

New institute looks at the criminal justice system in the Lehigh Valley through the lens of structural racism, crime, and justice

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing May 3, 2021

 Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder 

Gadfly shares his reading. What are you reading that you'd like to share?

*selections from Cecelia Khorrami, **“Reimagining Justice in the Lehigh Valley.”** Spring 2021 **Sustainable L V.***

The Lehigh Valley Justice Institute (LVJI) launched in December 2020 to develop a reimagined criminal justice system that is equitable and fair for all. The Institute was an outgrowth of the Color of Justice organization that has been working to bring attention to local criminal justice issues. Several Color of Justice members saw the need for an academic-level institute to conduct data-driven research on the various processes of the criminal justice complex and their effect on our communities.

As part of our long-range research collaborative, faculty members from Muhlenberg College, Lafayette College, Lehigh University, and Penn State University are taking a comprehensive look at the criminal justice system in the Lehigh Valley through the lens of structural racism, crime, and justice. Study of Lehigh and Northampton Counties affords our team the opportunity to take a “deep dive” into the intricacies of all aspects of the justice system, from policing, to the court processes, to jail conditions, to re-entry programs, to probation and parole. Since the Lehigh Valley is often seen as a microcosm of the nation, we believe the solutions we craft also could be implemented in other communities.

From the first point of contact to the aftermath of arrest and conviction, and every step in between, LVJI identifies aspects of the criminal justice system that have damaged our community rather than sustained it. LVJI

especially considers those who are most pressed by structural inequity, making them the priority that drives the reimagined system. From its inception, the American criminal justice system has been rooted in racism and oppression — bolstered by the wording of the 13th Amendment and resultant Jim Crow laws. For example, black Americans are jailed at five times the rate of white Americans. This disproportionately targets people of color and people who lack resources to escape the cycle. We continue to endure the strain of this dark past. The U.S. holds the world's highest incarceration rate per capita and the third-highest recidivism rate. By identifying the multilayered roots of each issue, and creating alternatives to a failed system, we can promote an equitable and community based justice system.

Although the criminal justice system is currently unsustainable, LVJI believes in the potential of creating a sustainable, restorative justice system that can promote sustainable communities — but the work still needs to be done. Progressive criminal justice policies oriented around safety and quality of life — like the ones present in Nordic countries — serve as an effective model for sustainability, by focusing heavily on rehabilitation and humane conditions. In addition, there is an emphasis on overall quality of life and equitable distribution of resources and social services.

Creating a reimagined system in the Valley is challenging, yet possible. Ideally, the criminal justice system would function through rehabilitation rather than punishment, as this would allow individuals to have a smooth, safe, and successful reentry into society. In this way, a reimagined system that serves the interests of the community leads to greater sustainability. Rehabilitation over penalization would promote sustainable living — both now and for the future.

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