



THRIVE

THE MARYLAND THRIVE ACADEMY: YOUTH DEVELOPMENT & VIOLENCE INTERVENTION

 **Maryland**
DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE SERVICES

NICJR 
National Institute for
Criminal Justice Reform

FEBRUARY 2024

The Thrive Academy is a data-informed youth development and violence intervention program that provides intensive community-based services to youth under the supervision of the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) who are at very high risk of being involved in gun violence.

In 2023, DJS began working closely with the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) and the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) on an ambitious project to develop a statewide gun violence reduction strategy for system-involved youth in Maryland.

DATA-DRIVEN IDENTIFICATION OF YOUTH AT HIGHEST RISK OF GUN VIOLENCE

NICJR conducted a comprehensive assessment of youth involved in gun violence throughout the state and of all youth known to DJS who were victims or suspects in shootings in the past three to five years. The assessment identified common characteristics and risk factors of youth involved in gun violence, in order to establish screening criteria for enrolling youth in the Thrive Academy.

NICJR conducted three quantitative analyses: 1) an analysis of all youth who had been involved in a shooting during the study period, regardless of DJS involvement; 2) an analysis that compared DJS-involved youth who were and were not involved in a shooting; and 3) an analysis of youth who were involved in a shooting while under DJS supervision.

KEY FINDINGS

- Youth who were involved in shootings in Maryland were more likely to be Black, male, and live in Baltimore City. They were also younger at the time of their initial contact with the delinquency system.
- By the time they were involved in a shooting, almost two-thirds of these youth had been charged with a felony crime of violence, and one-third had a sustained adjudication for a felony crime of violence. For other youth, these numbers were approximately half.
- More than 80% of youth involved in shootings had been under at least one form of supervision, and more than half had been under more than one. Most also had both residential and nonresidential placements.

These analyses were supplemented by a detailed case file review of 44 youth who were involved in shootings in 2023 while under DJS supervision, to better understand life course factors that can greatly impact shooting risk but are not apparent within justice system data alone.

KEY FINDINGS

- Many youth had clear, immediate risk factors for violence, such as recent physical confrontations with other youth and/or family or involvement in a violent crew or gang conflict.
- Most youth were unable to attend traditional schools due to learning disabilities and/or school push-out issues (e.g., expulsions, suspensions, schools unwilling to enroll youth with a history of juvenile justice system involvement).
- Lengthy delays in case processing resulted in months or even years passing between when youth were involved in dangerous conduct and when they received any type of direct services.

DJS and NICJR used these findings to develop the screening tool and process for enrolling youth in the Thrive Academy. NICJR also supported DJS in designing Thrive Academy protocols for referral of identified youth to intensive community-based services, ongoing coordination across all program partners, and data-driven measurement of program progress and outcomes.

COMMUNITY BASED INTERVENTION SERVICES

The Thrive Academy is now being implemented in four Maryland jurisdictions: Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, and Prince George's County. NICJR continues to support DJS and Thrive Academy partners throughout program implementation. NICJR's gun violence reduction technical assistance team has provided a series of trainings for Thrive's partner community-based organizations (CBOs) as well as coaching and technical assistance for DJS staff.





After identifying high-risk youth through the screening process, DJS staff refer youth to the CBO leading the intervention services in the jurisdiction where the youth lives. 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 and who have similar lived experience as the youth, 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. Life Coaches also visit each youth's school to develop relationships with school personnel.

Eventually, the Life Coach works with each youth and family to develop a Life Plan to identify needed services and connect the youth and family to wraparound services. 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 horizon. Youth are also eligible to receive a monthly financial stipend as an incentive for achieving certain milestones.

The partnering CBOs providing Life Coaching services include:

- In Baltimore City: [We Our Us](#)
- In Baltimore County/City: [Continuous Growth](#)
- In Anne Arundel County: Glimpse of Paradise
- In Prince George's County: [Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement](#) (CM3)

Each week, DJS and the partner CBOs meet to coordinate efforts and to check on the progress of each youth. DJS and partner CBOs review and document referrals, enrollments, ongoing engagement, and outcomes. Youth are eligible to graduate from the Thrive Academy after six months of participation but will remain in the program if DJS or the partner CBO determine that the youth is still at heightened risk of being involved in gun violence.