

Crime Prevention and Youth Development

Some Common Themes from the Six Briefing Papers

- Prevention science has yielded a set of field-tested, evidence-based practices shown to effectively promote youth development and reduce juvenile crime.
- Such practices take advantage of new research findings on adolescent development, including the latest brain research, and of emerging research on risk and protective factors that must be targeted to foster youth resilience and prevent behavior problems and delinquency.
- Such practices are the foundation for many promising and critically needed juvenile justice reform efforts at the state and local levels nationwide.
- These reforms have been advanced significantly by federal policy guidance and funding, notably the *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP)*, the *Juvenile Accountability Block Grant (JABG)* and the *Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA)*
- Evidence-based reforms have nudged the JJ system away from over-reliance on incarceration and punishment-focused interventions and toward more community-based, prevention-oriented methods. Whenever possible, these reforms divert juveniles from entering the system, improve, humanize and shorten their exposure to the system, and promote successful re-entry through access to services and supports that foster positive development.
- Reform efforts have helped to produce highly beneficial outcomes for youth and families, communities, and local and state governments, including: lower percentages of youth confined in adult settings; lower juvenile arrest rates and incarceration rates; and reduced recidivism.

Unfinished Business: Despite substantial progress, reform efforts, and the more effective evidence-based prevention-oriented practices which are their hallmark, are not widespread enough to achieve maximum impact nationwide. Several factors contribute to the incomplete adoption of reforms and the persistence of more traditional, less effective downstream punishment-focused approaches.

- Federal juvenile justice funding, especially to support community-based prevention, has shrunk by more than 50% in the past dozen years. State and local budget cuts compound this problem.
- Few states have sufficient infrastructure (staffing, social science expertise, data systems and other administrative supports) to install, monitor and improve prevention initiatives.
- While OJJDP does a good job disseminating information about evidence-based approaches, it lacks the technical assistance resources to help states develop more implementation capacity.

Policy Implications and Possible Solutions

Generally, federal budgeting, grant-making and policymaking in juvenile justice/youth development should continue to prioritize evidence-based and prevention-oriented initiatives. Specific opportunities to do so include:

- Reauthorization of the *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act*, with enhancements that incorporate prevention science advances since the last authorization; that increase the technical assistance capacity of the OJJDP; that test new ways to finance and incentivize prevention and youth development initiatives; and that test new ways to account for and reinvest prevention-generated savings
- Delinquency risk factors can and should be addressed collaboratively by multiple government entities. Promote federal cross-department initiatives to support more upstream prevention approaches that address known risk and protective factors associated with delinquent behavior. These approaches often are focused in the early childhood and elementary school years, target families and neighborhoods as well as youth, and occur in non-justice settings such as schools, early education programs and community organizations.
- Move the proposed *Youth PROMISE Act*, which contains provisions that will prevent juvenile crime in high-need communities via expanded prevention and youth development efforts including job training, mentoring and neighborhood improvement. The Act also includes provisions suggested above to help communities account for and reinvest prevention savings.
- In grant-making initiatives designed to foster youth development, promote the creation of community coalitions that use evidence-based planning approaches (e.g. the “*Communities That Care*” model) to identify key community risk and protective factors and select effective interventions to target these factors. The Community Councils recommended in the *Youth PROMISE Act* could effectively employ such models.
- Educational struggles are a prime risk factor for delinquent behavior. One particular evidence-based model which promotes the academic success of at-risk students, *Integrated Student Supports*, delivers coordinated supports such as mentoring, tutoring, health and mental health services, and family support and counseling. Grant support for organizations exemplifying this model (e.g. *Communities in Schools*) is a sound prevention investment.