

COMMUNITY MEMBERS IDENTIFY GAPS IN WYANDOTTE COUNTY'S CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM

Community Researchers from Wyandotte County (WyCo), with the support of the Vera Institute of Justice, held focus group meetings with WyCo residents to learn about their perceptions of the Wyandotte County criminal legal system.[1]

Focus groups participants (including adult English and Spanish speakers, youth, and houseless adults) noted:

- a **LACK OF FAIRNESS** of the local criminal legal system;
- a **LACK OF EDUCATION** about how the system works;
- and an expressed need for the system to **SERVE COMMUNITIES BETTER**.

[1] WyCo District Attorney Mark Dupree's office invited the Vera Institute of Justice to engage in this work and is open to community-driven recommendations and solutions. The qualitative data gathered in the focus groups supports findings based on administrative data provided by the DA's office and analyzed by Vera staff.

LACK OF FAIRNESS: includes racial and economic injustice, unfair policing, excessive charges, and disproportionate bail.

"[The criminal legal system targets] lower income areas and puts more police in those areas so that those people could go to jail more, knowing that some of those people can't pay bond, don't have the money or the lawyers to get out of jail for those crimes." (youth community member)



Photo: Nichelle Barton

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LACK OF EDUCATION: includes the inability to understand evidence and not knowing one's rights, including not knowing immigrants' rights.



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"The first thing they do is throw this documentation in front of [the defendants] and say, 'Sign right here.' They haven't read nothing 'cause they can't read, or they use the excuse, 'I don't have my reading glasses,' which really is [their way of] saying, I can't read. And then they say, 'Sign right here,' and then, all of a sudden, it's like, 'Oh, I didn't realize what I was signing.' Well, that's the way the system blinds individuals because they know that their education level [is low]."

(community member)

The criminal legal system needs to **BETTER SERVE COMMUNITIES:** by being less punitive and by providing access to resources that can address issues of houselessness, mental health challenges, and substance use. It is also important to gain a better understanding of how the entire community is affected by contact with the system.

"I have a term that says, 'justice involved.' And that's not just the person [who] gets the conviction, justice involved [means], it is the family, our community, our neighbors, because it affects all of us."

(community member)



Photo: Nichelle Barton

WHAT'S NEXT?

Community researchers will continue gathering data through surveys and interviews. Get connected to utilize your voice and be a part of the change you want to see in WyCo!