

## Youth Justice Innovation on the West Coast: Examining Community-Based Social Justice Organizations through a Left Realist Lens

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**Abstract:** *This article uses a left realist lens to examine the philosophies and practices of three progressive organizations serving disadvantaged, 'at-risk,' or socially excluded youth—mostly of color—on the West Coast of the United States. Through face-to-face interviews with key organizational actors as well as qualitative content analysis of program materials, we highlight community-based organizations that, in line with some of the main tenets of left realism, take crime seriously, treat crime as a social and political phenomenon, focus on the economic roots of much serious violence, and value democratization of crime and social policy at the community level. While utilizing left realism as a way to begin organizing the diverse workings of these understudied organizations, we also discuss the promise and potential pitfalls that would likely arise if progressive criminologists were to work more closely with such groups.*

**Keywords:** community-based organizations, crime control in communities, left realism, public criminology, rehabilitative treatment, youth justice

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### INTRODUCTION

Drawing on qualitative case studies of three youth-serving organizations on the West Coast of the USA, this article employs a left realist lens to draw parallels between these organizations and the theory. To date, there are few studies in the U.S. about community-based organizations outside of administrative criminological studies that assess 'what works.' Such administrative criminology has some value, but it tends to miss contextual and big picture issues—as do its 'evidence-based' policy recommendations. Our examination of three social justice-oriented organizations—in San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles—allows us to shine light on community-based interventions that are cognizant and critical of big picture issues that impact the lives of marginalized young people, including the street violence, law and order policies, 'hard' dominant culture, and material inequalities conditioned by

neo-liberal capitalism. The recognition of these issues by organizations, and the desire to address them through collective organizing, parallels several of the main points in Elliott Currie's summation of the fundamental principles of "plain" left realism.

Taking crime seriously; recognizing that it disproportionately afflicts the most vulnerable; understanding its roots in the economic disadvantages, social deficits and cultural distortions characteristic of (but not limited to) predatory capitalism; insisting that those conditions are modifiable by concerted social action, and acknowledging the usefulness of some smaller-scale interventions that stand the test of evidence—while rejecting as counterproductive and unjust the massive expansion of repression as a

response to crime: those are, I'd say, the fundamental principles of "plain" left realism (Currie 2010:118).

Heretofore, left realism has not had significant impact in the design of community-based juvenile justice policy; however, we find that the approaches of the three community-based organizations—Homies Organizing the Mission to Empower Youth, the Seattle Community Justice Program, and the Youth Justice Coalition—parallel many of the tenets of left realism, including significant overlap between realist insights into the causes and control of crime. Therefore, left realism may serve as an organizing framework for these and similar youth justice organizations that share the following characteristics, all of which resonate with a left realist perspective: they take crime seriously, treat crime as a social and political phenomenon rather than just behavior, envision economic inequality as a catalyst of much serious violence, and value democratic influence over crime control efforts.

This overlap is ignored both from outside and within left realism, and we wish to mend this oversight.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, we hope to provide a bridge for future intellectual, practical, and organizational collaborations between progressive criminologists of all persuasions and the community-based organizations that are directly working with young people who are most 'at-risk' for violence and further entanglement in the harm-inflicting U.S. justice system. Thinking through what a progressive brand of intervention ought to look like is a crucial task for criminology, and a crucial task for a revitalized left realism. Elliott Currie echoes this:

Sorting out what we wish to mean by rehabilitation—and figuring out what kinds of intervention are both effective and compatible with our values—is a complicated task that we've barely begun to tackle. What would these more socially conscious "rehabilitative" programs look like? Who would run them? Here, as elsewhere, left realists need to develop a greater capacity to create new kinds of programs—based on our analysis and our principles—and to evaluate them, accumulating our own base of knowledge about "what works" in this deeper sense (Currie 2010:120).

Building on earlier work (Goddard and Myers 2011; Myers and Goddard 2013), we examine here the form and function of a particular type of organization: namely, reformist, social justice-oriented organizations whose services run counter to the sort of coercive, risk-oriented, and exclusionary forms of crime prevention and intervention often condemned in critical criminology and punishment and society scholarship. One of our goals in this paper is to illuminate to a U.S.-based criminological audience some of the features of locally-driven preventive crime control, carried out by what we consider to be

progressive community-based organizations (progressive in that these organizations are broad-minded, politically active, and offer 'interventions' to young people that counter some of the punitive and individualistic modes that now dominate U.S. youth justice policy).

## COUNTERING 'SO WHAT?' CRIMINOLOGY

The task for left realist criminology is to take seriously—in its theory and policy recommendations—the social and economic inequalities that generate both street crime and repressive reactions to it (DeKeseredy 2011a). Realism stands in contrast to 'administrative criminology,' which separates crime from the political context, policing practices, and underlying root causes (Young 1994), and also with variants of critical criminology that fail to acknowledge the 'real' fear, pain, and suffering that results from street crime. For a realist, a progressive criminology that matters would acknowledge that crime is sparked by socially and politically conditioned actions and reactions—the consequences of which often result in pain and suffering for disempowered populations. According to left realism, the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' in a capitalist society is theorized to be at the root of much street violence: a society that abandons and punishes its poor—while promoting a culture that celebrates greed, individualism and exploitation—is at greatest risk of producing individuals who "suffer relative deprivation, frustration, and anger, which they express through disrespect and violence inflicted on each other" (Henry and Lanier 2006:297).

When it began in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, the left realist movement was in many ways a reaction to the dominant critical left-leaning criminological scholarship of the day, which focused predominantly on how street crime was created by a biased criminal justice system, and its scope 'overblown' by a sensationalist mass media (Walklate 2007). Realists concede—then and now—that crime is in part generated by a biased criminal justice system (Henry and Lanier 2006). But serious street crime is also a 'real' enough phenomenon for citizens living in socially excluded communities where interpersonal violence is heavily concentrated (Currie 2010). To only focus on the socially constructed nature of crime, or to dismiss interpersonal violence as unconscious political protest, is a 'left idealist' position (Young 1992): such a view may seem reasonable to comfortable academics, but it is an untenable one for citizens at the bottom of the economic ladder who must negotiate communities where repressive crime control and violence remain everyday realities.

Moreover, as the founding left realists pointed out, when left-leaning crime scholars fail to take seriously intra-class violence and self-abuse at the bottom of the class structure this leaves the question of 'what should be done' about crime to the political right. Although the vast

inequalities generated by capitalism give rise to myriad sources of street crime, for a realist, to sit and wait for the end to this unjust social order before doing something about violence is intellectually wrongheaded and morally indefensible. And that is because, as a discipline, we know quite a bit about the sorts of programs and policies that can buffer families and communities from the ravages of predatory neo-liberal capitalism in ways that reduce violence (Currie 2010). Of course, in order for it to be realist in nature, a criminologist's policy recommendations must take social and political context into account (Young 1994); however, to dismiss all manner of small-scale crime prevention and intervention as politically doomed or socially insignificant from the outset is shortsighted: without a progressive voice in the crime policy arena, the crime problem is left to the blinkered vision of technocratic criminology and the lively imaginings of those on the political right.

Unfortunately, the intellectual shortcomings that initially gave rise to left realist thinking are still evident in modern criminology. As it stands now, much of the scholarship on rehabilitative treatment and community efforts at intervention are made up of highly technical studies that seek to determine 'what works' without taking into account social or political context (Michalowski 2010). Far and away, the dominant variant in U.S. criminology is this sort of administrative criminology, which separates political and moral considerations from the business of determining an 'evidence-based' approach to crime control. To quote Edwards and Hughes (2012): "[these studies] bracket political analysis off from the science of explaining crime and 'what works, what doesn't and what's promising' for prevention (Sherman et al. 1998). And it is in this sense that such criminology can be depicted as 'administrative' (Young 1994)."

Administrative criminologists rarely open up the black box of treatment or crime prevention; however, this is a clear shortcoming because much of what gets called 'treatment' or 'crime prevention' is morally troubling when seen firsthand. Some interventions, for instance, equate treatment with degradation; others offer such thin 'help' that the word does not seem applicable. In fact, our interest in studying these more hopeful, more liberating community-driven forms of prevention and intervention was sparked by seeing what 'treatment' looked like in juvenile institutions and what youth crime prevention looked like in communities. For example, in a recent study of his own, the second author interviewed detained young women about, among other topics, their histories with rehabilitative programming. Given the number and magnitude of the life problems young women faced, the interventions they were offered had a sort of absurd quality to them, in that what treatment actually entailed often did little or nothing to address these problems. The following exchange highlights one young woman's experience with

group treatment at an alternative school built specifically for 'system-involved' youth:

What kind of lessons did you learn?

None. Well, I mean, you know, the counselors would teach us stuff about, or tell us stuff about, you know, films and how to enjoy a good film, and like why—

How to enjoy a film?

Well, like, take 'The Fast and Furious,' it has no real moral value or anything. It has a lot of, you know, action—well, what our minds want to see because it, it makes us excited. They call it a...uh, they called it pornography... [be]cause, it really has no moral value. And, they're not really good actors. You know what I mean? And, it's just a lot of uh, loud crashing and banging and fighting, and blood and guts, or whatever, you know?

What was the point of the lesson?

That uh, we don't—it's what our minds want, you know, we don't know how to enjoy a good movie. I don't know. I'm not really sure.

Out of context, this sort of programming is perhaps a bit humorous; however, given the number and magnitude of the real world problems that this young woman faced—in particular, her addiction to very potent pain pills, her entanglement in an abusive relationship, and in the fact that she had few marketable skills and no safe and sober place to live upon release—this sort of 'welfare inaction' was no laughing matter: given her location on the wrong end of numerous social inequalities, it is very likely she will be exposed to many gendered risks for violence as well as further self-destruction and criminalization upon release.

Other responses to crime are troubling in our view because they ignore the material inequalities at the root of so much real violence, often while feeding-off of and furthering the 'othering' processes that play into a hard culture prone to social exclusion (Young 1999). For example, during recent fieldwork of his own, the first author came across a faith-based youth-serving organization that envisioned delinquency and crime as a consequence of the moral impurity of immigrant residents. This excerpt from a field note captures the words of the program's director as he detailed to a public audience the crime prevention services that his organization offered 'the community':

*During his presentation the director explained that: 'We go to where the crime is; we circle the area, lock arms, and pray together. We do this because the cause*

*of crime is in the soul, and we are the experts of the soul.’ In the pictures shown, those praying appeared middle-class, and predominately white. The inhabitants of this high-crime apartment complex where they circled and prayed were predominately Latinos living in poverty.*

We are well aware of the troubling qualities apparent in many rehabilitative and preventive efforts; there is much to be critical of. And, indeed, there is no shortage of critical scholarship on treatment and crime prevention. We are sympathetic to many of the critiques levied by critical scholars. However, we feel that much of it paints the field into a corner by tying on-the-ground workings to indomitable social forces while having little to say about what a more humane alternative might look like, meaning that it could be construed as a variant of ‘So What?’ criminology.

As realists routinely remind us, critical accounts that speak *only* to the expansion of a punitive ethos and the suffusion of crime control policies into all manner of civil society do little to advance our claims on either theoretical or political grounds, as sites for resistance or reform are theorized out of the picture (Matthews 2005). And such a constricted lens sidelines progressive criminologists when it comes time to suggest policy reforms (Currie 2007; Jacobson and Chancer 2010; Matthews 2009; 2010).<sup>2</sup> Policy relevance is inherent in the realist project, and such a focus could inform other modern criminologies. A revitalized realism, for instance, could stand alongside, learn from, and inform, cultural criminology and aid in a project that cultural criminologists have been relatively silent on up till now: namely, “the identification of viable alternatives, together with strategies and visions of how these alternatives could be realized” (Matthews 2010: 130).

Realism remains an important orientation in part because it entertains the possibility of progressive change while remaining critical of the construction of crime categories and all forms of social inequality. It sidesteps both variants of ‘so what’ criminology discussed here; that is to say, it avoids the blinkered view of administrative criminology and the impossibilism of most—though not all—critical criminological work. It is a refreshing and necessary perspective for this reason. And while it might not be generating the number of collected works and journal articles that it did twenty years ago (e.g. Matthews and Young 1992; Young and Matthews 1992) realism is indeed alive and well. For instance, a realist lens has recently been brought to such subjects as terrorism (Gibbs 2010), gendered violence (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2002; DeKeseredy 2011b; Mooney 2000) and anti-feminist fathers’ rights organizations (Dragiewicz 2010). Moreover, well-known realists have recently assessed the health of left realism (Schwartz and DeKeseredy 2010) and

weighed-in on what a reinvigorated realism ought to look like (Currie 2010; Matthews 2009; 2010).

While realists remain critical of the material inequalities and hard cultures generated by neo-liberal capitalist arrangements (e.g. DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2010), they also acknowledge that fundamental social change must begin somewhere. And the subjects of our study make it clear that resistance and creativity live on in the world of community-based youth justice intervention. We would suggest that these locally-driven programs may serve as a template for a more hopeful sort of intervention (Currie 2012), or even as catalysts for broader social and criminal justice reform (Goddard and Myers 2011); indeed, these organizations show promise for organizing marginalized communities around crime issues in ways that might bring about social justice (Matthews 2005). To be sure, their funding sources and how they are held accountable have been shaped in meaningful ways by neo-liberal governance and a responsabilization agenda; however, such an agenda has not erased all manner of resistance or creativity—at times, it has sparked it or at least allowed it enough space to grow. In short, we use a left realist lens to make sense of the common practices shared by three youth-serving organizations, and to begin imagining how progressive academics and critical community-based organizations might learn from each other.

## **THE MAIN TENETS OF LEFT REALISM AND AN OVERVIEW OF THE COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS**

The three progressive youth-serving organizations have four defining characteristics in common. In this section we describe the sort of innovative work being done by these groups, while also arguing that they share four overlapping characteristics that are in line with left realism. These characteristics include the following:

1. All three organizations treat crime as a social and political phenomenon rather than *just* behavior (In their own unique ways, each group pushes back against the criminalization of young people);
2. All three treat ‘street’ crime as ‘real’ phenomena. While each of the three groups is critical of the criminalization of youth, each takes violence seriously as well;
3. All three of the organizations focus on the economic roots of much serious violence, and;
4. Each values the democratization of crime and social policy at the community level.

## The Organizations

In the field of crime control, these organizations work to *prevent* youth and gang violence, *intervene* on ‘negative’ behavior, and increasingly *reintegrate* young offenders back into the community. The youth involved in these organizations are not the so-called ‘good kids.’ Many have been expelled at least once, if not from several schools; others are returning or have spent time in juvenile or adult facilities; some participants are currently under formal supervision; some are currently detained; and some are former or active gang members. Common to all the youth is their experience with concentrated disadvantage, hyper-surveillance by law enforcement, and brushes with the law. The vast majority are young men and women of color (primarily from African-American, Latino, Central American, and Indigenous populations). Although we do not have precise demographic data, after spending time at these organizations it is understood that the young people come from low-income families and that their lives have been shaped by relative deprivation (Young 1999). In what follows, we give a brief overview of the three organizations, followed by the linking of left realism to the goals, characteristics, and activities of the three organizations.<sup>3</sup>

***Homies Organizing the Mission to Empower Youth (HOMEY)***. Founded in 1999, and located in the Mission District of San Francisco, the organization works with young people, primarily between the ages of 14 and 22, who are from low-income neighborhoods. At any given time, HOMEY serves between 30 and 50 youth, with a particular focus on Latino youth—many of whom are considered by law enforcement as being active gang members (a term not used by the organization). As a youth violence prevention service for the City of San Francisco, HOMEY designs its intervention through a lens of social justice—specifically, by teaching Latino history and culture, political education, activism, and community organizing skills. In addition to several private donors and grants from foundations, HOMEY funds itself through contracts with the city and the county juvenile probation department to provide these non-traditional counseling and case management services to youth.

***The Seattle Community Justice Program***. Founded in 2000, and located in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of Seattle, Washington, the Seattle Community Justice Program works with 300 and 400 young people, ages 15 to 21, each year. The participants are primarily African-American and Latino, and there are a large number of indigenous young people. The mission of the Seattle Community Justice Program is to develop youth leaders for social change and work to end racial disparities in the juvenile justice system. Drawing from the civil rights struggles, the organization operates the Tyree Scott Freedom School, a multi-day workshop that offers an historical understanding of how race and racism was

constructed in the U.S. Through the lens of race, the program uses non-traditional counseling to teach youth how to avoid harm when confronted by the criminal justice system, and it describes the history of activism. Building on lessons from the past, participating youth also learn about social justice-oriented and community-focused responses to crime and violence. The organization recently conducted Freedom School lessons with youth inside state-level juvenile prisons and was looking to expand the scope of this program. Along with financial support from private donors and grants, the Seattle Community Justice Program is a part of the American Friends Service Committee.<sup>4</sup>

***The Youth Justice Coalition (YJC)***. Founded in 2002, and located in South Los Angeles, the Youth Justice Coalition serves youth who have been expelled from mainstream and other alternative schools and whose lives have been shaped by U.S. criminal and juvenile justice policy (directly and indirectly). Some of the young people affiliated with the YJC have been imprisoned in adult facilities, while many have spent time in the juvenile justice system. One of its goals is to build a youth-led movement to challenge race, gender, and class inequality in the Los Angeles County juvenile justice system. The organization currently serves between 100 and 130 youth, ranging from the ages of 14 to 22. A key component of the Youth Justice Coalition is the charter high school that it runs, Free Los Angeles High School, which the federal government funds through the Workforce Investment Act, and which is accredited by the John Muir Charter School Program.

The three organizations are not formally connected, but they share much in common in terms of philosophy and practice. All three groups campaign on social justice issues that pertain to the criminal justice system, community-driven crime control, racism, and grassroots activism; each articulates these ideas into a critical curriculum aimed at contextualizing students’ understandings of personal troubles. In the following section we connect some of these specific organizational activities to some of the central tenants of realism as a way to illustrate left realist principles in action.

## LEFT REALISM IN ACTION

### Treating Crime as a Social and Political Phenomenon Rather than Behavior

Building on labeling theory and early critical criminology scholarship, left realism’s position is that crime is, in part, a social construction—it is one part action, one part reaction (Lea and Young 1984). Given this, according to left realism you would want to chip away at *excessive criminalization* and assist youth to *negotiate U.S. crime control*. These are precisely the activities these organizations carry out. For example, practitioners and

youth organizers at the Youth Justice Coalition work to combat the excessive criminalization of young people of color. According to an organizer at the Youth Justice Coalition, this includes reforming “the current overuse of suspension and expulsion to address willful defiance” in schools, and organizing efforts to rescind the Los Angeles Police Department’s Special Order 1 and 11.<sup>5</sup> In another recent action, the Youth Justice Coalition developed a way for young people to challenge civil gang injunctions by submitting a form to the city prosecutor to review (until the Coalition worked with the city to develop the form, there was no way to remove oneself from a gang injunction—an anti-gang strategy that restricts non-criminal activities such as loitering at schools, carrying pagers, and riding bicycles). These actions by the Youth Justice Coalition typify the de-criminalizing work of these organizations: youth-driven actions that lack a taken-for-granted perspective of crime and its control, and attempt to revise local policies.

In addition to pushing for change at the policy level, all three organizations educate youth on how to negotiate traditional crime control efforts in their neighborhoods and schools. For instance, the Seattle Community Justice Program teaches young people at their Freedom School about their rights in encounters with law enforcement. Moreover, it schools young people in what one respondent called “commonsense survival skills” such as not making sudden movements or asking too many questions of the officers. Similarly, the Youth Justice Coalition recently developed a pamphlet that helps youth “stay cool but not have their rights violated during an encounter with the police.” As the pamphlet says:

So at all times when a cop approaches you, no matter how friendly or innocent the situation might seem, give the police your name, address and picture ID. Beyond that, be cool, be calm, be polite and flip the script: “No disrespect officer but I will not answer any further questions without speaking to a lawyer.”

The practitioners at these organizations relate a great deal of the tension with law enforcement to historically rooted race relations (Alexander 2010; Glover 2009), including the contemporary manifestation of what they consider the overly broad use of the label ‘gang member.’ All three organizations contest the use of the word, and they see it as a political construction—one defined by those with the power to name certain groups and individuals as gang members. Respondents at HOMEY explicitly told us they never use the words ‘gang’ or ‘gang member.’ Since cultural practices (e.g. music, clothes, body language) of young people in these neighborhoods are often criminalized, or at least thought to be associated with practices of gang members, the organizations attempt to decouple gang behavior from minor delinquent behavior (e.g. tagging), law abiding behavior (e.g. standing on a

street corner), and skin tone. And for those who are, in fact, active gang members, the organizations humanize the image of a gang member—rejecting the image of a remorseless, marauding thug, who prefers violence to a conventional lifestyle. In these ways and others, these organizations aim to combat crime by changing the reactions of law enforcement and shifting the cultural backdrop that normalizes the criminalization of young people in the U.S. And in these ways—like left realist scholarship—these organizations view crime, and the criminal, as a social and political phenomenon.

### Treating ‘Street’ Crime as a ‘Real’ Phenomenon

Left realists view crime as a genuine observable fact that is felt disproportionately by the powerless. Therefore, they argue, you ought to take violence and its victims seriously. Our interviewees at all three organizations spoke about the violence that the young people in their programs are exposed to. The director of HOMEY described how violence is an added challenge during the already challenging time of adolescence: that is, youth who commit violent acts still experience the same angst, relationship problems, and concern over looks as other teenagers. The director qualifies these young people’s experience in the following way:

The difference is that they are often targets, you know, and that’s the tough part, you know, that’s the part of being targets of either police, or other young people, or whatever, and it is what we try to get them away from, and try to steer them away from.

Similarly, organizers at the Youth Justice Coalition stress that ‘high risk’ populations of young people are at high risk of becoming victims of street crime as well as state-sanctioned violence:

We have come to recognize our legitimate voices not just as people who have direct experience with school push-out, arrest, court, and custody, but as people who have also been regular and long-term victims of violence, crime, and PTSD.

In this way, Youth Justice Coalition’s actions aim to not only scale back social control, but also shape civil society in a way that will (or should) lead to less violence. The Youth Justice Coalition recognizes, however, that there is a need for safety in places where young people spend time, and they conduct safety-oriented activities such as a workshops series called ‘Respect: Ending the School-to-Jail Track.’ They describe this workshop as a “skills and action planning workshop to have safe schools without pushing students out.”

Thus, it is not that these organizations see crime as overblown or that they underplay the experiences of

victims of crime. Rather, like realists, they see the problem of crime as being exacerbated by the crime control reaction, particularly to public order crimes, and point out that people overlook that offenders and criminalized young people are usually (direct and indirect) victims of violent street crime as well. As with attempts to change societal reactions to young people's behaviors, the views of these organizations regarding violence point to, albeit in a less cogent manner, left realism.

### **Economic Inequality Breeds Violence**

Given the assertion by left realists that inequality relative to others in society is a formula that engenders violence, organizations ought to help youth to *understand*, *negotiate*, and *change* these criminogenic economic realities. Paralleling this central left realist tenet, the organizations linked violence to economic inequality and (in less overt ways) relative deprivation. All three groups helped youth understand the nature and effects of racialized social and economic inequality. For instance, the director of the Seattle Community Justice Program described one of its consciousness-raising interventions—one which took place in a locked juvenile facility—in the following way:

We will take them through a process of looking at the conditioning of socialization—how we're all conditioned, and the mediums in which we're conditioned...Then we'll take them through a power analysis—really lookin' at the institutional relationship to poor communities. Lookin' at every institution, from the media to insurance industry, and especially education and criminal justice, which most impact these young people. Then we'll look at the internalization of racial oppression. The internalization of racial inferiority and superiority. The individual messages that people of color get in our society and that white people get in relationship to each other, and how we can play out those messages unconsciously.

Providing young people with a sociological understanding of inequality and its internalization was a goal of all three groups. In HOMEY's mission statement, it states that the organization "addresses and combats internalized oppression, discrimination, disenfranchisement, and other social ills that have common roots in poverty and lack of education and resources." The director described to us his view of the relationship between poverty and violence in the working-poor neighborhood of San Francisco where the HOMEY office is located:

I see street violence, and like domestic violence, and all those kinds of different, you know, *ills* as

symptoms and not as root causes of what's goin' on in those neighborhoods, right? So, in my neighborhood, that's not the root cause of why people shoot themselves. The root cause is because people don't got no money.

The Youth Justice Coalition also makes links between inequality and violence. In many of its campaigns for justice-system reform, the Youth Justice Coalition critiques the justice system for not taking into account the complex social issues at the root of crime. In a 2012 flyer to mobilize community members to pack a courtroom to protest the sentencing phase of a trial in which a 14-year-old boy faced 300 years in prison for an alleged drive-by shooting, they point out that in the courtroom the "root causes" of violence cannot be discussed in a way that allows the "complexities of community relationships" to be understood.

For all three organizations, we see an attempt to complicate simple, dominant individualized explanations for violent crime by providing an alternative explanation that connects multiple factors and the unfair allocation of resources that operate on one another—creating a 'toxic brew' for many U.S. communities (Currie 1997). Our informant in Seattle spoke to what made the programing his organization conducts in juvenile detention unique from the dominant approaches young people usually encounter behind bars.

There's no one else talking about social issues in the way in which we're talking about social issues. So, that's, that's the major difference. We're coming in... with a desire to revolutionize kids, you know? And, that's, most people aren't comin' in with that sense. So, we're really trying to encourage them to become political actors. Inside and outside. Help them to get a sense of their own power that they can change some of these issues that are impacting them. And, again, helpin' them to make better choices in their own lives. I mean, every one of them, you know, I'd say the majority of them aren't gonna be, you know, community organizers, or what we would call anti-racist community organizers, but they all can do something in their own sphere of influence that can make their community better. And that's what we want them to see.

The ultimate aim of the organizers we spoke to is to empower young people to become agents for social change, personally and collectively; however, one byproduct of this effort may be a changed self-concept for the young person that is less prone to the sort of self-destruction and intra-class violence that is most likely to land them in the U.S. criminal justice system. Such actions are real-world examples of a more principled form of intervention (Currie 2010; 2012).

## The Solutions to Crime Ought to be Democratically Determined

Last, a left realist policy agenda must include a horizontal decision making arrangement.<sup>6</sup> The organizations spoke to the importance of having solutions to crime come from the bottom up. This can include having elements of a program designed or informed by youth themselves. For instance, HOMEY's *Kalpulli* program is a social justice, youth organizing group that meets weekly. Through *Kalpulli*, HOMEY staff educates and facilitates activism through youth-led leadership development and political organizing around issues that are important to the youth. At the Youth Justice Coalition, too, campaigns target social issues that youth identify, and young people largely design the campaign tactics used. Such youth-led aspects are another difference between these alternative forms of intervention and what normally occurs under the name of treatment or prevention.

Beyond valuing youth-input in the shaping of program workings, key informants all spoke to the more general need for responses to crime to be informed by the community. For instance, in our interview at the Seattle Community Justice Program, the organization described the need for a more holistic and community-driven approach to crime prevention and social intervention:

If you have easy access to guns, if you have unresolved mental health issues, potentially, unresolved trauma issues, unresolved issues in terms of just everything we talked about with the society, that creates a toxic mix. And no one's really had the foresight to really dig in and deal with all those issues that are swirling around for our young people. You know, typically, the approach has been we'll have some youth violence programs, and we'll have more of a police response. And, that's not to say we don't need those two components, but it needs to be more holistic. And, that's the conversation we're trying to push forward. How do we have a more holistic, community-based response to what these young people need?

Similarly, on its website, the Youth Justice Coalition describes how it "believes in self-determination and empowerment of our communities and all oppressed peoples..." During face-to-face interviews, respondents at the Youth Justice Coalition explained to us that, "We do not feel that the current social, cultural, political, economic, and other forms of governance represent, or have ever represented our interests, our means of existence, freedoms, or liberations." And their particular treatment focus is to "mobilize the voice, vision, talents, and power of young people, through direct action organizing, advocacy, issue education, and activist arts." Reflecting this last parallel with left realist criminology,

the director of the Seattle Community Justice Program described to us how the purpose of the freedom school is to "raise the consciousness of young people in social justice issues and create young anti-racist community organizers." Thus, alongside their activist educational pedagogy, these organizations work to build a youth-led movement to challenge race, gender, and class inequality, particularly in crime legislation, its enforcement on the street, and in the correctional system. We predict that the success in this area, will impact, more than any other, the success of the other three areas we see as parallel to left realism. And we can only wait to see, over time, how these groups will fair in the current 'culture of control' (Garland 2001).

## PROGRESSIVE POSSIBILITIES?

This article casts light on the critical and progressive work being carried out by community-based organizations that have to this point been largely overlooked by criminologists. As a first step in calling attention to this alternative brand of intervention, we have tried to organize what holds these groups together in terms of practice and outlook. Our examination of the guiding philosophies and daily workings of the three organizations revealed four defining characteristics which can be usefully construed as being in line with the main tenets of left realism: crime as political, violence as 'real,' inequality as a generator of violence, and intervention as democratically informed. Drawing such parallels might serve as an avenue for a bottom-up sort of public criminology—one that works actively with agents for social change. Moreover, this work should serve as a reminder to criminologists that progressive policy innovation can be achieved at the popular level and not just by doing 'policy relevant' work that sways the actions of those already in power at the state level (Michalowski 1983). Indeed, to the extent the subjects of our case studies are not aberrations, further exploration of locally-driven, locally-designed crime control efforts may serve as a starting point for a more compassionate approach to juvenile crime control. Should collaborative relationships be formed, we see the possibility for meaningful and impactful form of "deep prevention" (Currie 2010)—since not only does the theory parallel, albeit imperfectly, practitioners' own views and lived experiences, but for critical scholars these organizations have the access to, and the trust of, the most hard to reach 'high risk' young people.

This article provides new directions for left realism by highlighting a policy area where the theory can operate and be impactful—somewhat unfettered by government filters and negligence. Along these lines, we show optimism for left realism as a viable theory for informing juvenile justice policy. However, we should point out that the promise of these organizations might be greater than their actual delivery, as they face subtle hindrances, economic



obstacles, and potential political backlash (Myers and Goddard 2013). Opening a youth center on every street in an area facing fundamental social problems is not the answer. However, it could be part of the answer. And, because these organizations envision crime and punishment as shaped by larger social forces, they may serve as catalysts for broader social change. How this process may unfold—or not—ought to be a subject for critical or progressive criminologists to think hard about.

What is for sure is that we have observed left realism in action. But this raises an important question—possibly a danger. If we are to democratize preventive crime control decisions, how do we integrate the knowledge of critical and left realist criminology with local knowledge of the youth and the senior practitioners from these organizations? That is, how can progressive academics work alongside community-based actors in ways that are helpful to bringing about the sort of social change that both groups generally agree is necessary? O'Malley (2008) has argued we subject expert definitions of problems and solutions to 'lay' critique—although in the above findings we see that there is a great deal of agreement already in place. Where disagreements do arise, however, there would need to be opportunities for negotiation in instances where the left realist and the local organizations both have something to offer, as O'Malley, again, suggests. For if you lose the local voice and decision-making capacity, you lose the local organizations.

Through a slightly different lens, though, this seeming tension between academics and local organizers could be repurposed as a clear strength. Academics and oppositional movements critical of neo-liberalism and its consequences might work together in order to more clearly chart a path towards a world that is more equal and socially just. Harvey (2005:198) notes that in creating a plan for social change there are "two main paths to take": you can "engage with oppositional movements" and attempt to "distil from and through their activism the essence of a broad-based oppositional program" or you can engage in theoretical and practical exercises in the hopes of deriving alternative models through engaged scholarship. While tensions will surely arise when these two paths cross, the relative strength and value of either one does not need to be built on de-valuing the other.

To take the latter path in no way presumes that existing oppositional movements are wrong or somehow defective in their understandings. By the same token, oppositional movements cannot presume that analytical findings are irrelevant to their cause. The task is to initiate dialogue between those taking each path and thereby to deepen collective understandings and define more adequate lines of action (Harvey 2005:199).

What is clear is that the understandings of progressive criminologists resonate with the logics and practices of these already established alternative organizations. And, it seems reasonable that lines of communication ought to be established since both sides have important and unique contributions to make towards increased understanding and social change. However, if stable bridges are to be built between progressive outposts in the academy and critical organizations in the community, this will need to be done in spite of an academic reward structure that does not value such work (Currie 2007). Moreover, such an effort will be at odds with a long history of academic silencing in the US-based social sciences generally and criminology in particular (Young 2011). While doing social science and doing campaigning politics simultaneously is certainly not without risk or contradiction (Carlen 2012), it is seems clear that criminologists with progressive values have much to learn from ground-up efforts that oppose mass incarceration and racialized economic inequality. Thus, such sites ought to inform theories for social change, and the multiplication of such organizations outside the traditional policy arena ought to become a part of critical scholars' policy suggestions. Moreover, such organizations could serve as sights for a 'policy relevant' critical criminology that is somewhat buffered from the political and economic interests of the powerful (Michalowski 2010). From the point of view of community-based organizations, an important litmus test for whether they would want to pursue a closer relationship with the academy is whether academic work has a reasonable chance at improving the community being studied. As our informant in Seattle put it:

The work you do in the academy needs to be connected to organizing out in the community. The whole purpose of y'all doin' your work is to make this a better country, right? A better world. So, how do you do your work in that way?

As neo-liberal capitalism continues to deepen inequalities and harden cultures across the globe, a transformative critical criminology that speaks to real world issues is needed now more than ever (Reiner 2012). While rates of homicide have dropped in recent years, the U.S. remains a very violent place when compared to Western European countries (Hall and McLean 2009). And this violence remains concentrated within communities facing similar constellations of social problems—problems that have been exacerbated by the heavy-handed crime control policies that stand in place of a progressive public policy that would allow all young people access to the meaningful work and social supports needed to live lives free of violence and coercive crime control. Given the nature, scope and depth of these real world problems, a left realist perspective—in theory and in action—is needed now more than ever.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although we do not engage fully in the complicated history of left realism in this article, see Walklate (2007) for an excellent review of the theory and an informative discussion of the differences between UK and North American strands of thought. See also Henry and Lanier (2006) for a good general overview of the theory.

<sup>2</sup> Our claim here is not so much that one critical approach is better than another, but simply that left realism can inform juvenile justice policy, thus remaining a useful orientation—and one that is compatible with building a sociologically-inclined criminology committed to progressive values. Moreover, the value of a realist perspective does not need to be built by the wholesale denigration of other approaches, be they critical or mainstream; in fact, one of the strengths of realist authors has been in synthesizing large bodies of administrative criminological studies into more contextualized accounts of crime and punishment, and in their ability to incorporate such findings into their own policy recommendations.

<sup>3</sup> Although the sample is small, there are scores of similar organizations operating in the U.S. For example, the national organizations All of Us or None, Barrios Unidos, and YouthAction; the Los Angeles-based organizations The Advancement Project and El Joven Noble; the San Francisco-based organizations Community Justice Network for Youth, The Center for Young Women's Development, and United Playaz; the Oakland-based organizations Critical Resistance, SOUL (School of Unity and Liberation), and The Center for Third World Organizing; the Chicago Freedom School and Project NIA in Chicago; Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving), and Sista II Sista in Brooklyn, New York; and The Children's Defense Fund in Washington DC, to name a few.

<sup>4</sup> The American Friends Service Committee is a Quaker organization that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace, and humanitarian service.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Youth Justice Coalition, the two Special Orders allow Suspicious Activity Reports to be issued for non-criminal behavior such as using video cameras, taking notes, or using binoculars.

<sup>6</sup> The idea is increasingly being supported at different levels of U.S. government, as the 'turn to' communities is being re-introduced in crime control as the best formula for preventing and intervening on 'street' crime in urban neighborhoods.

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