



Center
for
Court
Innovation

Building the Research Base

An Evaluation Blueprint
for Community Courts

Center for Court Innovation

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Introduction

For nearly three decades, community courts have offered a highly localized, flexible approach to addressing crime and disorder. The model's inherent malleability has allowed community courts to flourish in centralized courthouses, neighborhood-based satellite courts, local libraries, community centers, and other locations. Some community courts focus on criminal cases, while others include non-criminal violations, juvenile cases, housing matters, and more. Community courts differ even in the ways they resolve cases, with some incorporating peer-to-peer youth courts, restorative justice programs, mediation, and other innovative approaches that supplement the traditional adversarial process.

This adaptability, however, has also made community courts more difficult to evaluate than other, more standardized models. Compared to drug courts, for example, there is a marked lack of research on the community court model, and few conclusions can be drawn about what specific features or practices are important for a community court's success. To promote a more robust research base, and to help develop an evidence-based framework for the model, this paper sets forth a blueprint to guide future community court evaluations. It begins with a brief discussion of the evolution of community courts and a description of the research challenges they present. It then sets out seven key principles found in community courts: **individualized justice, community engagement, alternative outcomes, client accountability, system accountability, enhanced information, and collaboration**. The blueprint concludes with strategies for isolating and testing the impact of the key principles that undergird community courts.

This blueprint is the product of a national gathering of researchers and experts in community courts and related fields who came together to discuss the state of community courts in the 21st century. For the first time, this blueprint defines the essential features of the community court model in a way that can be measured consistently across the model's many local variations. Using this blueprint, researchers and practitioners can build the research base for the model, help community courts to adopt evidence-based practices, and ensure that community courts remain a sustainable, impactful solution to local problems.

The community court movement began with a single experiment in neighborhood-focused justice—the Midtown Community Court—which opened in New York City's Times Square neighborhood in 1993. Building upon earlier innovations in problem-oriented policing and specialized problem-solving courts, the Midtown Community Court sought to apply a problem-solving approach at the neighborhood level to meet the needs of justice-involved individuals and address neighborhood conditions related to crime. The court combined accountability and help, requiring defendants to perform meaningful community restitution while also connecting them with individualized services, like substance use treatment and employment assistance. The Midtown experiment has since led to the development of nearly 60 community courts across the United States and dozens more internationally.



The Community Court Model

Community courts share a number of key features with other problem-solving court models. They aim to improve public safety and reduce reoffending by addressing underlying issues—like substance use disorder and chronic unemployment—that often bring people into the justice system. To achieve these goals, community courts employ a less adversarial approach that encourages collaboration between the legal parties, prioritize alternatives to jail and fines, mandate participation in rehabilitative services, and use ongoing judicial monitoring to promote compliance.

Despite these similarities, however, community courts differ from other problem-solving models in important ways. Notably, community courts do not focus on one particular issue (as drug courts do) or a specific population (as veterans treatment courts do). Rather, they aim to address a broad array of community concerns related to crime and disorder within a specific neighborhood or geographically defined area. Reflecting local needs, some community courts focus on lower-level crimes like property theft and vandalism, while others also handle non-criminal concerns like housing and juvenile cases.

Community engagement also plays a much larger role in community courts than in other problem-solving courts. From their earliest planning stages, community courts work with neighborhood residents, business owners, community-based organizations, schools, religious institutions, and other stakeholders to identify priority issues and to leverage community resources to address those issues. They convene community advisory boards that meet regularly with judges and court staff, conduct resident surveys and focus groups, and design community service projects in collaboration with community members. Moreover, the court’s on-site services can be offered to community members on a voluntary basis, even if they do not have a court case.

Community courts are also uniquely positioned to help address longstanding racial and ethnic disparities in the justice system. With their focus on reducing the unnecessary use of jail, using summonses instead of custodial arrest and pre-trial detention, making individualized decisions, and providing litigants with help and access to culturally-relevant services, community courts can help to ensure that justice is being administered fairly and that they are not perpetuating practices that disproportionately harm communities of color.

The Research Gap

The community court model's adaptability is one of its greatest strengths—it has allowed the model to flourish in communities as diverse as New York City (America's largest city), Milliken, Colorado (a small, rural town), and Aneth, Utah (in the most remote corner of the Navajo Nation). Moreover, the model's flexibility enables community courts to focus on the kinds of cases that each community identifies as a priority.

The Red Hook Community Justice Center, for example, is a neighborhood-based community court in Brooklyn, New York that hears a mix of cases that would normally be heard in separate criminal, civil, and family courts. Jersey City Community Solutions uses community court principles within the city's main municipal courthouse, offering thousands of defendants in lower-level cases the option of resolving their cases by engaging in community service and social services. The Spokane Community Court is located within the Downtown Spokane Public Library and addresses lower-level offenses in the city's downtown core.

Their diversity, however, has also made community courts more difficult to evaluate than drug courts and other problem-solving courts. While drug courts tend to have relatively consistent goals—reducing reoffending and substance misuse—and can be evaluated using readily accessible justice system data, community courts are tailored to

meet the needs of their neighborhoods and seek to impact community life beyond simple case outcomes. This inherent variability makes the model and its goals harder to define. In addition, community courts' focus on both individual- and community-level outcomes necessitates challenging methodological questions (e.g., how to define community) and new data sources (e.g., community perceptions of the justice system).

These differences in program goals, performance measures, and data sources have led to a striking disparity in the research base for drug courts and community courts.¹ Researchers have conducted hundreds of drug court evaluations in the past three decades, including several major meta-analyses. In comparison, there have been around 20 evaluations of community courts, analyzing 11 community courts in the United States, two in the United Kingdom, and one in Australia.

To be sure, there have been some important evaluations of community courts, including a National Center for State Courts study of the Red Hook Community Justice Center,² a multi-agency study of the Midtown Community Court,³ and others.⁴ Despite these achievements, however, there remains a relative paucity of community court research, and this research gap poses replication challenges for community courts and leaves the model vulnerable in policy climates that use evidence-based practices to guide funding priorities.

Toward a More Robust Research Base

To begin addressing the need for a more robust community court research base, the Center for Court Innovation convened a two-day roundtable discussion in September 2019 at its headquarters in New York City. Participants included experienced community court practitioners from across the country, experts in community-justice system relations, and leading researchers in the field. The roundtable, which was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance, was designed to tackle the evaluation

challenges of community courts head-on, with particular emphasis on measuring the community engagement features and community-focused outcomes that make community courts unique among problem-solving courts. The roundtable agenda and a list of participants are included in Appendix A. Following the roundtable, Center for Court Innovation researchers and community court experts held a series of meetings to distill key themes and develop a practical foundation for the next generation of community court research.



An Evaluation Blueprint for Community Courts

The following outlines an evaluation blueprint for community courts. The blueprint is intended to guide community court practitioners and their research partners in developing future evaluations of the community court model. It is organized along the seven guiding principles of community courts: **individualized justice, community engagement, alternative outcomes, client accountability, system accountability, enhanced information,**

and collaboration. The blueprint provides a broad description of each principle, common strategies that community courts use to effectuate the principle, and specific performance metrics associated with measuring each strategy.

Before turning to the full blueprint, however, the first three principles—individualized justice, community engagement, and alternative outcomes—warrant



special consideration. These three principles are applied in particularly unique ways in community courts, even when compared with other problem-solving courts. Therefore, these principles are discussed in detail below, with particular attention to how each of the three principles can be analyzed in the context of a process evaluation or impact evaluation. Following this discussion, the full blueprint—covering all seven guiding principles—is set forth in table form.

We encourage researchers to use this blueprint to design new research on the community court model and hope that it will help to build a research base that supports cross-site comparison and, ultimately, a set of evidence-based best practices for community courts.

INDIVIDUALIZED JUSTICE

Unlike other problem-solving court models, community courts tend not to focus on a particular problem, like substance use, and instead seek to holistically address needs and reduce risk of reoffending among individuals cycling through the justice system. Often, community court clients present with relatively minor charges and a constellation of issues, which may include unstable housing, chronic unemployment, exposure to trauma, history of human trafficking, lack of childcare, medical challenges, and much more. In this context, an individualized approach to justice is particularly important.

Community courts have pioneered a number of practices to achieve this highly individualized approach, including:

- Individualized risk-need assessment using validated assessment tools
- Court mandates that are legally proportionate and informed by risk-need-responsivity principles
- On-site services to engage clients immediately and reduce obstacles to compliance
- Cross-training staff in procedural justice practices
- Close collaboration with community-based agencies to provide additional services

Evaluating individualized justice strategies requires the ability to track and analyze data for each individual client coming into the courthouse.

The first step is implementation of a robust data tracking system that houses case-level data on each client (e.g., demographic information, arrest and charge information, risk-need assessment results, case management plans, compliance with court mandates, engagement with local service providers, and case disposition). Once a sound data system exists, it can be used in many ways to evaluate the individualized justice approach in a community court.

Population profiles and descriptive studies

- Charge, risk, and need profiles of community court participants over time
- Retention and successful mandate completion rates
- Trends in treatment and service engagement
- Relationship between client characteristics, mandate types, and success rates

Impact evaluations

Many practitioners will be interested in whether their strategies for promoting individualized justice will have an impact on clients in the longer term by reducing recidivism, meeting client needs, or improving individual perceptions of the justice system. In order to do this, practitioners and their research partners should identify a comparison group—a group of individuals similar to the community court cohort based on charge, criminal history, or and demographics—whose cases went through a traditional court. Using this approach allows courts to isolate the effect of the community court on important indicators:

- Case outcomes (e.g., jail versus community-based sentences)
- Treatment engagement
- Recidivism
- Client perceptions of the court
- Client perceptions of procedural justice

While case outcomes and recidivism may be measurable using administrative or court records, defendant perceptions would require focus groups or interviews with community court clients as well as with individuals who went through the traditional system. In either case, it's the comparative approach that allows researchers to isolate the impact of the community court model.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A key component of community courts is the direct connection between the court and the community itself. This relationship between the justice system and the community strives to be mutually beneficial: the community influencing the creation and priorities of the court, the court providing localized justice to help restore the community for the harm caused by crime and violence. Working in partnership, the court and community can foster new responses to problems, like training residents to lead restorative justice circles or facilitating community by leading environmental scans or identifying community restitution projects for participants and community members to work on side-by-side. Community courts can also play a role in improving the physical conditions of the utilizing Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles to help improve lighting and remove features that can attract crime. At their best, community courts can even help to strengthen the fabric of the community by hosting community events, like outdoor movie nights or community cookouts, and building connections between residents.

The community plays a central role in:

- Prioritizing the crime and disorder issues that the court will focus on
- Keeping the court informed about crime trends and the community conditions associated with crime and disorder
- Serving on a community advisory board to help guide the court design, operations, and priorities
- Submitting requests for meaningful community services projects

Likewise, the community court and its staff can engage the community by:

- Sharing information about the court's services by presenting to community groups and tabling at local events
- Organizing events—like community art projects, back to school giveaways, and outdoor movies—that bring community members together and build healthy connections
- Offering voluntary walk-in services to help residents—including individuals who are not court-involved—address their needs

Evaluating the extent to which the court fosters community engagement requires defining the community, identifying what needs the community has identified as important, and how the community court has addressed those needs.

Process evaluations

The following process evaluation activities can provide those answers:

- Needs assessment to identify community members' goals for the court
- Performance metrics based on goals identified by the community
- Document review of community court planning documents
- Interviews with current and former advisory board members

Impact on the community

Different strategies can be used to determine the impact of the court on the community, depending on what impact you are interested in measuring.

- Pre- and post-community perceptions surveys measure changes in perceptions about the community court and justice system. This is a good opportunity to use Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods, with community members fully engaged in the design and execution of the survey and analysis of findings.

- Qualitative interviews and focus groups with partners and stakeholders, including treatment providers, law enforcement, and neighborhood associations about their interactions with the community court staff and clients.
- A change point analysis of catchment area crime provides useful information on changes in crime and arrests over time. Importantly, anyone conducting change point analysis should beware of attribution error and document other factors that could also contribute to changes in crime rates in the neighborhood.

ALTERNATIVE OUTCOMES

Community courts resolve cases in ways that improve public safety while addressing root causes of crime and disorder and building public trust in the justice system. Community courts seek to reduce the unnecessary use of jail and fines, while instead prioritizing alternative approaches that address the underlying causes of crime, link participants to on-site and community-based services, and repair the harm done to the community. Some alternative dispositions used by community courts include:

- Meaningful community service projects that repay the community for the harm done and contribute to the strengthening of the community
- Mandated social services—like substance use treatment, mental health counseling, employment services, housing assistance, etc.—that help participants build capacity and avoid reoffending
- Using restorative justice approaches—like peacemaking circles, family group conferencing, and mediation—to help participants heal relationships and strengthen community and family ties

Profile of alternative outcomes

Comparing the practices of a community court with those of a similarly situated traditional courtroom can highlight the differences in outcomes prior to conducting an impact evaluation. Additionally, documenting these outcomes can provide a

template for other, traditional courts to possibly incorporate some restorative practices. Use the following methods to document alternative practices:

- Structured courtroom observations
- Interviews and focus groups with staff to document day-to-day practices of specific programs
- Observation of restorative practices
- Quantitative statistical analysis of court data, program participation, and written agreements from restorative practices

Impact of alternative outcomes

Evaluating the impact of alternative outcomes in community court extends beyond simply looking at re-arrest rates for individuals who participated in the community court compared to those who did not. It requires carefully considering the effect the alternative dispositions have on individuals, families, the community, and the justice system overall. An impact evaluation of alternative outcomes would look at:

- Reduction in offending behavior
- Improved relationships
- Increased participant compliance with restitution and acceptance of responsibility
- Improved victim/participant satisfaction
- Cost effectiveness



Evaluation Blueprint for Community Courts

PRINCIPLE 1. INDIVIDUALIZED JUSTICE	
Community courts take an individualized approach to justice that is tailored to the specific circumstances of each participant	
Strategies	Performance Measures Resource Center
Screen each client using a validated risk-need tool to identify the client's risk of reoffending and criminogenic needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of participants screened for risk and need using a validated tool • Average number of days between arrest and screening • Percentage of cases in which screening results are used to craft court mandate and/or disposition
Use mandates that are proportional to charge severity, potential legal exposure, client's risk level, and client's need profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court maintains written guidelines setting forth a typical range of mandates for different scenarios (charge, legal exposure, risk level, needs) • Percentage of mandates that comport with the court's written guidelines
Mandates are individually tailored to respond to each client's risk level and need profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court employs or partners with licensed clinicians who are responsible for determining each client's specific treatment plan and/or other services • Type and intensity of compliance monitoring is appropriate to each client's risk of reoffending, documented substance use disorder, mental health needs, and other objective, individualized factors • Whenever possible, community restitution projects bear some connection to the crime committed

PRINCIPLE 2. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT Community courts engage community residents, businesses, service providers, and other stakeholders to ensure that the court is identifying, prioritizing, and solving local problems	
Strategies	Performance Measures Resource Center
Maintain a community advisory board to help guide the court’s design and operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree to which the advisory board is multi-disciplinary and reflects the community’s institutional and community stakeholders • Number and frequency of advisory board meetings • Percentage of advisory board meetings for which detailed minutes and/or transcripts are recorded • Frequency with which the court utilizes advisory board input to make significant decisions re: court design or operations
Offer voluntary, on-site services for all community members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and types of services offered to community members on a voluntary basis • Number of service providers offering voluntary services • Number of community members engaged in voluntary services; frequency of engagement with each type of voluntary service offered • Steps taken to advertise voluntary services to the community
Community has a voice in identifying meaningful restitution projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods and frequency with which the court solicits community input regarding the location and nature of community restitution projects • Frequency with which the court utilizes community input to design and implement community restitution projects • Community satisfaction with the design and implementation of community restitution project as measured by periodic surveys
Community members are offered opportunities to participate in the resolution of cases through neighborhood justice boards, restorative justice circles, and other participatory approaches to justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of community members trained to serve as neighborhood justice board members, restorative justice circle participants, etc. • Number of cases/sessions in which community members participate

<p>Court helps to organize community events that bring residents together for activities that build relationships and strengthen the fabric of the community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of community events held monthly/annually • Number of community members participating in community events • Community feedback and satisfaction with events as measured by periodic surveys
<p>PRINCIPLE 3. ALTERNATIVE OUTCOMES</p> <p>Community courts prioritize the use of meaningful alternatives to jail and fines that address clients' underlying problems, strengthen the community, and improve public trust in justice</p>	
<p>Strategies</p>	<p>Performance Measures Resource Center</p>
<p>Reduce the use of jail sentences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of reduction in cases resulting in a jail sentence compared to other courts in the jurisdiction and/or pre-community court dispositions • In cases resulting in jail sentences, reduction in number of average jail days imposed
<p>Reduce the use of fines and fees</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of reduction in cases resulting in fines/fees compared to other courts in the jurisdiction and/or pre-community court dispositions • In cases resulting in fines/fees, reduction in average amount imposed
<p>Increase the use of alternative sentences/sanctions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of increase in cases resulting in non-jail, non-fine dispositions • Percentage of increase in cases resulting in a community restitution mandate • Percentage of increase in cases resulting in a social service mandate • Number of participants who continue to engage in services voluntarily after the court mandate ends • Number of voluntary sessions/length of engagement in voluntary services after court mandate ends
<p>Decrease the number of cases resulting in criminal conviction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of decrease in cases resolved through guilty plea • Percentage of increase in cases resolved through pre-plea diversion, vacated guilty plea, or other non-conviction disposition

<p>Reduce reoffending</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of reduction in community court clients' 1-yr, 2-yr, 3-yr re-arrest/re-conviction rates • Percentage of reduction in community court clients' average number of re-arrests/re-convictions 1-yr, 2-yr, 3-yr post-disposition
<p>Save money</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difference in court operating costs compared to other courts in the jurisdiction • Savings to criminal justice system (considering reduced jail costs, reduced costs of reoffending, reduced victimization, etc.) • Savings systemwide (considering reduced emergency room admissions, reduced homelessness, etc.)
<p>Improve community perceptions of the court/justice system</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of increase in residents, businesses, etc. expressing improved perceptions of the court system post-community court implementation • Percentage of increase in residents, businesses, etc. expressing improved perceptions of the justice system as a whole (including police, probation, etc.) post-community court implementation
<p>PRINCIPLE 4. CLIENT ACCOUNTABILITY</p> <p>Community courts require clients to repair the harm they have caused to the community</p>	
<p>Strategies</p>	<p>Performance Measures Resource Center</p>
<p>Require individuals to perform meaningful community restitution</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of community restitution mandates and/or % of cases receiving community restitution mandates • Dollar value of labor invested in community through restitution projects • Type and frequency of community restitution projects • Length of community service mandates
<p>Employ restorative justice practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of restorative justice referrals • Number of sessions completed by referred individual • Number and types of participants taking part in restorative justice sessions • Types and frequency of restorative justice practices used

<p>Monitor compliance with court mandates</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of compliance data collected (e.g., court appearances, intake at service provider, attendance at treatment/other sessions, drug testing, etc.) • Methods by which compliance data is reviewed and shared • Length of time between noncompliance and court response • Types and frequency of sanctions used • Degree to which sanctions are graduated • Types and frequency of incentives used • Degree to which incentives are used in a graduated manner • Degree to which court responses to noncompliance are clearly communicated to participants in advance
<p>PRINCIPLE 5. SYSTEM ACCOUNTABILITY</p> <p>Community courts work to ensure that the court and their partner agencies are responsible to the participants and communities they serve</p>	
<p>Strategies</p>	<p>Performance Measures Resource Center</p>
<p>Monitor the quality and consistency of services provided by partner agencies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of written MOUs with partner agencies describing the specific services to be offered by each agency and outlining the agency's obligation to adhere to evidence-based practices whenever possible • Number and frequency of site visits conducted to partner agencies to review, observe, and/or learn about services provided • Use of client satisfaction surveys re: services received from specific providers; results of such surveys
<p>Maintain a community advisory board to help guide the court's design and operations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree to which the advisory board is multi-disciplinary and reflects the community's institutional and community stakeholders • Number and frequency of advisory board meetings • Percentage of advisory board meetings for which detailed minutes and/or transcripts are recorded • Frequency with which the court utilizes advisory board input to make significant decisions re: court design or operations

<p>Implement procedural justice-informed design elements in the court facility and operations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree to which signage is clear, understandable, and accessible for the court’s clients • Degree to which court officers, court staff, judge, and others interact with clients in a manner that reflects the values of procedural justice • Use of client satisfaction surveys re: signage and staff; results of such surveys
<p>Identify and address disparate racial and ethnic impacts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collection of appropriate demographic data and case processing/resolution data to identify potential disparate impacts (e.g., in case filing, plea offers, dispositions, services offered, sanctions, etc.) • Frequency with which data is analyzed to identify potential disparate impacts • Steps taken to address any disparate impacts identified (e.g., review with advisory board, discussion with community, revision of court policies and procedures, training for staff, etc.) • Degree to which any identified disparate impacts are reduced through remedial measures
<p>PRINCIPLE 6. ENHANCED INFORMATION</p> <p>Community courts collect, analyze, and utilize a wide array of information to make more informed decisions and improve outcomes for participants and the community</p>	
<p>Strategies</p>	<p>Performance Measures Resource Center</p>
<p>Maintain a robust case management system to track each client’s bio-psycho-social data and information about court appearances, mandates, compliance, and disposition</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of a specialized case management system designed to meet the needs of problem-solving courts
<p>Judge uses case management system to make informed decisions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether the judge has real-time access to the case management system from the bench • Percentage of cases in which judge uses information from the case management system to make decisions about court mandates, referrals to specific services, sanctions, case dispositions, etc.

<p>Judge, attorneys, and partners are trained in key issues affecting court clients, including substance use disorders, mental health, housing, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature and frequency of training provided to judge, attorneys, and others on key issues affecting court clients • Knowledge gains demonstrated by pre-/post-testing or other methods
<p>Judge, attorneys, and partners are educated about the community context of crime</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency with which judge, attorneys, and partners discuss community context of crime with advisory board, community members, and others • Extent to which the judge uses information about the community context of crime to inform decisions about service referrals, mandates, compliance monitoring, restitution, etc.
<p>PRINCIPLE 7. COLLABORATION</p> <p>Community courts bring together a diverse array of justice system players, service providers, and regular community members to improve collaboration and foster new responses to problems</p>	
<p>Strategies</p>	<p>Performance Measures Resource Center</p>
<p>Government agencies and community-based service providers offer services to community court clients and community members</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of providers offering services to clients and community members • Number and types of services offered on-site; off-site
<p>Court and service providers agree to share information, as appropriate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of written MOUs outlining each partner’s obligation to share information pertaining to client contacts, services provided, progress, compliance, etc. • Percentage of cases in which client information is shared as agreed
<p>Court and service providers adjust practices as needed to promote client success</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjustments to referral process, service delivery, compliance monitoring, etc. made in response to documented client outcomes
<p>Court works with schools, employers, and other partners to help promote client success</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of cases in which the court engages a client’s school, employer, or other relevant partner to coordinate services, supports, or information-sharing

Conclusion

Nearly three decades of experience have made it clear that community courts are complex, multidimensional entities that ultimately require a similarly complex, multidimensional evaluation framework. Using this blueprint, researchers can design future evaluations that consistently and rigorously explore all major facets of the community court model and allow for cross-site comparison of different community courts. In turn, a growing research base will allow the field to develop a set of evidence-based practices that court planners and practitioners can use to enhance existing community courts and build new ones that solve local problems as effectively as possible.

Community court evaluation is complicated by the evolving nature of the model itself. While the earliest community courts were self-contained, neighborhood-based based facilities, later adaptations of the model were launched in centralized courthouses, community centers, and libraries. Early community courts focused largely on minor crime—like turnstile jumping, vandalism, public indecency—while more recent models are increasingly focusing on non-punitive responses to homelessness, restorative justice approaches to neighborhood disputes, and other innovative strategies. Looking ahead, community courts will continue to evolve, particularly in response to the country’s overdue reckoning with systemic racism in the justice system and need to dismantle systems and practices that promote racial, gender, and class inequities. The authors will update this blueprint as needed to ensure that researchers have up-to-date guidance for evaluating this important model.



Endnotes

1. It should also be noted that community courts have not benefitted from federal research funding nearly to the degree that drug courts have. One of the driving forces behind the tidal wave of drug court research has been a consistent flow of federal funding from the National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, and other agencies over more than two decades.
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