



Retiring Juvenile Detention Centers for Wrap-Around Community-Based Services

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All too often, juvenile detention centers (JDCs) are seen as a solution to providing a safe and secure housing option for youth where they can

obtain treatment and rehabilitation after involvement in the criminal justice system.

However, youth in JDCs, and girls in particular, have often been

victims of trauma

that contributed to their

criminal justice involvement. Like other systems serving youth with externalizing symptoms of trauma, JDCs implement

punitive policies that exacerbate symptoms of trauma and fail to meet youth's needs for love, belonging, and self-esteem.



Figure 1 Photograph by PxFuel CCO

“The girls’ feedback, which was conceptualized within a System Responsiveness and hierarchy of needs framework, led JDC probation and mental health staff to improve services (e.g., better laundry system, longer showers, warmer food), climate (e.g., consistent reward system, confidentiality of grievances), and treatment (e.g., increase focus on gender and culture) to reduce the trauma of incarceration among girls in custody.”

Highlights

Youth are not best served in JDC environments and should be diverted to community-based and therapeutic environments whenever possible.

Girls’ feedback through a confidential youth advisory process prompted systemic change better suited to meet their needs.

Methods

As part of a multi-year collaboration, our research team created a confidential youth advisory process in one JDC. We acted as liaisons between the girls in custody and JDC administrators, reporting girls' feedback at monthly meetings. Participant confidentiality, safety, and consent were priorities.

Results

- Many of the girls in detention had experienced significant trauma, including commercial sexual exploitation. The behaviors that led them to be incarcerated were symptoms of trauma.
- Existing Juvenile Detention Center policies may have been worsening the girls' trauma symptoms.
- Youth should receive comprehensive mental health services, services to meet their basic needs, and education to heal from past traumas and feel safe.
- A confidential youth advisory process was effective at encouraging JDC probation and mental health staff to improve services, climate, and treatment.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Community Psychology values research and action that promotes personal, collective, and relational wellness to help communities make decisions that support their health and growth. Attending to Community Psychology methods and ethical values, we listened to the needs and perspectives of both the girls and the juvenile justice administrators. Our role as consultants helped us bridge communication and power differences to promote reasonable and effective recommendations for transformative action.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: A confidential youth advisory process effectively supported improvements in the JDC. This process also helped us uncover novel, and unexpected, findings; for example, that most girls in the center were survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. Based on the success of our methodology, including the legal and ethical guidelines we implemented, we recommend that criminal justice researchers implement a confidential youth advisory process or youth participatory action research to integrate youth client perspectives in their research.

Practice: Juvenile justice systems need to re-evaluate their JDC intake policies to ensure that youth are only incarcerated if they are truly a risk to their communities. Most youth who come into contact with the juvenile justice system should be served in their communities with intensive, wraparound programming as necessary. JDC intake practices should include screening for commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) risk or victimization and referrals out to CSE-specific programs outside the JDCs. For youth who must be served in JDCs, a confidential youth advisory process has the potential to help JDCs maintain the highest standards of care with attention to their clients' needs for love, belonging, and self-esteem.

Social Action: Youth who are in the juvenile justice system are frequently acting out due to experiences of trauma or failures of community or social systems to serve them well, thus, youth need to be provided with mental health and substance abuse treatment instead of punishment or exclusion for their misbehavior.

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