David Onek—the first executive director of the Berkeley Center for Criminal Justice (BCCJ)—serves up a succinct and cogent case for his vision of the center’s mission: “We are intent on using the intellectual capital at Boalt to tackle the most pressing criminal justice issues facing communities today.” Onek’s determination to harness academia’s brainpower in the service of addressing crucial problems at the local level makes him a perfect fit for Boalt and BCCJ.

Onek comes to his new post flush with hands-on experience as the deputy director of San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom’s Office of Criminal Justice, where he headed up numerous criminal justice initiatives, including programs aimed at reducing gang violence and restoring public safety in the city’s most beleaguered areas.

Onek’s arrival at Boalt comes at a time when a number of Bay Area municipalities are scrambling to find ways to contend with an alarming resurgence of gang-related violence that includes record-breaking homicide rates. He and faculty co-chairs Jonathan Simon ’87/’90, David Sklansky, and Charles Weisselberg have immediate plans to bring BCCJ into the fray with an initiative aimed at fostering effective collaboration among community leaders and law enforcement. “To address gang violence successfully, criminal justice agencies, community leaders, and academics have to work together, and the center is uniquely positioned to foster that kind of collaboration,” says Onek.

BCCJ is basing its approach on national efforts such as the widely emulated Boston model, an innovative—and among the cognoscenti, almost legendary—partnership of faith-based leaders, street outreach workers, and law enforcement officials that in the mid-1990s succeeded in reducing Boston’s gang-related homicides by two-thirds. The Boston model, which has been successfully implemented in Chicago and a handful of other communities across the country, couples an unequivocal message that violence is unacceptable with a credible promise of resources and services to help young perpetrators escape the poverty and hopelessness that have led them into a violent lifestyle.

This is not a one-size-fits-all approach, Onek says. Every community has its own patterns of youth violence and gang behavior, its own values, and its own strengths, all of which need to be carefully assessed before any specific measures can be taken. But regardless of the details, a successful outcome hinges on solid partnerships with community leaders and genuine follow-up—both in the delivery of effective services and resources and in swift and sure enforcement when necessary. BCCJ’s efforts include getting the buy-in and active cooperation of decision makers such as elected officials, judges, district attorneys, and public defenders.

That Onek is already considered a leading expert in criminal and juvenile justice law and policy at the relatively young age of 37 is not really surprising—he’s had a head start. “I decided to study law because of my interest in juvenile justice,” he notes. Before entering Stanford Law School, he had already dealt with youth crime and prevention both behind the lines and in the trenches—he studied model juvenile justice programs as a research associate at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, and served as a counselor at a treatment center for adolescent delinquents. Onek spent his law school summers working at the Juvenile Division of the San Francisco Public Defender’s Office and the Youth Law Center. After graduating in 1999, he won the prestigious Skadden Fellowship, which he applied to his work at San Francisco’s Legal Services for Children. He followed that up with a stint as senior program associate at the W. Haywood
Burns Institute for Juvenile Justice Fairness and Equity, where he worked to reduce racial disparities in the juvenile justice system.

Onek lives in the hilly, young-family-with-children enclave of Bernal Heights in San Francisco with his wife, Kara Dukakis, and their daughters, Olivia, 5, and Nora, 2. And yes, since you ask, it’s that Dukakis. Onek’s father-in-law is a former governor of Massachusetts and the 1988 Democratic nominee for president. In fact, public service seems to be a long-standing tradition on both sides of the family. Onek’s father, Joseph, was deputy counsel to the president in the Carter administration, served in both the Justice Department and State Department in the Clinton administration, and was recently tapped to be senior counsel to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi.

Simon, Sklansky, and Weisellberg are delighted to have Onek on the team, and Onek returns the compliment: “I’m honored to have been selected to work with them. I couldn’t ask for more distinguished and supportive faculty co-chairs,” he says. BCCJ plans to continue ramping up and recently brought Jessie Warner ’05 on board as a program associate. —Jared Simpson

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