

# The Future of Criminal Justice Reform

[00:00:00] **Nida Abassi:** So I think there's a lot of places around the country that can see themselves in Lucas County.

[00:00:14] **Jason Hibbs:** This is a conversation I've been waiting for. And I'm so grateful that so many of the stakeholders here in Lucas County, the people involved in the Safety and Justice Challenge, have talked to us about this project.

But on this episode We're going to pull back just a little and ask a representative from the MacArthur Foundation to assess the efforts and the outcome here in Lucas County. We'll talk about where the foundation plans to go from here, I'll share a few thoughts, and we'll take a wider look at the future of criminal justice reform.

Welcome to the Foundation. Final episode of the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast, produced by WGTE Public Media and made possible by support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails.

I'm your host, Jason Hibbs.

[00:01:16] **Nida Abassi:** Our first cohort of sites,

[00:01:18] **Jason Hibbs:** MacArthur Foundation Criminal Justice Team Program Officer Netta Abassi says there are more than 80 safety and justice challenge sites altogether, about a quarter of them were fully funded.

[00:01:31] **Nida Abassi:** It's a place based initiative, so each site works to safely reduce their jail populations and their racial and ethnic disparities based on what they think is going to work.

We try not to be too directive with the sites, and we encourage them to come up with their own plan for meeting their goals. There are certain things we do want to see Collaboration between the government stakeholders and the community. We want to see rigorous data collection. But we also acknowledge that the sites

are the experts in their communities, so they're the best at coming up with innovative ideas.

I think Lucas County is a really good example of some of the things that went well for them and in other sites. I think they are committed to collaboration and thinking of new ways that they can improve some of the things that are already happening. So for example, they have something called the opportunity project, which houses social workers in the public defender's office, and that particularly targets clients that have substance use challenges because they saw that was an issue.

So they're like, how can we have a collaborative relationship that can help? Those people and keep them out of the jail and get them the treatment that they need. They also noticed that probation violations feed into the jail population, which is an issue across many, if not most of our sites. So they used coordinated community corrections practices to target.

The supervision portion of someone coming out of the jail system just to try to minimize any violations that would send them right back into the jail. They have a really strong re entry program, which is I can't state how important that is. And they have people who were incarcerated previously that are helping individuals come out of the jail.

And I think that is really helpful to have that connection to make sure that people are being safely transitioned back into the community. So those are some things that I think we see different variations of in different sites that have been successful.

[00:03:45] **Jason Hibbs:** Does MacArthur Foundation provide a score for each site or some type of audit, and if so, how did Lucas County do it?

[00:03:53] **Nida Abassi:** Not really a score, just because we don't necessarily look at our sites in that way. We like to think we're like partners in the work, even though it's not fully accurate because they're doing all the hard work. But we, yeah, we definitely think it's critical to regularly look at what's going well, what needs improvement.

We look at the jail numbers for each site. We have technical assistance providers working with each site that help us. each quarter look at what has gone well, what are some challenges they're dealing with what are some connections we can make with allies that might be helpful. I will say for Lucas County, they've been the best at keeping their jail numbers down across the

board, which is huge, because a lot of places are struggling with that for different reasons, especially right now and Lucas County has been consistent.

If they were to get a score, that would bump that them up. Definitely.

[00:04:49] **Jason Hibbs:** So you mentioned jail numbers. Is there another way to evaluate success?

[00:04:56] **Nida Abassi:** Yeah, I think jail numbers is just. One of the things that we look at, I think it sticks out so much because this initiative is centered around the jail system and how that is like the primary or the first place that someone could potentially enter the criminal justice system overall.

And it's just very disruptive. I don't think people realize just one day of jail can have such an impact on someone's life. But we look at. All types of data related to the jail. So what does, what are the actual numbers? Like at what point are people entering the system? Some numbers around like exiting the system racial and ethnic data also around the jail.

Then we look at qualitative data as well. Like what kind of impact. Are any of the services have having on the people who are trying to use them? If there's something around like community engagement, do people feel like they're having like a genuine voice in the at the table? Are they being heard?

Are their suggestions being accounted for? Do they have an opportunity to provide feedback? We have a lot of different Yeah, options for looking at what's going on. Yeah.

[00:06:15] **Jason Hibbs:** She says the MacArthur Foundation relies on the site to provide the feedback, and she believes Lucas County leaders have been honest about their shortcomings in this endeavor.

[00:06:25] **Nida Abassi:** In terms of things that they could do better, I think that Lucas County has had an uphill battle with engaging the local community, and I think One great thing about Lucas is that they're very candid about things that are going well and things have been challenging. And I also think that the challenge with engaging the community is not for the lack of trying.

They've tried several different methods of getting people involved in getting that relationship there with local with the local community. I think our sites that have been more successful with community engagement already had an element of that going into the project. We added actually four or five years into the

safety and justice challenge, we added a portion on community engagement and we asked sites to deliberately think about that and incorporate it into Their projects.

And for some of the sides, it was including Lucas County is really challenging because they didn't have those relationships there. But for some of our other sites they already have been working with community based organizations and they already had people involved in the project who were directly impacted.

So that was like, Oh, yeah, We already do this and we can just do more of this. Yeah. So I think if you don't have that already, it's, it is really, it's like probably one of the most difficult areas to build those relationships. Cause there's a lot of distrust.

[00:08:00] **Jason Hibbs:** Abbasi also says the remaining racial and ethnic disparities within the jail population is another issue the foundation is seeing across their sites.

Plus, she says the political pendulum has swung back toward being tough on crime.

[00:08:17] **Nida Abbasi:** Yeah, it's tough right now. We are. Going through a rough patch, there's a backlash to reform efforts, especially in the media. We try to visit our sites every year, and we can hear the frustration about crime, and then the worry about the people who are being criminalized, and all of the misunderstanding between what's actually happening in the legal system versus how people are feeling.

And what it feels like to just everyday people. It's really hard to say what the future of criminal justice reform is. I think even through the last 10 years that the safety and justice challenge has been around. We've seen COVID. We've seen The protests in 2020 due to the murder of George Floyd, and now we're seeing like the pendulum swing against the progressive movement from there on, so it's just, it's hard to predict.

I think there's still a lot of people who are hoping and really committed to doing this work and to public safety and changing the conversation around that. So we are definitely trying to stay as positive as possible.

[00:09:39] **Jason Hibbs:** According to the Gallup organization, 58 percent of Americans think the U. S. criminal justice system is not tough enough on crime. That's a sharp reversal from 2020 when 41 percent of respondents said It's also

important to note that More white adults than people of color say the system is fair and should be tougher.

[00:10:04] **Nida Abassi:** MacArthur Foundation is a philanthropic entity. The mission is to foster a world that is just, verdant, and peaceful. And we do that through a number of different programs. There's the criminal justice program, which I work on. There's a program on focused on corruption in Nigeria. There's a Program on climate change and then we have a few that have no time limit.

So there's a program that focuses on journalism and media All across the country. There's one that is committed just to Chicago since that's where we're based and then I think probably the most well known program is our fellows that we Select every year just a group of amazing people. And we're just funding a lot of different organizations and that are led by everyday people who happen to be amazing and doing really great things.

So that's what I think we're always in search of finding, finding more people who are doing that and looking for ways to work with them and learn from them. The safety and justice challenge. Was a time limited initiative by MacArthur. So we're due to make our last grants in 2025 and then initiative.

It's gonna, start to end a couple years from then. So as far as the foundation's commitment. We're absolutely committed to all of our sites and our grantees through the remaining years. We're trying to work with them for plans around sustainability. We've been in constant conversation around that in hopes that they'll be well positioned to continue this work after the funding goes away from MacArthur.

As far as What the foundation is doing overall and criminal justice reform. We're exploring new work constantly thinking about different areas that MacArthur can make an impact in a meaningful way, but we're still in the exploratory phase. So we're not sure we're going to stay in criminal justice. If we're going to go into another area, that's all still being determined right now.

[00:12:23] **Jason Hibbs:** You're telling me that MacArthur might not continue this, might transition and focus those resources on something else. A lot of people may interpret that as this didn't work. MacArthur realizes it doesn't work and they're turning.

[00:12:36] **Nida Abassi:** No, not at all. That was the plan from the beginning. So MacArthur has four time limited projects right now.

And they came up one after the other, that was all planned. So they're all meant to be 10 years long. And the idea was what kind of impact can this have? amount of funding in this limited amount of time have on, this issue? What can we do around changing the way that the U. S. uses the jail system knowing that we can't fund it for an endless amount of time?

So what can we do in this short amount of time? And what kind of data can we pull out? What kind of lessons learned can we pull out? An uplift once that time and so that different communities can keep working on those things afterwards. But absolutely, yeah, we, I think we're really proud of all the things that the sites have been able to accomplish.

And we know the jail system has been around for centuries. So I think we were pretty realistic about our goals going into it. And yeah definitely not. In the thought process that it didn't work.

We're trying to ensure that CJ reform keeps moving forward after the SJC can conclude despite all of the challenges ahead knowing that. This initiative had a time limit. We did ask each site to think about sustainability early on. In fact, Lucas is currently in its capstone phase, which is meant to transition the SJC strategies to new sources of funding.

Many of the sites have been successful in getting their counties and local funders to take on some of this work, which is really validating to see. that it's of value to others and Lucas County is one of those sites that has been able to transition some of some parts of their SJC work into the county and to local legal aid.

I think they're still in the activity of looking for different funding sources.

[00:14:56] **Jason Hibbs:** So that's where the MacArthur Foundation currently stands. As you may remember from previous episodes, Lucas County leaders were pretty optimistic that most, if not all of this work would continue as the grant expired. But regardless of the grant, I have some insight from local people who can keep the momentum going.

Here's Juvenile Court Judge Robert Jones.

[00:15:18] **Judge Robert Jones:** We in Juvenile Court want to make sure that they have a consequence, but more importantly, we don't want them to do it again. And it's about supporting them. helping them and trying to get them to the point where they won't commit an offense again.

[00:15:33] **Jason Hibbs:** Jones's colleague, Juvenile Court Judge Linda Knapp, says she believes the best thing we can do moving forward is to nurture the kids.

We all know the cliché, it takes a village. And that's not an online or social media village.

[00:15:53] **Judge Linda Knepp:** If you think about it, years ago, studies proved that if you held babies and nurtured them while you fed them, that was better than the baby that had the self feeder. You could thrive and grow. It's the same thing. Social media is good to an extent, but there's something about one on one contact.

[00:16:13] **Jason Hibbs:** Lucas County Juvenile Court Administrator Saeed Ora agrees, especially now.

[00:16:18] **Said Orra:** They talk about isolationism for us as Americans, and you say to yourself how can that be? There's so much social media, there's so much opportunity for a connection, but the studies all show that we as Americans have never been more isolated than now.

There's a loneliness that's taking place there. So when the judges talk about connections and how kids can take root in the community, those connections are vital. They allow youth to take root. They allow youth to get support. It might come from traditional family settings, it might come from the families they build through those connections.

But they're vital to supporting youth in, in, in how they progress through life.

[00:16:55] **Jason Hibbs:** The judges say they want to build partnerships with these community groups.

[00:17:00] **Judge Linda Knepp:** Ideally, we would have every little neighborhood have a spot that we could use to help the youth, have positive social engagement. My youth have to get there, and, I can't really have 13 year olds taking buses across the country.

town or especially, in the winter when it's dark at five o'clock, we have to look to the safety of the youth. You really have to look at what's available within their little pocket of the community. And a lot of the work comes from working with our assessment center or our misdemeanor services.

probation officers, or even our general probation officers, who try and find, and we've been Syed and Judge Jones and I have been working with trying to make contacts for them. They need something, productive to do with their lives. After school, finding these programs, reaching out to the community.

the unions for our older youth to try and get them into apprenticeship programs, trying to bring an apprenticeship readiness program to our youth treatment center with TPS, anything that can give them something concrete to, to make them feel good about themselves and have, they don't even know about the opportunities that are out there.

[00:18:14] **Jason Hibbs:** My producer asked me to weigh in a little here at the end, and I am not a criminal justice reform expert, just a former TV news reporter and news manager turned teacher. I love the emphasis on the community organizations. There's a lot of great work happening there on the ground, and leaders are already tracking crimes in specific zip codes, so ideally community non profits could respond to the specific needs in their community.

based on what that arrest data is showing them if they had access to it, or a clear directive with funding, of course. Part of the magic in these community organizations is there's a person behind it, someone inspired by their own difficult past trying to help others. In many ways, They have unique curriculum.

So while we need to appreciate the unique nature of each program, I do wonder what a difference it would make if Toledo had somewhat more uniform curriculum. Maybe some of the programming could be unique, whether it's a focus on basketball or building something. But if there's a class taught, we should use something that we know works.

Tested curriculum. And that brings me to my next point. And this was made forcefully by Avis Files, the Director of Family and Supportive Services at Pathway Incorporated. I asked her about tracking success for the Returning Fathers Program. Forty four percent. Formerly incarcerated men who were at the halfway house preparing to return to their families completed this program at no cost to them thanks to the MacArthur Grant through Brothers United.

[00:19:48] **Avis Files:** I started Brothers United from my eight million dollar grant from the federal government. What you think I'm gonna do with ten thousand dollars? I can't even damn hire staff. You know who does this work? It's my husband. My husband goes into the jail to teach these classes. He's contracted with us. That's what he does.

He teaches classes. I don't even pay him to do it. He's my husband. So he's just, I got staff that are so committed to the organization. I'm like, hey y'all, it's only 10, 000 but do you think, you guys think you could go and do the class over at the jail? Don't tell me about how we're concerned about something and throw pennies at it.

You can start putting some damn money on the table.

[00:20:22] **Jason Hibbs:** She says it's hard to get a clear picture of what works best and when and how, because she doesn't have the money to fund the study.

[00:20:31] **Avis Files:** Now I do have an evaluator. I have a third party evaluator on these little 40 people. It gives you a brilliant pulse.

But think about the deeper I could go if I took these 40 people and you ask me a very important question. Do they recidivate? How can I tell you? Because I can't follow them.

[00:20:45] **Jason Hibbs:** I also heard something similar from the teacher of the Misdemeanor Diversion Program focusing on having healthier interactions with law enforcement.

Most of those students, she said, were charged with obstruction. I asked how many graduates go back to jail for the same thing or something else. No one knew because they didn't have the money to search for that data. And of course it's easy to arm chair quarterback. Money is limited. There are a lot of issues that commissioners, police and others deal with.

And there's only so much money. It also takes time to build trust between communities, especially of different races. But what's somewhat ironic is this solution maybe doesn't cost that much money at all. If we, myself included could just remember to hold each other up, to check on our neighbors, to participate in the community events, to be kinder in person and online.

For years now, people have been blaming the media for stoking racial tensions and other divisive issues. Fewer and fewer people are turning on their televisions. They're turning to us on TikTok, on Facebook. And X, it's you, me, we are the ones creating more of the media now. So let's take this opportunity to make it kinder.

Let's be better in every social media post. And some of the harsher rhetoric at a time when racial tensions were high was directed at law enforcement. And

Bowling Green State University political science professor Adam Watkins says the fallout from that. Is twofold. First, in the hiring trends right now,

[00:22:23] **Adam Watkins:** there's just a general acknowledgement that the police are the most important.

And they just play critical roles in the criminal justice apparatus. And to the extent that we're struggling to attract. People into the profession that gives me some serious pause and concern. And I know many police departments. This is obviously not off the radar.

They're trying to come up with ways to try to reach young people to provide a fuller picture of the opportunities within law enforcement, the nature of the work of what they do. It's not all bad. There's a lot of great things that happened more incentive programs, sign on bonuses and those types of things to try to reach, but it, based on what I know and the anecdotal evidence that I have available to me, it, it remains a real challenge.

[00:23:08] **Jason Hibbs:** And Watkins says there's an impact on criminal justice reform approaches moving forward.

[00:23:14] **Adam Watkins:** I think police are more amenable to oversight. And. And there, there has been need for quite some time. And I think even law enforcement would acknowledge that too, maybe not openly. I don't think anyone likes to be reviewed like necessarily, but I do think that there is a more openness or amenability to issues more generally related to transparency and decision making.

And we have seen some of that through the uptake of body worn cameras and sort of review process. And through that review process some departments have involved community partners as part of that review process. And I do think. I consider that a favorable trend is helping to build some of those relations really hear about all the bad things about the nature of the relationship with putting the police in the community, but I do think there have been some genuine inroads, pragmatic inroads that have been made about the systematic review of decisions on the part of law enforcement, whether in an aggregate level or individual level.

I also think police departments have gotten really creative about using social media themselves, about figuring out ways to engage with the public. And the fact that you have, maybe young people that are still interested in law

enforcement despite everything that they hear, I think they're going into law enforcement for a lot of the right reasons.

It is just A reality that for an extended period of time, maybe contrary to general perceptions, law enforcement personnel in certain jurisdictions with overtime opportunities can be paid quite well. And understandably, just as in many professions, people just went into the profession for the paycheck.

But I, I don't, that's definitely not true anymore. And I do think for those people that are going into law enforcement now they are going in for all of the right reasons. That being said, that there's fewer of them. And that is a major concern that I have is how do we go about trying to continue to make the profession attractive to, to young persons and to continue to invest or create interest within the profession.

Unfortunately, the staffing part, and while I obviously have been focusing on law enforcement, it's also been true with jails and detention facilities that the staffing issue is. Really challenging. And while many court systems as well have been able to get back to where they were at prior to the pandemic.

It is my understanding that there are several larger court jurisdictions throughout the country that are still very backlogged. And so I think an immediate need, based on what I know is, somehow. Directing dollars to try to get just to meet baseline staffing needs is an acknowledgment.

Needless to say, it's exponentially difficult to do anything if you're just not adequately staffed at a baseline level.

[00:26:22] **Jason Hibbs:** Even in an era when staffing shortages across industries made headlines, Community leaders tell me they're thankful for the cooperation of the companies that hire people upon re entry.

But they wonder if those companies, especially the bigger ones with deeper pockets, could help partner in the local work of preparing people to go to work.

[00:26:43] **Avis Files:** Can they donate something? Can they donate something? They're hiring the people that they get tax credits for the people that work for them.

[00:26:55] **Jason Hibbs:** And speaking of work, there's still plenty of criminal justice reform work ahead.

But in Lucas County, most of the people I interviewed for this podcast series, like Commissioner Lisa Sobecki, agree that There's also a lot of momentum.

[00:27:11] **Lisa Sobecki:** Part of MacArthur was, yes, it's going to be for a period of time, but the commitment behind MacArthur and accepting it is you don't stop the work. And so we're not stopping that work.

[00:27:24] **Jason Hibbs:** Thank you so much for listening to the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast. And just a reminder, many of the materials that we have referenced throughout this series are on our website at [www.wgte.org](http://www.wgte.org).

And if you don't already know by now, the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast is produced by WGTE Public Media and made possible by support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over incarceration by changing the way it thinks about and uses jails.

I'm your host, Jason Hibbs.