

**“Wasn’t that Restorative?”: Judicial Concepts in Restorative
Justice Court**

By

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Introduction¹

On a Thursday morning², I sit in the back of a multi-purpose room in a community center in Meadow Springs³. Meadow Springs is a low-income and disadvantaged neighborhood in a large urban metropolis in the Midwest, where violent crime per capita was 30.9 per 1,000 incidents in 2017.⁴ In this multi-purpose room, the Meadow Springs Restorative Justice court meets weekly. Roughly a dozen individuals, including the assistant state's attorney, a public defender, court coordinators, case managers, circle keepers, and its standing judge, Judge McLowrie, sit at four long tables fashioned into a square. They all have their laptops open for the Zoom/in-person hybrid court. A couple RJ Court (Restorative Justice Court) participants sit against the wall of the room, but most participants have chosen to participate in their mandatory court check-in over Zoom. With an earbud in one year, I attempt to pay attention to the Zoom court and in-person dynamics. Near the end of this day's session, Judge McLowrie calls on Deon, who was not on Zoom earlier when his name was called, to turn on his camera.

Deon turns on his camera to show him sitting with a hoodie pulled up sitting in the passenger seat of a car. The judge recounts what his circle keepers and case manager told her – that Deon had missed seven circles, an unacceptable number of absences, and was combative in the circles he did attend. She breathes out and tells him that he will be referred back to the

¹ I am extremely grateful for the time and insights from my interview participants and the staff at the Meadow Springs RJ Court. I appreciate your vulnerability and helping me understand the RJ Court. Thanks as well to my preceptor and advisor, Dr. Kyla Bourne, and Dr. Sharon Hicks-Bartlett for guiding me throughout my University of Chicago experience. Finally, I want to thank my wonderful support system throughout this year, especially the wonderful Jack Trager and my family.

² All names are pseudonyms to protect individual's confidentiality

³ To protect confidentiality of respondents, Meadow Springs is a pseudonym for a neighborhood in a major city in the United States.

⁴ The following vignette is a recollection of an in-person court session, based on notes taken after the court session.

traditional court, where he will be normally prosecuted and possibly face incarceration. Deon quickly responds, claiming that he was only late to circles and that no one waited for him. He says that no one listened to him and he was trying to be a good participant. In a move unique to Deon's situation, his mother takes Deon's phone and directly speaks to the Judge. "Please, he's trying to get this done. I'll make sure that he signs in on time." Deon's private attorney, Francis, chimes in. "Please, your honor," he says, "I will call him before every circle and make sure he goes." Judge McLowrie turns to the assistant state's attorney and asks for her thoughts. "He's missed seven sessions. That's just too much," she says. Deon takes the phone back and tells the judge, "I have been on new meds and sometimes I feel a bit fuzzy on them." At this, Deon's two circle keepers look at each other out of view of their laptop cameras.

Deon and his mother continue to plead with the judge until she "mutes" Deon's screen on Zoom. She turns to the rest of the court and asks, "What do we want to do?" One of Deon's circle keepers says that he did not know that Deon was on medications that affected his thinking and behavior. The other circle keeper says that this information would change the way they would approach Deon's process. Judge McLowrie tells the assistant state's attorney that the decision is hers. The assistant state's attorney asks the circle keepers, "Do you want to give it another chance?" The circle keepers want to. Judge McLowrie "unmutes" Deon and tells him that he is very lucky. His circle keepers are willing to try one more time. Deon's mother and attorney profusely thank the judge and exit the Zoom session. Once the court is out of session and the court reporter leaves Zoom, Judge McLowrie says to the room, "Well wasn't that restorative?"

The Meadow Springs RJ Court is an innovative court that was created as a response to the high incarceration rates in Meadow Springs and in the spirit of liberal reformation. In this

brief example, the court, divorced from the traditional hierarchy of traditional justice systems, shared the responsibility and judgement of Deon and worked towards a non-adversarial solution. In the RJ Court, different judicial concepts are tested and curbed, in an attempt to prioritize the progress and healing of the RJ Court participant. In this research, I attempt to extrapolate judicial concepts oft studied in criminal and misdemeanor courts onto a court system that explicitly distances itself from traditional court systems.

Meadow Springs RJ Court in Context

The Meadow Springs RJ Court operates under the Chief Judge in the jurisdiction, but the novel system operates by very different rules. Accused defendants are referred to as participants in the RJ Court program and are technically on pre-trial release until they have graduated from the program. To graduate from the RJ Court program, participants must meet with several members of the community court in proscriptive steps. First, they meet with a social service worker who completes an intake assessment with them. Second, they are paired with a case manager, a position similar to a probation officer, but from the Meadow Springs community, who aims to guide the participant through their goals. Third, the participant meets with their designated circle keepers. Circle keepers are also community members, but have extensive training in Restorative Justice techniques, and who pride themselves on breaking through to these participants. Through these circles, participants and circle keepers decide on a list of tasks that the participant must accomplish to graduate the program. The official list of these tasks is called a ROHA (Repair of Harm Agreement). Once all the tasks are completed, the participant goes through the final step: graduation. Graduation ranges from a round of applause during the final court check-in to grand parties and ceremonies with prominent members of Meadow Spring's larger city, such as the mayor and State's Attorney. It is a lengthy process, but post-

graduation, the participant's case is nolle prosequi (effectively dismissed) and the history of arrest expunged. Currently, 224 participants have been enrolled in the RJ Court, 135 have graduated, and 30 have been referred back to the traditional court.

The Meadow Springs RJ Court was created in 2017, with the goal to repair harm in the disadvantaged Meadow Springs community, through Restorative Justice. Through several months of participant observation ethnographies of weekly court sessions, both in person and over Zoom, and semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with court actors and program participants, this paper focuses on how justice is constructed in the RJ Court.

Literature Review

Restorative Justice is a concept native to the indigenous peoples of North America and New Zealand (Zehr 2015). In Restorative Justice, the aim is to heal all parties involved. Healing is done through peace-keeping circles, where the victim's and accused individual's support systems voluntarily discuss the criminal incident in the presence of a trained moderator (Umbreit 1994). In a highly specialized community space, victim and offender agree to participate and come to a mutually agreed solution. These solutions can include forgiveness, restitution, or just space for understanding. As both parties come to the program voluntarily and are respected, conflicts are often diffused. In this victim-lead practice, the victim can ask the criminal questions, such as why they chose to hurt them, how they chose this person, ect. The accused individual has space to answer these questions and explain themselves, without excusing their actions (Zehr, 2015).

While the values of Restorative Justice are important, they are only half of the story. Restorative Justice requires a distinct process, where these values can play out in real-time (Marshall 2007, Dzur 2003). Different institutions have slightly different processes but share in the same values of restoration and accountability. The first step of the Restorative Justice process is the offender to accept responsibility for their actions (Marshall 2007). The second step in the Restorative Justice process is a peacekeeping circle, which can involve the offender, offender's family, victims, victims' families, community surrogates, victim surrogates, and even the arresting police officers (Saulnier and Sivasubramaniam 2015, Zehr 2015, Umbreit 1994, Verity & King 2008, Kurki 2000). Within these conferences accused defendants can express remorse, seek forgiveness, and explain themselves (Umbreit 1994). Victims and community members can

tell the accused defendant how their actions affected them; in ways the offender might not have imagined (Zehr 2015). Within these circles, accused defendants are shamed by the community-expressed disapproval, but are then reintegrated into the community (Braithwaite 2007).

As a final step, accused defendants must make amends to the community and/or victims, with tasks such as a letter of apology, community engagement, or practical tasks such as obtaining a driver's license or meaningful employment (Feeley 1979; Zehr 2015; Gray 2005). Tasks that do not have tangible benefits to the victim or community may be seen as more punitive than restorative, so most Restorative Justice programs tend to stress accountability and community-related tasks (Gray 2005; Marshall 2007). While different programs have different processes, the values of Restorative Justice guide the programs implementation (Braithwaite 2002).

There are many critiques of Restorative Justice. One critique is that Restorative Justice practices are seen as "softer" on criminals than penal incarceration. However, research shows that participants see the Restorative Justice process as difficult, and victims show higher satisfaction rates in Restorative Justice proceedings as opposed to traditional systems (Umbreit, 1994). The current criminal justice system offers little to no rehabilitation for incarcerated peoples, and only furthers the schism between the individual and community. Critics also claim that Restorative Justice offers too wide of a discretion, and different individuals will receive different outcomes, even if their crime was the same (Morris 2002). Again, this criticism is not solved with the traditional system. Convicted individuals constantly have varying sentences independent of whether they are in a Restorative or traditional court (Eisenstein et al 1977). These varying sentences are negatively exacerbated if the accused individual is a person of color (Alexander, 2020). Discretion in Restorative Justice at least allows for creative solutions to be

made. Critics are quick to disparage Restorative Justice, yet their own critiques are just as applicable to the traditional system (Morris 2002).

Restorative Justice courts share elements of policing, felony courts, and misdemeanor courts, and spans a great breadth of judicial concepts. Within the depth of traditional court research, three judicial concepts have bearing on Restorative Justice Courts: Procedural Justice, Performing Compliance, and Therapeutic Justice.

Procedural justice is “a process in which litigants feel that they have the opportunity to express their point of view fully and in which the decision maker is perceived as having listened and considered their side’s argument” (Casper et al 1988, 486). Even individuals who received poorer outcomes in the court system look favorably on the system if the individual perceives a high level of procedural justice (Tyler 1984). There are seven tenets of procedural justice that have a direct positive impact on how the individual perceives the judge and overall court system. These are “(1) the degree to which those authorities were motivated to be fair; (2) judgements of their honesty; (3) the degree to which the authorities followed ethical principles of conduct; (4) the extent to which opportunities for representation were provided; (5) the quality of the decisions made; (6) the opportunities for error correction; and (7) whether the authorities behaved in a biased fashion” (Tyler 1988, 103). Procedural justice, like Restorative Justice, is concerned with fairness perceived by the offenders, to achieve justice.

A second judicial concept is Managerial Justice. Managerial Justice is a recent theory “organized around the supervision and regulation of the population that flows through misdemeanor courts, often with little attention to questions of law and facts in individual cases” (Kohler-Hausmann 2019, 61). In line with Malcolm Feeley’s seminal work “The Process is the Punishment”, court officials hassle misdemeanor offenders through long days at court, where

offenders must put on a performance of compliance to “earn” a positive outcome. While they watch the seemingly chaotic courtroom, offenders must comply with the rules of the courtroom. They may not use their phones, or even bring a book. They may not approach the bench to ask a question, and if they leave court for any reason, such as childcare or a job, they risk ruining their performance of compliance. Often, individuals of color or those in lower socio-economic classes face a higher level of burden as they often cannot afford to miss a day of employment or pay for childcare (Kohler-Hausman 2019). Misdemeanor court cases are funneled through bureaucratic and procedural channels, not through a fact-finding mission to determine guilt.

Restorative Justice Courts are similar in that they do not try to ascertain evidential guilt. Restorative Justice participants must perform compliance to continue the program, but they also must perform a heart-felt engagement with the emotional process. The consequences are rarely incarceration but monitored surveillance and the threat to “stay out of trouble” or there will be more severe consequences the next time. In misdemeanor court, Judges and lawyers play a complicated game of suggestion and often quid-pro-quoos when deciding what level of surveillance the accused defendant deserves (Feeley 1979). When an accused defendant displays a successful compliance performance to the judge and lawyers, court actors are more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt. However, if the accused defendant fails in this performance, for any reason, judges and State Attorneys infer that the individual requires more surveillance, and a heavier misdemeanor sentence (Kohler-Hausmann 2019). The managerial model of justice compels accused defendants to act in compliance with court expectations, despite the burdens they often cause.

The third judicial concept is Therapeutic policing. During his years as an ethnographer in Los Angeles’s Skid Row, Forrest Stuart defined therapeutic policing as “a form of outreach

social work that aims to transform and reintegrate residents as productive, self-governing citizen” (Stuart 2018, 15). Within a court setting, therapeutic policing drives court actors to enforce measures that are not necessarily penal but compel the offender to be a more productive and upstanding member of society. In Restorative Justice, this might be a repair task like getting a job or driver’s license. According to Stuart, this concept employs a paternalistic and individualized lens, which where offenders are coerced into large-scale care facilities or dysfunctional therapeutic programs, where offenders can be “cured” of their moral failings.

Therapeutic policing can be closely related to Cognitive Behavioral Therapies (CBT), or Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT), where participants engage in a therapy setting, designed to change participant mindsets. CBT attempts to teach participants how thoughts, feelings, and actions are connected and how participants can recognize this cycle in their lives and intervene before they display negative behaviors (Clark 2010).

Meadow Springs is a predominantly Black community, and most participants are Black men. Therapeutic policing and justice has been more forcefully used on individuals of color, and others who do enjoy a level of cultural privilege (Stuart 2018). Therapeutic means carry a paternalistic sense of superiority, which can quickly lead to paternalistic forms of racism and classism.

Methodology

This research is interested in understanding how justice is constructed in the Restorative Justice Court. Thus, I relied on two qualitative methods: Interviews and ethnography. Qualitative interviews are the best way to learn people's meanings and perceptions. However, only using interviews could risk research falling into the attitudinal fallacy, which is the "error of inferring situational behavior from verbal accounts" (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). In general, interview respondents are not necessarily reliable when it comes to predicting their future behavior, and verbal accounts reflect morals, expectations, and desires on the part of the respondent. Jerolmack and Khan (2014) recommend ethnographies in addition to interviews, as ethnographies offer empirical instances of socially constructed interactions, where the researcher can see what actors *do*, not only how they talk about it. By probing for meaning, interview respondents are reflective about their experiences with the RJ Court, but an ethnographic account will be able to triangulate verbal accounts and observed court proceedings.

Between November 2021 February 2022, I attended weekly Zoom court sessions, where I was visible as a named observer in the Zoom. I collected anonymized notes about the court session, especially noting moments where there was some tension between different court actors. Zoom has become instrumental to the court during the Covid-19 pandemic and it was vital to understand the court as participants interact with it. In March, 2022, I started attending the weekly court sessions in person. In these weekly court sessions, I was able to better understand the court dynamics and how lawyers, case managers, circle keepers, and the judge interacted. The last two weekly court sessions I attended had an "open circle," before court was in open sessions, where participants gathered around coffee and a moderator to talk about their experience.

I sampled for my interview participants from a frame of all participants current or graduated, and court actors in the Meadow Springs Restorative Justice Court. With the gracious help of a circle keeper named Maggie, I was able to contact some of the participants that she had worked with, as well as court workers. As Maggie is a strong RJ Court advocate, the participants that she recommended were graduates of the program, with whom she had created deep, personal relationships.

I contacted court actors through emails and later through meeting them in person at the weekly zoom courts. I interviewed nine professional court actors, including the presiding judge, the initial judge (who is no longer serving in Meadow Springs), the court public defender, an attorney for a community engagement program, a private attorney, a circle keeper, a circle keeper and court coordinator from a Meadow Springs RJ Court sister court, two case managers, and the social service liaison. These individuals had worked for the RJ Court between two months to its inception in 2017 and were eager to share their views on the court. I recognized that many were uneasy to be frank about their employer, as well as the court they were passionate about. However, by consistently attending weekly court proceedings, I was able to view how interview respondents actually interacted with all of the actors in the RJ Court, especially in the dialogue between the judge and RJ Court participants.

I sampled RJ Court participants mainly through snowball sampling. After getting to know circle keepers and case managers, I was able to contact their current and graduated participants. However, I recognized that court actors were connecting me to participants who were or did excel in the RJ Court program and may have a skewed experience in the program. Thus, I also contacted participants directly, during in-person or Zoom court sessions.

If a participant does not finish the program, they are referred back to the city circuit court, and their case is processed as a felony, so I was unfortunately unable to hear their perspective. Due to IRB restrictions, I was not able to interview incarcerated individuals at this time, who referred-back individuals would be classified as. These 30 individuals either did not engage with the program and did not progress, or they had been arrested on a different charge while they were in the program. The lack of representation of referred-back individuals provides a significant limit to this research. These individuals did not receive the benefit of getting their case dismissed, nor the communal healing the RJ Court promises. Therefore, it follows that referred-back individuals would have views of the RJ Court different than the success stories I was immediately passed off to. However, the meanings created by individuals who graduated or were still in the program provided meaningful data.

Eleven out of the sixteen interviews were over some technological device. Ten of them were over Zoom and one was just over the phone. For the five in-person interviews, I met interview participants in their office, at their community center, at a restaurant, or at a coffee shop near the RJ Court center in Meadow Springs. As I was interested in the meanings that participants create in the program, the in-person/digital divide was important. I found that I was able to have more organic conversations and get to a deeper level of meaning with those I interviewed in person. However, digital interviews were often the medium that participants and court actors felt most comfortable with. While in-person interviews lent themselves to an initial awkwardness in a way digital interviews did not, they allowed for more in-depth discussion, a sentiment felt by those in the program as well.

According to a metropolitan community snapshot conducted in 2019, Meadow Springs' population is primarily Black with a Hispanic minority. The demographics within the court

represented this. Throughout my ethnographic observations, I identified two Hispanic men and one Hispanic women as participants. Besides this, all program participants were Black, and for the vast majority, men. All program participants that I interviewed were Black men between the ages of 21 and 26. As the RJ Court is a community court, some of the court actors have similar backgrounds and demographics as the Meadow Springs community. The case managers, circle keepers, public defender, and social service liaison were all Black individuals from the Meadow Springs or sister court neighborhood. Both judges and both attorneys were white.

After compiling all sixteen interviews I did two rounds of coding on MAXQDA. Initially, I used open coding with extensive memos to get a first insight into the data. As themes emerged, I created tentative codes and utilized “versus coding” for my second round of coding. “Versus Codes identify in dichotomous or binary terms the individuals, groups, social systems, organizations, phenomena, concepts, etc. in direct conflict with each other” (Saldana, 115). The RJ Court has many different stakeholders, some of which seem to stand diametrically opposed to each other. So, using versus coding, I was able to tease out what these differences and tensions were. After both rounds of coding, I engaged in axial coding, re-defining some codes so that they can be organized into main themes and subcodes. Using MAXQDA’s reconciliation programs, I was able to check that the main themes that I was seeing were still present in the data itself.

A note on positionality

Positionality in qualitative court research has started to come to a forefront with works like Gonzalez Van Cleve’s “Crook County.” During my data collection phase, I used this as a guide for how to handle myself as a White woman researcher from an elite university. I was not “patted-down” during in-person court sessions, while participants were subjected to searches, nor was I barred from bringing in conveniences like a cell phone, coffee, or a laptop. One male

sheriff made a point to tell me about how to avoid “bad cops.” While striking up conversations in the court lobby, participants often asked, “you’re not in this program, are you”? Visually, I looked more like the judge and private attorneys, as opposed to a community member. However, I found that this was not necessarily a hindrance, because community residents often explained their meanings and turns of phrase, assuming that I didn’t know their terminology. Finally, during the pre-staffing circles, I was often the butt of light-hearted jokes, as icebreakers usually included talking about the last thing they did or music they listened to. This banter helped build rapport with participants, which later translated into more comfortable interviews.

Findings

The RJ Court is a court that merges classic Restorative Justice concepts like repairing harm and peace circles with the trappings and consequences of a traditional court. Different concepts of justice are merged as well. Similar to therapeutic policing, the RJ Court views its position not as one that delivers judgements, but as one tasked with providing therapeutic options meant to heal the participant. The RJ Court also coerces its participants to perform compliance (Kohler-Hausmann 2019), not just with the managerial hassles of being under court supervision, but with the emotional transformation expected by the judge and other Restorative Justice actors. Lastly, the RJ Court invites many elements of procedural justice such as an opportunity for a participant to express themselves and to be an active part of their punishment sentence. However, some participants viewed the RJ Court as lacking in procedural justice as they did not see their charge as criminal or harmful.

Therapeutic Justice in RJ Court

In therapeutic policing, police attempt to “cure” criminal behavior through intervening social control mechanisms (Stuart 2018). Similarly, the RJ Court attempts to heal program participants through therapeutic means. The court begins by first acknowledging the disadvantaged community all program participants are coming from. The court claims to be acutely aware of the struggles and trauma that many of the program participants enter with. Judge McLowrie calls pre-therapeutic survival strategies “body armor.” She described life pre-RJ Court for the participants:

“When you're born in a neighborhood that is riddled with violence and drugs and guns and gang members got you don't have a chance you know there's rampant unemployment and. The trauma the trauma that the people who live in Meadow Spring...and the other neighborhoods in the city where gangs are in control is palpable you know they're walking down the street with their best friend and the next minute their best friend is on the ground dead because they've been shot. You live with that kind of tension and it changes your body, there are physical changes, and then there are emotional changes.”

The Judge is an outsider looking into the Meadow Springs community, but her insights on the community are echoed by those who have lived their entire lives in Meadow Springs. Justina, a former case manager and current case manager supervisor also sees Meadow Springs as a hotbed for community trauma. “Our young people are so traumatized. I was saying, we were to poll, everybody in Meadow Springs. The majority of our young people would have some sort of PTSD, either from being a victim of gun violence to being a perpetrator of gun violence or some type of crime in the community. That's trauma.” Therapeutic policing is enforced in

neighborhoods seen as destitute and needing recovery management (Stuart 2018), and the RJ Court's therapeutic response to community members echoes this sentiment.

A difference between the therapeutic policing seen in Skid Row and therapeutic justice in Meadow Springs is that participants themselves see their own trauma acutely. As residents of a highly policed neighborhood, participants are aware of the violence in their community. Jamal, a RJ Court graduate, has lived in Meadow Springs his whole life and says Meadow Springs,

“is considered a red zone. It's a lot of killing...So whatever goes wrong, you're used to it. whatever good, you probably get excited. But you're used to that too, because it happens every once in a while and all-all day. So like the killing happens every day, all day. You hear gunshots when you sleep waking up.”

William, another RJ Court graduate articulated his trauma and loss in the community with the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle.

“Hey, you found a piece of a puzzle, right? And you lose it, you know what I'm saying, I miss, like, you now know that you will never have the complete puzzle that you sought out when he first started. When you unbox it, you know, I'm saying and put it all out there. It's like you lose pieces. And you got to really understand like, I will never be able to really put this puzzle together. How I thought I would be like it came on by side. So that's a that's kind of hard to deal with as well. You know what I'm saying? Because it's like, life as you-you know it? You know, you don't even understand it. Now you're like the life that you do know, is looking unfamiliar to you.”

Participants in the program expressed a reflexivity and emotional maturity therapeutic justice strives for. For some of the participants, this therapeutic intervention was beneficial not just for finishing their RJ Court program, but in their lives. For Jamal, who, like many participants was a young father, was able to work on his relationship with his baby's mother.

“I asked them like, how would you guys go about certain situations, like with cheating with lying with things like, we can't get along? We argue all day. So they always told me about personal situation with them. And so that was some of the things that we were able to talk about.”

Jamal described himself as shy and anti-social and did not consider himself to have many close friends. Through working with his circle keeper, Maggie, though, he was able to be a conscientious and a supportive father, as his infant son struggled with health problems. For shy participants like Jamal, being able to connect through phone calls was beneficial for creating these relationships.

“We were on the phone for hours, every week or so. So it was like, like I said, I was nervous. But it was a really good experience. Because I was it was like, I was basically behind the curtain. So I could talk to the wall all day. You know, you know how you be caught up in your thoughts at night, or you caught up in your thoughts when you're going through things. And you're always able to listen to yourself. But it was just actually someone else to give me different opinions on different things.”

The Meadow Springs RJ Court also relies on a local and culturally-specific therapeutic program called GunSpeaks. GunSpeak is one of the most common tasks participants go through to complete the program. GunSpeak uses circles and open discussions where community

members of all ages talk about the role of weapons and violence in their lives, as well as forge connections with other members. Andre, who had graduated but was skeptical of RJ Court's therapeutic leaning found the community-based program more impactful than the RJ Court itself. Regarding GunSpeak, Andre said,

“It's like, it's like therapy, but not therapy because the guy you talking to, he talking back to you and he's telling stories too. So he can relate like being able to drop a little gems or whatever, little stuff that you wouldn't know. So it was a cool program. Like I thought it was dope. I thought it was just going to be a boring program that we'll talk about, make us write about why we had a gun or something like that. But it wasn't not like that. It was a cool program. We all would have sat in a circle and talk.”

Andre kept in touch with some of the participants and speakers with GunSpeak, and even invited them to speak at a community center that he works at. While he did not feel like he “went deep” and was vulnerable during his healing circles, the RJ Court facilitated what Andre identified as a positive therapeutic intervention.

Andre was not the only one skeptical of allowing the RJ Court to act as a therapeutic agent in his life. Many participants were initially hesitant to being vulnerable with court-designated actors.

“At first, it was, like, I'm not gonna lie. At first, I was like, kind of, like, I don't want to say weirded out. But the process is just was different. Due to the fact that it was like, it seemed like more of like an AA type thing more than like, court to well a traditional court. So it was something that I wasn't necessarily used to,” said Marcus.

The RJ Court demands therapeutic interventions such as peace circles and GunSpeak , but participants seem to genuinely be affected by these connections, unlike the Skid Row residents in Stuart's ethnography. A main theme that participants identified as a positive impact was learning empathy. During circle keeper training, Donna, a circle keeper and court coordinator from the Meadow Springs sister court, said, within circles, she learned "the biggest thing is figuring out your stressors, figuring out your point, your pain points, and being able to kind of see people as people." This idea of being able to "see people as people" was echoed in engaged participants. Marcus said that the peace circles,

"gave me a different outlook on life on certain aspects. Because like, you never really know something about a particular group of people or a particular person until like, either you see them go through it, or they like thoroughly explain the thought whole thought process and the whole feelings and just the whole situation. And once you get to that, it's just like, everything's different, and you have different understanding."

William felt that in a community constantly on edge, or living in what he called "survival mode," interpersonal understanding is a way of life. "Like, if I know how to deal with you know how to deal with me. A lot of things can be solved and settled... If I know how to speak to you and you know how to speak to me, when we accidentally bump each other, then we don't have a senseless murder." Engaged participants felt that they had learned valuable lessons in being able to understand other people and were able to use that in their own lives.

Therapeutic justice does not just mean that participants are subjected to therapeutic interventions. Court actors such as case managers, circle keepers, and the judge, act as agents of therapeutic healing, rather than agents of judgement. For court actors, engaging therapeutically

with their immediate community is what drives their commitment to the job, making it more than just an occupation. Justina was offered a job not in the community with a higher salary, but she took a position at the RJ Court instead. “I think that the court involving the community is the best like the best thing ever, because those people who will usually turn your back to certain people or not want to be associated with them, we're running towards them. So that was the most appealing thing for me.” Maggie, a key Meadow Springs resident, stressed that she got into the RJ Court, not a different program because Meadow Springs “it's a part of our, our DNA.” And this communal connection affected participants. Jamal, when describing his case manager, Caleb said, “He understand how black men like me has a target.” For participants who feel deeply connected to a neighborhood with deep historical and cultural roots, by seeing their case managers and circle keepers as members of their own community, engagement can be facilitated.

Similar to a traditional social worker or therapist, court and court-affiliated actors work hard to break down the participants’ emotional “body armor.” Justina, a case manager supervisor, and life-long Meadow Springs resident felt a tension between pushing participants to engage with the process and “respecting them as a human and letting them take letting them engage in the process when they're comfortable.” For some participants, this may mean that the process will take longer. To encourage that engagement, different court actors employed strategies that best fit them. For Maggie, a circle keeper and long-time community leader, she viewed her relationship with participants as maternal. “I guess because we are the older women in the group, um, I try to put it in my mind, uh, motherly style, uh, not babying, but what I would ever, what I would say to my son, I would try to say to these young men and women the same way.” Maggie’s strategy appeared to be one of the most effective, as many participants referred to her

as someone important to their RJ Court process. William said she was one of the reasons he started to open up.

“When you in the circle you sitting next to miss Jackie and you don't really feel too comfortable talking about what may not be in the mood. Maggie can do shoulder a nudge like come on and just participate you know, you don't want to tell Miss Maggie No, no. No, it's like you're she's-she's she cool with everybody but like she's everybody person.” Miss Jackie, she kind of like gives that Auntie vibe like she-she feels like family.”

Marcus said, “Yeah, she feels like family. So like, when it came down to that it was just like, Oh no, she just she has that familiar energy, those kind of like, easy to speak to her about certain things easy to open up to her.”

Court actors like Maggie and Justina rely on their deep connections to the community and emotional labor to encourage participants to begin the hard work of healing trauma and restoring the harm done to them.

While court actors expressed admirable sentiments in interviews, they, like Skid Row police enforcing therapeutic policing often misjudged how their own perceptions of how “proper treatment” really affect the participant (Stuart 2018). Case managers mainly remained silent during weekly court proceedings, often unaware or misinformed about their participant’s progress. Additionally, while Maggie was hailed by most as being an exceptional circle keeper, her personal discretion sometimes affected participants in ways that other actors saw as more burdensome than needed. For one participant, she wanted him to write to the victim every day, writing a different apology until he finished the program. She took participants to a local NICU hospital and hold infants born to substance-addicted mothers, to show the consequences of

selling illegal substances. Therapeutic policing offers police wide discretion regarding citations, arrests, and escorts to preferred shelters, while therapeutic justice similarly leaves participants at the hands of individuals primed as therapeutic agents.

Therapeutic policing has been called “re-parenting” (Stuart 2018), and its paternalism has been a key criticism against it. However, for many of the participants, this parental relationship between circle keeper or case manager and participant was a benefit to their participation, not a critique. Perhaps due to their young age, or the immediacy of circle keepers and case managers to their community, RJ Court participants expressed an appreciation for their parental position. William, who expressed plans to become a circle keeper himself said that it was his close, auntie-like relationship with Maggie that motivated him through the program.

“Because what you what you really do is it's not even like at one point it stopped being about the case you beat it right? But here's some here's me wanting to not disappoint people, genuine people that that really took the time off the clock to help me and just really want to see me do better so me-me not want to disappoint them as though it's a big thing to me.”

At the time of the interview, Marcus was attempting to reconnect with his own parents, after establishing a parent-child relationship with his case manager, an older man named Caleb. “He felt like a parental figure, even though you know, he's not in no way related to you. It just like it was just the type of energy that he gave off. And it was something that I wasn't necessarily comfortable with, at first.” When reflecting on his time in the RJ Court, Marcus was deeply reflexive and explained how his relationships in the RJ Court changed his own self-regard, “me

going through the court and meeting certain people and having certain conversations taught me that [looking for validation] wasn't necessarily what I should have been doing, it taught me to kind of find that in myself before I kind of tried to go find that another person.”

Creating Upstanding Citizens

One of the goals of therapeutic policing is to create “citizens who are more willing and capable of entering into the [employment] market” (Stuart 2018, 14). For many individuals, getting a meaningful and future-oriented job was a task on their ROHA (repair of harm agreement). During weekly Zoom court sessions, Judge McLowrie spoke of creating upstanding citizens and in our interview, said that justice is, in part, “community as contributing citizens.” For a court that purports to be understanding of the racially and economically systemic issues that impact Meadow Springs, the goal is individualist, turning an accused individual into an upstanding and employed citizen.

Unlike Skid Row residents, RJ Court participants were provided with support and connections to become the upstanding citizen Judge McLowrie hopes for. As Meadow Springs is a community filled with non-profits and connections, participants were supported by their community in finding jobs that were suited for the long-term. Jamal, who suffers from a back injury, already had employment at a warehouse, but wanted a job where he could spend more time with his son, rather than relieving his back pain. Caleb, his case manager was able to reach out to existing community networks, as well as his own friends, in order to find Jamal a less active job.

Another common task that helps an individual become an upstanding citizen is getting a driver's license. While most participants know how to drive, many of them either had their license revoked at some time or struggled with the administrative hurdle of obtaining a license. Case managers and circle keepers can provide administrative support, helping participants fill out the required paperwork, and providing the car with up-to-date registration for participants to take their driving test. Finding stable and adequate housing was another task that participants undertook. Through communal and personal connections, participants were tasked and aided to develop the core structures in their post- RJ Court life.

Not all tasks pushed participants into a productive and constructive workers and citizens. Many circle keepers pushed their participants to think creatively when it came to their tasks and what they wanted to achieve. Many participants were musicians or producers and used established RJ Court connections to produce their own single or create a reflective song about their community or experience. William wrote a song about his experience and living in Meadow Springs and got to perform it in front of the mayor and states' attorney, which gave his music great exposure.

Therapeutic policing and subsequent therapeutic justice requires the court to act as an interventionist mechanism, attempting to affect not only accused individuals' legal proceeding, but intimate parts of the participant's psyche. For the young participants in the Meadow Springs RJ Court, many welcomed the emotional involvement, especially as they were inclined to see court agents as parental or mentor figures. However, therapeutic justice allows for the court

system to reach far from its original jurisdiction of delivering judgment. This far reach can have unintended, paternalistic consequences.

Compliance Performance in RJ Court

In many court events, accused defendants often must perform compliance and deference when they are being supervised (Kohler-Hausmann 2019). Performing compliance by successfully and quietly engaging in procedural tasks is part of managerial justice (Kohler-Hausmann 2019). And courts often impose administrative and procedural hassles punitively, and defendants must successfully navigate these hassles to perform compliance (Feeley 1979). In the Meadow Springs RJ Court, participants must perform compliance in the often tedious judicial process. Participants must attend court sessions which can start up to an hour and a half late, and if they attend in person they must dress in an appropriate manner. If they are wearing a hat or their pants are hanging low, the sheriff will tell them to adjust their appearance. In the words of one of the recurring sheriffs, “It’s still court.”

A compliant performance becomes more nuanced over Zoom. In court emails, Judge McLowrie consistently asked case managers and circle keepers to tell their client to keep their camera on and audio off, unless they are actively being spoken to. Judge McLowrie was happy to use the Zoom format for court as it decreased barriers for participants. During weekly Zoom court sessions, participants often called in from school, work, volunteering, or other activity that would have prevented them from attending court if it was only held in-person. However, when a participant had the option to Zoom in, court actors like the judge were less lenient on them missing court sessions. Several participants attended via Zoom while they were visibly ill, at least one suffering from Covid-19. Another attended a court session over his phone while he was being driven home from his brother’s funeral. Especially in a Covid-conscious world,

participants would have been encouraged to stay home and reschedule their court appointment if Zoom was not an option, allowing them to rest. As court actors seemed to reasonably accommodate unexpected problems in the healing circles and repair of harm agreements, it is likely that the participant whose brother passed away would have been excused from court if he had to attend in-person. While virtual sessions eased some of the hassle of court check-in's, the immediate and easy nature of Zoom made court actors less lenient to excuse participants.

Performing compliance over weekly Zoom court sessions looked different than compliance performances observed by Feeley (1979) and Kohler-Hausmann (2019). As many participants attended in the comfort of their own homes, there were often times when appropriate compliance had to be pushed. Many times, participants Zoomed in without a shirt on, while they were on the toilet, or with loud noises like friends or television in the background. Judge McLowrie recounted an instance when a male participant joined the session while he was in bed next to a woman. In the traditional court settings that have been previously observed, the setting has been tightly controlled. Over Zoom, participants could control their environment without immediate consequences.

The only form of control the Judge could impose on participants was asking them to change their behavior or appearance (such as putting on a shirt or moving to a quieter area), or “muting” individuals. Throughout my observations, I only witnessed the Judge “mute” a participant once, Deon, who I mentioned in the introduction. The participant was loudly questioning why he had been referred back after missing seven healing circles. The participant and his mother pleaded with the judge and tried to get their point across and excuse the

participant's actions. The Judge "muted" the participant and his mother and asked the assistant state's attorney and circle keepers to decide his fate in the program. This was the boldest defiant performance, and likely would not have been tolerated in a traditional court with a positive outcome. However, in this situation, the therapeutic element in the RJ Court prevailed. While the assistant State's attorney initially wanted the case referred back to traditional court, the participant's circle keepers were able to convince her to give the participant one more chance. Unfortunately, this participant was arrested soon after this instance and was immediately referred back to traditional court.

Throughout interviews, I referenced this instance and asked how the individual felt about it. Views greatly differed. Maggie and Judge McLowrie felt that this was a quintessentially Restorative Justice moment. Maggie said, "it brought tears to my eyes." However, Maxwell, a case manager said, "Oh I would have kicked his butt out," and blamed the case manager and circle keepers for the participant's absences. Even some participants wished that the Judge would demand a more compliant performance than she was seeing. Curtis said, regarding participants he had seen on Zoom interacting with the Judge, said, "In the Zoom you know she's trying to talk and like you know most people in my position you know just says like they don't show no manners at all." From my observations, the vast majority of participants Zoomed into court sessions, rather than in-person, so the Judge and other court actors had to navigate enforcing compliance without control of the participant's environment.

Performing compliance also required an adeptness and access to technology. Participants often had phones that did not work or had temporarily had their phones disconnected due to

unpaid phone bills. As many did not have laptop access, their phones were their primary connection to the court and its proceedings. Without a working phone or stable internet, participants were encouraged to either attend in person or visit a public library with computers. For many participants, these options were either unfeasible or impossible. Participants also had to be able to use Zoom, turning their cameras and audio on when asked. For some, this proved to be a difficult task. As court check-in's were a major stage for participants to perform compliance, they were unable to show their dedication or progress in the court due to problems outside of their control.

As the Meadow Springs RJ Court fashions itself as a collective voice of therapeutic agents, instead of a hierarchical judgement delivery system, it demands a performance of more than compliance. In the RJ Court, participants must perform a transformation from traumatized accused defendant into a reformed young adult with all the trappings of an upstanding citizen. For some, this tension can cause frustration with the program. Malik was in the healing circle stage of the RJ Court and was having a difficult time performing this transformation. "I felt like a college student, you know, saying, trying to graduate eighth grade, you know, so, up until this point, we really been the best way I could put it, we really been trying to find my place in the program." While Malik was interested in engaging with the program, his earlier success in having a stable job, apartment, and popular podcast, meant that he could not perform an engaging transformation. This tension caused his progress in the program to stall as his circle keepers and he had difficulty finding meaningful short-term tasks.

Many participants said they felt hesitant about the vulnerability aspect required for a performance of transformation. Curtis, who had just started the program said, “You know, tell them everything about my life? Which is kind of weird. I don't really opened up like that way.” Other participants were more forceful with their resistance to the transformation performance. Andre, a recent participant graduate, was especially critical.

“I'm not as deep, like they probably like, like people probably think I am because like the kind of case I have it's like, people might like, think I'm like for a lot, like deep, probably like in the streets and stuff, but nah, situation that day was just different. But, but now I want everyone to know, not to talk about like what drove me to that point that like, nah, wasn't nothing like that. Like nothing to really open up about it was just like business needed to be done.”

His case manager, Maxwell described him as someone, “that didn't want to be bothered too much.” Andre felt that the transformation was more warranted for people who had committed more violent offenses or were “real criminals,” but was more of a hassle for himself.

“I honestly feel like they thought I was like crazy. Or like I'm some type of you know, murderer or something. Because like, I feel like we open up to a lot of people and get close with a lot of people it's like if I was frustrated with my situation at times.”

During weekly court sessions, Judge McLowrie asks participants about their process in the healing circle, and how they are engaging with it. While the court room itself is less imposing than a traditional court room, participants are still pressed to perform not just compliance, but engaging transformation. As the court attempts to holistically heal the program participants, it

requires a significant amount of performed engagement, something some participants are understandably wary of.

While a performance of engagement and transformation is pushed on all participants, a failure to perform engagement does not fully hinder participants from successfully finishing the program. Andre, who graduated from the program, but did not emotionally engage said, “I guess people don't be finishing, but I don't see how, cause it's kind of easy. Like they give you the option to pick and they help, they, they was helpful with finding me, uh, the programs I needed to be in.” Although Andre was able to graduate the program, when participants do not actively perform a change of heart, it can be detrimental to their success in the program and in the eyes of stake-holders. Kenneth, a social service worker who conducts initial assessments and task recommendations, and ardent supporter of the RJ Court said, “if you're not ready for change, or if you're not willing to change, then okay, the system will put your ass in jail, then maybe you need to go to the county or you need to, unfortunately, go to the penitentiary.” Participants constantly are aware that if they do not engage in the tolling emotional process, they can be referred back to the traditional circuit court system.

Procedural Justice in the RJ Court

Procedural justice claims that when an accused individual understands the procedure of their judicial proceeding and has the ability to express themselves, they will find their judicial outcome fairer, and less likely to commit the same offense (Tyler 2003). In the RJ Court, participants are given a wide berth to tailor the program to their needs. In my interview with social service worker, Kenneth, he recalled that the first judge, Judge Matthews, had explicitly pushed for the court to be an example of procedural justice. To him, procedural justice meant letting participants be active participants in their own proceedings and all participants seeing their process as fair. Jamal found the program easy and fair because he was in control of the process logistically. “It’s a really good system. They don't they, they're gonna work on your time, do whatever you want them to do. You're basically like their boss, you just got to complete the work. So that's it. Once you complete the work, you're fine.”

Participants also expressed their appreciation for being heard. When Judge McLowrie explains the Restorative Justice Community Court to new participants, in addition to explaining repairing harm, she tells them that the court is there to listen. She tells participants that the traditional court is only interested in a snapshot in time, namely the moment of their arrest. The RJ Court however, is interested in listening to all of their life. In an interview, she said that in the peace circles, for some people, “it's the first time anybody's listening to them.” Maggie felt the same, “we get the young participants and they'll say, oh, I never had an opportunity to tell anybody how I feel in this confidential circle.” And Justina felt that in addition to being heard, participants could be vulnerable because they felt emotionally validated. “I've had some young

men cry in my car, and it is touching because they're like, Justina, I can't cry in front of people. I'm this person on the street. And this is the only time I get to be vulnerable.” For engaged participants, this ability to be listened to was vital. Jamal summarized this relationship simply. “Maggie, Lucy, and Mr. Caleb was like my diary.”

Case managers and circle keepers also recognized the importance of the participant leading the process, to achieve this procedural justice. Donna, a circle keeper at a sister program, detailed how she would begin and gauge relationships in the first healing circle. “You kind of let that participant kind of guide the process because it's really about them.” Maxwell, a recent case manager, felt similar about a recent participant he was working with. “[The participant] kind of like that he's kind of leading the dance” By expressing themselves and being active in their own proceedings, participants felt that the process was fairer and just than the traditional retributive system.

An element of procedural justice is understanding and agreeing on the illegal nature of the offense (Tyler 1984), and for the RJ Court this understanding is phrased as “repairing the harm”. For some participants, however there was a disconnect with the phrase “repairing the harm.” The metropolis Meadow Springs is in has strict gun control laws, partly due to the proliferation of violence in neighborhoods like Meadow Springs. Therefore, even for participants who have a FOID (Firearms Owners Identification) and legally purchased their weapon, they have been charged with an AGG UUW for having their weapon loaded and in an unsecured location like their back pocket or in their glovebox. For Meadow Springs residents, owning a gun

is not necessarily a sign of aggression, but a common way to protect themselves and those around them.

Throughout interviews, several individuals mentioned an increase in food delivery drivers being robbed or carjacked. Jamal chose to keep his weapon with him while he was delivering food for DoorDash with the mother of his child. After he ran a red light, he was stopped and searched by police officers who found his weapon after Jamal identified it. While Jamal was receptive and engaged in the RJ Court process, he did not feel that his “crime” was doing anything wrong or hurtful to the community. Even his case manager, Justina, had a similar rationale for his gun ownership. “He's like a good kid like he's like a working kid and they were like doing like DoorDash or something that makes sense they have a gun. Carjackings are horrible right now. And the delivery drivers and Uber drivers have been a big target.” Justina and Jamal both rationalized why Jamal would own a gun and keep it with him, and contrasted that with, as Justina said, “young man who gets arrested with the guns standing out on the corner with a lot of drugs and money on him, that is a different conversation.”

For some participants, this tension between harming the community and not considering their act harmful is a key reason they are hesitant to fully engage in the RJ Court process. Malik, who was trying to engage, but felt “advanced” for the program was charged with a AGG UUW for having an illegal laser sight. He recognized that there had been harm, but not to the community.

“I personally don't feel like I did anything wrong to the community or anything like that...Honestly feel like the only person that I let down or did any type of damage to was

my son. So other than that, I'm like I said, I wasn't part I wasn't committing any crimes or anything. Just Based on my negligence and not doing all the proper research, you know, in a technicality I was charged with this unfortunate felon.”

Malik and Curtis described their cases as negligence, not harm. Curtis, originally from Mississippi, claimed that he was simply unaware that gun laws were different in Meadow Springs. He recognized that he had made a mistake but felt that he just needed to be more aware, not fully transformed by Restorative Justice. “Yeah, I just had to make smarter choices. Yeah, y'all have different laws you know, I'm saying like, I didn't know the law really, or Meadow Springs. And that's how I got in that situation.” This is not only a sentiment shared by un-engaged participants. Francis was a private attorney who had several clients go through the Meadow Springs RJ Court program. Unlike any other interviewee, Francis had no training in Restorative Justice and only interacted with it through weekly court sessions and speaking with clients. He strongly disliked the terms Restorative Justice and repairing harm, because, like Malik and Curtis, he did not see what the harm had been.

“And so this whole nature of restorative justice hits them in the face right away with like, Okay, you did something. You have an unlicensed gun, you don't have an FOID. or you don't have the little license that people have to still get...to even have a gun. And I think there's some friction with that. You know, Oh, that. I mean, I think the restorative justice name has, there's an issue with it.”

Marcus, who did actively engage in the RJ Court process, explained how it could be difficult for people committing “victim-less crimes” to view their behavior as harmful. “People

don't necessarily look at that look at look at it, look at it as they're harming the community...because of how many people they're feeding off of it or like, whatever benefits may be come forth from it.” While the RJ Court implemented many positive aspects of procedural justice, court actors seemed to be unaware that participants felt an understandable tension between their charge and their fairness of their judicial proceedings.

Neighborhood Specific

While the RJ Court interacts with different judicial concepts, the court is neighborhood-specific and the connection to the Meadow Springs community is palpable. As some reforms have called for community-based justice solutions (Vitale 2021; Kohler-Hausmann 2019), neighborhood engagement and analysis are vital. Many participants and court-affiliated actors viewed their process as healing their community by bettering it. As members of the Meadow Springs community are proud of the history and vibrancy of their neighborhood, by repairing the harm to themselves, they see their community repaired as well. Maxwell, a case manager, went through a similar program as he was young, said repairing the harm means reducing crime so Meadow Springs is not seen as a dangerous community. “The victim being you know, channel five Meadow Springs Kids, you know, you know, Meadow Springs kid and blah, blah, blah. Community is scared of getting put on the news.” Marcus felt similar saying, “People don't want to be here because you sell the drugs here. Like people don't want to come people don't want to live here. People don't want to come to these businesses. People don't want to be people don't want to be around it.” By reducing crime, especially for gun crimes, the RJ Court process attempts to repair harm done to the community by the accused offender participants.

Whether a participant saw the community as a harmed victim or not, members of the Meadow Springs community wanted to see Meadow Springs thrive. Near the end of my interview with William, he said that the RJ Court has started a calling for him. “I feel like I can give that off to other new-coming participants. I feel like I can be that help. Show people who are

you know, I'm saying we really need restorative justice in the community other communities too.

So my restorative justice is big, I really feel like it's really big. I hope I think it can save lives.”

While William was the only one who expressed wanting to be involved in Restorative Justice post graduation, his sense of community engagement was common.

Conclusions and Discussion

Restorative Justice Courts across the county have grown, and many use the same model that the Meadow Springs RJ Court was based on (“Red Hook Community Justice Center”). However, it is important to look at these courts with a critical eye. The Meadow Springs RJ Court is openly therapeutic and sees its existence as one squarely set in the participant’s psyche. For the limited participants I was able to interview, they felt favorably on these therapeutic interventions. However, therapeutic interventions can be concerning as they aim to make productive and compliant citizens out of accused individuals. Forrest Stuart’s ethnography is an example of therapeutically minded agents acting in ways they deem as best aiding the accused individual, but end up only hurting those meant to be healing. In the Meadow Springs RJ Court, the court actors are trained in trauma-based therapeutic techniques, and perhaps the participant’s youth makes the RJ Court more beneficial in its therapeutic goals. However, the Meadow Springs neighborhood is an over-policed and under-served neighborhood and the court’s growth from strictly judgmental rulings to being a daily part of participant’s lives poses concerns.

While the court actors attempt to act in trauma-informed and caring ways, repairing harm to the participant is a hefty task for individuals affronted with trauma in their neighborhoods. Participants must navigate their stipulations within the court, emotionally engage with a vulnerable process, while still living their lives as young adults. Individuals are pushed to make their lives fit a mold “respectable living,” but the systemically racist and classist world they are living in does not change. The RJ Court provides support to help participants achieve their goals which will promote respectable living and repairing harm, but little is done to affect the larger

picture. Since its inception, two participants have been murdered, according to Maggie, due to gang violence. Another was seriously injured. The RJ Courts purports that they want to heal the community, but its individual focuses means that participants are often still in the same dangerous and under-privileged living situation they were in before the RJ Court.

Court reforms such as the Meadow Springs RJ Court certainly seem to be a better alternative to the traditional incarceration model. All participants and court actors I interviewed agreed with this. However, a better alternative does not mean that it is perfect. Participants in the Meadow Springs RJ Court still have to submit themselves to an emotionally grueling process in a court that demands not only compliance, but emotional transformation. This is a steep cost for many participants who struggle with making ends meet in a difficult neighborhood. Support is there for this emotional transformation, but participants are justifiably guarded against its intense vulnerability, especially to individuals associated and assigned by the court.

While the pandemic shut down graduation ceremonies for participants, the court still celebrates its success through speeches and press statements. Court actors that I interviewed such as both judges, the public defender, and circle keepers mentioned that they had often been contacted and interviewed by reporters. During my data collection phase, I was even asked to do an interview by a journalist. Interviewees described graduation ceremonies as grand celebrations, complete with the mayor's and other city dignitaries' attendance. These performances demonstrate the transformative success of RJ Court participants but leaves little room for criticism.

The Meadow Springs RJ Court seems to be, in general, a successful alternative for young individuals looking for a second chance and a way to not live with the unfavorable mark of a felony on their records. However, the RJ Court traffics in therapeutic justice, demands a performance of emotional transformation, and often involves cases where individuals question the supposedly criminal nature of their offense. These judicial concepts raise legitimate concerns about the fairness of court systems, and potential Restorative Justice Courts should critically think about these concerns before viewing Restorative Justice Courts as a faultless way to reform themselves into fairer systems.

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