

Reimagining Community Safety, Policing and the Future of Criminal Justice Reform

The impact of key events over the past five to six months is causing many in the disability and criminal justice community to think more creatively than ever before about ways to continue our work successfully. We are living in uncertain times and must put our best foot forward to meet current and anticipated challenges in the future. At [The Arc's National Center on Criminal Justice and Disability](#), we have been responding to the following key issues as we seek ways to consider our role and further our mission to promote and protect the human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) within the criminal justice system, both nationally and internationally.

- ***The immediate and long-term impact of COVID-19***

While NCCJD's [Pathways to Justice](#) has reached over 2,000 people in 14 states over the past five years, the pandemic has put a pause on training efforts since it is provided in-person only (this is by design in order to bring the community together from different professional groups and allow for one-on-one interactions between criminal justice professionals and people with I/DD). As many others are doing post-COVID, we are considering what future training could look like. For example, how can we provide effective online training that is also engaging by using a hybrid approach of combining both online and in-person training? How can we incorporate virtual reality technology that could create a more realistic and memorable learning experience for trainees? We are also working on a project funded by the [Bureau of Justice Assistance](#) to infuse I/DD throughout an online national law enforcement training curriculum that has traditionally focused on mental health disabilities (similar to Crisis Intervention Team training). The hope is that this will allow current and future CIT-trained officers to have a deeper understanding about I/DD, while also building their confidence and skill level when working with this population.

- ***Addressing the impact of racism within policing and its impact on people with I/DD***

In response to the killing of George Floyd, The Arc issued a [statement](#) advocating that we (as a disability community) must stand with those taking action against

systemic racism because too often members of marginalized communities are devalued and neglected. The statement encouraged members of The Arc to “step up and speak out...to uphold the rights of communities of color to be free from over policing, police brutality, misconduct, harassment and racism.” Before the tragic death of Mr. Floyd, NCCJD had been working to address these issues head on through webinars and training. Through the Pathways to Justice training, we are committed to educating officers, attorneys, victim advocates and others about intersectionality and the sometimes deadly consequences faced by those who have a disability and are marginalized in other ways.

[According to one report](#), almost half of the people killed by police have some kind of disability. [One research article](#) found that youth with disabilities are 13% more likely to be arrested than those without disabilities, and that figure jumps to 17% for Black youth with disabilities. In 2017 NCCJD hosted the webinar “[Policing & People with Disabilities: The Intersection of Race, Disability and Policing](#)” which delved deeply into intersections that can create discrimination and violence toward people with I/DD in the criminal justice system and explored innovative programs and potential solutions from around the country. We’ve also authored and edited [publications like this one](#) that highlights the story of a Black family worried about the safety of their child with autism and respond to media inquiries related to multiply marginalized groups, such as this story in [TIME Magazine](#).

NCCJD has worked closely with partner organizations over the past two years on a project that seeks to end violence in the lives of people with disabilities, with a focus on victims who are multiply marginalized and are the least likely to access services, support and healing. We are also considering ways to deepen our own understanding of these issues, considering who to partner with to support the work of anti-racism organizations and ensuring that the lens of intersectionality is applied throughout all of the center’s work.

- ***Reimagining community safety and the role of police***

As part of the reimagining process of the Center, we are considering how to be an effective ally in the movement to reform policing and the criminal/legal justice system. One key aspect is partnering with other rights-based agencies, such as racial justice advocates and organizations, to ensure that people living at the intersection of disability and other marginalized identities have a platform to be

heard within criminal justice reform movements. We are also working within an international “Access to Justice” Knowledge Hub supported by [Open Society Foundations](#) to conduct a review of promising practices and strategies that support public safety, with or without police involvement. Throughout the one-year project, we will seek guidance and input from people with disabilities and other marginalized communities while reimagining policing and considering how to effectively serve those currently involved in ineffective and oppressive systems of “justice.” Some key questions we are asking include: How do people with disabilities and those in marginalized communities perceive safety? What do they need to feel safe? How do they define safety? An in-depth review of these promising practices is critical and will reveal key information that can direct future work. This timely and in-depth discourse with other countries doing similar work in disability and criminal justice issues will spark new ideas and conversations that have the potential to redefine current assumptions about how criminal justice processes should work, and ways to prioritize prevention efforts that could impact international disability and criminal justice-related policy and practice.

It’s a relief that none of us must face these challenges alone. There is true power to change broken systems when we come together to create shared vision. While overwhelming at first, it can also reveal new opportunities to dream bigger than ever before when it comes to criminal justice reform. What are you as an individual or what is your organization currently facing related to these challenges? Feel free to reach out to me at LDavis@thearc.org with ideas or questions. I look forward to hearing from you!