

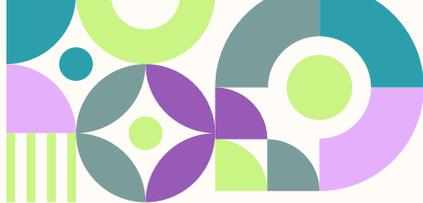


COMMUNITY JUSTICE SCHOOL



**A GRASSROOTS
INITIATIVE TO
TRANSFORM ACCESS
TO JUSTICE IN
MEXICO**





CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS Y ACCIÓN POR LA JUSTICIA SOCIAL

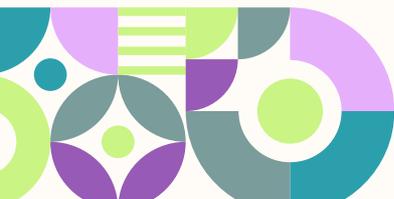
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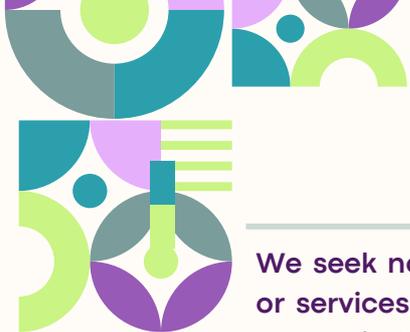
WHO ARE WE?



"HERE, THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN VICTIMS OF THE PENAL SYSTEM RAISE THEIR VOICES, RECOGNIZE THEMSELVES AS RIGHTS-HOLDERS, AND COLLECTIVELY BUILD COMMUNITY-BASED PATHS TOWARD JUSTICE."

We are a civil society organization in Mexico dedicated to the defense of human rights and access to social justice from a feminist, trans-inclusive, and anti-punitive perspective. We work to ensure that individuals and communities affected by abuses within the criminal legal system can experience social justice through the recognition of their dignity and the exercise of their human rights.

To achieve this, we engage in research, advocacy, strategic accompaniment, and both legal and political strengthening; working with communities as well as with individuals who have been affected by systemic violence and criminal system abuse in Mexico.



HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND JUSTICE?

We seek not only to have formal legal mechanisms or services, but to foster the active participation of people in the defense of justice, dignity, and human rights.



We conceive this process as collective and community-driven; built “from the ground up” by recognizing the voices, experiences, and resistance of people and communities who have faced harm at the hands of the criminal justice system. These individuals are the spokespeople and protagonists of their own struggles, demands, and calls for restitution. Their efforts are sustained by networks of solidarity among collectives, organizations, and actors committed to justice.

Why consolidate a Community Justice School?

Since 2006, Mexico’s militarized “war on drugs” has led to widespread criminalization and incarceration, particularly affecting marginalized communities. Today, over 246,000 people are imprisoned, nearly 40% without a sentence, and many face serious barriers to justice—such as lack of legal defense and due process violations. Public defenders are overwhelmed, with each assigned to more than 200 cases on average. Women, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds, face even greater challenges: nearly half are imprisoned without a sentence, often receiving disproportionate penalties without a gender-sensitive legal review.

Furthermore, the recent judicial reform has restricted the legal scope and rights that previously could benefit those who have been victims of the penal system.

The Community Justice School (CJS) is a response to this context: through this community-based educational initiative, we are transforming strategic litigation into a tool to democratize the law and reclaim justice from within the affected communities themselves





BACKGROUND: THE FIRST SEEDS OF THE SCHOOL



2021

Community-Based Social Reintegration report

We published a participatory research study on the obstacles people face after being released from prison. Access to justice emerged as a central issue.

2022

Training Community Advocates

We began building a group of advocates who, after their release, now support others affected by punitive policies.

2023

Support for Families of Women in the Federal Prison

We support families of women who were arbitrarily transferred to the federal women's prison. We are promoting a mechanism for accountability with the authorities.

2024

Collective Achievement: Return of Women to Prisons Near Their Families

After two years of organized advocacy, we secured the return of women to prisons closer to their communities.

These experiences led us to imagine new ways of thinking about and demanding justice; one that begins from below, from the needs and demands of the people and communities most affected by the violence and abuse of the justice system and other punitive state policies.





COMMUNITY JUSTICE SCHOOL: A COLLECTIVE PATHWAY TO ACCESSING JUSTICE IN MEXICO



The Community Justice School is a collective endeavor aimed at strengthening and promoting the legal, political, and organizational capacities of individuals, families, and communities that have experienced abuse by the criminal legal system. It is rooted in the exchange of knowledge, the recognition of lived experiences as legitimate sources of insight, and the construction of alternative pathways to justice.

The main objective of the Community Justice School is for people to learn about their rights, strengthen tools to defend them, and apply legal, political, and organizational alternatives based on their own needs, contexts, and demands in the pursuit of justice.

The current vision for advancing the Community Justice School is structured around four main areas of work:



Training, knowledge exchange among stakeholders, and promotion of community leadership



Strengthening community-based processes of teaching, learning, and action to demand the recognition and full access to rights



Production, democratization, and application of knowledge based on concrete legal problems and needs.



Exchange of strategies and collective construction of alternatives to transform the justice system.

Our pedagogical approach is also a political commitment: it recognizes people affected by the justice system as agents of change, capable of generating knowledge and constructing strategies to transform their lives and communities. We believe that the knowledge generated through the Community Justice School is not only a way to understand reality; it is a community-based alternative to change it.



FIRST EDITION OF THE COMMUNITY JUSTICE SCHOOL

“[We are here] for all people who are or aren’t deprived of liberty. We know well the violations we’ve endured—we have something in common, which is the fight for our rights.” — Leonardo



In 2024, we launched the first edition of the School, titled “Legal Tools for Access to Justice.” It was designed as a learning-through-action space with the primary goal of strengthening legal and political tools to demand rights in the face of the criminal legal system.

This edition successfully convened and consolidated a group of 25 people, including formerly incarcerated individuals and family members of those deprived of liberty, from the State of Mexico and Mexico City. While their personal histories and life experiences are diverse, they share a common thread: surviving discrimination and abuse at the hands of the justice system.

The starting point of this experience was the creation of a collective diagnosis to identify the main rights violations and justice access needs of individuals who have interacted with the criminal justice system.

We also supported the development of practical tools for defending their own cases, negotiation strategies, and the assertion of rights with justice system actors. Additionally, we facilitated the exchange of organizing strategies to demand visibility and institutional responses to their calls for justice.

Throughout the process, using participatory methodologies and the exchange of knowledge and lived experience, we built session by session a space of trust where we explored the practical exercise of rights, how the criminal procedure works, the key authorities involved, and their respective powers.

MAIN FINDINGS

Through the active and reflective participation of all members of the first edition of the School, a collective diagnosis was produced. It allowed us to identify and critically reflect on the main justice access needs and human rights violations experienced by the participants when navigating the criminal justice system.

The Right to the Presumption of Innocence

As a group, they reflected that the violation of this right is largely rooted in the discrimination and criminalization that persist throughout the entire criminal process, especially during arrest. According to participants, skin color and socioeconomic status often become reasons for being detained



The Right to Live Free from Torture

The use of force, incommunicado detention, and coerced confessions are common from the moment of arrest. Even when there is forensic evidence of torture, it is often ignored by the Public Prosecutor's Office and judges.



The Right to Adequate and Effective Legal Defense

The group's experiences reveal a widespread lack of adequate legal defense, including the absence of counsel from the time of arrest and representation by lawyers who failed to communicate clearly or consider their accounts and needs.



Arrest: The Starting Point of Rights Violations

Most human rights violations occur at the moment of arrest, often involving warrantless detentions, lack of explanation, unidentified authorities, excessive force, incommunicado detention, and fabricated charges—creating fear and powerlessness for both detainees and their families.



Excessive Sentences and Measures Imposed

The group expressed concern that excessive and disproportionate sentences or measures reflect a punitive mindset. Judges often impose unrealistic conditions without considering individual circumstances, hindering reintegration and reinforcing exclusion and rights violations.

"My brother was arrested for being brown and poor."

"I was forced to sign papers under torture without reading them."

"They explained everything using words we didn't understand; we just signed."

"I thought I was being kidnapped because they never identified themselves."

"I got a shortened procedure, but now I have to comply with a thousand conditions. This isn't reintegration, it's punishment."

"Now I know what I went through wasn't my fault. I can defend myself and help others."

FROM LEARNING TO COLLECTIVE ACTION:

WHAT THE FIRST EDITION OF THE COMMUNITY JUSTICE SCHOOL TAUGHT US



"Knowing our rights has helped us defend ourselves against injustice."

Diverse leadership

Spokespersons, community advocates, and defenders emerged, strengthening the group and carrying forward this pedagogical and political initiative.

Identification of structural patterns

It was acknowledged that the violence experienced is not a series of isolated incidents, but expressions of a system that punishes poverty, difference, and dissent. This realization sparked the need for collective action.

From victims to advocates

One of the most significant changes was a shift in self-perception: from being seen as guilty or invisible to recognizing themselves as rights-holders and advocates.



Knowledge of rights and legal tools

The 25 participants strengthened their understanding of the criminal justice system, learned to read case files, submit legal documents, and defend their rights. They used legal tools to modify precautionary measures, demand dignified conditions, and support others.

Community, trust, and belonging

Dialogue and active listening fostered a deep sense of community. People began to see themselves as part of a network of solidarity.

Building a grassroots network

At the closing, participants expressed the desire to create a movement of people who have been incarcerated, to defend and transform access to justice based on their experience and dignity.





NEXT STEPS FOR OUR COMMUNITY JUSTICE SCHOOL



From our lived and collectively built experience, those of us who make up the School aim to strengthen and expand this initiative as a tool to transform access to justice in Mexico.

The main objectives are:

- **Replicate the educational experience in new regions and on new topics**
- **Promote leadership and community advocacy processes**
- **Democratize legal tools through communication strategies**
- **Strengthen ties with key stakeholders and participation mechanisms**
- **Promote a University Network of Community Justice Schools**

We believe in a justice built from the ground up, with and for those most affected by the penal system. Our vision is collective: to build a movement that defends a dignified life in common and creates solutions from within the community, not imposed upon it.





