



HR²

Effective Services and Supports for Youth Who are **High Risk and Hard to Reach**



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Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, the United States has made historic progress in reducing youth incarceration and juvenile justice system involvement. Youth detention has declined by approximately 75% since 2000, as juvenile arrests have fallen sharply and research has made clear that incarceration can cause lasting harm to young people. Despite these gains, a very small subset of youth remain involved in serious and violent conduct and are difficult to engage in traditional services. These youth who are High Risk and Hard to Reach (HR²), pose a disproportionate challenge to youth justice systems and reform efforts.

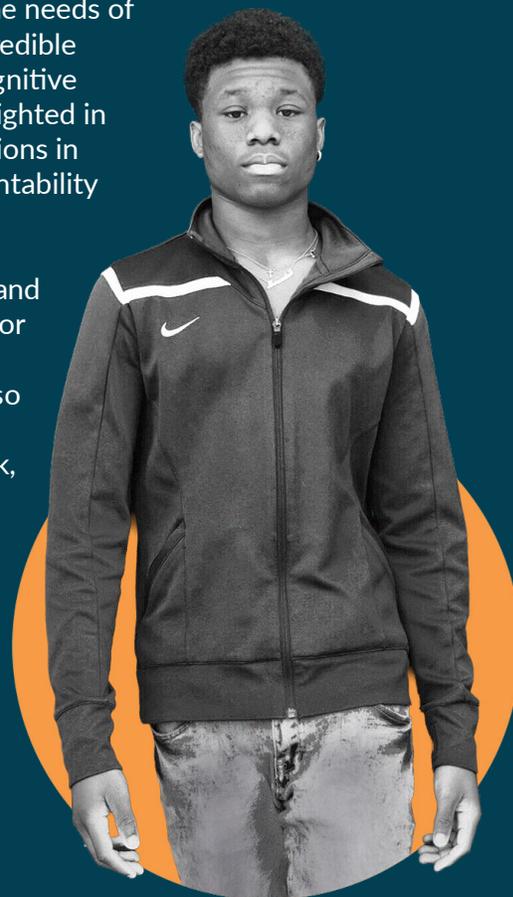
HR² youth often experience multiple, compounding risk factors, including chronic trauma, family instability, community violence, school disengagement, mental health and substance use issues, and repeated justice system contact. While the overall number of youth in the system has declined, a growing share of those who remain have higher levels of need and more complex circumstances. Highly publicized offenses committed by a small number of HR² youth have fueled misperceptions that youth crime is widespread, threatening to undermine decades of reform and prompting calls for punitive responses that are ineffective and harmful.

This group of young people, often numbering no more than 25 in a mid-sized city, stymie juvenile justice officials and community-based organizations. HR² youth can exhaust system resources and evade even the best programs. The outsized attention they receive can also thwart justice reform efforts, with elected officials and community members mistakenly believing the group is larger in size and therefore increased incarceration is necessary. In some jurisdictions, responses to this population are threatening to roll back the enormous gains made in the youth justice field.

Existing evidence shows that community-based, trauma-informed, and relationship-centered interventions can reduce recidivism, but many established models struggle to meet the needs of HR² youth. In response, a growing number of programs have adapted credible messenger and intensive life-coaching models, often combined with cognitive behavioral approaches and wraparound supports. A few programs highlighted in this brief demonstrate promising outcomes, including significant reductions in violent reoffending, improved school engagement, and increased accountability without reliance on incarceration.

At the same time, these initiatives reveal persistent gaps in knowledge and practice. Key challenges include determining how to respond to unsafe or unstable home environments and adapting adult-focused violence intervention models to the developmental realities of youth. There is also a need to better understand which combinations of services – life coaching, cognitive behavioral interventions, family support, group work, and incentives – are most effective, for whom, at what duration, and under what circumstances.

This brief argues that the next phase of youth justice reform must focus on intentionally and effectively serving HR² youth. Doing so will require moving beyond strict replication of existing evidence-based programs toward innovation informed by data, transparency, and rigorous evaluation embedded in practice. Policymakers and practitioners must invest in specialized, culturally grounded interventions, support sustained research-practice partnerships, and center the lived experiences of HR² youth and their families.



Decline in Youth Detention Rates

In the past two decades, the United States has seen a steady and significant reduction in the number of youth incarcerated as well as the overall number of youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Between 2000 and 2020, there was a 75% reduction in youth detention across the US, in all parts of the country—including in urban, suburban, and rural areas, and in red and blue states and counties.¹ This coincided with an even sharper decline in the number of young people incarcerated alongside adults, with the population of youth under the age of 18 in adult jails and prisons in the United States falling by 84%, from 14,500 in 1997 to 2,300 in 2022.² These sharp declines are due to the tireless efforts of youth justice reformers, the growing body of evidence of the ineffectiveness and harms of youth incarceration, more programs informed by evidence working with young people, and the steep costs of the system.

This dramatic shift aligns with research showing that incarcerating young people does not increase public safety and may, in fact, reduce it: As youth detention numbers have dropped precipitously over the past twenty years, juvenile arrests have also dropped dramatically (See Box I).³

Box I

There has been a sharp decline in youth delinquency, arrests, and incarceration over the last three decades

Data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) provide a detailed overview of youth delinquency and detention. The most recent BJS report on youth arrests, from 2020, shows a dramatic downward trend. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a general increase in most forms of juvenile offending (burglary, larceny, and robbery), and the use of firearms among youth increased. However, in recent years there has been a decrease in most forms of juvenile offending.⁴ Despite this progress, noticeable racial disparities persist; Black youth are much more likely than White youth to be held in juvenile facilities.

Figure 1. Youth Arrest Rate Trends, 1980-2020 over the graphic



1 The Sentencing Project. (2024). Youth justice by the numbers [Policy brief]. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/youth-justice-by-the-numbers/>

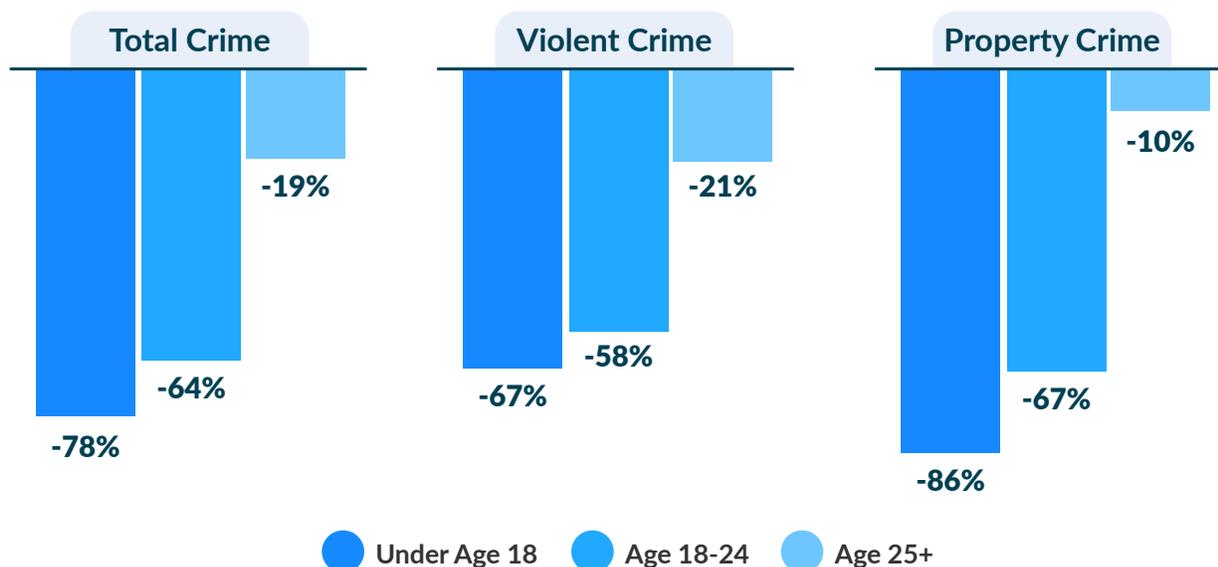
2 Ibid.

3 Youth Arrest Rates, OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/statistical-briefing-book/crime/faqs/jar>

4 Council on Criminal Justice. (2024). Trends in juvenile offending: What you need to know. <https://counciloncj.org/trends-in-juvenile-offending-what-you-need-to-know/>

Further, juvenile arrests have decreased more than adult arrests over the past several decades, and youth incarceration has fallen at a far more significant rate than adult incarceration. For example, arrests of juveniles declined by 78% from 1995 to 2024, while arrests of adults ages 25 and above dropped by only 19%.⁵ (See Box II)

Figure 2. Number of Arrests Nationwide in 2024 Compared to 1995⁶



With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures, job losses, and economic turmoil, crime increased throughout the country. Youth crime surged, including armed robberies and carjackings. Although shootings were still largely being committed by adults, the overall increase in shootings, including those by and against youth, received significant traditional and social media attention.⁷ The prevalent perception was that youth were running rampant.

By 2023, youth delinquency rates had decreased. Though it went nearly unnoticed, 2024 was one of the safest years in US history, and 2025 was even safer. Some of the most dramatic reductions were in youth crime, yet perceptions of unhinged juveniles persist, in some instances fueled by mainstream media. This continued narrative jeopardizes the significant progress that has been made in reforming youth justice.

As the overall juvenile justice population has declined, the young people who remain in the system tend to have greater levels of need and tend to have committed more serious crimes. Moreover, while youth represented a small proportion of the overall COVID-19 pandemic crime surge, there was still a sizable increase in young people committing serious violent offenses. For instance, from 2016 to 2022, homicides perpetrated by youth increased by 65%; juvenile homicides have since declined steeply.⁸

While the percentage of youth confined in detention or placement facilities for more serious offenses has increased (some, but not all, of whom include the high risk, hard to reach population this paper focuses on), it is important to remember that most young people in both detention and commitment facilities are not held on what are considered serious offenses. (See Box II).

5 Butts, J. A., & Moreno, G. (2025, August 25). Minor Role IV: Violent Crime More of an Adult Problem Today [DataBit 2025-2]. Research and Evaluation Center, John Jay College of Criminal Justice. <https://johnjayrec.nyc/2025/08/25/databit202502>

6 Ibid.

7 Mendel, R. (2024, December 11). The real cost of 'bad news': How misinformation is undermining youth justice policy in Baltimore. The Sentencing Project. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/the-real-cost-of-bad-news-how-misinformation-is-undermining-youth-justice-policy-in-baltimore/>

Has there been an increase in violent/serious-offending youth in the youth justice system?

The share of juvenile arrests and delinquency cases involving violent crime index (VCI) offenses and weapons possession rose over the past decade from around 8% of delinquency cases in 2015 to 13% in 2022,⁹ and from about 8% of juvenile arrests in 2015 to 12% in 2024.¹⁰ Put another way, the share of cases and arrests not involving weapons or serious violence went from a little over 90% to a little under 90% over the course of a decade while the volume of cases and arrests plunged. This means that there were many fewer overall arrests of young people, shifting the percentage of arrests to the more serious categories. Still, the overwhelming bulk of youth arrests were for less serious charges.

The trend is similar regarding the share of cases entering youth detention. In 2015, 15% of detained cases were for violent crime index or weapons offenses; by 2022, that share was up to 25%. The VCI share of detained cases went up by about half, from 13% to 19%, and the share detained for weapons possession doubled from 3% to 6%.¹¹ While these are nontrivial increases in the share of youth entering detention for more serious offenses, there are, again, far fewer young people in detention overall, and 75% of young people in detention entered on charges that are neither VCI nor gun offenses.

Post-adjudication placement patterns follow a similar trend. In 2015, 16% of cases disposed (or sentenced) to placement were for VCI or weapons adjudications; by 2022, that figure was up to 25%.¹² Despite a sizable increase in the proportion of cases sentenced to placement being for serious offenses, the majority of cases sentenced to placement continue to be for less serious offenses.

Looking at the federal Count of Juveniles in Residential Placement (CJRP, a one-day snapshot of youth in custody nationally), the notion that there is a more serious cadre of young people in custody (either in detention or placement) seems more valid, in large part because young people detained and/or placed on more serious offenses stay longer than others, so they constitute a larger proportion of the the daily population than they do in annual admissions. Per the CJRP, young people in placement based on VCI or weapons offenses were 32% of the population in 2015, compared to 45% in 2023.¹³ Still, even when looking at the distribution of offenses in the daily population, it is evident that most of the young people incarcerated are there for offenses that are less serious than VCI or gun offenses.

During the same period, the number of young people in placement for criminal homicide in the CJRP rose considerably; up from 767 in 2015 to 2,245 in 2023 (increasing from 1.6% to 7.7% of youth in custody).¹⁴ But again, this increase represents an extremely small fraction of the national population of 26 million 12–17-year-olds.

Also, a few caveats are warranted here. In some jurisdictions, homicides and attempted homicides are included in the “criminal homicide” category. If a jurisdiction started charging more serious assaults as attempted homicides over time, it might inflate this category. Further, although there has not been a snapshot of youth in custody since 2023 (which was disproportionately affected by the increase in violent crime among juveniles and adults in the waning years of the pandemic), there is evidence that there has been a national decline in youth crime since then.

8 Lantz, B., & Knapp, K. G. (2024). Trends in juvenile offending: What you need to know. Council on Criminal Justice. <https://counciloncj.org/trends-in-juvenile-offending-what-you-need-to-know/>

9 Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (n.d.). Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics (EZAJCS): Case Processing. Statistical Briefing Book. Retrieved from <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/statistical-briefing-book/data-analysis-tools/ezajcs/case-processing>

10 U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation. (n.d.). Crime in the United States. Retrieved from <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/>; California Department of Justice, Criminal Justice Information Services Division. (n.d.). CDE — Data Explorer [Data set and download page]. Retrieved from <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/downloads>

11 Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (n.d.). Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics (EZAJCS): Case Processing. Statistical Briefing Book. Retrieved from <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/statistical-briefing-book/data-analysis-tools/ezajcs/case-processing>

12 Ibid.

13 Puzzanchera, C., Sladky, T. J., & Kang, W. (2025). Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement (EZACJRP). Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/asp/display.asp>

14 Ibid.

Again, a very small number of youth commit serious and violent offenses, and an even smaller portion of those youth who have committed serious offenses pose either a high risk of reoffending or are difficult to engage in programming. Some have their cases dismissed or are acquitted and receive little to no follow-up support. Even some who are adjudicated and are served by the system do not receive what many believe to be appropriate levels of accountability, as ill-defined as accountability often is.

Many young people within the very small portion of overall system-involved youth either avoid or are not well served by community service providers. Even programs that focus on youth adjudicated for more serious offenses are sometimes unable to effectively engage this population. As such, some HR² youth recidivate with serious offenses. Highly publicized offenses by this very small group of youth can therefore unfairly call into question the effectiveness of community-based programs and the youth justice system itself, as well as harden perspectives that all youth who are involved in any level of delinquency should be incarcerated for long periods. If we have learned anything from the 1990s “superpredator era” of dramatically hardening youth justice practices, it is that young people can be painted with an overly broad—and overly harsh and ineffective—brush for the actions of a few.

As a society, we need to figure out how to effectively respond to HR² youth in a way that holds them accountable while also giving them a chance at success. To address this challenge, the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) has produced this brief to shed light on what is known about young people who remain involved in the youth justice system despite massive declines in arrests and incarceration—those who are high risk and hard to reach.



Who are High Risk and Hard to Reach Youth?

Although young adults up to age 24 are often considered transition-age youth and are among the population that have the very highest risk of being involved in serious violence, for the purposes of this brief, NICJR is focusing specifically on young people involved in the juvenile justice system whose offenses occurred prior to age 18.

HR² youth have often experienced significant trauma or toxic stress, have very challenging family dynamics, have chronic school absenteeism and school discipline, have many previous arrests, and may have mental health and/or substance abuse issues. HR² youth also tend not to do well in the community-based programs that are common in the youth justice system, either because these programs are not oriented toward addressing youth with more serious challenges or because life circumstances attenuate their ability to consistently participate in these programs.

The experience of Micah (See Box III),¹⁵ who was referred to NICJR's Neighborhood Opportunity and Accountability Board (NOAB) program for high risk, system-involved youth, highlights the multiplicity of circumstances that make it difficult to serve many of these youth.

Box III

Micah

Micah was referred to NOAB by the Oakland Police Department (OPD) at the age of 12 after he was arrested with a group of young people for a string of high-profile robberies for which he was detained but not charged. His referral also came after he was a victim of gun violence.

Early on, it became clear to Micah's Life Coach that he was a very smart young man as well as a talented athlete. However, it was also clear that crime was already a regular part of his life. Micah said his delinquent behavior began when he was nine. When he was referred to NOAB, he was not regularly attending school.

Micah's mom was caring for a small baby and two older children, leaving little attention for Micah—and much of what he did receive was negative. Despite this, Micah looked up to his mother and sought her approval. Micah had little to no relationship with his father, who had been incarcerated for most of his life and was a well-known local gang leader.

A few days after Micah's enrollment in NOAB, his Life Coach, who is also a football coach, led him in football workouts that they continued nearly every day for a week. Unfortunately, Micah's mother was not interested in receiving support for her son and actively blocked the Life Coach from engaging Micah.

A few weeks into his participation in the program, Micah was arrested for a carjacking in Oakland. He spent a few days in detention and was released pending the adjudication of his case. He was allowed to continue participating in NOAB in lieu of formal probation.

Although Micah was reluctant to trust new adults, his Life Coach made significant progress in connecting with him. He was more engaged in school, and he met regularly with his Life Coach after his mother agreed to let the Life Coach work with him at the school; she would not allow the Life Coach to pick Micah up from home.

¹⁵ Name changed to preserve anonymity.

Over time, Micah's Life Coach encountered increasing difficulty in connecting with him, in part because his family was unwilling to participate in the program, and in part because Micah himself became less willing to connect. Micah also became less engaged in school and was on the verge of expulsion for chronic misbehavior, including threatening a principal.

The increasing difficulties with Micah came to a head when he was expelled from school for bringing a gun on campus. None of Micah's family would respond to the Vice Principal's calls that day, so the school contacted the Life Coach to come pick Micah up from school.

The Life Coach was able to contact Micah's uncle, who agreed that Micah could be dropped off at his house. The Life Coach picked Micah up from school and took him and the Vice Principal to lunch. After lunch, they dropped the Vice Principal off back at the school before taking Micah to his uncle's place. The Vice Principal was riding in the front seat of the Life Coach's car, and when they dropped her off Micah remained in the back seat. As they were driving to the uncle's house, Micah expressed interest in remaining with the Life Coach for the rest of the day. As they got closer to the uncle's house, Micah pulled out a gun and pointed it toward the Life Coach's head. Fairly certain that the weapon was just a BB gun, the Life Coach acted quickly to forcibly disarm Micah. The Life Coach continued to talk with Micah and dropped him off at his uncle's house. When Micah exited the vehicle, he thanked his Life Coach for the ride and, as he always does, said "be safe Coach" as he walked off.

Micah later returned to the school and was arrested after he brandished the firearm on campus. He was released from detention a few days later. Lack of awareness regarding his release date and lack of coordination among partners resulted in the new organization who was going to take over services for Micah not engaging him when he was released. Two months later, Micah was arrested for felony murder, when a group of people who he was with robbed a gas station store and killed the cashier. Micah was outside of the store when the shooting happened, but he was charged with robbery and felony murder. After being held in detention for several weeks, the felony murder charges were dropped and he was released. Only a few weeks later he was again arrested for armed robbery. He remained in detention for several months before being sent to a residential treatment center for six months, where he was at the time of publication of this paper.



A sizable body of research and experience shows that while Micah’s circumstances and experiences are somewhat rare, they are not unique among youth with repeated involvement in the delinquency system. As noted in NICJR’s most recent Youth Data and Intervention Initiative report, although there is no single risk factor that is overwhelmingly predictive of involvement in violence, a combination of predictive risk factors and adverse life experiences can help distinguish youth who are at heightened risk.¹⁶ Notably, the risk factors tend to have a multiplicative impact: youth who have multiple risk factors are at much higher risk of persistent involvement in violence and other delinquent conduct than young people who only have a few. These predictive risk factors and adverse life experiences can be grouped into three categories: individual, family, and community.

Individual Risk Factors

- School absenteeism
- Numerous previous arrests
- Learning disabilities
- Substance use
- Mental health disorders

Family Risk Factors

- Childhood abuse and neglect
- Family violence
- Homelessness and housing instability
- Weak social ties

Community Risk Factors

- Poverty and neighborhood disorganization
- Community violence

It is important to note that while there is often overlap, high risk and hard to reach youth are not one and the same. There are some youth who engage in behaviors that are not necessarily dangerous; however, the repeated nature of those behaviors puts the youth at a higher risk of continued involvement in the justice system, regardless of the dangerousness of their repetitive actions. While their risk factors certainly impact the youth, they are not necessarily engaged in serious behaviors such as gun violence. In contrast, there are other youth with similar environmental and circumstantial risk factors who do engage in dangerous behaviors, including serious violence. Also, there are some youth who are at very elevated risk for violence or who have already engaged in violence who are responsive to community-based programs—so they are high risk but not hard to reach. And there are youth who have not yet escalated to being at very high risk but are engaged in lower- or moderate-level delinquency and are eluding and not engaging in programming—so they are not high risk but are hard to reach. It is the youth who are both high risk and hard to reach—HR²—who are the most challenging.



16 National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform. (2025, January). Youth Data and Intervention Initiative Report Vol. II. https://nicjr.org/files/galleries/YDII_Volume_II_Final_2024_11_2024-0001.pdf

What Do We Know? Existing and Emerging Evidence About Serving HR² Youth

Across the youth justice continuum, there is a wide body of research that demonstrates how community-based, family-centered, and trauma-informed interventions can reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for youth. However, while these models show promise in controlled evaluations, their implementation in real-world contexts often falls short, especially for HR² youth, who present with complex trauma histories, multiple system involvement, and/or chronic (and sometimes ongoing) exposure to violence.

The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model has become the dominant framework for juvenile justice system interventions across the US. The RNR model emphasizes the fact that youth who are higher risk and higher need require higher-intensity services. The model also emphasizes the efficacy of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) as the primary intervention strategy for youth involved in the delinquency system.¹⁷ In many ways, the recognition that services and interventions should focus on higher-risk youth while minimizing contact with lower-risk youth has been transformative for the juvenile justice system, paving the way for the massive reductions in youth arrests and incarceration described above. Nonetheless, as a small but persistent number of high risk and complex young people have continued to be involved in delinquency and violence, it has become clear that gaps remain.

Traditional youth-centered and family-centered models based on CBT-principles, such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT) and multisystemic therapy (MST), do have demonstrated success with youth involved in the delinquency system, but research has found variation in efficacy based on a variety of fidelity, youth, and community characteristics.¹⁸ Moreover, because these approaches rely on structured casework and family involvement, they can be difficult to implement with fidelity with youth who have complicated family issues and multiple overlapping risk factors, like most HR² youth do. In addition to this challenge, both FFT and MST are delivered only by trained clinical therapists, who are often in short supply and who rarely match the racial/ethnic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds of their clients.

Programs that use credible messengers, people who have similar lived experiences as the people they are serving and therefore relate to the participants and have credibility, are more effective at convincing hard to reach youth to engage. Credible messenger programs, which represent a growing response to traditional system gaps, can take a group-based cognitive-behavioral approach, a one-on-one intensive mentorship (aka “life coaching”) approach, or both. In both the group-based cognitive-behavioral programs and the individual life coaching programs, trained mentors from similar cultural and experiential backgrounds as the young people they are serving—often including prior involvement in the justice system—connect with youth in an authentic, culturally grounded way. These models emphasize trust building and consistent engagement, relational accountability instead of punitive monitoring, and cultural credibility combined with lived experience alignment. Many also provide fiscal incentives for young people who achieve established milestones in their life plans and desist from delinquency.

17 Latessa, E. J., & Reitler, A. K. (2015). What works in reducing recidivism and how does it relate to drug courts? *Ohio Northern University Law Review*, 41(3), 757–789. https://nyatcp.org/assets/pdfs/handouts_old/What%20Works%20in%20Reducing%20Recidivism.pdf

18 van der Stouwe, T., Asscher, J. J., Stams, G. J. J. M., Deković, M., & van der Laan, P. H. (2014). The effectiveness of Multisystemic Therapy (MST): A meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 34(6), 468–481. Sexton, T. L., & Turner, C. W. (2010). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25047448/> The effectiveness of Functional Family Therapy for youth with behavioral problems in a community practice setting. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 24(3), 339–348. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019406>

The **Arches Transformative Mentoring program** (Arches), was a group mentoring intervention for young people aged 16 to 24 who were on probation in New York City. Launched by numerous nonprofit groups in 2012 under the auspices of the New York City Department of Probation,¹⁹ Arches delivered intensive group mentoring sessions using an Interactive Journaling curriculum based on cognitive behavioral therapy principles and delivered by credible messengers. Mentors were trained to facilitate group sessions and expected to be available for additional one-on-one meetings with mentees, using motivational interviewing in both contexts. An evaluation found that participants were half as likely to be convicted of a new felony relative to a comparison group one and two years after starting the program. Outcomes were particularly strong for participants aged 16–17.²⁰

Positive outcomes notwithstanding, there is some evidence that this approach, at least on its own, is not sufficiently intensive for higher-risk participants who would benefit from more frequent engagement with their mentors over a longer duration.²¹ A number of more recent credible messenger life coaching programs draw from earlier models such as Arches and the intensive life coaching models used in community violence intervention (CVI) to work with HR² youth.

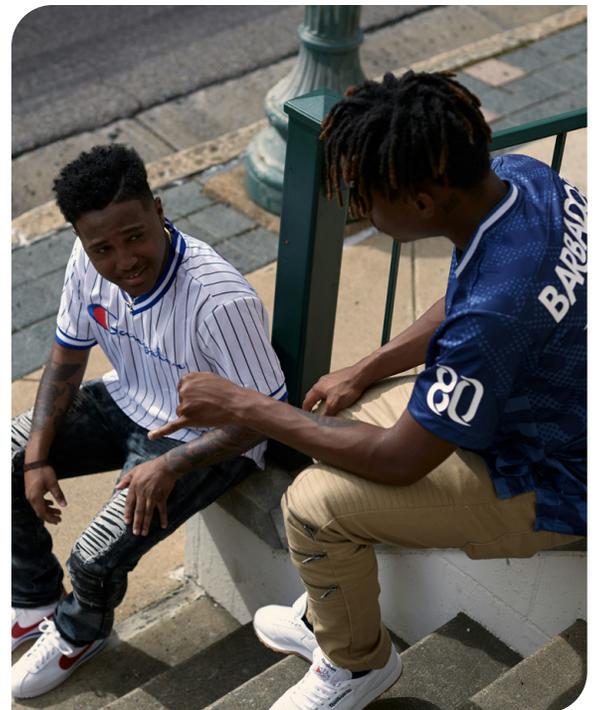
NICJR's **Neighborhood Opportunity and Accountability Board (NOAB)** is a youth development and diversion model that allows young people arrested for offenses for which they would otherwise be detained in juvenile detention and adjudicated through the juvenile court to remain in the community.

Youth and their families referred to NOAB appear before a board of community leaders to develop a support plan and are immediately connected to life coaching and community-based services and supports, with a focus on addressing the underlying causes of their behavior and interrupting a life trajectory toward delinquency. In particular, a strong and sustained relationship with a Life Coach who is a credible messenger is key to youth engagement in the program. After six to nine months of successful program participation, the youth graduates and all charges are disposed.

NICJR launched the first NOAB program in Oakland in May 2020, after a multi-year planning process with community stakeholders and the Oakland Police Department. Since its inception, the Oakland NOAB has received more than 100 referrals, with very few youth being re-arrested for new offenses after enrollment in the program.

In 2025, NICJR added a CBT component to NOAB in partnership with one of the program's community-based service providers (CBOs). In addition to life coaching and connection to needed services, NOAB youth now also attend weekly **Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise (HWW)** sessions. HWW is a culturally relevant, trauma-informed, cognitive behavioral intervention where youth spend 16 weeks engaged in a curriculum with CBT lessons that are relevant to their lives.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) is currently conducting an **extensive evaluation** of the NOAB program.



19 For full disclosure, two of this report's authors, Vincent Schiraldi and David Muhammad, were Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of NYC Probation when the department launched Arches.

20 Lynch, M., Astone, N., Collazos, J., Lipman, M., & Esthappan, S. (2018, February). Arches Transformative Mentoring Program: An implementation and impact evaluation in New York City. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/96601/arches_transformative_mentoring_program_0.pdf

21 Ibid.

While NOAB primarily serves youth who do not have extensive prior delinquency histories, **The Maryland Thrive Academy**, launched in 2024, works with youth who have multiple prior referrals to the delinquency system, including for multiple violent arrests. After identifying a high risk youth through a data-driven screening process, Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) staff refer the youth to the community-based organization leading Thrive Academy intervention services in the jurisdiction where they live. The local CBO provides intensive life coaching to the youth as well as support for the family. The Life Coaches employed by the CBOs are people from the same community as the youth with similar lived experiences, which gives them credibility and much more likelihood of acceptance. The Life Coach builds a positive and trusting relationship with the youth through intensive engagement that consists of daily communication with the youth and two to four times per week in-person engagement with the youth and family. The Life Coach also visits the youth's school to develop relationships with school personnel.

The Life Coach works with each youth and family to develop a Life Plan that identifies needed services and connects the youth and family to a robust set of wraparound services—which the program calls a “Suitcase of Supports.” Groups of Thrive Academy youth also participate in “transformative travel” experiences, where youth and Life Coaches go on educational excursions that take youth out of their everyday environments and broaden their horizons. Youth are also eligible to receive a monthly financial stipend as an incentive for achieving certain milestones.

DJS selected youth for Maryland Thrive Academy participation who were on its probation or aftercare caseloads and at the highest risk of gun violence—either as perpetrator or offender—in the four jurisdictions that accounted for 80% of youth homicides in Maryland.²² From its inception in September 2023 through the end of 2025, no youth have been homicide victims while participating in Thrive. In its first year, only 1.5% of Thrive participants were victims of gun violence and four out of five Thrive youth were not arrested for a gun offense.²³ The University of Pennsylvania's Crime and Justice Policy Lab is conducting a rigorous, independent evaluation of Thrive funded by the Annie E. Casey and Abell Foundations.

Choose to Change® (C2C®) is a trauma-informed cognitive behavioral therapy and intensive mentoring program developed by nonprofits Brightpoint and Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. (YAP). The intensive mentorship, delivered by a YAP advocate with a similar background and experiences as the youth, includes both one-on-one mentorship and family-based wraparound services and support. Advocates are available to youth and families 24 hours a day, seven days a week and provide, on average, eight hours of support and interaction with each youth per week. Similar to The Thrive Academy, C2C® provides transformative experiences within and outside of youths' neighborhoods, both to make the process fun and to expose participating youth to new people, places, and experiences.

This individual and family support is supplemented by trauma-informed CBT group sessions delivered by trained clinicians who also tend to have similar cultural backgrounds as the youth they are serving. Based on the Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress (SPARCS) curriculum, these group therapy sessions avoid clinical jargon that can be off-putting to youth, while giving them the space to process trauma and grief, as well as tools for responding to stressful situations in real time. As with the mentorship, the group therapy sessions are highly intensive, with groups of 8–10 youth meeting with a coach in 12–16 sessions over the course of three to four months.

A large-scale, randomized control trial (RCT) of C2C® conducted by the University of Chicago Crime Lab found extremely positive results. Two years after participating in C2C, youth were 39% less likely to be arrested for a violent crime than were control group youth, with additional positive benefits extending even longer after participating.²⁴

22 In 2023, these were Anne Arundel County, Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Prince George's County. Since Thrive's initiation, youth homicides have fallen more in those four jurisdictions than the rest of the state, so they may no longer account for 80% of youth homicides in Maryland.

23 Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. (2024, November). Thrive Academy Joint Chairmen's Report: Section V00D01.01, FY2025. https://djs.maryland.gov/Documents/publications/MD-DJS-Thrive-Academy-Joint-Chairmens-Report_FY2025.pdf

While both NOAB and The Thrive Academy are undergoing rigorous external evaluations, initial program data indicate positive outcomes, with youth in the programs showing higher levels of school engagement and lower levels of justice system engagement following program enrollment. At the same time, all of these programs surface persistent challenges in working with HR² youth and, relatedly, gaps in our collective knowledge about what works in doing so.

One longstanding program that combines life coaching and cognitive behavioral therapy delivered by trained mentors is **Roca**. Established in the early 1990s, Roca has continually refined its program and service model, as well as its target population, to align with emerging research. Over the last 15 years, Roca's program has increasingly focused on youth and young adults aged 16–24 who are at risk for involvement in gun violence due to prior experience with trauma and violence.

Although Roca uses the term “Youth Workers” instead of “credible messengers,” a comparable model applies: Youth Workers who come from similar backgrounds as the young people they work with leverage their credibility to build meaningful relationships based on these shared experiences. A cornerstone of Roca's approach is “relentless outreach,” wherein outreach workers persistently, repeatedly, and relentlessly make contact with young people who are struggling: “We track them down through their friends, call them, show up at their doorsteps, and scout the streets until we find them.”²⁵ These young people are then connected to Youth Workers who build relationships through a combination of intensive mentorship and case management.

Cognitive behavioral skills are a core component of this work, with Youth Workers using Roca's Rewire CBT approach to help young people address trauma they have already experienced and build the skills necessary to respond more effectively to stressful situations in the future. After Youth Workers have helped youth address immediate crisis situations and the young people have begun to learn and apply these cognitive behavioral approaches (often as long as 12–18 months after initially engaging), they are then enrolled in a variety of other life skills programming, within which they can practice what they have learned through CBT while building competencies in areas such as education, parenting, and employment.

Multiple evaluations have found positive outcomes among young people who participate in Roca's programs. A recent analysis of Roca's Baltimore program found that participants were reincarcerated at a 19% lower rate than similarly situated young men released from prison or juvenile commitment who did not participate in Roca,²⁶ while an evaluation in Massachusetts found that Roca participants with a history of incarceration had substantially lower recidivism rates than did nonparticipants.²⁷ Both evaluations found particularly strong effects among individuals with prior incarceration for violent offenses.²⁸



24 Abdul-Razzak, N., Domash, B., Hallberg, K., & Pinto Poehls, C. (2025). Longer-Term Impacts of a Youth Behavioral Science Intervention: Experimental Evidence from Chicago (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. 5303292). Social Science Research Network. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5303292>

25 Roca, Inc. (n.d.). Our intervention model. Retrieved from <https://rocainc.org/how-we-do-it/our-intervention-model>

26 Abt Global. (2025, March 13). Administrative data analysis for Roca – Recidivism memo: Maryland (Short version). Roca Inc. https://rocainc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Abt-Recidivism-Memo-MD-March-2025_Short.pdf

27 Hickman, S., Masters, C., & Reddy, N. (2024). Reincarceration among Roca participants in Massachusetts: Three-year recidivism rates (Report). Roca, Inc. https://rocainc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ABT_MA-3-YR-RECIDIVISM-RATES-2024.03.19.pdf

28 A recent RCT of Roca did not find statistically significant positive outcomes for Roca participation; however, only 38% of treatment group members actually enrolled in Roca, and 9% of the control group did so, reducing the study's ability to detect program effects.

Common Justice operates an alternative to incarceration and victims' service program focused specifically on youth aged 16 to 28 who are accused of violent offenses in New York City's adult criminal courts and who are facing a year or more of incarceration. Its approach is to work with both harmed parties (i.e., the victims of the crime) and responsible parties (i.e., the perpetrators or defendants) to attain their agreement to participate in Common Justice's program. In this way, harmed parties not only meet the perpetrators but also have a voice in the development of plans for repair. As one person put it:

“

Common Justice was exactly right for me. I knew immediately when I was robbed at gunpoint that I didn't want those boys to go to prison, but I wanted something. I needed something. I wanted them to face me man-to-man, human-to-human. I wanted to know they would do something with their lives so they'd never do this to anyone again. And I wanted to have some say in what that might be.

”

Common Justice carefully interviews prospective participants in a two to six-hour intake to formulate a treatment plan and gain their buy-in to engage in Common Justice's intensive, 12–15 month case management and counseling program, as well as to interact directly with the harmed party.

The first three months are the Preparatory stage, during which the participants' belief systems that contributed to their involvement are probed and they are prepared to engage in a restorative justice circle with their harmed party or that person's representative. During the Circle stage, the parties come together to discuss the impact of the incident and come to consensus around sanctions—other than incarceration—to hold the responsible party accountable. The participants then engage in a year of Supervision, meeting with their Intervention Manager three times a week to engage in a curriculum focused on the core factors underlying violent behavior; support achievement of the participants' agreements; and work toward community stabilization.



Common Justice has served 150 responsible parties and 503 harmed parties since 2009. Only 8% of responsible parties engaged in the program have been terminated for new crimes, and only 9% have been terminated for noncompliance. Of those who exited Common Justice (not including transfers), 78% graduated successfully. In an analysis conducted by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services that looked at program graduates enrolled between 2012–2022, only one had been convicted of a new violent felony offense. Participants who successfully complete Common Justice have their cases either dismissed or their charges reduced per pre-arranged agreements with prosecuting attorneys.

What Are We Still Working On? Areas for Exploration

One of the core challenges in working with HR² is figuring out how to respond to the complex and often unsafe home and/or family environments that these youth disproportionately experience. As Micah's story exemplifies and a large body of research verifies, youth with serious and/or persistent involvement in the delinquency system are much more likely to live in homes with abuse and/or neglect, extreme poverty, family members who are engaged in criminal conduct, and a variety of other circumstances that can make it extremely difficult for even the most well-intentioned youth to succeed. Giving these young people a chance to thrive almost certainly requires new and innovative residential options that offer safety and security for the few who cannot remain home or who have no home, without replicating the many failures of juvenile correctional facilities and group homes in the delinquency and dependency systems. Key questions related to this concept include:

- What does it look like to create some sort of respite residential options for these youth?
- Can these exist in a way that gives youth real opportunities and does not repeat the failures of so many current residential placements for system-involved youth?
- What models exist for this, and where?

While non-carceral residential options that are therapeutic, developmentally appropriate, and provide quality education must be developed, custodial options must also be explored, both to keep youth safe when their home environments do not and to keep the community safe. Ignoring the need for high-quality youth facilities will only result in young people continuing to be held in harsh, inappropriate, and harmful juvenile prisons.

There are too few examples of government-run facilities that are adequate for youth. The most nationally recognized youth system known for transforming its facilities and operating humane, education-based custodial centers is Missouri. Missouri uses smaller facilities that try to resemble college dorms more than prisons, are closer to the youth's home, and have an emphasis on education and rehabilitation.

Several jurisdictions across the country have attempted to replicate the "[Missouri Model](#)" with varying success. One of those jurisdictions was Washington, DC, which closed its sole post-disposition, long-term youth facility—whose abuses were the subject of a 20-year federal court consent decree—and replaced it with the [New Beginnings Youth Development Center](#), modeled after Missouri.

In California, the State Department of Juvenile Justice facilities were shuttered, going from a high of 10,000 youth incarcerated in its youth prisons in the 1990s to zero in 2023. Youth adjudicated for serious and violent felonies are now allowed to stay in their home counties through what is known as Secure Track. And though the facilities themselves are not designed for long-term stays and are mostly not therapeutic environments, some California counties, like the Bay Area's San Francisco and Alameda Counties, have infused community-based organization programming into Secure Track units, including credible messengers and CBT. State law also requires all Secure Track youth to be assessed every six months by the court for potential release.

Are there Core Elements of Effective HR² Services?

With the increasing adaptation of CVI-based credible messenger life coaching models for HR² youth, another critical issue for the field is figuring out how to adapt this model to better fit the circumstances of young people. While the core CVI approaches of developing a relationship with a credible messenger and cognitive behavioral interventions show success among older populations, the developmental and social realities of youth require tailored adaptation. Many CVI programs were designed for adults aged 18–35, but HR² youth

face different circumstances that extend beyond developmental differences. Unlike adults who have substantially more autonomy over their lives and decisions, youth must live with adult guardians, they must attend school, and they generally lack independent income or housing. They do not have the agency to make life changes that adult-centered interventions assume. This lack of autonomy, combined with developmental factors such as impulse control, identity exploration, and heightened susceptibility to peer influence, means that risk factors and protective strategies that work for adults do not directly translate to youth. Some fundamental questions arise:

- How does life coaching look different for youth compared to adults?
- What additional services and supports are needed or can be removed? For instance, can HR² youth be served in isolation or must their families be engaged for the program to be effective?
- Are some youth too high risk or high need for credible messenger or community-based interventions to be effective?
- Is there an age below which HR² youth are too young for these models to resonate?

The multiplicity of credible messenger program models also indicates a need to more thoroughly examine both standalone and interactive benefits of different components, including group-based cognitive work, individual life coaching, wraparound services, fiscal incentives, and combinations thereof. The comprehensive C2C[®] model has clear research-validated benefits. At the same time, it requires a level of resource and staffing intensity that can be hard to scale, including the central role of clinical therapists. By contrast, other credible messenger models use non-clinical staff, often people who have not had extensive formal education but who can leverage their personal experiences with violence and trauma to effectively apply cognitive behavioral methods with HR² youth. Questions for further exploration include:

- Is there a particular integration of life coaching, cognitive-behavioral groupwork, and individual or family wraparound services that is most effective?
- How well and for what populations do one or two of these services work, compared to all three?
- What is the relative efficacy of clinical therapists versus non-clinical credible messengers in the facilitation of cognitive behavior practices and group-based work?
- Can or should these modalities be combined at scale, and when is one sufficient?

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that even within the relatively small population of HR² youth there are certain subgroups that require specialized attention, as they face additional barriers. LGBTQ+ youth often face higher risks of victimization, homelessness, and system discrimination. Survivors of sex trafficking often deal with compounded trauma that requires not only intensive therapeutic interventions, but also safety interventions. Youth who have been involved in numerous violent crime arrests but whose cases have been dismissed (so they are not under community supervision) may need services that are voluntary but incentivized with stipends or otherwise relentlessly pursued outside of a formal, court-ordered supervision structure. Lastly, youth with disabilities and/or severe mental health trauma are sometimes misidentified as defiant rather than improperly served. Related questions include:

- How do the models and approaches described above fit HR² youth who have additional and unique needs?
- How does the field balance the need for replicable models with the multiplicity of unique circumstances in young people's lives and the need for specialization?

A person is seen from behind, suspended on a zipline and gliding through the air. The background is a bright, hazy sunset sky with silhouettes of trees and hills. The zipline cables are visible, extending from the top right towards the person. The overall mood is one of freedom and forward movement.

Where Do We Go From Here?

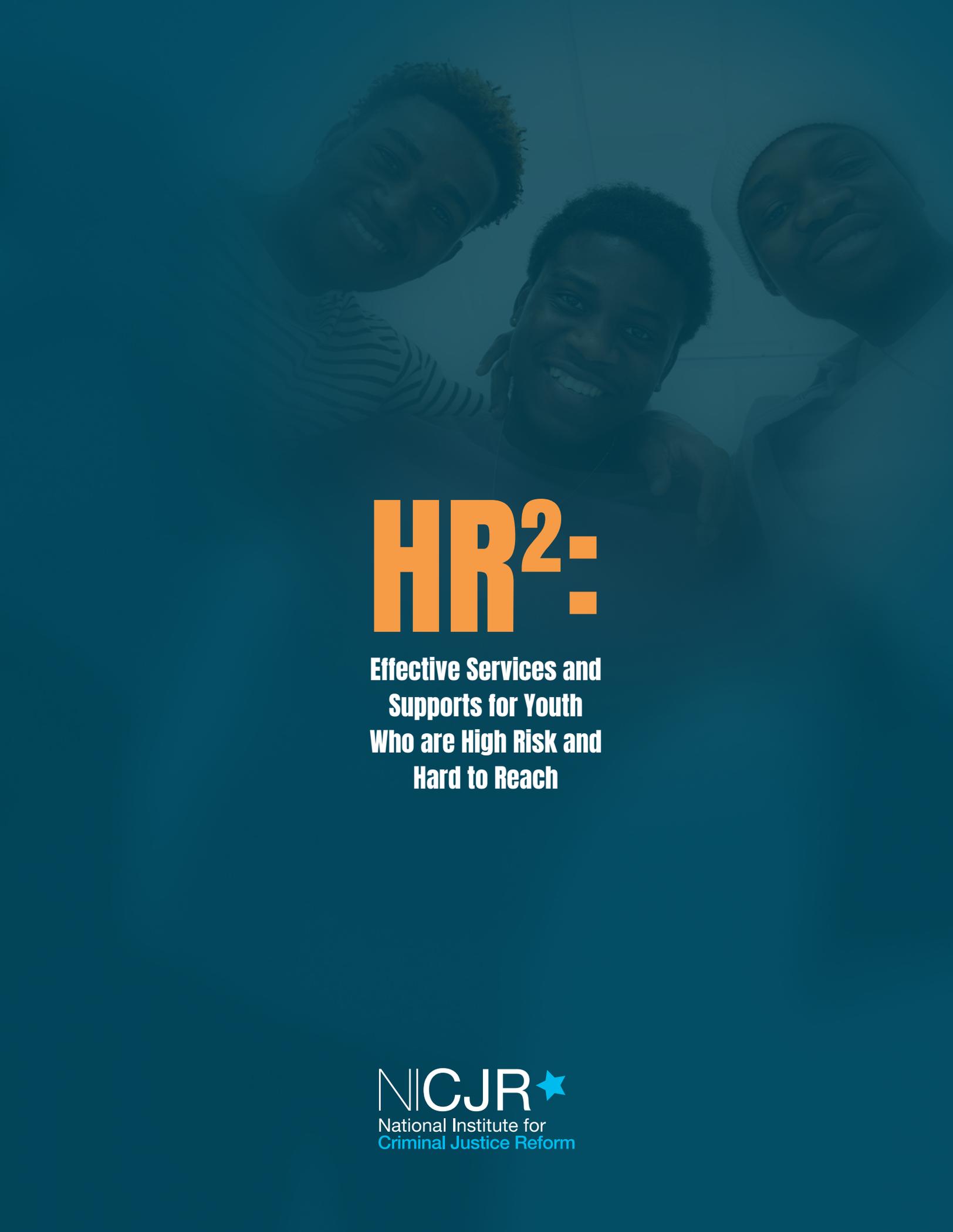
The persistent gap between evidence and implementation for HR² youth reflects a need for different approaches to knowledge building. Promising practices do exist, such as credible messenger life coaching, wraparound services, and culturally grounded interventions, but they require more rigorous study and exploration to understand what works, for whom, and why. As a field, we must be willing to acknowledge and identify these gaps, try new approaches, and systematically study what is working and what is not.

Doing this requires an important shift from the focus on replicating evidence-based programs to embracing innovative interventions informed by data whose outcomes are transparent and subject to independent, high quality research. Practitioners should be willing to create programs tailored to their communities' realities and needs, even as they draw lessons from what has and has not worked in other places. Practitioners, both government and community based, should commit to tracking their own work and partnering with researchers to understand if what they are doing is effective. They should also partner with HR² youth and their families to gain first-hand feedback on what is necessary for the communities they are serving. Doing so will ultimately lead to new evidence on HR² youth interventions that is shaped in part by former and current HR² youth and their families.

Systems serving HR² youth will require infrastructure that supports this ongoing learning—namely, research partnerships embedded in practice. This represents an important shift from traditional research conducted in controlled settings, requiring academia to grapple with how its methods can evolve to meet the realities of the HR² youth field.

Although the US has made great progress in decreasing juvenile justice system involvement, these systems continue to fail the high risk and hard to reach youth population—to the detriment of the system's reputation, public safety, and positive youth development. Current programs and services often lack the specialization and focus required to engage HR² youth, who face complex trauma and environmental factors, and whose family systems are at times resistant to engagement. Existing guidance provides limited help for this group, leaving practitioners and policymakers without widely known, evidence-informed frameworks for intervention.

There are far fewer young people in the youth justice system, significantly less youth crime, and a greater array of evidence-based and informed practices to draw upon, as compared to 25 years ago. Therefore the system is now small enough for us to focus on the next stage of youth justice reform—successfully serving high risk and hard to reach youth.



HR²-

**Effective Services and
Supports for Youth
Who are High Risk and
Hard to Reach**