COVER IMAGE: MOTHERS FOR ADEQUATE WELFARE PROTEST, BOSTON, 1966.
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58. Service Provider, in discussion with the author, 2022.
59. Service Provider, in discussion with the author, 2022.
60. Service Provider, in discussion with the author, 2022.
61. Service Provider, in discussion with the author, 2021.
62. Former Service Worker, in discussion with the author, 2022.
63. Service Provider, in discussion with the author, 2021.
64. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*.
65. Cate, *The Myth of the Community Fix*.
66. Vera Lopez, *Complicated Lives: Girls, Parents, Drugs, and Juvenile Justice* (Rutgers University Press, 2017); Ranita Ray and Korey Tillman, "Envisioning a Feminist Urban Ethnography: Structure, Culture, and New Directions in Poverty Studies," *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 1 (2019): e12652; Isabella C. Restrepo, "Pathologizing Latinas: Racialized Girlhood, Behavioral Diagnosis, and California's Foster Care System," *Girlhood Studies* 12, no. 3 (2019): 1–17; David Stovall, "A Challenge to Traditional Theory: Critical Race Theory, African-American Community Organizers, and Education," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26, no. 1 (2005): 95–108; Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Susila Gurusami, "Working for Redemption: Formerly Incarcerated Black Women and Punishment in the Labor Market," *Gender & Society* 31, no. 4 (2017): 433–56.
67. Service Provider, in discussion with the author, 2022.
68. Martensen, "Prison Is Not Feminist."
69. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; Gottschalk, "Razing the Carceral State."
70. Gilmore, Abolition Geography; Gorz, "Reform and Revolution"; Kaba and Ritchie, *No More Police*.
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73. The future of racialized punishment in our current uncertain and precarious moment is hard to predict. See Seid, "Project 2025's Plan for Criminal Justice"; Leadership Conference Education Fund, "Project 2025: What's At Stake for Immigrants' Rights," The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, August 2024, https://civilrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Project-2025-Immigrants-Rights.pdf; Thurgood Marshall Institute, "Counterproductive Public Safety Proposals: Less Accountability for Law Enforcement, More Punishment of Black Communities," *LDF. Thurgood Marshall Institute*, 2024, https://tminstituteldf.org/project-2025-public-safety-criminal-legal-system/.
74. Rachel Herzing, "Abolition Is Practical," *Inquest*, July 11, 2023, https://inquest.org/abolition-is-practical/.
75. Mimi E. Kim and V. Kalei Kanuha, "Restorative Justice and the Dance with the Devil," *Affilia* 37, no. 2 (2022): 189–93.
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Dear Reader,

While *The Scholar and Feminist Online* is usually a fully online publication, the Fall 2025 special issue, "Abolition Feminism and the Politics of Reproduction," has been simultaneously designed for print in an effort to facilitate intellectual exchange across prison walls. Copies of the full issue are available for free to incarcerated people through Haymarket's Books Not Bars program. Contributors include Bayan Abusneineh, Alisa Bierria, Orisanmi Burton, Sarah Haley, Kwaneta Harris, Tiffany Lethabo King, Kayla Marie Martensen, Sara Matthiesen, Judah Schept, Rosie Stockton, Emily Thuma, and Stevie Wilson. To request a copy, please visit tinyurl.com/SFO-in-print.

In solidarity,
Sarah Haley and Emily Thuma, Guest Editors

Carceral Collusions with "the Community": An Examination of Community-Based Juvenile Justice Reforms

KAYLA MARIE MARTENSEN

After decades of "get tough" policymaking, the United States has entered a moment of fractured reform. Policymakers and criminal justice reformers increasingly advocate for evidence-based alternatives to incarceration,[1] while activists push for decarceration and the reallocation of resources to community.[2] These changes have directed more energy, attention, and resources into community-based responses to "crime," reconfiguring the carceral landscape. Yet the trajectory is uneven: many jurisdictions have seen a resurgence of punitive politics and renewed investments in policing and incarceration, often reinforced by current federal priorities.[3] Taken together these contradictions have generated radical interdisciplinary interest in analyzing and understanding the evolving dynamics of this moment.

This reconfiguration of the carceral landscape is especially evident today with youth decarceration trends representing various community-based interventions that rely on public-private partnerships, leading to an increased reliance on community-based services,

41. Illinois youth prisons custody numbers have dropped by over 90 percent from their 1999 peak by 2023. In addition, other benevolent sites of confinement, such as group homes, mental and behavioral health hospitals, and drug treatment facilities, are being used as part of court orders. Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, *Annual Report* (IDJJ, 2023), https://idjj.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/idjj/2024-documents/2023%20ANNUAL%20REPORT%20IDJJ%20Final.pdf.
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52. Still, some participants in this study are community members who advocate for these reforms. Rather than framing their efforts as less community-based, these efforts can be situated in the political tension of the nonprofit industrial complex, where community labor is both indispensable to and constrained by the logics of reformist reform.
53. Explored further in a forthcoming book project.
54. Here I allude to how service providers are distinct entities with varying values, service missions, etc., and yet together, under the orchestration of the courts make up one industry. [See Also] Nicole Kaufman, "The State's Accomplices? Organizations and the Penal State 1," in *Prisoner Reentry in the 21st Century*, ed. Keesha M. Middlemass and Calvin John Smiley (Routledge, 2019); Philippa Tomczak, *The Penal Voluntary Sector* (Routledge, 2016); Kaitlyn Quinn and Philip Goodman, "Shaping the Road to Reentry: Organizational Variation and Narrative Labor in the Penal Voluntary Sector," *Punishment & Society* 25, no. 4 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745221128102.
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31. Cate, *The Myth of the Community Fix*.
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33. Thomas J. Bernard and Megan C. Kurlychek, *The Cycle of Juvenile Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Beth Caldwell, "Shifting the Paradigm: An Abolitionist Analysis of the Recent Juvenile Justice." *Nevada Law Journal* 23 (2022): 115.
34. Anthony M. Platt, *The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency* (University of Chicago Press, 1977).
35. Reuben Jonathan Miller, "Devolving the Carceral State: Race, Prisoner Reentry, and the Micro-Politics of Urban Poverty Management," *Punishment & Society* 16, no. 3 (2014); Miller and Amanda Alexander, "The Price of Carceral Citizenship: Punishment, Surveillance, and Social Welfare Policy in an Age of Carceral Expansion," *Michigan Journal of Race & Law* 21 (2015): 291.
36. Lynne Allison Haney, *Offending Women: Power, Punishment, and the Regulation of Desire* (University of California Press, 2010), 213–214. On this argument, please see INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (Duke University Press, 2017); Zhandarka Kurti and Jarrod Shanahan, "Carceral Non-Profits and the Limits of Prison Reform," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 20, no. 6 (2021); Jennifer Musto, *Control and Protect: Collaboration, Carceral Protection, and Domestic Sex Trafficking in the United States* (University of California Press, 2016); and Dylan Rodriguez, "The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2016), https://sfonline.barnard.edu/dylan-rodriguez-the-political-logic-of-the-non-profit-industrial-complex/.
37. Individuals remain marked by their convictions even while in services, limiting access to work, housing, and parental rights. They face hybrid punishment and surveillance managed by both the state and service agencies. See Benjamin J Mackey, "Penal Hybridization: State Influence and Local Resistance at a Community-Based Reentry Organization," *Punishment & Society* 26, no. 2 (2024): 414–34. If they fail to complete the program, they may face further sanctions. And because these diversions don't address structural issues like poverty or mental health, there's little evidence they are effective. See Katherine Beckett, "Diversion and/as Decarceration," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 86, no. 1 (2023).
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39. Nellis, *Mass Incarceration Trends*.
40. Rachel Shapiro et al., *Youth in Crisis: Stop Civil Rights Violations against Vulnerable Students with Disabilities at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center and Its Alternative School* (Equip for Equality, 2023), https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23711829-equip-for-equality-jtdc-report-final/?responsive=1&title=1; Mariame Kaba and Project Nia, "Juvenile Justice in Illinois: A Data Snapshot," Project Nia, April 2014, https://chiyouthjustice.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/juvenile_justice_in_illinois.pdf.

programming, and treatments.[4] These interventions, encompassing deflection, diversion, and alternative-to-incarceration programs, serve as enhancements and alternatives to traditional punishments. Today, such services are increasingly offered by a network of providers representing "the community," effectively creating a community-based service sector tasked with performing juvenile justice within communities. The "community-based service sector" refers to the public and private institutions that partner with the juvenile legal system to develop these community formations.[5] This sector uses both familiar and new penal welfare logics, such as therapeutic, trauma-informed, and rehabilitative approaches, which create a seemingly benevolent form of punishment.[6] I use benevolence not as a neutral descriptor of well-intentioned service,[7] but to describe a carceral strategy — a way of making punishment appear kinder, softer, and embedded in forms of social reproduction that ultimately sustain carceral logics.[8]

Abolition feminism offers the necessary analytic lens for this project, as it interrogates carceral expansion, particularly when it is motivated by such benevolent reforms aimed at "vulnerable and deserving groups" — i.e., women and children — which subsequently create harm for Black, Indigenous, and other women, children, and communities of color.[9] Thus, abolition feminism offers a necessary frame for this project, not only because abolition and feminism cannot be separated, but because abolition itself is made stronger through feminist analysis.[10] Within this framework, reforms that appear beneficial often function as false solutions, ultimately reinforcing the very structures they claim to change.[11] This is why it is increasingly urgent to keep an abolition feminist gaze on community-based reforms which predictably follow a reformist reform pattern — reforms that reinforce carceral institutions, as opposed to non-reformist reforms that work to reduce carceral power — pushing punishment further into the community rather than dismantling it.[12]

We are in a transitional moment marked by national criminal justice reform. Historically, such shifts occur during periods of state economic crises and times of counterinsurgency,[13] making these transitional moments ripe for abolitionist analysis in the pursuit of transformative possibilities.[14] As the state attempts to respond to calls for reform related to the 2020 uprisings and ongoing financial crises, abolition feminists continue to be vigilantly aware of the rebranding of carceral institutions.[15] Where the uptake of community-

based reforms has created institutional optimism and belief that the criminal justice system is capable of change, abolition feminists continue to embody the "analytical elasticity" to document the versatility of carcerality that is "all around us."[16]

"Reforms that appear beneficial often function as false solutions, ultimately reinforcing the very structures they claim to change.

Situated within abolition feminist thought, in this paper I explore the nuanced shift from youth incarceration to what I have termed the "carceral service industry" — an expanding yet homogenous sector of service providers in the community offering services to the juvenile legal system for youth at all stages of court contact. It presents a synopsis of findings and analysis from a larger project examining community-based reforms in Cook County, Illinois, including Chicago — a hub for both juvenile justice reform and abolitionist work. The paper is situated at the intersection of empirical evidence, theoretical analysis, and reflective summary. Following Erica Meiners' reminder that "moments of transition are opportunities to anticipate and to resist new forms of capture," I frame this project as contributing to movement assessment through a description of modern reforms.[17]

The data used in this paper specifically derive from semi-structured interviews (n=59) conducted between 2021–2022 with individuals working in the juvenile justice division and community-based service sector including probation officers, court actors, and service providers. This data was triangulated with document analysis of both public and noncirculating documents. Moreover, this paper draws on empirical evidence and observations from working in various contexts with court-involved youth and the juvenile legal system in Cook County, including volunteering, organizing, professional internships, nonprofit work, and academic research, all of which have shaped the theoretical lens with which I analyzed the data.[18]

This paper is structured to analyze three interconnected themes in the research. First, it outlines the shift from youth incarceration to community-based services in Cook County. Second, it examines

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17. Meiners, *For the Children?*, 19. Meiners continues "moments of transition are opportunities to anticipate and to resist new forms of capture. As select criminal laws and institutions are reformed, particularly those affecting young people, movement assessment is imperative." I see this project on juvenile justice reforms as contributing to movement assessment.
18. Having grown up and lived in the Chicago area for decades, I witnessed this shift not only through formal roles but also in the everyday texture of community life shaped by carceral systems, all of which shaped the theoretical lens for which I analyzed the data.
19. Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Harvard University Press, 2016); Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Marie Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2016).
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25. Patrick McCarthy, Vincent Schiraldi, and Miriam Shark, *The Future of Youth Justice: A Community-Based Alternative to the Youth Prison Model*, Harvard Kennedy School and National Institute of Justice, 2016, https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/NIJ-The_Future_of_Youth_Justice-10.21.16.pdf; Penal Reform International, "Children," *Penal Reform*, 2022, https://www.penalreform.org/global-prison-trends-2022/children/.
26. Karen A. Snedker, "Mental Health Courts," in *Handbook of Issues in Criminal Justice Reform in the United States*, ed. Elizabeth Jeglic and Cynthia Calkins (Springer, 2022): 659–84.
27. Ashley Nellis, *Mass Incarceration Trends*, (The Sentencing Project, 2024), https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2024/05/Mass-Incarceration-Trends.pdf.
28. Anthony Petrosino, Carolyn Turpin-Petrosino, and Sarah Guckenburg, "Formal System Processing of Juveniles: Effects on Delinquency," *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 6, no. 1 (2010): 1–88.

NOTES

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2. Sam Levin, "These U.S. Cities Defunded Police: 'We're Transferring Money to the Community,'" *The Guardian*, March 11, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/07/us-cities-defund-police-transferring-money-community.
3. Brianna Seid, "Project 2025's Plan for Criminal Justice Under Trump," *Brennan Center for Justice*, January 29, 2025, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/project-2025s-plan-criminal-justice-under-trump.
4. Kayla M. Martensen, "Prison Is Not Feminist, Service Is Not Liberation," in *Abolition Feminisms Vol. 2: Feminist Ruptures against the Carceral State*, ed. Alisa Bierria, Brooke Lober, and Jakeya Caruthers (Haymarket Books, 2022).
5. Social services, human services, education, medicine, foundations, and the nonprofits that make up this sector have long histories of racialized violence against communities of color. Here, "community-based" is not used to soften those harms, but to underscore how the carceral state enlists other institutions under the guise of "community" — a dynamic this paper critiques.
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7. Participants don't use the term "benevolence," but they describe a culture shift away from harsh punishment toward kinder, therapeutic responses, like "trauma-informed care" (explored in a forthcoming paper) and the "community-based" interventions discussed here.
8. Rose Braz, "Kinder, Gentler, Gender Responsive Cages: Prison Expansion Is Not Prison Reform," *Women, Girls, and Criminal Justice* 7, no. 6 (2006): 87–88; Martensen, "Prison Is Not Feminist."
9. Benevolent approaches to punishment, often situated as acts of reform, have historically resulted in carceral expansion — where punitive logics, practices, and apparatuses proliferate beyond prisons. See Beth E Richie, "Carcerality," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (New York University Press, 2021), 40–43.
10. Angela Y. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, (Haymarket Books, 2022).
11. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*.
12. "Reformist reforms," i.e., reforms that make incremental changes without fundamentally challenging the core principles and practices of carcerality, giving more power, resources, and money to the system being reformed, as argued by Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie in *No More Police: A Case for Abolition* (New York: The New Press, 2022). "Non-reformist reforms," i.e., reforms that work to uproot the structure working toward larger transformation, as argued by André Gorz in "Reform and Revolution," *The Socialist Register 5* (March 1968): 111–143.
13. On economic crises, see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007); Marie Gottschalk, "Razing the Carceral State," *Social Justice* 42, no. 2 (2015): 31–51. On counterinsurgency, see Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (Doubleday, 1969); Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State* (University of California Press, 2016).
14. Erica R Meiners, *For the Children? Protecting Innocence in a Carceral State* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
15. Ren-yo Hwang, "Bad Apples, Rotted Roots, and the Three Rs of Reformist Reforms," in *Abolition Feminisms Vol. 2: Feminist Ruptures against the Carceral State*, ed. Alisa Bierria, Brooke Lober, and Jakeya Caruthers (Haymarket Books, 2022).

how decarceration efforts resulted in the development of a carceral service industry that replicates the logic and practices of the juvenile legal system. This development represents a collusion — an entanglement between carceral institutions and community-based organizations under the guise of community-based reforms, which repackage punishment as service. Third, the paper critically interrogates representations of what the state and reformers invoke as "the community" in this collusion, questioning the authenticity and implications of such portrayals and the potential for cooptation of BIPOC community work. Here, I contrast genuine community as abolitionist politic — a set of relationships grounded in collective care and resistance that exist outside of and in opposition to carceral logics — with the way the carceral state invokes community as an instrument to extend carcerality into service provision, surveillance, and compliance.

I argue that the movement toward community-based services manifests as a carceral expansion into the community, where the service sector effectively extends the juvenile legal system's reach by taking on responsibilities traditionally associated with social reproduction, such as youth programming, supports, and basic services, under the terms and logics of carceral governance. This absorption is not neutral; rather, it reflects how institutions tasked with sustaining life are increasingly structured around surveillance, compliance, and punishment. Further, the framing of these interventions as "community-based" implies a benevolent approach, masking the punitive nature of these practices while threatening, and in some cases achieving, the coopting of BIPOC community work.

DECARCERATION IN CONTEXT

Since the 1970s, mass incarceration has structured criminal justice policy and shaped public beliefs about how to respond to "crime," especially through the expansion of prisons, policing, and punishment, with youth incarceration peaking in the mid 1990s.[19] In the 2010s, observers began to describe a tentative shift toward youth decarceration, marked by efforts to reduce the number of youth physically incarcerated by expanding community-based alternatives that often operate through partnerships between the criminal legal system and institutions of social reproduction.[20] Youth incarceration

has fallen by approximately 75 percent from its height, a decline that has driven the closure of numerous youth prisons.[21] For example, on June 30, 2023, California closed the last of its youth prisons, which held ten thousand young people at its height. The closure placed California alongside a handful of states that have eliminated youth prisons altogether, reflecting a national decarceration trend.[22] As youth prisons continue to come under controversy because of their high costs and inhumane conditions,[23] there is an increased interest in small, local, community-based facilities.[24] Despite these shifts, the US continues to disproportionately incarcerate youth at rates incomparable to the rest of the world.[25]

National decarceration efforts have increased diversions and alternatives to incarceration, such as electronic monitoring, reporting centers, enhanced probation, problem-solving courts, and community treatment, including mandated mental health services, drug programming, and family services.[26] These community-based options are often conditions for probation and parole. Since 1980, the number of people on probation in the US has doubled, and the number of people on parole has tripled.[27] Community corrections are said by proponents to be cost-effective community-based alternatives that reduce the harms of confinement, yet these measures have done little to minimize court contact.[28] Further, the harms enacted on people who are in diversion, or alternative programs, have proven to be degrading, harmful, and stigmatizing.[29]

The juvenile legal system has also increased the use of various services in the community, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, various family-focused therapy models, mentoring programs, restorative justice, and wraparound programming as alternatives to incarceration. This trend has led to what some have dubbed a "revolution" in juvenile justice,[30] while others have argued the "community-based reform movement" only delegates the work of youth punishment and surveillance to service agencies,[31] making inconspicuous the harm of these benevolent community-based reforms.[32] The latter view aligns with the cyclical history of juvenile justice that moves between harsh and lenient ideologies,[33] historically influenced by a "child saving" logic which justifies punitive interventions in the lives of disenfranchised youth and their families under the guise of protection and social welfare.[34]

While reforms portray the community as a benevolent and nonpunitive site of corrections, research on community-based

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CONCLUSION

We are in a critical moment of transition where, for the first time in over half a century, economic and social shifts are steering us away from relying on mass incarceration as the primary means of enforcing racialized punishment in the US.[73] However, the findings discussed in this paper indicate a long-standing pattern of reformist reforms in juvenile justice, making the implications of this work profound. These reforms manifest as a carceral expansion into community, extending the juvenile legal system's influence and risking the cooptation of community. This analysis pushes us to consider how these patterns inform both the limits of reform and the possibilities for abolitionist practice.

First, in this transitional moment, abolitionist movements can draw on the history of reformist reforms to influence the trajectory of contemporary ones. As the carceral state follows predictable patterns that have created harm, the momentum of the current moment offers space to impede the cycle of reformist reforms. Second, this momentum creates opportunities to push reforms in directions that resist cooptation. One such opportunity is to disengage juvenile courts from their role as gatekeepers to community services, reducing the court's capacity to define access. It is also vital to direct current investments in Black and Brown communities toward strengthening grassroots movements and ensuring funding supports BIPOC community work without imposing conditions aligned with carceral logic. Finally, rather than reproducing deficit-based service models that mandate therapy as a default, reforms should confront structural inequities and state violence as the conditions that shape youth involvement in the system.

The patterns described here also mirror a broader dynamic. As abolition becomes more visible, it too risks being absorbed into carceral logics through cooptation and institutionalization. As Rachel Herzing argues, abolition is practical only when rooted in ongoing organizing rather than symbolic gestures.[74] Yet, as we have already seen with the co-optation of restorative justice practices, there is a risk that abolitionist practices may be institutionalized in ways that strip them of their transformative power.[75] Dean Spade warns that funders' embrace of "transformative justice and community accountability," tools of abolition, can amount to containment rather than liberation.[76] It is crucial for abolitionist movements to remain vigilant about continued attempts to redirect community efforts into carceral logics.

corrections and surveillance shows that "the community" often refers to networks of social and human service providers with long-standing ties to racialized punishment. Nonprofits and other nongovernmental agencies become conduits conveying carcerality into the community through a process of carceral devolution,[35] wherein the only "imaginable alternative to mass incarceration" is shifting people from prisons to the community and nonprofit organizations that reinforce neoliberal carcerality.[36] This shift creates both a geographical and conceptual transfer of carcerality, where individuals must learn to "correct" their behaviors in the community, despite structural circumstances, under the supervision of a service provider who is in turn under the surveillance of the court.

The criminal legal system has thus created new appendages in "therapeutic," "rehabilitative," and "community" forms presented as alternatives (or enhancements) to traditional punishments. These appendages are embedded in the community through various "self-help" services. Whether or not people want or feel they need intervention in their lives, they can be pressured to accept these alternatives for fear of harsher punishment, foregoing their due process rights, resulting in both predictable and unforeseen consequences.[37] These conditions have led to growing criticism that such reforms are merely evolving the racialized carceral state into a new form.[38]

FINDINGS

In what follows, I provide a synopsis of findings from research on community-based reforms in Cook County comprising part of a broader decarceration trend. Here I broadly summarize the findings from my research to offer timely information for movement assessment while also observing how energy, resources, and time are being used at this crucial moment when the state, academics, and activists are all grappling with undoing mass incarceration.

YOUTH DECARCERATION IN COOK COUNTY

Youth decarceration initiatives in Cook County over the last decade have been associated with budget constraints,[39] criticisms of inhumane conditions,[40] and, according to participants in this study, a "culture shift" in the juvenile legal system, resulting in declining

incarceration rates in the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC) along with other confining institutions.[41] When the population at JTDC surpassed the facility's capacity, there appeared to be an urgency by the juvenile justice division to decrease the number of youth confined there.[42] In 2015, JTDC launched various decarceration initiatives including revised risk assessments, implementation of probation units to expedite custody decisions, and increased use of alternatives to detention.[43] In 2016, 47 percent of youth were kept out of custody, and 29 percent received expedited release.[44] Of these youth, 2,847 were placed on electronic monitoring as an alternative to detention, 885 youth were released to evening reporting centers, and a smaller unlisted number were sent to a staff secure shelter established as an alternative to JTDC.[45]

These changes occurred alongside policy and leadership shifts, such as adopting restorative justice bills in Cook County (2015–2016) and the 2016 election of Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx, who advocated for criminal justice reform.[46] This combination of factors led to fewer petitions filed by the state's attorney, more community-based programs, and "immense pressure by the state's attorney office on the judiciary to not hold kids in custody."[47] National legislative shifts paralleled local policy changes, such as deinstitutionalizing status offenses, anti-trafficking legislation, and developing pre- and post-confinement services, ultimately decreasing youth incarceration rates while increasing community-based alternatives. According to court actors interviewed in this work, these changes in policy and practice were supported by an overall culture shift in the juvenile legal system, moving away from harsh punishment and toward restorative justice and trauma-informed practices.

THE BUILDUP OF THE CARCERAL SERVICE INDUSTRY

In Cook County, the strategy to move away from incarceration and toward the community involved building an assemblage of services in the community to offer programming as an alternative to, or in combination with, other mechanisms of incarceration.[48] These services became tools for juvenile probation, replicating surveillance and detention on behalf of the courts.[49] The increased use of community-based services created a relatively homogenous sector of providers delivering interventions imposed on youth under court control — whether through diversion, probation, or pre-trial supervision.

According to a probation deputy, the Department of Probation

the view that the carceral state is not shrinking but instead shifting to embed itself in community spaces (usually associated with social reproduction) in the name of decarceration.

These findings align with a broader neoliberal trend in the juvenile legal system where service providers have become central to administering juvenile justice without enacting structural change,[65] instead adopting deficit-based practices that emphasize individual responsibility while reinforcing a cultural ethos that dismisses the legacy of racialized, colonial, and ableist punishment against BIPOC.[66] Through community-based reforms, we see a performative investment in social welfare in the form of services — and yet, as one participant shared, "It's not a resource desert if there's a ton of nonprofits, right? But it's still a resource desert."[67] This increase in service providers creates an illusion of investment; yet services, even if helpful, are not in themselves generative resources. Material conditions such as safety, housing, and income, which sustain life over time, are resources that services cannot replace.[68] These reforms fail to address structural inequities — above all, the defunding of social welfare and the criminalization of poverty — that result from neoliberal racial capitalism.[69]

These findings suggest that community-based juvenile justice reforms in Cook County represent a reformist reform, one that operates through the carceral service industry. Reformist reforms make incremental changes within an existing system without fundamentally challenging its core principles or structures; they focus on improving specific aspects of systems while preserving its overall framework.[70] Community-based reforms exemplify reformist reforms in maintaining public/private partnerships to contract services that replicate conditions of imprisonment, ultimately legitimizing the juvenile legal system while expanding its reach.[71] Although community-based reforms have reduced the number of youth in physical confinement, they have also produced new forms of confinement in the community. Service providers now enact surveillance, control, and temporary detention, while youth are coerced into accepting diversion "opportunities" under the threat of harsher punishment. In this way, the community-based service sector becomes another apparatus willing to take on the "ideological work" of the carceral state while supporting a rebranding of juvenile justice during another moment of economic crisis and social turmoil.[72]

involving Black- and Brown-led organizations in carceral service work, the juvenile courts effectively coopt community efforts and position themselves as agents of community engagement. As one former service provider reflected about their organization, "What's interesting is that [the organization] originated in Black and Native Indigeneity — like, this is how we connect as oppressed people. The bigger [the organization] got, the less it became about spiritual transformation, and more about, 'You need to be in college, and you need to be a good worker.'"[62] This reflection illustrates how carceral service work can shift the mission of community organizations, replacing liberatory goals with outcomes aligned with court mandates and neoliberal expectations of productivity and compliance. The expansion of carcerality into communities, coupled with what some identify as a performative investment in Black- and Brown-led organizations, creates a "brother's keeper effect."[63]

The juvenile courts' infiltration into communities through the carceral service industry has generated deep contention. To counter criticism of outside organizations leveraging their proximity to "represent" neighborhoods, both funders and the courts have begun to prioritize Black- and Brown-led organizations and community members. In practice, however, this shift often results in cooptation: community-rooted organizations are absorbed into carceral agendas, their missions reshaped to align with court mandates and funder expectations. These findings therefore indicate not a genuine shift to community, but an extraction — an extraction from the community, an extraction of space, an extraction of culture, and an extraction of experience and story.

DISCUSSION

Observations of decarceration and community-based reforms through an abolition feminist lens reveal that these efforts follow predictable and cyclical patterns of reformist juvenile justice reform, which historically have led to new forms of carceral control. In this context, proclaimed "lenient" treatment is delivered through services, programs, and treatments provided by the carceral service industry, which takes on the ideological role of punishment via surveillance, control, and detention in collusion with the juvenile courts.[64] As carcerality is reproduced within the community, this paper supports

and Court Services put a "call to the community" to partner in developing a "resource menu" of services for probation officers to refer youth and avoid "kids sitting in detention" because there is "nothing in the community."[50] They shared, "We saw the ramp up of community embracing these young people . . . they're like, 'Hey, we can do this, pay us,' so we contracted with them, and they started building their capacity to become big power wigs in the community."[51] Here there is a representation of community that is less about autonomy, liberation, or safety, and more about moving so-called juvenile justice into the community under conditions of court surveillance, compliance, and control.[52] What the Cook County case reveals is what I call the buildup of the carceral service industry — orchestrated by the juvenile legal system, maintained by influential community arbiters who serve as stewards to resources, and access, and composed of a growing number of service providers often competing for space and funding in the industry.[53]

There are two things fundamental to the carceral service industry. Firstly, in replicating carcerality in the community, service providers indicate various levels of involvement and comfort with carcerality, including managing probation conditions, court advocacy, and reporting youth progress and participation to the courts.[54] Where some service providers shared discontent with their proximity to the carceral state, other providers nearly replicate the very practice of court surveillance alongside the courts. One service provider expressed,

> If a youth is mandated to participate in services [with us], then that's where we kind of step in, assess the kid and their family, and we say, "Okay, these are the services needed," we come up with a treatment plan, we identify what that would look like, and then, we would report [youth and family] compliance directly back to the court.[55]

In this case, juvenile probation conducted an assessment to make recommendations for service, and the judge ordered the young person to comply with a service provider in the form of a court order. The provider then conducted their own assessments, often using the same or similar tools as probation, created their own order in the form of a treatment plan with obligations and objectives for the service period, and reports compliance back to the court — effectively "doubling-down" on carcerality.

Secondly, the collusion between the juvenile courts and community service providers has given way to emerging formations

developed as deflection, diversion, pre-trial, and various other alternative programming. These formations, too, replicate carceral practices, i.e., surveillance, control, and detention. One supervisor for a diversion program illustrates the level of surveillance when they shared,

> Our goal as a team is to be in the field, at [the] family home, in the community, meeting them at appointments ...going to an intake appointment, so that we really do see what's going on...Let's get a release on file for your therapist, and let's invite that therapist to the individual care team meeting.[56]

In this program, a coordinator with a social work background will do the same work as a probation officer, verbatim. To further complicate things, some youth diverted into these programs still have a probation officer supervising the diversion. This dynamic illustrates the collusion between the juvenile legal system and community-based service providers. Collusion captures the intentional ways the courts coopt community logics and how, as a result, service providers participate in the expansion of carceral practices. This framing is fundamentally rooted in abolition feminism, which interrogates the blurred boundary between carceral and seemingly non-carceral formations.[57]

“ Collusion captures the intentional ways the courts coopt community logics and how, as a result, service providers participate in the expansion of carceral practices.

Even as Cook County decreases the number of youth arrests, prosecutions, and incarceration, young people continue to be drawn under the surveillance of the juvenile legal system through alternative mechanisms, which extend court authority into community-based services. These emerging formations take over the role of traditional carceral institutions by engaging in nearly identical practices. Instead of diverting youth from the courts, these programs create new formations while producing another arm of the carceral state, this time inside the community.

COOPTING COMMUNITY

State-aligned ideas of community are often infused with a sense of benevolence framed as care, safety, and investment in youth, a sense that allows carceral logics to take hold in ways that feel supportive rather than punitive. Carcerality, then, becomes harder to name or resist, even as it quietly seeps into everyday life through these services. Although carcerality is less visible when situated in the community, a small subset of service provider participants (n=14) in the study critically observed the impact carcerality has on community:

> I always hear people say, again, “systems people language,” “connect to community,” “we need them in community,” “we need community partners,” “community staples,” and “we need community service,” whatever it is, community, community, community. Then, what does that mean?[58]

Participants criticized the state's refusal to allow local residents to represent themselves, instead relying on outside foundations and partners who were socially and geographically removed from the neighborhoods they claimed to represent and co-opting the language of community. In some of Chicago's most divested neighborhoods, empty lots and buildings routinely become new locations for service providers. One participant shared a quote from a young person affected by this situation: “It's a thousand nonprofits in a 4-block radius, and they're territorial.”[59] Participants expressed concern about a drastic and sudden increase in service providers. Local residents are concerned about the physical presence of community-based services and the problematic ways these organizations use their geographic proximity to represent them, including a means to accrue these organizations' own social and financial capital. The community members' concern is heightened by what they see as social stratification between service providers, who are focused on advancing their organizations or careers, and the youth they claim to represent, who are simply “trying to survive.”[60]

There is also a cultural cooptation underway which service providers identify, albeit often indirectly. In 2020, against the backdrop of widespread protest and heightened national attention to systemic racism, service providers recognized a “racial equity” shift in the industry, which translated into funding Black- and Brown-led community organizations. One participant shared, “I've been told by organizations that they love our work, [but] they won't fund it now because of the [white] leadership of [our] organization.”[61] By