As we have identified in earlier chapters, the origins of justice reinvestment situated it within a place-based approach to public policy. In the words of Tucker and Cadora (2003: 2, 4), ‘justice reinvestment seeks community level solutions to community level problems... solutions are required that are locally tailored and locally determined’. Place-based approaches are usually conceived as initiatives specific to a particular geographic location, rather than those that operate at a state-wide or federal level. In this chapter we explore the meaning and implications of place-based approaches to justice reinvestment. We do this through a critical analysis of locality, place and community and consider whether place-based approaches can respond to social groups who have been particularly impacted through rising incarceration rates.

The importance of place-based approaches has grown over the last several decades with the social and economic research showing the high level and long-term concentration of poverty and disadvantage in particular localities including neighbourhoods and communities. In this context, place-based responses became tied to public policy initiatives attacking social exclusion and can at least at a general level, be connected with a social justice orientation. Vinson (2009: 7) discusses the ‘web of disadvantage’ as the appropriate metaphor to show how people become entrapped in highly disadvantaged communities:

Progress in overcoming one limitation, say, unemployment, can be inhibited by related factors like limited funds, poor health, inadequate training or having a criminal record. This web-like structure of disadvantage restricts attempts to break free of it. And because disadvantageous conditions are often ‘bundled’ in this way, efforts must be
directed to loosening systemic constraints on people’s life opportunities if progress is to be achieved.

According to Gilbert (2012), place-based initiatives require governments to change the way they do things in at least two ways. First there is a requirement for greater coordinated service delivery by agencies that have traditionally delivered such services at the broader state or federal level. Second, government departments need to move towards less centralised and more locally informed service delivery models. This should involve greater flexibility, collaboration and community engagement. According to Vinson (2009: 9), the characteristics of a successful place-based approach involve the ‘maximum practicable engagement of disadvantaged communities in decisions ... a local coordinating or “steering” group needs to operate on a basis of authentic community participation’ (italics in original). Successful approaches also involve, inter alia, the cultivation of community capacity and adequate time for development and implementation (ibid.: 9).

Having said that, we argue that place-based approaches can be conceptualised, and operationalised, as either ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’. In a top-down approach, governments still set the policy priorities and parameters, although they may be aimed at particular communities. While there may be greater coordination in service delivery and consultation with communities, the place-based initiative is still firmly set by government agencies and their agendas. In contrast a bottom-up approach, starts with the local community. The policy priorities, linkages and service delivery models are determined through community decision-making and negotiated with different levels of government. This latter approach involves a more participatory democratic approach to determining, prioritising and delivering public policy and services.

Although justice reinvestment is defined as a place-based approach, this can have competing definitions, differing political imperatives, and contrasting priorities for policy and practice. A strong emphasis on a place-based approach was core to the original conceptualisation of justice reinvestment. However, as we noted previously, there has been a tension between the original cornerstones of justice reinvestment and the way that it has played out. As originally conceived, the strategy was not limited to achieving cost efficiencies in the prison system. Its core premises were not only effecting sustained reductions in prisoner numbers, but also ‘rebuilding the human resources and physical infrastructure’ (Tucker and Cadora, 2003: 3) of communities that lose high numbers of people to prison. In order to achieve this, justice reinvestment