

Envisioning Alternative Accountability Systems in Evanston

**Listening to Heal, Learning to Act:
Community Safety Circles and Survey Insights**

James B. Moran Center for Youth Advocacy, July 2025.

About the Moran Center



ABOUT THE MORAN CENTER

The James B. Moran Center for Youth Advocacy (Moran Center) provides integrated, community-based legal, mental health, and restorative services for youth and families in the greater Evanston, Illinois area.

Our approach is holistic, healing-centered, client-driven. Our work advances the vision of a more just, racially equitable, and restorative society.

We believe that all children deserve justice in the courtroom, access to the classroom, and restoration in the community.

WE ENVISION:

- Youth and families have bright futures – successful in school, jobs, and the community;
- Our community is just and racially equitable, employing restorative practices to resolve conflict; and
- Systemic barriers are dismantled, adopting instead public policies that radically benefit and improve the lives of historically marginalized youth and families.

PROGRAMS & SERVICES

- Youth & Emerging Adult Criminal Defense Practice
- Education Advocacy Program
- School-Based Civil Legal Clinic
- Criminal Record Relief Practice
- Integrated Mental Health Services
- Roger Pascal Restorative Justice Initiative

ABOUT RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

The Roger Pascal Restorative Justice Initiative promotes restorative practices in the greater Evanston community to build a more just, equitable society.

Restorative practices provide mechanisms to identify and repair such harm - building relationships and empowering the community to take responsibility for the well-being of its members.

“Restorative Justice” is a philosophy based on this set of guiding principles that center relationships, community interconnection, and repair as ways to manage the response to conflict and harm. Restorative Justice reflects the reality that acts of wrongdoing do not just violate laws and rules but, more importantly, harm people, communities, and relationships.

Envisioning a Restorative Community



The Moran Center seeks to build a society where our shared responsibility to one another is lived out daily by our commitment to restorative philosophy and practices.

We envision a community advancing justice and equity by embedding restorative practices both culturally - in the way we treat one another - and structurally in our neighborhoods, schools, and social systems. This is done by and through facilitated, community-building conversations.

Our goal is to hold those who cause harm accountable, create realistic plans for repair, and establish communal pathways where we collaboratively address the needs of everyone.

The Moran Center advocates for addressing these needs with inclusive, restorative methods rather than punitive, exclusionary systems.

Our approach centers community input to ensure that our approaches in cultivating local alternative models of accountability reflect the views and values of those most impacted, fostering true partnership and trust in community-built systems.

As recipients of the 2022 Microsoft/Urban Institute's Catalyst Grant, the Moran Center was able to broaden the scope of our restorative practice by establishing a team of practitioners called the Community Peace Builders.

We formed this group in alignment with the Credible Messenger Model, which takes the approach of engaging individuals with lived experience(s) to serve as trusted sources of support and guidance.

The Moran Center's six Community Peace Builders - three elders in their 80s and three emerging adults in their 20s - accompany the Moran Center's Restorative Justice team to seek out community members' perspectives about community, safety, and accountability to guide our work in building a restorative community.

These multi-generational Community Peace Builders have been critical in helping the Moran Center understand community needs.

Circling Up and Surveying



SAFETY CIRCLES

Between October 2022 and December 2023, the Moran Center's Community Peace Builders brought together 322 residents—from kindergartners to elders—in community circles to share their perspectives on safety, accountability, and more.

In partnership with the Urban Institute, the Moran Center developed questions for these “Community Safety Circles,” where we collected input from the community around their perspectives on safety. These circles included community listening sessions, focus groups, and facilitated discussions with real people in our community.

We asked these guiding questions with the goal of strengthening and developing local accountability systems:

- What is community?
- What is safety?
- Who or what makes you safe?
- What does your community need to be safe?
- When people cause harm in our community, how do you believe they should be held accountable?

In taking time to listen to community member stories with genuine curiosity, we gained insights we would not have been able to collect with a survey alone.

We were initially challenged with how to document community members' responses, as Circles are inherently confidential and privileged spaces. Many participants were understandably apprehensive about being recorded.

We explored additional ways to gather information if circle participants opted out of recording, such as providing note cards for individual written responses or taking anonymized notes during circle.

COMMUNITY-WIDE SAFETY SURVEY

In partnership with the Urban Institute, the Moran Center also developed our online [Community Safety Survey](#) to supplement our community-based research.

Analyzing Responses



Following our circle process and survey, the Moran Center analyzed more than 2,000 responses using Microsoft tools such as Power BI, Stream, and Office 365 to interpret notes, transcribe videos, and create data visualizations.

We also worked with Microsoft and the Urban Institute to develop categories and subcategories to analyze themes and trends in the collected data.

These categories and subcategories were used to train an Azure Cognitive Services model to analyze the information gathered from these community circles and survey.

These findings highlight the community's emphasis on trust, relationships, and a holistic approach to safety and justice, reinforcing the necessity for ongoing restorative efforts in promoting and cultivating local alternative models of accountability.

Response categories from Community Safety Circles and Listening Sessions (2022-2023)

Categories	Perceptions of Community Needs (Gaps)	Definition of Community	Perceptions of Safety	Definition of Accountability
Key Themes from Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety • Economic Security/ Jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance • Inclusivity • Relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of Community • Good Relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-Based • Formal • Responsive to the Harm
All Subcategories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith • Emergency Services • Safety • Mental Health Services • Economic Security/Jobs • Housing Security • Access to Education • Health Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing • Joint Ownership or Participation • Social ties • Approachable • Location • Acceptance and inclusivity • welcoming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of community • Low crime rate • Non Judgemental • Informal systems of community accountability • Physical safety • Emotional safety • Good relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Punitive • Non-Punitive • Formal • Informal • Community-based • Fair • Equitable • Responsive to the harm

Themes

The majority of circle participants and survey respondents expressed that being part of a community involves feeling included and accepted by those with whom one shares social connections. These ties can be based on personal relationships, physical location, memberships in cultural groups, workplaces, and much more.

To our respondents, “community” is the people you trust and with whom you can share yourself, knowing you will be accepted

Definitions of “Community” Community Safety Circles and Listening Sessions	
Subcategory	% of Unique Respondents
Acceptance and inclusivity	22%
Relationships	20%
Social Ties	13%
Location	11%
Joint ownership/ participation	9%
Belonging	7%
Fairness	6%
Trust	5%
Welcoming	4%
Approachable	2%
Sharing	2%

“Safety is an expression of community. Safety emerges if we’re taking care of our children.”

EVANSTON SAFETY SURVEY RESPONDENT

When asked what gaps our community is facing in having its needs met, the majority of respondents answered with a form of security, such as safety, job stability, mental health, etc.

Perceptions of Community Needs (Gaps)	
Subcategory	% of Unique Respondents
Safety	22%
Economic Security/Jobs	21%
Mental Health Services	16%
Housing Security	14%
Health Services	13%
Access to Education	8%
Emergency Services	6%
Faith	2%

“Safety, to me, is everyone having their needs met... It means equipping everyone with housing, education, mental health, and social service resources. It means investing in support for marginalized community members to address the root causes of harm.”

EVANSTON SAFETY SURVEY RESPONDENT

Safety and Accountability



The analysis of the circle and survey responses revealed that Evanston residents have a complex understanding of accountability, yet the majority want individualized accountability in responding to harm. “Our research shows that when members of our community consider ‘accountability,’ they often ask themselves, ‘To whom am I accountable?’—whether it be family, friends, classmates, or the wider community.”

Definitions of “Accountability”	
Subcategory	% of Unique Respondents
Community-based	20%
Formal	19%
Responsive to the harm	19%
Non-Punitive	13%
Punitive	10%
Informal	10%
Equitable	7%
Fair	2%

“I think I feel safe when all of my needs are being met, like in all of the ways... like when I feel like my body is in equilibrium.”

EMERGING ADULT CIRCLE PARTICIPANT

To our community, accountability does not equate to punitive or exclusionary measures. Our community wants modes of accountability to act fairly and respond to harm with the community in mind.

Our research demonstrates that members of our community feel safest when their physical safety is supported by their personal relationships. When people can rely on one another and take personal accountability for harms, relationships become stronger, community is built, and people feel safe.

Perceptions of Safety	
Subcategory	% of Unique Respondents
Sense of community	22%
Good relationships	21%
Physical safety	17%
Informal systems of accountability	13%
Emotional safety	11%
Non-judgmental	9%
Low crime rate	7%

What We Learned



The Moran Center's Roger Pascal Restorative Justice team found the process of circling up with and surveying the community enlightening - particularly in the depth of insight garnered in participant stories.

Our findings confirmed our experiences with Moran Center clients: a majority of respondents felt that safety is not found in systems, but rather in their relationships and sense of community.

Often when discussing what made them feel safe, respondents identified the ability to connect with other people as the key factor of their perception of safety.

All of the respondents talked about how the reliable, dependable, ongoing connections that made them feel seen, heard, known, and able to count on other people was what really made them feel safe and secure—not the systems that we traditionally think of when we talk about “public safety.”

“Justice is when everyone has all of their needs met—housing, mental health, healthcare, food, employment—so everyone is not just surviving but thriving.”

YOUTH CIRCLE PARTICIPANT

Respondents perceived economic security and mental health support as the building blocks for preventing community violence as opposed to retributive, exclusionary punishments.

Our findings also supported our advocacy for law enforcement, the courts, our schools, and the broader community to find less punitive measures in holding our community members accountable, and instead build relationships to promote safety and accountability.

Guided by our dedicated Community Peace Builders, the Moran Center remains committed to advancing restorative practices across our community, uniting schools, law enforcement, courts, and the broader public in a shared mission to strengthen and cultivate local alternative accountability systems that foster healing, justice, and peace.

“Repair could be when the parties involved meet, identify and agree on the harm, why the harm happened, and work together to undo the original harm... make a shared agreement and commitment to prevent the harm from happening again.”

CIRCLE PARTICIPANT



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