

Youth Justice Programs

CENTER
FOR
COURT
INNOVATION

As a key part of its mission the Center for Court Innovation works to improve outcomes for young people involved—or at risk of involvement—in the justice system. The Center’s youth justice programs serve as critical off-ramps for young people, promoting accountability, engaging young people in skill-building, and sparking civic engagement among participants.

The Center for Court Innovation operates youth programs across all five boroughs of New York City. These include:

- [Alternative-to-Detention Programs](#) supervise and support young people in the community while they await court decisions on delinquency charges;
- [Adolescent Diversion Programs](#) seek to combine the best features of the Family and Criminal Courts by crafting non-criminal dispositions for adolescents so they can avoid permanent criminal records;
- [Youth Futures Programs](#) provide comprehensive care coordination to justice-involved youth and families in need of mental health services;
- [Early Stationhouse Diversion](#) pilot programs, run in partnership with the New York City Police Department, steer young people into community-based services instead of the justice system;
- [Youth Courts](#) use positive peer pressure to encourage young people who have engaged in minor wrongdoing to repay the community;
- [Youthful Offender Domestic Violence Courts](#) work to prevent relationship abuse among teenagers;
- [Justice Community Plus](#) provides participants with vocational, educational, and career readiness services while coordinating community benefit projects to reduce violence;
- [Youth Justice Board](#) teaches high school students to study and make recommendations about justice policies that affect them and their peers;
- [AIM \(Advocate, Intervene, Mentor\) Programming](#) provides young people on probation with community-based, wraparound support and advocacy;
- [JustArts Photography Program](#) and other cultural initiatives offer young people opportunities for creative expression while learning about art;
- [Community Service Learning Programs](#) train young people to be civic leaders while benefiting local neighborhoods;
- [Juvenile Offender Intervention Network](#) provides wraparound case management, group mentoring, and internship opportunities for justice-involved young people in Brownsville and Red Hook, Brooklyn.

FRAMEWORK

Though areas of focus vary from site to site, all youth justice programs at the Center for Court Innovation share a primary goal: to prevent or reduce justice system involvement by engaging young people in pro-social activities.

The Center grounds its programming in the robust body of research on adolescent brain development, childhood trauma, and youth development. Research shows that human brain development continues through adolescence and is not fully complete until the mid-20's.¹ Young people typically experience increased emotional intensity and mood swings and are more likely to take risks and have immature or impulsive decision-making skills.

However, young people are also uniquely responsive to rehabilitation and behavioral change. As a result, youth programs at the Center for Court Innovation are grounded in the knowledge that youth can learn and strengthen healthy behaviors with the correct set of supports. Youth programming at the Center for Court Innovation seeks to employ a trauma-informed approach, recognizing that difficult-to-manage behaviors—aggression, anxiety, jumpiness, paranoia, difficulty concentrating—are often by-products of chronic abuse, neglect, domestic violence, and community violence.² Consequently, our programming works to simultaneously hold youth accountable for their actions while creating the safe and structured environments they need to begin developing essential cognitive and emotional regulation skills they need to avoid future justice system contact.

Building on positive youth development and positive youth justice models,³ youth programs at the Center for Court Innovation emphasize participants' strengths, building core skills and competencies, promoting positive connections to peers, family, and community, and providing opportunities for youth to practice healthy

behaviors. The Center recognizes the important role that the community and family play in the lives of adolescents and works to engage parents, faith communities, and community volunteers in providing support and opportunities for justice-involved adolescents. Moreover, the Center's approach to adolescent delinquency seeks to inform policymakers, parents, and community members on the need for developmentally appropriate responses that are evidence-informed, restorative, and respect the cultural integrity of a young person's community and family.

PRINCIPLES

These ideas inform youth programming at the Center for Court Innovation and have helped shape the following key principles:

1. JUSTICE STAKEHOLDER CONFIDENCE IS NEEDED FOR ALTERNATIVE SANCTIONS TO SUCCEED.

Interventions that offer young people an alternative to justice system involvement can only be successful when they earn and maintain the confidence of key justice system partners. Judges, prosecutors, probation officers, police, and school principals must trust that interventions for youth are appropriate and effective. Communication among partners, and reports to legal players must be consistent, objective, and credible. For example, the existence of the [Staten Island Youth Court](#) has encouraged judges to divert shoplifting cases involving 16- and 17-year-olds out of standard criminal court case processing. This significant change in case processing would not have been possible if the courts didn't have confidence in the youth court as a credible program. The youth court has established its credibility through creating clear program requirements, comprehensive client monitoring and consistent communication with court players. The Center for Court Innovation deliberately positions its programs so that they are accountable to not only the

young people and families they serve, but to justice system stakeholders as well. In this way, Center programs not only assist young people and families to avoid continued system involvement, but promote changes within the justice system.

2. ASSESSMENT OF INDIVIDUAL RISK AND NEED SHOULD INFORM INTERVENTIONS.

Studies have conclusively demonstrated that the highest-risk offenders—those young people whose behaviors and beliefs make them most likely to reoffend—should receive intensive monitoring and services to reduce their risk of continued offending. Conversely, low-risk cases have a lower chance of reoffending even in the absence of services, and therefore require minimal supervision.⁴ The Center actively implements the idea of risk-need-responsivity while also seeking to ensure that interventions for mandated youth are proportionate to their offense. Our [Adolescent Diversion Programs](#) match low-risk young people with short term interventions while alternative-to-placement programs provide long-term support and mentoring for young people with more significant risk and exposure.

3. SERVICE AND STRENGTHENING PLANS SHOULD BE INDIVIDUALIZED.

The Center for Court Innovation tailors service plans to each young person, taking into account risk factors, needs, and strengths. In many places, the Center uses evidence-based practices like Motivational Interviewing to work collaboratively with youth and families to identify strengths, challenges, and areas for goal-setting. Individual service plans draw upon a range of programming, including arts projects, internships, targeted mental health services, educational advocacy, and community service learning. For example, the [Juvenile Offender Intervention Network \(JOIN\)](#) at the Brownsville Community Justice Center creates

unique pathways and service-linkage plans for each of its participants. And the Center's [Youth Future Programs](#) craft highly individualized service plans for young people who are mentally ill.

4. POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Research shows that youth who have experienced childhood trauma often struggle to form positive, empathetic relationships with others.⁵ Therefore, the Center focuses on helping youth develop strong, caring relationships with competent adults and peers. Family members are engaged through family meetings and conferences, as well as recreational opportunities and events. Furthermore, the Center's programming is designed to encourage healthy attachments with both the local community and staff. Positive reinforcement and incentives for small steps forward help to create supportive, trusting environments where young people are more likely to thrive. The Center's [Alternative-to-Detention](#) programs build strong staff-youth relationships through home and school visits, family conferences, afterschool programming, and phone calls. Programs like Staten Island's [AIM \(Advocate, Intervene, Mentor\)](#) match youth to community mentors who build relationships with young people and offer day-to-day guidance and support to help youth manage challenges.

5. LIFE SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES ARE LEARNED THROUGH PRACTICE.

Often traits and behaviors common to justice-involved youth such as aggression, impulsivity, and excessive daydreaming, are attributed to mental illness or "bad attitudes." Researchers have demonstrated, however, that these behaviors are often the result of lagging skills. The research is clear: youth thrive in situations where they can acquire new skills, be exposed to new ideas, stretch their thinking, and demonstrate mastery. At virtually all of its youth

programming locations, the Center helps participants build and strengthen the skills and competencies necessary to effectively regulate behavior, manage conflict, and make healthy decisions. Workshop leaders teach new skills and pro-social activities while organized events provide opportunities for youth to practice them. And by shifting the framing of justice-involved youth from villain or victim to resource, the Center strives to break down the distinction between court-involved youth and their peers and sends the message that all are part of the same community. [Community Service Learning](#) programs, [JustArts](#), and [Youth Courts](#) rely on teams of mandated and voluntary youth to participate together in community service, art, and photography workshops.

6. PROCEDURAL JUSTICE MATTERS.

Research shows that when people believe they have been fairly treated by the justice system, they are more likely to follow the law in the future. Unfortunately, the relationship between the justice system and young adults is often marked by misunderstanding and distrust, particularly in low-income and minority communities. All too often, the juvenile justice system reinforces the negative ways kids view themselves—as wrongdoers, delinquents, lawbreakers. The Center for Court Innovation seeks to create more positive links between justice agencies and local youths, looking for opportunities for joint work, dialogue, and respectful two-way communication. The goal is to improve the legitimacy of the justice system. The Center's [Youth Courts](#) teach young people about the legal system and engage them in co-producing justice in their communities.

7. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PROMOTES DURABLE CHANGE.

Research shows that young people who have strong connections to their community are less likely to engage in activities that are harmful to their neighborhoods. Center for Court Innovation programming works to help young people see themselves as part of the law-abiding community rather than as outsiders. Each young person is valued as a potential leader with distinct responsibilities. The Center for Court Innovation seeks to craft pathways for young people—both justice-involved and not—by providing assistance with college and educational attainment and by offering training and internships. The [Youth Justice Board](#) provides youth input into citywide policy development around justice-related issues. [Community Service Learning](#) programs train participants to be leaders about critical community issues—combining service work with education and promoting lasting investment in overall community well-being.

ENDNOTES

1. Sowell, Elizabeth R, Paul M. Thompson, Colin J. Holems, Terry L. Jernigan and Arthur W. Toga. In vivo evidence for post-adolescent brain maturation in frontal and striatal regions. *Nature Neuroscience* 10 (1999), also Paus, Tomas, Jay Giedd, et. al. Structural maturation of neural pathways in children and adolescents: in vivo study. *Science*, 283 (1999).
2. These include attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, conduct disorder, oppositional-defiant disorder, depression, and bi-polar disorder.
3. See Scharitz; R. 2000. "Juvenile Justice and Positive Youth Development." In *Public/Private Ventures* (ed.). *Youth Development: Issues, Challenges, and Directions*. Philadelphia, Pa.; Benson, P., and R. Saito. 2000. "The Scientific Foundations of Youth Development." In *Public/Private Ventures* (ed.). *Youth Development: Issues, Challenges, and Directions*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Public/Private Ventures; Catalano, R.F.; M.L. Berglund; J.A.M. Ryan; H.C. Lonczak; and J.D. Hawkins. 1998. "Positive

Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs." Paper submitted to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation and National Institute for Child Health and Human Development; and Bazemore, Gordon and Clinton Terry. 1997. "Developing Delinquent Youth: A Reintegrative Model for Rehabilitation and a New Role for the Juvenile Justice System," *Child Welfare*, 74(5): 665-716.

4. Andrews, D. A., & Dowden, C. (2006). Risk principle of case classification in correctional treatment: A meta-analytic investigation. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 50, 88-100. For more on this, see Vincent, GA, LS Guy, and T Grisso (November 2012). *Risk Assessment in Juvenile Justice: A Guidebook for Implementation*.

5. Perry, BD et al. (1995) "Childhood Trauma, the Neurobiology of Adaptation, and 'Use-Dependent' Development of the Brain: How 'States' Become 'Traits.'" *Infant Mental Health Journal* 16(4): 271-291.

CENTER FOR COURT INNOVATION

The winner of the Peter F. Drucker Award for Non-profit Innovation, the Center for Court Innovation is a unique public-private partnership that promotes new thinking about how to solve difficult problems like addiction, neighborhood disorder, domestic violence, and the misuse of incarceration. In New York, the Center creates demonstration projects that test new approaches to problems that have resisted conventional solutions. The Center's demonstration projects include the Midtown Community Court, the Red Hook Community Justice Center, and other projects that have been documented to reduce re-offending and the use of incarceration.

Beyond New York, the Center disseminates the lessons learned from its experiments, helping justice reformers around the world test new solutions to local problems. The Center contributes to the conversation about justice through original research, including

much-cited studies that have documented the efficacy of treatment as an alternative to incarceration. The Center also provides hands-on technical assistance, advising innovators about program design, technology, and performance measures.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Center for Court Innovation
520 Eighth Avenue, 18th Floor
New York, New York 10018
646 386 4462
info@courtinnovation.org
www.courtinnovation.org

This publication was written by Raye Barbieri, senior director of youth and community programs and planning at the Center for Court Innovation.

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