



“SAFETY IS FREEDOM FROM TRAUMA”: LESSONS FROM THE BROWNSVILLE COMMUNITY JUSTICE CENTER

*Greg Berman: Author and Chair of the Centre for Justice Innovation UK
Contact Details: Greg.Berman@icloud.com*

Abstract

This interview with one of the leaders of the Brownsville Community Justice Center explores how the innovative project in Brooklyn, New York is working to promote community health and safety without conventional law enforcement strategies. The article also provides an overview of the history of community justice centres in both the US and the UK, including the short-lived North Liverpool Community Justice Centre.

Keywords

Community Justice; Alternative policing; alternative incarceration; community revitalisation; Black Lives Matter

Introduction

2020 was a year of upheaval in New York. Already reeling from the social, economic, and health repercussions of Covid-19, the city was convulsed with protests in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020. Day after day, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets to register their commitment to racial justice and their disapproval of the American criminal justice system.

Inspired in no small part by the Black Lives Matter protests, many New Yorkers have begun to express an interest in shrinking the footprint of the criminal justice system, particularly within the city's minority neighbourhoods. Some activists have even argued for "defunding the police." A number of prominent politicians, including candidates for mayor, have voiced their support for the idea of redirecting money from the New York Police Department's budget to community-based alternatives.

In sum, there is a great deal of interest in investing in community solutions as an alternative to policing at the moment in New York. But what does this really mean? What kinds of alternatives make sense? Is it really possible to reduce local crime without defaulting to the kinds of law enforcement strategies that contribute to racial disparities and undermine public trust in justice?

The Brownsville Community Justice Center is attempting to answer these questions. Operated by the Center for Court Innovation, a non-profit organization that seeks to reform the justice system and strengthen communities, the Justice Center is located in one of New York City's most neglected neighbourhoods. Recently declared the "deadliest neighbourhood in New York," Brownsville, Brooklyn is a community that has been marked by high rates of poverty and crime for decades (Culliton, 2019).

Launched in 2011, the Brownsville Community Justice Center has sought to respond to this reality. Instead of the conventional justice system response to crime (arrest-prosecution-incarceration), the Justice Center seeks to offer at-risk young people pathways out of justice system involvement while addressing local hotspots where criminal activity clusters.

Context (US and UK)

The Brownsville Community Justice Center did not emerge out of nowhere. Rather, it is part of a wave of community justice projects that have emerged in the United States over the past 25 years or so. The first such project, the Midtown Community Court, opened its doors in Manhattan in 1993. The court focused on both misdemeanor offending (offering judges an array of alternatives to fines or short-term jail sentences) and community revitalization (hosting a range of employment and community service programs).

In Midtown's wake have come more than 50 similar projects, scattered throughout the United States. This expansion was partially fuelled by the interest of the US Department of Justice, which at various points offered technical assistance and seed grants to local jurisdictions, but also by the flexibility of the model. Because each project was designed to be deeply rooted in its local community, each project was unique. There was no cookie-cutter model for community justice, only a commitment to improving neighbourhood safety (and engaging local residents) through unconventional means.

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Perhaps the most well-known community justice project in the United States is the Red Hook Community Justice Center, located in southwest Brooklyn. Independent evaluators documented that the project succeeded in reducing reoffending and improving public confidence in justice (Lee, 2013). These kinds of results attracted enormous attention, not just in the United States but in the United Kingdom as well.

Over the years, the Red Hook Community Justice Center has hosted a range of visitors from the UK, including Harry Woolf, Jack Straw, and David Blunkett. The Blair government in particular found the project appealing. This makes sense: in many respects, Red Hook’s approach was consistent with the Blair mantra “Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime” – the project sought to take low-level offending seriously, but to link defendants to the kinds of services (drug treatment, counseling, etc.) that might prevent them from further engagement with the justice system.

The British interest in Red Hook culminated with a decision to create a replication of the project in Liverpool. The Center for Court Innovation and the Office for Public Management convened a US-UK roundtable in late 2004 to help inform the development of this pilot. Highlights from the convening were subsequently published in the *British Journal of Community Justice* (Berman, 2005).

The North Liverpool Community Justice Centre opened its doors in 2005. Like Red Hook, the North Liverpool project employed a dedicated judge who sought to respond to minor crime using tools other than incarceration. While the Justice Centre was popular with many local stakeholders, it was closed down eight years later, the victim of both austerity measures and the lack of evidence that it had a measurable impact on re-offending (Robins, 2013).

Since then, there has been little interest in the UK in the community court model, at least among high-ranking government officials. The broader idea of community justice, however, continues to reverberate. Signs of this can be seen in Scotland and in smaller experiments like Highbury Community Advice in Islington.

The idea of community justice is also being adapted in the US to respond to changing conditions on the ground. For example, instead of creating a free-standing courthouse, Spokane, Washington used local libraries as a launching pad in an effort to engage homeless individuals who have been charged with minor offenses.

The Brownsville Community Justice Center is also a significant departure from the Red Hook model. The most significant difference is that it does not contain a courtroom or process criminal cases, as is the case in Red Hook. This is a reflection of the community’s deep skepticism about the formal apparatus of the justice system; many important local voices made it clear that they did not want a courthouse in their community.

Instead, the Brownsville Justice Center focuses on working with local young people, providing both those involved in the justice system and those who are not, with

employment and other opportunities to gain new skills and broaden their horizons. The Brownsville Community Justice Center also works to improve safety by reclaiming public spaces where illegal activity has flourished.

In the summer of 2021, I talked with Deron Johnston, the deputy director of community development at the Center for Court Innovation, about the ideas that animate the Brownsville Community Justice Center, local perceptions of the police, and different approaches to community engagement. Johnston played a key role in the development of the Justice Center, joining the project as a case manager in 2013 and rising through the ranks to serve as the director of the project from 2017-2021.

While the Brownsville Community Justice Center, is, of course, the product of an idiosyncratic set of circumstances and personalities that can't be easily replicated, the challenges it confronts and the strategies it has employed are not unique to Brownsville. Indeed, the Justice Center offers a blueprint for any crime-plagued neighbourhood that seeks to reduce both local violence and the harms that are often associated with the conventional criminal justice system.

The following transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Policing in Brownsville

Berman: Rewind for me: how did you first come to the Brownsville Community Justice Center?

Johnston: It was 2013. I had been working at public schools in New Jersey with special education children for a few years. I knew that I wanted to be more impactful than just working with 10 or 15 kids a year, so I started looking for a new job. I found the Brownsville Community Justice Center on Google. I saw a listing for a case manager position. I applied and I got lucky.

Berman: Had you been to Brownsville before?

Johnston: I had. I grew up in New Jersey, but my mom lived in Brooklyn for a time and my best friend 's family lived in the Tilden Houses (a public housing development in Brownsville). So I was familiar.

Berman: If you can cast your mind back to 2013, what were your impressions of Brownsville as you got to know it again in a different light?

Johnston: It reminded me of the tightknit, loving environments I grew up in – large families, everyone hanging out in the park, brilliant innovators in black vernacular, music, and fashion. I was struck by folks having a deep historical/political awareness that shaped their understanding of their current environment. And I remember being accepted, even though I wasn't from Brownsville, because I understood so many of the challenges that people faced.

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To be completely honest, Brownsville reminded me of Newark, which is where I’m from. It had the post-apocalyptic feel of a historically and systemically neglected neighbourhood. Newark had a hard time recovering after the riots in the 1960s. In Brownsville, I saw the same destitution. When you walk the streets in Brownsville, sometimes you see substance abuse right in front of you. You see poverty. You see hunger. You see the lack of jobs. You see the vacant buildings.

When I came to Brownsville, it reminded me of home. I think that was probably critical to the connections that I ended up making in the neighbourhood. When you grow up in those kinds of conditions, you either run away from it or you run towards it. I have chosen to run towards the trauma. As a professional, I have leaned into the problems that I see in communities like the one that I come from.

Berman: 2013 was a time when there was a big push to end the New York Police Department’s aggressive use of stop-and-frisk, including a court case that ended up ruling that it was unconstitutional. Were people talking about stop-and-frisk when you got to Brownsville?

Johnston: It was very much a part of everything. And I experienced it first-hand, to be honest. When I got to Brownsville as a case manager, I had a caseload of around 30 young people that I was supporting with wraparound social services. About 20 of the 30 had a direct justice system connection, whether they were coming home from prison or had a pending case or something. Along the way, many of them had been stopped and frisked. They were regularly patted down, officers saying, “What’s that smell?” and checking for marijuana, when there’s literally nothing to smell. I would experience the same thing where I lived - coming out of my apartment, getting in the car, and immediately being pulled over. I experienced it on both sides, personally and professionally.

Berman: What impact did this have on the young people that you were trying to serve?

Johnston: For the young people I was working with, it was just another day in the office. They were used to being abused by police. They were used to being stopped and frisked. They were used to sweeps. They were used to not being treated as a person by the police. When these things would happen - and make no mistake, they still happen - young people would come to my office and they would be upset about it. But it almost felt like they were saying it because they just wanted someone to confide in - they didn’t expect for anything to change. It was just regular. It was just how folks grow up. They were used to those kinds of interactions with police. But the staff at the Justice Center, we knew it was wrong and we felt it was our job to protect them and to try to hold police accountable as much as we could.

Berman: You work for an organization that has traditionally wanted to work in partnership with the police where possible. Did that feel emotionally fraught for you?

Johnston: When I came to Brownsville, I didn’t really see a purpose in working with the police. I felt like there was a brick wall between us. We do not speak the same language.

We do not care about the same things. We do not have the same solutions to problems. As I dealt with young people who had been traumatized by their interaction with police, this feeling only deepened.

I've had bad experiences with officers in Brownsville, really bad. I've been disrespected and undermined and dismissed in situations that were volatile and violent. I don't mean to say that all cops are trash, but I have not had many good experiences with them. And the ones that I have had tolerable experiences with tend to be Neighbourhood Coordination Officers who are supporting community events and stuff like that.

Fast forward to this past year. After all of the civic unrest in New York around police brutality, the NYPD has been reaching out, calling in community leaders and essentially asking folks what a better approach to public safety might be. They wanted advice, and so we share. The police say that they want to try different approaches to safety, but what it looks like from my vantage point is that they are just using the language that all of the community organizations have developed without actually doing the strategy. So again I end up, after this year, feeling like I don't really have much hope that the police will change.

Having said that, I do recognize that somebody has to sit at the table and engage with the police. There has to be somebody from the community that understands the challenges, that can at least attempt to advocate for the community and sustain some type of relationship with police because they are in our spaces and aren't going anywhere any time soon. If no one is at the table with them, community voices will be overlooked. From what I've seen in Brownsville, the local elected officials have been the best folks to sit at the table with them.

Engaging Young People

Berman: There has been a lot of media coverage recently about the uptick in shootings in New York City. Does Brownsville feel unsafe to you?

Johnston: Brownsville still feels like Brownsville. I think there are some homes in Brownsville that feel safe, and there are some folks in those homes that feel safe. And there are some homes and some folks in Brownsville who do not feel as safe.

Safety, to me, and this may sound trite, actually means freedom. Safety to me is I can wake up free from trauma. I can go outside confident in my identity. And there are cushions around me when I make mistakes because the community and the infrastructure around me is healthy and strong. To me, that's what safety is. I can just wake up, and I can be me, and I can explore myself, and build myself, and when I mess up, there's cushioning there that means I won't just die or go to jail because I made a mistake. I do think in Brownsville, it's really difficult to be free in this way.

Berman: You used the metaphor of cushioning. What do you mean by that? What would it look like for a young person to wake up in Brownsville with the kind of cushioning that you are talking about?

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Johnston: It means that a young person wakes up and they have gotten a complete night's rest. There's food on the table. There's something to eat. Their family members and siblings are sharing a good meal. Everyone has goals and they feel like they could actually reach them. If I'm a kid, I know I can actually make it to school without being jumped or stopped by police. I can go to the places that I need to go to achieve my goals. I can go to the local park to figure out what I'm going to do next. I can walk down the street and get a job. That's not easy to do right now in Brownsville. You can't just walk down the street, put in a job application, and get a job because there are no jobs.

That's what cushioning looks like to me. It also means that if I do make a mistake, there are not life-ruining consequences. In other parts of the city, when you're young, and you make a stupid mistake, and maybe you get fired from a job, you can just go around the corner to another place. You can't make those kinds of mistakes in Brownsville because those opportunities are few and far between.

Berman: You really pushed the Justice Center to incorporate economic opportunity for young people as a core element of the public safety strategy in Brownsville. Why was that?

Johnston: Part of the inspiration came from the young people coming into our space and just saying “I need money, man. I don't have money to do anything. I can't move out of this apartment. I can't buy a car. I can't even afford a Metro card. I can't help my mom who has medical condition.” They were coming in saying they really needed some money. Most of them were finding alternative ways to make it, and of course getting tied up in the justice system. That was part of the thinking: our young folks just needed money.

The other part of it was thinking about how to stop the revolving door. I would have a cohort of 30 young people that I would work with for six months, supporting them with all of their issues and challenges. They would leave and then another crop of 30 young people would come in with the same exact challenges. How can I put myself out of a job? How do we stop the revolving door? It became clear again that poverty and the lack of economic opportunity was really a driving force. We wanted to come up with innovative solutions for our young people. For us, entrepreneurship and workforce development were critical to putting some money in young people's pockets and keeping them away from the justice system.

We also want to be at the table with government and with the business sector to talk about investing in the neighbourhood. Why do you think folks are selling drugs and the quality of life is so poor? It's because there's really no investment happening in the spaces that they occupy. So, at the Brownsville Community Justice Center, we've been working to develop local merchant associations. And we've been working to transform neglected commercial corridors so that they are safer and young people can get jobs and folks can explore entrepreneurship. I will say, of course, that this work is layered and difficult and deep. It's not going to happen overnight.

Berman: It is one thing to create programming for young people. It is quite another thing to actually get them to come in and use it. How has Brownsville managed to engage kids, including those that are disconnected and justice-involved?

Johnston: Well, one component is that we're crazy. Sometimes we put ourselves into questionable situations. And cultural competency matters. We have folks on staff who understand trauma and what happens when you grow up in poverty. In general, we prioritize relationships and problem solving.

When I first started as a case manager, and a probation officer would send me a young person, I wasn't thinking about anything at that moment except getting to know him and establishing a safe relationship with this young person. Because of that, young people would just want to hang out in my office. They would just want to come back to the Justice Center to hang out. They felt safe talking to me about the challenges they were having. And that's where the problem solving piece comes in. Once I had formed a relationship, I would try to help them with things. Sometimes it was big things and sometimes it was small things. Like maybe they needed to get a copy of their birth certificate. Or maybe they needed food that night. Or maybe they got arrested and they need someone to pick them up, and I came through.

I was someone that they could call with those kinds of issues. I was doing that over and over and over with hundreds of young people each year. And it wasn't just me. It kind of snowballed. We just started having all of these young people that loved the Justice Center. And they still do. I wish I could tell you that there was some magical secret. But the key to successful engagement is basic: you need to really develop a relationship and actually help them with something. Just offer a safe relationship and everything will build from there.

Hot Spots and Placemaking

Berman: There are areas in Brownsville that I would call hotspots, that are magnets for criminal activity. Talk to me a little bit about how you have gone about addressing those areas.

Johnston: The first step is to spend time in that identified hotspot. That looks like walking through it and talking to folks so that we can start to get a feel for what's actually happening there. We then turn that up a bit and create a more formal assessment. Usually that involves looking at pedestrian traffic, looking at what activities are happening in that hotspot, looking at the physical structure of that hotspot, and then looking at what's available in that hotspot and what is not available in that hotspot.

Then that assessment tends to lead to some kind of working committee. For example, in one location we created a quality-of-life committee that included local residents, representatives of government, small business, and local organizations. We also invited some police officers because the hotspot assessment uncovered that there was a concentration of substance abuse and drug distribution and selling happening in that space. (It is important to note here that the alleged drug activity involved folks who were from outside of the community and who were taking advantage of vulnerable members of the Brownsville community.) So, the NYPD did an investigation and found that a local clinic was part of a larger ring that was selling opioids. A lot of activity was concentrated in a vacant lot that was right around the corner from this clinic. So now we're working on a place-making strategy to acquire the lot and reactivate it.

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When we're looking at hotspots, we spend time really looking at the problem, doing some real assessment. We create the type of stakeholder group that actually engaged members of the community in making decisions. And then we try to come up with creative solutions to actually address the problems that we have identified.

Berman: You mentioned the importance of having community members as part of the process. How do you think about community engagement? One of the things that I found challenging when I was doing similar work in the past was that I saw the same half dozen people from the community come out to every meeting. How do you think about that? Do you feel like there's a need to go beyond the established activist class that exists in any community?

Johnston: It depends upon the community. I don't think the Brownsville Community Justice Center would have been successful if we didn't go beyond the group you are talking about. The Justice Center was an outsider in Brownsville. We were not locally grown. We were not a black-owned organization. We brought a lot to the table, but we needed to prove ourselves. We needed to show that we had the ability to actually be helpful and impactful and create some change. Our ability to bring folks that usually aren't at the table to the table is what gave us the credibility and the foundation that we needed in order to win the support of existing stakeholders. So, for us specifically, having new and different voices -- particularly youth voices -- at the table has been critical to building our reputation and to developing our ability to solve problems.

Now, do I think that is the case for communities in general? I think it depends. Every community has its own fingerprint. Some communities have very active, and effective, pre-existing stakeholders. The same half dozen people may be coming to all the meetings, but those people might actually be getting things done.

One of the challenges we have in Brownsville is that some of the local stakeholders are simply overwhelmed. They might be a part of a two-person organization that doesn't actually have the resources to do what needs to be done. So, part of what we have been trying to do is to help other groups build their own capacity. I think it is critical to develop the neighbourhood's infrastructure.

Berman: You used the expression “place-making” earlier. What do you mean by place-making?

Johnston: Over the past year, this term has evolved into “place-keeping.” I think the reason why the language is shifting from “place-making” to “place-keeping” is to recognize that we aren't starting from scratch. We're not really “making” a place – there's already so much vibrance and life and creativity already there.

Whether you call it “place-making” or “place-keeping,” the idea is to look at how a given place or space can be a conduit for safety, can be a conduit for opportunity, can be a conduit for healing. The community has to play a central role in all of this. The ideas are coming from the community. And they have to maintain the space. They keep it. It is their space.

A concrete example of what I am talking about is a project that we worked on in Brownsville. There was a hotspot in the community where there was a lot of youth violence. We went in to see what was happening in this space. We did the kind of assessment that I spoke about earlier. Crucially, we established relationships with the young people that were at center of these challenges. When we spoke to those young people and asked them what they needed they said, "In order for us to be safe, we need a space where we can get trainings, where we can get educated, where we can grieve when someone passes, where we can come together." They said they wanted a clubhouse where they could do all of that. So, we leveraged our relationships in order to create that space for them. We did that five years ago. The clubhouse continues to provide a kind of reprieve for those young people to this day.

Berman: As you look back on the past decade in Brownsville, what are you proudest of?

Johnston: That's a hard question. The first thing that comes to mind is one of my participants who I saw just this past Monday. He stopped me in the middle of the street, and we hugged. This is someone who has had a lot of challenges. We helped him get a license so he could work as a security guard. I'm so proud of him. I'm proud of so many of our participants. Just last year, we helped six of them launch businesses. The achievements of our participants is a critical piece that I'm proud of.

I'm also proud of the folks who work at the Brownsville Community Justice Center. They show up. They really care. They are problem solvers. They may be tired but they're still going.

The last thing that I would say I'm proud of is the amount of investment that we have brought to the neighbourhood. We have helped millions of dollars come into Brownsville. That feels good. There are merchant associations and revitalization projects and other non-profits that weren't there before. We help them get resources and build their capacity to do the work. I feel really proud about that too. Those would be my top three.

Greg Berman is the executive director of the center for court innovation and the distinguished fellow of practice at the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. He previously served as the Center for Court Innovation (2002-2020). In that capacity, he helped to convene the 2004 US-UK roundtable about community justice that sought to inform the development of the North Liverpool Community Justice Centre. He currently serves as the chair of the Centre for Justice Innovation UK. His most recent book is Start Here: A Road Map to Reducing Mass Incarceration (The New Press).

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