trust with marginalized communities and begin to tackle power dynamics by giving people from those communities leadership positions. Special attention may also need to be paid to the needs of young people and to people whose first language is not English.

Provide benefits to community members who attend meetings. To better recruit and retain community members, compensate them for their time and labor. In larger settings, it may be beneficial to provide child care or food to help build rapport.

Leverage technology to engage the community. One of the by-products of the pandemic has been that online methods have been increasingly used to make system stakeholder meetings more accessible to the public and to make community engagement events open to people who previously could not have attended because of travel and time constraints. The plethora of online events leads to Zoom fatigue for some community members, and the three sites had to consider how to keep community members

engaged digitally and make their strategies more engaging to fit their audiences. For example, some of the stakeholders we spoke with found great success with social media campaigns and informational videos.

Ensure a diverse group of people are engaged. Engage with a more diverse set of stakeholders representing various facets of local communities, including activists and organizers working in the realm of criminal legal reform and abolition. Some system stakeholders shy away from engaging advocates, but this may create challenges later when seeking buy-in for certain reforms.

Notes

- ¹ In 2017, the MacArthur Foundation shared four pillars of community engagement with the SJC network and introduced more resources to assist the SJC sites in developing their strategies; sites were required to address community engagement in their renewal proposals.
- ² You can learn about the Intercultural Development Inventory at <https://idiinventory.com/>.
- ³ Buncombe County 2018–2020 SJC Report submitted to the MacArthur Foundation and shared with Urban.
- ⁴ “Criminal Justice 101,” Buncombe County Safety and Justice Challenge Community Engagement Workgroup, August 6, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWhZ2nsJwQY&t=1s>.
- ⁵ For communities in the county that host viewings of the video, the community engagement workgroup offers to facilitate discussions between system stakeholders and community members.

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