

DEVELOPING A **POSITIVE** YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Developing A Positive Youth Justice System

THE SIX PRINCIPLES OF A POSITIVE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM



1

Minimize contact with the juvenile justice system

- Confinement is harmful for youth
- Divert youth whenever possible



2

Partner with youth and families to develop and share ownership of case plans



3

Community-based organizations should take the lead



4

Build on youth assets and provide services to address needs



5

Provide exceptional care to those who do need system involvement

- Keep youth in the juvenile justice system
- Keep supervision terms short
- Use carceral facilities as a last resort



6

Reinvest cost savings into the communities in which youth live

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that involvement in the juvenile justice system, especially incarceration, causes young people to have worse outcomes than similarly situated youth who were not engaged in the juvenile justice system. In addition to being harmful and ineffective, youth incarceration is also extremely expensive. Therefore, only the very small number of youth who have committed the most serious and violent offenses should be confined. The quality, conditions, and services of the system should also be significantly improved.

The past two decades have seen critical improvements to the juvenile justice system, as jurisdictions across the country have worked to move away from a punitive approach to one that is more restorative and acknowledges adolescents' impulsivity and ongoing brain development.¹ Despite this shift, overwhelming evidence indicates that engagement in the juvenile justice system is harmful for youth. Even beyond the detrimental effects of confinement on young people's physical and mental health, there is substantial evidence that the juvenile justice system fails to achieve its most basic goal: reducing young people's involvement in delinquent or criminal conduct.² In fact, research has shown that at virtually every juncture of the juvenile justice process, young people who are diverted to less formal and/or less restrictive options have better outcomes than those with more restrictive conditions.³

Juvenile Justice Process Flow

At every step in the juvenile justice process, youth do better when they are diverted or less formally processed.

1. Arrest

Police Department Decision
(usually city level)

- Counsel and release
- Refer to a diversion program
- Give a Notice to Appear
- Bring to Juvenile Detention



3. Referral for Possible Prosecution

Juvenile Probation Decision
(usually county level)

- Dismiss (take no action)
- Probation-led diversion
- Present to prosecutor's office for a filing decision (usually required for serious offenses)

5. Adjudication

Judge Decision
(usually state level)

- Finds that a youth committed a violation of the criminal law (adjudicated delinquent)
- Finds that a youth did not commit a violation of the criminal law

2.a Initial Detention

Juvenile Probation Decision
(usually county level)

- For most offenses, probation has wide discretion whether to detain or not
- In most jurisdictions, certain serious offenses require detention

2.b Detention Hearing

Judge Decision
(usually state level)

After a youth has been in detention for a few days, a judge is required to make a decision of whether the youth will remain in detention during the adjudication process or be released to come to court from home.

4. Petition Filing

Prosecution Decision
(usually county level)

- Refer to diversion program without filing a petition
- File a delinquency petition *and* refer to a diversion program
- File a delinquency petition
- Files criminal charges in adult court (usually only with judicial approval)

6. Disposition

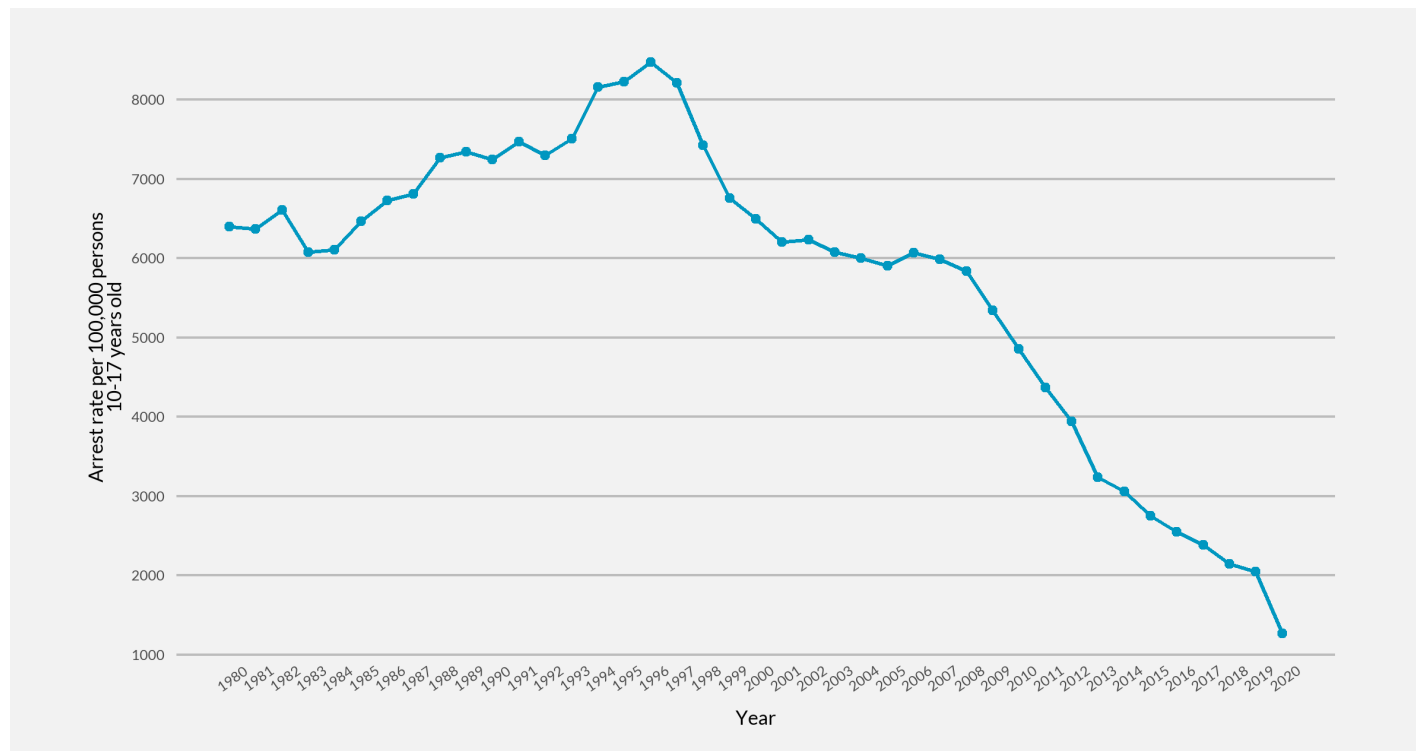
Judge Decision
(usually state level)

Standard options include:

- Informal probation
- Formal probation supervision (wardship)
- Out of home placement (group homes, residential treatment centers)
- Commitment: juvenile correctional facilities, juvenile ranches/camps

The good news is that the system is shrinking. Due in part to shifts in the behavior of young people and in part to changes in how law enforcement and juvenile justice system actors respond to youth behavior, far fewer young people are involved in the justice system now than 5, 10, or 20 years ago. In the 20 years between 2000 and 2020, there was a 74% reduction in youth confinement in America.⁴

Figure 1. The juvenile arrest rate has plummeted over the last 25 years⁵



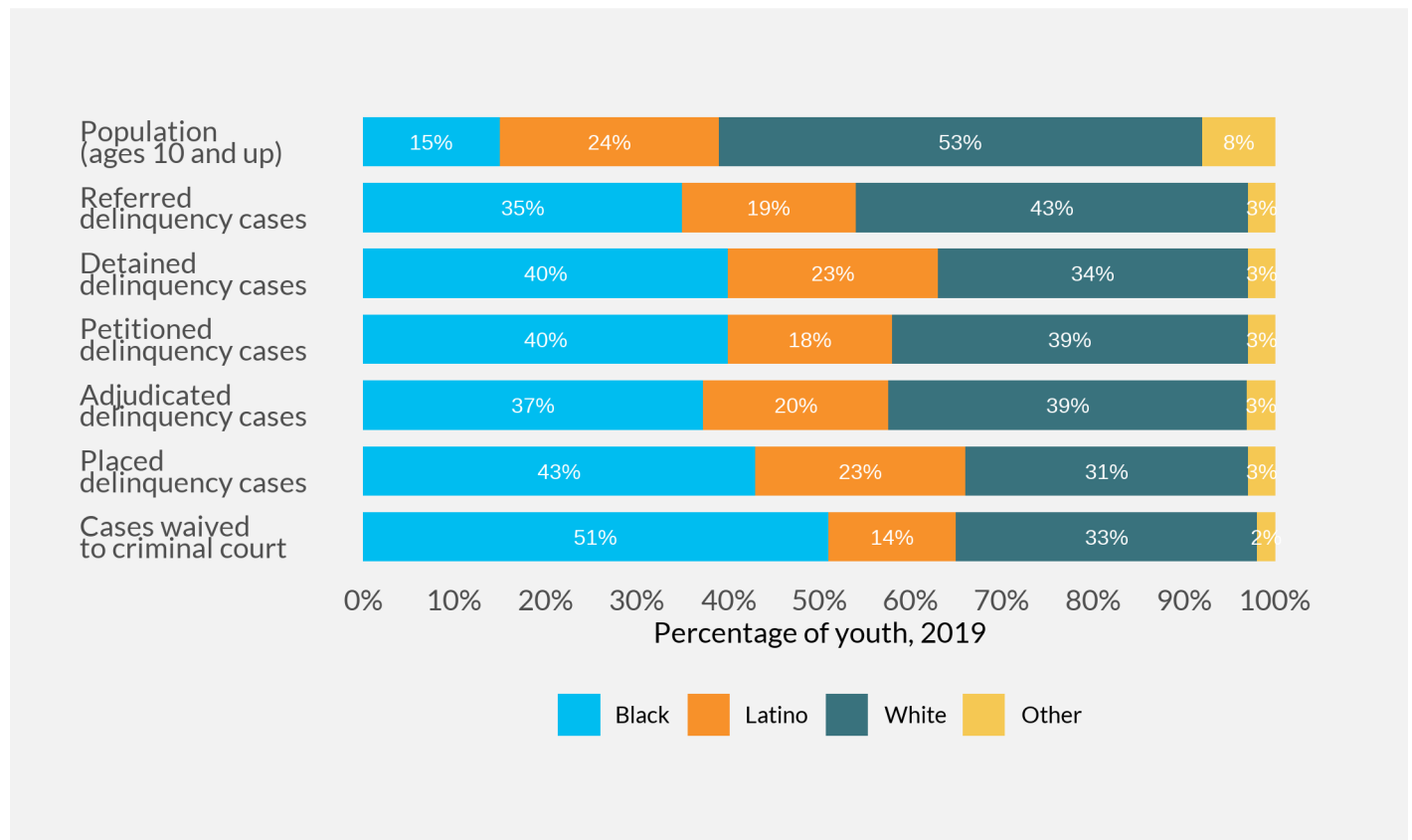
Additionally, in many ways and in many places, the juvenile justice system is evolving. Adolescent brain science demonstrating the impulsivity and ongoing developmental needs of youth and young adults has become more advanced, widely disseminated, and accepted, helping to drive a shift away from punitive responses to youth misbehavior in favor of a response that is more restorative and community centered.⁶

Despite this progress, problems persist. The United States still confines young people at rates that far exceed the rest of the world. In addition, despite widespread efforts to reduce the punitiveness of the juvenile justice system, prison-like conditions persist, and abuse remains rampant.⁷ For example, in Los Angeles County, the state agency that inspects juvenile facilities ordered the closure of two of the county's juvenile detention centers in 2024, declaring them "unsuitable" for youth placements. Detained youth complained of abuse and neglect, including having to urinate and defecate in their rooms without toilets. Eight staff of the county juvenile hall were placed on leave for setting up a "fight club" among detainees, and one child died of a drug overdose inside one of the facilities in May 2024.⁸

Meanwhile, in Kentucky, the US Department of Justice is investigating reports of violence and abuse in state juvenile detention centers,⁹ and in Illinois, an audit found youth being confined to their cells 24 hours a day, unnecessarily strip searched, and provided with inadequate education and mental health care.¹⁰

Moreover, extreme racial disparities persist throughout every stage of the juvenile justice process, with Black youth being especially overrepresented and Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Latino youth experiencing disproportionate contact in specific geographic areas.¹¹ As of 2021, Black youth were 4.7 times more likely to be in a custodial facility (either detention or placement) than White youth in the US.¹²

Figure 2. Relative to their proportion in the population, Black youth are overrepresented at every point in the juvenile justice system¹³



This report reviews the primary components of a positive youth justice system (PYJS) and provides a brief discussion of recent research related to each principle. In addition, the report offers examples of programs and/or jurisdictions that have implemented pieces of a PYJS.

The National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) utilizes a **Reduce, Improve, Reinvest** framework to reform the youth justice system: **Reduce** the size of the system; **Improve** how the system operates, improve conditions, and improve the outcomes of system-involved youth; and **Reinvest** the savings from a reduced system back into the communities most impacted by crime and incarceration. The six principles of a positive youth justice system defined and described in this report fit within this framework.

Two other key practices are central to the effective implementation of a positive youth justice system: 1) using data to inform decisions and 2) being transparent about what decisions are being made and how those decisions are being made. Reflecting these priorities, this report makes use of a variety of research and publicly available data to describe each of the PYJS principles. We further discuss how these practices intersect with PYJ in the conclusion.

1



MINIMIZE CONTACT WITH THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

A large body of research has made clear the detrimental effects of the juvenile justice system on youth well-being and on their outcomes both within and beyond the justice system. Broadly speaking, this research falls into two key areas: research on the harms of confinement and research comparing various avenues of delinquency system processing with alternative approaches that divert young people from further involvement.



1.a Harms of Confinement

As the system process map above illustrates, youth who are involved in the delinquency system can be confined at multiple points in the process, including prior to being adjudicated (following arrest, initial court appearance, or petition filing) as well as following adjudication as part of the disposition (juvenile court language for sentencing). Pre-adjudication confinement, or detention, usually occurs in a county-level facility colloquially known as a juvenile hall, while post-adjudication confinement can involve any one of a number of out-of-home placements or commitments identified as part of the disposition. Research has found that both pre- and post-adjudication confinement is detrimental to youth well-being and, generally speaking, neither is effective at reducing subsequent delinquent conduct.¹⁴

In 2020, *The Lancet Public Health* published a review of hundreds of peer-reviewed journal articles on juvenile detention and incarceration from around the world. This synthesis, which included articles published from January 1, 1980 through June 30, 2018,¹⁵ found persistent and extensive physical and mental health conditions affecting young people long after their release from custody, including “mental disorders (0–95%), substance use disorders (22–96%), self-harm (12–65%), neurodevelopmental disabilities (2–47%), infectious diseases (0–34%), and sexual and reproductive conditions (pregnant by age 19 years 20–37%; abnormal cervical screening test result 16%).” Although the findings are not causal and, as the authors note, the “social and structural drivers of detention overlap to a large degree with the determinants of early disease morbidity and mortality,” it is nonetheless noteworthy that there is no evidence that detaining or incarcerating young people in any way reduces pre-existing health or mental health conditions, and that “adolescents who have been in detention die at a rate that is five to 41 times higher than that of their age-matched and sex-matched peers, most often from drug overdose, suicide, injury, or violence.”

Other research does indicate a causal relationship between youth confinement and a variety of poor outcomes, including reduced academic achievement, lower rates of high school graduation, poor employment and earnings into adulthood, and poor health into adulthood.¹⁶ Another study that rigorously examined the effects of the juvenile justice system found that “juvenile incarceration results in large decreases in the likelihood of high school completion and large increases in the likelihood of adult incarceration.”¹⁷

Health issues impacting youth post-release



Mental disorders



Substance use disorders



Self-harm



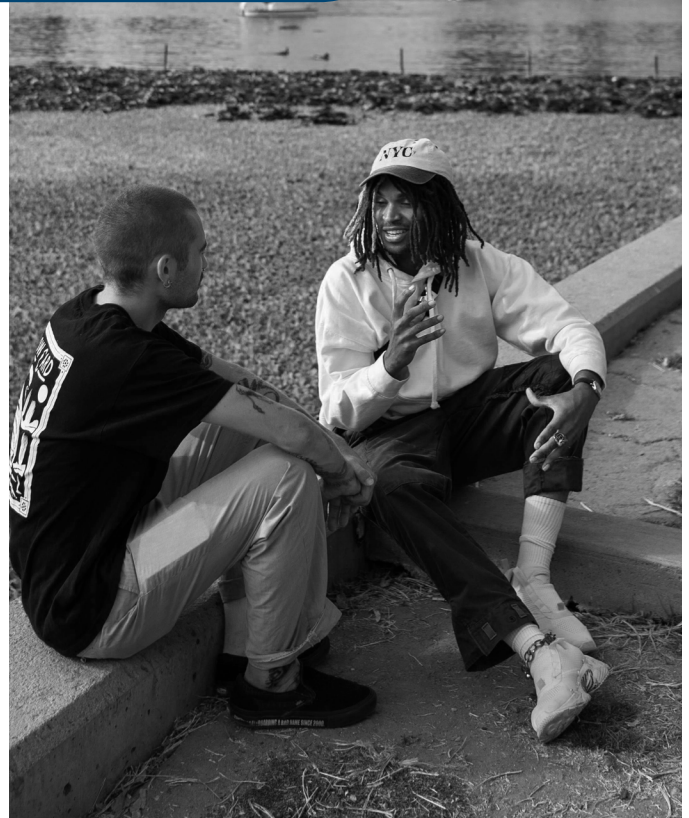
Neurodevelopmental disabilities



Infectious diseases



Pregnant by age 19 years



Given this, it is all the more disturbing that both detention and out-of-home placement fail to meet their most basic objectives: reducing subsequent delinquent behavior and promoting community safety. As detailed in an analysis by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Available studies of youth released from residential corrections programs find that 70 to 80 percent of youth are rearrested within two or three years. Of the six states reporting juvenile or adult arrests within two years of release, none showed less than a 68 percent rearrest rate, and virtually all states reporting three year rearrest rates converge at about 75 percent.”¹⁸

More recent data from a number of states have found mixed results at best. Youth in some states have shown slightly lower recidivism following return from correctional facilities, while youth in other states have either shown higher rates of recidivism or have shown essentially the same rates of delinquent conduct prior to and following their placements.¹⁹

Findings on youth confined in pretrial detention were similar, with multiple studies showing that youth who were detained were more likely to have new arrests, probation violations, and adult incarceration. Pretrial detention also increases the likelihood that youth will be adjudicated delinquent and then placed in a post-adjudication correctional facility, thus exposing them to all of the negative consequences of post-adjudication confinement.²⁰

Importantly, a majority of the studies described above not only show that incarceration has negative outcomes—they also show that youth who are incarcerated have worse outcomes across an array of areas compared to similarly situated youth who are diverted from confinement. Consequently, a positive youth justice system should use incarceration only as a last resort; youth should be diverted whenever possible, and no youth should ever be confined for a technical violation of probation.

“

A positive youth justice system should use incarceration only as a last resort.

”

1.b Divert Youth Whenever Possible

Research has shown that detention and incarceration are not just bad for young people in a generalized way—they actually lead to worse outcomes than diversion from custody, even for youth who have been adjudicated for similar conduct.

In Texas, a comprehensive evaluation of a state effort to shift youth from state correctional facilities to county probation supervision compared recidivism rates of youth who were involved in the juvenile justice system prior to and following the reform. The study found that, “after controlling for dozens of variables to ensure that a reasonable and appropriate comparison was being made,” youth who were supervised by probation were significantly less likely to be rearrested than those who had been committed to a state facility.²¹

Evaluations of a comparable statewide initiative in Ohio have consistently shown similar results. Reasoned and Equitable Community and Local Alternatives to the Incarceration of Minors (RECLAIM) Ohio is an initiative that redirects funds from the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS) to community-based services. One multi-year evaluation found that, among youth adjudicated delinquent for felony offenses, those who were committed to the state correctional facility were more likely to recidivate than youth at the

same assessed risk level who received community-based services. In fact, high-risk youth who were placed in community-based services were less likely to have a new offense resulting in state custody than low-risk youth who had been in state facilities. Across all risk levels, youth who were placed in state correctional facilities had higher recidivism and other failure rates than youth who were placed in community-based services.²²

It is not only youth who are diverted from custody who have better outcomes. A larger body of research shows that at every stage in the juvenile justice system, young people who are diverted to less serious and/or less formal processes have better outcomes than youth who become more deeply entrenched in the delinquency system.

In 2023, RAND published a review of 162 research articles on effective interventions for youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The review found that diversion programs aiming to provide treatment in community-based settings are effective across a variety of program models and at multiple junctures in the delinquency process. This included true diversion programs that occur prior to petition filing and avoid the delinquency system altogether as well as post-adjudication diversion models that provide treatment and/or supervision in the community instead of in custody.²³

While many pre-file diversion programs focus on youth with minimal prior justice system contact and/or misdemeanor offenses, there is also evidence that pre-file diversion can be effective for youth accused of more serious conduct. A randomized control trial (RCT) of a restorative justice diversion program for youth accused of fairly serious felonies, including burglary and assault, found that participation in the program “reduces the probability of a rearrest within six months by 19 percentage points, a 44 percent reduction relative to the control group. Moreover, the reduction in recidivism persists even four years after randomization.”²⁴

A critical component of diverting youth and avoiding the harms of incarceration is eschewing the use of incarceration for nonserious conduct, especially technical violations of the conditions of probation or parole.

Program Example:

LA County Department of Youth Development

In 2022, Los Angeles County created the Department of Youth Development (DYD) to connect youth with community-based diversion and restorative justice as an alternative to arrest, citation, and court involvement.²⁵

Established largely in response to longstanding concerns about the quality of services provided to youth involved in the County’s Probation Department (particularly youth housed in the juvenile halls, camps, and other residential facilities), DYD is an ambitious effort to build a comprehensive system of services to prevent young people from becoming involved in the justice system and to offer a continuum of off-ramps and community-based supports for those who do. DYD funds community-based organizations (CBOs) throughout Los Angeles County to provide youth diversion services. The Department also coordinates partnerships between these providers and law enforcement agencies, Probation, and the District Attorney (DA). Young people can be diverted by law enforcement pre- or post-arrest, as well as by Probation, the DA, or the court pre- or post-filing.

DYD also funds credible messenger programs that support youth with mentorship and care coordination in the County’s juvenile halls and in one of the post-adjudication placement centers. Within credible messenger programs, adults from similar life circumstances as the youth who have transformed their lives serve as examples and mentors.

Program Example:

The Oakland Neighborhood Opportunity and Accountability Board

The Neighborhood Opportunity and Accountability Board (NOAB) is an innovative, community-driven youth diversion and development model that allows young people charged with 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 a NOAB program appear before a board of community leaders to develop a detailed support plan and are immediately connected to services and supports. The NOAB model offers a new approach to youth justice that focuses on restorative, rather than punitive practices; increases community involvement in decision-making; and invests resources in youth, families, and neighborhoods.

NICJR launched the first NOAB program in Oakland in May 2020, after a multi-year planning process with the Oakland Police Department (OPD) and community stakeholders. When a youth is arrested by an officer, they are processed through the OPD Youth Desk. Staff at OPD review the case, assess whether the youth meets the NOAB criteria, and decide whether to refer the case to the program. If the case has a victim, the victim is consulted for their consent before the youth is referred to the program. If the youth is referred, they receive a notice that they will be contacted by a NOAB Senior Life Coach and must engage with the diversion program.

Within 48 hours of receiving the referral, a NOAB Senior Life Coach meets with the youth and their family to explain the program, including its many benefits, and conduct an initial assessment and intake. Following this intake, the staff member schedules a NOAB Conference.

The youth and their family appear before the NOAB at a conference that follows a family group conferencing model. In this meeting,

board members engage the youth and family in a discussion about their strengths, challenges, and goals, as well as any specific needs, providing guidance and support throughout the conversation. The diversity of board members offers several lenses through which to understand and address the youth's needs and risks, unlike traditional processes dominated by the sole lens of a justice system practitioner.

Based on the initial assessment and NOAB Conference discussion, a NOAB Life Coach works with the youth and family to develop an Individual Achievement Plan (IAP) that will connect them to the most appropriate services, with an emphasis on educational support, mentoring and life coaching, behavioral health care, family counseling, and youth employment.

If there is an identified victim who is willing to participate in the process, the plan also includes restorative justice programming. When incorporated, restorative justice circles serve as vehicles to drive the development of the IAP, ensuring that victims feel included in the process. When appropriate and feasible, the NOAB also considers providing restitution to victims, particularly in cases where the absence of restitution is a barrier to engaging in a restorative process.

Once the IAP is established, the Life Coach directly connects the youth and family with the identified service providers, in addition to providing life coaching, self-advocacy, and mentoring services. The Life Coach maintains consistent contact with the youth, family, and service providers throughout the program. Detailed notes and updates on each youth are maintained in a NOAB database to track progress, and after six to nine months of successful program participation (with specific duration determined on a case-by-case basis), the youth graduates and charges are disposed. As of Oct. 1, 2024, NOAB had enrolled 58 youth, of whom 86% had not been rearrested.²⁶

2



PARTNER WITH YOUTH AND FAMILIES TO DEVELOP AND SHARE OWNERSHIP OF CASE PLANS

A central component of both the Oakland NOAB program described above and The Thrive Academy discussed in the next section is the co-creation of case plans in partnership with youth and families (Individualized Achievement Plans for NOAB and Life Plans for The Thrive Academy). Despite notable differences in these programs' target populations and larger program models, their common approaches to developing case plans and their associated engagement of and partnership with youth and families are an important commonality that helps account for their success.



For decades, researchers, policymakers, and advocates across the wide array of social and medical services that utilize case management have recognized the importance of engaging clients and families in case planning and implementation. Within the social work field, partnership with clients in the development and ownership case plans is so widely accepted as to be part of the standards of practice, incorporated into the first sentence of the National Association of Social Workers *Standards for Social Work Case Management*: “The social work case manager shall collaborate with clients to plan, implement, monitor, and amend individualized services that promote clients’ strengths, advance clients’ well-being, and help clients achieve their goals.”²⁷ For adolescents, families are also part of this process: “youths and their families [should] be active participants in their case planning and service delivery.”²⁸

Unfortunately, despite several decades of reformers advocating for greater inclusion of justice-involved youth and families in case planning, it is far from normal practice in juvenile justice agencies. As the Annie E. Casey Foundation notes in their 2022 guide to family-engaged case planning, their experience working with probation departments across the county has made it clear that “case planning can sometimes amount to no more than court-ordered conditions reiterated in a case planning document.” Moreover, even in jurisdictions that engage in more intentional case planning based on risk and needs assessments, their approach “often relegates the interests and strengths of youth and the wishes of families to secondary tasks.”²⁹

In so doing, probation officers and others who are working with young people miss a critical opportunity to leverage and build a young person’s intrinsic motivation, despite decades of research on the importance of intrinsic motivation in driving positive outcomes for youth involved in the juvenile justice system.³⁰ Moreover, by neglecting to work with young people’s families, the system overlooks the important influence families have on young people and their role in supporting and reinforcing positive outcomes.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network underscores the vital role families play in an issue brief on family engagement in the juvenile justice system, noting: “When families are viewed and treated as partners in both their child’s care and in the operations of the juvenile justice system itself, the child, the family, and the system benefit. The most effective interventions for youth in the justice system are those that engage families in a strength-based partnership.”³¹

Family Group Conferencing is a model that the child welfare system has used to involve youth and their families in a group planning and decision making process. A few juvenile justice agencies around the country have attempted to use such models.

Program Example:

Washington, DC Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services

The Washington, DC, Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) used to develop and update the case plans of all youth committed to the agency through a Youth and Family Team Meeting. The 2012 DYRS Annual Report provides a detailed description of how these youth and family team meetings were conducted: “With all the appropriate assessments in hand, a meeting is called with the youth, the youth’s parents or guardians, the youth’s DYRS Case Manager, and any other adults who are invested in the young person’s success. The group reviews the youth’s assessments, considers his or her strengths and key needs, and then develops an individualized plan that outlines ongoing supervision, services, supports and opportunities the youth will need to successfully transition to adulthood and to reduce the likelihood of reoffending.”³²

Unfortunately, this process was discontinued by a subsequent DYRS administration, which returned to a traditional top-down case planning process. This backtracking demonstrates the level of commitment required to implement and sustain PYJ practices.

3

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD



“By recognizing the importance of community-based organizations and leveraging their unique role as resources that are located in youths’ neighborhoods and staffed with personnel that is culturally attuned to the population of youth being served, **practitioners will enhance the likelihood of youth engagement success.**” —Center for Juvenile and Criminal Justice³³



While research has generally found youth detention to be associated with poor outcomes and little to no effect in reducing subsequent delinquent conduct, providing services and supports to young people in community settings and via community-based organizations has a stronger track record of success.

In both the Texas and Ohio statewide juvenile justice reform initiatives discussed above, policymakers implemented a combination of community supervision and CBO-provided services to divert youth from state custody. While the evaluations of these initiatives cannot untangle the relative value of community supervision and CBO service delivery, there is evidence that the incorporation of CBO services is key to improved youth outcomes.

In the 2023 RAND review of effective practices for justice-involved youth mentioned above, a wide range of diversion programs and community-based services—including restorative justice, cognitive behavioral

interventions, behavioral health treatment, collaborative courts, and more—were found to be “associated with better outcomes for youth, including a lower likelihood of future arrests, adjudications, and out-of-home placements across multiple studies.”³⁴ By contrast, augmenting community supervision was found to be counterproductive, leading to either no effect on recidivism or increased likelihood of technical violations.

Evidence from a number of CBO-led initiatives has shown that interventions in which CBOs take the lead can reduce subsequent delinquent conduct while avoiding the negative outcomes associated with juvenile justice system involvement. Restorative justice and credible messenger-based interventions have proven particularly effective.³⁵

There is also evidence that CBO investments have broader benefits for public safety beyond improving youth outcomes. In a seminal 2017 article entitled “Community and the Crime Decline: The Causal Effect of Local Nonprofits on Violent Crime,” Sharkey et al. used more than 20 years of longitudinal data from 264 cities to estimate the effect of local nonprofits on community violence and crime. Examining CBOs that focus on neighborhood improvement, crime prevention, job training, youth programs, and substance abuse prevention, they found that, on average, for every 10 nonprofit organizations added in a city with 100,000 residents, the murder rate fell by 9%, the violent crime rate fell by 6%, and the property crime rate fell by 4%.³⁶

While outcomes from community-based services are much better than the outcomes youth face when they go into the juvenile justice system, CBOs are not perfect either. A positive youth justice system should also be responsible for supporting the improved quality of services, increased organizational capacity, and accountability of CBOs contracted to provide community services.

While the community taking the lead is an important principle of a positive youth justice system, there must also be recognition that many rural communities do not have many, if any, community-based nonprofit service providers. In such areas, faith-based institutions and the system itself must take on positive youth development (PYD) principles in working with youth.

Program Example:

The Thrive Academy

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.

The Thrive Academy is the result of DJS working closely with NICJR and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, beginning in 2023, on an ambitious project to develop a statewide gun violence reduction strategy for system-involved youth in Maryland. NICJR began by conducting a comprehensive assessment of youth involved in gun violence throughout the state and of all youth known to DJS who were shooting victims or suspects in the past three to five years. The assessment identified common characteristics and risk factors of youth involved in gun violence to establish screening criteria for enrolling youth in the Thrive Academy.

Specifically, 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 included:
 - 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 than system-involved youth who did not go on to be involved in shootings.
 - Among youth who were under DJS supervision when involved in a shooting, almost two-thirds had been charged with a felony crime of violence, and one-third had a sustained adjudication for a felony crime of violence prior to that shooting.
 - Among youth who were under DJS supervision when involved in a shooting, more than 80% had been under at least one form of supervision, and more than half had been under more than one. Most also had prior 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 included:**



Many youth had clear and immediate risk factors for violence, such as recent physical confrontations with other youth and/or family members 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.

The Thrive Academy is now operating in four Maryland jurisdictions: Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, and Prince George's County. After identifying a young person through the screening process, DJS staff refer the youth to the community-based organization (CBO) leading

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, and they have similar lived experience as the youth. This gives them credibility and much more likelihood of acceptance. The Life Coach builds a positive and trusting relationship through intensive engagement that consists of daily communication with the youth and two to four times per week in-person engagement with the young person and their family.

Eventually, the Life Coach will work with each youth and family to develop a Life Plan that identifies needed services, and they will connect the youth and family to those wraparound services. Groups of Thrive Academy youth also participate in “transformative travel” experiences, where youth and Life Coaches go on educational excursions to 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.

The partnering CBOs providing life coaching are:

- **In Baltimore City: We Our Us**
- **In Baltimore County/City: Continuous Growth**
- **In Anne Arundel County and Prince George’s County: Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement (CM3)³⁷**

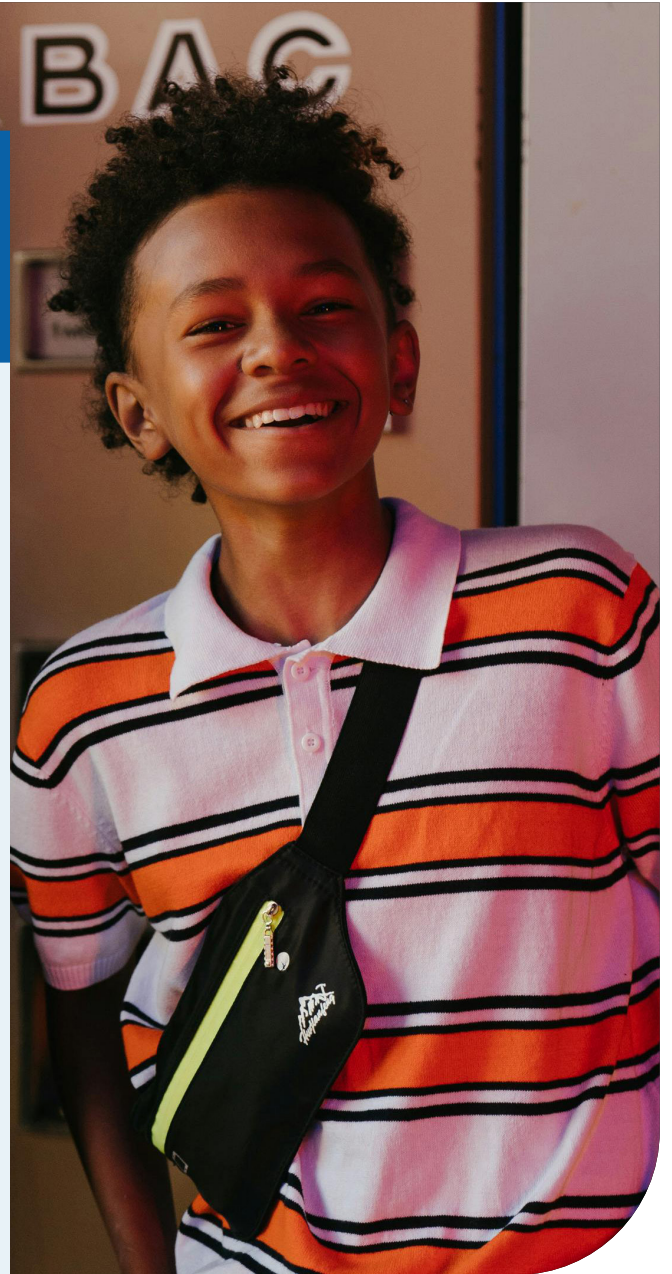
Each week, DJS and the partner CBOs meet to coordinate efforts and to check on the progress of each youth. DJS and partner CBOs review and document referrals, enrollments, ongoing engagement, and outcomes. Youth are eligible to graduate from The Thrive Academy after six months of participation but will 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.

4



BUILD ON YOUTH ASSETS AND PROVIDE SERVICES TO ADDRESS YOUTH NEEDS

The premise of positive youth development (PYD) is to build on the strengths and assets of youth and provide them with positive developmental opportunities. Historically, the youth justice system has focused on the deficits of youth. The system has viewed youth as problems to be fixed or punished. PYD looks at youth as assets and potential to be supported and developed.



At every point in the youth justice process, practitioners should engage youth positively by building on their strengths and connecting them with tailored services that support their growth and development. Youth in the juvenile justice system are still developing mentally, emotionally, and physically and should be given the support to do so.³⁸ Investing time and resources into protective factors contributes to healthy youth development and counteracts risk factors.

Scholars have found that juvenile justice programs that measure the strengths of youth—including their relationships with friends, families, schools, and communities—to guide case management reduce the risk of reinvolved in the juvenile justice system.³⁹ Moreover, building on youth assets such as educational and professional skills can help youth to establish positive habits and feel more committed to their communities.⁴⁰ While most probation and youth justice agencies conduct risk assessments and some conduct needs assessments, very few assess assets or strengths.

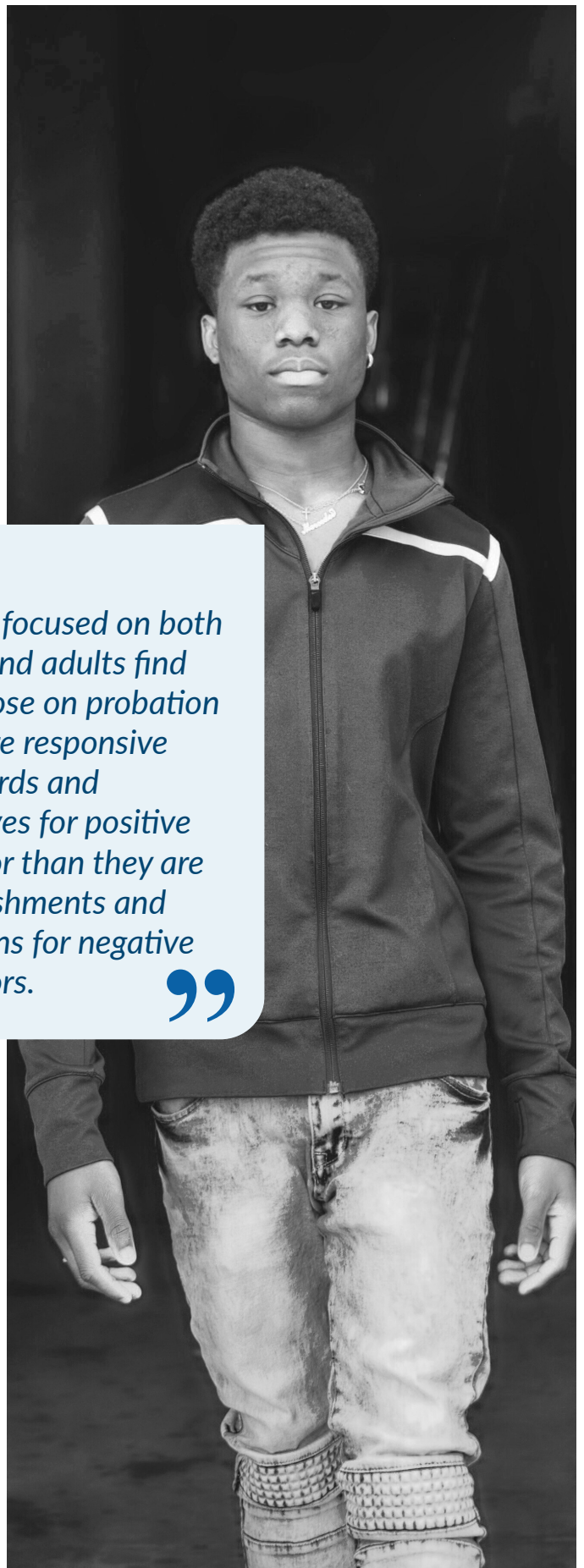
A mentorship structure in which youth develop a stable relationship with an adult role model is one of the most impactful tools to encourage youth to build on their strengths. The tenets of PYD that state that healthy social attachments form the foundation of positive youth outcomes.⁴¹ Mentorship programs that have been rigorously tested by scholars in RCT studies have proven to significantly reduce youth's risk of recidivism.⁴² The *Journal of Adolescent Health* also found that youth in detention who could identify a positive role model in their lives were significantly more likely to have long-term goals.⁴³ Long-term goals such as higher educational attainment and career aspirations set youth on the path to build a stable future simply because they had someone to look up to.

Justice-involved youth in the community, including those who have been diverted or placed on supervision, should be connected with intensive support services that build their academic and professional skills. The Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators advocates for community-embedded reentry support services that measure success by the presence of positive outcomes and behavioral changes, rather than the absence of negative outcomes, such as recidivism rates.⁴⁴

Using rewards and incentives to recognize and encourage positive youth behavior has also been shown to be effective. An evaluation of "Opportunity Probation," in which youth who achieved milestones in their case plans were rewarded with points that could be exchanged for prizes like movie tickets, found that youth who participated had 60% fewer new referrals to court and 67% fewer probation violations compared to their peers supervised via traditional probation.⁴⁵

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which has funded significant research on probation reform, notes, "Studies focused on both youth and adults find that those on probation are more responsive to rewards and incentives for positive behavior than they are to punishments and sanctions for negative behaviors."⁴⁶

“*Studies focused on both youth and adults find that those on probation are more responsive to rewards and incentives for positive behavior than they are to punishments and sanctions for negative behaviors.*”



Program Example: Chicago Choose to Change

Choose to Change (C2C) is a violence prevention program that has engaged more than 800 at-risk Chicago youth since its founding in 2015. C2C combines trauma-informed therapy and wraparound support with the goal of reducing youth violence while improving educational outcomes.⁴⁷ The program is a partnership between the University of Chicago Crime Lab, Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), and Brightpoint.

C2C's six-month program includes individualized support through wraparound services. The program connects youth with YAP Advocates who are available 24/7 to support them and connect them to needed services. C2C also provides group behavioral health sessions conducted by clinically trained therapists. Youth attend up to 16 trauma-informed sessions while enrolled in the program.

The University of Chicago Crime Lab found that C2C has a significant impact on violence prevention and reducing youth involvement with the justice system. According to the Crime Lab, Choose to Change reduces violent crime arrests by nearly 50% during the program and 33% two and a half years after the program has ended.⁴⁸ The University of Chicago also found that the program has positive educational outcomes, increasing school attendance by 6% and decreasing school misconduct by 33%.



5

PROVIDE EXCEPTIONAL CARE TO THOSE WHO DO NEED SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT

When youth do become system-involved, the juvenile justice system must provide high-quality, developmental, trauma-informed care. Studies have shown that youth in the justice system have staggeringly high rates of exposure to trauma, with 75% to 93% of youth having experienced at least one significant traumatic event.⁴⁹



5.a Keep Youth out of the Adult Criminal Justice System

Youth who are processed in the adult criminal justice system have worse outcomes and a higher likelihood of committing further crimes than comparable youth who are processed in the juvenile justice system. Youth who spend time in an adult jail or prison are more likely to recidivate and do so more quickly than youth who do not.⁵⁰ These effects last over a lifetime and are compounded by interrupted education and decreased job prospects.

Moreover, youth in the adult system face adverse physical and mental health outcomes. Youth incarcerated in an adult prison experience a 33% increase in their risk of mortality before 39 years old compared with individuals who were never system involved.⁵¹

Youth in adult institutions also have staggeringly high rates of depression, especially when compared to youth placed in the community.⁵² More than half of the young people in adult placements in a Michigan study experienced depression, and they were 64 times more likely to experience depression than youth in the community.

Notably, there is racial disparity in the rates at which youth are sent to adult courts. According to the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, “Black and Hispanic youth are more likely than their white counterparts to serve time in adult jail.”⁵³ Florida data, for example, shows that Black youth made up 67.7% of transfers to adult prison, but only 21% of the youth population. Further, Black youth were given 7.8% longer sentences than White youth for the same offense types.

5.b Keep Supervision Terms Short

Supervision inherently prolongs the length and frequency of a youth’s contact with the justice system and increases the risk of subsequent detention. Youth who are assigned more probation requirements have a higher rate of nondelinquent technical violations.⁵⁴ These violations can lead to more detentions and the further stigmatization of youth, which lead to more crime. Black youth are more likely to have a higher rate of technical violations than their White counterparts.

Supervision requirements and referrals are also racially disproportionate. White youth are assigned to significantly fewer probation requirements than Black youth and other youth of color.⁵⁵ Moreover, White youth are referred to more community-based programs, meaning they have increased access to

positive development relative to Black youth. White youth also have shorter supervision terms.

There are many benefits to shorter supervision terms, including fewer opportunities for technical violations, reduced exposure to racial disparities, and overall reduced harm. Shorter supervision terms for all youth also mean more effective use of resources and time. The Urban Institute explains that shorter supervision terms mean smaller caseloads for officers, which allows them to more effectively serve the youth that are on their caseload.⁵⁶ This also frees up resources that can be redirected into community-based programming and community partnerships. Ultimately, the goal of supervision should be to empower youth to engage positively with the supports in their community to promote long-term positive development and reduce recidivism.

5.c Keep Youth in Non-Carceral Facilities

While negative outcomes for youth placed in the adult system are disproportionately high, youth placed in any type of carceral facility experience negative repercussions to their health and well-being.

Youth in detention have significantly higher rates of depression than youth in the community.⁵⁷ Detention is also associated with a decreased likelihood of finishing high school and an increased likelihood of committing a crime the year following confinement.⁵⁸

Confinement also contributes to the stress and trauma that are associated with delinquent acts in the first place. Solitary confinement, used by many youth facilities across the country, causes enormous stress that can lead to lifelong mental health issues.⁵⁹ Less extreme yet equally common practices including restraints, intimidation, and physical force are all also contributors to negative youth outcomes. Additionally, 10% of youth report experiencing sexual abuse inside state-funded facilities.⁶⁰

When youth are placed in a facility, they must be met with an environment that promotes positive development. It is important to place youth who have been found to need time out of the community into institutions that are more homelike. This should include rooms that are more akin to a dorm than a cell; high-quality schools; community kitchens where youth participate in food preparation; rehabilitation and vocational programs; and spacious recreational facilities. Such residential centers should also provide medical and mental health care tailored to youth's individual needs.

Program Example:

Alameda County Probation Department

In California, the Alameda County Probation Department is a good example of reducing and improving, but not of reinvesting in community. The Probation Department renamed its juvenile services division the “Positive Youth Development” Division. The Probation Department describes its new PYD Division as using “evidence-based, trauma informed, family focused strategies to aid in the wellness and rehabilitation of youth and families who find themselves involved in the juvenile justice system. We offer and connect youth and families to a wide variety of no-cost programs and services aimed at limiting and/or eliminating contact with the justice system altogether.”⁶¹ Along with a new name, the Department provides a wide array of community-based programming for youth on probation and their families. This includes access to community service providers offering credible messenger mentoring, family counseling, job training and placement, and educational support.

Alongside this increased focus on PYD, the number of youth on probation supervision and detained in the Department's juvenile hall has plummeted over the past decade. In May 2013, the Alameda County Probation Department reported that 1,850 youth were on juvenile probation supervision. Ten years

later in 2023, the Department reported having just 367 youth on supervision—an 80% reduction. Additionally, according to data provided by the Department, more than two-thirds (67%) of those youth were assessed as low or moderate risk, and only one-third were assessed as high risk (33%).

Meanwhile, over the same time period, the Probation Department's budget has increased by more than \$100 million. Just in the past four years, the Department's entire budget has increased by nearly \$50 million. Even with an 80% decrease in the number of youth on supervision, within that time the PYD Division's budget has increased by more than \$5 million.⁶² While the Department does provide millions of dollars in contracts to local nonprofits to provide services to youth in the county, which is commendable, there is much more room for the County to increase direct investment in disadvantaged communities.

Program Example:

Close to Home, New York City

Close to Home is a placement track for New York City (NYC) youth that grew out of a response to unsafe juvenile facilities housing more than 1,000 youth at a time.⁶³ In 2003, NYC leadership launched a taskforce that worked over the next five years to decrease juvenile placements and increase community-based youth supports. Close to Home, which was born out of the taskforce's efforts, has fewer than 50 youth in its facilities today.⁶⁴

These facilities are residential programs operated by nonprofits for youth who are found by the courts to need time out of the community. Located in all five boroughs, they offer non-secure and limited secure home-like placements for post-adjudicated youth in sites close to their own families and communities.⁶⁵

Non-secure placement (NSP) group homes

house post-adjudicated youth, offering medical, mental health, and substance abuse services tailored to their needs. Youth attend school from the facilities and can freely participate in extracurricular activities inside and outside of the home. Limited secure placements (LSP) house post-adjudicated youth who have been determined to present higher risks than those placed in NSP. Run by nonprofits with the capacity to handle higher-needs youth, LSP sites also offer medical, mental health, and substance abuse services.⁶⁶

Both types of placements house youth in residential buildings that have been redesigned for a group home setting. The bedrooms are colorful and furnished with desks, lamps, and other furniture you would see in a typical bedroom. The houses have kitchens where youth can cook dinner together, living rooms and other shared spaces that promote harmony over isolation, and computer labs and work spaces for productivity. These elements come together to create a home-like living space that supports youth's needs for positive development.

Program Example:

Project Change at San Mateo College and the Rising Scholars Network

In California, there is a statewide effort to provide post-secondary education opportunities to youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The Rising Scholars Network is a consortium of community colleges across the state that provide programming to incarcerated or previously incarcerated people. In 2024, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) committed \$28 million in ongoing funding for the Network. This includes \$15 million in grants for programs targeting the youth population (for example, programs

facilitating coursework for youth in detention). This makes California the first state to dedicate higher education dollars to justice-impacted youth.⁶⁷

Project Change at San Mateo College,⁶⁸ a member of the Rising Scholars Network, is a standout program that supports incarcerated youth and youth in detention as well as justice-impacted students on campus. In the County juvenile hall, Project Change runs an in-person, cohort-style model in which all students are enrolled in the same classes at the same time. Students enroll in English, math, and other foundational courses, the most popular of which is about positive psychology. Most of the program's juvenile hall youth are dual enrollment students taking some college coursework while also finishing their high school degree or equivalent.

Project Change also offers extensive wraparound services to youth when they are released and attending classes on campus. The program's intensive academic and financial support includes course registration guidance, weekly mentorship meetings, and financial aid workshops. Project Change also provides a \$50 transportation stipend and a \$50 food stipend per semester to on-campus justice-impacted students with no prerequisites. Students who perform well in the program can see their stipends increase up to \$100, incentivizing engagement with support and mentorship structures. The program also sometimes supports other basic needs in case of emergency or on a case-by-case basis.

Staff at Project Change emphasize the importance of cultivating a sense of identity for students so that they feel like they belong on a college campus. The program builds on the strengths of youth, supporting those who wish to pursue their education by providing them with the resources and guidance needed to grow their academic skills and obtain a degree.

6



REINVEST COST SAVINGS INTO THE COMMUNITIES IN WHICH YOUTH LIVE

If done correctly, implementing the principles discussed above can and should result in a reduction in the size of the juvenile justice system and cost savings tied to this reduction. Detention and incarceration are particularly expensive; when youth are kept out of custodial settings and instead connected with community-based services, the reallocation of resources should follow suit. In the past decade, the average cost for the secure confinement of one youth was \$214,620 per year, with some states reporting over \$500,000 annually per youth.⁶⁹ With fewer youth in facilities, money saved on youth confinement should be reinvested into the community, including prevention and intervention organizations, schools, parks, and housing. Likewise, money once spent responding to crime should be invested in communities to build up protective factors including education, housing, and economic resources.



Expanded reinvestment should happen in at least two ways: 1) direct investment should be made in communities hardest impacted by mass incarceration to improve the conditions of neighborhoods and provide opportunities for residents; and 2) funds from the justice system should be given to local community-based organizations to provide services to youth at risk of coming into the juvenile justice system. To date, there are few, if any, examples of the first of these approaches, wherein reductions in the size and cost of the justice system have actually been reappropriated from the justice system to the community via direct investment into communities most impacted. There are, however, a number of examples of the latter.

Program Example:

Justice Reinvestment Initiative

The Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI) is a national effort led by the Bureau of Justice Assistance to manage system-involved people more cost efficiently and divert savings into targeted investment in community resources, with a focus on improving the lives of those most affected by the criminal justice system.⁷⁰ JRI uses a data-driven approach and a network of technical assistance providers to analyze a state's needs and create a plan to improve systems through policy and practice. As of 2021, JRI has supported 36 states that "have saved or averted more than \$1 billion and invested half of that in strategies to improve system outcomes."

Program Example:

RECLAIM Ohio

RECLAIM Ohio, the Ohio juvenile justice reform initiative described earlier in this report, diverts a percentage of DYS funds based on decreases in per youth expenditures on beds. As the DYS population decreases, funds are diverted to the juvenile courts to distribute to community providers. Originally piloted in nine counties in 1994, the initiative expanded statewide until it was restructured in 2005 to create a more stable funding source for the courts while maintaining its dependence on the usage of beds.

Program Example:

LA County Ready to Rise Initiative

In Los Angeles County, the Probation Department transferred more than \$38 million to two local community foundations to create the Ready to Rise initiative, which provides capacity building and grants to CBOs that serve at-risk youth.⁷¹ However, there are no examples to be found of rerouting funds from the youth justice system, which has shrunk significantly over the past 20 years, directly into communities. Such funding should go toward education assistance for students and improvement of schools, employment training and job placement, down payment assistance for home purchases and rental assistance, and neighborhood improvement like blight abatement and infrastructure development. Community members should be involved in final decisions of what investments are to be made in their neighborhoods. This is genuine community reinvestment.

Program Example:

Harris County Repurposed Facilities

There are also examples of jurisdictions repurposing existing correctional facilities into spaces with abundant resources for youth. In Harris County, Texas, for example, the Opportunity Center is a hub for youth to connect with community resources that is housed in a repurposed carceral youth facility. The Center serves youth who are currently and previously justice involved with academic classes, employment services, vocational training, athletics, and a recording studio.⁷² What was once a punitive space for youth is now a hub for positive youth development.

CONCLUSION

The six principles laid out in this report provide a roadmap for a national effort to Reduce the size of the juvenile justice system, Improve the services it provides, and Reinvest cost savings into neighborhoods and communities that experience a disproportionate burden of poverty and crime.

In this model, the delinquency system is a last resort, and juvenile justice agencies focus their resources only on the small number of youth who pose a true threat to public safety. Whenever possible, effective diversion and alternatives are utilized to minimize contact with youth. For those youth who do come into the system, the PYJS partners with them and their families to develop and share ownership of case plans. CBOs rooted in the communities where youth live are responsible for providing services, supports, and opportunities to young people, working directly with them and their families to address needs and build upon their assets, rather than focusing on their deficiencies and punishment. For the small number of youth who need time out of the community when all other interventions have failed, a PYJS provides exceptional care and development.

All of these principles and practices are supported by a sizeable body of data and research across the fields of criminology, psychology, public health, social work, and more. When these reforms are implemented, the size of the system will be smaller, producing significant cost savings; those funds should be invested back into the communities with the highest rates of poverty, crime, and incarceration. Such a system will make our communities safer and greatly improve outcomes for our youth.



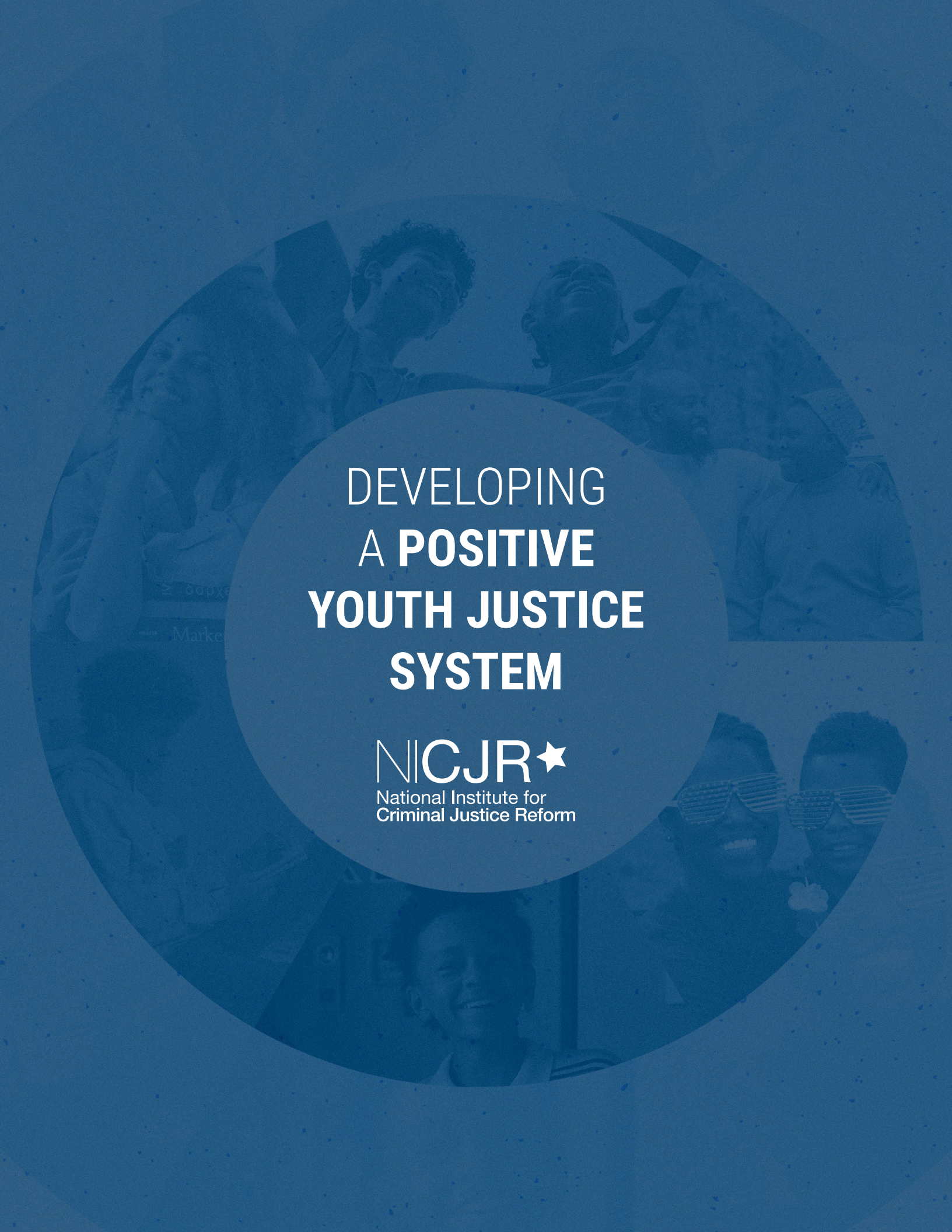
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