



INTERIM REPORT & DISCUSSION MATERIALS: AUGUST 2021
NATIONAL CENTER FOR STATE COURTS

Just Horizons Initiative

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Just Horizons Initiative

Overview

In August 2020, the National Center for State Courts launched an initiative to explore the changing needs of the judicial system and those who use it. The initiative was conceived in 2019 in preparation for the Center's celebration of its 50th anniversary in 2021. At that time, we had no idea that the initiative would be launched amid a global pandemic that forced courts to quickly innovate and implement new ways of doing business.

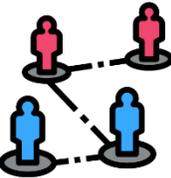
The pandemic has brought courts face-to-face with the future—or at least one aspect of the future. Rapid changes in social, technological, economic, environmental, and political factors further demand our attention and prompt the question of what will be the norm in the next decade. And for courts, what will this new normal mean, not only for their work, but for their very identity as the public's arbiter of disputes according to law and established legal rules?

This is the question *Just Horizons: Charting the Future of the Courts* is exploring. The initiative is led by a Council of court leaders and scholars and is grounded in strategic foresight, a planning discipline that helps people think rigorously and systematically about the future. The application of strategic foresight methods helps court leaders and other stakeholders better understand the changing landscape of courts and imagine new roles and processes for courts to ensure their relevance to the communities they serve well into the future.

During the fall and winter of 2020, the Just Horizons Council identified numerous signals and trends that could have an impact on what courts do and how they do it over the next decade. Through discussion and voting, the Council selected 13 trends most likely to drive change for courts. The Council next considered different possible futures for courts based on the drivers of change. One possibility is that the future might be very similar to what we have today with some minor changes. So, for example, concerns about racial justice and income inequality may be just as prevalent in 10 years as they are today. However, strategic foresight also asks us to consider futures where racial justice and income inequality may have substantially improved or worsened compared to today. The importance of the strategic foresight approach is to think about these different possibilities so as to influence what we can change and prepare for what we cannot.

This document presents the 13 drivers of change the Council identified as most disruptive – positively or negatively – to courts and four scenarios of possible futures based on two cluster drivers: data-driven public services and socio-political discord. The purpose of these materials is to generate discussion and push forward our thinking about the future of courts and how best to prepare for it. To that end, we invite you to review the materials in this document and engage in your own discussions. What are your reactions to the drivers of change and the scenarios? How might each scenario impact what courts do and how they do it? How might each impact how the public views and uses courts? And how might we prepare courts for each scenario? These are questions the Council is considering as we move into the next phase of the initiative and develop recommendations to take full advantage of opportunities and mitigate risks courts could face in the next decade.

Significant Drivers of Change for Courts

	<p>Racial Justice and Equity</p>	<p>The 2020 global protests about systemic racism, sparked by a succession of high-profile police brutality cases suffered by Black Americans, has heightened the visibility of differential treatment of individuals by race and ethnicity and renewed calls to address continued inequities.</p>
	<p>Income Inequality</p>	<p>Income inequality in the U.S. continues to rise and has profound effects on the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities.</p>
	<p>Digital Transformation of Public Services</p>	<p>Public institutions face a growing demand for easily accessible services on digital platforms, designed from a user’s perspective, though challenged by limited budgets, outdated technology, and concerns over data security.</p>
	<p>Trust in Public Institutions</p>	<p>The fracturing of public trust in institutions continues apace with increasingly deep divides among Americans related to confidence in the transparency and accuracy of government data and policies, media reports, and political parties. These divisions vary substantially by identity (e.g., age, gender, race), disposable income, and education.</p>
	<p>Behavioral Health Issues</p>	<p>Substance use and mental health disorders, already prevalent across society, have increased with the chronic nature of stress associated with the 2020 covid-19 pandemic, uncertain economy, and racial and social inequities.</p>
	<p>Cyberthreats & Disinformation</p>	<p>Cyberthreats and disinformation campaigns continue to expand and evolve, accelerated by the rapid transformation of many private and public sector businesses to remote operations during the covid-19 pandemic.</p>
	<p>Demographic Composition</p>	<p>Significant shifts in population demographics such as age, gender, race, birth and death rates, education levels, income levels, and family size pose challenges for government, business, and society.</p>

	<p>Professional Regulation</p>	<p>Current models of professional regulation and licensing, impacting who can develop, provide, and access goods and services, are increasingly facing criticism for stifling innovation and flexibility in responding to consumer needs and restricting consumer choices. This phenomenon is forcing professions and government entities to re-think their business models to remain relevant.</p>
	<p>Impact of Social Movements</p>	<p>Civic activation, supported by social media and philanthropic agents, is rising sharply and spurring change on a variety of social issues with potentially significant effects on the current roles, responsibilities, and operations of various public institutions.</p>
	<p>Data-Driven Organizations</p>	<p>The public sector relies increasingly on data and advanced data analytics to inform decision making and optimize performance. Tools for capturing and using data grow more sophisticated and broadly available, eliminating the need for specialized expertise and resulting in real-time use of information for management and decision making.</p>
	<p>Climate Change</p>	<p>Despite mitigation efforts, global warming continues, affecting areas such as human health (including potential pandemics), the quantity and quality of water, energy, transportation, agriculture, forests, and ecosystems.</p>
	<p>Changing Conceptions of Work</p>	<p>The fundamental meaning and nature of work is evolving rapidly as a result of digital and augmented intelligence, shifts from physical to virtual spaces, multi-generational expectations of the work environment and job satisfaction, and the need for new and different skill sets to accommodate new and reconceptualized jobs.</p>
	<p>Economy</p>	<p>The Congressional Budget Office projects a slow but steady improvement in economic growth over the next several years, with an associated decline in the unemployment rate to pre-pandemic levels. While the national debt remains high, federal revenues are projected to increase as a result of the expiration of temporary pandemic-related expenses, scheduled increases in taxes, and other factors.</p>

Creating Scenarios of the Future

The four scenarios described in this document are presented from the perspective of American life in 2032. They are based on two clusters of current drivers of change the Just Horizons Council considered critical uncertainties for courts in the future. That is, their disruptive impact on courts is potentially large and the certainty of their current trend continuing is unknown. The two drivers are defined below.



Data-Driven Public Services

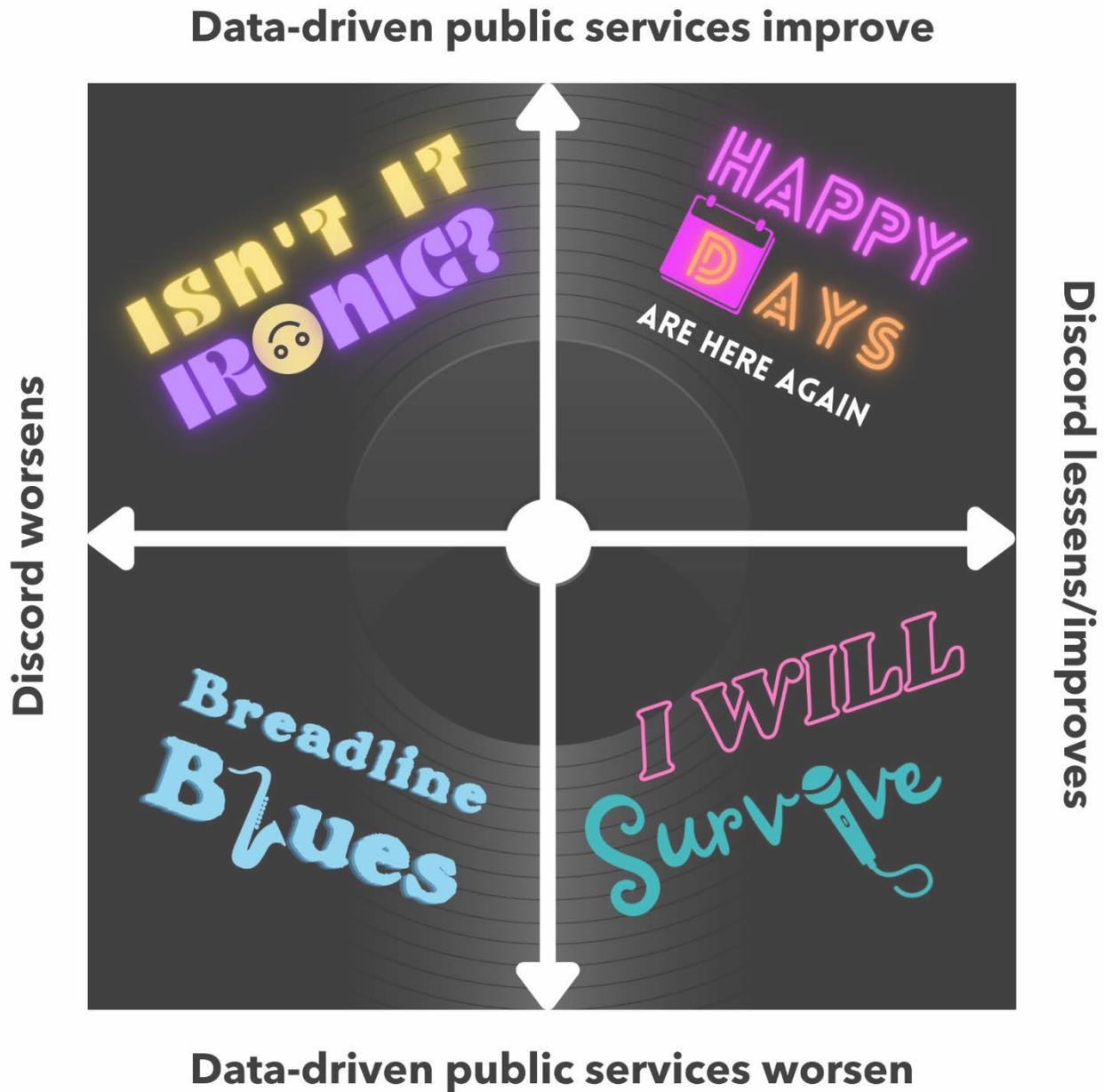
The public sector's limited use of data and advanced data analytics fails to meet the public's expectation for easily accessible and efficient public services. Although tools for capturing and using data grow more sophisticated and broadly available, public institutions continue to be challenged by financial and human resource limitations, outdated technology, and concerns over data security.



Socio-Political Discord

The fracturing of trust in public institutions continues apace with increasingly deep divides among Americans over socio-political issues. This polarization is exemplified by American attitudes toward the results of the 2020 election and global protests about systemic racism. The divisions are sharpened by competing views on the merit of governmental responses, lack of confidence in the transparency and accuracy of government data, and increasing partisanship in the news and social media. Perceptions vary substantially by identity (e.g., age, gender, race), disposable income, and education.

Each of the two cluster drivers anchors one axis of a 2x2 matrix to create four possible futures as depicted below.



The descriptions of the scenarios begin on the next page. In creating each, we considered events that might have occurred to bring us to each future. In addition, we considered how some of the other drivers might play out in each scenario. Although these are obviously fictionalized worlds, they each have different elements that could serve as legitimate signals of what's to come. As you read through them, remember to think about the following: 1) How might each scenario impact what courts do and how they do it, 2) how might each impact how the public views and uses courts, and 3) how might we prepare courts for each scenario?



Scenario 1: Happy Days Are Here Again (improved data-driven public services & less socio-political discord)

*Happy days are here again!
The skies above are clear again,
Let us sing a song of cheer again,
Happy days are here again!*

*Altogether shout it now,
There's no one who can doubt it now,
Let us tell the world about it now,
Happy days are here again!*

Milton Ager & Jack Yellen, 1929

As the country began to emerge from the pandemic in 2022, courts found themselves facing a new crisis. Non-stop daily media coverage of several high-profile political corruption cases involving judges “selling” their decisions, coupled with an exposé on the unprecedented length of time courts were taking to process the spiking backlog of child welfare cases due to the lack of foster care placements during the pandemic, eventually led to #DefundtheCourts protests. Initially, the movement started as small protests outside court buildings in a few scattered communities; but later, over the summer of 2023, the protests grew and served to rally segments of the public whose anger and frustration over the last few years had reached a tipping point. The logic of the demand to defund courts mattered less than the anger and disillusionment that it represented. Media worldwide took note of the furious demonstrators outside of court buildings, holding effigies of judges aloft, and of the signs painted with messages like, “The verdict is in: Defund Now!”

Court stakeholders, public officials and even business leaders recognized the protests as a crisis threatening a sacred component of American democracy and society. In the last half of the decade, the justice system was in a ferment of self-exploration about fairness and transparency. Court leaders grew determined to redesign the justice system in keeping with contemporary values, feeling that this could be their last chance to transform the system and its role in society. Their redesign comprehensively addressed process and execution, including the courts’ digital architecture for record-keeping and communication.

It helped that in other areas of society in the late 2020s, the public sector was enjoying an extended moment of good standing. A new generation of politicians raised on the concepts of teamwork and collaboration had filled the ranks of the House of Representatives and then the Senate. The combination of people in office who were competent, sophisticated marketers of their own policies had a moderating influence on national politics. A new green economy flourished after being

reabeled as the ‘new greenback economy’ and presented to the public as a way to challenge Chinese global power. This goodwill toward the public sector flowed to the court system. Local papers showcased modernization projects. Court users responded positively when they interacted with a more tech-savvy court system.

Decisive actions in the Supreme Court helped quell the most egregious acts of the big tech firms. New taxation policies, weak as they were, still brought in enough revenue to fund the new “continuous learning” grants to state education departments. Innovative programs helped reskill adults for the new economy and ensure more jobs for the growing population of healthy workers in their sixties and seventies. The mood of national reconciliation was infectious. People felt good about being Americans and catchphrases about diversity and inclusion that were ubiquitous at the beginning of the decade began to need less emphasis toward the end, as actual diversity and genuine inclusion could be felt and seen in people’s jobs, homes, and communities.

Having always struggled to fund new initiatives, court budget planners found a new lease on life in the extension of their eligibility for Byrne-JAG grant funds. Coupled with state budgeted funds, the extra funding helped state systems make progress on the knotty challenge of digital transformation.

Many states also accepted grants from a private sector consortium called Access to Justice (A2J) founded in 2028. The consortium was founded by two Silicon Valley tech billionaires who happened to be raised by a court translator mother and a drug court judge dad, respectively. “We value the court system. We want to improve it, not replace it,” said one of the founders, in a dig at Amazon’s and other tech firms’ mammoth private arbitration programs. They seeded A2J with a billion dollars each of their own funding and brought in another three billion through fundraising. Then they opened the grant floodgates.

As the money and goodwill flowed, a diverse board of advisors from the private and public sectors began working to reimagine the information architecture of a 21st-century justice system. Some members of the court community expressed hesitancy about working so closely with grantors and private sector advisors. But the overwhelming response was to accept the assistance and heartfelt intentions of their tech sponsors, so new technology and analytics could be introduced into the system holistically.

The benefits began to be felt by the early 2030s, as pilot programs were scaled. The system redesign also extended beyond software and hardware to the whole court environment. Infused with the minimalist aesthetics of the young billionaires, buildings and offices were revamped to fit the new technological needs. Desks cluttered with fax machines, accounting calculators and giant screens were replaced with lighter, paper-free workspaces with built-in ambient technology. People who worked in the justice system felt better about themselves and their work, walking into their shiny new offices.

The newly networked justice system offices connected more efficiently and productively to other institutions.



Administrators used more sophisticated, more easily accessed insights to generate better solutions and prompt early interventions in behavioral health, substance abuse, poverty, and education.

Having been chastised by the #DefundtheCourts movement and with better tools to address social injustice at its roots, the courts began the 2030s revitalized as an integral hub in a justice ecosystem that extended across different social services. For judges and court administrators, it felt like happy days were here, and they shouted it out at international conferences and peer seminars all through the early 2030s.



Scenario 2: Isn't It Ironic? (improved data-driven public services & worsened socio-political discord)

*It's like rain, on your wedding
day
It's a free ride when you've
already paid
It's the good advice that you just
didn't take
And who would've thought? It
figures*

*Mr. Play-It-Safe was afraid to fly
He packed his suitcase and kissed his kids
goodbye
He waited his whole damn life to take that
flight
And as the plane crashed down
He thought, "Well, isn't this nice?"
And isn't it ironic?
Don't you think?*

Glen Ballard & Alanis Nadine Morissette, 1996

Like nearly every other service institution and office in the country, the courts digitized its processes throughout the late 2020s. Although there were a few splashy projects and grand “digital justice” initiatives, improvements were mostly the product of incremental additions to existing contracts, overall improvements in broadband access, and rising computational speed and capacity.

By the end of the decade, all state supreme courts and most lower courts had become “smart courts.” Courtrooms had good cameras and recording devices. The entire system had decent e-services for court users with good oversight and processing.

Secure apps helped court staff members connect with court users awaiting processing. In some districts, people who didn't have smartphones were given an inexpensive one loaded with the necessary information and allowed to keep them after their court business was concluded. (Allowing people to keep their phones gave them an incentive to not lose or misplace them along the way, a big problem in the beginning).

Technology-enabled accessibility solutions from automated translation apps to court-specific image libraries (with faces displaying different emotional states, for example) made it easier to communicate with children and some intellectually disabled adults.

Over time, employees in the court system developed a relationship with technology that would once have seemed futuristic. The concern of some that technological interactions would displace the court

focus on people and humane interactions lessened. More people began to see how technology could enhance human interactions and benefit court users.

With that normality came rulings that also reflected the zeitgeist of the age. Apps that had once seemed intrusive and were periodically challenged in court were normalized by forgiving court judgments. Public sensors, motion detectors, and more algorithmic decision-making became a part of modern life. Court systems that could afford an extra hire created new positions to ensure government oversight on data and technology usage and liaise between the courts and technology providers.

The vast and accessible new data trove gave policymakers, researchers, and advocacy groups a new lease on life in creating evidence-based policy. They could show with ever greater clarity where due process was failing; how rulings could be made more equitable, and who had access and who lacked it. Even a famously grumpy and “old school” law professor weighed in from his emeritus chair at Yale to call the applications of data a “golden age” for justice.

Beyond courthouse walls, however, many felt they were in a neo-dark age for justice and democratic rule. The national anger that was so visibly unleashed over the killing of George Floyd and the presidential election in 2020 turned out to be the tip of the iceberg. The rest of the decade was spent in complete political deadlock. Each summer, some event triggered a new round of violent confrontations between hardened demonstrators on the right and the left.

The situation deteriorated into a genuinely dark spiral after the 2024 presidential election. After considering a run in 2024, former President Donald Trump had eventually given his blessing to a popular governor who won on the same aggressively populist messages as his mentor.

Like those of previous presidents, many of the new president’s executive judgments landed in federal courts. Despite taking extreme care to maintain an apolitical position, view cases on their legal merits, and avoid the national fray, some courtrooms still became the sites of violent protest. As for the Democrats, they spent their time whipping the rest of the country into a fighting position of their own. News outlets on both sides of the divide grimly warned of a second Civil War all through the presidential campaigning of 2028, as angry politics showed up everywhere, including within the justice system itself.

Many court employees took issue with the biometric authentication systems that had become standard technology in most American offices and institutions. Much of the population appreciated the efficiency of entering their workplace with a blink of an eye or a thumbprint. But not everyone. “This is how we protect privacy!?” said one judge angrily in a meeting called to address the issue.

Judicial passports, a form of blockchain-based records, became the pride of court systems that used them. From the courts’ perspective, a trustworthy record of each time a person interacted with the judicial system helped them be more efficient and fairer, because they could better understand court users. Not everyone saw it that way. In one community, demonstrators showed up on the local courthouse lawn to express their outrage. “This is just another way that the American justice system

has historically controlled Black people. Judicial passports are high-tech slave passes,” one demonstrator told a reporter.

In the early months of 2028, a conspiracy theory grew on social media that the US Government was collecting White people’s location data from their phones and smart watches as the first step in a plot to round them up and put them in internment camps. The event that fueled it was the murder conviction of a man based on evidence from his watch. The case itself had to do with a family dispute that had turned violent; but because the man had been a vocal White Lives Count supporter, movement leaders seized it and nurtured it until it fueled enough anger to produce protests. “Hey Feds, Don’t Watch My Watch!” was one of the more polite signs that could be seen in an April demonstration in Washington DC.

Judges and other court employees kept their heads down and tried to focus on work, but the continuous barrage of protest was taking a toll on their ability to gain cooperation and work with court users, no matter how well their systems worked.

The situation deteriorated further after the hack of a chatbot in a Midwestern city became a national scandal. Chatbots to provide faster service without huge labor costs had become a standard application on most state court websites; they made customer service much faster and easier for most people. When the chatbot of one court system was hacked, the attackers rewrote the bland and helpful robot scripts, replacing them with obscene comments that helped accelerate the downward slide of the court’s reputation until the chatbot was disabled. It wasn’t until several months afterward that the true motive of the attack became clear: The attackers tried to blackmail two famous actors and the CEO of a public company with proof they could access sealed court records showing crimes committed by these high-profile figures years earlier.

Many judges and court administrators began to feel they were living in ironic times: Finally, the system was as efficient and high-tech as any other service in the country, but all that technology simply got caught up in the same problems that had always existed.



Scenario 3: Breadline Blues (worsened data-driven public services &worsened socio-political discord)

*It's a rich man's job to make some rules
In order to rid our breadline blues
Now listen here folks and it ain't no joke
We've got to do something or we're all going to croak
We can't get a job, we've all been robbed
We've got no money and the corn's all cob
We've got nothing but blues, breadline blues*

Bernard (Slim) Smith, 1931

It was supposed to be the Roaring Twenties. Instead, it turned out to be the Great Crash. Blame it on the weather. The hot, hot summer of 2025 led to the worst year the country had ever seen. Wildfires in the West lasted longer, did more damage, and left more people homeless and desperate than in any prior years.

The 2026 Great Plains drought left yards and gardens parched, but just a few hundred miles to the east, the country was perpetually underwater. Entire neighborhoods floated away. As soon as one great storm was over and people had returned home to take stock of the wreckage, another disaster seemed to take its place. That was also the year that fourteen hurricanes made landfall along the southern and southeastern coasts. Houses and pets disappeared into the rising waters, office buildings and stores and factories became unusable. Inland, tornadoes ripped houses apart, sending them flying, and a storm of the century hit the Northeast.

It was impossible to contain the effects of the bad weather as it rippled across the country, putting people out of work and out of their houses. National agriculture was devastated, and the homeless population skyrocketed. Underinsured homeowners found themselves unable to afford repairs, even when they could help make their homes livable again. FEMA resources were exhausted by late summer.

The Cabinet under the Democratic President, who won the 2024 election with the skinniest of margins, did what it could. But the snowballing emergency made mincemeat of even the most competent leaders. Almost every state in the country needed emergency assistance on a large scale.

National guards and volunteer coast guards became full-time professionals on loan to a neighboring state as soon as their own location was stabilized.

Not surprisingly, state budgets were ravaged. After the efforts to rebuild budgets in the wake of COVID-22 many thought they were on the road to recovery. Still, the lack of federal funding and the compounding disasters brought things to a standstill.

The court system did not escape the unfolding crisis. There was, of course, the same suffering among employees that the entire country faced. People's homes were damaged; their children's schooling was interrupted; childcare and basic needs like groceries seemed like unbridgeable obstacles some days, and everyone was stressed financially. It was highly disruptive to the basic work of the courts, as absences were up, and people could not focus well when they were at work.

Court buildings, like every other workplace, faced electricity outages, building damage, and the destruction of paper records. Efficiency lagged as software services became sporadic in many areas where the telephone lines and satellite dishes that delivered internet services were disrupted.

The courts' ability to manage caseloads worsened. Response times slowed. The whole system appeared sluggish and increasingly unhelpful to court users as new issues piled up at the door. Every kind of crime and social ill seemed to be increasing. Assault and domestic abuse, robberies, homicides, drug abuse, divorce, child placements and bankruptcies were all up. People turned to the courts for help; but it was desperation, not trust, that sent them there, especially as it became increasingly difficult to communicate well with displaced clients using spotty communications technologies. Clerks and administrators turned to paper appointment books and notepads to keep track of their cases.

The age of innovation that many believed would emerge in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic did come about, in a way. But it was born out of desperate necessity to continue performing existing work, not move into the future. The hi-tech concept of courts-as-a-service looked more like a revival of 19th century judges "riding the circuit," as court employees took to the road to hold proceedings for people immobilized by transportation and housing issues.

Of course, there was an uneven quality to the devastation. People who could afford to get out of the way of the storms and the droughts did that, calling on private firefighters or equivalent services to help keep them safe. While no one fully escaped the descent into economic depression that enveloped the country in the late 1920s, the crisis exacerbated wealth disparities, as those without safety nets were hit hardest. Employers all over the country tightened their belts at precisely the same time that millions of people lost jobs or access to their gig work.

Social unrest erupted most prominently when rental property corporations in several major cities raised rents by more than fifty percent. The evicted took to the streets, where they were joined by many others in demonstrations protesting inequalities, corporate power, and the lack of affordable housing and jobs, inspired by the once-again popular slogan, *We are the 99%*.



Many participants emphasized the need to remain peaceful, but others did not contain their frustration, causing destruction and occupying buildings. Some thought that eventually, the government might turn to a 1930s style public works program to get people back to work in order to stimulate the economy. That was the talk in Washington, anyway; but as many people even in that cloistered city recognized, lack of trust in the government might doom any national projects of that scope. Small wonder then, that a couple of sixteen-year-olds' remake of a depression-era ditty Breadline Blues, a hundred years after it was first written, went viral on TikTok and became the most recognizable tune in the country in the first months of 2031.



Scenario 4: I Will Survive (worsened data-driven public services & less socio-political discord)

*At first I was afraid, I was petrified
Kept thinking I could never live without you by my side
But then I spent so many nights thinking how you did me wrong
And I grew strong
And I learned how to get along. . .*

Dino Fekaris & Frederick J. Perren, 1978 (performed by Gloria Gaynor)

Despite the bold claims of President Biden in 2021 that “big government is back,” it was clear by 2032 that, in retrospect, it never really had been. Moderate increases in corporate taxation and the taxes on the very wealthy that many states passed in the mid-2020s did not reverse the flow of ownership and expertise into private control.

Most people didn’t notice the disappearance of governance itself into private hands. Even in the early 2020s, people with relatives in prison couldn’t tell you if it was public or privately owned. Travelers paid no mind to whether security checkers at the airport were government employees or contractors. In the same way, no one took much notice as other areas of daily life were privatized, including cities and neighborhoods themselves.

One such city was Culesac Tempe, a carless all-rental neighborhood completed in 2024. Painted Rock, Nevada, was another example, the brainchild of tech investors who wanted to create a showcase for cutting-edge technology and a platform for profits. The new smart city in the desert was a peaceful haven for its 50,000 residents. Built on the blockchain, the connected community eliminated many of the outward signs of the presence of rules or law, obviating the need for many minor court processes. Car owners didn’t get tickets when they overstayed their time in a spot.

Instead, a parking fine was simply removed from their bank accounts. Everyone in Painted Rock received a receipt in the mail on a quarterly basis of infractions and charges. Same thing if anyone exceeded their garden water allotment in the ever hotter, drier Southwest. Home water meters connected seamlessly to a central office-in-the-cloud and to everyone’s personal banking account. Once anyone saw the steep fines for overages hit their bank accounts, they stayed within the sustainability limits established by Painted Rock’s chief executive officer.

But regardless of the different ideological veneers of these new cities, they all accelerated the well-established trend of Americans to cloister themselves with people they felt were like them. In the latter half of the 2020's, Americans increasingly chose to live with those who looked like they looked, worshiped the way they worshiped and wanted to eat what they ate. The openly confrontational mood of the early 2020s died down as Americans turned away from each other and toward the effort to live their lives peacefully among people with whom they were already comfortable.

There were various effects of this ethnic balkanization. Whether white, brown, or black, there were many positive effects for professional communities, even if some privately yearned for greater diversity. Black entrepreneurs and philanthropists sponsored private cities designed around the perceived needs of Black professional families, often harkening back to residential and community experiments of earlier centuries. Taking this cue, other groups built affinity communities. There was Transcity in Rhode Island, El Cielo Azul, a gated community in Texas, and the City of God in Arkansas.

People turned to civic projects of their own making in these new, homogenous surroundings. They no longer expected or responded to government efforts to "democratize" everything. It was easier to help and try to serve others they felt were like themselves. A few communities developed ad hoc arbitration systems built on ancient precepts of religious courts to settle minor disputes. When a community did turn to the formal court system, it was expected that the court would be responsive and knowledgeable about their particular priorities and issues.

In the meantime, the economy roared along, fueled by the infrastructure needs of the new smart cities, autonomous vehicle fleets and a thriving market in digital goods. Due to the proliferation of digital labor platforms as well as the broad digitalization of the workplace generally, people seldom needed to interact socially with individuals outside their community. That was how it was: you only socialized with the people who lived near you and were like you, but you consented to connect online with the more diverse group of co-workers in your company office.

Polls reflected that many in the country reported feeling less on edge than earlier in the century. Homelessness and other social issues were often kept out of direct view in private cities by security services and police hired to protect them.

Of course, not everyone lived in a new city. Millions of people lived in the same towns and cities run by elected officials that they always had. Yet, the general zeitgeist reflected the values of the privatized community and the new hi-tech economy. In traditional cities and communities, the general sense of well-being that had settled across much of the country helped buoy the mood. Many people felt hopeful, if not entirely trusting, of their local and state governments, at least in the first part of the decade.

In 2023 and 2024, happy to put the scourge of the pandemic behind them, mayors, too, took the time to kick back and relax. This turned out to be a mistake. Public pockets were emptied as private wealth and privatized municipalities took hold of the national purse strings. Cities and small towns were abandoned to the most disadvantaged people in the country. Left to their own devices and less digitally connected, they too became more self-sufficient and neighborly. Community gardens in lower-income areas flourished, for example.

At the lowest end of the economic spectrum, small encampments of homeless people took on the look of refugee camps in war-torn countries, becoming full-scale communities with barter economies of their own. Although there was some violence, the more remarkable fact was their generally harmonious quality. The police tended to stay away, having been organically defunded as public coffers emptied, so people created local ways to manage disputes. As for the courts, their fear of abandonment turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy, as fewer students and young professionals saw a future for themselves in the judicial system.

Even though violent crime was strikingly low all over the country, the number and destructive reach of cyberattacks grew every year. An attack could hold a city hostage for weeks and slow public services, including the work of the courts, even further. But with little to do, anyway, the court system had little incentive to modernize court technology. By 2030, the few big initiatives that existed had petered out.

For both people in private cities and people in traditional ones, the theme by the end of the decade was hostility or, even more typical, indifference to the public sector. If anyone gave a thought to the government or the courts, it was with the recognition that they had grown strong without government in their lives. They had learned how to get along.