Traditional Juvenile Justice Practices Are Expensive and Produce Poor Outcomes. Kids who end up in juvenile detention are less likely to graduate high school, less likely to find employment and more likely to reoffend as adults. Incarcerating kids is expensive, and counties foot the bill for many of the related costs and services. Counties pay for the operation of detention centers, medical and mental health care and education services for incarcerated youth. The expense of running a locked detention facility ranges by jurisdiction, but often costs $200-$300 per day per youth. The costs grown even higher over time, as juveniles who are detained and adjudicated are more likely to end up in the adult system.

Youth in Juvenile Justice Have Major Behavioral Health and Other Needs. Fewer than 5 percent of youth who are arrested are arrested for violent crimes.1 The vast majority of youth end up in the juvenile justice system for non-violent or relatively minor offenses, and all too often a contributing factor to their contact with the justice system is an unmet need for behavioral health treatment.

- Up to 70 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system suffer from mental health disorders.
- Over 60 percent of those with a mental health disorder also have a substance use disorder.
- Among those with mental health disorders, 27 percent have disorders so severe that their ability to function is significantly impaired.2

Many juvenile justice systems are ill-equipped to serve these youth; in fact, many do not even have the tools to identify these youth.

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It matters because the juvenile justice system has a direct impact on counties’ investments in health, justice and social services. It matters because juvenile justice systems cost more to counties than the benefits they bring to the community. And it matters because effective juvenile justice systems can divert youth from future involvement in the adult criminal justice system, where counties already spend more than $70 billion each year.

County governments are uniquely positioned to be leaders in the juvenile justice field and have a dramatic impact on the lives of their young residents, families and the broader community. As the primary local provider of health, justice and social services, counties have the opportunity and responsibility to implement comprehensive, evidence-based programs and policies that bolster public safety and improve human outcomes. The National Association of Counties (NACo) has joined the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s Models for Change Juvenile Justice Reform Initiative to educate and assist county leaders as they undertake important improvements to benefit communities and reduce costs.
Counties Can Introduce Alternatives That Produce Better Outcomes and Cost Less. Community-based services are less costly than detention and more effective than care in correctional facilities. Most juvenile offenders are less likely to be involved in future delinquent behavior when they remain in the community and receive services that address their underlying needs. Detention is among the least effective strategies to reduce crime, yet counties spend staggering sums on these systems. Alternatively, diversion and proven therapeutic programs produce as much as $13 worth of benefit for every $1 spent.

Counties now have access to good tools that can identify youth who would be better served with treatment rather than jail time. In the short term, this type of early intervention helps ensure that youth are engaged in school, are receiving appropriate treatments and services and do not fall further into the justice system. Long term, such reforms can help counties keep costs down as fewer youth reoffend and end up in the adult criminal justice system, saving money and lives.

Through its partnership with Models for Change and its explicit commitment to improving juvenile justice, NACo will share effective ways to improve juvenile justice, even as county leaders grapple with tight budgets and tough fiscal decisions. NACo will provide written publications, webinars, blog posts, podcasts and forums at sites around the country.

To learn more about the Models for Change Resource Center Partnership and access toolkits as well as examples from counties that have improved their juvenile justice systems, visit the sites to the right and http://www.naco.org/programs/csd/Pages/Models-for-Change.aspx.

ENDNOTES