

Close to Home: Strategies to Place Young People in Their Communities

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Information

This publication is part of an eight-part series of information sheets and reports developed from a national study on deincarceration conducted by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. The complete series, along with a ninth piece containing notes and resources, can be found here:

<http://nccdglobal.org/what-we-do/our-focus-areas/juvenile-justice/deincarceration-reports>

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NCCD promotes just and equitable social systems for individuals, families, and communities through research, public policy, and practice.

Introduction



Incarceration can be the default reaction to juvenile delinquency and crime in many states and local jurisdictions. Unfortunately, it is not the most beneficial response to a young person in trouble or threats to public safety (real or perceived). In some communities—particularly poor, urban communities of color—the impact of youth incarceration is more concentrated. For residents of these communities, youth incarceration is sometimes seen as law enforcement and supervising agencies sweeping through and arresting, removing, and relocating youth to large congregate care facilities (i.e., juvenile prisons) far from their homes.

Until recently, “tough-on-crime” communities were purported as being “safer” when they incarcerated youth; young people were seen as getting a second chance, a respite from street life, and even a dose of

rehabilitative structure. For those residing in poor and/or otherwise challenged areas, out-of-home placements were sometimes even considered a chance for a “normal” life. Yet, as the juvenile justice stakeholders we interviewed suggested, being removed from one’s community and placed in a cell is anything but normal. For many youth it means long separations from their homes, communities, and natural support systems. These punitive practices have fueled mistrust and friction between law enforcement and communities of color.

To picture this scenario, one only has to imagine states like Texas, Michigan, and California, where a person can easily drive for four to six hours and barely cover half of the state. Or, consider some of the nation’s large urban centers: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Transportation within

these cities may be difficult but manageable; however, travel outside of these locales is next to impossible, particularly for those without cars and resources, which is the case for a large number of justice-involved families. As one Northeastern stakeholder reported:

"This is one of the things we are doing. We don't ask families, 'how far away do you live from the facility where your kid is confined?' I only ask them, 'how long does it take you to get there?'"

It is well-established that removing system-involved youth from their homes or communities can, and often does, have devastating impacts on their futures. It impedes critical links to families that all youth need to thrive. In addition, these youth are more likely to reoffend, are less likely to reconnect to school and work, and often see more health challenges.ⁱ

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) spoke with 140 juvenile justice stakeholders across the country in a series of interviews, focus groups, and convenings.ⁱⁱ Through these conversations, stakeholders described reductions in the overall number of youth sentenced to out-of-home placements and secure confinement

in the last decade. Study respondents said that reductions and reforms often were driven by financial constraints and that declining youth crime rates were a factor in shrinking the pool of youth who might be incarcerated. In addition, respondents said that targeted reform efforts have resulted from juvenile justice leaders and advocates believing in the juvenile justice system's responsibility and potential to serve youth and families more effectively within their own communities.

Although stories differed by location, NCCD found three overarching themes among beliefs that most, if not all, study participants shared: (1) Out-of-home placements, including secure confinement, should be used sparingly (or be the exception rather than the norm); (2) whenever possible, youth in these placements should remain close to home; and (3) youth should be in the least-restrictive setting. Some of the specific strategies that respondents are implementing to align their practices with these beliefs include ensuring that an out-of-home placement is necessary and other options have been tried; building a local continuum of placement options within the community; and reducing lengths of stay in out-of-home placements.



Placement Strategies to Keep More Youth Close to Home

Develop a Decision Point Where Alternatives Are Reviewed

In California, Connecticut, Illinois, New York, Oregon, and Washington, DC, juvenile justice systems developed a decision point—a place in the process—where they review the decision to place a youth out of the home and identify other options to keep youth at home.

Build a Local Continuum

To build a better continuum, states are developing and funding networks of local nonprofit placements for youth; making a reduction in state placements a benchmark for success with providers; targeting the treatment needs of youth; and using halfway houses, treatment centers, and local facilities as alternatives to placing youth far from home. Nongovernmental agencies are providing technical assistance to localities and nonprofit partners to help develop a more robust continuum than existed before.

Reduce Lengths of Stay in Facilities and at Various Points in the System

States used strategies as diverse as repealing mandatory minimum sentences, specifying the lengths of stay in provider contracts, and hiring expeditors to move youth through the system to reduce the time they are incarcerated.

Develop a System to Review and Reduce the Number of Out-of-Home Placements

An explicit and systematic process can be developed so that each decision to remove a youth from his/her home is monitored, controlled, and used as the exception rather than the rule. Respondents stated that probation departments should support and strengthen relationships between youth and their families. To achieve this, many jurisdictions make out-of-home placement decisions prior to adjudication using multi-agency teams when possible so that mental health, child protection, and education needs can be taken into consideration. These teams ensure that all other options have been explored and exhausted before an out-of-home placement is recommended. Alternatives may include placement

with extended family members who can help transition youth back to their primary families as soon as possible.

Erie County, New York, reduced the use of out-of-home placement by ensuring that case planning occurs early in the decision-making process. According to an East Coast study participant, this procedure has reduced the use of out-of-home placements.

“In Erie County they have a model delinquency court in their family court and they really frontload case planning like a multi-disciplinary team. They bring a group of people from different specialties, and they all come to the table very early in a case. What they found is that when they do that processing and case planning very early and get a plan in place, kids are able to go home. And so

they have really reduced their use of out-of-home placement by doing upfront, cross-systems case planning, service planning, and implementing those case plans right away.”—Jacquelyn Greene, Director of Juvenile Justice Policy, Division of Criminal Justice Services, New York State

System stakeholders in New York, California, Connecticut, Illinois, and Washington, DC, have developed formal structures to review the decision to place youth outside of their homes and ensure that other alternatives have been exhausted and utilized.

Connecticut; Santa Cruz County, California; Erie County, New York; Multnomah County, Oregon; and Cook County, Illinois, use committee structures that include juvenile representatives from the courts, public defenders, prosecutors, the local juvenile probation department, and local providers. These committees review decisions around placement or detention. Santa Cruz County, for example, has a placement screening committee. Founded in the late 1990s, this committee provides fiscal and administrative oversight for placement decisions. Their goal is to reduce the county’s reliance on the most restrictive placements that remove youth from their homes.

In Washington, DC, a supervisor is responsible for convening a group within the department to review the information and decide whether all options besides out-of-home placement have been exhausted. This approach has helped reduce the number of young people sent to secure residential treatment centers (RTC) outside of the city. The DC Department of Behavioral Health serves a key role in determining whether other options were tried and if the RTC is necessary. In addition, a panel within the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services can review RTC recommendations any time a case manager requests such a review.

Develop a Local Continuum That Includes a Range of Options

In addition to other reforms, juvenile justice systems can build robust continuums of local placement and treatment options in order to keep more young people at home or in placements in their home communities. NCCD learned that juvenile justice system stakeholders are developing placement options (secure and non-secure) closer to communities in which young people live, networks of nonprofit placements that serve youth close to home, and treatment options for youth who need treatment in their home communities.

NCCD found that some states intentionally closed facilities located far from their urban areas and communities with high volumes of youth commitments. Appropriate placements in closer proximity to each young person’s home have replaced these facilities. But, as one stakeholder acknowledged, the term “home” is often used generically—what matters is that youth maintain or develop links to supportive adults.





"I think that 'close to home' is an open definition in many ways. It's not necessarily geography. It's not a house. It's a significant individual—parent, aunt, uncle—your support. It's not a physical location. It's a connection."—Kim Godfrey, Executive Director, PbS Learning Institute

For example, in just 10 years the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS) closed one half of its juvenile correctional facilities. Ohio DYS now has four state correctional facilities and funds and supports 12 community corrections facilities and other programs throughout the state. This "outside-the-fence" continuum has helped the state system reduce the number of juveniles in secure confinement.

Similarly, after developing a continuum of secure and non-secure post-adjudication facilities in local counties, Texas reduced its number of youth prisons from 16 to six while developing a continuum of secure and non-secure post-adjudicative facilities within counties.ⁱⁱⁱ Now 33 secure post-adjudication facilities are located throughout the state. Through this structure, probation departments can broaden their network of services by contracting with nearby counties. This allows delinquent youth to receive rehabilitative services without being shipped far from home.

"Texas has been very effective in terms of working with county juvenile probation departments to rally around the vision of providing juveniles with the right services at the right time. Many juvenile probation departments will contract with another juvenile probation department to access services they are not able to provide. This occurs whether the service is pre-adjudication detention, post-adjudication residential, and other services in between; local departments will work together to create, access, or share services necessary for the juveniles they serve."—Vicki Spriggs, CEO, Texas CASA, and former Executive Director of the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission

New York State and New York City have worked together to develop the Close to Home initiative, which keeps youth tied to their families and communities. Through legislation, this initiative created a collaborative agreement between the state Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) and the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS). Before this agreement, adjudicated youth from New York City were placed in state facilities that could be many miles from family and other support systems. Together these agencies developed a range of local placement options for New York City so that youth who would ordinarily be placed in state OCFS facilities can now be placed in ACS facilities in the city. This initiative has been implemented for youth in limited-secure and non-secure facilities. It will be implemented eventually for youth in secure facilities.^{iv}

Illinois and Michigan also implemented strategies, targeted grant funding to specific regions in their states, and reduced reliance on out-of-home placements.^v Other jurisdictions developed networks of nonprofit placements with the capacity to serve youth close to home. For example, Wayne County, Michigan, uses a network of preferred nonprofit providers. This structure enables the county to better serve the needs of youth through regional service

coalitions that target specific communities. Since developing this network of preferred providers, Michigan's largest county has seen a decline in the number of youth placed in youth correctional facilities—a decrease from 731 in 1998 to seven in 2012.^{vi}

“What we did in Wayne County is we went to a group of agencies and we said, ‘We want to create a preferred provider network. If you agree to participate in this network and you agree to work with our private management organizations around reduced length of stay, we will give you first referral of kids in Wayne County that are ordered to be in out-of-home care.’ In addition to doing this, we have to take a 10-percent rate reduction over what the state-approved rate is. In return, they receive first referral on these kids.”—Dan Chaney, Director, Department of Children and Family Services, Wayne County, Michigan

While the names and structures may vary, the preferred provider network model also is being used in other juvenile justice systems including those in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania;^{vii} and Washington, DC.

In Ohio and Illinois, local alternatives to placing youth out of the home due to serious mental health challenges has been a focus. Through their initiatives to meet the mental health needs of juvenile offenders, these states have leveraged federal Medicaid and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration dollars with local funds to keep young people out of the state system. They also have paired these funds with specific approaches to meet young people's mental health needs outside of juvenile facilities and focus on returning youth to their home communities. New York's Supervision and Treatment Services for Juveniles Program provides moneys to counties with the aim of developing local alternatives to detention and residential placement and treatment, including drug treatment services for youth.

In some states (e.g., New York, Illinois, Ohio), technical assistance was provided by the state agency or a nongovernmental partner, such as a foundation (e.g., The Annie E. Casey Foundation in Alabama, Models for Change in Ohio) or a university (e.g., Case Western Reserve and the University of Cincinnati in Ohio). Respondents reported that this technical assistance was a key factor in helping to expand local and community-based placement options.



Reducing Lengths of Stay

“When you look at the numbers in terms of the decrease, one of the biggest drivers was to reduce the length of stay. For many, many years kids who would be placed under OCFS could sometimes spend 12 or 18 months in a voluntary agency or OCFS facility. By investing in aftercare by opening community multi-service offices in neighborhoods across the state, and by investing in therapeutic and positive youth development programs, we reduced length of stay to seven months. We actually immediately decreased the number of beds that had to be used by the state.”—Felipe A. Franco, Deputy Commissioner, Division of Juvenile Justice and Opportunities for Youth, New York State Office of Children and Family Services

Length-of-stay actions and decisions should be closely monitored and tied to research. In the past, juvenile justice systems kept young people incarcerated and in out-of-home placements longer than required by the courts or deemed necessary by those providing supervision and treatment. This often was due to the faulty belief that long placements changed behavior and kept communities safer. However, longer stays



in juvenile institutions do not reduce recidivism.^{viii}

Research published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention confirms this fact. NCCD found that a number of juvenile justice systems across the country are responding to the aforementioned research by reducing the length of time youth are placed out of home and ensuring that youth return home expeditiously. Systems are using a variety of strategies to reduce lengths of stay. These include the following examples.

- In some Michigan juvenile justice departments, systems have specified shorter lengths of stay through contracts with the courts or with the nonprofit providers with whom they contract directly.
- In Washington, DC, staff are assigned to ensuring the removal of systemic barriers to the release of young people or instilling a sense of mission that the system must move young people home as soon as possible. As one Northeastern stakeholder of the length-of-stay challenge said, “I want to know by worker how many kids are in the facilities and how long each one of them has been there. And I am demanding that they ask the question every day: ‘Why is this kid still there and what the hell are we doing about it?’”
- Ohio recently changed a provision mandating that young people convicted of certain offenses be held for a set number of years; the system now has more flexibility to bring a young person back before a judge for a hearing to determine whether that youth can be served closer to home for the remainder of the sentence. In Oregon, the legislature recently voted to convene a task force to look at barriers to reducing the length of stay for youth sentenced under a mandatory minimum and give judges the ability to place youth in the community after a shorter term with the state.

Summary



This project has uncovered countless individuals and organizations working at grassroots and systems-based levels to keep delinquent youth close to home and to reduce out-of-home placements. This report outlines a fraction of these efforts and illustrates that the movement has seen success in many US states.

As discussed, partnering with group homes, service providers, families, and youth in the communities most impacted by incarceration can help build strong multi-disciplinary teams, stem the flow of placements, and offer broader continuums of care that are closer to home and more culturally appropriate than those that currently exist. Efforts to reduce lengths of stay may help young people build the connections to their

families and other support systems needed for better youth outcomes and safer communities for all.

Despite the gains and the strategies discussed in this report that have reduced the total number of youth in out-of-home placement, problems remain for the field to address. Glaring racial and ethnic disparities in the use of out-of-home placements continue (see “Trends in Deincarceration” in [this report](#)). These findings do not diminish the efforts of those working in this area; however, they point to the need for families, advocates, community members, and systems leaders to continue their efforts until outcomes are improved for all youth.