

D. Developing Sustainable and Just Communities

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Background

Policy Area and Goals

The goals of the “Sustainable and Just Communities” group is to bring together policy makers, practitioners, stakeholders, and researchers working in two different policy arenas including economic sustainability and criminal justice. The challenge presented to this group is to take these two policy arenas that, to date, have been considered separate and unrelated and to look at them as connected and mutually reinforcing. In practical terms, this means that we will look at such community level problems as joblessness, the lack of affordable housing, the economic inequality of native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and Southeast Asians in the state as related to the increased rates of incarceration in Hawai`i, the rise of drug use (especially “ice”) throughout many communities, and the recent political pressure to build new prisons in Hawai`i.

Economically Sustainable Communities

On the topic of economic sustainability, the goal of this policy group is to look at the term “sustainability” in new ways. In the past, sustainability initiatives have often evoked images of environmental conservation, land use planning, and alternative forms of transportation. Interestingly, in many areas of the country, policies designed to preserve the natural environment have negatively affected the poorest and most marginalized communities. As a result, policy makers around the country have had to build bridges between preserving the environment and providing widespread economic opportunities. In Portland, OR, for example, stakeholders learned that any regional sustainability agenda could not survive without the support of affordable housing advocates. Similarly, environmental policy makers in Atlanta learned that they could not craft effective initiatives without contributing to greater opportunities within low-income African American communities

Just Communities

Practitioners and policy makers throughout the country have also discovered the links between economic sustainability and crime and criminal justice initiatives. In the past several years in Hawai`i, crystal methamphetamine or “ice” use has quickly evolved into one of the most widespread social problems confronting the state. Not surprisingly, this drug tends to be rampant in the most marginalized and poorest communities. Although Hawai`i remains committed to avoiding an over-reliance on incarceration, the fact is that increased ice use, among other factors, has left this state with quickly growing corrections budget. The rising rate of incarceration has had a devastating impact on local communities. For example, incarceration spending often comes at the expense of education and job training programs that could provide viable opportunities for local youth. Without economic opportunities, adequate drug prevention, or drug treatment, youth and adults in economically disadvantaged communities have few non-drug related options. While Hawai`i

remains committed to providing treatment rather than incarceration for first time drug offenders (see SB 1188, 2002), the state straddles a delicate balance among the pressure to build new prisons, respond to community-level crime problems, and provide adequate community-based programs.

Issues

This policy group will exchange viewpoints, research, and experiences on community-level issues centered on the criminal justice system and economic opportunity, explore links between policy areas, and begin to formulate a policy agenda. The hope is that, by bringing individuals together from different policy areas, we can develop and implement a policy agenda that addresses the fundamental causes of a range of problems facing Hawai'i – in this case the causes of economic disenfranchisement, crime, and drug use. Towards this end, if there is sufficient interest and commitment among participants, the group may form the core of a long-term collaboration of individuals dedicated to addressing these concerns. An organization like the College's Public Policy Center could facilitate and logistically support this ongoing effort.

This policy group will bring together a collection of scholars and practitioners committed to improving the opportunities within poor and disenfranchised communities in Hawai'i, especially opportunities for youth. Each group member will have expertise in a particular area, but also be interested in discovering how others approach community-based problems. The premise of bringing such a diverse set of activists together is to explore how advocates of divergent policy agendas can learn from one another and build constituencies that facilitate and reinforce their existing work.