Project on American Justice Fireside Chat Summary

The Future of Corrections:
Emerging Technologies

Overview

The CNA Center for Justice Research and Innovation's Project on American Justice (PAJ) for 2024 focuses on the future of corrections based on current research and trends. To support this effort, CNA is working with several leading subject matter experts (SMEs) and senior advisors with research and practitioner experience in the corrections field.
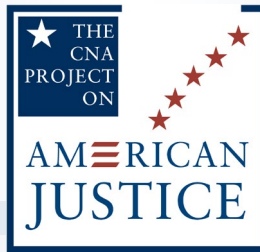
In March 2024, PAJ launched its first of several "fireside chats" with these experts to discuss the effects of emerging technologies. Specifically, PAJ used a futures analysis framework to examine the social, technological, economic, environmental, and political (STEEP) factors that may influence corrections and the criminal justice system in the future. With the framework, the PAJ team aimed to identify opportunities to mitigate risks and promote success.

To support this analysis, the PAJ team identified several overarching STEEP factors based on research and current trends. **Social** factors include Generation Y and the aging population; urbanization through megacities, regions, and corridors; and expanding diversity. **Technological** factors include the growth in applied artificial intelligence (AI), use of robotics, and adoption of automated vehicles. **Economic** factors include increases in the US national debt and expansion of wealth inequality. **Environmental** factors include climate action failure and bursts in eco-migration and climate refugees. **Political** factors include balkanization and a shift in global superpowers. Using the STEEP factors, the PAJ team created the following 2040 future scenario:[1]

> *In 2040, the number of adults outnumbers the number of children for the first time in US history, and urbanized megapolitan areas exist nationwide, including mega areas Phoenix-Tucson, Columbus-Cincinnati, Tampa-Orlando, and Washington-Baltimore-Richmond. In these areas and throughout the country, AI is commonplace. Automated vehicles traverse streets, and robots are replacing the workforce. However, the US national debt has reached historic highs, limiting our government's ability to invest in new priorities. Economic instability and climate action failure have increased tensions between states, and there is no longer any faith in local and federal governments. Globally, the US has lost its place as the top superpower and has been surpassed by China, while the number of foreign-born individuals in the US is at a historic high and created a nationally diverse populace where no racial majority exists.*

Using this future-state scenario as a starting point, the PAJ team identified potential risks and opportunities regarding emerging technologies, as well as steps to take now to mitigate those risks and promote successes. A summary of the discussion continues in the following sections.

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1   The PAJ team is using this scenario as a baseline for the conversations and does not assume that this outcome will occur. Rather, we are posing this scenario as one of many possible futures in 2040. In addition, this scenario grows and adapts after each fireside chat based on the findings from the discussion.
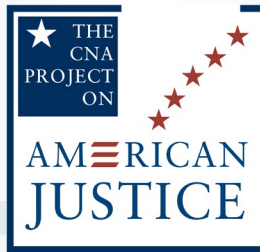
Risks and Opportunities

While discussing the 2040 future-state scenario, SMEs identified several **risks** to corrections and the criminal justice system:

- **Lack of support for people, especially those transitioning into society:** Hybrid and online-only services can be great approaches for increasing access to information, particularly for incarcerated individuals or their families who may have limited transportation, finances, and support. However, virtual engagements may diminish the human connection that many reentry services and treatments directly and indirectly provide, which is often essential when working with vulnerable populations, such as those transitioning into society.

- **Technology is only as good as the person using it:** Biases may influence the development of certain technologies—particularly AI. Equally problematic, the users of these technologies, such as correctional staff, may incorporate their own biases into how they use these technologies (e.g., when using AI to develop reports or to classify incarcerated individuals). In this way, technology can become an inefficient tool if staff are not conducting quality control processes and following effective policies.

- **Social inequality and its consequences:** Experts noted that the increased use of AI in society may leave some communities behind. AI may become commonplace, but it will not be fully understood by all, and marginalized communities that are already experiencing technology gaps may face additional barriers to jobs and other opportunities.

- **High costs, low budgets:** The criminal justice system, and particularly the corrections field, have limited budgets to keep pace with technological advances. Some experts expressed that emerging technology products will likely be too expensive for the vast majority of correctional facilities.

In addition, SMEs identified **opportunities** in relation to emerging technologies in 2040:

- **Improved safety and security in correctional facilities:** Correctional facilities are already seeing the benefits of technology, including tools to monitor individual's biometrics and alert staff of potential overdoses or other health conditions. Advanced technology could further enhance supervision capabilities and the overall safety of incarcerated people and facility staff.

- **Increased access to information:** Technology can improve and speed up access to information. Justice-involved individuals could have access to expedited learning and translation tools, and these tools could allow non-English speakers to receive the same services as English speakers without delays.

- **Information learning and sharing:** Experts noted that the criminal justice system could become more integrated, rather than having decentralized systems with siloed information. With megapolitan areas and more regionalization, agencies and facilities could expand information sharing to improve processes such as transportation, entry, and release.

Ideas to Take Action On

The SMEs recommended several steps to take now to address the concerns and opportunities identified throughout the discussion:

- Correctional and criminal justice leaders, policy-makers, and practitioners must **embrace emerging technology** because it is advancing rapidly and will inevitably become commonplace in society. One approach is to invest in schools and marginalized communities that are experiencing technology gaps, which will be widened without education and training.

- Correctional stakeholders should hold strategic dialogues to **understand the types and implications of emerging AI technologies—especially those that are available to corrections.** As AI becomes more widely used, additional **education and oversight through agency regulation will be necessary to ensure efficiency.** This oversight should include comprehensive policy development, training, and evaluation, with processes to adjust policy and practice as needed.

- **Preemptive work to mitigate bias is necessary** when developing and implementing advanced technology in the justice field, particularly in organizations that work with vulnerable populations. Criminal justice stakeholders should incorporate the perspectives of individuals with lived experience or who have been involved with the justice system to ensure that implicit biases are mitigated and that new technologies are used appropriately.

- Developers and administrators should **incorporate wellness into technology and its application** to reduce negative effects on individuals when technology is integrated with treatment and other services.

Overall, PAJ's first fireside chat on emerging technologies resulted in fruitful discussion on potential risks and opportunities, as well as steps to take now to reduce the abovementioned risks and promote successes. The next fireside chat will cover community involvement.

> "Technology can be a great benefit to us....We have to embrace it because that's where the next workforce is. That's who we are as a country, but we have to recognize that we are in the business of people."
>
> –PAJ SME

About CNA

CNA is a nonprofit research and analysis organization dedicated to the safety and security of the nation. It operates the Institute for Public Research—which serves civilian government agencies—and the Center for Naval Analyses, the Department of the Navy's federally funded research and development center (FFRDC). CNA develops actionable solutions to complex problems of national importance. With nearly 700 scientists, analysts, and professional staff, CNA takes a real-world approach to gathering data, working side by side with operators and decision-makers around the world. CNA's research portfolio includes global security and strategic competition, homeland security, emergency management, criminal justice, public health, data management, systems analysis, naval operations, and fleet and operational readiness.

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