



EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

The Aspen Justice and Governance Partnership: Initial Lessons from the Field

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FINDING
PROMISE
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CHANGE



INTRODUCTION

The following represents a summary of Equal Measure’s key findings in its role as the evaluation and learning partner for the first 18 months of the [Aspen Institute Criminal Justice Reform Initiative’s Justice and Governance Partnership](#) (JGP)¹. JGP, originally conceived by Dr. Douglas Wood in 2019, seeks to reimagine and transform a justice ecosystem within mid-size and micropolitan/rural² regions where crime rates per capita are often higher than larger cities in the United States and receive much less public awareness and philanthropic support. Rather than focus solely on the criminal justice system, JGP activates and moves within a *broader, local ecosystem* of justice and public safety with other local sectors such as healthcare, education, and housing to build sustainable collaborative support of discretionary policies to improve neighborhood-level outcomes.

In 2022, JGP initiated and launched a planning phase in Grand Rapids, MI, which was selected after strong interest from local leaders. Local funding was provided by the [Michigan Justice Fund](#). 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.³ The initial lessons shared here explore JGP’s project goals and initial learnings essential to 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.

KEY FINDINGS

A trusted and adaptive host organization is necessary to support the complexity of hyperlocal criminal justice reform initiatives.

The Grand Rapids’ JGP initiative was designed to be led by local individuals who could leverage their relationships and had *deep trust from other leaders in the region* and *sector expertise*. Two co-chairs cultivated interest and participation of sector leaders, and two co-leads from neutral and credible organizations served in project management, facilitation, and design functions. These leaders partnered effectively with national Technical Assistance (TA) partners and owned the local effort, recognizing that the sustainability of the JGP initiative in Grand Rapids would succeed only if local organizations and community members led and saw themselves represented in the work.

¹ While 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.

² A 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>.

³ <https://cfsem.org/initiative/michigan-justice-fund/>



The nationally publicized killing of Patrick Lyoya, a young Black Grand Rapids resident, by a Grand Rapids police officer at a traffic stop required strategic shifts in the early months of the planning stage. Sensitive interactions were required with local justice collaborators like the Grand Rapids police leadership and the county prosecutor, as well as members of the collaborative who knew Mr. Lyoya's family personally. The ability to interpret, respond, and adapt to local developments like this community flashpoint was critical, and reflected a willingness and ability to adjust priorities and activities even at the expense of initial plans.

Establishing and maintaining a healthy balance between “top-down” and “community-up” design in JGP requires close attention to power dynamics and context, and continuous conversation.

In the initial months of the Grand Rapids planning stage, the JGP approach leaned more “top-down” through engagement with the co-leads and co-chairs due to the extensive orientation local leaders needed to understand the complex, technical components of the JGP approach. While efficient, this stance limited engagement with a larger set of Grand Rapids community leaders and members. Other structures supported the “bottom-up” dynamic of JGP, grounding the effort in the importance of community representation, particularly community leaders from Grand Rapids' Third Ward, which has the city's highest Black population and the least investment. Throughout the planning stage, conversations with site leaders and local justice collaborative members evolved to focus more sharply on racial inequity—as an 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, with previous citywide initiatives often focused on programmatic interventions rather than addressing larger impacts of systemic racism in neighborhoods and on its Black residents.

The work of developing a representative justice collaborative with a shared vision in JGP was dynamic, recursive, and time-intensive; it was a productive, forcing mechanism to promote common purpose and to uncover both challenges and opportunities.

Grand Rapids justice collaborative members grappled with the degree to which a few leaders should hold the vision for the work versus the value of an extended coalition-building process. Building momentum for the initiative proved challenging with a shortage of early wins and longstanding community issues and dynamics that took time to name and collectively examine. Development of clear governance structures to clarify decision making and promote shared leadership, and intensive, shared experiences through planning and relationship-building opportunities—such as a small group convening in Aspen—supported the evolution of a collective identity for this group. Building relationships across sector representatives required time, overcoming generalized and, in some cases, personally held mistrust, and awareness of both implicit and explicit centers of power in the community.



QUESTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE FIELD

As progress and learning continues, 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?

We look forward to being part of continued local and national conversations, exploring the answers to these questions, and continuing the necessary partnership to support the transformation of local justice ecosystems in our nation's most burdened, yet overlooked, cities and rural regions.

“We recognize that there is systemic oppression in every system, and we see policy as being one of the greatest ways to change the oppressive system that we operate in.” — Planning Group Member
