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Focusing Juvenile Justice on Positive Youth Development

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The concepts of positive youth development suggest that nearly all youth are capable of growing up properly and avoiding trouble if they can be attached to a variety of social resources that facilitate healthy development and discourage harmful behavior. Concentrating on positive youth development goals in working with young offenders may provide the juvenile justice system with a new and compelling framework for service delivery, especially in cases involving younger juveniles and those charged with less serious crimes. A coordinated program of innovation and evaluation is needed to test the viability of positive youth development as a new services model for juvenile justice.

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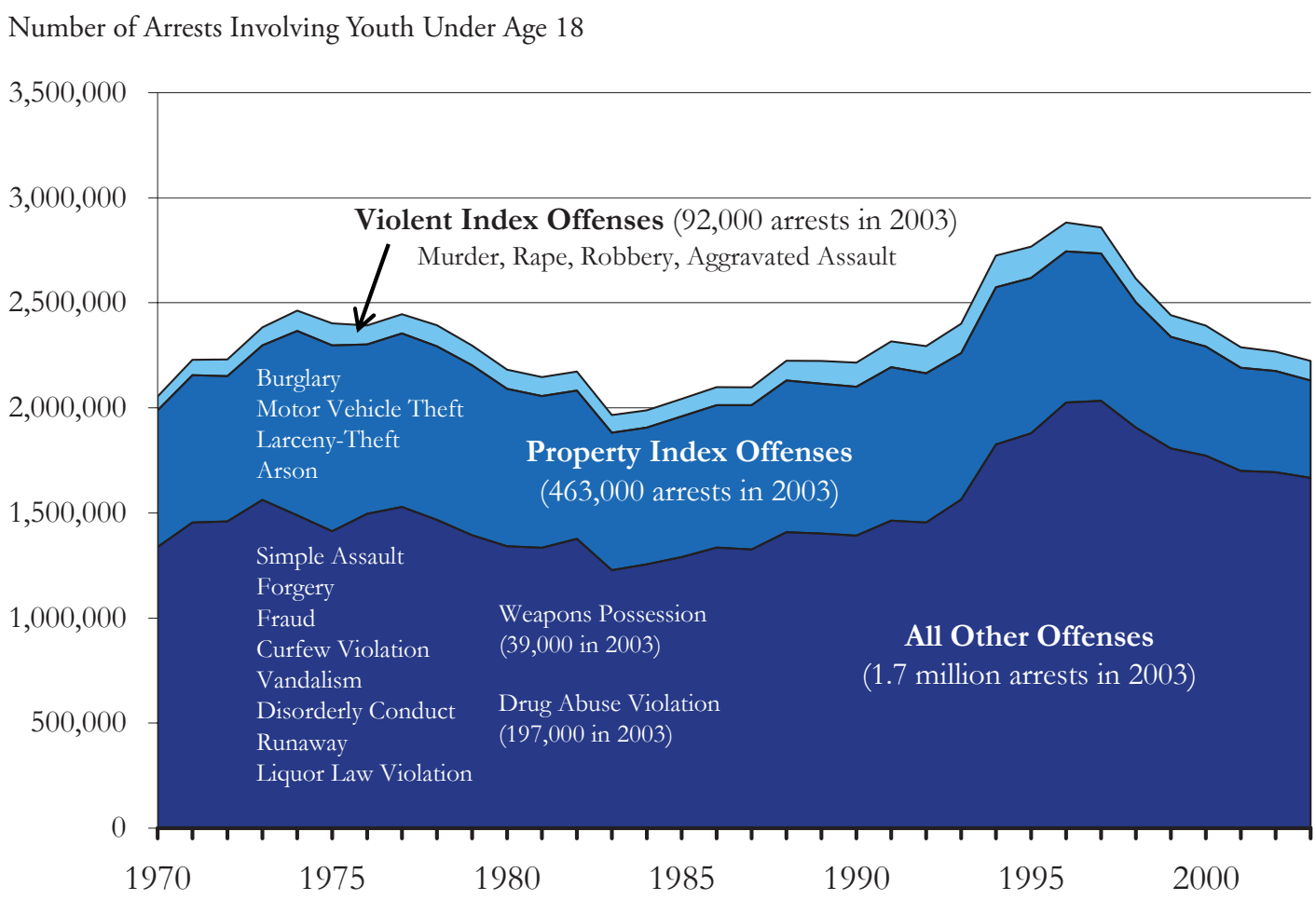
Juvenile Justice Today

After a decade of declining violence in the United States, the attention of many lawmakers and much of the public has shifted away from juvenile crime. Yet, the number of youth in the juvenile justice system remains high, especially for young people accused of property crimes and other nonviolent offenses. The number of juveniles arrested for these offenses has always been much larger than the number arrested for serious and violent crimes. According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Justice, the number of juvenile vandalism arrests in 2003 was four times as great as the number of arrests for robbery (107,700 versus 25,400). Arrests for disorderly conduct outnumbered arrests for aggravated assault by three to one (193,000 compared with 61,500). More juveniles were arrested for curfew violations (136,500) than for all four offenses in the FBI's Violent Crime Index combined (92,300 arrests for murder, forcible rape, aggravated assault, and robbery).

What does the juvenile justice system do with nonviolent offenders? Intervening with young offenders before they graduate to serious crime is a basic principle of the juvenile justice system, but how should authorities intervene with juveniles who are charged with less serious crimes? There are targeted interventions for some types of offenders. Youth with severe antisocial behavior are referred for family-based treatment. Sexual offenders are sent to specialized therapists. Youth with serious drug problems can be treated with a variety of evidence-based models for reducing adolescent substance abuse.

Figure 1: Serious, Violent Offenses Account for Relatively Few Arrested Youth



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (2005).

What are the evidence-based programs for youth accused of theft, vandalism, fraud, receiving stolen property, and disorderly conduct? These and other nonviolent offenses account for more than half the youth referred to juvenile court, but there are no theories of intervention for them. The justice system's response to these cases is not based on evidence of treatment impact. It is based on simple deterrence, or the belief that punishment changes behavior. At best, such offenders are ordered to pay restitution and perform community service, or they are given low-intensity probation with no explicit treatment plan. At worst, they may be forced like square pegs into intervention programs designed for other behavioral problems.

Before another juvenile crime wave appears on the horizon, policymakers and practitioners should do everything possible to ensure that the juvenile justice system has a clear plan of intervention and a menu of evidence-based programs for all types of youth, including offenders charged with property offenses, minor drug offenses, and various misdemeanors.

Process Without a Plan

In most cases, the juvenile justice system has no clear plan of action for typical or average offenders. One reason for this is that average offenders are not often the focus of state and federal policy initiatives. Recent initiatives have focused on smaller, specialized groups of offenders. Youth held in pre-trial detention, for example, have received a lot of attention in recent years, although data from the National Center for Juvenile Justice indicate that just 20 percent of juvenile delin-

quency cases involve the use of detention. Violent youth are a major focus of the juvenile justice system, but serious and violent crimes account for fewer than 10 percent of all delinquent offenders. Very young offenders are also increasingly a focus of policy, despite the fact that youth under age 13 account for just one in ten juvenile court cases. Youthful offenders with serious drug abuse problems receive substantial attention as well, but they represent approximately 15 percent of all juvenile offenders. (Many more juvenile offenders have experience with drug use that does not qualify as serious abuse, but in this they are not very different from youth in general.)

Each of these subgroups is an appropriate focus for policymakers and practitioners. Taken together, however, they represent only a portion of the juvenile crime problem. If the composition of these groups were entirely distinct and mutually exclusive—which is unlikely—a juvenile justice system that focused its resources on these populations alone would miss half of all young offenders.

Another way the juvenile justice system fails to plan for average offenders is by ignoring the full range of factors that lead youth to engage in criminal behavior. Many policies and programs are plagued by what criminologists such as Terance Miethe and Robert Meier call "psychological reductionism," or the tendency to view the causes and solutions to social problems in strictly psychological terms. Psychological reductionism in juvenile justice means that intervention programs focus on youth whose criminal behavior is believed to arise from psychological and emotional troubles. Less attention is paid to designing and evaluating interventions for youth who commit crimes for other reasons, such as a desire for social status, a fear for their personal safety, economic frustrations, negative peer associations, defiance of authority, and even simple adolescent thrill seeking. According to deviant peer studies, such as those by Gerald Patterson and his colleagues, youth who engage in criminal behavior for reasons other than psychological or emotional troubles are probably responsible for a large share of juvenile crime.

To make progress in reducing youth crime, the juvenile justice system needs a compelling, theoretically oriented framework to guide the design and implementation of services for all youthful offenders, even if they do not fit one of the special categories described above and even if they do not suffer from emotional or psychological trouble. Currently, services for these youth are not targeted on treatment outcomes because no specific treatment programs exist for them. The primary purpose of the juvenile justice process in these cases is to establish rudimentary surveillance and then to wait and see which youth re-offend.

If youth are highly unlikely to re-offend, such benign neglect may be effective public policy. In fact, the concept of juvenile "diversion" was created for just this reason. Unfortunately, there is no reliable way for the justice system to predict which youth will and will not commit offenses in the future. For many youth, a "wait and see" approach guarantees that they will receive no meaningful support or assistance until they have committed several more offenses. Howard Snyder reported in 1996 that 45 percent of 15-year-olds who appear in juvenile court at least one time can be expected to come back for another offense. The odds increase to 69 percent for 15-year-olds with two offenses, and 80 percent for those with three offenses.

Whether young offenders are to be diverted or handled formally within the juvenile justice system, every effort should be made to stop or reduce their pattern of offending. Services and sanctions for all youth should be delivered using methods that are cost-effective, theoretically coherent, and consistent with the best available research evidence. The framework of positive youth development may be a promising approach for coordinating juvenile justice services in cases involving youth charged with nonviolent and less serious offenses.

Effective Programs Needed

The need for effective programs has never been greater. There are many treatment models for delinquent youth, but few programs are supported by high-quality research. The "blueprints" project at the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence recently examined the evidence behind over 600 programs designed to prevent and/or treat violence, aggressive behavior, delinquency, or drug abuse. The study could identify only eleven programs that had been evaluated with research designs strong enough to produce credible evidence of effective-

ness, and few of those programs targeted youth already involved with the juvenile justice system. Most of the eleven programs were directed at the general population to prevent antisocial behavior among all youth.

The few programs that did focus on delinquent youth were designed for serious and/or violent behavior, or behavior caused by psychological and emotional problems. The strongest studies were evaluations of multisystemic therapy (MST), multidimensional foster care treatment, and functional family therapy (FFT), each of which approaches the reduction of delinquent behavior as a therapeutic task. Interventions for the broader juvenile justice population have not been tested.

Even when programs enjoy a reputation for effectiveness, the research behind their reputations may be methodologically compromised or there may be questions about its accuracy. In the case of multisystemic therapy (MST), for example, a thorough review by Julia Littell recently concluded that researchers have overlooked or under-reported a number of serious flaws in previous evaluations of MST. It may be premature, in fact, to claim that MST is a proven model.

Researchers continue to look for effective programs. Using meta-analysis, Mark Lipsey and his colleagues reported that some juvenile justice programs do seem to work. Programs using interpersonal skills training and behavioral change techniques in particular may have promise for youthful offenders. These studies, however, are suggestive at best. The only high-quality evidence for the effectiveness of juvenile justice programs points to a few treatment models that deal with antisocial behavior among young children, violent offenders, and youth with psychological and emotional troubles. For juveniles not included in these groups, policymakers and practitioners do not have a compelling framework for the design of juvenile justice services. Deterrence is the only apparent intervention theory.

Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a comprehensive way of thinking about the development of children and youth and the factors that facilitate or impede their individual growth and their achievement of key developmental stages. The array of concepts known as PYD emerged from several decades of research on adolescent development. The PYD framework is an alternative to viewing adolescent development through the lens of problems and deficits. The deficit-based approach dominated developmental theory and social policy during much of the twentieth century. The second decade of life was seen primarily as a period of risk and turmoil. Professionals were expected to identify the problems affecting individual adolescents and to manage those problems in professionalized, therapeutic settings. Because adolescents were seen as irresponsible and immature, it followed that they were unable to participate fully in society. They could be the objects of social policy but not participants in social institutions.

In recent decades, a number of factors combined to erode the dominance of the deficit-based perspective. Researchers began to challenge conventional assumptions about how human development occurs. Studies revealed that most children and youth manage to thrive and develop even in the presence of multiple environmental stresses. Michael Rutter and others began to use the term "resiliency" to describe the qualities that support healthy development in the face of adversity. Researchers began to investigate methods of increasing resiliency. Social programs started to incorporate such methods in their work with children and adolescents.

Developmental specialists analyzed human development in ways that emphasized interaction between youth and adults across a wide range of social worlds—not only families but schools, workplaces, and communities. A new generation of organizers and advocates began to insist that adolescents are not objects to be acted upon, but self-directed, independent individuals who may deserve special consideration and care, but who merit the same dignity and autonomy accorded other members of the community. In short, communities need their youth as much as youth need their communities.

These developments coalesced into the perspective now known as positive youth development. The concepts of PYD suggest that most young people can develop and flourish if they are connected to the right mix of social

resources. The PYD perspective recognizes that some youth grow up in circumstances that do not equip them for the transition from childhood to adulthood. It also recognizes that some youth behave in ways that cause serious problems for themselves and their communities. Public policy, however, must do more than react to problem behavior. According to Karen Pittman and other youth development advocates, "problem-free is not fully prepared."

Specific Frameworks

Several frameworks have been used to describe the processes of youth development, the outcomes of development, and the programs and organizations that provide opportunities for development. Some frameworks, such as the Community Youth Development (CYD) concept described by Francisco Villarruel and his colleagues, emphasize the role of communities in providing positive development opportunities to all youth. The CYD framework concentrates on youth participation in community institutions. Its direct target is the community rather than individual youth.

Other frameworks focus on enhancing developmental opportunities and resources for particular youth or subgroups of young people. Perhaps the most well-known PYD framework is the Search Institute's menu of forty developmental assets. The forty assets include individual and contextual factors that encourage youth to avoid harmful behavior and that engage them in activities that promote positive development. Some of the assets reflect class bias (e.g., young people should "read for pleasure three or more hours per week"). Others rely on conventional notions of morality that will not apply to all youth and families (e.g., young people should "spend one hour or more per week in activities in a religious institution"). The Search Institute assets, however, are useful benchmarks that draw upon research and theory in child development, risk, and resiliency.

Another influential framework was published by Richard Lerner and his colleagues as part of a larger framework for adolescent development. Their straightforward conceptualization of PYD outcomes is based on the idea of thriving, a condition marked by healthy relationships that encourage youth to see past their own self-interest and to appreciate community and societal goals. The framework emphasizes interactions between individuals within varying contexts, such as family, school, and community. As young people navigate and manage these interactions, they begin to acquire what the framework calls the five Cs –competence, character, connection, confidence, and caring/compassion. Society benefits as young people develop the capacity to nurture and sustain socially equitable institutions.

Underlying Concepts

Despite their differences, these and other PYD frameworks share three basic assumptions:

1. Focus on strengths and assets rather than deficits and problems.

Keeping youth away from drugs, criminal activity, premature sexual behavior, and other risks does not, by itself, prepare youth for a productive future. PYD frameworks emphasize the building of youth assets, or the skills and competencies that will allow youth to take on new roles as they transition from childhood to adulthood.

2. Strengths and assets are usually acquired through positive relationships, especially with pro-social and caring adults.

Relationships and interactions between youth and trusted adults are one of the key mechanisms through which healthy development occurs. Trusted adults include parents and family members, but also teachers, neighbors, local business owners, and members of the community. Relationships with pro-social peers can also facilitate development, but positive relationships with adults are the primary focus of PYD.

3. The development and acquisition of youth assets occurs in multiple contexts and environments.

Unlike older views of adolescent development that placed almost exclusive emphasis on the family, PYD sees youth development opportunities in all of the worlds adolescents inhabit. Schools, workplaces, community organizations, social programs, and neighborhoods are all part of a youth's natural environment and all offer opportunities for the acquisition of developmental resources.

PYD as a Services Framework

Building a juvenile justice system around the concepts of positive youth development is not a new or revolutionary idea. The concepts underlying PYD resemble those that led to the founding of the American juvenile justice system more than a century ago. The first juvenile courts tried to resolve the factors leading young people to commit crimes. Like other reformers during the "Progressive Era" of the late 1800s and early 1900s, the organizers of the first juvenile courts saw the solution to delinquency in better schools, community organizations, public health measures, and family supports. They believed an improved social environment would encourage youth to embrace pro-social norms.

Positive youth development begins with a similar premise—behavior is shaped by the interactions of individuals with their social environment. Ideally, young people move smoothly through a sequence of developmental stages in which they gradually acquire adult capacities for reason, responsibility, and commitment. To move successfully through this sequence, however, young people need certain developmental assets, including skills and experiences in the physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social arenas. Every community has a duty to ensure that young people have access to these assets.

Government agencies, charitable foundations, and professional associations see positive youth development as a national priority and a governing framework for youth policy. Importing the PYD approach into the juvenile justice system seems like an obvious and sensible extension of the concept. National groups involved in promoting positive youth development have pointed to the juvenile justice system as a logical focus of their attention, and although they acknowledge there are serious obstacles, juvenile justice experts such as William Barton, Gordon Bazemore, and Robert Schwartz have called for an infusion of PYD ideas in the juvenile justice system.

Day-to-day activities in the juvenile justice system would be very different if services were structured around PYD. The concepts of positive youth development could be used to identify the critical resources that young offenders need and to devise methods of providing those resources in communities that lack them. Rather than managing the efforts of the juvenile justice system to meet justice goals alone (e.g., hours of probation ordered, dollars in restitution paid), its efforts would be focused on treatment-related outcomes. Was each youth under juvenile court supervision successfully paired with an adult mentor, and did he or she work with the adult mentor on at least one community engagement project during the period of court supervision? Was every youth offender meaningfully involved in an appropriate outlet for recreation by the time probation supervision ends? Did officials ensure that every youth on probation had at least some experience with the routine of paid employment?

Structuring the efforts of juvenile justice agencies around PYD could encourage youth to capitalize on their strengths, develop new pro-social competencies, and connect to educational, employment, civic, and cultural opportunities that help them to avoid problematic behavior and better negotiate the transition from adolescence to early adulthood. A PYD-oriented juvenile justice system could also benefit the larger community through the partnerships it would inevitably create between youth and community groups, employers, and citizens. A PYD approach could help youth offenders to connect with positive members of the community as well as to give something positive back to the community.

Challenges and Obstacles

A growing evidence base suggests that the foundational principles of PYD can make a real difference in the lives of young people. When youth have access to supportive resources and positive relationships they are less likely to experience school failure, substance abuse, and delinquency.

Can the insights of positive youth development be applied in the juvenile justice system? An absence of supportive resources may be statistically related to greater school trouble and increased crime and drug abuse by individual youth, but does this mean introducing those resources into the lives of troubled youth will cause them to reverse course and avoid future problems? Even if it does mean that, would the juvenile justice system know how to attach troubled (and perhaps resistant) youth to the social resources identified by positive youth development? How much would a

Traditional Juvenile Justice vs. Positive Youth Development (PYD)

	Traditional Juvenile Justice	Postive Youth Development
Role of youth in community	• Target of change	• Agent of change
Role of youth in justice system	• Client	• Participant
Mission of juvenile justice system	• Public safety	• Community wellness
Key strategy of juvenile justice	• Control youth behavior	• Connect youth with social and developmental resources
Target of juvenile services	• Youth problems and deficits	• Youth strengths and assets
Purpose of service delivery	• Supervision and control	• Attachment and engagement
Intervention methods	• Probation supervision to ensure youth compliance with court orders	• Case management to ensure youth access to range of social resources
	• Individual and family counseling, group therapy (insight-based)	• Peer counseling, leadership development, family living skills
	• Job counseling, community service as punishment	• Work experience, community service as job preparation, career exploration
	• Outdoor challenge programs	• Conservation projects, community development projects, recycling and community beautification projects
	• Mentoring, Big Brother/Big Sister	• Youth/adult mentors work together on community service projects, intergenerational projects with elderly, etc.
	• Remedial education	• Cross-age tutoring (juvenile offenders teach younger children), educational action teams, decision-making skills training

Adapted in part from Bazemore and Terry (1997).

genuine youth development strategy cost? Is the evidence base behind positive youth development strong enough to justify a fundamental shift in juvenile justice policy? How many communities would have enough youth development opportunities and adult volunteers to implement an effective PYD strategy for young offenders? These questions have not been answered by research. Some have yet to be asked. They must be answered soon, however, if the juvenile justice system is going to incorporate PYD concepts.

Structuring the juvenile justice system around a set of service outcomes suggested by PYD would not be simple. The juvenile justice system could not accomplish such an agenda by itself. At a minimum, the juvenile court would have to collaborate to a greater extent with

schools, recreational programs, social services agencies, community organizations, and healthcare providers. It would also have to coordinate its efforts with neighborhood volunteers and local businesses.

A PYD-oriented juvenile justice process would be complicated and it would likely be more labor intensive than the traditional juvenile justice process. The juvenile justice process would have to begin with an individualized assessment of each youth's strengths and assets. Most juvenile justice systems conduct some form of assessment now, but they are often used to guide (and pay for) interventions by professionals rather than to coordinate a network of community-based resources. By definition, the resources needed for a PYD effort would be neighborhood-based and volunteer-based. They could not simply be purchased; they would have to be built and nurtured by community organizers and youth advocates. In most communities, the juvenile justice system already tries to employ community-based alternatives for young offenders, but such efforts often fall short. Developing and sustaining resources for disadvantaged youth is extremely difficult and time-consuming work, and communities are often unable to meet these challenges over the long term. Some try to buy a solution from local service providers, but in the end these arrangements create more professionalized services instead of genuine community-based resources.

Patricia Torbet and Douglas Thomas recently described how key components of the juvenile justice system would have to collaborate in order to pursue an authentic PYD strategy. As in any effort to change organizational culture and workplace practices, one of the most difficult parts of such an effort would be changing the routine activities of line staff. Particularly in a jurisdiction where juvenile probation officers see themselves as members of the law enforcement community, a PYD framework that asks probation wokers to be service brokers and case managers may be greeted with skepticism.

What would be the motivation for communities and for policymakers to invest time, energy, and resources in a PYD approach for typical or average offenders? When innovations are focused on serious and violent offenders, public safety is a motivating impetus. For detained offenders, avoiding the high costs of incarceration motivates agencies to explore alternatives. In the short term, what practical benefit would come from improving juvenile justice interventions for youth charged with less serious and nonviolent offenses? Who would pay for such an effort?

Some critics will argue the PYD concept is not a service delivery strategy, but a community-wide or societal framework for human development. These advocates would point out that PYD calls for a broad reform of social institutions. They might object to any effort that introduces PYD concepts within a particular service system, especially if the wider social environment is hostile to the true meaning of positive youth development. They might also wonder if any one service system could ever afford the social investments necessary to pursue an authentic PYD agenda. Philosophical debates aside, it appears that efforts to blend PYD and juvenile justice are likely to continue. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers must collaborate in devising effective methods of implementing PYD-inspired juvenile justice services.

Next Steps

The only way a juvenile justice system could begin to build its efforts around positive youth development would be to start small and monitor its effectiveness every step of the way. One unit or group of probation officers, for example, could be trained in PYD concepts and then work together to re-conceptualize their approach to juvenile supervision. As they imagine the range of community resources they would need, another group could begin the efforts necessary to develop new resources, to align with current service providers to access existing resources, and to identify community groups that would have to shoulder new responsibilities.

As new resources came into existence (e.g., mentors, internships, recreational programs, youth advisory councils, and tutors), juvenile justice managers and probation workers could begin to draw upon the resources in working with individual youth. Each of these efforts would likely raise new problems and obstacles, and the juvenile justice system would have to revisit its approach to PYD multiple times. This process of design, experimentation, and re-design would likely take several years, even in a community with already adequate resources.

Once a jurisdiction succeeded in implementing a distinct and genuine PYD approach to juvenile justice—even on a very small scale—a program of evaluation research would be required to improve the system further. Outcomes for youth served with the PYD approach could be compared with outcomes for youth receiving traditional juvenile justice services. The evaluation results could be used to restructure the jurisdiction's approach to PYD and to clarify whatever new resources would be needed for individual youth and for the community as a whole.

Conclusion

Communities across the United States have done much in the past decade to improve the juvenile justice response for serious and violent offenders, detained offenders, and those with mental health and substance abuse problems. Still, these programs miss about half of all youthful offenders. The juvenile justice system has yet to develop a compelling, theoretically informed framework for service delivery in typical or average cases. One resolution of this problem might be to structure the efforts of juvenile justice agencies around the goals of positive youth development. A systematic program of innovation and evaluation is needed to determine whether such a strategy is feasible and whether it will improve the well-being of communities.

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