



A Whole New Way to Look at American Probation

At the end of 2017, the New York City Department of Probation (NYCDOP) invited the nonprofit organisation Seeing for Ourselves to deliver its “participatory photography” programming to the agency’s clients. Such individuals—whose terms may range from months to five years—have committed offences ranging from drug possession to acts of violence but who a judge finds can be safely supervised in the community.

Seeing for Ourselves had previously delivered such programming to residents of the city’s housing projects, leading to a restart of the communities’ financial support by the city and state authorities. Therefore, it was considered that providing an intervention for people sentenced to probation supervision may be beneficial to the NYCDOP and its clients. According to the letter of support penned by the then NYCDOP Commissioner Ana Bermúdez:

“This will have the impact of creating a better understanding of the “photographers” as well as appreciation and support for the bettering of their communities. Moreover, it will help further normalise community corrections as a viable and palatable alternative to jail and prison sentences. Additionally, the Seeing for Ourselves project will provide our clients with new perspectives and skills that could lead to future employment. We believe in the potential of this project to impact the national conversation and further provoke



Jonathan Fisher
Acting Executive Director
Seeing for Ourselves

a continued paradigm shift from continued mass incarceration, to creating and sustaining effective alternatives to incarceration; discourage others from making poor choices; and promote the humanity of individuals who are too often reduced to and viewed as are mere statistics.”

By the time Seeing for Ourselves had completed its involvement with NYCDOP in 2021—the program had become permanently institutionalised at the agency—these aims were on a clear path to realisation.

Background

Like the UK, probation in the US is community supervision, an alternative to incarceration, rather than the concept of early release, which is known as parole. The generation-long negative treatment of probation by the American mass media, portraying it as a slap on the wrist, if not a joke, ironically began just as the criminal justice practice turned punitive in response to the 1972-92 crime wave. Despite rigorous efforts by individuals in the city and across the nation to return to a lawful life, Americans became accustomed to a photo of a mug shot accompanying such stories as “Florida man gets probation for taping dog’s mouth shut.” This and many similar portrayals of probation supervision as a soft option discouraged jurisdictions from utilising the sanction, which originally held a rehabilitative purpose, and so helped feed mass incarceration.

Meanwhile, European media had likewise been disrespecting probation. Participatory photography, known in Europe as “photovoice,” was similarly viewed by European criminal justice reformers as a way of creating a visual counter-narrative that could “normalise community corrections as a viable and palatable alternative to jail and prison sentences.” In a manifestation of synchronicity, a participatory photography initiative serving Scotland and Germany Probation Services began in 2014.

Recently, a competing narrative to the American media’s unflattering treatment of probation has made itself felt. In this narrative, rather than individuals failing probation, the justice intervention itself fails those whom it serves. While the lobbying group Reform Alliance, fronted

by the rapper Meek Mill, leverages such stories for legislative action, one prominent reformer views them as a call for abolishing probation supervision altogether.

Both narratives share a focus on failure, and in this respect typify the approach of American media. (To satisfy—some would say ‘pander to’—viewer interest in what goes horribly wrong, local television newscasts in the US often open with coverage of criminal or accidental violence, a practice famously known as ‘if it bleeds, it leads.’) But this common focus may not be as helpful to criminal justice as a different narrative altogether. Success stories involving agency may do more for reform than more tales of victimisation.

The Program

During 2018-2021, hundreds of New Yorkers on probation (along with their neighbours, whom NYCDOP makes a point of including in all such programming) enrolled in a college-level course in the art of visual storytelling. They borrowed high-end digital cameras donated by Sigma Corporation of America or Seeing for Ourselves, or used their smart phones, and set about creating a new visual narrative by documenting their lives photographically. Named “NeoN:Photography,” the effort took its place as one of a variety of programs of the agency’s Neighbourhood Opportunity Network (which included music, poetry, and wellness) serving the seven underserved communities that most individuals on probation call home: the South Bronx, Harlem, Jamaica, Bedford-Stuyvesant, East New York, Brownsville, and the north shore of Staten Island.

Starting up slowly in the spring of 2018, with Seeing for Ourselves regarded as an unknown entity in these communities, NeON:Photography would, before long, be swamped by applications. Reportedly, the waiting list now numbers over five hundred. Meanwhile, NYC paid participants stipends in the interest of job readiness—which, along with paid photo shoots and photograph sales, charted a path out of justice involvement going forward.

Galleries around New York City exhibited the most revealing self-captioned imagery, and even the out-of-town media began to take note. A new media narrative about probation was underway. Critical of neither those immersed in it nor the sanction itself, a new focus celebrated those who not only made probation supervision work for them but worked while on probation to reform the practice by documenting their lives photographically.


The effort began to take on the air of the paradigmatic Heroes' Journey. The program started up slowly, corresponding to the Journey's stage of "refusal of the call." But then the Seeing for Ourselves photography instructor taught the students, corresponding to the Journey's stage of "aid from a mentor." The participants accepted a mission to undo negative stereotypes, corresponding to the Journey's stage of "the challenge." Those students on probation were kept on the path by their neighbours also taking the course, corresponding to the Journey's stage of "help from allies." The photographers finally then were able to deliver brand-new imagery to the world to help reset Probation's public image, corresponding to the Journey's stage of "the return."

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Crime <

What if the probation office was a place of joy instead of fear? New York City shows how.

"We're trying to dispel some of the historical trauma that has been in place between probation, law enforcement, and the community," one probation official said.



Andre Whitehead, shown here near the South Bronx NeON, took advantage of photography classes offered at the probation office and discovered a new career path.
JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

by **Samantha Melamed**
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Seeing for Ourselves intended to collect these photographs in a book to further promote the new probation narrative but found itself stymied when the pandemic shut down global supply chains, bringing publishing to a halt. Although no one in Seeing for Ourselves had ever made a film before, the nonprofit organisation decided to attempt a documentary pending publishing's revival.

Launched onto the global film festival circuit in 2021, the half-hour documentary In a **Whole New Way** has, to date, been viewed by thousands while amassing some ninety awards. The film was also screened by American public television. Along with encouraging a new public view of Probation, all this may have helped create a fertile environment for legislative reforms. As history has shown, documentaries can and do change the world.

A workshop on the film was held at the annual conference of the American Probation and Parole Association in Chicago in 2022, which was co-hosted by Ana Bermúdez along with Seeing for Ourselves and was received enthusiastically. A [plenary screening](#) of the work at the annual conference in NYC in 2023 was co-hosted by NYCDOP's new leadership team, along with representatives from Seeing for Ourselves and a photographer who is now helping to run the program. The reception here, too, was strongly positive:

I have two words: 'inspirational'—both your personal testimony and the film [said an audience member]. They are inspirational. There's no other way to put it.

The other word I could use here is just 'profound'—the kind of transformation you've documented here that happened in the New York City Probation department and you've created an incredible program.... I just think that we all, as professionals in the field really want to make a difference and should take this lesson to heart. You work in a bureaucracy, and there are a thousand rules and restrictions: 'You can't do that. You can't do this. There's no hope.' All this kind of nonsense that we hear on a routine basis. This is an antidote to that. And I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything you've done.

When publishing did revive, what became the eponymous companion book to the film came out in 2023. This work likewise received widespread acclaim, eventually named a finalist in the Next Generation Indie Book Awards (known as the Sundance of the publishing world). The new public narrative about Probation continues to pick up steam. Thousands of LinkedIn Connections have been formed around it, while several New York City justice nonprofit organisations and even prison systems outside the city have expressed a desire to participate in the programming. Course instruction migrated online when the pandemic hit and never looked back, so the concept of including individuals not served by NYCDOP seems eminently viable. If interested, entities in the UK should reach out to the agency for more information and it is anticipated that NYCDOP would welcome that dialogue.



I see the tears you cry and without being told to do so, I comfort you with a kiss.
—Alisha



NYC is all about the hustle. However, it can be a place where unusual,
funny things can appear just about any place.
You just have to keep your eyes open.
—Victorio

