

A Guide to Reducing Juvenile Offending in Your Community

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A Step-by-Step Process



There is a growing movement in this country to replace punitive approaches to addressing juvenile delinquency. These nurturing programs and practices prevent offending from happening and intervene with those who do offend by using methods that prevent further offense.

This guide provides you with a brief overview of the costly nature of the juvenile justice system in many communities and solid evidence about how you can help your community move toward a system that nurtures every young person so that they grow into caring, productive, and successful adults.

Moving Away from a Costly and Ineffective Juvenile Justice System

Many states and communities have used an approach to juvenile justice that not only failed to prevent offending, but actually increased the chances that an offender would become a career criminal. The system emphasized punishment and brought offenders into contact with other offenders in ways that actually accelerated criminal behavior.¹⁻³

The costs of this heavy emphasis on incarceration are well documented. As of 2020, the average cost of incarcerating a youth offender was [estimated to be \\$214,000 a year](#). And because incarceration has been found to increase offending, we have had a system that invests taxpayer money in increasing the problem that it was supposed to solve.

Finally, our traditional juvenile justice system incarcerates young people of color at [twice the rate for white youth](#).



Progress in Reform of Juvenile Justice

Increasing the Effectiveness of Juvenile Justice Programs

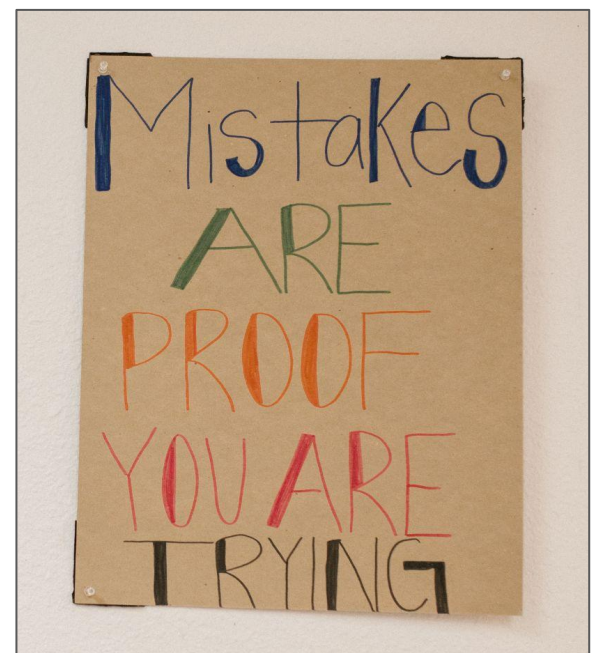
Research has pinpointed more effective ways of ensuring that juvenile offenders do not re-offend.⁴⁻⁶ Programs and practices that are oriented toward providing therapeutic services and skill building are distinctly more successful in reducing recidivism than programs focused on punishment or control.⁶

There are four types of effective services:

- A. **Restorative Justice** involves offenders making restitution for their offense and helping offenders and victims restore positive relationships through mediation.
- B. **Skill-building** focuses on helping offenders develop the social, academic, and vocational skills that open up increasing opportunities for prosocial and reinforcing endeavors.
- C. **Counseling** involves individual or group therapy that focuses on the development of social and behavioral skills and improvement of relationships with family and peers.
- D. **Programs that provide multiple services.** Many programs provide a mix of these services. These kinds of programs can cut recidivism by at least 10 percent.

However, among higher risk offenders the reductions in recidivism are generally greater. (Low risk offenders are often better off not having any intervention, since there is evidence that bringing such adolescents into juvenile justice programs can increase their offending.⁷)

A shining example of what is possible comes from the state of Colorado. Legislation has adopted a number of reforms, such as moving resources from detention to diversion, providing professional training for all staff on how to implement screening tools, and implementing evidence-based programs for prevention and intervention, among others. Colorado was able to implement a wide variety of evidence-based practices. One of their top priorities was to prevent incarceration by diverting low risk offenders to other programs and maintaining parental custody. According to a 2018 state report, "in the past year, Colorado has seen a 3.6% decrease in juvenile arrests, a decrease of 3.1% in delinquency petitions, a decrease in detention admissions of 8.1%, and a decrease in juvenile commitment rates by 1.5%."



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Additionally, across the past decade, the state of Colorado has documented a decrease in recidivism rates from 22% in 2011 to 14% in 2018. They also noted that “the majority of youth who participate in Colorado’s Division of Criminal Justice diversion program do not recidivate.” However, they also observed discrepancies in who was selected to participate in diversion programs. Their statistics showed that white youth offenders were five times as likely to be allowed to participate in diversion programs than black youth offenders. Unsurprisingly, this discrepancy was attributed not to a statewide pattern, but to jurisdictional differences. It is important to note this discrepancy when developing a plan to implement evidence-based practices to ensure opportunities for success are equally distributed across race, mental health, and socioeconomic status.

Estimating the Effectiveness of Your Juvenile Justice System

Lipsey and his colleagues⁴⁻⁶ have developed a system for assessing the degree to which local juvenile justice systems are employing practices that are likely to be successful and are not using practices that make further offending more likely. The Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP) is a system for rating juvenile justice programs to estimate their likely effect on recidivism, based on the meta-analyses that Lipsey and his colleagues have done. Any community can use this evidence-based rating scheme for assessing the expected effectiveness of programs for reducing the recidivism of juvenile offenders. Analyzing the state of your communities’ system can be a first step toward strengthening the success of your system in preventing further offending.

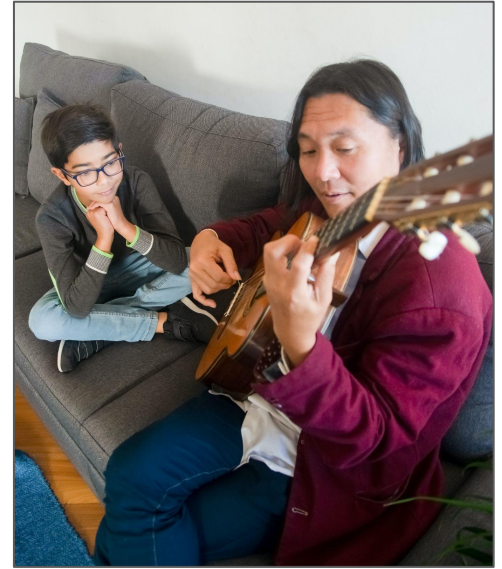


Preventing Delinquency

We are accustomed to thinking of the juvenile justice system in terms of the apprehension of offenders and the things we do to prevent further offending. However, as we elaborate in this section, offending can be prevented. Any community that seeks to reduce delinquency needs to formally include preventive interventions in its juvenile justice system.

There are at least three types of programs that can prevent delinquency. They include family interventions, school programs, and community programs that engage young people in all sorts of prosocial activities. These programs have the added benefit of preventing not simply juvenile offending, but the entire range of psychological and behavioral problems that undermine adolescents’ well-being.

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Family Interventions

Behavioral pathways have been found linking coercive family interactions in 12-13 year-olds to violence in young adulthood.⁸ Such coercive interactions extend and become patterns of learned behavior. As such, efforts to prevent or change these interactions can have outsize effect on the development of a young person's life. These interactions are one example of a risk factor that family prevention programs seek to help families with. They do this by helping families develop much more patient, consistent, and reinforcing ways of interacting.

Leslie et al. (2016)⁹ identified primary care providers as a key method of dissemination of family programs. Primary care environments offer several benefits, which would allow for easier implementation of these programs. First, existing infrastructure within primary care (existing staff, age-based screenings, pre-existing relationships) allows for effective implementation without significant additional resources for the primary care provider. Second, people tend to trust their child's doctors due to the frequency at which visits occur for children. This trust leads parents to ask doctors about behavioral health issues independent of any concerted effort. Finally, primary care environments have been shown to be effective avenues of administration, even for shortened versions of prevention programs.

There are three levels of preventative intervention: universal, in which all families can benefit; selective, which contain families with vulnerable populations such as special needs children or children of substance abusing parents, and; indicated, in which families of those already showing onset of behavioral problems are targeted. Unlike with post-hoc interventions involving the juvenile justice system, indicated preventive interventions show good efficacy at reducing problem behaviors.

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Prevention programs which reduce juvenile delinquency and criminality are present at almost all ages of development, from prenatal programs to prevention efforts with 18 year-olds (and beyond). For example, the Nurse-Family Partnership program involves nurses doing home-visits to first-time pregnant mothers up through the baby's first two years of life. This program has been shown to decrease delinquency when children reach adolescence. Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development¹⁰ (blueprintsprograms.org) has certified four preventative interventions targeting juvenile crime as "Model+" (externally validated and replicated), and as the literature continues to grow, more programs will become eligible for this certification. These Model+ programs include, for example, GenerationPMTO, a selective prevention program for 3-18 year-olds which uses parent skill training to address conduct problems in kids.¹¹

School Programs

Promoting nurturing environments that foster the development of prosocial behaviors may be the most effective way to prevent juvenile delinquency. While targeting the prevention of juvenile delinquency requires a multi-tiered approach encompassing intervention at the family and community level,¹² intervening in the school environment may be the most effective means to prevent the antisocial behaviors that often result in juveniles offending.

Although schools have the potential to cultivate environments that promote healthy well-adjusted youth from an array of socio-economic backgrounds, schools have also been identified as a potential gateway into the juvenile system: known as the school to prison pipeline. This phenomenon refers to the overwhelming number of students of color and students with disabilities who end up in the criminal justice system as a result of poor academic achievement and mismanagement of behavioral issues through the use of punitive punishment-based practices (e.g. suspensions, expulsions, etc.).¹³



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One way to address this may be through the promotion of School Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS). SWPBIS is a universal, school-wide prevention program with the goal of establishing a school's culture that aims to support the development of positive social skills and behavioral norms. SWPBIS gives peers the opportunity to work together to create a school environment rich in routine, consistency, positivity and safety. Schools that have adopted this model have seen a drastic decrease in suspensions and problem behaviors, as well as an altered perception of school safety among staff and students.¹⁴ While SWPBIS has consistently yielded positive outcomes, schools often struggle with staff buy-in, funding, time to train all individuals in the system, as well as the sustainability of implementing all required components of this practice.¹⁵

Knowing that SWPBIS comes with the limitations noted above, fostering nurturing environments and prosocial behaviors can occur in the classroom with minimal resources and time. While many classroom-based approaches to teach prosocial behaviors often involve committing instructional time, one approach can be folded into the daily instructional practice known as cooperative learning. Cooperative learning asks teachers to increase the opportunities for positive peer interaction through structured small-group learning activities.¹⁶ Through this method, students feel welcomed and develop friendships with others who may be from different social groups. Cooperative learning has been shown to enhance social acceptance of diverse students, at the same time that it prevents substance use and antisocial behavior. It also reduces discrimination; you're less likely to dislike someone who just helped you get an A.



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Another classroom-based intervention to address problem behavior is the use of the evidence-based behavior management system, the PAX Good Behavior Game (GBG). The GBG is not a curriculum, but rather a behavioral procedure based on the science of Applied Behavior Analysis. The GBG helps teach students how to work together to cultivate a positive learning environment. Implementation consists of dividing the classroom into teams and points being administered when students on each team engage in specific expected classroom behaviors. Once a specific criteria is met, rewards selected by the classroom are delivered. This approach has been replicated over 20 times across different students, grades, and settings with consistent positive outcomes including the increase of on-task behavior and decrease of disruptive behavior in the classroom.^{17,18} Additionally, long-term follow up on individuals who have received this intervention during their elementary education years indicate long-lasting impact of this intervention on impulsive and disruptive behavior of children and teens, as well as reduction in substance use or serious anti-social behaviors.

Creating a nurturing educational environment in which teachers, students, and staff enjoy each other, will not simply prevent painful outcomes for young people, it will enable them to live productive lives in caring relationships with others

Community Programs

Mentoring. Mentoring programs are one of the most commonly used forms of juvenile justice prevention and intervention in America.¹⁹ There is evidence of mentoring occurring as far back as our hunter-gatherer days,²⁰ and contemporary programs such as Big Brother Big Sister have received widespread acclaim. Despite this, there is relatively little research into the efficacy of mentoring on juvenile justice prevention or intervention. This section will attempt to collate the information that is available.



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Mentoring has been shown to be effective in aiding both prevention and interventions of delinquency. A meta-analysis, conducted by David DuBois and colleagues in 2011¹⁹ found that mentoring programs, implemented with fidelity, showed widespread low-to-moderate effect sizes on juvenile delinquency. These effect sizes increased further when the programs were targeted, with the recruitment of mentee-matched mentors showing the most impact on effect size. These effects were durable at a 4-year follow up across psychological, conduct problem-related, academic, and physical health categories.¹⁹ CrimeSolutions, a Department of Justice program and practice review service, gave the practice of mentoring a score of “effective” (their highest rating) in the prevention of juvenile delinquency (as well as a score of “promising” for reducing drug and alcohol abuse, multiple education outcomes, and psychological functioning).²¹

Prevention and intervention efforts generally focus on groups – families, schools, or communities – as a way to increase the breadth of the effort. Mentoring, by contrast, is a one-on-one interaction, allowing for more interpersonal experiences. In part due to this, the mentoring programs that are most effective at addressing delinquency are those which establish strong positive relationships (in which the mentee feels like they “matter” and their strengths are recognized).²²

There are still uncertainties regarding mentoring programs, especially in their scalability. Local programs have consistently had stronger results than when attempting to scale, primarily due to shortage of mentors and program sustainability issues.²³ Difficulties connecting a mentor with a mentee was cited by 77% of programs as the largest problem they faced.¹⁹ Iatrogenic effects have also been cited, with one study finding that youths who showed no prior delinquent behavior had increased levels of delinquency after exposure to delinquent peers.²⁴



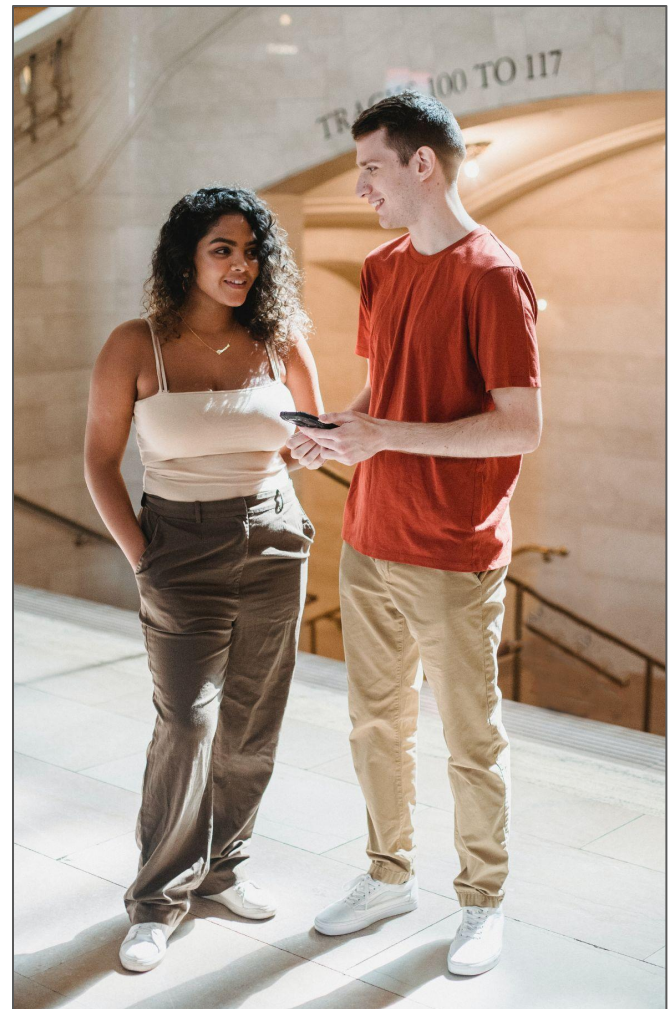
Extracurricular Activities. In his book *Our Kids*,²⁵ Robert Putnam describes how more affluent school districts have numerous after-school activities which increase the breadth of skill and knowledge that adolescents have, while also engaging them in reinforcing activities. In contrast, less affluent districts have virtually no after-school activities. This leaves their students to find things to do. Often the things they find to do are illegal. Thus, every community should ensure that all of its schools and youth serving organizations have extracurricular activities.

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Preventing Access to Tobacco and Alcohol. Access to tobacco and alcohol are risk factors for minors starting to use these substances. This can be reduced by rewarding clerks for refusing to sell to them^{26,27} as well as by enforcing the law with fines for illegal sales.²⁸

Interactions Between Youth and Law Enforcement. Police officers are usually the first point-of-contact between youth and the justice system. Although frequently the first responders in youth cases, police officers rarely receive adequate training in effective communication and interaction strategies targeted to youth. State juvenile justice policies still promote adult approaches, despite consistent neurobiological evidence that the adolescent brain processes, perceives, and responds differently than an adult brain. Strategies for Youth found that most police academies contacted, devote less than 1% of training to interactions with adolescents,²⁹ yet 20% to 40% of juvenile arrests are for “contempt of cop” offenses, such as questioning or “disrespecting” an officer.³⁰ Incarceration of adolescents fails to decrease recidivism and compounds the negative impacts on the 60% to 70%³¹ of youth in correctional facilities who have significant untreated mental health problems.³²

A program in Boston, Policing the Teen Brain was created to prevent arrests by improving officer-youth interactions. In 1998, the Boston public schools directed students to take public transportation to school, and within 1 year, 40,000 students used public transit daily. The Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority police implemented “zero tolerance” policies that led to 646 juvenile arrests that year.³³ In response to the large number of youths arrested for minor offenses, an attorney and a child psychiatrist devised training to address officers’ perceptions that juvenile misbehavior would best respond to arrest and incarceration. The 2-day training includes information about the functioning of the adolescent brain to help officers understand and respond more effectively to low-level offenses. After the training, juvenile arrests decreased from 646 in 1999 to 74 in 2009. Arrests have remained consistently below 100 each year since, with no decrease in public safety.³³ However, this has not yet been formally evaluated in a randomized trial. Additional information about this training is available at www.StrategiesforYouth.org.



Additional Resources

We have provided a summary of some of the best practices for reducing juvenile offending—and other problems of adolescence. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy provides an analysis of specific programs and their cost and benefit for reducing juvenile crime and related problems. It is especially valuable in that it identifies the cost per person receiving each program and the economic benefit it produces. The vast majority of these programs have greater financial benefit than the program costs. The benefits include reduced juvenile justice costs, reduced healthcare costs, and increased income for recipients of the program. For example, Cognitive Behavior Therapy for incarcerated youth is estimated to return \$52.59 for every dollar invested in it. This benefits taxpayers, participants, and others.

Any community that wishes to improve outcomes for their youth and reduce the burden of the existing system on taxpayers, should make use of this valuable information.



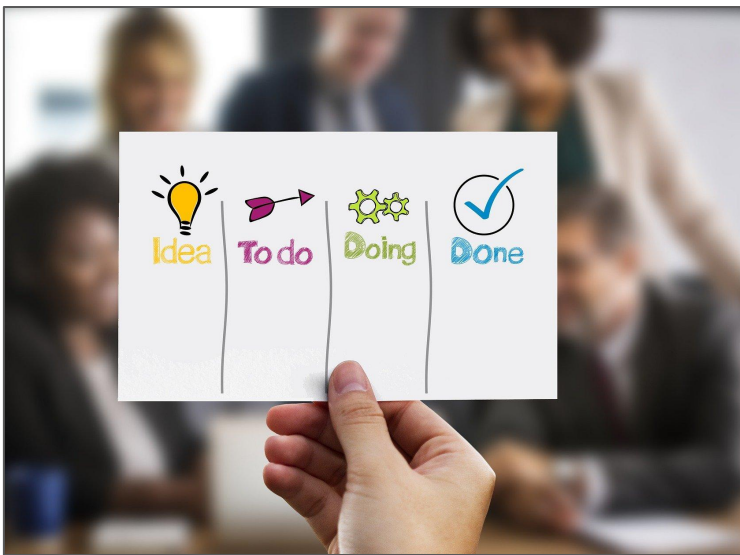
How Values to Action Can Help Your Community

Hopefully, we have convinced you that communities can have much lower levels of juvenile offending and much better outcomes for their children and adolescents if they implement research-based policies and practices that reduce offending. However, improving your system will require organizing a community consensus and the development of a concrete plan for how every sector of the community can contribute to improving your supports for youth development.

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Fortunately, there is research on how this can be accomplished. Neighborhoods and communities have been helped to take collective action to address problems like climate change, cardiovascular disease,³⁴ cigarette smoking,³⁵ youth alcohol use,³⁶ and youth drug use.³⁷⁻⁴⁴

The key to successful efforts has been the organization of support for change from every sector of the community. You may think that only the schools and the formal justice system are relevant, but the changes you need to achieve require widespread community support. For example, if funds are going to be raised or policies changed, you will need the school system, healthcare and family service providers, the faith community, businesses and industry, the media, law enforcement, and the justice system to provide strong support so that families get the kind of interventions needed and schools get better at nurturing every child's development.



We can help you get your community started on improving your system. We help create Action Circles of diverse community leaders to develop a strategic plan for ensuring that more young people grow into caring and productive adults. We help Action Circles get clear on the current state of juvenile justice in their community—the rate of offending, the cost of offenses, and the cost of incarceration and treatment. We help you clarify the practices used by your community to address offending and to gauge their effectiveness. We help Action Circles educate the rest of the community about how crime can be reduced, how tax money can be saved, and how young people can be helped to thrive.

Then, in a collaborative process involving a broad range of community members, we help you identify specific steps that can be taken to improve practices and outcomes.

If you would like to explore our helping your community, please contact Values to Action at hello@valuestoaction.org.

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