



The Annie E. Casey Foundation
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ESSAY AND DATA BRIEF



A Road Map for
Juvenile Justice Reform



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Our nation's juvenile justice systems are poised for a fundamental, urgently needed transformation—and not a moment too soon.

Among all of the policy areas affecting vulnerable children and families, juvenile justice has probably suffered the most glaring gaps between best practice and common practice, between what we know and what we most often do. Perhaps because it serves an unpopular and powerless segment of our society—behaviorally troubled, primarily poor, mostly minority teenagers—juvenile justice policy has been too long shaped by misinformation, hyperbole, and political prejudices.

The consequences have been both disturbing and costly: Our juvenile justice systems have become littered with poorly conceived strategies that often increase crime, endanger young people and damage their future prospects, waste billions of taxpayer dollars, and violate our deepest held principles about equal justice under the law.

Increase Reliance on Effective Community-Based Services

A responsible reduction of reliance on confinement entails the creation of a continuum of community-based youth development services and supervision options for delinquent youth. Although all jurisdictions offer probation, it too often amounts to perfunctory supervision and few positive youth development opportunities. Most jurisdictions have some programming, like anger management classes or community service. However, few sites offer an integrated continuum of resources to ensure that youth are placed in programs that improve the odds that they will desist from delinquency and progress personally. Indeed, in most jurisdictions, so-called alternative programs often “widen the net” of social control, rather than responsibly divert youth from confinement.

During the past two decades, a variety of program models have emerged that effectively expand system options beyond the traditional mainstays of training schools or probation supervision. Most notable are the **evidence-based programs: Multisystemic Therapy (MST), Functional Family Therapy (FFT), and Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC)**. These models have consistently produced far better results, such as lower recidivism and improved school performance, than traditional juvenile justice interventions. They are gradually spreading through state and local mental health and juvenile justice systems and now

serve an estimated 40,000 delinquent and otherwise troubled youth per year.⁶⁴ However, even in jurisdictions where such programs have been adopted, they often remain small-scale pilot projects in otherwise unreformed systems.

In addition to these evidence-based programs, an array of other non-residential alternative programs have been implemented over the past couple of decades. These include **wrap-around services** and intensive case management and supervision services, such as those conducted in many jurisdictions by **Youth Advocate Programs, Southwest Key, and North American Family Institute**. Unfortunately, because the lion’s share of juvenile justice funding remains committed to institutional care and traditional probation supervision, these programs typically operate at a modest scale, and they have not been subjected to rigorous evaluations.

Programs alone, however, are not enough. Appending even good programs to fundamentally unsound systems will not work. Alternative programs must be supported by smart decisions, timely case processing, accurate information systems, and quality supervision. An effective continuum of services must be designed strategically. Alternatives to detention, for example, should accomplish detention’s main purposes: maximizing court appearance and minimizing pretrial rearrest rates. Alternatives-to-incarceration programs should focus on a broader range of goals: addressing mental health and substance abuse treatment needs;