

# Criminal Justice and Community Psychology: Our Values and Our Work—The Introduction to the Special Issue

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## Highlights

- The values guiding community psychologists uniquely position them to effect change.
- This includes effecting change within and beyond criminal justice settings.
- The papers here demonstrate the intersection of community psychology values and criminal justice.

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**Abstract** This special issue of *The American Journal of Community Psychology* originated from the Society for Community Research and Action Criminal Justice interest group, with a goal of exploring the work of community psychologists intersecting with criminal justice research, practice, and policy and shaped by our shared values—equity, collaboration, creative maladjustment, social justice, and social science in the service of social justice. In this introduction, we discuss the socio-historical context of the special issue, followed by an outline of the special issue organization, and brief summary of the included papers. Across 13 papers and an invited commentary, we see the ways in which community psychologists are: (1) delivering and evaluating services, programming, or other supports to address the needs of system-involved people; and (2) working to improve the systems, structures, and interactions with units of criminal justice systems. Across these two sections, authors highlight the guiding role of our values to influence change within and outside of criminal-legal systems.

**Keywords** Community psychology · Criminal justice · Values

On May 25, 2020, police officers from the Minneapolis Police Department responded to a convenience store following a report that a man had used a counterfeit bill to purchase cigarettes. The responding officers restrained George Floyd as he lay face-down on the ground. One of the officers knelt on his neck for several minutes as George Floyd repeatedly stated he could not breathe and called out for his mother. He was pronounced dead a short time later. A couple of months prior, on March 13, 2020, plainclothes police officers from the Louisville Metro Police Department executed a no-knock search warrant to enter the home of a woman based on alleged connections to an ongoing drug investigation. During the warrant execution, the officers opened fire and shot Breonna Taylor five times. She was pronounced dead at the scene. Three months after the killing of Breonna Taylor and less than a month after the killing of George Floyd, on June 12, 2020, police officers from the Atlanta Police Department responded to a fast food restaurant following a report that a man was asleep in his car in the drive-thru. The responding officers shot Rayshard Brooks in the back twice as he attempted to flee. He later died at the hospital. By many measures, the killing of George Floyd by police was not unique, but instead painfully familiar. George Floyd was murdered after Breonna Taylor, before Rayshard Brooks, and in the midst of the police killings of too many other Black folk<sup>1</sup> not named here. What was unique, though, was what followed thereafter. The murder of George Floyd catalyzed communities across the

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<sup>1</sup> We use the word, “folx” to signal our inclusivity of all gender-expansive and gender non-conforming individuals.

country and around the world to organize and mobilize, demanding significant change to the United States criminal justice systems<sup>2</sup>. These renewed calls for change, reminding of us of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray, were bigger, louder, and refusing to be ignored.

As protests swelled in communities across the country, we, the guest editors of this special issue, were finalizing its contents. We had already accepted several papers for inclusion and were awaiting revised and resubmitted manuscripts from a few others. The goal of this special issue was to publish papers that demonstrate the intersection of community psychology values with research, practice, and policy affecting criminal justice systems and those affected by the criminal justice systems in the United States and around the world. As we wrote in the July 2019 call for papers, criminal justice systems have long been a target of social reform efforts and have rightly been subject to diverse criticism from social justice advocates. The number of individuals, families, and communities touched by criminal justice systems each year is vast, particularly so in the United States, and to an even greater extent among minoritized groups and low-income communities. As we wrote in our call in 2019, the values guiding community psychologists—equity, collaboration, creative maladjustment (King, 1968), social justice, and social science in the service of social justice—uniquely position us to effect change both within and outside of criminal justice settings to move us ever closer to a socially just and equitable world. The articles that comprise this special issue showcase a range of projects and studies intended to help us do just that.

This special issue consists of thirteen articles, which we have conceptually grouped into two sections. The first seven articles discuss the myriad needs of different system-involved individuals and the extent to which criminal justice systems provide services, programming, or other supports to meet these needs. The six articles that appear in the second half of this special issue focus on broader systems, structures, and interactions. Across these different articles, the reader will notice different terms used to refer to criminal justice systems. It is important to note that these different terms are more than just semantics. They may refer to different aspects of or related to criminal justice systems (e.g., legal system). Authors of the articles here may also choose to use alternative terms as they reject the notion that this system provides any form of justice. In our descriptions below, we adopt the terms used by each set of authors so as to not misrepresent their work.

<sup>2</sup> We refer to, “systems,” plural, to reflect that there are multiple criminal justice systems at the local, state, and federal levels.

To start, Comartin et al. (2021) describe the overrepresentation of individuals with mental illness in the criminal/legal system, the constitutional requirement that jails provide mental health care to this population, and the lack of training and tools for jails to do this effectively. In their exploratory study, Comartin and colleagues compare two methods to identify mental health needs among individuals at the time of jail booking across eight county jails, and how these two methods map on to the provision of jail- and community-based mental health services. They found that service provision was more tied to staff observation than standardized screening results, as well as varying by jail setting, demonstrating a need for coordinated, consistent screening and referral processes.

The next four articles focus on the specific needs of juvenile justice system-involved youth. Modecki (2021) uses a person-centered, latent profile analysis to create profiles of detained adolescent boys based on their attitudes and emotions toward the legal system. The three resulting profiles emphasize the heterogeneity across adolescent boys in how they view the legal system and their subsequent interactions with it. Anderson et al. (2021), Reed et al. (2021), and Singh et al. (2021) focus in on the specific needs of girls within juvenile legal and juvenile justice systems. Highlighting the increasing proportion of girls in juvenile legal systems and a need for effective community-based interventions, Anderson and colleagues report on a mixed methods evaluation of a family-based intervention intending to reduce girls’ system involvement. In the article that follows, Reed and colleagues work directly with girls in custody. Through a confidential youth advisory process, Reed et al. act as liaisons between the girls and system personnel to elevate the girls’ voices and guide changes in services, climate, and treatment within one juvenile detention center. Singh and colleagues investigate predictors of the critical reflection and action of system-involved girls, as they respond to experiences with the structural oppressions of trauma, racism, and sexism.

The last two articles in the first half of this special issue continue with this focus on the needs of specific system-involved populations. Zielinski et al. (2021) evaluate a correction center-based group therapy intervention for sexual violence survivors. The program showed to be beneficial to participants, with both participants and staff reporting how inter-organizational and interpersonal relationships were central to the long-term success of the program. Zielinski et al. also report on successful features of community-university partnerships, calling particular attention to the importance of partnership participants making a unique contribution to the collaborative work. Finally, the first half of the special issue closes out with work from McWilliams and Hunter (2021) focusing on

the needs of individuals with prior criminal convictions. McWilliams and Hunter explore how stigma associated with a prior felony or misdemeanor conviction negatively impacts quality of life among individuals with criminal records. Across this first section, then, this collection of articles explores the myriad, nuanced needs of individuals at different time points within criminal justice and legal systems, from initial jail booking, to time spent incarcerated, through the long-lasting impacts of a criminal conviction.

The second half of this special issue focuses less on the nuanced needs of specific system-involved individuals, and more on systems and settings. The first two articles from Jacobs and Skeem (2021) and Fountain and Mahmoudi (2021) focus on community setting characteristics, structures, and space. Jacobs and Skeem examine how neighborhood factors related to concentrated disadvantage, residential stability, and disorder interact with individual risk to predict recidivism among people on probation. In the next article, Fountain and Mahmoudi study how structural and spatial barriers, specifically transportation barriers and spatial disparities between youth residences and probation office locations, contribute to inequitable access to youth probation services. Both studies produce findings that emphasize the importance of examining and intervening upon setting-level characteristics and structures.

The next two articles take a closer examination of the use of force and subsequent interactions between communities and the police as criminal justice system agents. Particularly relevant at this moment in time, both of these articles focus on police use of force and brutality when engaging with individuals and communities, with particular emphasis on police encounters with Black individuals and communities. First, Thompson and Slaughter (2021) provide a first person account and case study of their reconciliation work with representatives of the City of Philadelphia and members of the (mostly Black, “back to nature”) MOVE organization. After a series of escalating conflicts between police and MOVE members, on May 13, 1985, the Police Commissioner with the cooperation of city officials ordered a bomb to be dropped on a house in a residential neighborhood; the explosion and ensuing fire killed eleven members of the MOVE organization, destroyed 61 homes, and left 250 residents homeless. In their first person account, Thompson and Slaughter reflect on their work as a community psychologist and reconciliation strategist, working with the MOVE organization, Philadelphia city officials, and community members through an iterative reconciliation process. Next, through a systematic review of the existing literature, Cowell (2021) examines and synthesizes what we know about the motivating factors for law enforcement’s use of force. Though individual actors engage in acts of force,

violence, and brutality, the authors of both of these articles emphasize the necessity of moving beyond a focus on those individuals and employing multiple, holistic strategies to examine and engage broader systems and structures.

Closing this special issue, the last two articles focus on interactions within and beyond criminal justice systems in responding to sexual assault. Javorcka and Campbell (2021) conduct interviews with a set of experts on campus sexual assault to understand tensions between the criminal justice and university responses to sexual assault among college students, acknowledging that concerns about criminalization of the campus review process may be borne out in recent changes to Title IX. In the final article, Campbell et al. (2021) describe their participatory action research project that brought together their team of researchers and criminal justice system actors to address approximately 11,000 untested sexual assault kits found in the city of Detroit. Both of these studies discuss shortcomings within current system structures and processes and the role of community psychology in developing solutions.

To conclude this special issue, Littrice (2021) offers a commentary that serves as a call to action for community psychologists. While the majority of the rest of the manuscripts in this special issue discuss work happening within or in collaboration with criminal justice systems, Littrice calls upon community psychologists to reveal “the truth about the criminal justice system,” a system plagued by “for-profit greed and racial disparities and inequities” (p. X). Littrice discusses firsthand experience with the U.S. criminal justice system in making a case for the role that community psychologists should play in responding to the criminal justice system—working toward ultimately abolishing it.

As we reflect on our goal for this special issue and the important publications that fill its pages, we cannot separate this work from our current landscape and our own identities. This special issue was developed against the backdrop of continued, structural violence targeting Black and other minoritized individuals and communities. This violence is sanctioned and tolerated by criminal justice systems and is reliant on many participants in and outside of the system to assist in the criminalization of Blackness that is used to warrant and justify it. This special issue also was developed by a team of all white guest editors. Throughout history and in this current landscape, we are able to rely on our whiteness for protection and wield it as a weapon if we so choose or if we become complacent.

As a collection, we see these articles providing examples and insights into how community psychologists and the values we hold dear may contribute to critical change

efforts that promote healing and social justice for individuals, families, and communities impacted by criminal justice systems. We are encouraged by seeing the tremendous work undertaken by our colleagues in the field. We also are reminded that we have a lot of work to do. The traditional academic dynamic of researcher–participant often includes a power gradient favoring the researcher. To the extent that any academic venture exacerbates this power dynamic is antithetical to the empowerment and participatory values of community psychology and should be interrogated, reflected on, and changed to better include those for whom the research is intended to advocate. Though these values were foundational to the intent of this special issue, intention is not the same as impact; alas, there is still much work to do. In years to come, we hope that this collection of articles acts as an archive, providing a snapshot in time of where we were that we may revisit to chart our progress toward liberation for all.

**Acknowledgment** We would like to thank Abril Harris for her review and feedback on our framing of this introduction.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors state that they don't have any conflict of interest.

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