

# How You Can Reform the Juvenile Justice System

In communities throughout the nation, far too many young people's lives are being harmed because of the juvenile justice system. Rather than preventing juvenile crime, the system waits until young people offend and then subjects them to programs that increase the likelihood of further offending. Fortunately, there is a growing movement to reform the system so that it does not contribute to further offending and does not consume [enormous amounts of taxpayer's money](#). In a number of states, reforms are ensuring that those who do offend get on track to become productive and caring adults. But more than that, they prevent offending from happening in the first place at the same time that they increase young people's successful development.

## A Justice System That Nurtures Young People's Development

A fundamental goal of every community should be that all of its children arrive at adulthood with the skills, interests, values, and health habits they need to lead a productive life in caring relationships with other people.<sup>1</sup> One way you can make this goal a reality in your community is by working to reform your juvenile justice system. In fact, there are communities all over the country that have put a concerted effort toward this end. We have written *A Guide to Reducing Juvenile Offending in Your Community*. The following is a brief summary of the guide.



### Tracking Arrest Rates and Re-offending

The first step is to get clear on the rate of juvenile arrests and the rate of re-offending among those who are arrested. These are the fundamental numbers by which your community can tell how well it is doing in ensuring that every young person develops successfully.

### Preventing Youth from Getting into The System

The second step is to assess whether the practices of police are reducing arrests or increasing them. For example, a study in Boston found that training police to interact with youth in non-confrontational ways that respect the youth's autonomy and striving for social acceptance, can significantly reduce the number of encounters that result in arrest.

### Reducing Recidivism

The third step is to ensure that evidence-based practices are used in dealing with arrested youth. Our guide to reforming juvenile justice describes four practices that reliably reduce re-offending. These practices are oriented toward providing therapeutic services and skill building rather than punishing or controlling the adolescent.<sup>2</sup>

### The Power of Prevention

The steps we have named so far all focus on what is traditionally called the juvenile justice system (though some have called it the [Juvenile Injustice System](#) because of the disparities in arrests and prosecution and the fact that it often increases re-offending). If you want a community that has as many youth as possible becoming caring and productive adults, you must create a community that prevents not just delinquency, but all of the psychological, behavioral, and academic problems of childhood and adolescence. Our guide describes a wealth of family, school, and community programs, policies, and practices that have proven to be beneficial in preventing the entire range of problems that undermine successful development.

**Family programs.** Over the past forty years, numerous family programs have been developed that help families replace conflict and neglect, with patient and skilled parenting. These programs have been shown to increase positive relationships in the family, at the same time that they foster children’s cognitive, social, and physical skill and prevent child maltreatment, substance use, depression, anxiety, and anti-social behavior.<sup>3</sup> Every community should be ensuring that it has a system of evidence-based family programs that every family can benefit from.

**Schools.** There are also numerous programs and practices for schools that can ensure successful development. Academic success is foundational for children’s successful development. Children who fall behind in school are less likely to graduate high school or attend college, more likely to live in poverty, and more likely to develop psychological and behavioral problems. Ultimately they are more likely to die prematurely.

One of the most important things schools need to assure is that children learn to read proficiently; a child who doesn’t read well by the end of third grade is unlikely to ever become a proficient reader. A phonics-based reading curriculum is essential. However, many schools do not have them and, as a result, many children -- especially poor and minority children -- do not become proficient readers.

The promotion of social and emotional development is also vital to successful development. There also numerous programs that ensure that children learn how to regulate their emotions and how to develop warm and cooperative relationships with peers and adults. Such programs have been shown to prevent problem development<sup>4</sup> at the same time that they increase cooperation, social acceptance, and respect among young people of diverse backgrounds.<sup>5-8</sup>

**Community Conditions.** Neighborhoods and communities need environments that promote social, recreational, and physical skills and that expand children’s experiences and skills beyond what is taught in school. They need parks where they can recreate and develop physically. They need extracurricular activities. Robert Putnam has documented<sup>9</sup> how schools in wealthier neighborhoods have vastly more extracurricular activities than schools in poorer neighborhoods. This difference in a wide array of experiences that enrich young people’s skills increases the disparity between wealthy and disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Especially in neighborhoods with many single parent families, our communities need mentoring programs that provide adult support for young people who can benefit from having a kind and caring adult in their life.

## Action Circles to Help Your Community Enhance Youth Development



Our guide to how communities can improve their juvenile justice system, is a road map to a more nurturing community.<sup>1</sup> Values to Action is helping communities create Action Circles that bring together all of the sectors of the community to develop and implement a strategic plan for ensuring that every young person gets the skills, interests, values, and health habits they need to become a productive and caring adult.

You can learn more in the full guide,

### [A Guide to Reducing Juvenile Offending in Your Community](#)

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