



New York County: Inside Criminal Justice

Practitioner:

[New York County District Attorney's Office](#)

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Summary:

Inside Criminal Justice is a six-week seminar in which prosecutors from the New York County District Attorney's Office and incarcerated individuals from a local correctional facility participate. The course aims to encourage in-depth and respectful conversations among participants about the criminal justice system and healthy personal development and change.

Problem

Prosecutors play a key role in the criminal justice system and their decisions can significantly impact the lives of individuals who are arrested and prosecuted for a crime.

Understanding and appreciating how those decisions affect individuals can better inform their prosecutorial discretion. At the same time, individuals who have been convicted and sentenced may believe the process was unfair and may not understand the challenges prosecutors face when making those decisions.

Program Description

The New York County District Attorney's Office, in conjunction with the [Institute for Innovation in Prosecution](#) at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the [Center for Justice](#) at Columbia University developed [Inside Criminal Justice](#) in 2016. The program was designed to bridge the gap between prosecutors and incarcerated individuals and was inspired by a similar model from Pittsburgh that involve incarcerated individuals and police recruits. After piloting the model in 2017, the first Inside Criminal Justice class occurred the following year.

Inside Criminal Justice is a six-week seminar that enrolls individuals incarcerated at one of two state correctional facilities (Queensboro and Edgecombe) located in New York City and prosecutors from the New York County District Attorney's Office. There is an equal ratio of prosecutors and incarcerated individuals ("inside students"), but no more than 24 participants in a class. Weekly evening sessions are led by one prosecutor-educator from the District Attorney's Office, one academic partner-educator from Columbia University, and a teaching assistant who is a staff member from the District Attorney's Office. The team provides readings and guides class discussions and exercises that seek to break down barriers among class participants. The teaching assistant also runs a weekly session assisting inside students with writing and processing their responses from class.

Assistant district attorneys apply to participate and must fully commit to the time requirement outside their normal work responsibilities. The prosecutor-educator seeks open-minded participants with a diverse range of expertise and experience.

An initiative of the state Division of Criminal Justice Services, the Knowledge Bank features summaries of promising local programs and practices and provides a platform for criminal justice practitioners to identify potential approaches to address their community's specific public safety issue.

The selection process for inside students varies by facility, but they should be eligible for release soon after the completion of the class and not have any active appeals or conflicts of interest with any of the assistant district attorneys participating (e.g., handled their cases).

A committee of professors from Columbia University approved the Inside Criminal Justice curriculum, which was developed by a Columbia University psychology professor, and focuses on healthy life development and making social and individual changes.

Inside Criminal Justice seminars encourage students to think together about a justice system that emphasizes public safety while supporting healthy personal development. Reading materials and discussion focus on analysis of the criminal justice system and the ways that it affects individuals and communities. Throughout the seminar, students have in-depth and respectful conversations about the criminal justice system, including issues of sentencing and racial disparity. Students jointly author policy proposals defining specific ways to improve the system. During graduation, students present their proposals to the New York County District Attorney, state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision officials, local politicians and other stakeholders. In some cases, practical, applicable proposals are considered for implementation. For example, students obtained funding for a computer lab in the correctional facility that allowed individuals to perform job searches and build resumes prior to release.

When the seminar concludes, the inside students receive a certificate of completion and have an opportunity to receive college credits from the Columbia University Center for Justice upon their release. Students often continue to stay involved with the program after graduation, in varying ways. Prosecutor students and inside students may maintain relationships and inside student alumni may participate in panels or focus groups or return for graduations. Prosecutor students also receive Continuing Legal Education credit for the time spent attending the seminar sessions.

As of December 2024, Inside Criminal Justice ran 10 seminars attended by approximately 175 students.

Anecdotally, students find it to be a challenging, but rewarding experience. Students report mind-set shifts of the other group and develop meaningful connections with one another.

Funding

The New York County District Attorney's Office supports Inside Criminal Justice within existing resources. The John Jay College of Criminal Justice provides the graduation location. Both instructors and the teaching assistant volunteer their time.

Supportive Research

Inside Criminal Justice stems from the [Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program](#), an educational program bringing college students and incarcerated individuals together in a semester-long course within a correctional setting. The program allows participants the opportunity to interact in a structured setting as equals. Despite social barriers, the program provides the opportunity for both groups to engage in potentially transformative learning experiences.

Critical Success Factors

- Collaboration among a district attorney, a correctional facility, and an academic partner is critical to the success of the Inside Criminal Justice program.
- Engagement from staff at the correctional facility hosting the course is a key factor. Instructors need to rely on correctional staff to ensure that there is an appropriate location for the seminar within the facility, and that inside students attend each of the six classes.

Lessons Learned

- Initially, the curriculum was eight weeks long. Prosecutors had a difficult time committing to eight weeks given their trial schedules and personal obligations, so instructors condensed the material into six weeks by lengthening class time to 2½ hours.
- Program staff should consider the best option for inside students to attend graduation and present their proposals. Graduation may occur after all inside students are released, inside the correctional facility, or at a work-release facility.

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- Inside Criminal Justice staff are discussing how to tailor a curriculum to focus on women's issues. One of the seminars included inside students from a women's correctional facility in New York City, and the curriculum was the same for men and women. As the semester progressed, instructors supplemented the course material for the setting.
- Ensuring there is support from the top down can ease the burden and challenges faced by partners. Creating a functional relationship is difficult but important, and each institutional partner agency may face different obstacles. Obstacles frequently encountered during set up were logistical (e.g., how to move inside students around the correctional facility, or bring the materials inside).

2021, Inside Criminal Justice graduates moderated small-group conversations with incoming assistant district attorneys, where they shared best practices for equitable prosecution and engaged in policy discussions such as those that occur in the Inside Criminal Justice classroom.

Additional Comments

- Inside Criminal Justice encourages its prosecutor students to use public transportation to travel to the correctional facility instead of driving. Although it does not compare to the challenges family members experience to visit loved ones in distant jails or prisons, removing travel convenience reinforces Inside Criminal Justice's goal for a prosecutor to consider the impact of decisions on both the incarcerated individual and his or her family.
- The Institute for Innovation in Prosecution developed a tool kit for agencies interested in implementing Inside Criminal Justice seminars, found [here](#).
- In March 2020, the host correctional facilities suspended visitation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Inside Criminal Justice team determined that a virtual platform could not replicate the classroom experience, and temporarily suspended the program. In-person programming has since resumed at select correctional facilities.
- When program operations were suspended, the Inside Criminal Justice team worked to incorporate some of the core values of the seminars into the New York County District Attorney's Office's incoming prosecutor training. This included bringing formerly incarcerated graduates to speak with the new assistant district attorneys, exposing them to both sides of a criminal case. In October

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