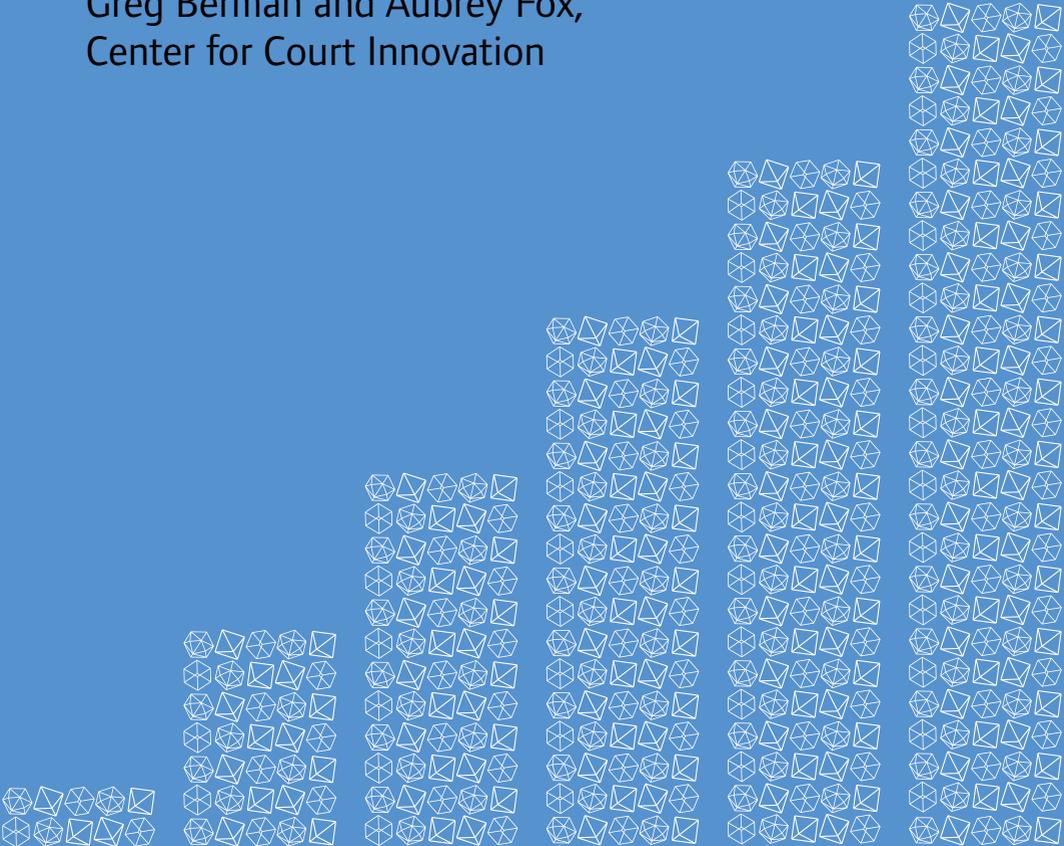


# Combining Research and Practice

The Center for Court Innovation  
and the Pursuit of Justice Reform

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## 1. Summary

The Center for Court Innovation is a non-governmental organization dedicated to reforming the justice system through demonstration projects, original research, training and technical assistance. Operated as a public/private partnership between the Fund for the City of New York and the State Court System, the Center for Court Innovation functions as the independent research and development arm of the New York courts – studying chronic problems, devising new solutions, and testing their feasibility. It then looks to aid reformers around the world, using its real world experience implementing concrete reforms to provide them with the tools they need to promote change locally.

In the most recent fiscal year (FY2010), the Center had a budget of \$17.6 million, which was underwritten by a range of funders at the city, state, and federal level (87 per cent of the Center’s revenues come from government grants, and 13 per cent come from private foundations and fee-for-service contracts). Broadly speaking, the Center’s 175 full-time employees work in three principal areas: demonstration projects, research, and technical assistance.

## 2. Origins and philosophy

As an organization committed to data and analysis, the Center studies problems within communities and government systems. It uses this information to inform the development of demonstration projects that field-test new ideas. Then, based on its hands-on experience implementing real-life reforms, the Center provides assistance to innovators around the world. The Center has aided justice officials and non-government organizations in dozens of countries, helping them assess local problems, implement new solutions and evaluate their effectiveness.

The Center for Court Innovation’s three primary areas of work are mutually reinforcing. Research is the foundation upon which demonstration projects are built. In turn, the Center’s experience implementing demonstration projects is the basis of its expert assistance to the field. And the Center attempts to apply what it learns from its engagement with the world to its own demonstration projects.

The Center has had a hand in creating 21 different model programs that seek to address specific criminal justice concerns in new and more effective ways. These projects range from court-based projects that focus on domestic violence offenses, drugs and quality-of-life crime, to neighborhood-based programs that aim to reduce teen truancy and halt gun violence (see Box 1). It has also produced original research of international significance, including studies that have examined the effectiveness of drug treatment

## Box 1: Demonstration projects

Through demonstration projects, the Center tests new approaches to improving public safety. While the Center's model projects cover a broad range of topics – from juvenile delinquency to the reentry of ex-offenders into society – the Center always relies on rigorous and collaborative planning, with an emphasis on using data to document results and ensure accountability. Evaluations have documented that these demonstration projects contribute to tangible results like safer streets, reduced levels of fear, and improved quality of life.

The Center for Court Innovation has created 21 demonstration projects:

- **Attendance Court**  
A truancy prevention program for students and their families.
- **Bronx Community Solutions**  
An initiative that seeks to apply a problem-solving approach to all non-violent cases in the Bronx Criminal Court.
- **Brooklyn Domestic Violence Court**  
Adjudicates all indicted domestic violence felonies in Brooklyn.
- **Brooklyn Mental Health Court**  
Links defendants with mental illness to long-term treatment in the community.
- **Brooklyn Treatment Court**  
New York City's first drug treatment court.
- **The Child and Adolescent Witness Support Program**  
Provides mental health support to children exposed to violent crime.
- **Crown Heights Community Mediation Center**  
Promotes cohesion in a Brooklyn community known for inter-ethnic conflict.
- **Harlem Community Justice Center**  
Solves neighborhood problems – including youth crime, landlord-tenant disputes and the challenges posed by ex-offenders returning to the community.
- **Integrated Domestic Violence Court**  
A 'one family/one judge' model that addresses related family issues such as child custody and civil protection orders.

- **Manhattan Family Treatment Court**  
Stabilizes families by linking substance-abusing parents or guardians to treatment.
- **Midtown Community Court**  
Targets quality-of-life offenses, such as prostitution, illegal vending, graffiti, shoplifting, farebeating, and vandalism.
- **Newark Community Solutions**  
An effort to re-engineer the local municipal courts' approach to minor crime.
- **New York Juvenile Justice Corps**  
An Americorps service program that puts participants to work offering career, clinical, and educational services to troubled young people.
- **NYC Community Cleanup**  
Presents low-level offenders with meaningful community service work.
- **Parole Reentry Court**  
Helps parolees transition from life in prison to responsible citizenship.
- **Queens Engagement Strategies for Teens (QUEST)**  
Provides after-school supervision and services to young people with delinquency cases.
- **Red Hook Community Justice Center**  
Seeks to improve public safety in Red Hook, Brooklyn through crime prevention initiatives and a problem-solving court.
- **Staten Island Youth Justice Center**  
Offers a peer-led youth court, case management, rigorous compliance monitoring, and after-school programming to troubled young people in Staten Island.
- **Youth Court**  
Trains teenagers to handle real-life cases involving their peers.
- **Youth Domestic Violence Court**  
Addresses misdemeanor domestic violence cases among teenagers.
- **Youth Justice Board**  
Brings together young people to study and propose solutions to public safety challenges.

as an alternative to incarceration, the impact of domestic violence offender intervention programs and the outcomes of intensive supervision of parolees. Additionally, the Center has shaped and aided the work of thousands of practitioners and policymakers around the globe through its consulting work and training initiatives.

### **The Center's start**

The Center's first demonstration project was the Midtown Community Court. When it opened in 1993 in Manhattan, it was the first court of its kind, and it served as a novel response to the cycling of repeat offenders through the justice system who had committed quality-of-life crimes, including drug possession, prostitution, and petty theft.

These activities were wreaking havoc in the area in and around Times Square. Theaters were dark. Tourism was down. The neighborhood was losing population to the suburbs.

The Center began, as it always does, with research. A two-year needs assessment process yielded a wealth of valuable information. Among other things, planners documented that the two local police precincts had the highest volume of misdemeanor cases in the city. They also documented an array of problems with the standard judicial response to these cases, including an over-reliance on both short-term jail and sentences involving no punishment whatsoever (e.g. conditional discharges with no conditions).

The Midtown Community Court was created to respond to these problems. Located in the middle of a busy Midtown block on West 54<sup>th</sup> Street, the Midtown Community Court shares a building with a local non-profit theater company. Handling misdemeanor cases from the neighborhood, the court seeks to combine punishment and help. The community court judge is provided with an array of alternative sanctions, which include drug rehabilitation, community service, and mental health counseling. An on-site social service clinic provides case management and referrals to local service providers. Accountability is emphasized; failure to follow through with the court's orders results in a warrant for arrest and the prospect of jail time.

Research has confirmed that the community court, in conjunction with aggressive law enforcement and economic development efforts, helped to curb street crime. An independent evaluation by the National Center for State Courts noted that the Midtown Community Court, in conjunction with aggressive law enforcement and economic development efforts, resulted in a drop in prostitution arrests by 56 per cent and a reduction in illegal vending by 24 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

Other community court results include improved compliance with court orders and reductions in case processing time. In addition, approximately two out of three local

residents surveyed in a telephone poll said that they would be willing to pay additional taxes to support the community court.

### **The next step: Tackling addiction**

The Center's next experiment was the Brooklyn Treatment Court. The first such court in New York City, the Brooklyn Treatment Court worked with more serious cases: felony offenders with long histories of addiction. Following a model originally established in Florida, participants were linked to long-term drug treatment in lieu of incarceration. Progress in treatment was regularly monitored by a judge using a system of sanctions and rewards.

The drug court model was a notable departure from the approach of traditional American courts. Instead of using incarceration as a default setting, the drug court sought to address the cause of criminal behavior through community-based treatment.

Researchers from the Center for Court Innovation evaluated the Brooklyn project and found significant reductions in re-offending. Over the course of three years, recidivism among Brooklyn Treatment Court participants was 27 per cent lower than offenders who went through conventional courts.<sup>2</sup> Based in no small part on these findings, the New York State Court System made an institutional commitment to spread the drug court model statewide.

The drug court model also attracted the attention of the executive and legislative branches of government in New York. In April 2009, the Governor of New York signed into law a significant revision of the infamous Rockefeller Drug Laws, long regarded as the toughest in the United States. Enacted in 1973, the Rockefeller laws established stringent mandatory minimum sentences for drug crimes – offenders convicted of possessing at least four ounces of narcotics, for example, automatically received a prison term that ranged from 15 years to a life sentence. By law, New York's judges were required to adhere to the Rockefeller sentence guidelines and had no discretion to propose shorter punishments or alternative sanctions, such as drug treatment.

In contrast, one of the explicit goals of the Rockefeller reforms – which the governor celebrated with an event at the Brooklyn Treatment Court – was to increase the number of defendants who participate in drug court. After nearly 40 years of the Rockefeller sentencing regime, the 2009 reforms signaled a sea change in New York's criminal justice policy. At the press conference announcing the reforms, then-Governor David Paterson noted that: *“drug abuse is an illness. We hope to forever eliminate the regime of the Rockefeller drug laws and replace it with a system that will give addicts and those who commit crimes the treatment that they need.”*<sup>3</sup>

The demonstrated success of New York’s drug courts provided legislators with concrete proof that a different approach to drug crime would work not just in theory but in practice. As Jonathan Lippman, New York’s chief judge, would later recount: *“When Governor Paterson and the legislature reformed the Rockefeller Drug Laws in New York in 2009, they explicitly relied on the success of our drug courts.”*<sup>44</sup>

The research findings on the efficacy of drug courts have also had a national impact. On the campaign trail, Barack Obama endorsed drug courts, making reference to the Center for Court Innovation’s research in New York: *“Drug courts have proven successful in dealing with non-violent offenders. These courts offer a mix of treatment and sanctions, in lieu of traditional incarceration... The success of these programs has been dramatic: One New York study found that drug court graduates had a re-arrest rate that was on average 29 per cent lower than comparable offenders who had not participated in the drug court program. These programs are also far cheaper than incarceration.”*<sup>45</sup> The Obama Administration has backed up this statement with concrete support: working with Congress in the most recent fiscal year, \$44 million was appropriated to support drug courts nationally.

### **Problem-solving justice**

While community courts and drug courts are the most prominent of the Center’s projects, they are far from the only ones. The Center has also established New York’s first mental health court, domestic violence court and reentry court, among other programs. While each of these projects is unique, they have come to be known collectively as ‘problem-solving courts,’ based on their efforts to address the underlying issues that bring defendants into the justice system (see Box 2).

Over the past 15 years, problem-solving courts have been widely replicated throughout New York State. Most of these projects have either been based on models created by the Center for Court Innovation or they have been created with the help of training and technical assistance from the Center’s team of expert consultants. Currently, there is at least one problem-solving court in each of the state’s 62 counties, including eight community courts, 192 drug courts, 41 domestic violence courts, and 26 mental health courts (see Box 3).

Underlying this rapid expansion is a critical shift in the perception of crime in the United States. After more than a generation of ‘tough on crime’ rhetoric and reform (e.g. mandatory minimums, three-strikes-and-you’re-out legislation), the national conversation about public safety has shifted noticeably in recent years. Crime is down in many places across the country. Funding shortfalls have limited the ability of state and local governments to build more prisons. And the success of alternative-to-incarceration programs like drug courts have helped fuel a movement dedicated to rethinking the American justice system’s reliance on incarceration.

## Box 2: What is problem-solving justice?

Problem-solving justice aims to change offender behavior, enhance the safety of victims, and improve the quality of life of communities. Five principles animate problem-solving courts:

- **A tailored approach to justice**  
Problem-solving courts eschew a one-size-fits-all approach in favor of matching the judicial response to the specific needs of each case.
- **Creative partnerships**  
Problem-solving courts find new ways for citizens to get involved in the judicial process; they also integrate social services into the standard operating procedures of the court so that judges and attorneys can access a wider range of sentencing options.
- **Informed decision making**  
Problem-solving courts provide judges and attorneys with psychosocial information about defendants; they also offer legal professionals specialized training so they have a solid understanding of the underlying sociological dynamics of the cases that they handle.
- **Accountability**  
Problem-solving courts aggressively use judicial monitoring to supervise an offender's performance in social service programs and community restitution projects.
- **A focus on results**  
Problem-solving courts use data to assess their impact on victims, offenders, and communities.

For more on the history, objectives, and achievements of problem-solving courts, see *Good Courts: The Case for Problem-Solving Justice* (The New Press, 2005).

International interest in problem-solving justice – and the Center for Court Innovation – is growing. Staffers from the Center have worked with criminal justice reformers in 50 countries. For example, the Center has aided the development of new community courts in England, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Australia has recently



## Box 4: Red Hook Community Justice Center

The Center is best known for creating the Red Hook Community Justice Center, a community court that seeks to improve public safety in a Brooklyn neighborhood notorious for high crime rates, urban blight, and social disorder.

Operating out of a refurbished Catholic school, the award-winning project addresses a range of neighborhood problems, including drugs, crime, domestic violence, and landlord-tenant disputes. Cases that would normally go to three different courts – civil, family, and criminal – are instead handled in the same courtroom by the same judge with the ultimate goal of offering a coordinated approach to neighborhood concerns.

The Red Hook Community Justice Center’s judge, the Hon. Alex Calabrese, has an array of sanctions and services at his disposal, including community restitution projects, on-site educational workshops and GED classes, drug treatment, and mental health counseling. The Justice Center also serves as the hub for an array of programs aimed at engaging the community in crime prevention, including mediation, community service projects, and a youth court, where teenagers resolve cases involving their peers.

Each year, the court handles approximately 3,000 misdemeanor criminal cases, 11,000 summonses, 500 housing court cases, and 175 juvenile delinquency cases. Since it began operation, more than 75 per cent of Justice Center defendants have completed their community service mandates, compared to 50 per cent at comparable urban courts.

The Justice Center has also had an impact on local attitudes. In 1999, prior to the opening of the Justice Center, 77 per cent of Red Hook residents said they were afraid to go to the local parks or the subway. By 2004, that percentage had dropped to 43 per cent.

and criminal cases (see Box 4). By contrast, the Brooklyn Mental Health Court, which connects mentally-ill offenders with outpatient treatment, serves fewer than 100 defendants annually. Meanwhile, the Brooklyn Domestic Violence Court handles serious felony cases involving intimate abuse, while the Harlem Youth Court deals with minor offenses committed by juveniles.

Regardless of the topic or the size of the project in question, the Center’s approach to developing a new program is the same. The Center begins with research, looking at a

given problem from as many different angles as possible. This includes examining both quantitative and qualitative information, using multiple methods (statistical analysis, focus groups, structured interviews, community surveys etc.).

Armed with data, the Center's next step is program planning – devising a solution to address the problem being studied. Almost always, this involves outreach to a wide variety of potential partners, including both traditional criminal justice players (police, judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation officers, etc.) and other relevant agencies (drug treatment providers, health departments, block associations, civic groups, etc.).

In collaboration with its government partners, the Center takes responsibility for all aspects of program design. Depending on the project, this might include defining a target population, creating an implementation plan, training staff, drafting a memorandum of understanding, overseeing architectural design, and raising funds from private and public supporters. After a project opens, the Center helps to oversee operations and evaluate impact.

## **Research**

Researchers from the Center for Court Innovation rigorously measure the work of its demonstration projects (see Box 5). The Center is committed to the idea of 'action research'. It employs a team of in-house researchers that monitor the impact that justice reforms have on street crime, substance abuse, sentencing practice, levels of neighborhood fear and public trust in justice. Action research is designed to provide immediate and useful feedback about everyday program operations so that those in charge can make midcourse adjustments as necessary. For example, the Center has used action research to determine whether the Brooklyn Treatment Court is meeting its volume targets, to learn more about the profile of drug court participants, and to generate a better understanding of the type of participant who tends to succeed under this model.

In addition to monitoring the day-to-day operations of demonstration projects, the Center conducts more formal, long-term evaluations to answer questions about the efficacy of a given reform. These studies are designed to have national and international policy implications. Examples of the Center's research work include:

- The Center has been a national leader in the study of drug courts. The Center's research on drug courts has explored not just whether they work but how and why they work. In 2003, the Center completed a statewide evaluation of New York's adult drug courts that demonstrated consistent and meaningful recidivism impacts across multiple sites. The Center is currently completing a national evaluation of drug courts in the United States funded by the National Institute of Justice (see Box 6).

## Box 5: Results

Researchers have documented numerous positive results at the Center's demonstration projects, including:

- **Reducing recidivism**  
Participants in the Brooklyn Treatment Court re-offend at a rate that is 27 per cent lower than offenders who go through conventional courts.
  - **Reducing crime**  
Independent evaluators from the National Center for State Courts documented that the Midtown Community Court cut prostitution by 56 per cent and reduced illegal vending by 24 per cent. The local police precinct where the Red Hook Community Justice Center is located is now the safest in Brooklyn.
  - **Improving public trust in justice**  
The Red Hook Community Justice Center has a 94 per cent approval rating from local residents. Prior to the Justice Center's opening, only 12 per cent of local residents approved of local courts.
  - **Changing sentencing practice**  
Bronx Community Solutions has cut the use of incarceration by one-third and doubled the use of community-based alternatives for misdemeanor offenders in the borough.
  - **Repairing disorder**  
Each year, the Midtown Community Court and Red Hook Community Justice Center sentence thousands of low-level offenders to perform community restitution projects such as painting over graffiti, sweeping streets, and cleaning local parks. In total, these two community courts contribute 75,000 hours of community service to the surrounding neighborhoods each year, which adds up to more than \$600,000 worth of labor.
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- The Center has conducted a wide variety of studies examining how the justice system responds to domestic violence. This includes a randomized trial that tested the effectiveness of batterer programs and ongoing judicial monitoring with convicted domestic violence offenders in the Bronx (no impact was found). Other projects include a national survey of how courts respond to the noncompliance of offenders; statewide

## Box 6: National drug court evaluation

The Center for Court Innovation, the Urban Institute and RTI International have jointly conducted the most comprehensive and long-term evaluation of drug courts to date. A five-year study that tracks defendants from 23 drug courts in seven states, the study documents that drug courts reduce recidivism and cut criminal justice expenditures for taxpayers. The study is also notable for examining *how* drug courts work and for *whom*. Among the research findings:

- **Drug use**

The study found that fewer drug court participants reported and tested positive for drug use 18 months after enrolling in court-mandated treatment compared to traditional court defendants (56 per cent of drug court defendants reported drug use compared to 76 per cent of the comparison group).

- **Recidivism**

Drug court participants also had lower rates of recidivism: 52 per cent of drug court offenders, compared with 62 per cent of traditional court defendants, were re-arrested within 24 months.

- **Cost benefits**

A cost-benefit analysis confirmed that drug courts reduce overall criminal justice spending. The drug court model returns an estimated net benefit of \$2 for every \$1 spent.

Among the key components to a successful drug court identified by the study are the participants' attitudes toward the judge. When defendants feel positively about the judge, they have better outcomes. Furthermore, drug court clients who received higher levels of judicial praise, drug testing, and overall case management reported fewer crimes and fewer days of drug use.

research on integrated domestic violence courts in New York; and an evaluation of an experimental Youthful Offender Domestic Violence Court in Brooklyn.

- The Center examined the Harlem Reentry Court, a program that provides intensive monitoring and community-based services to parolees in their first six months post-release. The goal is to reduce both crime and incarceration. The report, entitled 'Do Reentry Courts Reduce Recidivism?' found mixed results. The Harlem Parole Reentry

Court produced a significant reduction in re-convictions, yet also led to increased technical violations thanks to a ‘supervision effect’.

- In an effort to assess the impact of the Red Hook Community Justice Center on defendant perceptions of fairness, the Center conducted a survey of nearly 400 misdemeanor defendants who had their cases handled at either the Justice Center or a traditional, centralized criminal court. Structured courtroom observations supplemented the results of the survey. The Justice Center was considered to be more fair than the traditional court. In addition to offering a wider range of non-custodial sentences (including social and community services), respondents noted that the Red Hook Community Justice Center offered a more transparent and collaborative atmosphere for defendants. At Red Hook, 86 per cent agreed that their case was handled fairly by the court. This was true across the board, regardless of race, socioeconomic status or disposition of the case.

The Center’s research findings have been published broadly in the mainstream media, professional periodicals and peer-reviewed academic journals. They have also been compiled in a book entitled *Documenting Results: Research on Problem-Solving Justice*.<sup>6</sup> Other books by Center authors include *Dispensing Justice Locally*, *Good Courts*, *Trial & Error in Criminal Justice Reform*, *Drug Courts: Personal Stories*, *A Problem-Solving Revolution* and *Daring to Fail*.

The Center’s website<sup>7</sup> has become a hub of information for justice reformers around the world, attracting 90,000 unique visitors each month. On its website, the Center offers dozens of how-to manuals and best-practice guides for criminal justice officials written in an accessible, jargon-free style (more than 50,000 publications are downloaded each month). The Center’s website is also home to multimedia presentations, including blogs, slideshows, short films and a monthly podcast, ‘New Thinking’, which features interviews with leading criminal justice thinkers and practitioners.

### **Technical assistance and training**

The Center for Court Innovation provides hands-on, expert assistance to reformers – including judges, attorneys, probation officials, and community organizers – from around the world. Through its training and technical assistance programs, the Center offers guidance on assessing public safety problems and crafting workable, practical solutions.

Based on its first-hand experience implementing demonstration projects, the Center knows the nuts-and-bolts of getting a new project off the ground – from performing a rigorous community needs assessment to figuring out how to measure the impacts of new procedures. The Center is currently working with innovators in the United States and abroad to help create new responses to problems like drugs, domestic violence, delinquency, and neighborhood disorder.

The Center began providing technical assistance in 1996 when it received a grant from the US Department of Justice to assist a number of American cities with community court development. Over time, the Center has also won competitive grants to provide technical assistance on matters such as community prosecutions, domestic violence, drug court, technology, and institutionalizing problem-solving justice.

Each year, more than 650 visitors tour the Center’s demonstration projects in New York City. These site visits are structured learning experiences that provide visitors with an opportunity to interact with their peers and see new ideas in action. Notable visitors include US Attorney General Janet Reno, US Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, New York City Mayors Rudy Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg, and the Home Secretary, Lord Chief Justice and Attorney General of England and Wales.

But the typical visitor is not a dignitary or a high-ranking politician; the typical visitor is a local administrative judge or probation official or prosecutor or the head of a community-based organization concerned about a public safety problem in his or her community. By visiting one of the Center’s model projects, these officials receive a hands-on education in how to implement new ideas. The goal is not to encourage wholesale replication of the Center’s models, although that does happen quite a bit. Rather, the goal is to spark new thinking among visitors, encouraging them to adapt the Center’s ideas to their local needs – and to dream up new variations. More than 65 per cent of those practitioners who visit the Center say that they intend to implement something they saw on their tour.

In addition to hosting site visits, the Center for Court Innovation’s consulting group provides intensive technical assistance to reformers around the country and across the world. The Center provides intensive one-on-one assistance in the planning, implementation, and enhancement of justice reforms. Assistance is available in six main areas:

- **Needs assessment:** A needs assessment helps pinpoint pressing local problems, providing quantitative and qualitative data to sharpen planners’ understanding of the issues at hand.
- **Concept paper:** Once the problems have been clearly defined, the Center helps local planners to create innovative solutions in the form of a detailed concept paper that spells out the scope and goals of a project.
- **Project development:** The Center helps clients identify funding sources, create a start-up budget, and devise new ways to engage the community and potential government partners.

## Box 7: Technology

The Center promotes the adoption of innovative technology to support justice reform efforts. The community courts, for example, piloted an award-winning computer program that is used by courtroom staff to generate appropriate sentences, tailor individualized sanctions, and monitor defendant progress in community programs. Additionally, the technology application helps court staff track compliance rates, court appearance rates, and the types of referrals that have been made for the defendant.

The Center also harnesses technology to offer online training opportunities and resources. It has created a web-based learning program specifically for drug court professionals consisting of video presentations, a virtual site visit, and interviews with practitioners.

- **Technology:** Many of the Center's demonstration projects include innovative technology applications designed to improve case management, track participants and share information among partners. The Center's technology team provides help to justice system reformers, helping them analyze their technology team and adapt elements of the Center's management information systems (see Box 7).
- **Evaluation:** The Center helps planners evaluate the project, once it's up and running, by establishing performance measures and tracking the project's ability to meet its stated goals.
- **Troubleshooting:** Finally, the Center assists with troubleshooting, helping program managers analyze operations and make mid-course adjustments.

The Center for Court Innovation also provides customized workshops, panels, and trainings to criminal justice practitioners. For example, experts from the Center have trained hundreds of judges about how to incorporate problem-solving principles and practices on the bench. Other trainings include teaching prosecutors how to reach out to local residents, helping victim advocates work with the justice system, and educating community leaders about novel approaches to local public safety problems.

Speakers from the Center have been invited to participate in conferences, symposia and roundtables across the US and internationally. This includes lectures at leading colleges and graduate schools (e.g. Harvard University, Columbia University, Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania), appearances at gatherings convened by the major criminal

justice institutions in the US (e.g. Conference of Chief Justices, Bureau of Justice Assistance, American Society of Criminology, National Institute of Justice) and speeches at dozens of international events (including visits to China, South Africa, Australia, Japan, Georgia, Afghanistan, Mexico, Argentina and other countries).

## 4. Lessons learned

Key lessons from the Center for Court Innovation’s multi-faceted approach to promoting evidence-based justice sector reform include the following.

### **Balancing independence and access**

The Center for Court Innovation has sought to walk a fine line between working closely with government while remaining formally independent from it. Over the past 20 years, New York has had four governors (both Republican and Democrat), two chief judges, and three mayors of New York City (a Republican, an Independent, and a Democrat). All of these political officials have worked closely with the Center for Court Innovation – authorizing demonstration projects, providing access to crucial data, and making grants.

The Center’s commitment to working in concert with – rather than in opposition to – government decision-makers helps to ensure the relevance of the organization’s work. Advocacy organizations and academic institutions often run the risk of choosing topics of narrow interest that are unresponsive to the priorities of government.

At the same time, because the Center is not a formal part of the government, it enjoys a measure of insulation from the day-to-day politics of government. No organization is immune to political pressure of course, but the Center’s independence grants it the freedom that’s necessary to think beyond the next electoral cycle and to pursue a long-term vision of justice reform. The Center’s independence from government also means it does not operate under some of the institutional constraints, such as civil service regulations or union rules, that often hamper efforts to create an entrepreneurial culture within government.

Finally, political independence provides the Center with the ability to issue findings that are less than positive. For example, the Center’s randomized trial that examined the use of batterer’s intervention programs in the Bronx found no evidence of impact on the behavior of offenders. Although this finding called into question a common practice by judges, the Center’s study was not suppressed. Rather, it was featured in a front-page story in the *New York Law Journal*. The Center also conducted numerous behind-the-scenes briefings with court officials about the results, and these meetings ultimately led

the court system to issue a statewide memo with new instructions to local courts about how and when to utilize batterers' programs.

### **Combining research and practice**

Locating researchers side-by-side with criminal justice practitioners within a single organization has had multiple benefits for the Center. First and foremost, it forces practitioners to think more rigorously. In particular, the presence of researchers encourages those who plan and implement the Center's demonstration projects to be more disciplined about articulating measurable goals and objectives for their work. On the other hand, researchers benefit from being co-located among practitioners because they become grounded in the messy realities of day-to-day implementation, which makes their work more nuanced and their writing less esoteric and easier to read. Researchers from the Center understand the challenges and realities of project implementation – and they know how to avoid holding new programs to unrealistic standards of performance.

### **Bridging the local and the national**

The Center for Court Innovation has always had one foot in the world of local practice and one foot in the world of national policy. The Center's sustained engagement on the ground in New York has given it credibility and enabled it to build trust with local practitioners and policymakers. But the Center has a broader worldview than the typical local organization. Its national reach – and connections – means that it can bring ideas culled from across the country back to New York. For example, the Center recently adapted the Ceasefire anti-violence program, which has shown success in reducing gun crime in Chicago, to the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights.

### **Using multiple methods of analysis**

The Center has conducted several randomized trials, the 'gold standard' in evaluation research, but the Center also understands that these studies are often unfeasible in the real world. Accordingly, most of the Center's program evaluations are quasi-experiments. The Center believes there is much to learn from other types of research, including qualitative studies, process evaluations, and ethnography. The Center is also committed to moving beyond a pass-fail approach to evaluating social programs (see Box 8). In criminal justice, this means that the Center's research tracks more than just a program's impact on crime rates and instead examines a much wider set of program outcomes, including impacts on system efficacy, public confidence in justice, and perceptions of fairness.

## Box 8: Trial and error

To encourage criminal justice innovation, the Center is engaged in a multi-faceted policy inquiry designed to examine and capture the lessons that have been learned from criminal justice reform efforts of the past. The inquiry, which is being conducted with support from the US Department of Justice, has included roundtables, site visits, structured interviews, case studies, and literature reviews.

The ultimate goal is to encourage self-reflection and thoughtful risk-taking among criminal justice agencies. In 2010, the Urban Institute Press published *Trial & Error in Criminal Justice Reform: Learning from Failure*, a book based on the Center's study of criminal justice reform.

## Acknowledgements

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## Endnotes

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