

Research to Practice Memo
**How City Leaders Can Draw Upon Adolescent Development Research Findings
To Provide a Framework for Juvenile Justice Reform**

The YEF Institute recommends that cities adopt a framework for juvenile justice reform that draws upon current research into adolescent development. The research confirms the common sense notion that adolescents are especially prone to risky behaviors including breaking local laws, even though adults commit more crimes overall. Further, most youthful offenders do not commit crimes as adults. Evaluations of efforts to reduce youth crime indicate: 1) The certainty of being held accountable, rather than severity of punishment, most effectively prevents youth misbehavior and 2) well-targeted interventions most effectively reduce re-offending.

A. Youth crime stems more from adolescence than “criminality”

Recent adolescent brain development research confirms that misbehavior, even crime, largely ensues due to particular qualities of this unique developmental phase. The teen brain seeks immediate gratification, excitement, and peer approval and lacks impulse control and the ability to weigh long term consequences. In fact, delinquent acts represent one manifestation among many of adolescent risk-taking. Others include driver deaths, unintentional drownings, unintended pregnancies, and self-inflicted injuries.

In addition, mental health needs, substance use, and histories of trauma all occur more frequently among youth involved in the juvenile justice system than among all youth. These affect how the developing brain of a young person makes decisions and responds to stressful situations.

Most young, even serious, offenders do not become career criminals. Nor does the type of crime a young person commits, e.g. property, violent, or drug, accurately predict future ongoing criminal activity. In other words, we cannot predict that a youth who carries a gun is more or less likely than a youth who shoplifts to become a career criminal.

B. More severe consequences do not prove more effective

The mere threat of certain, immediate, even light consequences plays the greatest role in deterring youth crime. By contrast, serious punishment such as arrest and prosecution, may actually increase the short- and long-term cost to public systems and risks to public safety.

Regarding public system costs: Two studies tracking a large number of youth over a long period of time found that youth who experienced intensive involvement in the juvenile justice system suffered worse life outcomes. These poor outcomes include increased truancy and dropout. Both studies compared outcomes for similar youth, i.e. youth who were suspected of the same offense, had similar mental health needs, were the same race and age, etc.

Incidences of physical and sexual abuse and resultant trauma run high nationwide in juvenile detention facilities, placement facilities, and jails. Likewise, the mere process of arrest - handcuffing and spending time in a squad car or holding cell - may traumatize young people. Police officers can

contribute to positive outcomes by using their initial contacts with young people as opportunities to link youth and families to services, rather than to arrest and charge.

Regarding increased risks to public safety: Formally processed, i.e. arrested and prosecuted, youth showed the following negative outcomes more than youth who were informally processed, i.e. diverted to services without charge:

- More likely to reoffend within six months;
- More likely to be rearrested within two years; and
- Reduce offending more slowly over the subsequent two year period.

C. Provide well-targeted services to achieve positive outcomes

Closely matching services to a youth's individual needs leads to the best outcomes and greatest cost efficiency. The development and more expansive use of risk and needs assessments, such as the [Youth Level of Service Inventory](#) (YLSI), can lead to matching the right youth with the right services.

All youth benefit from certain supports for healthy development, and these form a solid base for city contributions to a continuum of community-based services. These include: a relationship with a caring adult; association with peers who model positive choices; and participation in work, community service, and extracurricular activities that require independent decision making and critical thinking. Restorative practices, such as [community conferencing](#), also engage young people in decision making and have proven positive outcomes.

Over-prescribing services can set up a youth for failure. Jurisdictions do well to target more intensive evidence-based interventions, such as Multi-systemic therapy and Family Functional Therapy, to youth with very significant risks and needs.

Programs that seek to modify behavior through cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques, constitute a more widely applicable, less intensive and expensive intervention with proven beneficial impact on long-term decision making ability. In contrast, recent evaluations demonstrate that "scared straight" programs do not result in long-term behavior change.

Additional research findings show that community-based substance use treatment for youth who need it -- especially if it centers around a youth's family and lasts more than three months -- makes a particularly important contribution to reducing reoffending. Continued substance abuse stands out as a particularly strong indicator that a youth will continue to offend as s/he ages.

To learn more

This summary relies primarily on four studies: early outcomes from the [Crossroads](#) study by [Dr. Elizabeth Cauffman](#) at University of California Irvine; the [Pathways to Desistance](#) study from researchers at the University of Pittsburgh; [Dr. Laurence Steinberg's](#) keynote address to the Models for Change Resource Center Partnership in May 2014; and [Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach](#), issued by the National Research Council in 2013. These studies and NLC's [Municipal Leadership in Juvenile Justice Reform](#) project receive critical support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's [Models for Change](#) initiative.