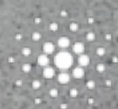




# BUILDING ROOT SOLUTIONS FOR PUBLIC SAFETY



LOCAL AND REGIONAL  
GOVERNMENT ALLIANCE ON  
RACE & EQUITY





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Root Solutions for Public Safety project (including this publication series) is created in close collaboration with people across the country who have been impacted by mass incarceration including those working in the community, justice-system impacted people, and frontline government practitioners. This work has also been done in partnership with jurisdictions participating in the MacArthur Foundations Safety and Justice Challenge and engaging in a focused Racial Equity Project: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Cook County, Illinois; Pima County, Arizona; and New Orleans, Louisiana. We'd like to extend our gratitude to leaders from the organizations [Why Not Proposer](#) (Philadelphia), [Total Community Action](#) (New Orleans), [CROAR](#) (Cook County), and the [YWCA of Southern Arizona](#) (Pima County).

Thank you to the [MILPA Collective](#) and [American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Mission](#) (AIT-SCM) for your support and thought partnership in this project. And thank you to [Olyvia Fabre](#), the talented graphic designer who brought this report to life.

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## INTRODUCTION

Building Root Solutions for Public Safety seeks to provide a platform sharing reflective pieces about the drivers of root solutions to mass incarceration while inspiring debate and discussion. Our commitment is to practice values of cultural healing and racial justice and feature content curated and crafted in partnership with justice-system impacted people, front-line government practitioners, and families. Our contributors will practice rigorous debate while offering practical and strategic solutions and analysis in service of advancing racial equity in the criminal legal system in the immediate term and ending mass incarceration in the long term.

Why launch this series now? We are at a critical inflection point. The 1990's *tough on crime* narratives and policies have returned, while the dominant reform strategies continue to fall short and often serve to sustain - rather than disrupt - the status quo. The lack of serious engagement with transformational solutions have trapped generations of Black and Brown communities in a carceral cycle.

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**“LIKE THE MAPLE, LEADERS ARE THE FIRST TO OFFER THEIR GIFTS. IT REMINDS THE WHOLE COMMUNITY THAT LEADERSHIP IS ROOTED NOT IN POWER AND AUTHORITY, BUT IN SERVICE AND WISDOM.”**

– Robin Wall Kimmer, Braiding Sweetgrass

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# “HEALING BEGINS WHERE THE WOUND WAS MADE.”

– Alice Walker

## A FOCUS ON ACCOUNTABILITY

The series will focus on the concept of accountability within the criminal legal system, how it has been constructed, why it has been elusive, and how to radically transform the way it’s applied. We are choosing this focus because moments of national outrage about state violence against people of color often lead to calls for *accountability* and *transparency* of government systems. While these moments often translate into increased resources, they do not translate into results.

Since the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013, resources have come in waves in the form of federal investigations, monitoring teams, lawsuits, consent decrees, oversight boards, and funding. While these measures have produced gains, racial disparities in the legal system have worsened across the United States. The longstanding chasms between Black and Brown communities and government grow wider, as demands for accountability remain unrealized in practice. Rarely have we seen our traditional responses lead to systemic change, particularly related to advancing racial equity.

Instead, accountability entities establish opaque monitoring practices that by their very nature send a signal that abuses will remain concealed. This cements the culture of violence, oppression, scarcity, and chaos they were tasked to address.

New York City’s [Riker’s Island Jail](#) is one of the more notorious examples. Known for decades of corruption, brutality, and inhumane conditions, Rikers Island has seen numerous oversight and *accountability* bodies including an external oversight board (Board of Corrections), a consent decree and federal monitoring team, an active City Council, and consistent media attention (Ransom & Pallaro, 2021). Despite all these layers of *accountability*, and a robust public data warehouse, incarcerated people



continue to lose their lives at a record rate, while Rikers remains notoriously one of the most corrupt jail systems in the US (Ransom & Pallaro, 2021). The roots of injustice at Riker’s Island are reflected in its name, as Abraham Riker stole the land from the Lenape People who used it as a site for trade and cultural exchange and his descendent Richard Riker was infamous for [abusing the Fugitive Slave Act](#) to send (or sell) African Americans in New York to slaveowners in the South” (Snitzky, 2015).

While Rikers Island is a profound example, it is, unfortunately, not unique. There is a chorus of national calls for *accountability* and *transparency* of public safety agencies across the country. These calls are in response to deeply ingrained corruption within police departments, pre-trial justice systems (prosecutors, court systems, jails), and prisons. While the chorus has grown louder, efforts have been underway to shrink and eliminate even the existing national accountability levers, such as the federal [Death in Custody Reporting Act \(DCRA\)](#).

Today, the concept of government accountability and transparency have become mere buzzwords. Minimizing their importance undermines efforts to make good on the promise of governing “for the people, and by the people.”

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**“AS THE LAKOTA SIOUX PUT IT, “MITÁKUYE OYÁS’IN”, WE ARE ALL RELATIVES; WE ARE HERE ON EARTH TO LEARN TO TAKE CARE OF ONE ANOTHER.”**

– Fania Davis, Race and Restorative Justice

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## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ACCOUNTABILITY?

The Merriam-Webster definition of [accountability](#) is “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions.” The common usage of the term reduces it to actions by an individual, but human beings work in the context of a *system* designed to evade accountability. This is not to minimize the harm that one person can do and the importance of holding that person accountable. However, only by creating accountable public systems can government be in alignment with its stated values. When more weight is placed on the individual level, rather than the systemic and institutional levels, we sustain the abusive status quo across decades, political cycles, oversight entities, and leadership changes.

We seek to explore accountability approaches that take into account one or more of the following three elements: 1) generational impact, 2) centering of truth-telling to change narratives and belief systems, and 3) restorative and healing strategies focused on relationships and communities.

We have much to learn from Indigenous communities who have a long tradition of practicing a circular [rather than linear] approach to accountability. A circular approach takes into account interconnectivity and does not see the individual in isolation from his or her social and natural environment, thereby encompassing these three elements.

In our region, colonization, cultural erasure, and white supremacy have come between us and these important teachings on accountability. But if we do not heal multigenerational trauma, we have not created accountable systems. Instead, we fall into false (and consistently disproven) assumptions that a more transactional policy change approach can create change. When we fail to incorporate all our relations into our solutions, including the historical and intergenerational impacts of those relations, and our atomized policy efforts fail, we blame the victims not the system. This cements this racist status quo and sustains it for generations to come. We must challenge ourselves to break outside of this paradigm and comfort zones.

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**“INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES THINK NOT ONLY OF THEIR CHILDREN’S WELFARE OR EVEN THAT OF THEIR CHILDREN’S CHILDREN BUT ALSO OF THE WELFARE OF SEVEN GENERATIONS TO COME. THIS CULTURAL TIMEFRAME IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF HEALING PROCESS. FOR JUSTICE TO BE, THERE MUST BE HEALING.”**

– Victor Jose Santana,  
Colorizing Restorative Justice

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**“OUT BEYOND IDEAS OF WRONGDOING  
AND RIGHTDOING, THERE IS A FIELD.  
I’LL MEET YOU THERE.”**

– Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, 13th century





## WHAT IS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE?

“Restorative justice seeks a healing for all versus a victory for one. This frequently occurs through a threefold collaborative and dialogical process:

**(1)** storytelling and relationship building, **(2)** truth-telling and accountability, and **(3)** reparative action.

It shifts the locus of the justice project from a dependence on systems and professionals to a reliance on the involvement of communities... It moves us from an individualist ‘I’ to a communalist ‘we’ thereby strengthening communities.”

- Fania Davis, Race and Restorative Justice.

**To push beyond our existing paradigm, we are looking at the issue of government accountability through a Restorative Justice lens.** At its core, Restorative Justice is about repairing relationships. While it is most often cited as a framework for addressing interpersonal harm, it has also been applied at the institutional and systemic level.

## ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AT THE SYSTEM LEVEL

Restorative justice is most often cited as a way to address interpersonal conflict. For example, many schools across the country have started building capacity for using the Restorative Justice circle process as an alternative to traditional school discipline protocols with an eye towards disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline which disproportionately harms Black and Indigenous young people. Restorative Justice has also been used as a pre-trial diversion program to keep young people out of the juvenile justice system, and as an alternative to the traditional court process to address incidents of violence in a more “survivor-centered, accountability-based, safety-driven, and racially equitable” way (Sered, 2017).

**W**hile all these entry points for restorative justice are critically important to advancing racial equity it is as important to look at restorative justice as a practice, philosophy, and approach to addressing institutional and systemic level harms.

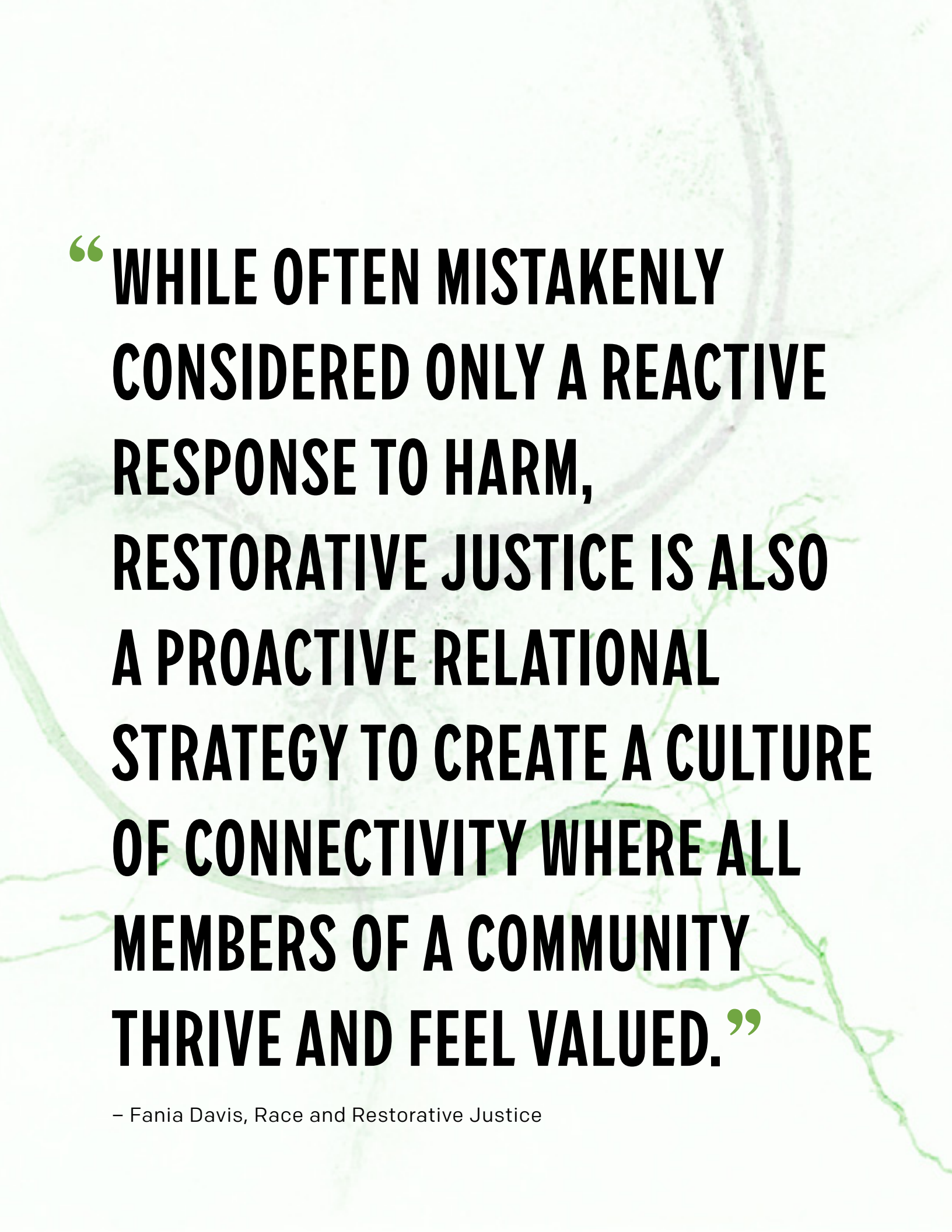
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**“THE ACCOUNTABILITY THAT EVERYONE CALLS FOR AND THAT PROVES SO TRANSFORMATIVE – BEING MINDFUL OF OUR SHARED ROLES IN HARMS– SELDOM REACHES BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL TO THE INSTITUTIONAL, MUCH LESS TO THE COLLECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY THAT IS THE GAME CHANGER FOR PEOPLES.”**

– Edward C Valandra, Wanbli Wapháha Hokšíla, Colorizing Restorative Justice

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**“WHILE OFTEN MISTAKENLY  
CONSIDERED ONLY A REACTIVE  
RESPONSE TO HARM,  
RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IS ALSO  
A PROACTIVE RELATIONAL  
STRATEGY TO CREATE A CULTURE  
OF CONNECTIVITY WHERE ALL  
MEMBERS OF A COMMUNITY  
THRIVE AND FEEL VALUED.”**

– Fania Davis, Race and Restorative Justice



One well known example of a restorative justice accountability process at the institutional and system level is from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SATRC) (Ensign, 2018). To move towards a new set of accountable systems and relationships, the SATRC offered a robust and nuanced definition of truth that includes four types (Ensign, 2018):

- 1 Factual/ Forensic Truth:** “Truth focused on individual events, cases, and people.” It focuses on “what happened to whom, where, when, how, and who was involved.” (Ensign, 2018)
- 2 Narrative Truth:** This includes “people’s perceptions, myths, and stories, with an emphasis on the cathartic benefits of storytelling” (Ensign, 2018). It makes meaning from factual/ forensic truth.
- 3 Social/ Dialogue Truth:** This recognizes that “the process through which truth was achieved has independent value” (Ensign, 2018) and is a reminder to prioritize process over outcomes or urgency. It is the act of sitting in a circle where each person is able to speak their truth, and for others to bear witness to that expression and experience.
- 4 Restorative Truth:** This category “emerges when facts are placed into their political, social, and historical context” (Ensign, 2018). This format acknowledges the impossibility of disentangling the uniquely American history of mass incarceration, from the 600+ years of colonization, stealing of native lands, genocide of Indigenous people, enslavement and cultural erasure of Indigenous and African people.

Truth telling is a key ingredient to meaningfully answer the call for government accountability and transparency (Gomez et al., 2022). This rigorous definition of truth allows for nuance and historical analysis to ground a relational dialogue (such as one held in restorative justice spaces) and creates a container for building root solutions.

## WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN FOR THE WORK OF ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY IN PUBLIC SAFETY IN 2024?

To navigate the inflection point we are in today, our history must serve as a compass. *Government accountability* is multi-layered and peeling back those layers will be painful. But there is too much at stake. Building a critical analysis of *government accountability* and how to achieve it will serve us well as we shape and sharpen our strategy to ensure we meet this moment in a way that makes our ancestors and the next seven generations proud.

Please be on the lookout for our next iteration of this series which will pick up where this one ends.

**“IT IS NO ACCIDENT THAT WHEN WE FIRST LEARN ABOUT JUSTICE AND FAIR PLAY AS CHILDREN IT IS IN THE CONTEXT OF TELLING THE TRUTH. THE HEART OF JUSTICE IS TRUTH TELLING, SEEING OURSELVES AND THE WORLD THE WAY IT IS, RATHER THAN THE WAY WE WANT IT TO BE.”**

– bell hooks, *All About Love*



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This brief was created with 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.



Supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation