



Resourcing Communities

Investing in Youth for Justice Transformation

POLICY PLATFORM

NATIONAL **YOUTH**
JUSTICE NETWORK

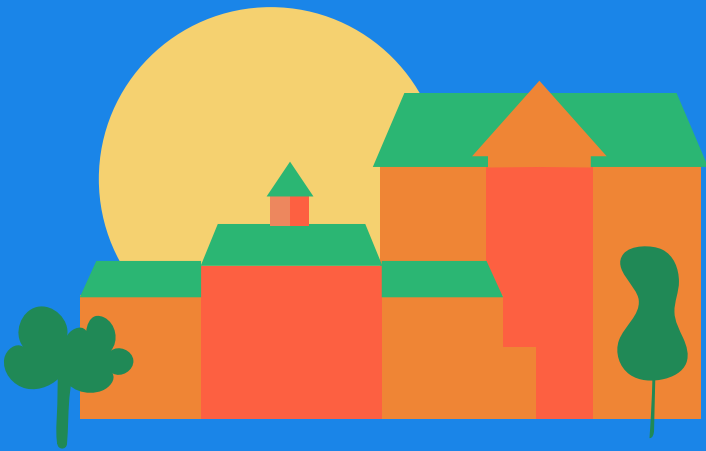


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SECTION 1

Executive Summary

We know that the way to healthy, safe communities is to ensure all our communities have an abundance of resources to create healthy living environments for children to flourish and to end the failed and morally bankrupt policy of mass incarceration of Black and Brown youth.

To further this goal, our policy platform recommendation is:

States and localities must invest in youth by giving communities the resources they need for young people to flourish; partnering with and empowering young people to reimagine holistic models of care that no longer rely on punitive, carceral systems; and creating the infrastructure to support the reimagined models of care.

“Investing in youth services, building spaces that support young people, reversing criminalisation and giving communities the resources they need to flourish — these are policies that could be enacted tomorrow if the political will were there. Together, as communities, it is our job to push these demands to the very top of the political agenda and fight to make sure that every child in our society grows up safe, thriving and free.”

Liberty, Art Against Knives, No More Exclusions, Northern Police Monitoring Project, Joint Enterprise Not Guilty by Association, Release, INQUEST, National Survival User Network, Maslaha and Kids of Colour, “Holding Our Own: A Guide to Non-Policing Solutions to Serious Youth Violence” (UK, 2023): 17, https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/HoldingOurOwn_Digital-DoubleSpreads.pdf.

This report aims to showcase the myriad community-based organizations and programs that can effectively serve young people if they are adequately funded, and to provide a roadmap to reimagine youth justice and create and implement a comprehensive infrastructure that supports restorative models rooted in care, health, and opportunity.

In the first section of this platform we state our policy recommendation, explore the visions of the young people that we talked to for investments needed to help youth feel safe and supported in their communities, and discuss the failure of the carceral model.

In the second section of the platform we discuss the types of programs that would make this vision possible. We recommend that jurisdictions make the following investments to support, heal, and empower youth in our communities and provide detailed examples of these types of investments:

- * Invest in youth leadership, self-expression, and empowerment
- * Invest in family, community, and connection
- * Invest in health, safety, and healing
- * Invest in education and opportunity

In the third section, we discuss how to implement this vision on a comprehensive scale; how to redesign justice to create an infrastructure that supports youth investment and a rehabilitative model rooted in care, health, and opportunity, rather than a punitive framework of custody, suppression and control. We suggest taking the following six steps and provide descriptions of four different examples of redesigning justice:

- * Establish a collaborative planning process for reimagining youth justice
- * Convene diverse stakeholders
- * Conduct an assessment
- * Develop an actionable plan
- * Identify a sustainable funding mechanism to support community-based programs and resources
- * Develop a clear plan to evaluate the impact of the community-based model using an evaluation process that builds community

We know what resources children need to thrive and we have effective program models to implement these investments and to transform our ineffective and harmful systems of justice and support rehabilitative models. We just need the political will to do so.

SECTION 2

Introduction
& Background

Policy Platform Recommendation

States and localities must invest in youth by **giving** communities the resources they need for young people to flourish; **partnering** with and **empowering** young people to reimagine holistic models of care that no longer rely on punitive, carceral systems; and **creating** the infrastructure to support the reimagined models of care.

Research consistently shows that investing in youth improves their well-being, strengthens their communities, and dramatically reduces the likelihood of justice involvement.¹ In order to better understand the types of investments most needed, NYJN turned to the experts: young people from directly impacted communities.

Youth Vision

In 2022, NYJN gathered 14 young leaders from across the country, aged 17-29, who had direct understanding of our nation’s youth legal systems, to engage with us in “[Redesigning Justice](#).”

They expressed to us that their vision of justice is:²

- * Grounded in abolition
- * Endless opportunity for growth
- * Realized in prevention
- * Achieving equity
- * Healing and restorative
- * Ours for the making!

During the summer of 2023, NYJN convened more focus groups of young people, aged 19 to 29 to answer the question, “**What does it look like to truly invest in youth?**” Collectively, they explored what investments are needed to help youth feel safe and supported in their communities, what barriers they experience to accessing resources, what programs were most helpful, and what they recommend as alternatives to incarceration.

They want investments in young people and their communities; jobs where they can earn a living wage; education with an abundance of academic support; recreational centers; college scholarships; community centers; advocacy skill development; programs to learn skills and trades; mental health support; and more. They want to be given a second chance and not be “broken down by correctional facilities.”³ Following the vision of these young people is the path to building healthy communities where young people and their families can thrive and feel a sense of safety and security.

Here are some of their many insightful responses:

What does youth investment mean to you?

"Pouring into their future. Investing money into leadership initiatives." *D.B.*

"Invest in programs that have proactive resources to prevent youth from going to jail." *DERICK T., 21*

"It means planting something in the youth that will create success, good growth, and innovation." *JUAN C.*

"Youth investment is the intentional reimagining of systems put in to help young people." *JAHI F.*

"More youth/adult coalitions where youth have a voice to speak and make decisions for themselves." *NIJAH M., 25*

"Mental health support, economic support, and solutions to root causes. More orgs to help youth grow, change systems, get involved, and spark their interest in different things than what they have seen growing up which isn't always good." *YASMIN F., 20*

"Reading enrichment, music enrichment, arts enrichment. Ensuring the kids have an outlet outside of their day-to-day basic." *M.L., 19*

"Recreational centers or programs in school that support equity." *J.C.*

"Financial literacy and more [mental health] counselors at an earlier time in their life." *REINA*

"Culturally competent mentors" *MARISA B., 27*

"Creative outlets like music and art, sports and dance" *PERLA G., 24*

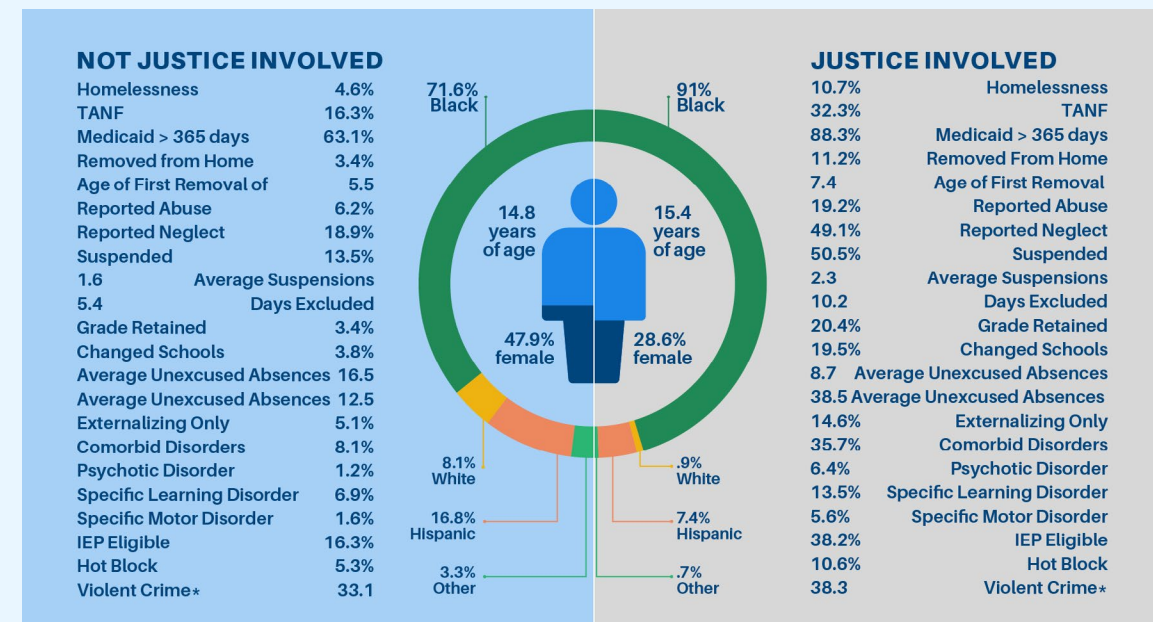
"Have a plan to get kids who've been in the system through school — should be asking 'How can we better serve them?' Should provide them with music and art, individualized. . . Think about the transition back home; provide them with the tools they need to come back" *TAYZ*

Failure of the Carceral Model: The Need to Address Root Causes

Research tells us that risky behavior is driven by social and economic factors rather than the individual choice of “bad” kids. Concentrated poverty, housing instability, poor school quality, and limited social capital all increase the likelihood of justice involvement.⁴ These conditions are most acutely felt in Black and Brown communities, which have historically been under-resourced and over-policed. It is this systemic problem that has led to the disparate criminalization of Black and Brown youth, who are detained at nearly five times the rate of white youth.⁵

As demonstrated in the chart below, there is a crucial connection between investing in services that support economic security, family support, safe neighborhoods, mental health, minimizing school disruptions, and reducing youth justice involvement.

Unfortunately, carceral models, rooted in punishment and separation, do little to address these underlying conditions. Instead, youth detention and incarceration have proven to be both ineffective for achieving public safety and profoundly traumatizing and harmful to the young people. These outdated practices have failed to steer youth away from risky and illegal behavior and instead have perpetuated a damaging narrative that criminalizes youth, rather than prioritizes their well-being.



Kaitlyn Still, “A Study of the Root Causes of Juvenile Justice System Involvement” (Washington DC: Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, 2020): 16, https://cjcc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cjcc/CJCC%20Root%20Cause%20Analysis%20Report_Compressed.pdf.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of youth in detention facilities steeply declined. While some jurisdictions have sought to maintain these changes, the majority of communities have returned to “business as usual,” even exceeding pre-pandemic levels of detention for Black youth, in large part due to longer lengths of stay.⁶

A return to the status quo has alarming consequences for youth and communities:

- * **Separating youth from their families and natural support systems often exacerbates trauma and disrupts the healing process.**⁷ Most young people in the justice system have already experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), potentially traumatic events, such as abuse or neglect, violence, or losing a loved one.⁸ Rather than healing the root causes, the experience of detention and incarceration can compound trauma.
- * **Youth in facilities experience educational disruptions and delays, which can have long-term implications on employment.** Youth in facilities typically receive less instruction time than peers in community schools, and many cannot access courses or transfer credits required for graduation.⁹ Even worse, some youth in facilities are not enrolled in any educational programming at all.¹⁰ Youth who did attend school while incarcerated recounted “chaotic classrooms, absent teachers, and frequent lockdowns that disrupted the school day.”¹¹
- * **Staff shortages in facilities have increased the use of physical and chemical restraints, isolation, misconduct, injury, and youth suicidality.** Between 2000 and 2015, 29 states and the District of Columbia reported systemic abuse in state-funded youth correctional facilities.¹²
- * **Incarceration is expensive.** In 2020, a majority of states spent at least \$100,000 annually to confine each child, with some states spending more than \$500,000 per child.¹³ The average state cost to securely confine a child in 2020 was \$588 per day, amounting to \$214,620 per year.¹⁴ By contrast, services from community-based alternative provider Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) costs between \$90-100 per family, per day.¹⁵
- * **Incarceration increases the likelihood that a young person will be rearrested and reincarcerated compared to peers supervised in the community, even when controlling for offense history.**¹⁶ Youth naturally desist from risky behaviors over time; however, this process can be disrupted if youth are removed from their communities, exposed to higher risk peers, or subjected to harsh treatment.¹⁷

We must invest in youth rather than furthering the failed policy of mass incarceration. It is imperative that we work collaboratively with young people from impacted communities to tackle the root causes of these inequities and transform these underlying conditions.¹⁸

SECTION 3

Vision: Investing & Empowering Youth

NYJN recommends that jurisdictions make the following investments in to support, heal, and empower youth in our communities. These investments are needed both for preventing youth legal system involvement and helping those youth who have been system impacted.

INVEST IN
youth leadership,
self-expression &
empowerment



INVEST IN
health,
safety &
healing



INVEST IN
family,
community
& connection



INVEST IN
education &
opportunity



INVEST IN Youth Leadership, Self-Expression and Empowerment



It is essential that we give young people the tools to feel empowered to direct their lives rather than being trapped in situations beyond their control. Fostering a sense of autonomy is important for all youth but especially those who experience poverty, racism and other forms of systemic oppression. Groups that teach leadership skills, advocacy and organizing, and skill development allow youth to see new ways of engaging in the world, as well as teach them how to change the systems that negatively impact their communities. These approaches educate them about the ways in which systems oppress people of color. Young people can also gain confidence and autonomy through after-school and sports programs, youth groups and creative expression, such as spoken word and music.

“Invest in opportunity and resources for youth to grow! Everyone deserves to have a choice and not be forced into impossible situations.”
YASMIN F., 20

Research has found frameworks that focus on Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) to be integral to supporting and inspiring youth, particularly from oppressed groups, to pursue a more positive, engaged, and meaningful life. PYD focuses on developing holistic, positive youth competencies in terms of physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development, in order to help youth become productive members of society. SJYD involves developing “youth’s awareness of their personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity, and the engagement in social justice activities that counter oppressive conditions.”

Yoshitaka Iwasaki (2016) The role of youth engagement in positive youth development and social justice youth development for high-risk, marginalized youth, International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 21:3, 267-278, DOI: 10.1080/02673843.2015.1067893.

Examples

Below are examples of a number of NYJN member organization’s programs that invest in youth leadership and empowerment.

- * **Anti-Recidivism Coalition (Los Angeles, CA)** The Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) empowers formerly and currently incarcerated people to thrive by providing a support network, comprehensive reentry services, and opportunities to advocate for policy change.
- * **Arts for Healing and Justice Network (Los Angeles, CA)** The Arts for Healing and Justice Network (AHJN) uses the arts as a vehicle to heal the youth they work with and to engage youth in advocacy to change the systems that serve them. AHJN provides a multidisciplinary arts education program to incarcerated youth in

every detention facility in L.A. County, through diversion and reentry programs, and at community sites, housing sites, parks, and schools.

- * **Colorado Youth Justice Collaborative** The National Center for Youth Law (NCYL) has worked since 2020 to build a multigenerational coalition space that empowers individuals and organizations to build capacity to create and influence youth justice policy.
- * **Lived Experience Advocacy Fellowship (LEAF) (Colorado)** The National Center for Youth Law (NCYL) is in the second year of running the Lived Experience Advocacy Fellowship (LEAF), a 6-month paid policy fellowship for young people ages 17-26 who’ve been directly impacted by Colorado’s juvenile justice system.

“We have Chuco’s justice center but need more of these.”

* **Chuco’s Justice Center (Los Angeles, CA)**

The Youth Justice Coalition (YJC) created Chuco’s Justice Center, which serves as a space for youth and community members to gather, as well as a resource center for other social justice organizations. Chuco’s works to fight the criminalization of youth. YJC and Chuco’s also established the FREE L.A High School which serves as an alternative to incarceration for youth ages 16 to 24, as well as an education site for those who have been subjected to exclusionary discipline.

* **Nis’to Incorporated (South Dakota)** “Nis’to” is a Dakota word that means “concern for others outside of ourselves.” Youth at Nis’to learn more about their culture, the environment, leadership, and self-expression through many art forms including painting, sewing, music, and poetry.¹⁹

* **Progeny (Kansas)** Progeny is a youth/adult partnership focused on reimagining the youth justice system and reinvestment into community-based alternatives. Progeny runs a Health and Wellness Corner for youth, a Word to Life program that engages 13- to 18-year-olds using music and spoken word, and also invests in youth leadership by holding youth visioning sessions where impacted youth have the opportunity to tell their stories and articulate exactly how they believe resources should be used in order to reform the youth legal system.

* **Rise for Youth (Virginia)** RISE for Youth is committed to dismantling the youth prison model and ensuring every space that impacts a young person’s life encourages growth and success. RISE’s Youth Development Academy provides employment opportunities for young people and strengthens their ability to grow into thriving adults.

How Policymakers Can Support Youth Leadership, Self-Expression & Empowerment:

- * Hold a youth centered policy roundtable with state and/or local policymakers so that policymakers can hear from directly impacted youth about how best to support and further empower them.²⁰
- * Add directly impacted youth to all statewide and local boards and commissions that provide oversight and accountability for how youth are treated in the youth legal system and how funds are spent.
- * Apply for federal grants for local initiatives, such as through Title V of the federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA). When Congress reauthorized the JJDPA in 2018 (H.R. 6964), they provided that a portion of the funds would be available to local communities through Incentive Grants for Prison Reduction through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support, and Education (Youth PROMISE Grants). These funds can be used for a wide variety of purposes - twenty-nine categories in all, including: substance abuse prevention programs, tutoring and remedial education, mental health and recreation services, youth leadership and development activities, job training programs, and restorative justice programs.²¹

INVEST IN Family, Community and Connection



“We need community building in ways that serve youth interest and access to explore what interest[s] them.” TAYZ

**“Youth need mentorship programs and fellowships.”
DERICK T., 21**

The proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child” reflects an important social reality: youth are designed to live in connection. Too often, families are struggling to make ends meet and living in isolation from systems of support. Investing in families and communities helps weave networks of support and create a stable foundation that fosters positive youth development, resilience, and connection. In the presence of caring relationships, whether with family members, caregivers or trusted mentors, young people can find a safe space to express emotions, build trust, and learn to navigate the world. Such nurturing environments target the root causes linked to legal system involvement and are crucial for mitigating the impact of any trauma a youth may have experienced. In addition to empowering young people, investments that foster connection can provide much-needed resources to families and improve the collective well-being of entire communities.

Examples

Below are examples of the types of programs that invest in family, community, and connection.

Credible Messenger mentoring programs

Credible Messenger mentorship programs match young people, often who are at risk of or have become legal system involved, with trained adults from the community of similar backgrounds, many of whom have been through the criminal legal system themselves.²²

- * **Credible Messenger Justice Center (CMJC)** is a training and research center and program incubator for helping to advance the Credible Messenger program and approach in local communities. CMJC offers training and support programs geared toward helping Credible Messengers succeed in their role as a mentor as well as programs for mentees and their impacted family members.
- * **Safer Streets Program (Syracuse, NY)** works to reduce violence resulting from personal disputes by utilizing cognitive behavioral therapy to address trauma and impulsiveness in youth, and provide them with credible messengers as mentors in order to build positive relationships and coping skills.

Support for parents/caregivers and basic family needs

- * **RxKids program (Michigan)** is the nation's first prenatal and infant cash allowance program. The state allocated \$16.5 million to the Rx Kids program in 2023. Led by Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, the doctor whose research exposed the Flint water crisis, Rx Kids allows every pregnant mother in Flint, MI, to receive \$1,500 for their needs during pregnancy and a continued sum of \$500 per month in the baby's first year with no strings attached.²³
- * **Rearing Court-Involved Youth (Louisiana)**, run by Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC), is designed to help parents whose children are court-involved. It provides parents with individualized training, support and mentoring in an effort to help parents to keep their children at home with them.

- * **New Jersey Parent Caucus (NJPC)** offers a number of programs to support parents and children with mental health challenges and legal involvement including the following:
 - * **Children of Children in Prison** program provides resources such as food, clothing, and gift cards to the children of incarcerated youth who were waived to adult court, in order to ensure their kids receive necessities in their parent's absence.
 - * **Parents Empowerment Academy** offers free parent-led training and education programs for caregivers on topics aimed to improve the quality of life for families raising children with emotional and behavioral issues.
 - * **Professional Parent Advocacy Training and Certification** is a free program for parents and caregivers of children involved in the mental health, youth legal system, or child welfare system to learn more about how these systems operate, their rights and responsibilities, and how to advocate successfully for their children.
 - * **Support Groups** are provided for parents and caregivers raising children with emotional, behavioral, and mental health challenges and NJPC offers Family Peer Support services as well.

How policymakers can support family, community & connection

- * Help local programs get greater funding through Participatory Budgeting. This is a process that allows a community to collectively determine how a portion of their local budget is spent.²⁴ Boston's Youth Lead the Change program is a promising example of youth-led participatory budgeting. Each year Boston youth get a say in how \$1 million of the city's local dollars are spent by submitting proposals for projects and then getting to vote on the proposals.²⁵
- * Advocate with state governments to fund programs that support youth and families, as Michigan did above with the Rx Kids program.
- * There are many federal resources to support mentoring. OJJDP funds the [National Mentoring Resource Center](#), which provides tools and training materials as well as offering technical assistance at no cost. OJJDP also provides grants for mentoring programs.²⁶
- * Look for sources of federal dollars outside of OJJDP as well, such as child welfare, Medicaid, workforce development, education, funding that supports victim services, and community development funding.²⁷

INVEST IN Health, Safety and Healing



**“What youth need
are restorative
justice programs,
rehabilitation for
incarcerated youth.”**
ISAIAH J., 24

Community safety and youth well-being go hand in hand. Unfortunately, too many young people have experienced the damaging impact of victimization, racism, and poverty, harming their physical, mental, and emotional health and contributing to a cycle of violence. Prioritizing investments in health, safety, and healing is necessary to create environments that emphasize well-being over punitive measures, like those often found in the youth legal system.

At a minimum, all youth need access to preventive, affordable healthcare and behavioral health services, with more intensive trauma-responsive interventions available to youth who have experienced violence or struggle with mental health or substance use disorders.

On an individual level, young people need access to trusted mentors and culturally relevant healers who are knowledgeable about the healing power of connection in response to trauma. On a systemic level, community justice models rooted in restorative practice focus on repairing harm through accountability, reconciliation, and community involvement, seeking to restore relationships and address the root causes of harmful behavior.

Examples

Below are examples of the types of programs that invest in health, safety and healing.

Restorative Practices

“Restorative practices focus on resolving conflict, repairing harm, and healing relationships.”²⁸

Restorative practices have been used in schools and in the youth legal system as a way to build healthy relationships and community, reduce conflict in schools, and to repair the harm caused by conflict in both systems.

- * **The Restorative Justice Project at Equal Justice, USA**, focuses on pre-charge restorative justice diversion programs.²⁹ Their diversion programs are meant to be intensive, targeting more serious misdemeanor and felony cases when an individual is harmed. They offer training and technical assistance to community-based organizations and systems partners in order to give survivors a voice in their healing process and hold youth who have caused harm accountable without relying on criminalizing youth.³⁰

Community Violence Intervention (CVI) Programs

CVI programs work to reduce the most serious forms of violence, such as homicides and shootings, by supporting those at the highest risk of involvement in this type of violence, as either victims or perpetrators.³¹ There are three main types of CVI programs:³²

- * Hospital-based — which involves reaching out to victims in the hospital to meet their needs and prevent retaliation.
- * Group violence intervention — which involves a collaboration with community leaders, social service providers, and law enforcement, to identify those at highest risk of violence and provide intervention and support.

- * Programs that center community — these employ “violence interrupters” or “neighborhood change agents” who are trusted community members that reach out to those at the center of violence³³ to build relationships and provide intervention and support.

* Cure Violence is a global violence interruption program that uses a public health methodology to prevent potentially violent situations, identify and change the thinking of those most likely to commit violence, and change the group norms supporting violence.³³ Independent studies have shown remarkable decreases in violence, including a 63 percent reduction in shooting victimizations and 33 percent positive shift in norms in New York City (2018).³⁴

* Other successful community-based violence interruption programs include South Bronx’s Save Our Streets; Baltimore’s Roca program, and Richmond, CA’s Advance Peace program.³⁵

Mental health service delivery

- * Community responder programs
 - * These are programs that replace law enforcement as first responders to mental health crises with staff that are trained in crisis response and are often health professionals.³⁶ Mobile health response programs are a type of community responder program used in Connecticut, Oklahoma, and Oregon, as an effective part of a continuum of care for helping youth experiencing traumatic events and mental health or substance use crises.³⁷

* Community Health Workers

* Community Health Workers (CHW) are paid or volunteer members of the community that work with the local health care system in urban and rural areas.³⁸ They serve as a trusted connection to community members through their shared ethnicity, life experiences, language, and other commonalities.³⁹ CHWs perform a variety of different roles, including referrals, education, interpretation, guidance, advocacy, and some direct service.⁴⁰ CHWs have also been involved in delivering mental health services and recent research has demonstrated positive mental health outcomes for traditionally underserved communities.⁴¹

* Decriminalize drug possession

* By decriminalizing drug possession, adults cannot be arrested or prosecuted for it and it becomes a status offense for youth, meaning it is treated like underage drinking. There are currently over one million arrests for drug offenses a year with 85 percent of them for drug possession alone.⁴² Decriminalizing drug possession leads to less arrest, court time, and incarceration, which frees up funds otherwise used for these purposes to be used for addiction services. Additionally, without the fear of incarceration, people are more likely to access treatment services.⁴³

How Policymakers Can Support these Initiatives:

- * The federal [Victims of Crime Act \(VOCA\)](#) established the Crime Victims Fund to allocate funding for crime victims' compensation and victims' services. VOCA funding can be used for restorative justice programs.⁴⁴ The Crime Victims Fund balance was over \$1 billion dollars as of November 2023.⁴⁵
- * States like California have funded restorative justice programs through [Victim Impact grants](#).

These grants fund victim-focused restorative justice programs provided by community-based organizations.

- * Mechanisms to fund community response programs include the following:⁴⁶
 - * Leveraging dollars from the state's general fund;
 - * Creating a special tax revenue source to fund the program;
 - * Medicaid — which can be used for mobile crisis outreach, or the state can apply for a Section 1115 waiver to use it for other programs;
 - * Federal grants such as the Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block grant, the Community Mental Health Services Block grant, State Opioid Response grants, and grants through the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, such as the Byrne Justice Assistance grant program; and
 - * Grants from private foundations.
- * Decriminalizing drug possession can provide a strong source of funding for treatment services, if coupled with legislation to ensure that the money saved through decriminalization is used to fund treatment services.⁴⁷
- * As part of the [National Opioids Settlement](#), an expected **\$50 billion dollars** will be awarded to states and localities for opioid-related lawsuits. Many states are now in the process of developing administrative structures for this disbursement. States have a great deal of leeway in use of the funds but "At least 70% of funding awarded to states and localities must be spent on "opioid remediation efforts."⁴⁸

INVEST IN Education and Opportunity



Equitable access to quality education ensures that every young person has the chance to reach their full potential. Schools, first and foremost, should be welcoming places that foster learning and belonging. Youth who need additional support should be provided with accommodations to meet them where they are, and discipline should be restorative such that it repairs harm and fosters relationships within the school community. Recognizing the negative impact that school resource officers have on school climate, administrators would be well-advised to remove police from schools. To support long-term success, youth should have access to a range of educational and vocational training opportunities that open the doors for economic mobility. Investments should support meaningful workforce development that offer a living wage in order to break the cycle of poverty and support long-term career advancement.

"We need livable sustainable wages for impacted youth — impacted youth [are the] least paid but ARE the movement."

Dynasty was expelled for fighting in school one time. She lost all of her school credits and had to go to summer school. She wishes they would have just talked to her instead. "One

conversation could have resolved the issue and gotten to the root cause of the problem. We should give kids the tools to dig deeper into what caused the problem. Have workshops around emotional intelligence, how to handle conflict. Pushing people out [of school] doesn't make anything better. When I was in school, mental health was a 'you' problem."

Examples

Below are examples of the types of programs that invest in education and opportunity.

* Meaningful workforce opportunities

* The Way to Work (Wichita, KS) is a job training program for youth ages 14 to 17 years old that provides them with a summer job in the community and teaches them skills needed to find and secure jobs. Expansion of the program to serve youth year-round would be even more effective.

* YouthBuild works with “opportunity youth” across the country and internationally — youth aged 16 to 24 years old who are not in school or employed and do not have a high school diploma or financial resources. They help these youth “to reclaim their education, gain job skills, and become leaders in their communities.”⁴⁹

* School-based programs

* Baltimore City Public Schools (Baltimore, MD) designated 14 schools as intensive learning sites to develop restorative practices beginning in the 2018-19 academic year. They trained all adults in the school in restorative practices and wove these practices into everything done at the schools in order to build community and to use restorative conflict resolution tools as well. Positive outcomes included suspensions decreasing by 44 percent in one year.⁵⁰

* Delaware School Offense Diversion Program (SoDP), run by the Delaware Center for Justice, was begun to divert youth from juvenile court for school-based arrests.⁵¹ It provides a space where impacted youth can learn to skillfully resolve problems and sustain healthy relationships and works with the young

person to develop a rehabilitation plan with measurable results.⁵² Charges are dismissed when the young person completes the plan and officials will move to expunge the charges.⁵³

* SchoolWorks Parent Advocacy for Student Success (PASS) (Multnomah County, OR) After hearing repeatedly from community members that young Black and Brown children were being pushed out of the school system instead of being provided with necessary supports, Youth Rights and Justice in Portland, Oregon, started the PASS program. PASS provides families with a pro-bono education attorney for school related issues and also provides educational rights trainings for community members to empower them to advocate for their children with the goal of disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminalization of children.

How Policymakers Can Support these Initiatives:

* Provide strong funding for federal workforce development programs that help youth, such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and YouthBuild.

* See this fact sheet from the Urban Institute for strategies that human services agencies can use to authentically engage young people in improving safety net supports. Best practices include empowering young people to lead, providing opportunities for professional development, identifying and reimagining practices rooted in systems of oppression, and compensating young people equitably for their expertise.⁵⁴

* Benefit agencies can use this checklist to better help young people access safety net supports.

ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

In the complex landscape of youth investment, a series of multifaceted structural challenges often obstruct the path for many deserving youth. These are some of the challenges that young people expressed to us as having faced:

- * Financial constraints
- * Transportation limitations
- * Lack of awareness of the programs/services
- * Language barriers
- * Accessibility issues for youth with disabilities
- * Time constraints (family responsibilities, jobs)
- * Racism/discrimination
- * Stigma
- * Intervention programs not provided early enough

These challenges, while substantial, are not insurmountable. While each community has its own unique needs and resources, we can address these issues systematically with strategic state, local, and federal funding and support, ensuring that no young person is left behind. By investing wisely and inclusively, we can remove these obstacles and unlock the potential of our nation’s youth, providing them with the opportunities they need to thrive.

SECTION 4

Implementation Recommendations:
Creating the infrastructure to support youth investment on a comprehensive scale

In order to support the types of programs described in Section 3 on a comprehensive scale, we need to engage in sustained advocacy to drive the political will to create an infrastructure that supports youth investment and restorative models rooted in care, health, and opportunity.

This involves both realigning our resources, so that more funding is going to provide communities with the resources that support healthy youth development and serve to prevent youth legal system involvement, and reimagining what accountability looks like in order to provide healing and reduce harm.

Some of the key elements needed to create this infrastructure are:

STEP 1: Establish a collaborative planning process for reimagining youth justice

The planning phase should clarify the vision and seek input from community and youth leaders to ensure that the proposed process for achieving that vision is equitable and inclusive. As the planning process becomes more formalized, there may be enabling legislation or an executive order that provides access to funding the initiative.

STEP 2: Convene diverse stakeholders, especially youth

While traditional partners may be at the decision-making table, such as the court, law enforcement, the prosecutor’s office, and probation, it is crucial that community leaders, and especially directly impacted young people themselves, are authentically engaged in the process. It is highly recommended to hire a neutral facilitator or consulting team that is skilled in listening to all parties and perspectives while guiding the group to consensus.

STEP 3: Conduct an assessment

Understanding the strengths and needs of the community is essential to designing a model that leverages existing resources and fills in gaps. A thorough assessment will include data and policy analyses, qualitative feedback from surveys, and one-on-one interviews or listening sessions to identify solutions that will be most impactful.

STEP 4: Develop an actionable plan

The findings of the assessment should drive policy and funding decisions aimed at enhancing availability, accessibility, and coordination of services. The planning team generally oversees the process of determining action steps, timelines, and associated costs to implement the solutions.

STEP 5: Identify a sustainable funding mechanism to support community-based programs and resources

The three main funding mechanisms are:

- * Invest-divest: shifting funding away from traditional law enforcement and correctional entities toward alternative community priorities.
- * Up-front investment: generating new sources of funding for community initiatives.
- * Reinvestment: harnessing savings from reform and channeling them to community initiatives.⁵⁵

Often, a program may involve more than one type of funding stream and the funding can come from local, state, federal, and/or private funding sources. However the funding is obtained, it should be “consistent, equitable to access, and allocated to communities most impacted by incarceration.”⁵⁶ Ideally the investment should be rooted in divestment from incarceration, rather than layering community-based programs on a punitive, trauma-inducing carceral approach.

STEP 6: Develop a clear plan to evaluate the impact of the community-based model using an evaluation process that builds community

Local community-based programs may want to use programs that they have developed which are specifically tailored to their local youth population. The impact on youth can be effectively evaluated using methodologies that bridge the partnership between participant and evaluator so that the research and evaluation process is not extractive but builds the community. [See [Appendix B](#) for further details]

We have detailed five comprehensive initiatives from around the country that have successfully implemented many of these steps toward systems transformation, highlighting where they are aligned with the steps outlined above.

- ✱ [Youth Justice Working Group \(YJWG\)](#) (Los Angeles, CA)
- ✱ [Redeploy Illinois](#)
- ✱ [Michigan Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform](#)
- ✱ [Close to Home](#) (New York, NY)
- ✱ [Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund](#) (Harris County, TX)

1) LOS ANGELES: YOUTH JUSTICE WORKING GROUP

YJWG was established with the goal of “reimagining a youth justice system rooted in healing and wellbeing, racial equity, and youth development.”⁵⁷

Establish a Planning Process

Following years of dedicated grassroots activism led by youth and advocacy groups in Los Angeles, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a motion to establish the Youth Justice Work Group (YJWG) in August 2019. The YJWG was tasked with addressing youth development and diversion, youth formally processed in the legal system, and addressing needs for community-based alternatives to detention and incarceration.⁵⁸

Convene Diverse Stakeholders

Facilitated by the W. Haywood Burns Institute, the YJWG brought together 150 diverse participants, including youth leaders, to develop a roadmap to reimagining the youth justice system in a way that prioritizes healing, wellbeing, racial equity, and youth development.⁵⁹

Conduct a Community Assessment

In addition to this large, collaborative group, the YJWG also gained further perspectives through holding listening sessions (focus groups for 10–15 people), learning exchanges (peer-learning opportunities with other jurisdictions), one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders, and surveys.⁶⁰

Develop an Action Plan

Through this work, the YJWG developed a comprehensive, multi-year plan – “Youth Justice Reimagined (YJR).” A key element of the plan was a phased transitioning away from the Juvenile Probation department to the creation and funding of a newly created Department of Youth Development (DYD) to be the vehicle for youth justice reform.⁶¹ The foundational elements of the plan included:⁶²

1. Developing a Countywide Youth Development Network (YDN), that would include community centers and be connected to 24-hour crisis response;
2. Expanding and investing in community-based youth development and diversion opportunities and restorative, rather than justice system, alternative responses;

3. Using Youth Empowerment and Support (YES) Teams to drive community and youth based input in decision-making;
4. Establishing Safe and Secure Healing Centers, envisioned as small, community-based therapeutic housing, to be used when youth had to be removed from home for their safety or the safety of others;
5. Ensuring that those working with youth are trained to provide “culturally rooted support and care coordination, including healing-centered support;” and
6. Involving youth and community in program, policy, and budgetary decision-making.

The YJR plan called for implementation in three phases. In July, 2022, a key recommendation of YJR was implemented with the creation of the Department of Youth Development (DYD).⁶³

Implementing the full YJR plan has taken on even more urgency with the closure of the last state run youth prisons in the summer of 2023.⁶⁴ While plans for the Safe and Secure Healing Centers (SSHC) are being developed, troubles persist in the current county youth jails, or “juvenile halls.” An 18-year-old died of an overdose in the summer of 2023 and a state oversight board ordered the closure of two juvenile halls in May of 2023.⁶⁵

Identify Sustainable Funding

Funding recommendations called for the reallocation of at least \$75 million of probation funds to establish DYD with initial leadership positions, administer contracts and grants to YDN providers, as well as provide transition resources for probation staff.⁶⁶ As of July, 2022, the County had only invested \$25 million to establish DYD, to the frustration of

advocates, while the probation department continued to maintain a \$400 million budget for juvenile detention facilities even though it had more than 400 vacant positions.⁶⁷ Advocates continued to push for more funding and the County increased DYD’s budget to \$60 million for FY 2023-24..

Evaluate the Impact

YDD contracted with RDA Consulting in January 2022 to evaluate their diversion program, which began in 2022.⁶⁸ The evaluation is being done in two phases. The first phase was a process and implementation evaluation of the YDD diversion model. In the second phase, they will do “an outcome assessment, a cost/cost-benefit analysis, an equity analysis, and a sustainability and replicability memo.”⁶⁹

For phase one, RDA collected quantitative and qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with YDD staff, providers, law enforcement, and youth and families that received diversion services.⁷⁰ RDA also utilized a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) component in which young people (aged 16-18) participating in the diversion services also engaged in evaluating the program as part of the research team.⁷¹

The phase one evaluation (July 1, 2022 to July 1, 2023) found overall youth satisfaction with services was high with negative feedback more prominent among youth receiving virtual services. The providers focused on addressing access barriers to youth and families in a variety of ways, including providing bilingual communications, offering transportation, hosting virtual services, and meeting youth at their homes. Some challenges still remained, as well as some service gaps, particularly for mental health services and recreational services.⁷²

The funding for community-based services through the Redeploy program gets allocated by the courts and probation departments in the Redeploy sites, making the leadership of those departments very important in ensuring that the money is spent wisely. If these were not trusted agencies in the state, then the outcome could have been very different. Part of the challenge with the Los Angeles Youth Justice Reimagined initiative has been that the probation department has not been investing significant portions of the funding that they have received into local, community-based programs.

2) REDEPLOY ILLINOIS

The goal of the Redeploy Illinois program is to decrease youth incarceration through encouraging localities to divert youth to evidence-based community programs as an alternative to commitment by initially providing financial support in exchange for requiring a 25 percent reduction in commitments. Funds are then reallocated from state youth correctional confinement to finance an expansion of community-based programs.

Establish a Planning Process

By the early 2000s, the state was committing approximately 1,700 youth to state youth prisons each year. Advocates were alarmed by this high incarceration rate, and frustrated with the perverse financial incentive to localities to incarcerate youth because the cost was then borne by the state. Led by the Illinois Juvenile Justice Initiative (JJII), advocates began working on a way to dismantle this system. JJII organized a coalition of state and local advocates that included Chicago Metropolis 2020 (now “Metropolis Strategies”), a business-based non-profit organization, and the John Howard Association, a non-profit that monitors and provides independent oversight of carceral systems.⁷³

The advocates led an educational campaign to inform legislators and policymakers about the high cost of incarcerating youth (an average cost of over \$70,000 per youth annually), the poor outcomes (nearly half the youth were reincarcerated within three years), and the research demonstrating that community-based alternatives were a better and more cost-effective way to serve youth.⁷⁴

Initially conceived with a focus on reducing recidivism, the program now takes a more holistic, positive approach to serving youth and their families, focusing on the “Positive Youth Justice” approach, as developed by Jeffrey A. Butts, director of the Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.⁷⁵ This model is based on the concept of positive youth development and encourages a focus on “protective factors as well as risk factors, strengths as well as problems, positive outcomes as well as negative outcomes, and generally . . . facilitating successful transitions to adulthood for justice-involved youth.”⁷⁶

Develop an Action Plan

Redeploy Illinois was started in 2005 as a pilot project in four sites. By the end of the 2021 calendar year, Redeploy had expanded to 10 sites encompassing 41 counties.⁷⁷

Identify Sustainable Funding

The Redeploy Illinois program grants funds to counties to establish “a continuum of local, community-based sanctions and treatment alternatives” for youth who would otherwise be subject to commitment (meaning incarceration) to the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) if those alternatives were not available.⁷⁸ The provider must agree, in exchange for these funds, to reduce the number of youth commitments from that county (or counties) by a minimum of 25 percent compared to an originally approved rolling baseline. Established program sites must maintain or reduce commitments. After doing so for five years, they can serve an expanded population of youth.⁷⁹

Evaluate the Impact

From 2005 to 2021, the number of youth incarcerated by Redeploy Illinois sites has steeply declined.⁸⁰ During the 17 years of the program, it was projected that the participating counties would otherwise have incarcerated 6,091 youth in IDJJ state facilities. Instead, the combined total of youth committed to IDJJ state facilities was 2,119. This represents a 65 percent reduction in projected commitments.

- * It cost \$7,526.71, on average, per-capita, to provide services to youth in the Redeploy Illinois program annually from 2005 to 2021. This is a fraction of the annual cost to incarcerate a young person in an IDJJ facility, which is \$111,000 per-capita.
- * From 2015-2021, Redeploy sites incarcerated 3,972 fewer youth than were projected. This kept young people from the trauma of incarceration and also saved Illinois taxpayers more than \$158.6 million.
- * By 2021, Redeploy sites reduced IDJJ commitments by 82 percent from their original baselines.

3) MICHIGAN TASK FORCE ON JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM

In 2023, Michigan passed 19 pieces of legislation, the cornerstone of which was the enhanced funding structure for promoting community-based alternatives. This legislation was based on recommendations developed by the Michigan Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform.

Establish a Planning Process

The Michigan Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform was established by Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2021 by Executive Order 2021-6, with the aim to “lead a data-driven analysis of Michigan’s juvenile justice system and recommend proven practices and strategies for reform grounded in data, research, and fundamental constitutional principles.”⁸¹

The Task Force set out to:

- * Safely reduce placement in detention and residential placement and associated costs.
- * Increase the safety and well-being of youth impacted by the youth legal system.
- * Reduce racial and ethnic disparities among youth impacted by the youth legal system.
- * Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the state’s and counties’ youth legal systems.
- * Increase accountability and transparency within the youth legal system.
- * Better align practices with research and constitutional mandates.

Convene Diverse Stakeholders

The Task Force comprised a diverse array of stakeholders. Task Force members included representatives from across branches of government, political parties, locales, and the youth legal system continuum representing diverse perspectives, including youth and family members with lived experience of the youth legal system.

Conduct a Community Assessment

The state selected the Council of State Governments (CSG) to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the current system and oversee the process of developing recommendations to inform state policy. With support from CSG, the Task Force conducted over 100 focus groups and interviews with key interest groups across the state, including law enforcement, prosecutors and defense attorneys, court and probation staff, detention and residential staff, educators, service providers, tribal members, and youth and families with lived experience. CSG also did an extensive review of existing state policies and practices.

Their findings revealed a deeply flawed system not aligned with best practices that lacked the necessary policies and infrastructure to effectively serve young people. There was no infrastructure to consistently support diversion, no minimum standards or resources for youth defense, and significant differences in the quality of services and case management across jurisdictions and facilities. Because data was largely unavailable or unreliable, the state could not effectively track how many young people were in the system, for how long, or for which offenses. There were structural challenges that undermined residential bed availability and quality, and no statewide quality assurance system

to ensure that local courts, the state, or private providers were implementing programs and practices effectively. Additionally, they found:

“Black youth are disproportionately represented in all parts of the juvenile justice continuum, and few statewide structures exist to address disparities.”⁸²

Develop an Action Plan

Equipped with a comprehensive view of the system’s inadequacies, CSG facilitated a transparent and collaborative process to develop policy recommendations. This process included convening eight issue-specific working groups through 2022 to delve into policy concerns related to competency, court processing, data, diversion, youth defense, financing, out-of-home placement, and waiver to the adult system. Ultimately, the Task Force approved 32 recommendations, including numerous sub-recommendations, for adoption, all of which were either unanimously supported or supported with greater than two-thirds consensus.

During the 2023-2024 Legislative Session, many of the recommendations were adapted into legislation, resulting in 20 bills that were introduced with bipartisan support. In October 2023, all of the bills, save for one bill related to youth defense, passed the Michigan House and Senate, and were signed into law by the Governor.

The successful legislation, which goes into effect October 1, 2024, included bills that allow for greater use of diversion, including pre-arrest and pre-petition diversion; create a financial incentive for courts to utilize community-based programs over residential placement; eliminate non-restitution fines and fees associated with justice involvement; and ensure greater oversight and accountability by expanding the Office of the Child Advocate and services within the State Appellate Defender Office.⁸³

Identify Sustainable Funding

A cornerstone of the legislative package was the enhanced funding structure for utilizing community-based alternatives. The majority of youth legal services are paid through the Child Care Fund, a 50-50 percent cost share between the counties and the state. The enhanced reimbursement will now permit courts to be reimbursed at a rate of 75 percent for community-based programs, while remaining at 50 percent for residential placements. Additionally, it will now be permissible for funds to be used for pre-arrest and pre-petition diversion services; previously, these funds could only pay for diversion after a petition had been filed. It is anticipated that cost-savings associated with diverting youth and preventing residential placement will be reinvested into community programs.

Evaluate the Impact

While a statewide evaluation plan has not yet been developed, implementation workgroups have been convened to explore the most effective ways to collect and analyze consistent data across 83 counties.

4) NEW YORK: CLOSE TO HOME

The vision behind New York’s Close to Home initiative was to reduce the footprint of the youth legal system and reimagine how to better serve young people by removing youth from state prisons, bringing them back to their home communities, shortening lengths of stay, and developing a continuum of services.

Establish a Planning Process, Convene Diverse Stakeholders, Conduct an Assessment

Close to Home involved a multi-year effort to change the way the youth in New York City were handled in the youth legal system. There were myriad factors that led to a belief in the need for reform, including: the large number of youth being incarcerated in facilities far from their homes; the large expense of incarcerating these youth; the dangerous, abusive, and sometimes deadly conditions in many of these facilities; and the high recidivism rates.⁸⁴

Officials in state and local agencies, advocates, impacted youth and families, and foundations, made collaborative efforts to reimagine justice for young people over many years through a number of mechanisms, including the following:⁸⁵

- * In 2003, the New York City Department of Probation created “Project Zero,” which had the goal of zeroing out commitments of New York city youth to state youth prisons. It promoted objective decision making tools and expanded community-based supports.
- * A great deal of public scrutiny focused on the state youth facilities following the death of a boy held in custody in 2006. This is part of what

led to the U.S. Department of Justice’s (DOJ’s) investigation into the horrendous conditions in New York state’s youth prisons.

- * The DOJ investigation was part of the impetus for OSFS Commissioner Gladys Carrion to begin working with the Governor’s office in 2007 to establish a Task Force on Transforming Juvenile Justice in New York. The Task Force included representatives from state and local agencies, the judiciary, advocacy organizations, service providers, and family members.
- * Also in 2008, Commissioner Carrion launched a communications campaign called “Empty Beds, Wasted Dollars” which helped to generate the political pressure needed to close or downsize state youth prisons.
- * In 2010, Department of Probation Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi spearheaded efforts to increase diversion of youth from prosecution and reduce probation violations, all of which further decreased the number of youth incarcerated.
- * Also in 2010, the Vera Institute and the Missouri Youth Services Institute collaborated with the Brooklyn Family Court to pilot the “Brooklyn for Brooklyn (B4B)” Initiative.⁸⁶ This was a community-based, graduated continuum of care for youth in Brooklyn, including residential and non-residential programs, close to youths’ homes.⁸⁷ The success of this program helped New York City to demonstrate that they could serve youth effectively in smaller, local programs.⁸⁸

The work of advocates and impacted young people and families were instrumental in bringing about Close to Home. They brought lawsuits, documented and spoke out about the problems, testified at hearings, served on Task Forces, strategized with agency officials, coordinated a large coalition to

drive reform, and held lobby days and press conferences.⁸⁹ Additional vital support was provided by non-profit organizations and educational institutions, including the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the Vera Institute of Justice, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.⁹⁰

Develop an Actionable Plan

New York state passed the Close to Home law in March of 2012. Through this law, the custody of children adjudicated delinquent from New York City moved from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to the New York City Administration for Children’s Services (ACS).⁹¹ While the Close to Home work was directed by ACS, the work was a shared responsibility of many state agencies as well, including the Department of Youth and Community Development, the Department of Education, the Housing Department, and the Social Services Department.⁹² Each of these agencies brought their expertise to providing services to young people and their families. For example, most of the youth in Close to Home facilities attend community-based schools operated by the Department of Education.⁹³

The Close to Home initiative led to a significant expansion of community-based alternatives, such as *Credible Messengers*, as well as the use of smaller more welcoming facilities to house those youth who needed out-of-home placements.⁹⁴ Administrators looked to the “Missouri Model” for direction in developing local facilities. This model is focused on rehabilitative care in small, comfortable, and welcoming facilities that are located close to young people’s homes.⁹⁵ Administrators also focused on developing strong educational programs, family engagement, and community-based aftercare programs. The presumption was that young people would be in placements for approximately six months.⁹⁶

Officials and advocates had to overcome many concerns in order to get Close to Home passed. Chief among them was the fact that strong unions staffed the youth prisons and could lose many jobs if these prisons closed. Legislators in the districts where youth prisons were located objected to this job loss. To help address Union opposition, the Governor guaranteed new jobs for all staff at state facilities within OCFS or other state agencies, and OCFS and the Department of Labor helped staff find new positions. New York also passed legislation requiring one year notification before closing a facility.

Marissa Weissman, Vidhya Ananthakrishnan, Vincent Schiraldi, “Moving Beyond Youth Prisons: Lessons from New York City’s Implementation of Close to Home” (New York: Columbia Justice Lab, February 2019): 23, [https://justicelab.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/Justice%20Lab%20C2H%20Case%20Study%20FINAL%20\(Web%20Version\)%20\(1\).pdf](https://justicelab.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/Justice%20Lab%20C2H%20Case%20Study%20FINAL%20(Web%20Version)%20(1).pdf).

Identify Sustainable Funding

Officials anticipated that the Close to Home initiative would eventually result in an overall cost savings because it would enable the state to close youth prisons. However, an initial outlay would be required to start the program. The state began by working to reduce detention numbers. One tactic they used was to create a new funding stream in their 2011 state budget called the “Supervision and Treatment Services for Juveniles Program (STSJP). STSJP provided fiscal incentives for counties and New York City to provide a continuum of services to youth with an emphasis on programs to reduce detention and out-of-home placement.”⁹⁷

Close to Home’s initial funding structure was a cost sharing partnership that included a state block grant to New York City to cover an estimated half of the total cost to the City of the Initiative, with the City paying the other half.⁹⁸ This was a similar funding structure to that used to pay for youth placed in state facilities. However, in the 2018-19 budget cycle the state cut funding for the Close to Home program resulting in a loss to the city of approximately 40 percent of its funding. Fortunately, New York City was able to close the gap.⁹⁹

Evaluate the Impact

Close to Home has been effective at moving the vast majority of youth from New York City out of the large, state run secure carceral youth facilities and into local, smaller facilities where youth are housed much closer to home, as well as increasing diversion and the number of alternative to placement (ATF) programs in the community. Positive outcomes include the following:¹⁰⁰

- * Between 2012 to 2016, there was a 68 percent decline in the number of youth from New York City placed out of home; there was only a 20 percent reduction in placements for the rest of the state.
- * Looking at positive youth development indicators, 91 percent of youth passed their classes in the 2016-17 school year; 82 percent transitioned from a Close to Home facility to a parent, family member, or guardian in 2016; and 91 percent of youth who transitioned out of facilities were enrolled in community-based programs in 2016 with 67 percent of those completing the program.
- * Four years after Close to Home began, youth arrest rates declined 52 percent in New York City compared to 41 percent in the rest of the state.

Unfortunately, the Close to Home program has not yet been able to demonstrate a reduction in racial or ethnic disparities.¹⁰¹

5) Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund (Harris County, TX)

Rather than building a new, larger youth jail, Harris County, Texas—home to Houston and the third largest county in the country—committed to charting a new path forward to reduce incarceration and build out a community centered approach. The vision developed by local officials and community members, the Harris County Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund, was approved unanimously by the Harris County Commissioners’ Court in February 2021.¹⁰²

Establish a Planning Process¹⁰³

For many years advocates, service providers, community researchers, and directly impacted youth and families had been working to reform Harris County’s youth legal system. Concerned about increasingly crowded conditions at their local detention center in 2017, County officials initially were going to construct a large, new facility. Instead, with the election of a new head of the County in 2018, Lina Hidalgo, the Harris County Commissioners Court committed to examining the current youth legal system and laid the groundwork for a new path. From 2018-19, new leadership in juvenile court and juvenile probation helped to further reform efforts. The County

worked together with the Columbia Justice Lab, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and local stakeholders on developing a Task Force. While the Task Force’s launch was derailed due to the pandemic, its planning process led to new opportunities for reform. The pandemic also led to heightened efforts to decarcerate in order to protect the health of young people.

Convene Diverse Stakeholders

The success of these efforts helped make the case that youth could be safely returned home and motivated impacted youth and families, youth-serving organizations, and other interested stakeholders to establish the Redefining Youth Justice Coalition (the Coalition) in July of 2020. The Coalition’s intent was decarceration and development of a continuum of care for impacted youth in their communities.¹⁰⁴

The Coalition is taking steps to engage young people and center youth leadership and participation. The Harris County Justice Administration Department (JAD) has partnered with Collective Action for Youth (CA4Y) to establish a Youth Advisory Board. Members of the Board are young people from Harris County with lived experience that can advise the JAD and other county agencies on programs and policies impacting young people.¹⁰⁵

“The aim of reinvestment is to empower and resource communities to identify and design solutions that address their own needs. . . . Measures must be put into place for each reinvestment initiative to have community members at the table and meaningfully involved in supporting implementation.”

Cymone Fuller, Alessandra Meyer, Vidhya Ananthakrishnan, “Process Matters: Reflections from the Development of Harris County’s Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund and Recommendations to Guide Future Efforts” (New York: Columbia Justice Lab, December 2022): 50, 52, <https://justicelab.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/Process%20Matters.pdf>.

Conduct a Community Assessment

Harris County’s Justice Administration Department (JAD) conducted interviews with government agency officials and service providers in impacted communities and found that inadequate funding and challenging, difficult to navigate government contracting processes, were barriers to many grassroots, community-led organizations from serving youth in their communities.¹⁰⁶

Develop an Action Plan

The purpose of the Community Reinvestment Fund is to drive investment to Harris County’s most directly impacted communities and address the racial disparities in youth detention and lack of community-based alternatives.¹⁰⁷ Through the Fund, Harris County seeks to grow the capacity and operations of smaller community-based organizations to serve young people.¹⁰⁸ Many steps were involved in developing an action plan to establish the Fund, including the following:

- * County system stakeholders and Coalition members connected with leaders from Colorado’s Community Reinvestment Initiative to learn how to build a community reinvestment model.¹⁰⁹
- * The JAD invited Coalition members to join their Request for Proposal (RFP) working group to provide input on selecting an intermediary to receive and distribute the reinvestment funds.¹¹⁰
- * The Coalition initiated a process to solicit, train, and nominate interested Coalition members to serve in an advisory role to the Evaluation Committee for selecting grant recipients. The Coalition compensates them for their time.¹¹¹
- * The Harris County Commissioners Court selected Harris County-based non-profit, Change Happens, to serve as the intermediary organization to facilitate funding local organizations. Change Happens will engage directly with impacted communities to support grassroots service providers, strengthen their capacity, and improve their services.¹¹²

- * Stakeholders established a Youth Advisory Board to advise the intermediary. It is to be staffed by young people with lived experience.¹¹³

Identify Sustainable Funding¹¹⁴

The Fund was set up as a two-year pilot program housed within the JAD to make direct investments in community-based organizations serving youth and families in communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the youth legal system. The Fund currently totals \$4 million. Of this funding, two million is a reinvestment from the Harris County’s Juvenile Probation Department’s (JPD’s) budget; JPD’s Executive Director offered to contribute \$2 million from the agency’s unspent funds for the fiscal year, which were largely savings from decarceration during the pandemic. Two million more in funding is to come from the County’s general fund. This funding is understood to be just the beginning, or pilot funding, with stakeholders hoping to grow this funding through both redirecting resources away from incarceration and adding in new sources of funding.

Evaluate the Impact

A third-party evaluator will work with the intermediary to assess effectiveness.¹¹⁵

The Colorado Community Reinvestment team recommended looking across many government agencies — not just youth justice, for funding; starting small while getting to know community providers and then scaling up over time; and targeting resources hyper-locally to communities most impacted.

Cymone Fuller, Alessandra Meyer, Vidhya Ananthakrishnan, “Process Matters: Reflections from the Development of Harris County’s Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund and Recommendations to Guide Future Efforts” (New York: Columbia Justice Lab, December 2022): 51, <https://justicelab.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/Process%20Matters.pdf>.

Conclusion

Youth have told us what they need in order to thrive: investments in youth leadership, self-expression, and empowerment; investments in family, community, and connection; investments in health, safety, and healing; and investments in education and opportunity.

We must prioritize these investments for our children and families and partner with young people to reimagine holistic models of care that no longer rely on punitive, carceral systems. Through this platform we have profiled examples of these types of positive investments in our youth as well as examples of ways to create statewide and local infrastructure to support transformation of our youth legal system on a comprehensive scale. These investments and transformations can and have been done in localities around the country – we just need the political will to do so and the courage to confront the narrative that Black and Brown children can best be provided “services” by using the immense power of the state to criminalize and incarcerate them.

Appendix A

From Incarceration to Investment Checklist

This checklist is a non-exclusive series of questions to help guide transformation forward.



Reimagining youth justice

- ☐ Have you established a collaborative planning process for reimagining youth justice?
- ☐ Who is included in your collaboration for change?
 - * Most important are impacted youth and families but make sure to include all stakeholders, such as: advocates; public defenders; prosecutors; law enforcement; elected officials; judges; youth legal system agency/department heads, public health, education, and child welfare; community-based providers; community leaders.
- ☐ Have you hired a neutral facilitator or consulting team to help guide the group to consensus?
- ☐ Have you done an assessment of the strengths and needs of your community?
 - * Resource mapping to determine what community-based programs and services are available for youth in your community can be helpful in this assessment, including the following: afterschool programs, evening reporting centers, recreational centers, community centers, public libraries, public health clinics, youth arts programs, youth advocacy programs, vocational training, job skills programs, summer jobs programs for youth, mentoring programs.
 - * An example of community asset mapping: <https://placemattersmaine.org/community-asset-mapping/>
- ☐ What is the current continuum of care for system-involved youth in your state/locality?
 - * What services/resources/programs do you have for prevention, diversion, and community-based alternatives? How are they funded?
- ☐ What is the data on disparities in your youth legal system based on race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation and gender identity and expression?
 - * Create measures to track data and progress towards reducing disparities through the use of more community-based alternatives.
- ☐ Have you developed an actionable plan, including action steps, timelines, and associated costs to implement the solutions?
- ☐ Have you put into place a mechanism for oversight and monitoring of implementation of reforms?
 - * Can you get technical assistance to support you from any educational institutions, non-profit organizations, or private foundations?

Decarceration: Programs and policies should aim to reduce youth incarceration

- ☐ Does your state have legislation to support a sustainable funding mechanism for the support of community-based programs and resources?
 - * Ideally this would involve divestment from youth incarceration and reinvestment in which savings from reform are harnessed and channeled to community-based initiatives.
 - * Any divestment or reinvestment mechanisms should strive to ensure the funding saved cannot be used for other purposes.
- ☐ Does your state fiscally incentivize incarceration?
 - * What is the current framework for funding youth incarceration between states and localities and does this need to be changed so that localities are not incentivized to incarcerate youth in state facilities?
- ☐ What is your state’s cost per youth to incarcerate a young person?
 - * How does this compare to the cost per youth for community-based programs?
- ☐ What is the state of your carceral facilities for youth?
 - * Incidents of abuse
 - * Quality of education, recreation, other activities
 - * Deaths in custody
- ☐ What is the recidivism rate for incarcerated youth versus youth in community-based alternatives?
- ☐ How much lead time will the locality need to take over care of system-involved youth?
- ☐ How much state funding will be available to support localities?
- ☐ Can actions be taken to reduce unnecessary incarceration, such as due to technical probation violations and program failures?
- ☐ Consider whether implementation should be done at once or phased in.
 - * Determine how much funding will be available for implementation and the timeframe.

Investment in community-based alternatives to youth legal system involvement and incarceration

- ☐ Procurement policies - are your contracting and procurement policies hampering a community-based vision of youth justice?¹¹⁶
 - * Does your agency solicit and fund services specifically in communities that have the highest system referrals and youth incarceration rates?
 - * Are service needs informed by conversations and a review of needs with youth and families from directly impacted communities?
 - * Are you funding small, grassroots neighborhood-based providers rather than providers located outside of the neighborhood? Are the providers led and staffed by people in the community you’re intending to serve?

If not, investigate the reasons. Do you need to identify and build relationships with more locally-based organizations? Are there aspects of your solicitation process that serve as a barrier to their participation and could you address this?
 - * Keep the application and contracting process simple so that it is desirable to a range of potential candidates that have less experience procuring contracts.
 - * Does the current timeline and process for providers to receive payment from awarded contracts make it difficult for providers to work with you? Do you offer any support, like access to no-interest or low-interest loans, to bridge gaps there may be in payment?

Evaluation of community-based programs

- ☐ Does your state finance programs that are locally evaluated and not solely evidence-based practices?
- ☐ Are the community-based alternative programs able to evaluate their work? Are they sufficiently resourced with a stable source of funding?
 - * What metrics are being used to evaluate these programs and carceral facilities other than just recidivism? Consider including: educational attainment (passing classes, graduating), family reunification, jobs.
- ☐ How will you evaluate programs used?
 - * Consider using youth participatory research or other mechanisms that involve the impacted community in the evaluation process.
 - * Consider collecting both qualitative and quantitative data, including recidivism, educational attainment, job placement, and other measures of well-being.

Appendix B

Measuring Impact/ Program Evaluation

Evidence-Based Practices

When investing in programs to help youth, we want to ensure we are meeting their needs and having a positive impact on their lives. When it comes to youth justice, funders and policy makers in recent years have pushed for prevention and intervention programs to demonstrate greater effectiveness leading to interest in the use of evidence-based programs (EBPs).¹¹⁷ EBPs are programs that researchers have found to be effective after rigorous scientific studies, often involving an experimental design, such as randomized control trials.¹¹⁸ Increasingly, federal and private foundations are requiring the use of EBPs to improve youth outcomes and state agencies are requiring them as well.¹¹⁹

While EBPs have been helpful to many youth, they also have some limitations that can hinder some programs from being inclusive and accessible. Many EBP's are extremely expensive to purchase and implement because of the high cost it takes companies to develop and copyright them. They also often require specialized training for staff or the hiring of professionals to implement, as well as the purchase of curricula and other program materials. These programs are meant to be implemented exactly as designed in order to produce the most effective outcome, which leaves little room for financial leeway or adaptation to reflect the needs of the specific youth in a community. Finally, EBPs are often focused solely on preventing negative outcomes rather than cultivating positive developmental outcomes for youth. This results from the fact that many EPBs were sponsored by federal agencies concerned with addressing a specific, core issue, such as mental health, substance abuse, or delinquency.¹²⁰

Evaluative Processes that Build Community

NYJN recommends resourcing local community-based organizations to serve system-impacted youth. These organizations often cannot afford EBPs and, also, may want to use programs they have developed that are specifically tailored to their local youth population. Organizations can best evaluate the impact of their program on youth by using methodologies that bridge the partnership between participant and evaluator so that the research and evaluation process is not extractive but builds the community. Below are two models for localized and participatory evaluations of programs to determine how they are benefitting young people.

- * **Community Based Participatory Research Model** The Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) model is an approach designed to involve community members in the evaluation process in partnership with organizations and academic researchers.¹²¹ This helps evaluators gain a better understanding of the personal impact of social problems and potential solutions that actually benefit the stakeholders.

CBPR has been described as “an approach to research that is about effecting [sic] change to improve health and well-being in the communities involved.”¹²²

- * The Young Women's Freedom Center (YWFC) used a [Youth Participatory Action Research \(YPAR\)](#) approach in their research report on the experiences of system-impacted youth in the youth legal system in San Francisco “as a way to decolonize research practices.”¹²³ Young people impacted by the carceral state were sourced as researchers because they hold the expertise needed for new methods of evaluation that involve first hand experience, rather than simple observation.¹²⁴ YWFC invested in training and leadership for the youth participants to enable them to be equal partners in the research process.¹²⁵

- * The Urban Institute, with support from the Young Men's Initiative, conducted an evaluation of the Credible Messengers approach to restorative justice, using community-engaged methods (CEM) and a participatory action research (PAR) approach.¹²⁶ Researchers involved outside organizations, city agency staff and leaders, funders, and stakeholders in the project design and literature review of their study.¹²⁷ They also directly hired four Credible Messengers (CMs) and trained them to work as research assistants on the study. The CMs were involved in all aspects of the study, including research design, data collection, and dissemination of the study's findings.¹²⁸

- * **Collaborative Model** The collaborative approach to an evaluation “systematically invites and engages stakeholders in program evaluation planning and implementation.”¹²⁹ This model can involve the use of consulting services, national partnerships, and community coordination to develop research-based evaluations. For example, The Youth Collaboratory partners with organizations by offering consultation and connection services along with conducting their own research to help solve social issues.¹³⁰ They rely on community coordination and comprehensive research in order to help strengthen outcomes for youth in high risk situations.

- * In the [Youth Outcomes Project](#), the Youth Collaboratory partnered with Chapin Hall, federal agencies, researchers, practitioners, funders, and directly impacted youth to develop a set of metrics that can be used to facilitate consistent data collection related to the core outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness. They consolidated the full set of core measures into a sample survey that organizations can use to evaluate the impact of their work.¹³¹

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About NYJN

The [National Youth Justice Network \(NYJN\)](#) builds the movement for anti-racist, healing-centered youth justice. We unite a diverse network of advocates and organizers to shift youth justice away from policing and prisons toward community-based, trauma-informed and healing-centered responses to youth needs. Our work centers the needs of the most marginalized, and we seek a reimagined future where Black, Brown, Indigenous, LGBTQIA+ youth, and youth with disabilities have the freedom, resources and opportunities necessary to thrive.





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