

## FROM SYMPOSIUM TO ACTION: FIVE WAYS FOR LAW SCHOOLS TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN STUDENTS AND MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

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*Justice Reinvestment: The Solution to Mass Incarceration?* brought organizers, public defenders, prosecutors, community and policy advocates, social workers, and more to our law school space. Together, we learned how organized grassroots communities have become outraged at the massive influx of resources going towards the criminal justice system—from prisons, to parole systems, to prosecution offices, to police departments—instead of being invested in institutions and structures that can bring stability and opportunity to communities. Early childhood education, safe and affordable housing, long-term employment, and high-quality public schools, for example, go unfunded or underfunded, leaving communities to struggle and suffer. Failure to invest in these critical areas also leads to more involvement in the criminal justice system, making communities less safe and perpetuating generational cycles of poverty, injustice, and inequity.

Justice reinvestment—the idea of resizing and reprioritizing the criminal justice system and redistributing funds—has become an urgent demand of marginalized communities. Law schools, institutions whose resources and expertise could support such efforts and make a real impact, are often largely disconnected from communities and this campaign. Unfortunately, this is not a surprise to many. Law schools can often be too far removed from the real concerns of people on the ground. We become immersed in our studies and our scholarship, transfixed by all things “law.” Even with the growth of clinics and experiential learning opportunities, which tend to provide an outlet to contribute to community needs, if we are not extremely intentional, we can easily bypass the moral obligation we have to listen to and learn from communities. Indeed, when we do venture out of our siloed legal world, we typically parachute in to share our expertise and provide direction to others.

This symposium reminded us that we must do more to bridge the gap that exists between law students and the outside world. More specifically, we must find ways to connect our students to the marginalized communities who are demanding their voices be heard. Law students and

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lawyers have a role to play in campaigns like the fight for justice reinvestment, but we have to do a far better job of preparing future lawyers for what such a fight entails.

There are many ways to transform law schools over the long term so that the lines between law school and community begin to blur. We need to engage in the in-depth analysis and study that is needed to transform legal education so it can become a structure that supports marginalized communities and teaches students how to support communities as lawyers. But, there are also small steps that we can take that will begin to pave the way for such a transformation, while simultaneously connecting students to communities, their concerns, and their campaigns.

Here are five steps law schools can take right now:

***1. Expand the types of required reading for students, and align more of the curriculum with social movements.***

Cases, statutes, and law review articles all have a place, but they cannot teach students everything there is to know about the law, let alone social change work. Too often, we fail to provide the sociopolitical context that is needed to understand complex crises and inequities and, thus, our students leave us with a lens that is far too discrete and singular. As students read a case, they also need to read about the corresponding social movement. As students study statutory language, they need to study the campaign that led to the enactment of the law. We have the ability to contextualize many, if not most, legal issues alongside historic and current movements—now, we rarely ask students to study any. This is true in the context of justice reinvestment as well. Numerous studies and reports exist that focus on justice reinvestment from a range of perspectives. Youth testimonials on their experiences with lack of investment in their education and overinvestment in the militarization of their schools and criminalization of their behaviors exists. Videos, news articles, books, blog posts, and more documenting grassroots movements to fight for justice reform exist. We must integrate these sorts of studies into our curriculum.

***2. Expand who is deemed qualified to teach and supervise our students, and create opportunities for students to pursue systems change work.***

Law schools typically train students to think like lawyers; hence, lawyers typically think *only* like lawyers. Because of what we fail to do, many have no idea how to comprehend even tackling an issue like justice reinvestment. Organizers, youth leaders, policy advocates, social workers, communications specialists, and lobbyists, among others, play integral roles in fighting for systemic social change. Our students, however, get little to no exposure to such experts in the classroom or in the field. We need to change this so we can better replicate their future realities

and expand their appreciation for other necessary perspectives. We need to allow students to pursue field placements with non-lawyers, and we need to allow non-lawyers to teach classes within our building as well. It is not enough to simply allow our students to enroll in courses at their own free will in other graduate programs. We have to integrate such voices into our existing curriculum, legitimizing those voices and valuing them as part of the toolkit that is necessary for any lawyer seeking to engage in systemic reform. Consider who is more qualified to teach our students the lay of the land of justice reinvestment in Colorado and provide opportunities to impact systemic reform than Ricardo Martínez, longtime grassroots organizer and co-founder of *Padres y Jóvenes Unidos*, or Christie Donner, executive director of the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition? We simply must allow such opportunities to exist.

### ***3. Share our physical space.***

By physically opening our doors to members of the non-legal community, we can begin to break down barriers between lawyers and non-lawyers. Inviting others to join our space demonstrates to our students and to non-lawyers that we believe what happens in our buildings should be accessible to those beyond our walls, and that we welcome other voices and perspectives. Law schools can regularly host and promote conferences, trainings, workshops, and other events dedicated to social change and social movements, regardless of whether they include lawyers. For example, we now know the justice reinvestment community in Colorado. What if we regularly hosted meetings among the players at the law school, providing them with a space to work together and gain the benefits of law school support? Opportunities for our students would likely result and we would play a small role in fostering social change locally.

### ***4. Introduce concepts of coalition building and collaboration.***

The competitive nature of legal education has been widely documented. We also know that traditional litigation tactics—the tactics many law students are regularly exposed to—are, by their nature, adversarial. And, we know that with the exception of some experiential learning opportunities, students do not typically work in teams in law school. The problem? Broad-sweeping social change—social change like what a justice reinvestment campaign aims to do and can do—essentially requires working collaboratively with others, both fellow lawyers and non-lawyers. If we care at all about achieving social change and preparing our students to be able to impact such work, we must do a better job of offering opportunities that expose students to how to use their legal skills in a collaborative manner, and begin to allow them to study and practice the art of effectively working with others.

### *5. Establish movement lawyering clinics.*

How can a lawyer play a role in a local, state, or national movement like justice reinvestment? What value does the legal lens bring to movement work? How can a lawyer navigate relationships between lawyers and grassroots communities? Most law students have no idea how to answer any of these questions, as few have been given the opportunity to explore them. Law schools can offer robust, in-house clinics that provide support to organized communities so students can experience first-hand what lawyering in partnership with movements really looks like. Law school clinics offer intensive and intentional instruction to the benefit of our students. Movement lawyering demands the same level of attention. Imagine the learning experiences that could result from a movement lawyering clinic taught in partnership by some of the lawyers and grassroots organizers that attended the symposium and are actively collaborating to pursue state legislative justice reinvestment reform. All of a sudden, movement lawyering would no longer be a term that few and far lawyers understand. We would have the opportunity to truly immerse students in a real life campaign and in the concept of the practice.

If we are serious about bridging the gap between law schools and communities, we can start with a robust, thoughtful symposium that integrates movements and the law, but this cannot be where we end. Lawyers can absolutely play a role in campaigns like justice reinvestment, but only if we as legal institutions do better. If we fail to expand our students' training and exposure, we not only fail them, but we also fail the grassroots communities that can benefit from our support. To support the social change we seek, we must change too. Just five steps begin to move us from symposium to action. What are we waiting for?