Art Beyond Bars
A Case Study of the People’s Paper Co-op in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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Art Beyond Bars

In a city like Philadelphia, which has one of the highest incarceration rates of all large cities in the United States,¹ how can reentry services better address the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals?² The number of government assistance programs and nonprofit services meant to serve Philadelphians returning from jails and prisons is growing, but many remain underutilized and inaccessible to those who need them most. People with lived experience, who know the shortcomings of these services and the barriers to access them firsthand, are uniquely positioned to reform how services are delivered. But, too often, they lack the social and cultural capital to advocate for their needs. In 2014, ArtPlace America and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation funded the creative placemaking work of the People's Paper Co-op (PPC), which uses arts and culture strategies to develop and implement a model of reentry service provision that aims to be not only accessible and effective, but also engaging and representative of the needs of the Philadelphia residents it serves.

The PPC is a participatory program of the Village of Arts and Humanities (the Village) that seeks to enhance reentry service provision by introducing arts and culture to a Philadelphia neighborhood where rates of incarceration are high. The arts have been used in justice system reform efforts for decades, notably in correctional programming, and a growing body of evidence has established its effectiveness in preventing violence and enhancing well-being (Brewster 2014; Gardner, Hager, and Hillman 2014; Yahner et al. 2015). Research suggests that exposure to the arts helps incarcerated people develop agency and voice,³ build social and emotional learning skills (Brewster 2014; Yahner et al. 2015), strengthen problem-solving capabilities (Gussak 2007, 2009), and address substance misuse and mental health issues (Tannenbaum 2015).

Similarly, arts-based desistance programs, designed to aid reintegration, have expanded nationwide⁴ and gained traction at even the federal level: in 2015, then-Attorney General Loretta Lynch noted that “the arts serve a fundamental need—as a creative outlet and form of self-expression, providing opportunities for collaboration, emotional growth, and talent exploration.”⁵ But, despite its proliferation, research on the scope of arts-based reentry strategies, explaining how they work and how they can be effective, remains scarce (Cheliotis and Jordanoska 2016). This case study documents how PPC integrates a place-based arts and culture strategy into participatory efforts to strengthen reentry services, while improving the well-being of formerly incarcerated individuals. Box 1 discusses creative placemaking and community safety and describes the three case studies of creative placemaking that accompany this report.
BOX 1
Creative Placemaking and Community Safety: Research Agenda

Public, private, nonprofit, and community sectors have begun using creative placemaking strategies to address the challenges facing disinvested communities and their residents, with barriers to public safety being one area of focus. Creative placemaking is a strategic and collaborative approach to the physical, social, and economic development of neighborhoods around arts and culture. We understand “arts” broadly to include murals, music, sculpture, and dance, but it also incorporates creative work more generally, such as promoting entrepreneurism, creatively engaging stakeholders, and using space in novel ways.

Although prior work has drawn links between creative placemaking and public safety, we lack specific knowledge about how public safety-oriented programs that integrate creative placemaking address public safety challenges. This is one of four case studies, and a report synthesizing common themes, that aim to fill this knowledge gap. The other studies include the following:

- **The Beerline Trail and ARTery** project in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, focuses on how cultural organizations are working with police, other local law enforcement agencies, and community groups to turn places perceived as unsafe or actually unsafe into community assets.

- **Eden Night Live** in Alameda, California, is an effort by the county sheriff’s department to build a community space by working with community developers, artists, and arts and cultural organizations and to rethink the department’s mission, priorities, and ways of engaging with the community.

- **The People’s Paper Co-op** in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, analyzes artist-led programs and initiatives aimed at reducing recidivism and working with formerly incarcerated residents through transformative artmaking.

The four programs featured in this series vary in how they address community safety through creative placemaking. The case studies discuss their design, implementation, challenges, and successes. This work aims to inform others interested in understanding how creative placemaking improves community safety, as well as how to measure the effectiveness of these interventions. Although creative placemaking is only one part of the work local stakeholders are undertaking to improve community safety, these case studies focus on that thread.

The Urban Institute collected information for the creative placemaking and community safety case studies between August 2017 and March 2018. Data we collected include semistructured phone interviews with ArtPlace/LISC staff, semistructured, in-person interviews with stakeholders, broadly defined to include community leaders, local artists, nonprofit partner staff, and city government agency staff, in-person focus groups with program participants, systematic observations of key events (i.e., planning meetings, public events), surveys administered by site staff, and a document review of quarterly reports, memos, grant applications, presentations, and other materials. Content, survey, and secondary data analysis methods were used to identify common themes and recommendations presented in the creative placemaking and community safety case studies.
The People’s Paper Co-op

The PPC was developed in 2014 as a program of the Village in the Fairhill-Hartranft neighborhood of north Philadelphia. Founded in 1986, the Village is a community-based arts organization that aims in part to enhance public spaces in Fairhill-Hartranft through arts and culture strategies. Since its inception, the Village has worked to engage neighborhood residents in events that leverage the local community’s assets to creatively revitalize its public spaces. Building trust between its artists and local community members is a core component of the Village’s strategy to advance community-driven development. As part of this strategy, the Village founded the SPACES artist residency program in 2014. The program launched its first solicitation that year, inviting visiting artists from around the country to codevelop and creatively activate community spaces in Fairhill-Hartranft, with and for community members. Each year since its inception, the program has brought together visiting artists and neighborhood residents to participate in four- to nine-month residencies. Collectively, they assess and identify community needs and develop creative, social interventions.

The programs proposed by artists are reviewed by a panel of community members and Village staff. The PPC was among several programs selected to form the inaugural SPACES cohort. The PPC’s core activities include the People’s Expungement Clinic, which enhances a community expungement clinic through arts and culture, and the Women in Reentry internship program, which aims to improve the accessibility of reentry services for returning women. Together, these activities support PPC’s broader goals of strengthening the leadership capabilities of people affected by incarceration so they can have a say in reentry service provision reform and increasing the accessibility and uptake of reentry services. In 2015, PPC remained a full-time, permanent program of the Village.

The People’s Expungement Clinic

An estimated one in five people in Philadelphia have some type of criminal record. In Pennsylvania, even people who are arrested for crimes that do not result in conviction may retain a criminal record. The public accessibility of these records can be far reaching, magnifying barriers to employment, among various other areas of social life that are made more difficult after release. Employers, who frequently access criminal history information as part of routine background checks, are less likely to hire people who have experienced incarceration (Duane, Reimal, and Lynch 2017; Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll 2003), especially those who are Black (Pager 2003, 2007).
People with prior justice system involvement who are able to secure jobs may struggle with keeping them (Pettit and Lyons 2007; Tyler and Kling 2007), in part because of challenges like housing instability (Geller and Curtis 2011), family obligations (Berg and Huebner 2011; Hofferth and Collins 2000), transportation barriers (Corcoran, Danziger, and Tolman 2004; Visher and Travis 2003), and, in some cases, the criminal justice system itself. For example, the high demands of postrelease community supervision, such as supervision meetings, may interfere with a supervisee’s work schedule and cause absences from work (Rakis 2005).

Many states, including Pennsylvania, authorize criminal records to be sealed or expunged, barring individuals’ court involvement from the public view. In June 2018, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf signed the landmark Clean Slate Act, which permits minor, nonviolent criminal records to be automatically sealed if the individual does not acquire a subsequent misdemeanor conviction within 10 years or summary offense within 5 years. The bill also prompts the automatic sealing of arrests that did not result in convictions within 60 days. Record clearing is correlated with indicators of financial stability. One study in California, for instance, found an average yearly income increase of $6,190 after expungement (Chapin et al. 2014).

Although the bill was considered a watershed moment for Philadelphians with criminal records, the legislation was narrow in scope, and leaving the barriers to access expungement services high. The pool of individuals who can access expungement is restricted to those who have committed low-level offenses. Those who are eligible may be prohibited by financial costs and geographic distance from services. Expungements are legally required to be filed in the county where the arrest occurred, and filing fees vary widely by state. Only 12 counties in Philadelphia had no filing costs in 2015, and some counties charged over $100. Additionally, prior reentry research has highlighted a “service delivery mismatch” in which reentry services are geographically out of reach for those who need them (La Vigne and Mamalian 2003). Access to reliable transportation is limited in low income neighborhoods, where most formerly incarcerated individuals return (Luther et al. 2011); many of them face disincentives to seek services due to the unpredictability and rising costs of public transportation.

For years, organizations like the Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity and Community Legal Services have assisted expungement clients in house, but more recently they have begun holding community-based clinics to serve targeted, high-need areas that may otherwise face large hurdles to access. In 2014, PPC began collaborating with the Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity’s free expungement clinics, and currently work with Community Legal Services. Both locally based legal services organizations regularly hold community-based clinics throughout the city, and PPC’s partnership was intended to creatively activate the clinic space.
The PPC has supported both organizations with recruiting legal services clients, primarily through word-of-mouth. Although flyers and social media advertisements are used to recruit clients, PPC interviewees emphasized the importance of leveraging personal connections to gain the buy-in of potential clients who may otherwise be skeptical of receiving support from a service that, from their remarks, represents a flawed system. Formerly incarcerated individuals who are already involved in PPC’s key activities are critical to recruiting others who may benefit from expungement services, not only for their ability to bridge gaps in trust as credible messengers, but also because of their residential geographic proximity to others who slip through the reentry system’s cracks.

People released from jails and prisons often return to neighborhoods that experience high rates of poverty and disinvestment (Harding, Morenoff, and Herbert 2013; Morenoff and Harding 2014; Wakefield and Uggen 2010). They also come home to neighborhoods with high concentrations of people who have been affected by incarceration (La Vigne and Cowan 2005). Likewise, most people accessing Community Legal Services’ community expungement clinics, including People’s Expungement Clinic clients, reside in areas of concentrated disadvantage and neighborhoods with large shares of residents who have incarceration histories (figure 2). Because many PPC participants live in
communities where rates of unmet expungement needs are high, and given that they may have greater social interaction with others who are returning to these communities than those who do not live in them, it follows that PPC participants should be integral in efforts to raising awareness and increasing accessibility. As study participants suggested, their built-in community connections may be critical to connecting those recently released from jail and prison to such expungement services.

FIGURE 2
People Released from Philadelphia Jails and Prisons Served by the People’s Expungement Clinic

Source: Author’s tabulations of 2014–18 Community Legal Services expungement clinic data and 2015 data from the City of Philadelphia.

But, these connections may be hindered by the notable police presence affecting neighborhoods with high shares of people released from jails and prisons, which are predominantly comprised of low-income communities of color (Liberman and Fontaine 2015). Research shows that the collateral
consequences of the justice system may destabilize a community’s collective efficacy, that is, its ability to organize and identify mutually agreed-upon solutions to problems affecting their communities (Bandura 1977). Where collective efficacy is weak, so too is civic participation and community cohesion. In neighborhoods where high police presence and incarceration are prevalent, low levels of collective efficacy limit residents’ abilities to take part in efforts to reform the systems that may themselves undermine community safety (Jannetta, Travis, and McCoy 2018). One such example could be mobilizing neighbors to reinforce participation in community events like the People’s Expungement Clinic. But, recent research has highlighted the potential of nonprofit organizations, suggesting that enhanced availability and accessibility of social services could help strengthen collective efficacy in communities where it is most acutely absent (Sharkey, Torrats-Espinosa, and Takyar 2017). This possibility reinforces the need for creative strategies to enhance the delivery of reentry services in ways that are accessible and participatory.

ENGAGING PEOPLE RETURNING HOME IN ADVOCACY

All expungement clinic clients receive information about their legal rights from a “Know Your Rights” training co-led by co-op members and Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity or Community Legal Services lawyers. The quarterly clinics are staffed by Women in Reentry interns and members of the Reentry Think Tank, another arts-based reentry advocacy program that is also run by the PPC directors (see appendix B). These staff allay the concerns of clients, often by sharing personal experiences of getting their records expunged. While waiting to be seen, clients can also choose to complete the “Reentry Bill of Rights for Returning Citizens,” a survey administered by the Reentry Think Tank.

The survey contains 23 open-ended questions, such as, “If you were in power, what programs would you start to ensure that people with criminal records have access to a need [that people with criminal records have]?” and “When people look at your criminal record, what about you as a human being do you wish they saw?” Responses to the survey are used as part of the think tank’s broader “People’s Bill of Rights” campaign. The bill aggregates a list of policy suggestions developed by people returning home centered on reforming reentry services in Philadelphia.

The open-ended nature of the questionnaire lends itself to recommendations that may not fit squarely into traditional ideas about reform. In the context of the People’s Expungement Clinic, the Reentry Bill of Rights fosters an opportunity for clients to be civically engaged in reentry advocacy, enabling them to become active participants in reform efforts intended to improve their service needs.
“It’s something that we would like to be placed into law. Just like when you go to a hospital, you have a Patient’s Bill of Rights. What you’re expecting, what’s expected from them . . . it’s the same thing here. It follows the same principles as a preamble, and once you read it, you start feeling the words, because you understand that it’s not just rhetoric. It’s somebody’s voice. ‘We the people, the 70 million…’ and it just continues from there.” – Think tank fellow

“PAPER SHOULDN’T HOLD US BACK”
After clients meet with attorneys, they bring a printout of their record to PPC staff, who help shred, pulp, and redevelop it into a clean sheet of paper. Clients then embed a “reverse mugshot” polaroid portrait into a new sheet of paper, along with a response to the prompt, “Without my criminal record, I am...” This latter half of the PPC expungement clinic process represents a wholesale departure from the former, which is focused primarily on recounting, as the PPC codirector explained, “what was probably the worst day of that person’s life, telling the same story over and over again.” By engaging clients who may themselves not identify as artists in an artistic activity focused on the future, the papermaking process helps clients reimagine the expungement clinic as a space characterized by possibility and transformative potential.

“You’re taking that negative piece of paper and turning it into something that’s positive. It symbolizes that that’s your old life, and now here I am with a new life. I’m still the same person. It’s written on the same paper. But it’s a whole different look.” – Think tank fellow

Interviewees across the board described the papermaking process as a powerful tool for healing from the harms of incarceration. Inscribing clients’ hopes and desires for the future onto the remade sheet of paper offers them an opportunity to put their pasts behind them and rewrite their stories. These repurposed rap sheets with their new narratives are sewn into a quilt that is displayed in venues across the city, such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia City Hall, galleries, churches, and other legal clinics. As a public-facing exhibit, the quilt is intended to generate awareness of the nuanced ways people experience reentry while shedding light on the structural barriers that adversely affect many areas of social life for those returning home (figure 3).
Women in Reentry Internship

In spring 2016, PPC launched the Women in Reentry internship. The internship was funded shortly after PPC hired one of the program’s original neighborhood artists as a paid lead fellow of PPC. This hiring decision catalyzed a turning point in PPC: with a formerly incarcerated woman now co-leading PPC, the program’s vision evolved to focus specifically on supporting women returning from incarceration. The PPC’s shift toward gender justice was made in part to address what stakeholders noted as a deficiency of effective services for formerly incarcerated women.

The accessibility challenges of postrelease services are especially salient for returning women, who are the fastest-growing population of people behind bars. Between 1980 and 2016, female imprisonment increased by more than 700 percent (Carson 2018), outpacing men by more than 50 percent (Sawyer 2018). In 2016, Pennsylvania’s female incarceration rate was roughly 43 per 100,000 women (Carson 2018). Upon release, many of them face greater challenges than men with obtaining housing (Fontaine 2013), securing and retaining employment (McLemore and Warner Hand 2017), gaining stable family support (Fontaine et al. 2012), dealing with intimate partner violence (Hairston and Oliver 2006; Harris 2015), securing child support (La Vigne, Brooks, and Lloyd 2009), and addressing mental health and substance misuse issues (Salem et al. 2013; Visher and Bakken 2014).
These challenges are magnified for women of color, who make up the majority of women released from Philadelphia’s jails and prisons (figure 4).

**FIGURE 4**
Percentage of Women Released from Philadelphia Jails and Prisons by Race or Ethnicity, 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>59.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 3,638.

Further, women are overlooked when it comes to reentry programming, even though studies find they report significantly more service needs than do men (Garcia and Ritter 2012). An evaluation of housing, education, employment, and behavioral services offered to 357 women returning from prison in 11 states found that the sample of women who received services experienced positive gains on employment and substance misuse outcomes, but they had worse outcomes than the control group on housing, family and peer relationships, and physical and mental health (Lattimore and Visher 2010), suggesting services were inadequate.

Garcia and Ritter (2012) suggest that these service gaps exist because most reentry programming has been designed for the needs of men returning from prisons. Whereas men’s top service needs, on which most reentry programs are based, include antisocial behavior, antisocial personality, antisocial attitudes, and antisocial peers (Bonta and Andrews 2007), the top four needs for women include support for employment and financial well-being, substance misuse, parenting, and anger (Van Voorhis et al. 2013). A limited, but growing number of reentry programs addressing the unique needs of women have recently begun to show positive results: women in gender-responsive treatment settings, for example, experience reductions in posttraumatic stress disorder and improvements in work, family, and
relationships (Messina, Calhoun, and Braithwaite 2014). But, programs such as these are few and far between and remain largely underused.

The Women in Reentry internship was designed to meet the overlooked needs of returning women. Each year, PPC staff facilitate programming for two cohorts of between six to eight interns each. The interns, who are co-op members, are nominated by halfway houses and local community organizations that serve formerly incarcerated individuals. They meet twice a week at the Village’s storefront space in Fairhill-Hartranft for 12 consecutive weeks.

“It’s different. It’s like, okay, I can be goofy with these people. I can get deep with these girls. Just be yourself, like, sometimes outside of here you can’t. You have to put on a different suit because of your job or whatever. Here, I’m allowed to be myself.” – Women in Reentry intern

Primarily, Women in Reentry interns help run the Village’s storefront, where PPC sells paper products such as books and journals created through the same papermaking process used by the People’s Expungement Clinic. Co-op members develop the paper products during the internship by using recycled materials donated by local businesses, and each journal includes a poem or short story about their experiences returning home. Their expressions, says the PPC codirector, are “like bringing a human element into an object.” The books and journals are sold at the Eastern State Penitentiary, citywide markets and fairs, and online. Nearly all interviewees described the storefront as a “community space” or a “community living room,” suggesting it functioned as more than a commercial enterprise. Box 2 describes how one local group uses the storefront to provide basic reentry services.

In addition to running the storefront, Women in Reentry interns participate in a broad swath of activities during the 12 weeks that are intended to support their emotional and professional development. Participant interviewees from across cohorts mentioned participating in legal and “know your rights” workshops, yoga classes, poetry labs, computer literacy, and workforce development training.
BOX 2
Walk-in Reentry Services

Since October 2016, the storefront has been donated to Walk-in Reentry Services (WIRES) for two hours a week throughout the academic calendar year. Operated by the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Social Policy and Practice, WIRES provides clients with case management services. Clients come from throughout the city and through word of mouth. The most common service clients request is procuring a photo ID, which is necessary to meet most other service needs. Other services include clothing, resume review, counseling, personal action plan development, and financial assessments. WIRES also acts as a resource center, connecting clients to services that may be beyond the scope of what WIRES can offer. In many ways, WIRES complements PPC’s work. WIRES volunteers are trained to focus on providing services that “meet [clients] where they’re at” in such a way that volunteers allow formerly justice-involved individuals to be the experts of their own reentry experience.

Source: Study interviews with WIRES volunteers
Note: N = 3.

FIGURE 5
The Village Storefront

Photo courtesy of Mark Strandquist.
WOMEN IN REENTRY RESOURCE GUIDE

Throughout the internship, locally based artists, advocates, policymakers, and service providers working in the criminal justice space periodically deliver presentations to Women in Reentry interns. These presentations reportedly tend to focus on the service options and resources available to formerly incarcerated people in Philadelphia as well as their legal rights. Many of them are tailored specifically to the needs of women leaving jails and prisons.

“There were resources out there for me all this time. Why did it take me 10 times to cycle in and out of jail for me to find them?” – Women in Reentry intern

To centralize these resources in one accessible place, in 2015 interns began documenting what they learned from the informational sessions to assemble a Women in Reentry Resource Guide. The guide was established with the purpose of informing formerly incarcerated and soon-to-be-released women in Philadelphia about services to which they may not otherwise have access or knowledge. As a first step toward that goal, in fall 2018, the program has plans to partner with students from Drexel University College of Medicine to create a health-based resource guide that will draw on the Women in Reentry Resource Guide and be distributed through the national publication, Prison Health News.

WOMEN WITH INCARCERATION HISTORIES ORGANIZING

Internship participants help plan and facilitate two ongoing events dedicated to formerly incarcerated women living in the Philadelphia area. Since 2016, PPC has hosted “Ladies Night,” a monthly gathering space for women in the Fairhill-Hartranft neighborhood; each month is focused on a different theme developed by participants and typically involves discussion and artmaking. Additionally, in spring 2017, PPC held the city’s first annual Women in Reentry day, the culmination of the Women in Reentry internship. Attendees included service providers, advocates, city government officials, and probation and parole officers. Most probation and parole personnel do not attend because of supervision responsibilities, but out of interest and support. In 2018, PPC partnered with the Philadelphia Community Bail Fund, raising over $95,000 to bail mothers out of the city’s prisons prior to Mother’s Day.

Held at the Village, the event includes a symposium for service providers and advocates to connect with one another and share ideas on how to support women returning home. It also houses a resource
fair, an opportunity for reentry service providers to advertise their services. Artwork created by members of the co-op is displayed at the event to better connect the audience to the issue at hand (figure 6). “The art,” explains the PPC codirector, “becomes the background, the classroom, the stage to bring all these people together around this idea of ‘How do we better support women who are coming home?’”

FIGURE 6
Artwork at Women in Reentry Day, 2018

Monitoring and Evaluation

Much of the information collected by PPC staff is qualitative and composed of paper files. These files include documents from paper-based activities that are part of the People’s Expungement Clinic and the Women in Reentry internship; responses to open-ended surveys administered at the People’s Expungement Clinic; and artwork produced by PPC co-op members. The PPC’s work also is well-documented in thousands of photographs collected by the organization.

This large volume of records can support a detailed qualitative assessment of PPC’s progress, but to estimate the program’s broader outcomes and effects, quantitative performance metrics would be needed. Developing monitoring practices that can routinely capture key indicators of success and
regularly analyzing programmatic data to inform the program’s decisions would enhance PPC’s ability to evaluate its work and address gaps. Presently, the program has limited funding capacity to implement self-evaluation procedures that would enable assessment and improvement of its impact on Philadelphians returning from incarceration.

Creative and Participatory Reentry Services and Community Safety

The PPC’s creative placemaking intervention has made strides in the way of advancing community safety in the Fairhill-Hartranft neighborhood and, through its arts-based participatory reentry service provision reform efforts, the city of Philadelphia broadly.

Formerly Justice-Involved Individuals Leading Reform

At its core, PPC’s work hinges on the close partnership between justice-involved individuals and artists, lawyers, organizers, and service providers. Its work is fueled by the people who are most intimately familiar with incarceration and reentry. In recent years, there has been a growing push among criminal justice researchers, practitioners, and advocates alike to listen to community members and consider their input in the process of reforming the system that affects their own communities.

The PPC takes this idea a step further by working to redistribute power, social capital, and institutional access. By positioning people exiting jails and prisons as experts of their own experiences, PPC not only provides those returning home a seat at the decisionmaking table, but it also offers them the tools to make their voices heard. Through an innovative cohort model, it also gives select women throughout the Philadelphia area a toolkit to develop the skills and platform to lead their own reform efforts, empowering women with incarceration histories to influence the decisions that affect their own lives.

Building Community Around Shared Experiences

Participant interviewees emphasized that, by building a cohort of women returning from incarceration and working with others to transform reentry services, PPC builds community and develops the community’s capacity and social capital. Research on reentry programming underscores that people with lived experience—credible messengers—are uniquely suited to influence others experiencing
reentry (Austria and Peterson 2017; Lynch et al. 2018). As reported expungement clinic recruitment efforts showed, harnessing the collective power of people who have experiences with the justice system can also have promising implications for service referrals.

“I know a little something. I know some services here. She knows a little something. She has some other services over there. What I can’t do, she can do, and what I can, she can’t. Individually, we know a little, but together, we know a whole hell of a lot, and when we come together, we should be able to help every and anybody.” – Think tank fellow

The “PPC network” provides a platform for support and mentorship among formerly incarcerated people. Of a sample of 141 responses to the Reentry Bill of Rights survey, over 90 percent of respondents indicated they would use their experience to mentor other returning individuals. Among those respondents, 78 percent reported they would provide mentorship by sharing their experiences with others to “lead them on the right path,” as several respondents noted, and 20 percent said they would do so by connecting others like themselves to education, employment, and mental health resources. Respondents who did not report they would use their experience to mentor others (10 percent) indicated they would help advocate for issues affecting people returning home. The overwhelming desire to provide mentorship might suggest that connections with others dealing with similar postrelease obstacles could provide those returning home valuable support as they seek to regain stability that may have been lost during incarceration.

Arts and Culture as Reform Levers

The PPC’s work amplifies the voices of people returning home to ensure they are active in the process of making their communities safer through the redesign of a participatory form of social service provision. Spearheaded by returning women, the artwork created at the People’s Expungement Clinic and in the Women in Reentry internship is disseminated to public spaces and institutions to shed light on the harms of incarceration and disrupt what participants described as “complacency” around the needs of returning individuals. Almost unanimously, interviewees reiterated the importance of the creative aspect of PPC’s placemaking and institution-rebuilding efforts. Art and culture were described
as fueling systems change, impacting both the public perceptions of those with criminal records and consequently the material hardships they experience.

Historically, decisions made around reforming the criminal justice system have excluded people affected by its collateral consequences in both obvious and subtle ways. Structural and institutional barriers are paramount to the lack of participation among those who have been affected by incarceration. Art provides a lever for dialogue between people affected by criminal justice policies and government stakeholders with the institutional access to reform them. One Women in Reentry intern, for example, described the artwork she created throughout the internship as helping her develop agency in a way that writing or other modes of expression did not permit. She explained that “because art can be anything,” she felt the freedom to tell her story on her own terms, not by what her criminal record might say about her.

“I think the art is accessible and kind of neutral and can be a vehicle for narratives that otherwise may be perceived as threatening or make people defensive. Just the presence of the artwork can change the feel of a space or environment. It’s sort of de-othering, making it not about clients. These are the recipients and beneficiaries of services, but first and foremost, they are people.” – Advocacy stakeholder

Art also enables reform of the legal clinic into a temporary “creative” space. Through creative placemaking, PPC brings lawyers, advocates, and clients together to cultivate a sense of community, allowing clients to be a part of a shared experience as they contribute their voices to a collective effort with others in similar circumstances.

Challenges and Next Steps

Most stakeholders praised PPC’s work and described few challenges that pose barriers to implementation, besides the limited access to funding. As participant interviewees mentioned, PPC’s limited resources also constrain its ability to conduct outreach activities that would ensure that its services are accessible to a broader client base. Although most expungement clients report being knowledgeable about navigating the law, they are on average less aware of how to navigate the service
provision landscape (figure 7). The PPC aims to fill this gap by leaning on its various partners to expand outreach efforts. Nonetheless, interviewees noted that this challenge persisted and that people returning home were generally unaware of such services without firsthand knowledge from co-op members.

**FIGURE 7**

Knowledge about the Justice System

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How well do you understand the amount of programs available to those with criminal records?</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well do you understand how your criminal record impacts your rights?</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Reentry Bill of Rights for Returning Citizens survey.

*Notes:* Items ranked on a 1–10 scale. *N = 169.*

Although some core components of the PPC program have remained throughout its initial years of implementation, much of its programming continues to evolve and has been developed ad hoc. The PPC’s successes are made possible by its flexibility to navigate through trial and error. Although program staff acknowledge the limits of this approach, they maintain that it cultivates creativity and innovation in ways that support people returning home from prison or jail. Going forward, the program intends to expand its network of service providers and other agencies that support people returning home in Philadelphia and increase representation from critical missing sectors. Continuing to leverage the collective capital of all the people and organizations involved would greatly enhance the program’s goals of increasing formerly incarcerated individuals’ access to power and transforming social services. Particularly, building capacity for participant recruitment and research and evaluation should be key priorities for PPC as it seeks to strengthen and sustain its network of those with prior justice involvement and improve reentry services in Philadelphia.

The PPC represents a model intervention at the intersection of creative placemaking and community safety. As a place-based organization whose mission is animated by an issue affecting large pockets of the community, PPC has formed close-knit ties to the Fairhill-Hartranft neighborhood of Philadelphia and helped build stronger connections among service providers and mobilize them to empower several hundreds of expungement clinic clients to participate in and lead the way on reforming reentry service provision. Moreover, PPC’s work through the People’s Expungement Clinic
and the Women in Reentry internship program demonstrates exemplary ways place-based artistic endeavors can support the well-being of people returning from incarceration. These are conditions that may lend themselves to civic engagement among those who face the greatest barriers to community participation. Involvement in the community and working toward shared goals are constitutive elements of community safety, and, as our interview findings suggest, arts and culture may play an important role in that process.

Although limited in its scope and generalizability, this descriptive case study, as one of a four-part series, helps paint an increasingly fuller picture of the link between creative placemaking and community safety. Certainly, more qualitative research investigating different, varied approaches to creative placemaking and community safety would be needed to better understand and perhaps measure the relationship between the two. But the rich qualitative insights offered by individuals associated with PPC indicate that the connection between arts and culture and safety, facilitated around a singular purpose such as participatory reentry service provision, shows much potential and merits continued consideration.
Appendix A. Logic Model

**Inputs:**
- Core Partners
  - People exiting jails and prisons
  - Community residents of Fairhill-Hartranft
  - Artists-in-Residence
  - Village of Arts and Humanities

**Inputs: Other Partners and Stakeholders**
- Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity
- Community Legal Services
- Service providers
- Organizations from the Philadelphia Reentry Coalition

**Activities**
- SPACES Residency
- People's Expungement Clinic
- Storefront
- Women in Reentry Internship

**Outputs**
- PPC artists build relationships with residents of Fairhill-Hartranft and work with neighborhood artists on community-based projects
- Develop and sell handmade books and paper items
- Create and distribute artwork
- Record clearing
- Connect people to reentry services
- Paper "Reverse Mugshot" exhibited in institutions across the city
- Employ formerly incarcerated women
- Cultivate spaces to convene women returning from jails and prisons so they can network and provide support to one another
- Design creative expungement clinic intervention in collaboration with community members
- Link formerly incarcerated individuals to various government and nonprofit stakeholders

**Outcomes**
- Collective efficacy
- Expanded access to services
- Healing and reintegration
- Inform law and policy
- Civic Participation
- Employment
Appendix B. The Reentry Think Tank

In 2016, PPC’s codirectors launched the Reentry Think Tank, a 12-week fellowship program that funds 10 to 15 think tank fellows to lead reentry advocacy campaigns in Philadelphia twice a year. Although separate from the Village, the think tank extends PPC’s place-based work to reach more communities in Philadelphia.

Think tank fellows, who are nominated by reentry service organizations, work directly with the city’s Reentry Coalition, a broad working group of over 100 local, state, and federal government agencies; community-based service providers; researchers; advocates; people returning home; faith-based groups; and others collaborating to strengthen their collective capacity to support those returning home. As coalition members, think tank fellows work with these agencies on strategic outreach. In 2017, the think tank worked directly with the Defender Association of Philadelphia, a nonprofit organization that provides court-appointed defense for criminal and delinquency cases in the city. In its application, the organization noted that it struggled to build trust with clients. Noting the absence of an inviting, family-friendly waiting area, think tank fellows developed and murals and posters to post throughout the organization’s space. Additionally, think tank members designed and institutionalized a “Resume for Freedom” booklet clients complete during intake. The booklet prompts invite clients to share any information they’d like their attorneys to know about them, besides what is on their record.

In the fall of 2018, think tank fellows collaborated with the Philadelphia Mayor’s Office of Reintegration Services. One of the largest reentry organizations in the city, the office routes individuals returning from jails and prisons to services that match their needs. Remarking that the office space itself resembled a prison atrium walkway, think tank fellows developed and hung artwork throughout the building, including signage to direct clients and blown-up self-portraits. In spring 2018, the think tank began a leadership training series developed to equip people released from jails and prisons with the tools, networks, and skills to become leaders in reentry reform. Stakeholders across sectors facilitate trainings in areas such as public speaking, media training, and event planning. With funding from the Open Societies Foundation, think tank leaders are administering a pre- and posttraining survey to measure the impact of its curriculum.
Notes


2 Because a substantial portion of people returning from our nation’s jails and prisons are undocumented (see, e.g., M. Landgrave and A. Nowrasteh, 2018, Incarcerated Immigrants in 2016: Their Numbers, Demographics, and Countries of Origin 2016, Washington, DC: Cato Institute, https://www.cato.org/publications/immigration-research-policy-brief/their-numbers-demographics-countries-origin), this report avoids language such as “returning citizens.” Instead, people-first terms like “formerly incarcerated individuals,” “people returning home,” and similar variations are used to acknowledge the range of individuals returning from jails and prisons, including people who are undocumented.


4 See, for example, Reentry through the Arts (http://www.arts.ca.gov/programs/rta.php); the ImagineBusProject (http://imaginebusproject.org/program/); Right to Return USA Fellowship (https://www.rightofreturnusa.com/); and Reimagining Reentry Fellowship (https://www.muralarts.org/artworks/reimagining-reentry/).


6 Fair Criminal Record Screening Standards, § 9-3501.

7 House Bill No. 1419.

8 Sealing indicates that records may still be viewed by law enforcement agencies, employers who are required to consider criminal records under federal law, and employers who used FBI background checks.


10 Credible messengers are neighborhood leaders and individuals who have relevant life experiences to help motivate change, often among those who are affected by the justice system. They are distinguished from other mentors in their relatability coming from the same communities, their own involvement with the justice system, and their skills and training in mentoring. See, for example, M. Lynch, 2018, “How Credible Messengers Translate Experience into Action in Criminal Justice,” Urban Wire (blog), https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-credible-messengers-translate-experience-action-criminal-justice.

References


About the Author

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