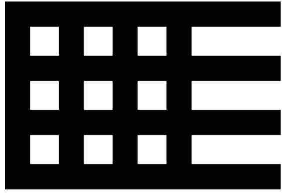

ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

Journal of the International Corrections and Prisons Association

Excellence in Juvenile Justice Policy and Practice

Edition #19 - 2025

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ADVANCING CORRECTIONS JOURNAL: EDITION#19-2025

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Excellence in Juvenile Justice Policy and Practice
Frank J. Porporino, Ph.D., Editor ICPA Advancing Corrections

A number of years ago, I decided it might be interesting, and also rewarding, to volunteer for some work with justice involved youth. My correctional lived experience in the early part of my career had all been with incarcerated adults, and I had heard a litany of quite painful recollections of childhood from my incarcerated adult clients, often put forth as explanations for why their lives had turned out the way they did. I offered my services to a local Day Reporting Center that dealt with youth on probation. Once a month, I would spend a day with the center's counsellors reviewing histories of newly arrived youth and trying to help in putting together reasonable case plans. Over and over, I began witnessing, in real time, examples of those same recollections my adult clients had recounted years before. It hit me in the gut. What I had anticipated might be interesting and rewarding, also became incredibly challenging, and even emotionally exhausting. I had to move on after about eighteen months but I was left with an important and simple understanding. Youth that fall into justice involvement have lots and lots of problems, few if any resources to help them get extricated from those problems, and levels of motivation that can easily and quickly evaporate unless they receive considerable and repeated support. Punitive responses to their lapses make things worse, and when we confine them as a last resort, they are often harmed even further. Youth are much more difficult to work with than adults, more vulnerable and more easily damaged. How best to work with them is also much more difficult to figure out compared to adults. The significant scope of issues and challenges in the field of juvenile justice certainly deserves more than one Edition of **Advancing Corrections**. We know there is wide variation in how justice involved youth are treated around the world, again perhaps even more so than for adults. That variation is evident even within many countries, as for example in the US, where we can find good examples of both compassionate care or punitive disregard, depending where we look. But if it is true that how we treat justice involved adults is a sign of our level of civilization, then how we treat our youth is surely a definitive sign of our level of humanity. I hope that this 19th Edition of **Advancing Corrections** can at least touch on a few ways for getting closer to 'excellence' in juvenile justice policy and practice.

The articles in the Edition are presented in three sections as usual and we begin by looking at Australia's experience with justice involved youth. **Catia Malvaso** and **Andrew Day** make a powerful case for a more concerted focus on early intervention and an across the board 'more compassionate and trauma-informed' youth justice system. Referring to analysis of some whole population 'big data', they highlight the strong evidence of crossover from child protection into youth justice, and then almost inevitably, transitioning into adult correctional systems. Incredibly, they point to evidence that "approximately two thirds of children with any history of juvenile justice involvement will enter the adult prison system within five years." In recent years, Australia has experienced the same decline in youth incarceration as many other countries, but Malvaso & Day remind us that there has also been an obvious increase in the

prevalence of 'complex needs' for those youth we still incarcerate, particularly in terms of the reporting of multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's). The authors argue for a more radical turn to a child-centered, 'detention as the last resort' policy and practice framework that emphasizes individualized responses, and for Australia (as well as a number of other countries), acknowledges the historical injustices that place many young people at a disadvantage from birth.

Continuing in a similar vein, **Cedric Foussard** and **Olivia Rope** go wider in suggesting that despite numerous child-rights legislative frameworks and standards, violence against children in detention (neglect, abuse and harm) is still very much a global issue that needs to be addressed. Their article summarizes **Penal Reform International's** analysis of global trends that shows how children "continue to experience violence in police custody, pretrial detention, and correctional facilities, as well as through judicial procedures that fail to respect their rights and dignity." They go on to summarize the kinds of violence often perpetrated against justice involved youth, nicely highlighting some of the various international agreements and laws calling for child protection, and concluding with some practical recommendations and a call for international collaboration, emphasizing the need for reforms that place children at the centre of justice processes. The upcoming 2025 World Congress on Justice with Children is suggested as an opportunity to begin that international exchange and mobilize collective action.

The next several articles in our **Views and Reviews** section raise a number of particular issues for improving service delivery to justice involved youth. **Rolando Nooks** brings an issue to the forefront that could certainly be taken more seriously; the quite frequent experience of loss among justice involved youth, their inability to appropriately manage their grief and the far- reaching consequences that can ensue with impact on youth mental health, judgement, motivation, family bonds ...etc. The article underscores the need for grief-sensitive policies and offers a number of suggestions for how we can give youth the emotional and psychological support they may need when they suffer loss.

Katherine Graves and **Annika Krause** address the issue of how 'education' should be delivered to justice involved youth. It's of course generally accepted that the classroom environment presents unique challenges for educators in juvenile justice settings. The youth are often not ready to learn, and they may actively resist, rebel or totally withdraw. Educators in those settings require special competencies and skills, understanding of youth development, resilience and proven strategies to effectively 'reach' their students. The authors argue convincingly that all of this should be addressed in continued specialized training and professional development, and particularly in terms of "providing individualized support and adaptable learning opportunities."

The first article in our **Featured Research Articles** section comes from the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators (CJJA) in the US, specifically from **Katie Barclay Penkoff**, the Director of Research & Training for the Council. The article discusses the findings from a significant national scan of the kind of educational programming and services available to justice involved youth across the US. CJJA was interested in knowing more about how educational programming was being delivered across the country, by whom and with what kinds of partnerships and levels

of funding, to what kinds of students, making use of what kinds of new technology, with what quality of transitional services being delivered post-release, and generally with what built-in monitoring systems to better understand impact. The article is chock full of useful and otherwise unavailable information about the educational landscape in juvenile justice facilities in the US. It will undoubtedly help clarify what is going on in terms of the scope and quality of educational services for justice involved youth. Even more important, however, it will hopefully also serve as a catalyst to keep improving on what is going on.

Fann Jiang Yunfan and her colleagues from the Singapore Prison Service address an issue that is receiving increasing attention in the juvenile justice literature; what are the sequalae of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) and how important are these experiences in understanding 'desistance' outcomes for justice involved youth. As the authors appropriately acknowledge, the research they conducted comparing level of ACEs of desisting versus non-desisting youth had some limitations. But as an exploratory study it nonetheless adds to our knowledge of how "early interventions that nurture agency and positive relationships with family and community members can perhaps mitigate ACEs' effects."

As well from Singapore, **Angeline Tay** and her colleagues, adopting a rather novel single-case methodology, give us a quite unique analysis of the "lived experience of a Singaporean young desistor." This is an article that is well worth reading both for its innovative narrative and life story approach and for the insights that are revealed about the "complex navigation of reintegration challenges along a justice involved youth's desistance journey." Four important themes emerge in describing that journey, that are fully consistent with theoretical explanations of desistance highlighting the interplay of personal, relational, and societal factors; the importance of supportive relationships, the work of identity reconstruction, change in lifestyle and concrete strategies to overcome challenges.

Another quite innovative approach is elaborated in the next article by **Rosemary Ricciardelli** and her colleagues. The message here is that the best kind of research is research that is done 'on the ground' with the full involvement of the individuals it will affect. The article describes how researchers can train practitioners to also become researchers, thereby empowering them to be data-driven in how they approach design and development of practice. As the Authors note, the ultimate challenge for researchers is to "empower people with frontline experience to apply evidence informed realities to their day-to-day work." In this case, Ricciardelli and colleagues detail how they supported the Texas Juvenile Justice Department in establishing an impressive operational research capacity that could help them "build a unified juvenile justice system" and

systematically improve the quality of their community and institutional work environments. The description of how MicroResearch training was applied in order to build internal research capacity is especially relevant to our theme of how to move towards *Excellence in Juvenile Justice Policy and Practice*.

The title of our last article in our **Featured Research Articles** section tells us what it's about; a descriptive analysis of smoking behaviors, nicotine dependence and use of nicotine replacement therapies (NRT) in young people in Australian youth detention. Though conducted in Australia,

I doubt whether the findings would be very different in North America or Europe. **Dr. Leigh Haysom**, a public health specialist in New South Wales, and her two colleagues **Nahla Kashem & Penelope Abbott**, present a wealth of data they collected, concluding that compared to previous data from a decade earlier, there were still very high rates of all smoking behaviors in young people entering detention. However, cigarette smoking was significantly reduced, cannabis use was unchanged and the new phenomenon of vaping was quite high. The authors discuss the implications for how to manage this more or less universal issue in juvenile detention.

Our last three articles in the Edition are perfectly suited for our **Practice Innovation** section, highlighting some promising new developments for enhancing service delivery to justice involved youth. **Sofia Almeida** and her colleagues from Portuguese-based Innovative Prison Systems (IPS), describe the work that was completed together with their partners in Belgium and the Netherlands, designing and then piloting and evaluating the TRIANGLE platform, a secure digital solution that provides a range of structured and controlled online educational resources, developed specifically to appeal to justice-involved youth. This is another fine example of initiatives supported by the European Commission's Erasmus+ programme that are making a meaningful difference in the service delivery landscape throughout Europe for both justice-involved adults and youth. The authors conclude their article with a set of policy recommendations that can potentially give youth greater access to digital platforms for servicing their educational needs.

Adopting a similar strategy of incorporating new technology to improve service delivery to justice involved youth, the article by **Abby Carbaugh** and **Jimmy Connelly** looks at how virtual reality (VR) technology can assist therapeutic interventions with juveniles, particularly in the provision of short-term mental health services. The authors provide some very useful technical guidance on how they dealt with a number of implementation challenges in introducing VR technology in a secure detention center in Nebraska (e.g., hardware selection, technological implementation and usage protocol creation). They then discuss findings from an exploratory pilot study with young girls in detention who self-reported both positive engagement with the VR experience and improvement in their emotional regulation abilities.

The final article in this Edition comes from the Correctional Services Department in Hong Kong where a team of young psychologists are exploring a variety of ways to better engage young persons in detention and support them towards desistance. In this instance, **Celia HO Wing-sum** and her colleagues describe a comprehensive and integrated intervention strategy that follows the three stages of 'desistance'; supporting youth to embrace primary desistance in terms of initial behavior change, encouraging identity change as an important aspect of secondary desistance, and finally, focusing on ways to consolidate tertiary desistance that involves finding community acceptance and belonging. For each stage, some quite creative, culturally specific and psychologically-informed approaches have been developed (e.g., Manga Drawing to motivate youth in narrating their life story). Fundamentally, the authors position their approach as going beyond just preventing reoffending and concentrating as well on "nurturing prosocial, thriving youth who can lead purposeful and meaningful lives"; an impressive aspirational vision for any youth justice agency.

The dozen papers in this ACJ Edition on ***Excellence in Juvenile Justice Policy and Practice*** are certainly not the whole story. Hopefully, a number of the papers will generate some dialogue and maybe even encourage some agencies and jurisdictions to experiment with new strategies. Excellence is not easy to achieve but in dealing with justice involved youth it behooves us to keep trying to get closer to the ideal. Justice-involved youth otherwise become justice-involved adults, and the cycle continues.

I close this Foreword by giving special thanks to CJJA and the ICPA Juvenile Justice Network for their full support in promoting this Edition of ACJ, and especially to **Katie Barclay Penkoff** who was fully engaged in helping to review manuscripts and offering feedback. In order to gather several additional reviews, we had to reach beyond the Editorial Board for this Edition. We want to extend a special thank you to **Simon Gonsoulin**, Principal Researcher at the American Institutes for Research, and **Dr. Heather Griller Clark** from Arizona State University. Of course, I also thank, as usual, the ACJ Editorial Board members who continue supporting our peer review process.

The next Edition of ACJ will be our 20th. It deserves a very special 20th Anniversary theme that we are working on. Please stay tuned to find out what that might be!

Your commentaries on this Edition or on the Journal more generally are always welcomed.

My warmest regards.

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Guest Editorial from the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators

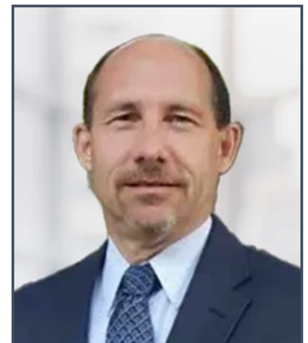
Michael P. Dempsey, Executive Director & Wendi M. Davis, Assistant Executive Director
Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators

Over the past two years, the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators (CJJA) has greatly enjoyed becoming a member of the *International Corrections & Prisons Association* (ICPA) and chairing its Juveniles Network. Organized in 1994, CJJA is a U.S. based national non-profit organization created to improve juvenile justice systems, enhance local correctional and residential facilities and programs, and, most importantly, promote better long term outcomes for youth and their families. CJJA represents the chief executive officers of state level juvenile justice systems, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and various local jurisdictions across the country.

Through our partnership with ICPA, we have connected with and learned immensely from our colleagues around the world engaged in serving young people who are justice involved. CJJA is now thrilled for the opportunity to partner with Frank Porporino, Ph.D., Chair of the ICPA Research and Development Network and Editor of Advancing Corrections, on the first issue of the journal focused solely on juvenile justice policy and practice.

As ICPA continues to expand its Juveniles Network, we were pleased to receive submissions representing juvenile justice research, policy, and practice from Belgium, Germany, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Portugal, Singapore, Southern Australia, and the United States. Common themes among these submissions include exploring pathways to desistance (including services and supports during custody as well as the transition and reentry process); educational, vocational, and therapeutic interventions; and the use of technology to enhance educational and therapeutic offerings in secure care settings.

We hope you find the resulting publication as engaging and thought-provoking as we have. We also hope that it stimulates greater interest from researchers to partner with juvenile justice systems. Together, we can learn from one another and continue to improve the services and support we provide to young people involved in the justice system, their families, their communities, and the professionals who serve them. We look forward to continuing to expand our network and increasing the collective impact of our work.



Michael Dempsey is the Executive Director of the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators (CJJA). Prior to joining CJJA, Michael served as Executive Director of the Indiana Department of Corrections, Division of Youth Services (DYS) from 2009 to 2015. He began his work with the Indiana Department of Corrections as Superintendent of the Pendleton Juvenile Correctional Facility in June 2006. Prior to moving to Indiana, he served as the Superintendent of the Kansas Juvenile Correctional Complex for approximately two and a half years. He began his career in corrections with the Missouri Department of Corrections, starting as a Corrections Officer at the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1985. Since that time, Mike has held positions as a Correctional Sergeant, Lieutenant, Captain and Major. He has also held positions as Correctional Training Officer, Internal Affairs Investigator, Assistant Superintendent and Associate Superintendent.

He has extensive experience with CJJA and Performance-based Standards (PbS). He served as president of the CJJA Board of Directors for two years (2012-2014), and on the PbS Board of Directors for four years, two of those years as president. Mike was an active member of CJJA while he was Director of Indiana DYS. Mike has over 30 years of experience working in both adult and juvenile correctional and detention facility settings and continues to be committed to assisting juvenile justice systems on improving conditions of confinement, reforming systems, and improving long-term outcomes for youth.

Michael holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Administration and Criminal Justice and has been actively involved with the American Correctional Association (ACA) as a member and certified auditor. He has served as the President/COO of Youth Opportunity Investments and brings a unique experience and perspective in both the public and private sectors in the juvenile justice field.

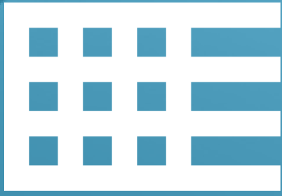
Wendi Davis is the Assistant Executive Director of the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators. Prior to joining the Council, Wendi served as Deputy Director of the Division of Facility Support for the Ohio Department of Youth Services. She was responsible for security, classification, operations, unit management, treatment and programming within the DYS facilities. The division also included Medical Services and the Buckeye United School District.

Before this role, she served as the Bureau Chief of the Office of Quality Assurance and Improvement for the Ohio Department of Youth Services. She was responsible for agency quality assurance efforts to include policy, research, auditing, and process improvement.

In addition to this considerable responsibility, Wendi also had oversight of the agency's Office of Information Technology Services which involved networking, telecommunications, desktop computing, application development, project management services, and unified communications such as email and calendaring. Serving as a trusted advisor, Wendi serves as a mentor to those who work under her leadership.

With over 23 years of experience in criminal and juvenile justice, Wendi has served on numerous national and statewide policy committees and councils. During her career, she has presented to various audiences on a wide range of criminal justice and juvenile justice topics. Her breadth and scope of the criminal justice and juvenile justice fields, specifically correctional administration, makes her not only a leader but also a subject matter expert.

Wendi received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Administration and a Master of Business Administration with a Leadership concentration from Franklin University.



ADVANCING CORRECTIONS
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Views and Reviews

TOWARDS AN EVIDENCE-DRIVEN AND TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH TO THE DELIVERY OF JUVENILE JUSTICE SERVICES

Catia Gaetana Malvaso & Andrew Day

University of Adelaide, University of Melbourne, Swinburne University, Flinders University

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Abstract

This paper discusses how current approaches to youth justice service delivery have largely failed to produce measurable success for both children and young people and the wider community. We draw on findings from a long-standing program of research in an Australian jurisdiction which has raised important social and political questions about the extent to which any system that relies largely on the use of punitive, risk, and deficits-based service models can only serve to criminalize childhood adversity. Local data are used to provide the evidence-base from which more trauma-informed justice system practices can be identified and implemented that protect the rights of children and young people while also protecting the safety of the community.

Introduction

There is ongoing, and often intractable, disagreement between government agencies and external stakeholders about the very purpose of any youth justice agency. The dominant model of practice, in our own jurisdiction as elsewhere, is based on an understanding that the overarching goal is to manage the risks of re-offending that are posed by children and young people, and that this can be achieved, in the main, through the provision of criminogenic assessments and programs (Armytage & Ogloff, 2017). It is an approach that is, however, often accompanied by a legislative and policy commitment to protect the rights of the child, to address the needs of First Nations families and communities (in settler colonial nations), and to address the welfare and well-being needs of children and young people (Malvaso et al., 2024). This is particularly true in England and Wales, where there is now a requirement that the child's 'best interests' are at the forefront of all decision-making (the 'child-first' model; see Case & Hazel, 2023). What has resulted, in our view, is ongoing confusion among stakeholders – both within and outside of government – about how best to balance the competing objectives of both criminal justice and welfare approaches to service delivery in a context in which there is an overriding obligation to deliver services that align with the sentences handed down by the courts (Butcher et al., 2024; see also Day, 2022). Some of the consequences of this include the overuse of custody as a common response to youth crime, as well as investment in a wide range of different services and programs for children and young people; from those that might be regarded as 'punitive', such as boot camps, through to those that might be considered more 'restorative', such as diversion to family conferences. The problems that inevitably arise with such eclecticism have made youth justice a politically contested space, with the uncertainty only compounded by the lack of convincing data to describe the needs of children in the justice system or the efficacy of any one approach to service delivery over any other.

In this article we describe some of the potentially iatrogenic effects of incarceration on children and young people, before reporting our efforts to generate evidence in South Australia (SA) about the profile and needs of children and young people in the youth justice system. We conclude, from our reading of the international research, that custodial sanctions cannot be reasonably expected to promote community safety and that there is a need to develop services and programs that will help us to respond in ways that do not further criminalize the high rates of childhood trauma, adversity, and disadvantage in the youth justice population. Our efforts locally have culminated in us advocating for an approach that we have called 'trauma-informed youth justice' (see Day et al., 2023); one that embraces and operationalizes the core principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (Table 1), and that is sensitive to the historical, cultural and gender related factors that impact children's developmental pathways. It is an approach that we see as having the potential to lead to more effective engagements with, and ultimately better outcomes for, children and young people in the justice system.

Some negative effects of juvenile incarceration

The first point we would make in relation to the use – and over-use – of custody for children is that it is not a particularly effective way to increase the safety of the community - and probably simply makes things worse. In Australia, for example, data show that 85 percent of children aged 10 to 16 years will return to sentenced detention within 12 months of release; with approximately two thirds returning within just six months (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023a). Perhaps most concerning though is evidence that approximately two thirds of children with *any* history of juvenile

Table 1: The key principles of trauma-informed practice (adapted from McLachlan, 2023).

Principle	**Description**
Safety	To ensure the provision of effective physical and emotional safety to service users so that they feel welcome, included, and heard.
Trustworthiness	To establish mutually understood, consistent expectations and boundaries between the service provider and the service user.
Choice	To provide information, options, and an awareness of their rights and responsibilities, to ensure service users have choice and control over their service preferences.
Collaboration	To enable service user participation in the planning and shared decision-making around activities and settings.
Empowerment	To promote skills-development of service users through a strengths-based approach; and recognizes the importance of individual characteristics, such as culture, history, and gender, when designing an effective service.

justice involvement will enter the adult prison system within five years (Craig et al., 2020). For Lambie and Randall (2013), the negative impacts of childhood incarceration will often include:

• *Disruption of the natural "aging out" of criminal behavior*: While we know that roughly one third of all children will, at some point, engage in some form of serious delinquent behavior, most will desist as part of normal maturation (see Tuttle, 2024). Incarceration may, however, inhibit the ability to 'age out' as custodial environments that are highly structured and that do not reflect the realities of independent living limit the acquisition of more coping skills.

• *Contagion effects:* Increased contact with peers who offend is thought to be a contributing factor to negative criminal justice outcomes. This is because there is limited reinforcement of societal norms and expectations in custodial settings, as well as restricted opportunities for children to develop adaptive interpersonal skills, such as conflict resolution (see Stevenson, 2017).

• *Rehabilitative limitations:* Although positive rehabilitative outcomes can be achieved in custodial settings, the potential for change is inevitably limited. There is, for example, also only limited evidence to show that programs delivered in custody will have long term positive effects post-release. Significant practical and logistical challenges also arise in efforts to provide high quality rehabilitation programs in custodial settings (including the high number of unsentenced young people who are incarcerated, the heterogeneity of the population in terms of age and maturation, and the use of short custodial orders that prohibit the delivery of programs that have sufficient intensity to change behavior) (see Day et al., 2022).

• *Victimization:* Significant levels of victimization, involving verbal, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse have been reported in custodial settings, particularly for those who are younger, from minority

racial groups, and /or who have been placed in adult facilities.

• *Mental health and wellbeing:* A large proportion of incarcerated children and young people are known to experience mental health problems such as depression, suicide attempts and ideation, as well as drug and alcohol abuse. It is considered likely that these problems are exacerbated by the conditions experienced during incarceration (see
Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013).

• *Social relationships:* Even after accounting for individual differences, incarcerated children and young people have been found to lose access to adult support and contact with friends more rapidly than their non-incarcerated counterparts.

• *Physical health:* Incarcerated children have a higher rate of physical health problems than their counterparts in the general community (see Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). This is likely to be only in part attributable to risk-taking that is often a feature of incarceration, such as violence, substance abuse, and sexual activity.

• *Education:* Despite the importance of quality education, incarcerated children often receive a more fragmented and inferior education than their peers in the community.

• *Re-entry into the community:* The transition from custody back into the community is thought to be particularly difficult for children and young people, as it happens concurrently with the transition from adolescence to adulthood (with challenges including living alone, unemployment, relationships, and parenthood; see Rock et al., 2025).

Statistics such as these speak not only to the ineffectiveness of incarceration as an effective method of crime control but suggest that custody can cause additional harms and only increase risk. This means that new, effective ways of responding to children and young people who commit crimes and/ or who come into contact with the justice system need to be developed and, importantly, evaluated in order for us to determine the most effective interventions that can be both meet the needs of children and young people and ensure community safety. In what follows, we describe a program of research which has focused on describing and understanding the needs of justice-involved children and using this research to articulate an evidence-informed approach to youth justice service delivery.

Understanding the needs of justice-involved children and young people

While the potentially harmful – and criminogenic – effects of custody on children and young people are reasonably well documented, the key task for youth justice agencies is to provide service responses that are likely to best meet the needs of children and young people and to prevent harm to the community. This involves understanding the presentations of those who are in the system, before then identifying ways in which key areas of need might be addressed. In this respect, population-level administrative data can tell us a lot about the pathways of children and young people in and out of the justice system as their contact patterns with the broader service system (and how these differ from those who never have justice system contact) can be observed. This can be supplemented with survey data and consultations with both staff, young people, and other stakeholders to develop a coherent and targeted approach to service delivery (see Table 2 for a summary).

Table 2: Summary of the sources of data and evidence drawn upon to articulate the need for trauma-informed youth justice

Data/evidence source	Example
Linked administrative data	The South Australian Better Evidence Better Outcomes Linked Data Platform (BEBOLD; Pilkington et al., 2019), which has been utilized to describe children's pathways in and out of the justice system, as well as intersections with other key agencies such as child protection and health.
Surveys	The Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma Study (Malvaso et al., 2022), which involved the collection of psychological data from 184 children and young people under Youth Justice supervision, and a survey of Youth Justice staff to understand receptiveness to a new model of service delivery (Boyd et al., under review).
Consultations	Focus groups with youth justice practitioners (Malvaso & Day, in press), and justice-involved children and young people (Malvaso, Day, & Robinson, in press).
Literature synthesis	An umbrella review of trauma-informed service models and trauma-focused treatment in youth justice settings (Malvaso, Day, & Boyd, 2024); a review of the legislative objects of youth justice in Australia (Malvaso et al., 2024); a review of trauma-informed and participatory approaches to youth justice service delivery (Day et al., 2023); a review of different styles of leadership models in youth justice (Butcher et al., 2024).

In our research we have drawn on data from the Better Evidence Better Outcomes Linked Data Platform (BEBOLD), a comprehensive whole-of-population linked data platform (see Pilkington et al., 2019) to highlight the significant crossover of children and young people between child protection and youth justice systems. This tells us (see Malvaso et al., 2020) that:

- approximately 1 in 4 of all children in South Australian born 1991 to 2002 were notified to the child protection system (n=44,816), although only two percent had youth justice contact, by age 18 (n=3,058);
- the majority of those in contact with child protection did not experience any youth justice system contact (of the 44,816 who had child protection contact, only six percent went on to have youth justice supervision);
- of those who did experience youth justice system contact (n=3,058), 84% had been notified to child protection, and a third had experienced out-of-home care.

The administrative data also highlight patterns of social and economic disadvantage from birth for children and young people who have child protection and youth justice contact, and how these

patterns are much more pronounced for those who have experienced both child protection *and* youth justice system contact. These data help us to identify the opportunity for early investment by developing programs that reduce the number of children who 'crossover' from child protection into youth justice.

Linked administrative data can also be used to illustrate an increase in the prevalence of 'complex needs' over recent years. As is the generally the case both nationally and internationally, the number of children in contact with the youth justice system in South Australia has steadily decreased over time (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023b), most likely driven by a reduction in young people committing one-off, low-level offenses (McCarthy, 2020). Using data drawn from the BEBOLD platform (Malvaso et al., 2023), we were able to show that:

- the youth justice population is now largely unsentenced (although at least half will transition to sentenced supervision within 12 months), with two thirds of children and young people already known to youth justice, and a smaller population who is generating a similar number of mandates;
- a growing proportion of children and young people who were aged 14 or under at their first contact, and who experience custodial supervision, child protection contact, and mental health and substance use related emergency department presentations and hospitalisations.

These data offer evidence to support the narrative from local professionals in the field who argue that although the actual numbers of children and young people in the youth justice system are decreasing, their complexity has increased substantially and how responding to these changes has significant implications for service planning.

In an effort to better understand when, how and why maltreatment (and child protection contact) leads to offending for some but not all young people, we conducted interviews with 184 young people under supervision (Malvaso et al., 2022). Almost all reported multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including experiences of maltreatment as well as exposure to parental substance use, mental illness, incarceration, separation, and death. In fact, the vast majority (88%) reported multiples ACEs (four or more), with nearly everyone who participated (92%) reporting experiencing at least one of these ACEs frequently. Importantly though, we found that trauma symptomatology, substance use, and social and emotional behavioral concerns were almost universal - the majority (88%) of children scored in the symptomatic range for at least one indicator of trauma symptomatology (such as anxiety, depression, anger, post-traumatic stress, dissociation and sexual concerns), with approximately one third indicating that they had thoughts about hurting or killing themselves. Most of the children interviewed (86%) also scored in the problematic ranges for alcohol and/or other drug use, with almost half (43%) reporting drinking or using drugs because they felt 'stressed, tense, or full of worry or problems'. Finally, almost two-thirds provided responses that reflected the presence of internalizing behavioral problems, and there was evidence that more than three-quarters experienced externalising behavioral problems. These data have been crucial in developing an approach to understanding the needs of children who commit crimes and the importance of services and programs that address the mental health and behavioral causes of crime from an early age. It has led to discussion about the relationship between well-being and risk and, in particular, reconceptualizing 'risk' in terms of the vulnerabilities that arise in response to childhood maltreatment and the social

and structural inequalities that are largely overlooked in current risk management responses.

Considering and Recommending Trauma-Informed Youth Justice

Based on this research, along with a series of consultations with youth justice staff and young people (Malvaso & Day, in press; Malvaso, Day, & Robinson, in press), and a series of reviews of current policy and case plan documents (Boyd et al., under review), as well as what we have called 'trauma-informed youth justice' (Day & Malvaso, 2024; Day et al., 2023a; Day et al., 2023b), we have identified the following ways forward for youth justice:

- *Legislation:* There is a need for a single, modern and responsive legislative framework for youth justice that is aligned with a child-centred philosophy. This should explicitly state that the most appropriate way for youth justice to prevent re-offending is to limit the use of custody and provide services that are explicitly and intentionally focused on protecting and promoting child safety and wellbeing (Malvaso et al., 2024). In Australia (and perhaps in other countries as well) this will include first acknowledging and highlighting the ongoing impacts of historical injustice, colonization, and intergenerational trauma for First Nations children. Not only should 'detention as a last resort' be legislated, but there should be a legal requirement to deliver diversionary and individualized responses before custody is considered.

- *Policy:* There is a need to develop policy that is sensitive to the differences that exist between those in early, mid, and late adolescence, rather than assuming that responses to children of different ages should be the same. A better understanding of the pathways through which childhood maltreatment can lead into youth justice engagement should result in services and programs that are better matched to the changing context in which offending behavior emerges, develops, and can be mitigated.

- *Practice:* Substantial commitment to the ongoing training, capacity and competence of justice system staff to work more effectively with children and young people who have experienced significant trauma and adversity is needed. This includes the development of practice guidance that supports developmentally informed and trauma-responsive casework as well as accredited training programs to develop workforce competencies and capacities to support work that is both trauma-informed and culturally safe.

- *Leadership:* Strong and principled political leadership is required to improve the coherence of current services and support those that are explicitly and intentionally focused on protecting the child from re-traumatization. There is also scope here to develop a national leadership program that conceptualizes and delivers an agenda for reform and continuous improvement (see https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal_and_Constitutional_Affairs/Incarceration47), as well as to share learnings about implementation and evaluation.

- *Governance:* It is through the process of engaging with, and listening to, children and young people, practitioners, and those with lived experiences that innovation and reform will occur. Genuine community partnerships are urgently required to meet the needs of First Nations children, families, and communities.

The Potential for a Trauma-Informed Youth Justice System.

Along with the findings of multiple independent reviews and inquiries into the quality of youth justice services across Australia, our research provides an example of how curating data from different sources can be used to develop the rationale that youth justice agencies need to move away from punitive, risk, and deficits-based models that mainly serve to further criminalize young people. There may nonetheless be a number of barriers to achieving a truly trauma-informed youth justice, including the misconception that a focus on trauma somehow absolves young people of responsibility for their actions or fails to hold them to account for crimes they have allegedly or have been found to have committed. Our response to this is to refer to the evidence relating to the effectiveness of our current systems, as well as to highlight the problems that are in punishment (and personal deterrence) responses to those who have experienced significant trauma and adversity. A more substantive challenge arises in efforts to be concrete and specific about what a trauma-informed approach would look like. It undoubtedly requires a fundamental shift in the actual operation of detention centres, as well as the significant change to the organisational, clinical, and corporate governance structures of youth justice that are supported by standards that require the development of robust mandatory education and training. Finally, people will rightly ask about whether there is evidence that a more trauma-informed approach will actually deliver better outcomes. We examined this in a recent umbrella review that synthesized the findings of recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses that have evaluated different elements of trauma-informed practice in Youth Justice settings (Malvaso et al., 2024). We concluded that the current body of evidence tells us about just one component of trauma-informed practice – the provision of trauma-specific *treatment* – with relatively little evidence about the effects of interventions in other key domains, such as organisational or systemic change. Our conclusion was that there are already sufficient grounds to offer treatment for those children and young people who have experienced trauma as well as to provide specialist training and support for staff. However, more evidence is required to demonstrate that this type of treatment will result in behavioral change that is specifically related to re-offending.

How will we know if trauma-informed youth justice is effective?

Beyond demonstrating that the trauma-informed principles have been adequately operationalized across both policy and practice, a major challenge is to explain and demonstrate how core activities might be expected to contribute to the longer-term performance of the agency and, most importantly, to better outcomes for children and young people, their families, and communities. The primary outcome or key performance indicator that most justice agencies current rely upon is re-offending (or some fairly crude metric of return to the criminal justice system), with this also used as the primary outcome variable in scientific studies investigating the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of youth justice interventions (see Lipsey, 2009). The problems in relying on re-offending as the sole measure of service performance have been well-documented by us and others (Day et al., 2023), but include: concerns about validity (e.g., many crimes are not reported or prosecuted); systemic and structural processes that influence who will, and will not, be arrested, charged, and convicted (e.g., systemic racism); and difficulties in determining whether reductions in offending reflect natural 'aging out' processes or whether they can be attributed to the impact of specific interventions. But, most importantly, simple re-offending data tell us little about the mechanisms through which services can influence future behavior and thus help with the search for the most successful interventions. Our advice here is to develop an approach to systematically measure short-term outcomes (indicators) that can be used to demonstrate the impact of a youth justice service (Day et al., 2023). While we

acknowledge that an improved set of indicators may never provide information about all possible aspects of a service, it should offer a basic dataset and comparative tool that can then be used to support monitoring and evaluation and to inform policy development. We have also proposed an outcome measurement framework that can help us to better understand whether (and when) a trauma-informed youth justice can achieve the goal of preventing re-offending. In this we suggest collecting information on indicators across four domains: the child; the practitioner; the service/organisation; and the broader system, as a starting point for developing an evidence base that will allow us to know if we are improving outcomes.

In this article then we have sought to illustrate just some of the ways that research (the collection of evidence) can be used to drive a service improvement agenda. We have come to recognize the importance of drawing on different sources of evidence, whether this is from administrative records, from consultations with stakeholders and children and young people who are in the system, as well as more conceptual work to lay out new frameworks for service delivery. Above all we would argue that our youth justice system should be designed to meet the needs of the people for whom it serves and that it is evidence, rather than politics or ideology, that should drive community responses to youth crime.

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PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN JUSTICE SYSTEMS

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Abstract

Violence against children in justice systems remains a critical and persistent issue worldwide. Despite international commitments and legal frameworks, children continue to face mistreatment, neglect, and systemic injustices when in contact with justice institutions. This article examines the root causes of such violence, including structural discrimination, lack of child-centered justice mechanisms, and punitive approaches to juvenile justice. It also explores effective strategies for prevention and response, emphasizing the need for multidisciplinary interventions, legal reforms, and child-centered policies. By highlighting key challenges and proposing actionable solutions, this paper aims to contribute to global efforts in ensuring justice systems protect, rather than harm, children.

The Urgent Need to Address Violence Against Children in Justice Systems

Children who come into contact with the justice system, whether as victims, witnesses, or accused individuals, often face environments that fail to protect their fundamental rights. Justice systems worldwide are meant to uphold the best interests of the child, but too often, they become spaces where violence, discrimination, and mistreatment are deeply entrenched. The very institutions that should provide justice and protection for children instead might expose them to harm, compounding the vulnerabilities that led them into contact with the system in the first place. Despite decades of advocacy, legal reforms, and commitments at the international level, the reality remains alarming in many cases: children may continue to experience violence in police custody, pretrial detention, and correctional facilities, as well as through judicial procedures that fail to respect their rights and dignity.

Violence against children in justice systems is not confined to physical abuse. It takes multiple forms, including psychological harm, prolonged detention in inhumane conditions, and institutional neglect. Children might be detained in facilities alongside adults, increasing the risk of violence and exploitation. In some countries, they endure solitary confinement, degrading treatment, and excessive use of force by authorities. The lack of child-sensitive procedures in legal proceedings can also amount to psychological violence, as children face intimidation, coercion, or the absence of adequate legal representation. This situation is particularly dire for children from marginalized communities, including those with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and children from low-income backgrounds, who face disproportionate rates of incarceration and mistreatment. (Foussard et al., 2025)

International legal frameworks, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations, 1989) and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the Beijing Rules) (United Nations, 1985), establish clear obligations for states to ensure that justice systems respect children's rights and are free from violence. These instruments emphasize that deprivation of liberty should be a last resort and for the shortest possible time, and that any child deprived of liberty must be treated with humanity and respect. However, the gap between these legal commitments and actual practice is stark. Many countries continue to rely on punitive approaches that criminalize children rather than focusing on rehabilitation, social reintegration, and alternatives to detention.

One of the key challenges in addressing violence against children in justice systems is the lack of comprehensive data. Violence against children is often underreported, particularly when it occurs in closed institutions where there is limited oversight. Many cases go unnoticed due to a culture of impunity among law enforcement officials or because children fear retaliation if they speak out. Even when abuses are documented, legal accountability mechanisms are often weak or ineffective. This lack of transparency perpetuates cycles of violence, making it difficult to push for systemic reforms based on concrete evidence. (Foussard et al., 2025)

At the same time, new trends are exacerbating the risks faced by children in justice systems. The criminalization of neurodivergent children, who are often misdiagnosed or misunderstood, has led to their overrepresentation in detention facilities without appropriate support. The increasing digitalization of justice, including the use of artificial intelligence and remote court hearings, raises concerns about children's rights being overlooked in virtual proceedings.(Foussard et al., 2023)

Climate injustice is also emerging as a key issue, as children displaced by environmental crises or involved in conflicts over natural resources find themselves in legal limbo, with justice systems ill-equipped to address their specific needs. (Day et al., 2024)

Despite these challenges, there are promising developments in the field. Some countries have successfully implemented child-friendly justice reforms that prioritize diversion programs, restorative justice, and community-based rehabilitation instead of detention. European research such as the Data MOSAIC Project[1] (Justice with Children, n.d.) are working to bridge the data gap by developing tools that help monitor harmful practices in detention settings, allowing for better prevention and response strategies. Moreover, international gatherings such as the World Congress on Justice with Children (Justice with Children, n.d.) provide crucial platforms for knowledge exchange, advocacy, and coordinated action to ensure justice systems are genuinely protective and rehabilitative for children.

This article explores the persistent problem of violence against children in justice systems, the systemic factors that contribute to it, and the emerging challenges that demand urgent attention. It examines the specific vulnerabilities faced by children in detention, highlighting the necessity of robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms. The role of data-driven solutions, such as the MOSAIC Project, is discussed in detail to illustrate how improved data collection can drive policy change. Finally, the article concludes with a call for international collaboration, emphasizing the need for reforms that place children at the center of justice processes. (Penal Reform International, 2023) The upcoming 2025 World Congress on Justice with Children (Justice with Children, 2025) will be a critical moment to mobilize stakeholders, share best practices, and push for concrete commitments to eliminate violence against children in justice systems.

This issue is not merely one of legal compliance but of fundamental human rights. A justice system that tolerates violence against children is a system that fails in its core mission to protect, rehabilitate, and ensure fairness. Addressing this issue requires a paradigm shift—one that moves away from punitive approaches and instead builds justice systems that are genuinely child-centered, grounded in dignity, and committed to the protection and well-being of every child.

Understanding the Scope and Forms of Violence Against Children in Justice Systems

Violence against children in justice systems is a global issue that manifests in various forms, affecting children at different stages of their interaction with the legal system. Whether as accused individuals, victims, or witnesses, children are often exposed to environments where their rights are not adequately protected. The scope of violence they endure extends beyond physical abuse to include psychological harm, institutional neglect, and the structural violence embedded in justice policies that fail to prioritize children's best interests. Understanding these different forms of violence is essential for developing targeted responses that ensure justice systems truly serve the needs of children rather than exacerbating their vulnerability. (Foussard et al., 2025)

Physical and Psychological Violence in Detention

A significant proportion of violence against children occurs in detention facilities, where they are deprived of liberty and often subjected to inhumane conditions. In many countries, children in conflict

1 *The Data MOSAIC project aims to enhance the collection and analysis of data related to children in justice systems, facilitating better-informed policies and practices to protect children's rights.*

with the law are placed in overcrowded and unsanitary detention centres, sometimes housed with adult detainees, exposing them to heightened risks of abuse. Reports from human rights organizations document instances of children being beaten by guards, subjected to excessive force, and placed in solitary confinement for extended periods, despite international standards prohibiting these practices. Such environments not only violate children's rights but also contribute to long-term psychological trauma, making reintegration into society even more difficult. (UN Secretary-General & UN. Independent Expert for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, 2019)

Beyond physical violence, children in detention frequently experience psychological harm. Threats, intimidation, and humiliation by law enforcement officials or facility staff are common tactics used to instil fear and enforce compliance. Children may be coerced into confessions, denied access to family members, or deliberately placed in degrading conditions as a form of punishment. The stress and anxiety associated with detention—often coupled with uncertainty about the length of their confinement—can lead to severe mental health consequences, including depression, self-harm, and suicidal tendencies. (Foussard et al., 2025)

Violence During Arrest and Police Custody

The moment of arrest and the period spent in police custody are particularly high-risk situations for children. Many cases of police brutality involve children being apprehended with unnecessary or excessive force, including physical aggression, restraint techniques that cause injury, and, in some cases, the use of firearms. Children living in marginalized communities are disproportionately affected, as they are more likely to be criminalized and subjected to harsh law enforcement practices. (Foussard et al., 2025)

During police interrogations, children often lack legal representation or the presence of a trusted adult, increasing their vulnerability to coercion. There are documented cases of children being subjected to threats, prolonged questioning without rest or food, and psychological manipulation designed to extract confessions. Such practices violate fundamental principles of child-friendly justice and contribute to wrongful convictions or unnecessarily harsh sentencing. (Meissner et al., 2023)

The lack of specialized training for police officers on child rights and appropriate procedures exacerbates the problem. Many officers view children accused of crimes through a punitive lens rather than recognizing their unique developmental needs and vulnerabilities. Addressing this issue requires significant reforms in law enforcement practices, including mandatory training on child protection and the implementation of safeguards that prevent abuses during arrest and custody. (Meissner et al., 2023)

Structural and Institutional Violence

Beyond direct physical and psychological harm, children in justice systems are often subjected to structural violence—systemic policies and institutional failures that deny them access to fair and child-sensitive justice. This form of violence is less visible but equally damaging, as it perpetuates cycles of injustice and social exclusion. (Foussard et al., 2025)

One of the most glaring examples of structural violence is the overuse of detention for children, even in cases involving minor offenses. International human rights standards dictate that deprivation of

liberty should be a last resort, yet in many countries, pretrial detention is the default response to juvenile offenses. (UN Secretary-General & UN. Independent Expert for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, 2019) Children languish in detention centers for months or even years without trial, denied the opportunity to present their case in a timely manner.

The absence of proper legal representation further compounds the problem. Many children, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds, do not have access to legal aid or lawyers trained in child justice. As a result, they may be unaware of their rights, unable to challenge unfair legal proceedings, and left without any meaningful defense. The failure of legal systems to provide adequate support for child defendants reflects a broader disregard for their rights and well-being. (Lieefard, 2019)

Moreover, justice systems frequently fail to accommodate the specific needs of children with disabilities, neurodivergent children, or those from linguistic or ethnic minorities. The absence of interpreters, accessible facilities, and tailored legal procedures creates additional barriers, leading to unfair treatment and a higher likelihood of wrongful incarceration. (Baker et al., 2020) The criminalization of neurodivergence, in particular, has become an emerging concern, with many children being misdiagnosed or punished for behaviors related to conditions such as autism or ADHD, rather than receiving appropriate support. (Clasby et al., 2022)

Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination

Girls in justice systems face unique forms of violence and discrimination that are often overlooked in legal frameworks designed primarily with boys in mind. Although fewer girls than boys come into conflict with the law, those who do are often detained for offenses linked to their gender, such as running away from abusive homes, being victims of sexual exploitation, or violating moral codes in their societies. In some regions, girls in detention are subjected to sexual abuse by guards or placed in restrictive conditions that deny them access to education and health services. (UN Secretary-General & UN. Independent Expert for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, 2019)

LGBTQ+ children in justice systems are also at heightened risk of violence, both from authorities and fellow detainees. Many face discrimination, harassment, and even physical assault due to their gender identity or sexual orientation. Some are placed in solitary confinement under the pretext of “protecting” them, while others are denied access to necessary medical and psychological care. These forms of discrimination reinforce social stigmas and make reintegration into society even more challenging. (Child Friendly Justice European Network & Global Initiative on Justice with Children, 2022)

Lack of Monitoring and Accountability

A key factor perpetuating violence against children in justice systems is the absence of effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Many detention centers operate with little external oversight, creating an environment where abuses go undetected and unpunished. Even when violations are reported, legal action against perpetrators is rare, and children often fear retaliation if they speak out.

Independent monitoring bodies, such as national human rights institutions and civil society organizations, play a crucial role in documenting and exposing abuses. However, in many countries, these organizations face restrictions that limit their ability to access detention facilities or gather reliable data. Strengthening monitoring mechanisms, ensuring whistleblower protections, and establishing clear complaint procedures for children are essential steps in breaking the cycle of violence. (Foussard et al., 2025)

The violence experienced by children in justice systems is not an isolated problem but a symptom of broader failures within legal and social structures. From physical abuse in detention to structural injustices that deny children fair treatment, the issue demands urgent attention. The next section will explore the legal and policy frameworks designed to protect children in justice systems and assess the extent to which they have been effectively implemented. (UN Secretary-General & UN. Independent Expert for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, 2019)

Legal and Policy Frameworks Protecting Children in Justice Systems

The protection of children in justice systems is enshrined in multiple international legal instruments, national laws, and policy frameworks. These standards establish the fundamental principles that should guide how justice systems interact with children, ensuring their rights are upheld at every stage of the process. While many countries have ratified international conventions and adopted child-friendly justice laws, gaps remain in their implementation. In practice, legal protections often fall short due to weak enforcement mechanisms, insufficient training for justice professionals, and systemic barriers that prevent children from accessing justice. This section examines the international legal framework, regional policies, and domestic legislative efforts aimed at safeguarding children in justice systems, while also identifying key challenges in their effective application. (Foussard et al., 2025)

International Legal Frameworks

At the heart of the international framework protecting children in justice systems is the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** (United Nations, 1989), adopted in 1989. The CRC is the most widely ratified human rights treaty, and it establishes fundamental principles such as the best interests of the child, the right to a fair trial, and the prohibition of torture and other cruel treatment. Several of its articles are directly relevant to children in justice systems, including:

- **Article 37**, which states that the detention of children should be a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period. It also prohibits torture and inhumane treatment.
- **Article 40**, which guarantees children the right to legal assistance, the presumption of innocence, and treatment that promotes their reintegration into society.

The **Beijing Rules** (1985) (United Nations, 1985) and the **Havana Rules** (1990) (United Nations, 1990) provide additional international guidelines on the administration of juvenile justice and the treatment of children deprived of liberty. These rules emphasize the need for specialized courts, alternatives to detention, and conditions that respect the dignity of children in custody.

The **Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT)** (2002) (United Nations, 2002) has also played a key role in establishing national preventive mechanisms to monitor detention facilities, including those housing children. However, many countries still lack effective independent monitoring systems to prevent violence and abuse in juvenile detention centers.

Another major instrument is the **United Nations Guidelines on Justice in Matters Involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime (2005)** (United Nations, 2005), which set out principles to ensure that children participating in legal proceedings are treated with dignity, provided with adequate support, and protected from secondary victimization. These guidelines are particularly important for child victims of violence, who often experience further trauma when engaging with the justice system.

Regional Legal and Policy Frameworks

In addition to international treaties, regional human rights systems have developed their own frameworks to strengthen child justice protections. The **African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC)** (Organization of African Unity, 1990), adopted by the African Union in 1990, complements the CRC but places stronger emphasis on community responsibility for child protection. The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child has issued General Comments and guidelines on juvenile justice to help states align their legal frameworks with international standards.

In Europe, the **Council of Europe's Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice (2010)** (Council of Europe, 2010) provide a detailed roadmap for ensuring that children's rights are respected in all judicial settings. These guidelines highlight the importance of child participation, legal assistance, and the use of restorative justice approaches. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has also issued rulings reinforcing states' obligations to prevent the ill-treatment of children in detention and to ensure fair trial standards.

In Latin America, the **Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR)** has issued landmark decisions on juvenile justice, emphasizing the need for rehabilitation over punishment. The **Brasilia Rules (2008)**, adopted by Ibero-American countries, provide principles for access to justice for vulnerable populations, including children. (Ibero-American Judicial Summit, 2008)

The **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)** has also made efforts to integrate child-friendly justice principles through its **Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Justice Systems (2016)**, though implementation varies across the region. (ASEAN, 2019)

National Legal Reforms and Implementation Challenges

Many countries have incorporated international standards into their national legal frameworks, establishing juvenile justice laws that emphasize rehabilitation and diversion over punitive approaches. However, significant challenges remain in translating these laws into effective practice. (Foussard et al., 2025)

One major issue is the **discrepancy between law and practice**. While numerous states have enacted laws prohibiting the detention of children for minor offenses, the reality is that pretrial detention remains widespread. This is often due to judicial discretion, lack of alternative measures, or inadequate infrastructure for community-based rehabilitation programs.

Another persistent challenge is the **age of criminal responsibility**. International human rights bodies recommend a minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) of at least 14 years, yet many countries continue to prosecute children as young as 10 or even lower. Some states have even moved to **lower**

their MACR in response to political pressures and fears of youth crime, contradicting international human rights recommendations.

The **lack of specialized juvenile justice systems** further undermines the effectiveness of child protection laws. In many jurisdictions, children are tried in adult courts, exposing them to harsh sentencing and procedures that do not consider their developmental stage. Even where juvenile courts exist, they are often under-resourced, with limited access to child psychologists, trained judges, and probation officers.

Legal aid remains another critical barrier. Many children, particularly from marginalized communities, lack access to **free legal representation**, leading to unfair trials and wrongful convictions. In some cases, children are pressured into plea bargains without fully understanding the consequences, resulting in unnecessary deprivation of liberty.

Furthermore, justice systems often fail to provide **gender-sensitive approaches**. Laws and policies rarely account for the specific experiences of girls in conflict with the law, who are frequently criminalized for offenses linked to their gender, such as running away from abusive households. Similarly, LGBTQ+ children face discriminatory treatment, both in legal proceedings and detention settings. (Child Friendly Justice European Network & Global Initiative on Justice with Children, 2022)

The Role of Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

For legal protections to be effective, robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms are necessary to ensure compliance. Independent national human rights institutions, child ombudspersons, and civil society organizations play a crucial role in overseeing the treatment of children in justice systems. However, in many countries, these institutions lack the authority, resources, or political independence to hold governments accountable.

International treaty bodies, such as the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**, provide oversight through periodic country reviews and recommendations. However, their influence depends on the willingness of states to implement recommendations. Some countries have established **National Preventive Mechanisms (NPMs)** under the OPCAT, but these mechanisms are not always adequately resourced or empowered to conduct unannounced visits to juvenile detention facilities. (Penal Reform International, 2023)

Strategic litigation has emerged as an important tool for enforcing children's rights in justice systems. In recent years, courts in various countries have ruled against practices such as prolonged juvenile detention, solitary confinement, and excessive sentencing of children. These legal victories have set important precedents but require sustained advocacy to ensure systemic change[2]. (Child Rights International Network (CRIN), n.d.)

Despite the existence of strong legal frameworks at international, regional, and national levels, the protection of children in justice systems remains uneven and often inadequate in practice. Gaps in

2 *This resource provides detailed case studies of strategic litigation efforts aimed at enforcing children's rights within justice systems, illustrating how legal challenges have been used to address issues such as juvenile detention, access to justice, and the treatment of vulnerable children.*

enforcement, legal loopholes, and systemic discrimination continue to expose children to violence and rights violations. Strengthening implementation mechanisms, ensuring access to justice, and holding governments accountable are essential steps in bridging the gap between legal commitments and real-world protections. The next section will explore practical strategies for preventing violence against children in justice systems, including promising initiatives and best practices from around the world. (Foussard et al., 2025)

Strategies for Preventing Violence Against Children in Justice Systems

Preventing violence against children in contact with justice systems requires a multidimensional approach that combines legislative reforms, institutional changes, and awareness-raising efforts. Given the many shortcomings identified in justice systems worldwide, it is crucial to promote strategies that ensure child-friendly justice and reduce the risk of abuse. These strategies are built on several key pillars: strengthening legal frameworks, improving institutional practices, developing alternatives to detention, and enhancing accountability mechanisms.

Strengthening Legal and Normative Frameworks

A strong legal framework is the first line of defence against violence against children in justice settings. Various international instruments, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Havana Rules on the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty, set minimum standards for safeguarding children in conflict with the law. However, the implementation of these standards remains uneven across different countries.

Legislative reforms are therefore necessary to align national justice systems with international standards. Some jurisdictions have made significant progress by enacting laws that explicitly prohibit pretrial detention of children except as a last resort, thereby reducing the risk of mistreatment in detention facilities. (Foussard et al., 2025) Other countries have strengthened procedural safeguards for children in conflict with the law, such as requiring mandatory legal assistance from a specialized lawyer at the earliest stage of judicial proceedings[3]. (Foussard et al., 2025)

Nevertheless, the existence of a protective legal framework alone is insufficient to prevent violence. Its effectiveness depends on the training of justice actors, monitoring of practices, and the establishment of independent oversight mechanisms. States must therefore ensure the dissemination of these norms and integrate them into the professional training of judges, lawyers, and law enforcement officials.

Improving Institutional Practices and Professional Training

Beyond legal reforms, preventing violence requires improving the practices of institutions responsible for children in conflict with the law. This necessitates a cultural shift within justice systems to adopt a more child-centered approach.

Training professionals is a key component of this transformation. Police officers, judges, and prison staff must be sensitized to children's rights and appropriate approaches to handling juvenile cases.

3 *France has reformed its juvenile justice system through the 2021 Code de justice pénale des mineurs, which ensures mandatory legal assistance by a specialized lawyer from the earliest stage of proceedings.In Mexico, the SAPCOV model ensures specialized legal defence for children in vulnerable situations.*

In some countries, specialized training modules have been incorporated into police academies and judicial training institutes, emphasizing non-coercive interrogation techniques and child-friendly justice procedures[4]. (Foussard et al., 2025)

Enhancing infrastructure is also essential to preventing violence. Many juvenile detention centers suffer from overcrowding, poor hygiene conditions, and understaffing, all of which contribute to abuse. Investing in facilities adapted to children's needs, with dedicated spaces for socialization and psychological support services, helps mitigate the risks of institutional violence.

Promoting Alternatives to Detention

One of the most effective measures to prevent violence against children in justice systems is to reduce the use of detention. Numerous studies show that juvenile incarceration has devastating effects on children's development and increases the risks of abuse, neglect, and trauma. (Abram et al., 2004)

Alternatives to detention, based on restorative justice and socio-educational support, provide more appropriate responses to children's needs. These include mediation, community service, and placement in specialized foster care. In several countries, pilot programs have demonstrated that these approaches significantly reduce recidivism while ensuring greater respect for children's rights[5]. (Foussard et al., 2021)

Child-friendly courts also offer an effective response by ensuring adapted hearings and individualized follow-up. In some jurisdictions, these specialized courts include multidisciplinary teams (social workers, psychologists, and educators) who assess each child's needs and propose alternative measures to incarceration.

Strengthening Oversight and Accountability Mechanisms

Finally, the establishment of independent monitoring and complaints mechanisms is crucial for preventing violence in justice institutions. The absence of external oversight fosters impunity and increases the likelihood of abuse.

In several countries, mechanisms such as Children's Ombudspersons or independent commissions for monitoring juvenile detention centers have played a key role in documenting cases of violence and advocating for structural reforms. Providing children with confidential means to report abuse, without fear of retaliation, is a fundamental safeguard for their protection.

The active involvement of children and civil society in these oversight mechanisms further enhances their effectiveness. Child rights organizations play a crucial role in documenting violations and advocating for reforms. States should therefore promote transparency and encourage the active participation of these actors in evaluating juvenile justice policies.

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4 *Chile has also introduced safeguards through Law No. 21.057, which ensures child victims and witnesses are interviewed by trained professionals in child-friendly settings, helping prevent re-traumatization and improving procedural fairness.*

5 *The report highlights Belgium's use of "Groupes de Concertation Restaurative" (Restorative Dialogue Groups), which engage children in conflict with the law, victims, and community representatives in mediated discussions—demonstrating improved reintegration outcomes and reduced recidivism.*

Preventing violence against children in justice systems requires an integrated approach combining legislative reform, institutional transformation, and alternatives to detention. While notable progress has been made in certain regions, significant challenges remain, necessitating continued commitment from states and international organizations. The establishment of accountability mechanisms and the active participation of civil society are indispensable to ensuring a justice system that truly protects children's rights.

Conclusion:
A Call to Action for the Protection of Children in Justice Systems
The persistence of violence against children in justice systems worldwide underscores the urgent need for comprehensive, evidence-based reforms. The global patterns highlighted in this article reveal a troubling reality: children in contact with the law, whether as accused, victims, or witnesses, are highly vulnerable to physical, psychological, and institutional violence. Despite numerous international legal instruments advocating for child-sensitive justice, their implementation remains inconsistent, leaving many children exposed to harmful practices.

One of the primary challenges in addressing violence against children in detention is the lack of reliable data. Many instances of violence remain underreported due to fear of reprisal, lack of independent monitoring mechanisms, and the normalization of harsh treatment within detention facilities. The Data MOSAIC Project emerges as a crucial initiative in bridging this knowledge gap. By developing a tool to systematically identify and monitor harmful incidents, the project aims to provide professionals with concrete data to assess risks and improve detention conditions for children. This initiative not only enhances transparency but also fosters accountability among justice and correctional authorities.

Beyond data collection, effective responses to violence against children in justice systems require the implementation of alternative measures to detention. Diversion programs, community-based rehabilitation, and restorative justice approaches have demonstrated their effectiveness in reducing recidivism and promoting positive outcomes for children. Countries that have embraced these strategies have witnessed significant improvements in child protection, emphasizing the necessity of scaling up such initiatives globally.

The role of international cooperation and knowledge-sharing cannot be overstated. Platforms such as the World Congress on Justice with Children, scheduled for June 2025 in Madrid, serve as critical spaces for stakeholders to exchange best practices, discuss policy advancements, and mobilize collective action. This upcoming Congress presents a pivotal opportunity to reinforce commitments to child-sensitive justice and to advocate for stronger safeguards against violence in justice systems.

In light of these findings, policymakers, practitioners, and civil society actors must intensify efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children in justice systems. Strengthening legal protections, investing in data-driven monitoring tools, and prioritizing non-custodial measures are essential steps in building justice systems that respect children's rights and dignity. The international community must seize the momentum to transform commitments into tangible actions, ensuring that every child, regardless of their legal status, is treated with fairness, compassion, and respect for their fundamental rights.

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GRIEF IN JUVENILE JUSTICE: THE ROLE OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTHCARE AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Rolando Nooks
Compassionate Reprieve

Abstract

It has been noted that more than 70% of justice-involved youth may have experienced traumatic bereavement—often the death of a parent, caregiver, sibling, or close friend. Yet, juvenile justice systems worldwide often overlook the emotional toll of grief when designing rehabilitation programs. International frameworks such as the United Nations Beijing Rules (1985) and Havana Rules (1990) emphasize humane, rehabilitative treatment and the protection of rights and dignity for youth in custody (United Nations General Assembly, 1985; United Nations General Assembly, 1990). While these standards promote rehabilitation, grief remains an under-addressed factor affecting mental health, legal decision-making, behavioral outcomes, and community reintegration. Drawing on global research and case studies, this paper demonstrates how unresolved grief can exacerbate psychological distress, impair cognitive function, increase recidivism risk, and weaken family bonds (Harnisher et al., 2015; Gonzalez et al., 2022). Despite international mandates, many justice systems lack structured interventions to support grieving youth (Coomber, 2022; Ford, 2022). This paper presents evidence-based mental health strategies, trauma-informed legal protections, rehabilitative programming, and family-centered support models that align with the Beijing and Havana Rules. We underscore the urgent need for grief-sensitive policies to ensure that all youth receive the emotional and psychological care necessary for successful reintegration and long-term well-being.

Introduction

The treatment of children in conflict with the law is a matter of global concern. Internationally, the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the "Beijing Rules") and the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (the "Havana Rules") set out minimum standards to ensure that juvenile justice systems prioritize the welfare, rights, and dignity of justice-involved youth. These frameworks emphasize rehabilitation over punishment and highlight the importance of family and community in the justice process. Since their adoption in 1985 and 1990, the Beijing and Havana Rules have shaped juvenile justice reform across many nations, encouraging alignment with more humane and rehabilitative approaches.

One critical, yet often overlooked, aspect of juvenile justice is the role of grief and loss in the lives of youth in custody. Many of these young people have endured profound bereavement - including the deaths of parents, caregivers, siblings, or close friends - often due to violence, overdose, or other traumatic circumstances. These experiences can profoundly affect a young person's mental health, behavior, and capacity to engage in rehabilitation.

Research confirms the prevalence and depth of this issue. A Chicago study found that nearly 90% of newly detained adolescents had experienced the death of a close loved one (Harnisher et al., 2015). Additional studies estimate that approximately 72% of detained youth have experienced significant bereavement, often without structured support for processing these losses (Abram et al., 2004; Coomber, 2022; Gonzalez et al., 2022). These staggering rates suggest that grief is a persistent and under-recognized force within juvenile detention populations.

Unresolved grief may manifest as emotional withdrawal, aggression, defiance, or risk-taking behaviors - all of which can complicate facility management and reduce the effectiveness of rehabilitative efforts. This paper examines four critical domains where grief intersects with juvenile justice: (1) Mental Health, (2) Legal Rights, (3) Rehabilitation Programs, and (4) Community Engagement. Within each, we assess the extent to which jurisdictions are aligning with the Beijing and Havana Rules by implementing policies and interventions that acknowledge and support grieving youth. Through this lens, we explore global best practices and present a compelling case for embedding grief-informed care throughout juvenile justice systems.

Grief and Mental Health in Juvenile Detention

Psychological Effects of Grief Justice-involved youth often carry deep psychological wounds from traumatic loss. Grief, especially following the death of a parent, caregiver, sibling, or close friend, is not only an emotional response - it can also intensify or trigger mental health disorders. Studies have found strong correlations between bereavement and psychiatric issues in detained adolescents. For example, Harnisher et al. (2015) reported that juveniles who had lost a loved one were significantly more likely to exhibit mood disorders or behavioral challenges compared to peers without such loss. Other studies reinforce these findings, showing that youth who experience traumatic bereavement are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Clow et al., 2023; Gonzalez et al., 2022).

The effects of "high-risk" loss - such as deaths due to violence or sudden accidents - can be especially severe, compounding trauma with grief. In addition to grief-specific disorders such as prolonged

grief disorder (PGD) or complicated bereavement, broader mental health needs are prevalent among justice-involved youth. Estimates suggest that 60–70% of detained adolescents meet diagnostic criteria for at least one mental health disorder, compared to approximately 20% in the general adolescent population (Gerson, Beck, & Lawrence, 2023).

Unfortunately, many juvenile facilities lack the mental health infrastructure required to meet these needs. When grief is left unaddressed, it may manifest as anger, hopelessness, dissociation, or emotional numbness - behaviors that can lead to disciplinary infractions in secure settings. Research shows that grief can impair brain functioning in adolescents, affecting emotional regulation, impulse control, and cognitive decision-making (Ford, 2022). Grieving youth may withdraw socially, experience disrupted sleep, struggle with focus, and engage in high-risk behaviors such as substance use - all of which worsen mental health outcomes and complicate rehabilitation efforts within correctional environments.

Importance of mental health interventions:
Aligning with the Beijing and Havana Rules - which underscore the fundamental importance of a child's well-being - many jurisdictions now recognize that addressing mental health in custody is both a legal and ethical obligation. The Havana Rules (1990) explicitly state that justice-involved youth must receive necessary physical and mental health care throughout their detention, including initial psychological assessments and continuous access to treatment. Despite these mandates, research shows that many juvenile justice systems around the world continue to fall short in providing adequate mental health services, leaving young people in custody vulnerable to worsening psychological conditions (Gerson, Beck, & Lawrence, 2023; Vera Institute of Justice, 2016).

Some countries, however, have begun to embed trauma-informed mental health practices within their juvenile justice frameworks. For example, India's Juvenile Justice Act (2015) mandates care, treatment, and rehabilitation as core elements of the system, explicitly affirming mental health care as a right for detained youth. Similarly, the United Kingdom's Youth Justice Board prioritizes psychological support within detention centers, and certain U.S. states have adopted trauma-informed screening tools during intake to assess for risk factors such as PTSD and bereavement (Gonzalez et al., 2022).

Effectiveness of Grief-Focused Therapy in Detention
Specialized grief interventions have demonstrated strong potential in reducing the psychological harm experienced by justice-involved youth. One of the most well-documented models is Trauma and Grief Component Therapy for Adolescents (TGCTA) an evidence-based group treatment specifically designed for trauma-exposed and bereaved youth in justice settings.

A large-scale U.S. study by Clow et al. (2023) found that detained adolescents who participated in TGCTA experienced the following outcomes:

- A 50% reduction in maladaptive grief symptoms
- Significant declines in depression, PTSD, and conduct-related issues
- Fewer violent infractions in correctional settings
- Improved decision-making and impulse control compared to control groups

These results are consistent with broader research on trauma-informed care, highlighting how grief-

sensitive approaches can enhance rehabilitation outcomes. Ford (2022) and Gonzalez et al. (2022) report that when grief counseling is embedded within rehabilitation programs, juvenile recidivism rates can drop by up to 40%. Similarly, Gerson, Beck, & Lawrence (2023) found that youth who received structured trauma counseling were less likely to reoffend and more likely to exhibit emotional regulation and prosocial behavior.

Global Implementation and Policy Challenges

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting grief-focused mental health interventions, many countries still lack structured programs to support grieving youth within their juvenile justice systems. For instance, a study by Coomber (2022) revealed that justice-involved youth in the United Kingdom often do not receive grief counseling following the death of a loved one, contributing to worsening psychological outcomes. Similarly, an evaluation of juvenile facilities in the United States found significant inconsistency across states—while some have begun implementing trauma-informed practices, others have yet to formally recognize grief as a core rehabilitation concern (Vera Institute of Justice, 2016).

However, some jurisdictions offer promising models. In Philadelphia, a juvenile detention center partnered with the Uplift Center for Grieving Children to incorporate grief therapy into its rehabilitation programming. Early evaluations showed that youth participants exhibited higher academic engagement, fewer behavioral infractions, and improved emotional regulation and coping skills (Ford, 2022).

Additionally, several European countries have adopted bereavement-informed policies that prioritize access to grief support and maintain family contact for youth in detention. These efforts align with the principles outlined in the Havana Rules (1990), which call for youth to be housed near their families and to receive mental health services that support emotional development and reintegration.

Final Thought: The Case for Universal Adoption

The findings presented throughout this paper strongly support the case for making grief-sensitive mental health interventions a global standard within juvenile justice systems. The evidence is clear: unaddressed grief exacerbates psychological distress, increases the likelihood of reoffending, and significantly impairs a young person's ability to reintegrate into society (Clow et al., 2023; Ford, 2022; Gonzalez et al., 2022). Given the legal and ethical imperatives outlined in the Beijing and Havana Rules, policymakers must move urgently to integrate grief counseling into all juvenile detention settings. Failure to do so risks not only violating international human rights standards, but also perpetuating cycles of trauma, system involvement, and intergenerational harm among justice-involved youth.

Grief and Legal Rights of Juveniles

The impact on legal decision-making grief and trauma can significantly impair a young person's ability to navigate the legal process. Justice-involved youth who have experienced bereavement often struggle with memory disruptions, difficulty concentrating, and emotional dysregulation - all of which can hinder their ability to participate effectively in court proceedings or make informed legal decisions (Gonzalez et al., 2022). Despite this, grief is frequently overlooked as a factor that influences a youth's legal behavior, leading to potential misinterpretation by attorneys, judges, and other court officials (Ford, 2022).

For example, a grieving juvenile may appear defiant, apathetic, or disengaged during hearings when in fact they are overwhelmed by emotional distress. Others may be more impulsive, more vulnerable to suggestion or coercion, and more likely to accept plea agreements without fully understanding their long-term consequences (Gerson, Beck, & Lawrence, 2023). Ensuring that grieving youth are treated fairly within the justice system requires legal practitioners to recognize these trauma responses and adopt courtroom procedures that are sensitive to their psychological state.

Trauma-Informed Judicial Practices: The Growing Legal Movement

Across the globe, a growing movement is calling for trauma-informed legal practices that uphold the rights of justice-involved youth while accounting for their psychological and emotional state. In the United States, the American Bar Association (ABA) has recommended that juvenile courts adopt trauma-sensitive procedures to ensure that young people are not retraumatized by adversarial legal environments (ABA, 2013). A 2022 study by Gonzalez et al. found that approximately 70% of youth in the juvenile justice system have a history of trauma exposure, with PTSD rates similar to those of military veterans.

Legal scholars and practitioners argue that unrecognized trauma can result in unjust outcomes for grieving youth - especially when court personnel mistake emotional numbness, avoidance, or anger as defiance rather than symptoms of grief or trauma (Ford, 2022). In response, courts in countries such as New Zealand, Canada, and parts of the U.S. have begun implementing trauma-informed legal accommodations to ensure that grieving juveniles can meaningfully participate in their own defense. These accommodations include:

- Allowing additional breaks during hearings to prevent emotional overwhelm
- Using child-friendly language to improve comprehension
- Ensuring a trauma-trained advocate or guardian is present in court
- Training judges, attorneys, and court staff to identify trauma responses instead of mislabeling them as misconduct (Gerson, Beck, & Lawrence, 2023)

These interventions help reduce the risk of wrongful convictions, overly punitive sentencing, and procedural injustice - ultimately creating a more equitable and humane legal process for grieving youth.

Rights and Protections in Different Legal Systems

In accordance with the Beijing Rules, many national legal systems uphold key procedural safeguards for justice-involved youth, including:

- The right to legal counsel
- The right to have a parent or guardian present during legal proceedings
- The right to remain silent
- The right to appeal convictions (United Nations, 1985)

For grieving youth, these protections are especially vital in reducing emotional strain and confusion during legal proceedings. Access to legal support and familiar adults can prevent vulnerable adolescents from entering into plea agreements they do not fully understand or from making coerced statements under distress (Vera Institute of Justice, 2016).

Some countries have taken steps to reinforce and expand these protections:

- India's Juvenile Justice Act (2015) guarantees legal representation and mandates parental involvement throughout legal proceedings.
- New Zealand's family group conferencing model integrates grief-sensitive approaches by providing both emotional and legal support to youth and their families before decisions are rendered (Coomber, 2022).
- The United Kingdom and several U.S. states now offer court-appointed trauma specialists to assist juvenile defendants with understanding their rights and navigating complex legal processes (Ford, 2022).

Nevertheless, many legal systems continue to overlook grief and trauma as fundamental influences in juvenile justice cases - leaving significant gaps in protection for youth facing emotional vulnerability during some of the most critical moments of their lives.

The Case for Trauma-Informed Legal Reform

Given the overwhelming evidence that grief and trauma shape how youth engage with the legal system, it is imperative that juvenile justice systems adopt trauma-informed legal policies in alignment with the Beijing and Havana Rules. Failing to account for the emotional and psychological needs of justice-involved youth not only increases the risk of wrongful convictions but also undermines fundamental human rights protections for some of the most vulnerable individuals in society (United Nations, 1990).

Implementing trauma-sensitive courtroom procedures, training legal professionals to recognize and respond to grief-related behaviors, and ensuring that youth have access to advocates who understand bereavement are essential steps toward a more equitable and rehabilitative justice system. By embedding trauma-informed practices into legal processes, courts can create safer, fairer environments that support healing and uphold the dignity of grieving youth.

Grief and Rehabilitation Programs

Therapeutic rehabilitation and grief processing rehabilitation is a foundational principle of the Beijing Rules, which emphasize that juvenile justice systems should promote the well-being and reintegration of justice-involved youth. Effective rehabilitation does not merely address criminal behavior - it also confronts the underlying emotional and psychological conditions that contribute to it. Given the high prevalence of grief and trauma among youth in custody, many jurisdictions are beginning to recognize that processing loss is a critical component of true rehabilitation. When grief is ignored, youth may remain trapped in cycles of anger, despair, or emotional numbness, undermining the goals of personal growth and behavioral change.

International standards such as the Havana Rules explicitly call for detained youth to be "guaranteed the benefit of meaningful activities and programs... to promote and sustain their health and self-respect, to foster their sense of responsibility and encourage those attitudes and skills that will assist them in developing their potential as members of society" (United Nations, 1990). In practice, this includes access to counseling, education, vocational training, and therapeutic services - many of which provide opportunities to address unresolved grief.

For example, group therapy models like Trauma and Grief Component Therapy for Adolescents (TGCTA) offer evidence-based strategies to help youth build emotional literacy, develop healthy coping mechanisms, and navigate their grief safely. Some juvenile justice facilities now incorporate bereavement support groups or weave grief-specific topics into broader therapeutic curricula, creating space for youth to process loss in a structured and compassionate environment.

Jurisdictions that embrace a trauma-informed approach to rehabilitation frequently collaborate with mental health professionals or nonprofit organizations to implement specialized programming. In the United States, several states have adopted interventions such as "Healing Trauma" or "Grief Recovery" workshops, acknowledging that successful rehabilitation must account for each youth's lived experience and emotional history. Early evaluations show promising outcomes: participants report reduced feelings of isolation, improved self-awareness, and greater motivation to change once they recognize that unresolved grief has been driving destructive behavior. These findings are reinforced by research showing that grief-focused interventions can reduce violent or delinquent conduct (Clow et al., 2023).

By helping youth understand and make peace with their losses, these programs strengthen emotional resilience and directly support the broader rehabilitative aims of juvenile justice - empowering young people to move forward with healthier, more hopeful futures.

Alignment with Beijing and Havana Rules

Many countries have codified rehabilitation and therapeutic care into their juvenile justice laws, reflecting the influence of the Beijing Rules. Nations such as China, South Africa, and several European states explicitly mandate that juvenile facilities provide psychological services and prioritize re-education and personal development as part of a youth's sentence. These policies align closely with Rule 26 of the Beijing Rules, which calls for a range of non-custodial dispositions that emphasize guidance and treatment over incarceration (United Nations, 1985).

When institutionalization is deemed necessary, Rule 28 of the Beijing Rules and Rule 12 of the Havana Rules stress that confinement must serve purposes of care, protection, and education - not punishment. A compelling example of this principle in action is a pilot project in Philadelphia, USA, where a juvenile detention center partnered with the Uplift Center for Grieving Children to integrate grief therapy into its daily programming. Mental health clinicians from the nonprofit conduct grief processing sessions with detained youth and also train staff to recognize and support grieving adolescents.

Initial outcomes have been promising, with participants demonstrating improved behavior and increased engagement in on-site educational programs (Ford, 2022). This initiative illustrates how jurisdictions can bring the vision of the Beijing and Havana Rules to life - by addressing the emotional realities of youth in custody and treating the "whole child." As practitioners note, "to successfully rehabilitate youth involved in the juvenile justice system, we must also provide support for the grief in their lives" (Gonzalez et al., 2022).

Diversion Programs for Grieving Youth

Another approach consistent with the Beijing and Havana Rules is the development of trauma-

informed diversion programs. Diversion redirects eligible youth away from formal detention and into community-based treatment or services. Advocates have called for diversion models that specifically target grieving youth - arguing that when unaddressed grief underlies a juvenile's behavior, timely access to counseling and family support can reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Ford, 2022).

Sydney Ford (2022) proposes a trauma-informed pretrial diversion model that screens youth at the point of arrest for signs of bereavement-related trauma. Those identified as experiencing significant grief would be offered therapeutic interventions and family-centered support as an alternative to prosecution. Although still emerging, this concept reflects a shift from punitive justice to therapeutic accountability - closely aligned with international principles that call for doing the "least harm" to children in conflict with the law and reserving institutionalization as a last resort (United Nations, 1990).

Grief and Community Engagement

The family and community context surrounding a young person is central to both their experience of grief and their potential for rehabilitation. Both the Beijing Rules and the Havana Rules emphasize the importance of preserving family relationships within juvenile justice systems. Specifically, the Havana Rules recommend that youth facilities be located as close as possible to a child's home community to support consistent family visitation. Maintaining these connections is especially vital for grieving youth, as it offers emotional continuity and a sense of belonging during an otherwise destabilizing period.

Research strongly supports the rehabilitative value of family engagement. Youth who receive regular visits from parents or guardians tend to perform better academically, demonstrate fewer behavioral incidents in custody, and are less likely to reoffend after release (Vera Institute of Justice, 2016). For grieving youth, consistent family involvement also helps reduce isolation and mitigate the emotional distress that can be compounded by separation from loved ones. In this way, family engagement serves both emotional and practical functions in the healing process - reinforcing the need for systems that prioritize human connection as a pillar of justice.

Global Family Engagement Initiatives

Around the world, jurisdictions are adopting policies and practices that strengthen family engagement as a core component of juvenile justice reform. These approaches not only support youth rehabilitation but also recognize the vital role families play in the grieving and healing process:

- United States: Several U.S. states have implemented enhanced visitation policies, including the creation of family-friendly visitation spaces and extended visiting hours. These reforms aim to encourage more frequent and meaningful contact between youth and their loved ones while in custody.
- New Zealand: New Zealand's youth justice model places the family at the center of legal and rehabilitative processes. Its use of Family Group Conferences, rooted in indigenous Māori traditions and restorative justice, brings together the young person, their family, and any victims to collaboratively address the offense and the youth's needs. This model helps process grief and trauma within the family context and mobilizes familial support as part of the healing journey.
- Europe: In many European countries, juvenile justice systems employ multidisciplinary case

management, in which parents or guardians are actively involved in the planning and execution of the young person's rehabilitation and reentry. These models reflect the principle of "family responsibility" outlined in the Beijing Rules, acknowledging that family participation is essential to a youth's development and long-term success.

Therapeutic Family Interventions

For grieving youth, family involvement can be a transformative part of the healing and reintegration process. Several juvenile justice systems have developed targeted practices that actively engage families in grief recovery:

- Family therapy sessions: Some juvenile facilities offer structured family therapy programs in which youth and their caregivers jointly explore experiences of loss. These sessions aim to rebuild trust, improve communication, and support emotional healing - laying the groundwork for successful reentry.
- Multi-family support groups: Facilitated group sessions involving multiple families allow participants to share grief-related challenges, coping strategies, and collective wisdom in a guided, supportive environment.
- Community outreach programs: In some jurisdictions, probation officers or social workers conduct home visits for youth on community supervision. These visits are designed to help families connect with grief counseling services and support systems that may otherwise be out of reach.

By engaging families in these ways, juvenile justice systems can help youth process bereavement while also empowering families to play an active role in recovery. This collaborative approach increases the likelihood of positive outcomes and reinforces the importance of family as a stabilizing force during and after detention.

Interagency Collaboration and Community Support

Grieving youth benefit most when they are supported by a coordinated network that extends beyond the boundaries of the juvenile justice system. The complexity of their emotional and developmental needs often requires sustained collaboration among correctional institutions, mental health professionals, schools, and community-based organizations. These partnerships help ensure continuity of care and a smoother reintegration experience. Examples include:

- Community-Based Grief Counseling: Partnerships with local mental health providers allow youth to continue grief therapy after release, ensuring that healing continues beyond confinement.
- Educational Support Services: Schools that provide counseling, tutoring, and reentry support for justice-involved youth help reduce educational disruptions and promote emotional stability during reintegration.
- Mentorship and Peer Support Programs: Pairing youth with mentors - especially those who have successfully navigated the justice system - can offer powerful models of resilience and guidance, fostering hope and accountability during the transition home.

By linking youth to these broader support systems, jurisdictions can address grief holistically and help young people reclaim a sense of identity, purpose, and belonging as they rebuild their lives.

Final Thought: Strengthening Family and Community Support
Recognizing the central role of family and community support in juvenile rehabilitation aligns with international human rights standards, including the Beijing and Havana Rules. Jurisdictions that prioritize family engagement, therapy-based interventions, and interagency collaboration consistently show improved outcomes for grieving youth—reducing recidivism, strengthening emotional resilience, and fostering long-term success. Expanding these efforts globally is both a strategic and ethical imperative to ensure that justice-involved youth receive the support they need to heal, grow, and reintegrate into society.

Conclusion

The intersection of grief and juvenile justice demands greater recognition from policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike. As this paper has shown, bereavement profoundly affects justice-involved youth—shaping their mental health, influencing legal decisions, and impacting both their rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes. Despite the guiding principles of the Beijing and Havana Rules, many juvenile justice systems still fail to treat grief as a core concern.

Implementing trauma-informed, grief-sensitive policies is not just a matter of ethics - it is a practical necessity. Evidence-based strategies such as grief counseling, trauma-focused therapy, family-inclusive programs, and legal advocacy for bereaved youth have been shown to reduce recidivism, improve emotional well-being, and facilitate successful transitions back into communities.

Moving forward, a more concerted effort is needed to weave grief awareness into the fabric of juvenile justice reform. Governments, correctional institutions, and community-based organizations must collaborate to ensure that all youth in custody are given the tools to process their loss and rebuild their futures. By embracing grief-informed, trauma-responsive practices, juvenile justice systems can become more compassionate, restorative, and aligned with the international standards they are pledged to uphold.

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EDUCATION BEHIND BARS: CONCEPTS AND NEEDS FOR TEACHER'S PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT[1]

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Abstract

Educators within correctional facilities are essential in facilitating the (re-)integration of justice-involved youth into society. Their influence can be transformative, shaping the educational journeys of their students throughout the learning process. The classroom environment in juvenile justice centers presents unique challenges: (a) diverse student populations with specific learning requirements, (b) limited educational resources within the facility, and (c) education often taking a backseat to other priorities. These factors create a complex set of demands for educators. Teachers require specialized training and development to effectively address the professional hurdles they face in this setting. This paper examines and compares the issue of teacher professional development in juvenile justice settings.

Keywords: professional development, juvenile justice system, teachers

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Introduction

The juvenile justice system has long been a topic of debate and discussion among policymakers, scholars, and practitioners alike, as it seeks to balance the need for accountability and rehabilitation of young justice-involved individuals with the preservation of their rights and well-being. Education is intrinsic to the juvenile justice (JJ) system and takes place at different levels within the system. In educational settings (e.g., educational programs), teachers play a significant role in the successful (re-) socialization of justice-involved individuals and can substantially shape the (educational) biographies of learners through the teaching process. This poses various demands on the teachers. The literature clearly demonstrates the lack of quality educational services (e.g., accreditation and compliance with special education laws) that youth receive in JJ facilities compared to their peers in the traditional education environment. There is a gap between the needs of students in JJ facilities and the (special) educational qualifications and professional development (PD) of teachers.

The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2001) define a juvenile as a person under the age of 18. Delinquency is defined as behaviors that are generally illegal for all the population (e.g., car theft) and behaviors that are illegal due to the age of the juvenile (e.g., drinking under state legal age). The term used for the conviction of a juvenile is "adjudicated delinquent," and juveniles are not referred to as inmates, convicts, or prisoners due to the rehabilitative goals of the JJ system. Using "adjudicated delinquent" calls attention to the "whole adult conceptualization of crime and punishment [being] fundamentally inapplicable to children in a juvenile justice context" (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2001, p. 23).

This article provides an overview of professional development for teachers in JJ settings. It highlights the need for professional development of JJ educators, with a particular focus on adapting teaching methods to meet the distinct educational needs of justice-involved learners and developing evidence-based approaches for this unique learning environment.

Teacher Qualifications in Correctional Settings

Professional Requirements

Typically, in the United States, the county in which the JJ center resides provides teachers for the facility. When public schools are unable to provide adequate educators to the facilities, some use resources outside of the districts (Leone & Wruble, 2015). Recruiting teachers from neighboring schools would create consistency in the education provided within facilities and in the traditional education environment. Unfortunately, surveys of administrators and teachers in JJ facilities show that only half of the education programs followed curricula similar to that in the public schools, 20% did not always use or develop Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), 67% participated in No Child Left Behind, only 7% were accredited by American Correctional Association (ACA), less than half offered transition services, and 75% did not always receive student records (Gagnon et al., 2010; Koyama, 2012). The literature clearly demonstrates the absence of quality educational services (e.g., accreditation and compliance with special education laws) that youth receive in JJ facilities compared to their peers in the traditional education environment.

There are also challenges in other countries in connection with the absence of quality educational services: In Germany, teachers in the field of school education for young justice-involved individuals

have diverse educational backgrounds and teaching qualifications, and special education teachers are the exception in JJ settings (Myschker & Stein, 2018, p. 419; Reinheckel, 2015, p. 542). The employment conditions for teachers in German prison schools are diverse and differ in some aspects from those in regular German schools (Haubrich, 2020). This results in a teaching staff with different employers, diverse employment relationships, a wide range of competencies, and varying levels of remuneration (Krause, 2024, p. 87).

The discrepancy between the needs of learners in JJ facilities and the formal qualifications of teachers has been a recurring focus of attention in the special education discipline of pedagogy for emotional and behavioral development impairments for decades. Schweder (2014) raises the question of whether teaching in prisons should become a stronger (research) subject in teacher education to paint a realistic and unbiased picture of teaching behind bars and to stimulate a discourse on the necessity of professionalizing teachers in prisons (Schweder, 2014, p. 40; [Author's translation]).

Training Pathways and Professional Development (PD)

The structures of PD in JJ settings should mirror the suggested structures in the traditional education environment (Capps et al., 2012; Ruddy & Prusinksi, 2012; Patti et al., 2012). Suggestions for PD from the literature include technology, ongoing support rather than just one instance of learning, and practical applications. Consideration in developing PD should include coaching and/or interactive follow-up to ensure practices are being implemented effectively, and it can include teacher coaching (Shippen et al., 2014). The literature presents few studies testing the effectiveness of PD in JJ settings.

General Professional Development Needs

Continuous improvement in academic, behavioral/mental health, and transition knowledge are needed topics in PD (Gagnon et al., 2012). A report published by Keleher (2017) provided a myriad of suggestions for PD in JJ settings. State coordinators from the report indicated that staff should engage in PD from outside areas, such as the justice system, special education, psychology, trauma, and family engagement. The report further suggested PD should be developed to help staff recognize the needs of the whole child, and given the overrepresentation of youth disabilities, staff would benefit from PD that teaches behavioral interventions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Any PD regarding behavioral practices should include specific case study examples and generalizable skills and provide a wide range of behavioral supports (Gagnon et al., 2012).

Other topics that should be considered for PD in JJ facilities are motivational strategies, student population characteristics, professional learning communities, trauma-informed care, multi-agency support in transition, using data to support high-quality behavioral and academic interventions and services, using effective instructional practices to increase engagement and quality of education, federal laws and how they apply to the youth in the facility, and family engagement and support (de Azua, 2018; Gonsoulin et al., 2015; Keleher, 2017; Mathur et al., 2009; Shippen et al., 2014). Additionally, family engagement and support are areas within JJ facilities that is severely lacking, which may, in part, be due to previous negative family experiences with the system (Zhang et al., 2011). While engaging the family may prove to be difficult, its benefits for youth outcomes are positive (de Azua, 2018; Kubek et al., 2020). See Table 1 for a summary of suggested PD topics for teachers in JJ settings.

Table 1: Summary of Suggested Professional Development Topics

Topic	Citation(s)
Family Engagement	de Azua (2018); Zhang et al. (2011)
Justice System	de Azua (2018); Keleher (2017)
Special Education	Keleher (2017)
Effective Instructional Practices and Motivation Strategies	Mathur et al. (2009); Shippen et al. (2014)
Behavior and Academic Interventions	Mathur et al. (2009); Shippen et al. (2014)
Trauma-Informed Care	Gonsoulin et al. (2015)
Student Population Characteristics	Keleher (2017)
Professional Learning Communities	de Azua (2018)

Current Professional Development for Juvenile Justice Settings

There are many PDs offered for staff within JJ settings. However, little evidence exists of their effectiveness in staff and youth behaviors (Gagnon et al., 2012). For example, McCarty and colleagues (2023) examined using an integrated approach to the supervision of staff and their own mental health needs and workplace stressors. The McCarty and colleagues study used the crucial Cs (i.e., connected, count, capable, and courage) to increase staff efficacy. Crucial Cs are similar to workplace belonging (i.e., feeling a sense of self-worth, connectedness within the environment, and motivation to continue towards competence). However, student outcomes were not measured as a result of this teacher intervention. Most studies examining PD in JJ settings are descriptive or cross-sectional and typically do not include large samples, longitudinal evaluation, or randomized clinical trials (Gagnon et al., 2012), so the results have limited generalizability to all JJ facilities. Additionally, there is typically a low number of staff in one facility, a wide variation of JJ facility structures and processes, and often differing supervisory agencies (i.e., corrections and school district), which greatly affect generalizability. For example, a national report found that only one state provides collaborative PD between the local school district and the JJ facility to increase knowledge of instructional practices (Keleher, 2017); this practice has not been developed nationally. Additionally, specific to students with disabilities, the National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice (2005) offered a professional development series on working with students with disabilities in the JJ setting, and the Correctional/Special Education Training (C/SET) Project developed and tested an intervention for females with disabilities and their behaviors within JJ classrooms. Both trainings were shown to be effective in increasing teacher knowledge; however, they are wildly outdated and no longer being implemented.

Many of the facilities currently offer one-day PDs or workshops. The PDs and workshops are rarely evaluated, include little follow-up, and the staff is generally unsupported in implementation, resulting in the inability to utilize and master the skills learned long-term (Mathur et al., 2009). To illustrate, Youth Mental Health First-Aid is an eight-hour PD for adults who work with youth with mental health

concerns (Anderson et al., 2020). Youth mental health is an important PD topic for JJ staff due to the high population of youth with mental health issues; however, this PD is not ongoing, therefore lessening its effectiveness (Gagnon & Swank, 2021). In a study conducted by Gagnon and Swank (2021), 58% of staff indicated there is no follow-up support for teachers in JJ settings for the skills learned in PD. Also, only about half of the staff indicated that the PDs focused on evidence-based practices, were multidisciplinary, and were generalizable to different situations in the facility (Gagnon & Swank, 2021). The literature found that PD in JJ facilities could be more sustainable and evidence-based, and therefore, refining the PD for staff in these settings could greatly increase positive behavioral and academic outcomes for youth.

Due to the specific population in JJ facilities (i.e., high numbers of youth with disabilities, substance abuse issues, trauma), teachers require specialized professional development to support the unique needs of the youth and to fulfill a crucial condition for the success of inclusive education (e.g. Döbert & Weishaupt, 2013). To illustrate, the National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth (NDTAC) published a report on quality indicators for education in JJ centers (Gonsoulin et al., 2015). One strategy in the report was to "provide professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators based on staff and student needs" (Gonsoulin et al., 2015, p. 6). While this suggestion is similar to PD for general education teachers, the JJ setting presents unique needs. Further, interviews with state coordinators suggested teachers should engage in learning in areas outside their current job description (e.g., counselors in special education and teachers in psychology; Keleher, 2017). The state coordinators also suggested that given the overrepresentation of students with disabilities, staff would benefit from PD that focuses on evidence-based behavioral interventions (Keleher, 2017). Teacher coaching is recommended in addition to PD to further the professional development and implementation of evidence-based interventions. Coaching is defined as a process in which an expert leads a practitioner in intensive, differential support to improve existing abilities, skills, and behaviors (Knight, 2007; National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, 2012) and is associated with an increase in the use of teaching strategies implemented and treatment fidelity (Hsieh et al., 2009; Reinke et al., 2014; Stormont et al., 2015; Reinke & Stormont, 2012). These findings suggest that additional PD with coaching should be offered for staff in JJ settings to increase their use of evidence-based practices.

Specific Challenges and Required Competencies

While current recommendations suggest that JJ teacher PD should mirror the traditional education system's PD, there is little to no research on coaching teachers in JJ settings. The above recommendations (Table 1; Gagnon et al., 2012; Mathur et al., 2009) focus primarily on the knowledge of teachers rather than how the PD can be applied most effectively. Specifically, research suggests that teachers must have the knowledge and skills necessary to implement high-quality behavioral interventions and effective instructional practices to increase youth engagement and overall quality of education (Gonsoulin et al., 2015; Larkin & Hannon, 2020; Shippen et al., 2014), yet in order to be fluent in these skills, it is helpful to receive ongoing support through PD and coaching (Reinke et al., 2012). Therefore, coaching needs to be implemented and evaluated within the context of teacher PD in the JJ setting (Mather & Schoenfeld, 2010).

The extant literature shows a lack of effective, up-to-date PD utilizing evidence-based instructional

and behavioral management interventions and strategies for teachers in JJ - a problem that does not only apply to the USA. More specifically, based on a comprehensive review of the literature for the USA, there is a clear gap in PD specific to the experiences of teaching in a JJ setting. Updated, empirically sound research should be conducted on PD specific to teachers in JJ settings, using evidence-based instructional and behavioral management strategies and PD, coupled with ongoing coaching, supporting positive outcomes for staff and youth. Mathur & Schoenfeld (2010) discuss specific, effective instructional practices needed in the JJ setting. Students specific to this setting often have deficits in core subjects (math, reading, and writing; Steele et al., 2016) and increased aberrant behaviors due to trauma, low emotional regulation, and social and communication skill deficits (Baglivio et al., 2014; Mathur et al., 2018). PD in universal classroom management strategies would be beneficial to teachers in JJ settings and may increase positive student outcomes such as academic, behavioral, and social-emotional development (Korpershoek et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This article underscores the complex challenges faced by teachers working with justice-involved youth, emphasizing the need for tailored educational approaches in JJ settings. There's also a growing need for qualifications among teachers due to evolving demands in the field. The increasing diversity of learners and a focus on inclusion necessitate specific skills from educators, particularly in providing individualized support and adaptable learning opportunities. By addressing these areas, teachers can be better equipped to navigate the intricacies of teaching within the JJ system and maximize their positive impact on students' lives. The goal is to develop a more accurate understanding of teaching in juvenile justice centers and promote educators' professional development in this unique cooperative environment.

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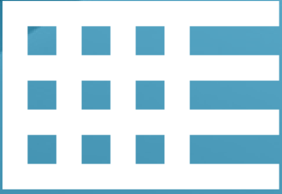

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Featured Research Articles

EDUCATION LANDSCAPE FOR YOUTH IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM[1]

Katie Barclay Penkoff
Director of Research & Training, Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators

Abstract

Through conducting a national survey of juvenile justice leaders, this study sought to illuminate the programs, services, and opportunities available to young people in U.S. based juvenile justice settings. Specifically, the study sought to determine the entities responsible for providing correctional educational services, the funding sources utilized, the characteristics of students served, the types of educational and career-related programming offered, the partners involved in delivering these opportunities, how educational technology is used to enhance learning, and the transitional services provided to youth reentering the community. The findings provide valuable insights into the current landscape of correctional education in the U.S.

1 *Support for the Juvenile Justice School District Profile Survey conducted as part of this project was supported in part through a grant from The Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of The Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation*

Introduction

Organized in 1994, the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators (CJJA) is a U.S. based national non-profit membership organization created to improve juvenile justice systems, enhance local correctional and residential facilities and programs, and promote better long-term outcomes for youth and their families. CJJA's mission is to provide opportunities to connect, develop, and support juvenile justice leaders to strengthen their abilities to implement and sustain transformational practices. CJJA fulfills its mission through educational activities and programs as well as research and technical assistance projects. Educational activities include a series of annual meetings for members offering sessions on best practices and evidence-based approaches. These meetings convene leaders from each state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and selected large counties to share information, identify issues and strategies to address them, and form a national voice for system-involved youth (CJJA, n.d.). CJJA and its members also have the ability to form working committees to discuss current issues, share best practices, and exchange ideas and resources (i.e., the Behavioral Health Committee, Positive Youth Outcomes Committee, Research and Data Analysis Committee, etc.).

National reforms over the last three decades have led to changes in the populations of youth served in U.S. based juvenile justice settings. As a result of these reforms and a growing understanding of adolescent development, the age at which young people can remain in the juvenile justice system in the U.S. has steadily increased (Emerging Adult Justice Project, n.d.; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2025; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2024). Not surprisingly, the need for developmentally appropriate educational and career-related programming and opportunities has also increased. Leaders in juvenile justice agencies and correctional education alike recognize the vital role education plays in secure care. Providing meaningful educational opportunities not only reduces idle time and helps create safer facilities, but also builds critical skills that lower the likelihood of recidivism and increase the chances of post-release employment (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders & Miles, 2013).

Historically, juvenile justice agencies have focused on providing youth with opportunities to close gaps in their primary and secondary education. Agencies across the country have expressed a strong desire to expand the academic and career-related educational opportunities they offer, as well as the services and resources they broker to support youth as they prepare for and reenter the community (CJJA, 2022; CJJA, 2024). In response to this need, the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators (CJJA) and its members recently formed a working committee comprised of educational leaders (superintendents, directors, etc.) and individuals directly responsible for overseeing educational programming and services within juvenile justice agencies (i.e., the Education Committee). The goal of this committee is to discuss current issues in correctional education, share best practices, and exchange ideas and resources. To support this work and to understand what programs, services, and opportunities are currently being offered, CJJA conducted a national survey of correctional education services offered in juvenile justice facilities. The purpose of the survey and its related analysis were to determine:

- what entities are responsible for providing correctional educational services,
- what internal and external funding sources make these opportunities possible,
- what are the characteristics of students being served in correctional educational settings,
- what educational and career related programming, services, and opportunities are being provided,
- who juvenile justice agencies are partnering with to provide these opportunities,

- how educational technology is being used to augment, enhance, and accelerate learning,
- what transitional services are being provided to youth reentering the community, and
- what data is being collected to understand the impact of these opportunities.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) within the U.S. Department of Justice is the federal entity charged with providing "…national leadership, coordination, and resources to prevent and respond to youth delinquency and victimization. The Office helps states, localities, and Tribes develop effective juvenile justice systems that create safer communities and empower youth to lead productive lives" (OJJDP, n.d.). As stated in OJJDP's vision statement, "Youth contact with the justice system should be rare, fair, and beneficial" (OJJDP, n.d.). Although significant progress has been made to narrow the front door to the juvenile justice system **over 27,000 youth are in residential placement in the United States and its territories on any given day** due to the nature of their infractions and/or to state and local policies (OJJDP, 2023). While in placement, a mixture of state and locally operated and privately contracted facilities are responsible for their care.

While many states have increased the use of diversion and successfully raised the age of criminal responsibility keeping older adolescents in the more rehabilitative focused juvenile system, these changes have had a profound impact on juvenile justice systems and facilities. As a result of these and other policy reforms, youth who remain in secure care settings are closer to transitioning to adulthood, are often adjudicated for more serious offenses, and have more complex needs (Development Services Group, 2017; Kelley & Haskins, 2021; OJJDP, 2023; Vida, McConnell, Prince, & Tebes, 2018; Salinger, 2018). Consequently, juvenile justice leaders are tasked with serving youth with greater needs and expected to succeed where other youth serving systems have struggled. Further compounding these challenges, many juvenile justice agencies are facing high staff turnover rates and critical staffing shortages exacerbated by the pandemic and by salary schedules that have not kept pace with the rising cost of living (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2023; Quattlebaum, Umpierre, Schweitzer, Dempsey, & Cunningham, 2023).

> "Recent successful juvenile justice and juvenile detention reforms have resulted in better and more meaningful public policy on the use of custody facilities and have triggered significant reductions in juvenile detention and corrections populations. However, a secondary—and perhaps unintended—consequence has been a parallel reduction in the resources available to continue providing much needed training and technical assistance to facilities that still must confine the most troublesome youth. As history continues to show, juvenile detention and corrections remain the "forgotten" elements of the juvenile justice system" (Dunlap & Roush, 2014).

Research conducted over the last several decades has shown that therapeutic approaches to juvenile rehabilitation are far more effective than approaches that rely on control. Within juvenile justice settings, programs built on therapeutic philosophies include those that focus on skill building like cognitive-behavioral techniques, social skills, academic and vocational skill building (Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Champman, & Carver 2010). Overburdened and under resourced stakeholders within state and local juvenile justice systems often do not have the time or resources to review the research on the latest advancements in the field or to understand how to apply those innovations within their jurisdictions. Given these realities, and borrowing from the health literature, it is not surprising to

learn that it takes 17 years to translate research about what is effective into practice (Development Services Group, 2015; Morris, Wooding, & Grant, 2011; Proctor, Ramsey, Saldana, Maddox, Chambers & Brownson, 2022).

Over the past 30 years, CJJA has become a national leader, trusted partner, and voice for juvenile justice systems by representing the issues unique to system-involved youth and the professionals that serve them. A critical part of this work has been and continues to be helping juvenile justice leaders translate research to practice thereby accelerating the pace of reform. Through conducting a national review of the educational landscape within juvenile justice settings, CJJA aims to build the awareness and capacity of jurisdictions to increase **opportunities for youth who are system involved.** These opportunities have the potential to **maximize youth outcomes, minimize collateral consequences,** and **reduce recidivism** (Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Champman, & Carver 2010; Seigle, Walsh, & Weber, 2014).

Summary of Relevant Literature. Within the last decade, two national reviews of the educational landscape in juvenile justice facilities have been conducted. In 2015, the Council of State Governments (CSG), in partnership with what was then the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (now CJJA), surveyed leaders around the country seeking to learn about the educational and vocational services provided to youth in their care, the outcome data they collected, and the continuing services youth were connected to post release (CSG, 2015). In the ten years since the release of the resulting publication, *Locked Out: Improving Educational and Vocational Outcomes for Incarcerated Youth,* there have been significant developments in the safe integration of educational technology in juvenile justice settings (National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth [NDTAC], 2020). CJJA, and its Education Committee, recognized that much could be gained from conducting a subsequent review to understand how these developments have impacted educational offerings and to learn what, if any, barriers exist to expansion.

In a more recent publication from California's Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR), entitled *Building Higher Education Pathways for Youth in Secure Treatment Facilities in California: A Call to Action,* the authors share key findings from their national review of relevant educational research for "...program examples for creating higher education pathways in juvenile justice institutions" (n.d.). Through interviews and reviewing associated materials, the authors identify program examples from ten states. For each example, they provide a brief description of the program, its outcomes, successes, challenges, the source of its funding, and a link to where more information can be found (OCYR, n.d.). While the publication offers a wealth of information, it is specifically geared toward creating pathways for higher education in California. Similar to the aforementioned 2015 review, in the current review of educational programs, opportunities, and services offered in secure care settings, CJJA sought to engage a more representative sample of juvenile justice leaders from around the country.

Research Methods

Subjects and Selection Procedures. The subjects for this national review were CJJA's membership comprised of chief executive officers of state juvenile justice systems and various local jurisdictions (metropolitan areas with a population of 500,000 or more) across the country. At the time of the review, membership consisted of leaders from 49 state agencies, 19 local jurisdictions, the District of

Columbia, and Puerto Rico. All members were invited to participate.

Study Design. The national review of educational programs, services, and opportunities offered within juvenile justice agencies employed a research design that was descriptive and exploratory in nature utilizing an online survey with both closed and open-ended questions. The analysis of the survey results entailed qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative analysis was used to understand the types of programs, services, and opportunities offered by juvenile justice agencies; the technology utilized; the entities with whom they partner; the sources of funding they leverage; the educational transition services they provide; and the types of data they collect. Quantitative analysis in the form of descriptive statistics was conducted to understand how many juvenile justice agencies are offering a particular program, service, or opportunity; utilizing different types of educational technology; partnering with different types of entities; leveraging particular funding sources; providing various educational transition services; and collecting outcome measures pre- and post-release.

Description of Key Constructs. For the purpose of the questionnaire, educational and career-related programs, services, and opportunities were defined to include elementary and secondary education (i.e., eighth grade diploma, high school diploma, credit recovery, high school equivalency [i.e., GED, HiSET, etc.], and dual credit courses); career and technical education (CTE) (i.e., CTE courses, work-based learning, vocational certifications [e.g., food handlers' card, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, forklift certification, etc.], internships, apprenticeships); and higher education (i.e., college credit, correspondence courses). Educational technology was defined as hardware such as computers, tablets, simulators, and virtual reality devices; software applications; learning platforms; and open educational resources, etc. (Canny, n.d.). Partners were defined as other state or local agencies (i.e., child welfare, department of health, regional behavioral health authority, workforce development boards, vocational rehabilitation, state education agencies, local education agencies, etc.); public and private institutions of higher education and career and technical education providers; and nonprofit and community based organizations. External funding sources were defined as funding from other state or local agencies, foundations, or federal grants or cooperative agreements. Educational transitional services were defined as the reentry planning activities juvenile justice agencies engage in with youth and families and the connections they assist youth in making in the community. Finally, data was defined as measures that juvenile justice agencies collect that capture youth outcomes such as credits completed, certificates earned, internships or apprenticeships completed, and jobs secured.

Materials Used/Survey Development. CJJA worked with its newly formed Education Committee to develop the questionnaire for juvenile justice agencies on the nature of the educational programs, services, and opportunities they currently offer to young people in their care. The initial draft of the questionnaire was then shared with the Education Committee members for their review and feedback and to ensure its content validity. The final twenty-six item questionnaire included closed-ended questions (requiring respondents to choose from a predetermined set of choices) with an optional comment box allowing participants to elaborate on their responses as well as open-ended questions.

Procedures for Data Collection. Once finalized, the survey, titled *Juvenile Justice Agency School District Profile*, was placed into the Survey Monkey platform. The survey was then distributed to CJJA's membership representing chief executive officers of state juvenile justice systems and various local jurisdictions across the country. The CEOs then worked with their internal teams to complete the

sections of the survey. Participants were given eight weeks to complete the survey. Responses were tracked at the end of each day. Targeted reminders were sent at four weeks, one week, and one day before the survey period closed.

Procedures for Data Analysis. Once the survey closed, qualitive and quantitative analyses of the responses were conducted. Using an inductive framework to code data and determine emerging themes (Chandra & Shang, 2019), patterns and innovative programs, services, and opportunities were identified.

Results

Subjects/Participants. Thirty-three responses representing local juvenile detention centers and state level juvenile correctional facilities in twenty-six states (a 47% response rate) were received. Figure 1 below provides a visual representation of the number of surveys received by state. Of the thirty-three responses received, seven were from local juvenile justice systems and twenty-six were from state-level systems.

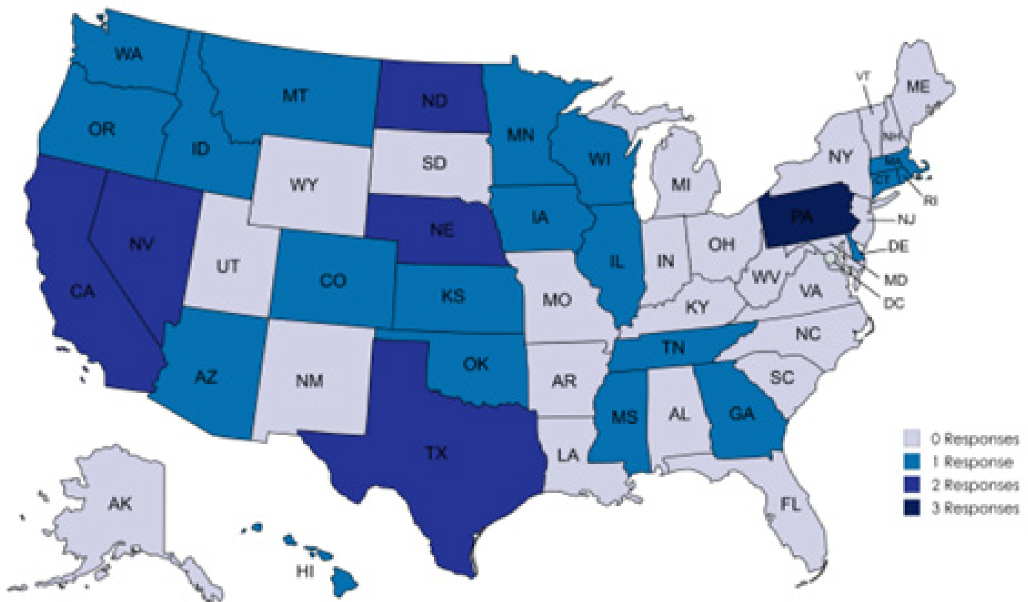

Figure 1: Number of Survey Reponses Received by State

Entities Responsible for the Provision of Educational Services. Within the survey, participants were asked to indicate the entity or entities involved in the provision of educational services within their agencies. Table 1 below illustrates their responses. As can be gleaned from these responses, there is significant variability from jurisdiction to jurisdiction regarding the entity or entities responsible. In their comments, several agencies noted that they contract for the provision of educational services.

Table 1: Entities Responsible for the Provision of Educational Services

Entity or Entities	Number	Percentage
Juvenile justice agency	16	48.48%
Local education agency where facility or facilities are located	11	33.33%
State education agency	8	24.24%
Contracted educational service provider	5	15.15%
Combination of juvenile justice, state/local education agency, and private providers	5	15.15%
Regional educational service agency	3	9.09%
Other [please describe]	3	9.09%

Funding Sources. Respondents indicated that they receive a mix of federal, state, and local funding to support educational and career-related services. Table 2 provides an overview of these funding sources, along with the number and percentage of respondents receiving each type. A brief description of each funding source and examples of its potential uses are provided.

Federal Funding Authorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act. Regarding federal funding, just over three-quarters of respondents (75.76%) indicated that their agencies receive support through Title I, Part D of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This specific program within ESSA, also known as the Prevention and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At Risk, is supplemental to state and local education funding and focuses on improving educational services for students within the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Further, it supports transition services from residential placements to further education and employment and aims to prevent students who are at risk of dropping out or returning from correctional facilities by providing the necessary supports to continue their educational journey (National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth [NDTAC], 2022).

To a lesser extent, respondents also reported receiving funding through Title I, Part A (21.21%) and Title IV, Part A programs authorized under ESSA. The Title I, Part A program, known as Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies, provides funding to school districts serving high percentages of students from low-income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). As stated in the most recent nonregulatory guidance, “The purpose of Title I of the ESEA is to provide all children with significant opportunities to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education and to close educational achievement gaps” (U.S. Department of Education, 2023, p. 8). The Title IV, Part A program of ESSA, referred to as the Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) program, aims “...to improve students’ academic achievement by increasing the capacity of States, local educational agencies, schools, and local communities to—(1) provide all students with access to a well-rounded

Table 2: Educational Funding Sources Received by Schools within Juvenile Justice Agencies

Funding Source	Number	Percentage
Federal Funding – Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)		
ESSA Title I, Part D – Prevention and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At Risk	25	75.76%
ESSA Title I, Part A – Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies	7	21.21%
ESSA Title IV-A – Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program	5	15.15%
Federal Funding – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)		
IDEA Part B – Assistance for All Children with Disabilities Ages 3 to 21	16	48.48%
Federal Funding – Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V)		
Perkins V Funding for Secondary and Post Secondary Students	11	33.33%
Federal Funding – Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)		
WIOA Youth Program & Reentry Employment Opportunities Program	3	9.09%
Federal Pell Grant Program for Students Attending Programs at Two-year Community Colleges, Career Schools, Trade Schools, Online Schools, and Four-year Colleges and Universities		
Pell Grants for Individuals Who Are Confined or Incarcerated	1	3.03%
State Funding Sources		
State agency funds (juvenile justice agency funding)	22	66.67%
State per-pupil funding (state education agency funding)	15	45.45%
Local Funding Sources (i.e., county and/or regional level funding)		
Local Funding	5	15.15%
Other Funding Sources		
Other (please describe) • ESSA Title II – Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teachers, Principals, or Other School Leaders • ESSA Title II, Part A – Supporting Effective Instruction • ESSA Title VI, Part B – Indian, Native Hawaiian, Alaska Native Education • Categorial Funding through the State Legislature • State Level Discretionary Grant Programs • Payments by Students Home Districts	6	18.18%

education; (2) improve school conditions for student learning; and (3) improve the use of technology in order to enhance academic achievement and digital literacy for all students" (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2025).

Finally, in the "Other" category identified in Table 2, respondents reported receiving funding through ESSA's Title II program, which supports the recruitment and development of their workforce and through ESSA's Title VI program supporting the unique needs of students who are Indian, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). These federal programs are essential in helping meet the needs of students who have often had fragmented educational experiences and the educators who serve them (The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2018).

Federal Funding Authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. To meet the needs of their students with disabilities who qualify for special education and related services, nearly half of respondents (48.48%) indicated that they receive funding authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA. As described on the U.S. Department of Education's IDEA website, "Part B. Assistance for All Children with Disabilities includes provisions related to formula grants that assist states in providing a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for children with disabilities ages three through 21" (U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). These services ensure that students with disabilities receive academic supports, accommodations such as assistive technology, related services such as occupational therapy, and transition planning and services for postsecondary education and employment beginning no later than 16 years of age (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Federal Funding Authorized by the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V). In addition to federal funding to support students' academic success, respondents also reported securing funding for career and technical education (CTE). Eleven or 33% of respondents indicated that they receive funding through the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V). As described on the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education's Perkins Collaborative Resource Network website, "Perkins V represents an important opportunity to expand opportunities for every student to explore, choose, and follow career and technical education programs of study and career pathways to earn credentials of value" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Perkins V funding can be used for but is not limited to offering career guidance and counseling, developing CTE programs, purchasing instructional materials, acquiring CTE related equipment, providing stipends for students, covering the child care for eligible students, paying for student transportation, investing in professional development for instructors and more (Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, (2018).

Federal Funding Authorized by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Through establishing collaborative relationships with local workforce boards, a few respondents (3 or 9.09%) indicated that they are connecting their students to programs authorized by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Youth who are justice involved and who meet certain criteria are eligible for workforce programs such as the WIOA Youth Program and the Reentry Employment Opportunities Program (REO). As stated on the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity website, "WIOA is landmark legislation that

is designed to strengthen and improve our nation's public workforce system and help get Americans, including youth and those with significant barriers to employment, into high-quality jobs and careers and help employers hire and retain skilled workers" (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Eligible youth receive career and training services (e.g., alternative secondary school services; credit recovery; paid and unpaid work experiences, which include: summer and year round employment opportunities, pre-apprenticeship programs, internships and job shadowing, and on-the-job training; occupational skill training; education offered concurrently with workforce preparation and training, etc.) as well as supportive services such as diversion from adjudication, expungement of juvenile record, transportation, child care, housing, counseling, and more (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 1998; U.S. Department of Labor, 2024; U.S. Department of Labor, 2025).

Financial Aid for Students via the Federal Pell Grant Program. One respondent indicated that students served by the agency receive Pell Grants. Pell Grants are a type of financial aid available to assist students in paying for higher education, including individuals confined or incarcerated in juvenile facilities. To apply for aid, students must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) form (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

State and Local Funding Sources. Two thirds of respondents (66.67%) indicated that the state juvenile justice agency allocates funding for educational and career related services. Nearly half (45.45%) indicated receiving state per-pupil funding. Finally, just over 15% of respondents indicated that their agency receives local funding to support these services.

Student Characteristics. Participants were asked to report on several characteristics of the students they serve including the upper and lower age limits, the percentage of students receiving special education services (students with disabilities who qualify for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA), the percentage of students with 504 plans (written plans for students who need accommodations as a result of a disability but who do not quality for special education services), and the percentage of students who are English learners. Table 3 illustrates the range, average, and mode (the most frequently occurring number or percentage) reported by respondents. As can be gleaned from the table, some states do not have a minimum age of juvenile court jurisdiction for status or delinquency offenses while other states statutorily define the lower age. The majority of states define the upper age limits and extended jurisdiction when continuing with dispositions, sanctions, and services (OJJDP, 2024). Thus, for educational programming, a system must have a full range of options available to meet the needs of students who may be as young as 8 or as old as 26 years of age.

Thirty-one of the 33 respondents reported the percentage of students receiving special education services at the time they completed the questionnaire. One participant noted that the percentage varies without sharing a numerical value while another respondent indicated they were unsure. In the current study, the range of students receiving special education services was between nearly one quarter (22%) and up to nearly three quarters of (72%). The average percentage across all jurisdictions was 45.65%. This range is significantly higher than the percentage of students in public schools served under IDEA across the United States and the District of Columbia which was found to be between 7% and 21% in the most recent school year for which data is available (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Table 3: Student Characteristics

Student Characteristic	Range	Average	Mode
Minimum Age	0 to 14 Years of Age	11.85 Years of Age	12 Years of Age
Maximum Age	17 to 26 Years of Age	20.12 Years of Age	21 Years of Age
Percent Receiving Special Education Services	22% to 72%	45.62%	60%
Percent Who Have a 504 Plan	0% to 60%	7.05%	0%
Percent Who Are English Language Learners	0% to 90%	8.45%	0%

Not all students who have disabilities qualify for services through IDEA. In the United States, students who have disabilities that impact their access to education who do not qualify for special education services may still be eligible for services under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. As described by the U.S. Department of Education, "Section 504 helps ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to educational opportunities" (U.S. States Department of Education, 2025). Although less prevalent, some respondents indicated that a high percentage of students in their care have 504 plans. The percentage of students with 504 plans ranged from 0% to 60% with an average of 7.05% across all jurisdictions. Nationally, approximately 3% of students attending public schools during the 2020-21 school year received services through Section 504 (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

When asked about the percentage of students who are English learners, the percentage ranged from 0% to 90% with an average of 8.45% across all jurisdictions. Although not indicated as a funding source received in this study, students who are English learners may be eligible for services under Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Educational and Career and Technical Education Program and Service Offerings. In the next section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate the types of 1) elementary and secondary educational services, 2) career and technical education (CTE) and vocational programs, and 3) higher education opportunities (outside of CTE programs) they offer. For each of these areas, participants were given a set of predetermined choices to select from as well as a comment box to elaborate on their selections and/or write in additional services offered. For the CTE and vocational programs and higher education opportunities sections, participants were asked to share with whom their agencies partner to make these programs and opportunities possible.

Elementary and Secondary Educational Services Offered. The percentage of respondents who indicated offering each type of elementary and secondary educational service is provided in Figure 2. Within the comments, respondents spoke about the full continuum of services offered, the assessments conducted to help determine the best learning path for students, as well as the development of personalized learning plans.

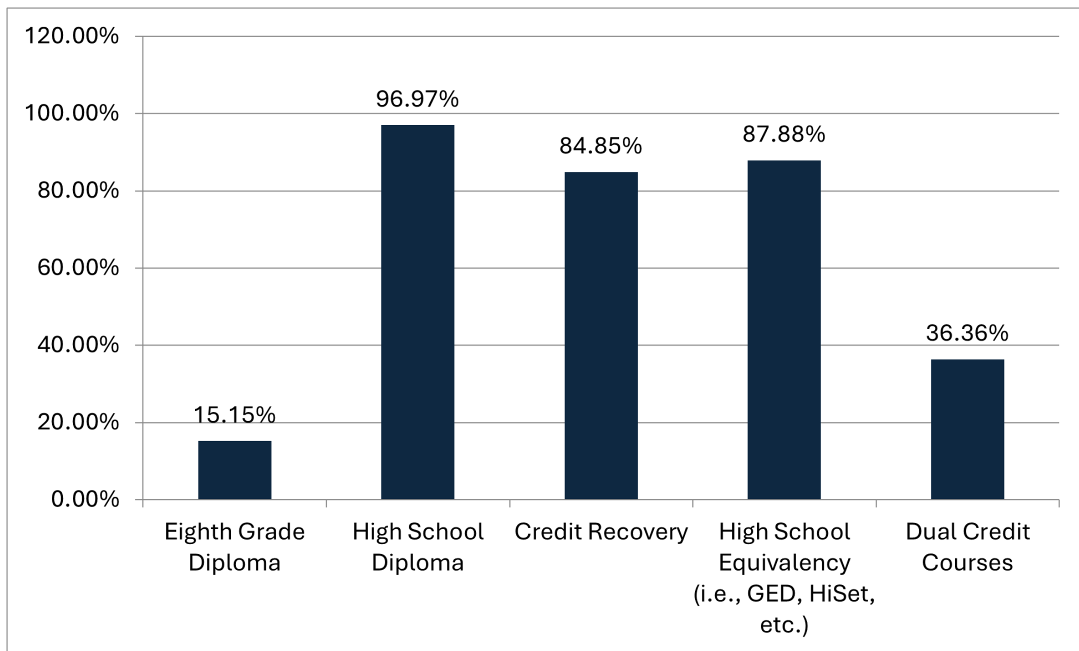

Figure 2: Types of Elementary and Secondary Educational Services Offered

Career and Technical Education and Vocational Programs and Services Offered. Again here, the percentage of respondents who indicated providing each type of career and technical education and vocational program and service offered is provided in Figure 3.

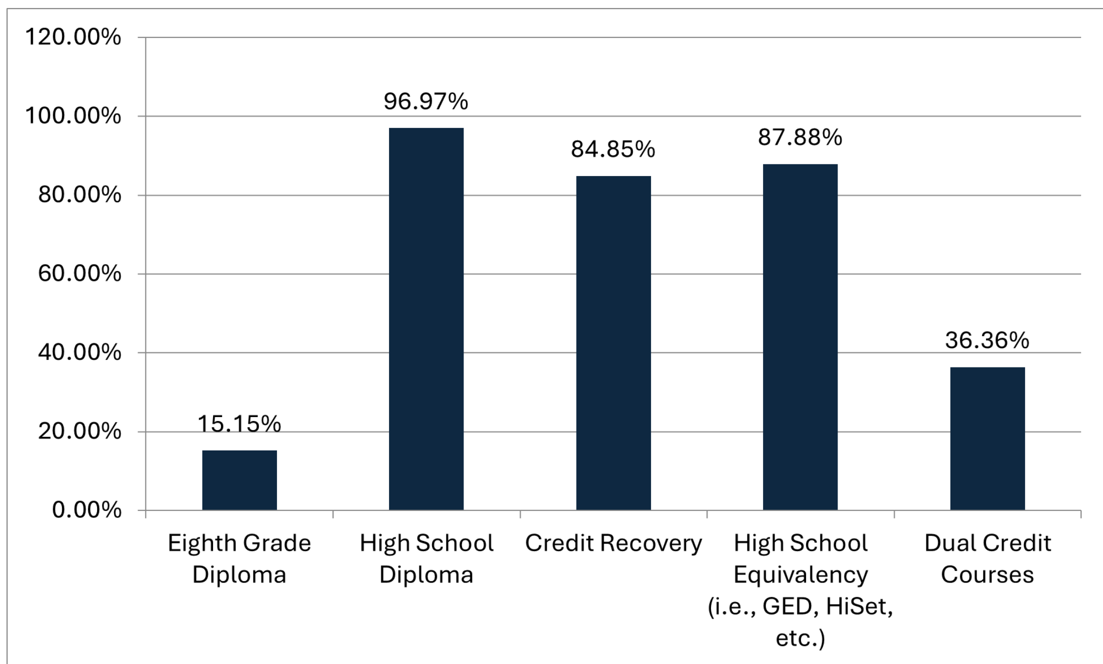

Figure 3: Types of Career and Technical Education and Vocational Programs and Services Offered

Specific examples of the types of programs and services offered by respondents are provided in Table 4. Respondents represent both short term detention centers and long-term correctional facilities. Thus, the types of programs and services their agencies offer differ accordingly. As one respondent explained, "Due to the frequent turnover of our students, they do not meet the CTE hourly requirements for our courses to be official CTE. Our culinary, cosmetology, building/trades, and welding programs all provide micro-credentials to students that explain the skills and techniques they have learned within our programs. These credentials can be added to a resume to enhance employability upon release. In addition to the micro-credential, our welding program certifies students in welding techniques that can transfer immediately to the workforce. Students receive an official American Welding Association (AWA) certificate that is recognized by welding employers." Respondents also spoke about the relationship between skill building and meaningful engagement in one's community and reductions in juvenile delinquency.

Table 4: Specific Types of Career and Technical and Vocational Programs and Services Offered

Construction & Trades	**Beauty & Personal Care**
• Welding • Electrical • Carpentry • Woodworking • Automotive • Construction Technology • Heavy Equipment Operation • Building and Construction Trades • Tree Farming & Trail Building	• Cosmetology (nail technology, natural hair care) • Barbering Apprenticeship **Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (STEM)** • STEM Curriculum • Robotics • Graphic Design • Drafting & Piloting Drones
Health and Safety Certifications	**Horticulture & Animal Care**
• OSHA 10 and OSHA 30 Certifications* • CPR/First Aid Certification • Certified Nursing Assistant (CAN) • Phlebotomy	• Horticulture • Poultry and Small Animal Husbandry • Dog Training and Boarding • Landscape Maintenance
Culinary Arts	**Vocational Immersion & Work-Based Learning**
• Kitchen Works Program (Culinary Skills) • Food Cart and Commercial Food Preparation • ServSafe Food Handler's Certification • ServSafe Culinary Certification	• Work-based learning opportunities across industries like culinary, customer service, landscaping, and more • Job shadowing and internships through partnerships with local colleges and businesses
Business & Marketing	**Special Programs & Certifications**
• Retail Marketing • Principles of Business and Marketing • Entrepreneurship (via coffee cart work experience)	• Pre-apprenticeship Certificates • Micro-credentials in Specific Trades and Skills • Traffic Flagger Certification • Babysitting Certification

**Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) 10 and OSHA 30 represent the number of hours of training students receive (basic or more advanced) on common safety and health hazards on the job.*

When asked about their partnerships for CTE and vocational programs and services, one-third of respondents (33%) reported partnering with local community colleges, while thirty percent (30.30%) indicated collaboration with career and technical schools. Nearly seventy (69.70%) percent provided additional details elaborating on or listing other partnerships formed. Respondents highlighted partnerships with state agencies (e.g., State Career Tech, Vocational Rehabilitation), state licensing boards, community-based organizations, local workforce organizations and boards, local businesses, and community colleges and universities. Additionally, they noted collaborations with contracted providers and the use of online learning platforms such as CareerSafe and ServSafe.

Higher Education Programs Offered Outside of CTE. When asked about higher education opportunities, nearly two-thirds of the respondents (65.52%) indicated that they offer college courses while approximately 7% (6.90%) reported offering correspondence courses. Just over 60% stated that they partner with local community colleges and one third of respondents (33.33%) stated that they partner with four year colleges or universities to offer these opportunities to the students in their care. Additionally, one respondent mentioned partnering with community-based agencies, another spoke of the use of a collaborative statewide online platform for higher education, yet another noted that their agency is actively seeking partnerships, and a fourth respondent shared that their agency hopes to expand student options through the use of Pell Grants. Notably, just over 12% (12.12%) shared that students are able to leave the facility to participate in postsecondary opportunities (academic or career and technical in nature) while approximately 88% (87.88%) shared that their students are not permitted to do so. Although not explicitly stated, students may be restricted from attending off-facility opportunities due to agency policies and/or safety and security concerns.

Access to Educational Technology. Several questions in the survey focused on access to educational technology. Participants were asked about the locations within the facility where students could use educational technology, the types of technology available, the learning platforms accessible, and whether students could access online resources (e.g., Open Educational Resources, Department of Labor sites, etc.). As illustrated in Table 5, virtually all respondents (96.97%) reported that students had access to educational technology in the classroom, while nearly half (45.45%) indicated that students also had access to technology on the living units.

Table 5: Access to Educational Technology

Areas of Facility Where Students Have Access to Technology	Yes		No	
	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
In the Classroom	96.97%	32	3.03%	1
On the Living Units	45.45%	15	54.55%	18

Figure 4 provides a breakdown of the types of educational technology available for student use. In addition to the predefined answer choices, respondents also mentioned that students have access to desktop computers, Smartboards, and 3-D printers.

Table 6 contains a list of technology platforms respondents noted that their students have access to within correctional education settings.

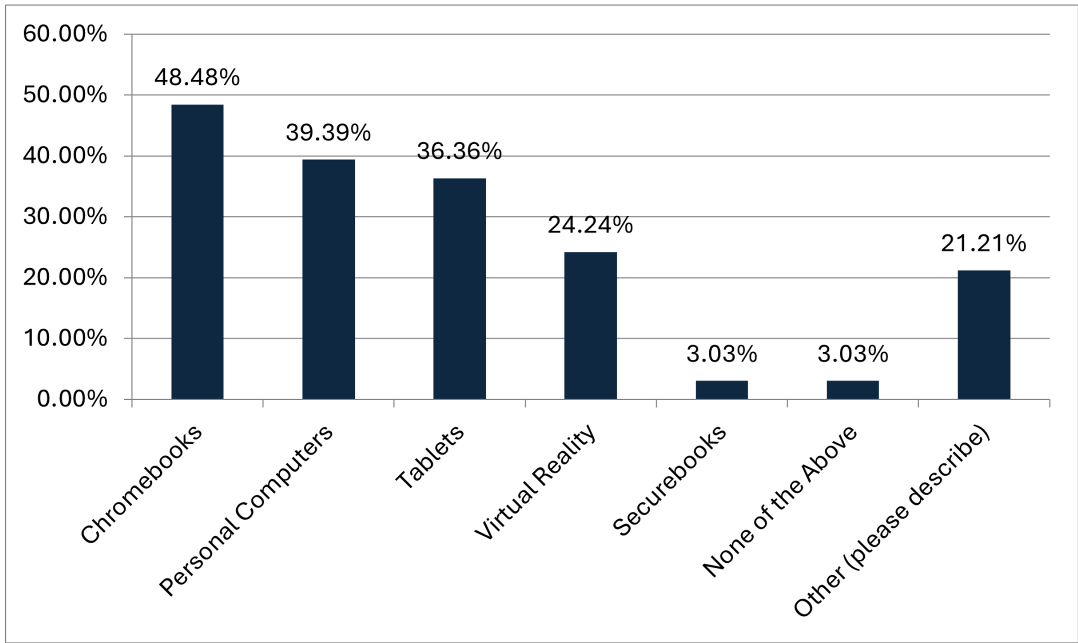

Figure 4: Types of Educational Technology Available for Student Use

Table 6: Technology Platforms Available for Student Use

Technology Platforms	
Apex	Khan Academy
ALEKS	LOOM
BarinPOP	MagicSchool AI
BreakoutEDU	Mango Languages
Canva for Education	Microsoft Office
Career Safe	Newsela Pro with Content Extras
Connexus	Odysseyware
Edmentum	OpenSciEd
EdPuzzle	OrbitNote
Edgenuity	Pear Deck
Equatio	Pearson Connexus
Essential Education (GED Academy)	Pixlr for Education
EVERFI	Personalized Learning Platform
Fluency Tutor	Reading Horizons
Gizmos ExploreLearning	Reading Plus
Google Classroom	Savvas (formerly Pearson)
Google Education Plus	Senso Cloud
Google Read and Write	Socrative
Hāpara	The Choices Program
HiSET Academy	Khan Academy
Imagine Edgenuity	Tinkercad
IXL Learning	Typing Software
Kahoot	WritQ

Remarkably, nearly 64% (63.64%) of respondents reported that their students have access to online resources while just over 36% (36.36%) stated that their students do not. In the comments section, respondents highlighted the various protections in place to ensure safe and restricted access to these resources. These include web filters tailored for elementary and secondary schools, secure applications to monitor student online activity, 'allowlists' and 'blocked websites' lists, restrictions on where open resources can be accessed within the facility, and strong staff supervision. Respondents also shared examples of resources available to students, such as online secondary and postsecondary coursework, career exploration tools and pre-employment training programs (including state-level resources and federal tools from the U.S. Department of Labor), and local and Congressional Library systems.

Outcome Measures Tracked. Over the last decade, juvenile justice systems have sought to broaden the outcome measures they track moving beyond recidivism alone (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2014; Griller Clark, Mathur, Brock, O'Cummings, & Milligan, 2016; U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 2014). As illustrated in Figure 5, many juvenile justice agencies now collect data on youth educational and career related outcomes. Among the educational outcomes collected are credits earned, degrees obtained, and post-release school enrollment. Respondents elaborated on the educational outcomes tracked to include math and reading scores, high school diploma attainment, high school equivalency attainment (HiSet, GED, etc.), postsecondary enrollment, and community-based training enrollment pre and post-release. For career and vocational outcomes, respondents indicated collecting data on certifications earned, internships and apprenticeships completed, and post-release employment. Finally, respondents also reported tracking youth participation in programs while under community supervision.

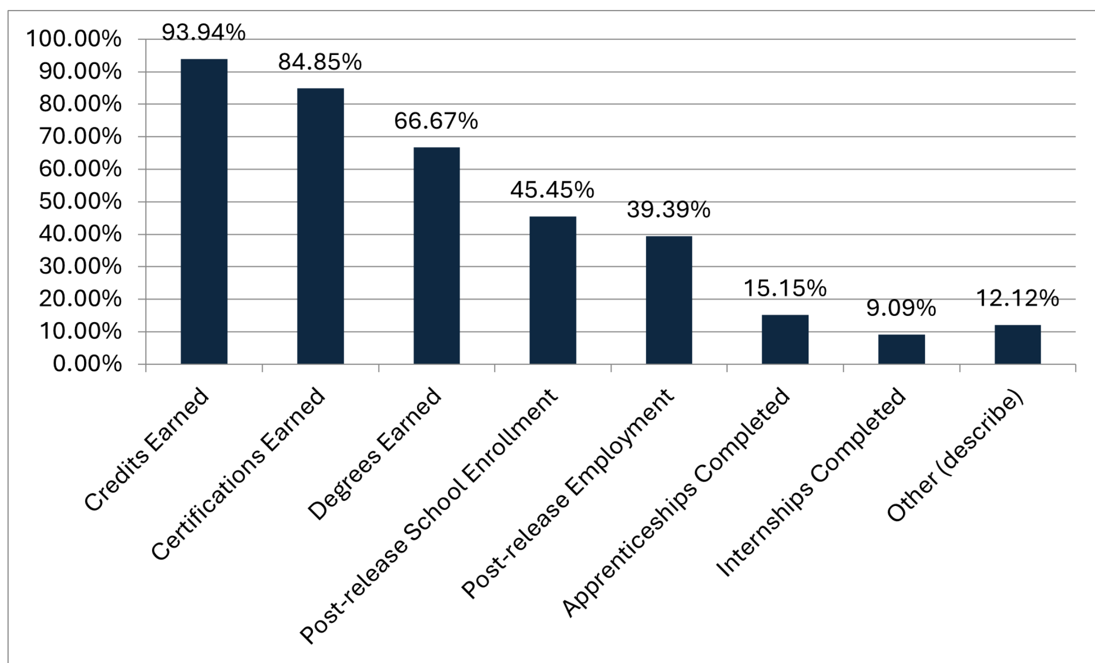

Figure 5: Educational and Career Related Data and Outcomes Tracked by Respondents

Transition Related Changes Experienced. When asked if their agency encounters challenges with reenrolling students in community-based schools post-release, more than sixty percent (61.29%) reported experiencing difficulties. In their comments, respondents highlighted several challenges including delays in reenrollment and the transfer of records, misalignment between release dates and community school calendars, and differing policies across districts. Additionally, some school districts were hesitant to accept students due to past behavioral infractions. Other barriers included additional reenrollment steps, such as required meetings or alternative school placements before returning to the home school. Respondents also noted challenges families face in completing enrollment processes and providing necessary documentation, such as proof of residency. Previous literature on the topic has echoed these challenges that students and families face as they seek to reenroll in school upon release and pointed to the need for transition and reentry supports (Thomsen & Wren, 2024; U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 2014).

Innovations and Barriers to Innovation. In the final section of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to describe the innovative educational practices they are currently implementing, the innovations they hope to introduce, and the resources they would require to bring such innovations to fruition. Focusing on holistic youth development, using virtual reality and simulators (e.g., virtual welding, virtual driver's ed, automative training, etc.), forming partnerships and collaborative initiatives (e.g., industry partners, institutions of higher education, workforce development providers), expanding career and technical education programs, implementing project-based learning and personalized competency based learning opportunities, applying for innovative waivers and flexibilities to bypass traditional seat time requirements, integrating artificial intelligence, and offering dual enrollment and postsecondary opportunities are ways in which respondents shared they are innovating.

These innovations represent the types of activities that respondents expressed a desire to expand upon and implement more extensively in the future. Additionally, respondents expressed interest in implementing more restorative and responsive practices, increasing their focus on transition and reentry planning and supports, and connecting young people with disabilities to community based resources like Vocational Rehabilitation. Respondents identified the need for financial resources, leadership support, additional staffing, dedicated time for planning and partnership development, updated and adequate spaces within facilities for programming, and increased access to technology as the key resources required to make these activities possible.

Discussion

It has often been said that accountability or punishment in the justice system is the loss of freedom (Beccaria & Voltaire, 1767). Referring back to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's vision statement, the critical question then becomes how can correctional leaders and educators ensure that young people's experiences with the juvenile justice system are fair and beneficial. Prior to arriving at juvenile justice facilities, many young people have experienced fragmented and negative educational experiences, leaving them academically behind their non-incarcerated peers and utterly disengaged. One crucial way to maximize their time in juvenile justice facilities is through the provision of relevant and engaging academic and career-related opportunities. As aforementioned, research conducted over the last several decades has consistently demonstrated a strong relationship between correctional education and reductions in recidivism (Davis, Bozick,

Steele, Saunders & Miles, 2013; Davis & McCoy, 2013). As is evident from this national review, the age of students served by the juvenile justice system is increasing and their needs remain complex. As we also learned from this review, many of the systems and educators who serve justice involved youth are continuously expanding upon the innovative programs, services, and opportunities they offer by identifying and leveraging new funding sources, exploring and forming novel partnerships, and harnessing the power of technology. For systems that are either not yet where they want to be or hope to continue innovating, it is crucial that policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels as well as system leaders ensure that correctional educators have the time and resources (i.e., financial resources, staffing, space, equipment, access to technology, etc.) they need to engage in planning and partnership development and implementation. Moreover, it is critical that federal agencies and national nonprofits provide training and technical assistance opportunities for systems to learn from another to help facilitate the pace of reform.

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About the Author

Katie Barclay Penkoff, PhD, is the Director of Research & Training for the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators. Katie's passion for working with youth and families who are system involved began over three decades ago when she participated in a service-learning internship matching university student in mentoring relationships with youth on parole. This opportunity allowed her to work alongside youth, families, and system stakeholders and to understand the many challenges youth faced as they reentered their home communities. Since that pivotal experience, she has served in a variety of capacities from providing direct services to coordinating training and technical assistance.

Common threads throughout her career include assisting youth in transitioning from secure care to the community and engaging in interagency collaboration to reduce duplication and maximize outcomes. In her previous role at the American Institutes for Research, Katie worked as part of several national training and technical assistance centers supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the U.S. Department of Education. She served as Project Director for the Age of Criminal Responsibility Research Training and Technical Assistance Center, Deputy Director for the Center for Coordinated Assistance to States, and as a State Liaison for the National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth.

Across all projects she supported, Katie connected stakeholders with the research, information, and resources they needed to make informed decisions about the justice and educational related policies and practices. Katie holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, a Master of Arts in Special Education with an Emphasis on Youth in the Juvenile Justice System, and an Interdisciplinary PhD within Special Education with a Concentration on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice from Arizona State University.

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FROM ADVERSITY TO DESISTANCE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES, AGENCY, AND SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG JUSTICE-INVOLVED YOUTHS

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Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are known barriers to desistance for justice-involved youths, with research showing its high prevalence among them. Additionally, agency to desist and social support have been identified as facilitators of desistance among justice-involved adults and may play an important role to mitigate the impact of ACEs for justice-involved youths. Given the lack of research on desistance of justice-involved youths, this exploratory study examined the role of ACEs, agency to desist, and social support in the desistance journey of justice-involved youths in Singapore. Findings reveal the complex interplay of these factors and provide insights for targeted rehabilitative interventions.

Keywords: desistance, justice-involved youth, adverse childhood experiences, agency, social support

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Introduction

Singapore has seen a decline in the proportion of justice-involved youths below the age of 21 who reoffended within two years. The two-year recidivism rate for the 2021 release cohort decreased to 16.3%, marking a 12.5%-point reduction from the 2018 release cohort's 28.8% (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024). This improvement, attributed to enhanced in-care rehabilitation programs and aftercare supervision services, reflects Singapore's ongoing commitment to youth rehabilitation and reintegration (Tan, 2018).

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are a known barrier to desistance among justice-involved youths. Such experiences arise from stressful and potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood, such as family abuse, neglect and dysfunctional household dynamics (Oei et al., 2021). Justice-involved youths experience ACEs at an elevated rate compared to their peers in the general population, with a systematic review showcasing that over 85% of justice-involved youths had experienced at least one ACE (Malvaso et al., 2022). Similarly, 93% of youths in Singapore’s juvenile justice system reported experiencing at least one type of ACE (Singapore Prison Service, 2020).

The high prevalence of ACEs among justice-involved youth is concerning, as research consistently demonstrates their negative impact on youth desistance. A meta-analysis by Yohros (2023) indicated that exposure to each ACE increases the risk of reoffending among justice-involved youths by 4.4%. In Singapore, specific ACEs such as family criminal history, substance abuse, and poor parenting correlate with accelerated reoffending rates (Chng et al., 2016), while parental loss or criminal history increases the risk of repeated justice involvement (Xu et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, declining RTC recidivism rates suggest that desistance remains achievable despite high ACE prevalence. Facilitating factors, such as agency to desist and social support, may contribute to promoting desistance among justice-involved youths (Yeo et al., 2017). Therefore, the current exploratory study examines the interplay between the barriers and facilitators of desistance among a group of justice-involved youths in Singapore.

Desistance from Offending

Desistance occurs when justice-involved individuals transition from a pattern of offending to a law-abiding life (Gålnander, 2024; Goodwin, 2022). It is a dynamic and ongoing process marked by progress and setbacks, as various factors like cognitive patterns, social relationships, and life circumstances may support or hinder desistance efforts (Halsey et al., 2017; Au & Wong, 2022).

Farrall and Maruna (2004) differentiated between two forms of desistance: primary desistance represents a temporary break in criminal activity where criminal activity is absent, but not necessarily creased (O’Shea, 2020), while secondary desistance represents the adoption of a non-offender identity beyond just the cessation of criminal behavior (Reich, 2023). McNeill (2014) later introduced tertiary desistance to represent the social recognition of one’s reformed identity and the subsequent reintegration into society. Altogether, this indicates that desistance involves behavioral changes, identity transformations, and social recognition and acceptance (Graham & McNeill, 2017).

Given the ongoing and tortuous nature of desistance, it is challenging to identify “successful desisters” as it is never certain if one might reoffend. To address this concern, Maruna (2012) proposed

the concept of desistance signaling where desisters can be identified based on credible actions they take as proof to others that they are committed to desisting. Examples of such actions include completing rehabilitation programs (Maruna, 2012) and pursuing education and/or employment (Bushway & Apel, 2012).

Adult versus Youth Desistance

Literature theorizes certain key differences in the desistance pathways of justice-involved adults and youths. For justice-involved adults, their desistance tends to be facilitated by the cognitive and psychosocial developments associated with aging (O'Shea, 2020), such as enhanced self-control and increased ability to resist peer pressure (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2015). This is evidenced by the age-crime curve which shows that criminal behavior increases during adolescence, peaks in late adulthood, and rapidly declines thereafter (Shulman et al., 2013). Moreover, adulthood typically involves the assumption of conventional adult roles such as marriage, parenthood, and employment, which deters justice-involved adults from continuing their criminal behavior (Nader, 2019).

In contrast, justice-involved youths have yet to reach full cognitive and psychosocial maturity. O'Shea (2020) proposed that for justice-involved youths, desistance is more dynamic and agentic than for adults. This is supported by a study showing that youth desisters who were motivated to desist made active decisions and cut off connections with their criminal lifestyle and peers, leading them to desist for longer (Terry & Abrams, 2017). Conversely, youths who were merely focused on avoiding arrest were ambivalent about doing the same, which resulted in more relapses (Terry & Abrams, 2017). These results indicate that active decision-making and intentional effort are important for long-term youth desistance.

Facilitators of Desistance: Agency to Desist and Social Support

Past studies on justice-involved adults identified agency to desist and social relationships as important for desistance. Agency to desist is the belief that one can control and change their self and lifestyle to become crime-free (Lloyd & Serin, 2012), which crucially supports one's efforts to stop offending.

Several studies have linked agency to desistance among justice-involved adults. In Maruna's (2001) study, desisting adults were found to use 'language of agency' more within their narratives, expressing a willingness to take ownership of their lives and a strong ability to desist. Persistent adults, on the other hand, lacked this agentic language; they tended to view themselves as victims of their environment and expressed little hope in their ability to change their offending ways (Maruna, 2001).

These findings are further corroborated by Howerton et al. (2009), who found a link between desisting justice-involved adults' perceived likelihood of successful re-entry and their actual recidivism outcomes. Adults who were pessimistic about their ability to stay away from crime prior to their release had poor outcomes after their release (e.g., drinking, homelessness). In contrast, those who were optimistic and hopeful about desisting prior to their release experienced more success in their community following their release (e.g., living a crime-free life, securing employment). The results indicate that justice-involved adults who believed in their ability to desist actively pursued this goal,

whilst those with lower self-belief resigned themselves to a fate of continued offending. Taken together, as Terry and Abrams (2017) identified active decision-making and intentional effort – both cognitive aspects of agency – as key to desistance for justice-involved adults, agency may be as important for youth desistance too.

Apart from agency, social support can support or hinder desistance (Albertson et al., 2022). Chouhy et al. (2020) state that social support can influence desistance by enabling or constraining one's agency and one's positive attitude towards change. The researchers proposed two possible mechanisms on how social support may affect agency, and thereby desistance.

First, support from family and friends can catalyze the transformation of attitudes and narratives for justice-involved individuals. In their observation of Maruna's (2001) findings, Chouhy et al. (2020) interpreted that formerly incarcerated individuals often gained confidence and made meaningful changes in their lives through the support from others. Additionally, several narratives described close ones as inspiring and supporting these individuals in transforming their lives – a sign of agency (Chouhy et al., 2020).

Second, support from loved ones reminds justice-involved individuals of their prosocial identities and their sense of personal value (Chouhy et al., 2020). This promotes a positive attitude towards change and foster a sense of confidence that one can control one's life and to desist. Hence, social support not only empowers justice-involved individuals with the internal confidence to change but also provides external recognition of their merits and capacity to stay crime-free.

Taken together, these two mechanisms suggest that social support can promote desistance by enhancing individuals' agency to desist, which may apply to justice-involved youths. Barry (2007) explained that although justice-involved youths often start offending to gain social recognition from their offending peers, the negative social repercussions within the wider community lead them to re-evaluate the banes of continuing down this path. The efforts taken to recover their social capital catalyze the desistance process further and keep them from reoffending.

Overall, the overseas studies discussed thus far indicate that agency to desist and social support are facilitators of desistance. Consistent with this conclusion, a local qualitative study by Yeo et al. (2017) found agency to desist and social relationships to be central to desisters' accounts of their journeys, with many noting these factors as important and helpful in their desistance. The study concluded that agency and social relationships play a crucial role in facilitating adult desistance. Taking into consideration the discussions about the relationship between agency, social support, and desistance thus far, it was implicated that agency and social support are promising factors to consider for youth desistance too.

Current Study

The aim of this exploratory study was to examine whether factors known to influence desistance for justice-involved youths and adults also apply to justice-involved youths in Singapore. Given the well-established research on the negative impact of ACEs on reoffending, it was hypothesized that ACEs would be a risk factor for reoffending among justice-involved youths in Singapore. Additionally, the study investigated the positive roles of agency and social support as facilitators of desistance among

justice-involved youths with a history of ACEs.

To investigate the role of ACEs, agency, and social support in youth desistance, this study compared two groups of youths: repeated justice-involved youths and prospective youth desisters. Repeated justice-involved youths were operationalized as currently incarcerated youths who were sentenced at least two separate times at the point of recruitment. For the study, these youths recalled their experiences in the community before they were re-admitted to the Reformative Training Centre. Prospective youth desisters were operationalized as youths who were incarcerated at least once and had been released into the community for a minimum of six months at the point of recruitment. The following four research questions (RQ) were investigated:

RQ1: Does the number of ACEs vary between repeated justice-involved youths and prospective youth desisters?
RQ2: What does the relationship between ACEs and agency look like for repeated justice-involved youths and prospective youth desisters?
RQ3: Does the level of agency vary between repeated justice-involved youths and prospective youth desisters?
RQ4: Does the relationship between social support and agency vary between repeated justice-involved youths and prospective youth desisters?

Method

Participants

The sample comprised of 63 justice-involved youths: 48 were repeated justice-involved youths and 15 were prospective youth desisters. All participants were male and included those of Chinese, Malay, and Indian ethnicities. Recruitment and data collection took place between July 2022 and August 2023. Participants with offences of any category, except sexual offences, were recruited. The average age of participants was 21.48 years (range: 18 – 23). Among the prospective youth desisters, the average offence-free period was 1.14 years (range: 0.5 – 3.4).

Data Collection Procedure

Repeated justice-involved youths were recruited from the Reformative Training Centre (RTC) and Changi Prison Complex institutions. Group data collection sessions were conducted using pen-and-paper surveys, at the start of which participants were briefed on the survey and informed consent was obtained. These youths answered the survey retrospectively based on their experiences in the community before they were re-admitted.

For prospective youth desisters, those who were released into the community for a minimum of two years were contacted and completed surveys over the phone after consent was obtained. The sampling criteria were broadened, owing to limited initial participation, to include youth who had successfully completed and received early discharge from community supervision following a minimum six-month supervisory term. The recruitment criteria were informed by behavioral markers associated with preliminary desistance processes, as evidenced by participants' successful early discharge, adherence to supervisory conditions, and maintenance of either employment or educational pursuits.

The verification process encompassed several key mechanisms to confirm desistance of prospective youth desisters. Records were examined to ensure they had not been re-admitted into the institutional system. For those granted early discharge, electronic monitoring devices were deployed to track their movements. Furthermore, community supervision reports were reviewed to verify that no reoffending behavior had been flagged during the mandated supervision period.

Prospective youth desisters who agreed to participate were provided with an online survey link and completed it on their phones. The achieved sample size remained suboptimal despite recruitment strategy adjustments, primarily due to the voluntary participation protocol.

Survey Measures

Social support was assessed using two adapted scales. The Caring Relationships scale, taken from the Resilience Youth Development Module (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2007), measured perceived support from six sources (peers, family, workplace, school, community, and a Community Supervisor[1]). The Significant Other subscale of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) measured perceived support from significant others.

Agency to desist was measured with the Agency for Desistance Questionnaire (Lloyd & Serin, 2012), and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were assessed using the ACEs Questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998), with binary "Yes" or "No" responses.

The link between social support and desistance was explored using Personal Network Analysis, a social network analysis approach that focuses on the individual and their social relationships (McCarty, 2002). Participants listed five people they felt closest to, described their relationship, and profiled each person on factors like closeness, marital status, employment, schooling, criminal history, and perceived influence (antisocial or prosocial).

Analyses Method

Due to recruitment challenges, the prospective youth desister group had a small sample size, leading to an imbalanced sample size between the two groups. To account for this, non-parametric statistical methods were employed which included Spearman's correlation and Mann-Whitney U test.

Results

Repeated justice-involved youths reported experiencing more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than prospective youth desisters, $p = 0.02$ (Figure 1). Additionally, ACEs was negatively linked with agency to desist for repeated justice-involved youths, $p = 0.02$.

Repeated justice-involved youths had lower agency as compared to prospective youth desisters, $p = 0.005$. Additionally, repeated justice-involved youths perceived less social support from their significant other ($p < = 0.005$) and community supervisor ($p = 0.003$) as compared to prospective youth desisters (Figure 1). Community support was positively linked with agency for repeated justice-

1 *Each youth supervisee on community program is supervised by a civilian rehabilitation specialist and/or a uniformed Reintegration Officer (RO). The term 'Community Supervisor' in this paper thus refers to either type of supervision staff.*

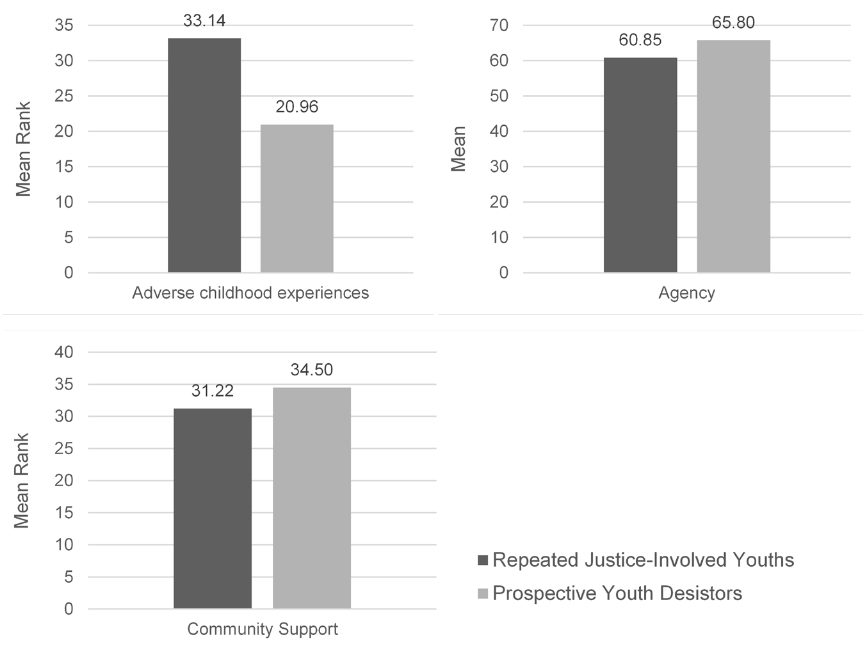

Figure 1: Comparison Between Justice-Involved Youth Groups for Adverse Childhood Experiences, Agency, and Community Support

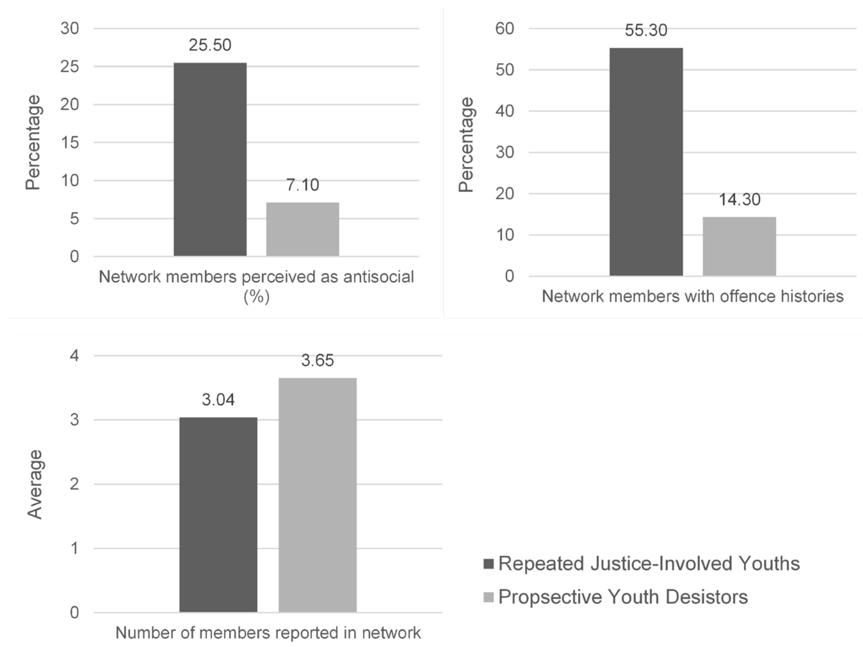

Figure 2: Comparison Between Justice Involved-Youth Groups for Characteristics of Social Support Network

involved youths, $p = 0.02$, such that those who perceived greater support from their community had higher agency to desist.

Majority of repeated justice-involved youths (38.3%) and prospective youth desisters (42.9%) reported feeling closest to their parents, with 77.1% of youths in general feeling closer to a family member than a friend. A greater percentage of repeated justice-involved youths had a perceived antisocial member and/or a member with a criminal history in their social support network, as well as a lower average number of members reported as part of their network, than prospective youth desisters (Figure 2).

Discussion

Adverse Childhood Experiences among Justice-Involved Youths and Its Link to Agency

The study showed that repeated justice-involved youths had higher adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) relative to prospective youth desisters. This aligns with past research showcasing that cumulative childhood adversity increases the risk of reoffending among young and adult offenders (Weber & Lynch, 2021; Yohros, 2023). Additionally, ACEs was linked to agency among repeated justice-involved youths, with those experiencing more ACEs reporting lower agency to desist. These findings indicate that cumulative ACEs may erode one's belief in their ability desist and potentially increasing one's risk of reoffending.

Agency among Justice-Involved Youths

Results also showed that repeated justice-involved youths had lower agency to desist relative to prospective youth desisters. This is in line with research on justice-involved adults where those with persistent offending often demonstrated a lower sense of agency by expressing hopelessness about change and resignation towards deviance in their self-narratives (Maruna, 2001; Howerton, 2009). Desisting adults, in contrast, often used a 'language of agency' in their narratives, expressing a strong belief in their ability to desist (Maruna, 2001). This agentic language is echoed in the Agency to Desist questionnaire used in this study, which includes items such as "I am in charge of whether I stop doing crime," and "I believe I can be good at going straight, just like I was good at getting what I wanted through crime." The difference in reported agency levels between the two groups suggests that the feeling of having agency over one's behavior and future plays an important role in encouraging youth desistance, which is in-line with Yeo et al.'s (2017) findings that agency was important and helpful for desistance amongst adults (Yeo et al., 2017).

Social Support among Justice-Involved Youths

Results revealed that repeated justice-involved youths perceived less social support from their significant others and community supervisors relative to prospective youth desisters. This result highlights significant others and community supervisors as key figures in enhancing desistance outcomes for justice-involved youths. The result is particularly relevant for Singapore Prison Service (SPS) as most youths in this sample (71.4%) reported having a significant other. Thus, leveraging support from significant others may be effective in supporting SPS' efforts to improve youth desistance outcomes. The importance of social support for desistance is also supported by research, with studies showing that social support acts as a protective factor against recidivism (Kras, 2019), whereas a lack of support following release can lead individuals back to crime (Brown et al., 2009).

Community Support and Its Link to Agency

Among repeated justice-involved youths, those who perceived less community support also reported lower agency to desist. This result suggests that community support is crucial in helping youths regain their confidence to remain crime-free. Particularly during periods of setback, acknowledging their efforts to reform and encouraging them not to abandon their path to rehabilitation can be pivotal in strengthening their resolve to avoid criminal behavior. Indeed, Farrall and Calverley (2005) showed that community trust and recognition are key in helping those attempting to leave their criminal lifestyles behind to sustain their desistance.

Social Support Networks of Justice-Involved Youths

The social support networks of repeated justice-involved youths were less conducive to desistance relative to those of prospective youth desisters. Compared to prospective youth desisters, a higher percentage of repeated justice-involved youths had an antisocial member and/or a member with a criminal history in their network, as well as a lower average number of network members. These results are consistent with research on social network and their influence on desistance. Studies show that interactions with antisocial peers and limited social capital can make it hard for individuals to successfully desist (Best, 2016; Boman IV & Mowen, 2017).

Additionally, both groups reported feeling closest to their family members rather than their friends. This is surprising as peer relationships typically become more important during adolescence and early adulthood (Malonda et al., 2019). The current result suggests that parents remain a significant figure of support for justice-involved youths in Singapore. Importantly, most youths in this sample rated their parents as prosocial influences (96%) and without a criminal history (86%), suggesting that parents can be positive role models that encourage and guide their children's desistance efforts. Nevertheless, careful appraisal of the quality of familial relationships and dynamics is crucial when leveraging family support for youth desistance, as negative familial dynamics or the presence of antisocial family members may hinder the youth's efforts to desist.

Limitations and Future Directions

As social support was measured using self-report data, results may not accurately reflect the actual level of support provided by different sources. Future studies could collect data from multiple sources, including family members and peers, regarding the support provided to justice-involved youths during and after incarceration. Corroborating their perspectives with youths' self-report would provide a more comprehensive understanding of social support dynamics.

Recruitment challenges resulted in a small sample size and necessitated a change in the desistance period criteria for the prospective youth desister group. This limits the generalizability of the findings. Although non-parametric analyses were used to address the small sample size, future studies should recruit larger samples with longer desistance periods to strengthen findings. This can be done by diversifying the recruitment strategies from the get-go to maximize the number of potential participants.

The limited sample size also restricted the study's ability to examine potential ethnic or racial differences, underscoring the need for more representative samples in future research. Additionally, the small sample size precluded the use of randomized sampling, and the resulting imbalance

between groups made it difficult to match participants on potential confounding variables such as age, offence type, and assessed risk of recidivism. Hence, results might have been confounded by other unassessed variables.

As only male youths were included in this study, findings might not be representative of the desistance experience of female justice-involved youths. Mixed-gender or female participant samples should thus be considered for future research.

Finally, the study design being cross-sectional instead of longitudinal limits the ability of the results to illuminate the dynamic nature of desistance, as the process is often nonlinear and better understood via longitudinal methods.

Conclusion

The current exploratory study identified adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as a barrier to desistance among justice-involved youths, emphasizing the need for trauma-informed approaches within juvenile justice systems. Such approaches stress the importance of addressing trauma early among at-risk youths. Preventive measures, such as school-based interventions and community programs, can help mitigate the impact of ACEs and reduce the likelihood of future offending and reoffending. Moreover, by gaining a deeper understanding of how trauma contributes to offending (Mouhiddin & Adams, 2022), trauma-informed practitioners can translate this knowledge into interventions that target the needs of justice-involved youths. This study also highlighted the roles of agency and social support in promoting youth desistance. Early interventions that nurture agency and positive relationships with family, significant others, community supervisors, and others in the community can further mitigate ACEs' effects, enhancing youth desistance outcomes.

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MORE THAN JUST A PHASE — LIVED EXPERIENCE OF A SINGAPOREAN YOUNG DESISTOR

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Abstract

Juvenile delinquency continues to be an area of focus globally. Inspired by a youth desistor, who hoped to leverage on his lived experience, to impact positive changes to other justice-involved youths, this study explores the complex navigation of reintegration challenges along a justice-involved youth's desistance journey. Narrative analysis of one case study, drawn from an in-depth life story interview, revealed four key themes, highlighting the process of primary, secondary and tertiary desistance. Relational desistance was reflected strongly as well, where the role of mentoring and the positive effect of belonging to a community of desistors aided the process.

Keywords: desistance, justice-involved youth, family support, mentoring, identity, redemption script

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Introduction

Juvenile delinquency is one of the most pressing social problems, with negative emotional, physical, and economic effects felt throughout society (Tarolla et al., 2002). Over the past five years, the average youth offending in Singapore was about 2,500 youth arrests per year (MSF, 2023). Even with the recent decline in youth arrests locally, there remains a concern about the growing proportion of youths with more permissive views on drugs, indicating a possibility of future drug use (MSF, 2023). The phenomenon of desistance, defined as the cessation of criminal behavior, has emerged as a critical focus for researchers and practitioners seeking to understand how youth transition away from offending and reintegrate successfully into society.

Justice-Involved Youths and the Offending Pathways

Early criminological research, such as the life-course perspective introduced by Glueck and Glueck (1940) and advanced by Sampson and Laub in 1993, laid the foundation for understanding how social bonds and turning points influence desistance. Moffitt's (1993) developmental taxonomy further distinguished between adolescence-limited offending and life-course-persistent offending, emphasizing the significance of social and environmental factors in shaping offending trajectories. Moffitt's theory is also influential in understanding the different pathways of criminal behavior and has implications for targeted intervention strategies. Existing literature indicates numerous and complex risk factors that can explain youths' continued involvement in crime as they journey into adulthood. Risk factors include a variety of social, familial and individual circumstances such as lower socioeconomic status, familial abuse and violence, association with antisocial peer groups, unstable education or employment engagement, and low cognitive ability or other learning difficulties (Boden et al., 2010; Soothill et al., 2010; Green et al., 2008; Horowitz et al., 1995; McMakin et al., 1998).

Offending pathways and desistance

While we understand how risk factors can explain continued involvement in crime, lesser is known about how justice-involved youth desist. Theories of desistance have evolved over the years, offering insights into the complex and multi-faceted nature of this process. Contemporary scholars, including McNeill (2015), Maruna (2001), and Giordano et al. (2002), have expanded on these foundational theories, identifying three interconnected dimensions of desistance: behavioral change (primary desistance), identity transformation (secondary desistance), and societal reintegration (tertiary desistance).

Behavioral change is often regarded as the first indication of desistance, marked by a temporary cessation of offending. However, secondary desistance highlights a deeper transformation, where individuals begin to see themselves as desistors and adopt prosocial identities (Maruna, 2001). This identity shift is often facilitated by cognitive transformations and personal motivations for change, as outlined by Giordano et al. (2002) in their cognitive transformation theory. Finally, tertiary desistance involves societal recognition of the individual's prosocial role, underscoring the importance of community support and belonging (McNeill, 2015). McNeill and Schinkel (2024) emphasize that desistance is not solely an individual process but a relational one, where the support of family, mentors, and community plays a crucial role in sustaining long-term change.

Desistance and Redemption Scripts

A particularly influential concept in understanding desistance is Maruna's (2001) theory of redemption

scripts. According to this framework, individuals who desist from offending often reconstruct their personal narratives, framing their past behaviors as lessons that inform their commitment to a positive future. This narrative reconstruction enables justice-involved persons to make sense of their experiences, establish new identities, and gain societal acceptance. Giordano et al. (2002) further emphasize the role of "hooks for change," or external opportunities that facilitate desistance, such as meaningful employment, stable relationships, or community involvement. These opportunities interact with internal factors, such as motivation and identity, to support long-term desistance.

While international research on desistance offers valuable theoretical insights, there is a need to examine how these theories apply within the Singaporean context. As McNeill (2015) observed, the process of tertiary desistance is deeply influenced by societal norms and perceptions, suggesting that culturally specific research is essential before developing effective interventions. However, local research has been scant.

The current study addresses this gap by exploring the desistance journey of Singaporean young desistors, focusing on the interplay of personal, relational, and societal factors. In view of the intent of this study to collect rich data with a holistic view on the complexity of desistance, a narrative inquiry method is proposed. The narrative approach seeks to capture participants' lived experiences, providing an in-depth understanding of how identity, relationships, and community support influence long-term desistance. By situating these findings within established desistance theories, the study aims to provide culturally relevant insights into Singaporean justice-involved youths and existing correctional practices for successful rehabilitation and reintegration.

Method

This study focused on the lived experience of a desistor, with coherence and meaning making as key aspects of the research method. The Life Story method is used as it offers deep insights to the desistance mechanism that may be missed with a larger sample and thematic analyses. To assure quality in this qualitative research, strategies for trustworthiness and rigor were incorporated and applied (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Consent was obtained from the participant and peer debriefing with fellow researchers was conducted before and after the interview. Positionality statements of the researchers that explained the background and how each had come into the study are compiled in Annex A.

Participant

"John", not his real name, is a 31-year-old, male, Singaporean, who was involved with crime since he was 13 years old. He committed theft-related offences, criminal trespass, housebreaking, robbery offences, and drug consumption, and went through a youth hostel, Singapore Boys' Home, Reformative Training Centre (RTC) and an adult prison. Upon the completion of his sentence, he was admitted into The New Charis Mission (TNCM) halfway house at 24 years old to go through a one-year reintegration program. In 2024, at 30 years old, he joined TNCM as a permanent employee and became a trained facilitator for programs conducted for Reformative Trainees (RTs). John was aware of the limited confidentiality of his responses as some of his account would be shared in this article.

Procedure

Phase 1: Life Story Interview

An in-depth, semi-structured interview based on McAdams' Life Story Interview protocol (McAdams, 1993) was conducted. Prior to the start of the interview, John was informed about the purpose of the interview and audio recording of the interview session. The first interview lasted two and a half hours and was conducted by two researchers. The main interviewer was responsible for asking the interview questions while the second interviewer recorded John's responses. On occasions, the second interviewer would ask additional clarifying and probing questions to seek further understanding of John's responses.

Phase 2: Reflexive Participant Feedback

John was approached by interviewers with preliminary interpretations to assure accuracy and to incorporate additional information. The second interview lasted 30 minutes and John was encouraged to reflect on the researchers' interpretations. John's feedback, clarifications and additions to his story, were recorded. This phase helped to ensure that the research accurately represented the participant's perspectives.

Phase 3: Narrative Refinement

Based on the feedback from the participant, researchers refined and finalized the narratives. This involved reorganizing the stories, highlighting key themes, and ensuring that the final narratives were coherent and meaningful. The goal was to produce a nuanced and authentic representation of the participant's experiences.

Measures

The Life Story Interview Guide (LSIG) developed for this study is a comprehensive, structured qualitative tool, adapted from McAdams' Life Story Interview protocol (McAdams, 1993). The LSIG was designed to elicit in-depth narratives across major domains of the participant's life, including life chapters, key events, future narrative, encountered challenges, personal ideology, and overarching life theme. To enhance relevance to desistance research, adaptations to McAdams' original framework included the removal of questions about political views, expansion of prompts on social values, and additional questions focusing on crime and reintegration experiences beyond the prison context. While maintaining the protocol's original flow and narrative style, clarifying questions were added to support participant understanding. The comprehensive nature of the Life Story approach necessitated this detailed questioning framework. The LSIG is attached as Annex B.

The interview process involved sharing the questions with the participant a day before the session to allow time for reflection. Two researchers conducted the remote interview via Microsoft Teams, with one facilitating and the other taking detailed observational notes. The session was recorded, and Microsoft Teams' transcription service was used initially to create a transcript, which was subsequently reviewed and corrected for accuracy by the note-taking researcher.

Data Analysis and Coding

The data analysis followed a five-step narrative analysis framework (see Figure 1), adapted from Liamputtong's (2009) systematic approach to narrative inquiry, which integrates thematic content and narrative structure. Our adaptation emphasized an in-depth, within-case analysis over cross-case

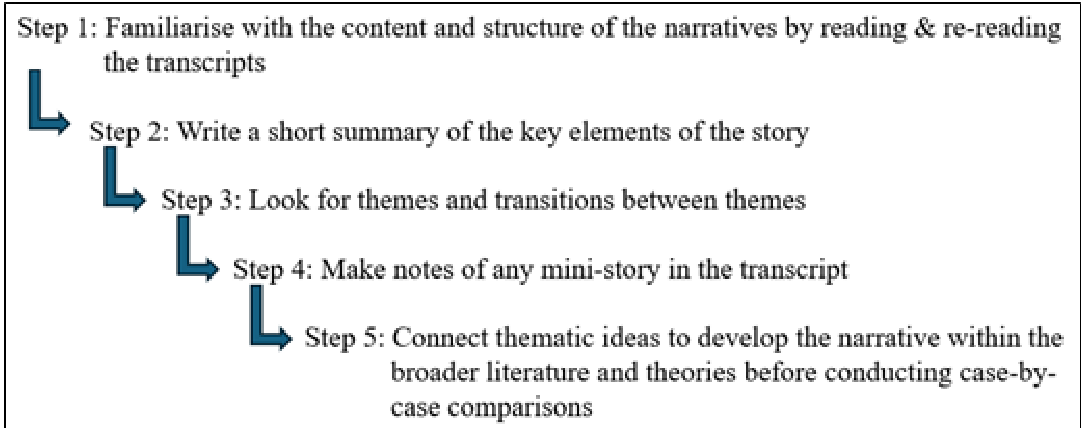

Figure 1: Five steps for narrative analysis. Note. Adapted from Liamputtong (2009).

comparison, appropriate for our single-participant design. Two independent coders conducted the analysis. In Step 1, the coders went through multiple readings of the transcript to immerse themselves with both the content and structure of the narrative. For Step 2, each coder independently wrote summaries of the essential narrative elements (past, present and future) while noting thematic ideas and structural points in the transcript. In Step 3, the coders engaged in inductive coding to identify emerging themes, examine the transitions between these themes, and analyze how different life stages were expressed in the participant's story. During Step 4, the coders identified mini stories embedded within the larger narrative, noting how these smaller narratives contributed to the participant's overall desistance story. Finally, in Step 5, the analysis focused on connecting the identified thematic ideas with broader literature, theoretical frameworks and the paper's research question. While Liamputtong's framework typically includes case-by-case comparisons in the final step, this was not applicable given our single-participant design. Throughout the process, the coders met regularly to discuss their interpretations and resolve any discrepancies through consensus.

Results

The analysis of John's life story revealed four key themes in his journey of desistance, namely supportive relationships, identity reconstruction, change in lifestyle, and strategies to overcome challenges. The themes highlighted the complex nature of the desistance process which were further refined in the sub-themes.

Theme 1: The Role of Supportive Relationships in Fostering Desistance Behaviors

John expressed feeling fearful, doubtful of his 'success' and emphasized the impact of supportive relationships on his desistance journey. He described the impact of his family, particularly his mother and grandmother, in providing emotional support and motivation for change. John highlighted the crucial role of TNCM in providing a supportive community and positive role modelling. This finding aligned with previous research on the importance of social bonds and support networks in the desistance process (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Maruna, 2001).

Family Reconciliation and Rebuilding

John's narrative indicated a process of rebuilding relationships with family members. The initial desire

to avoid disappointing his family motivated him to cease offending and further reinforced his new non-offending identity.

> "…, *she was very angry with me*, so she said: 'Why, why, my father and herself, why would they give birth to someone like me? So much dishonor, you know, so much problem. So much trouble.'"
>
> "…for so many years I was not around… I think in 2019 there was one photo which … when I saw that like, wow! It's *a picture that I didn't think that would exist at all* if I continue my journey in crime… For the past 8 to 9 years, that was the only photo with my entire family that I was there with them!"
>
> "*I want to let my mom know that* I'm not a disappointment. I'm someone she can be proud of!"

Journeying with Peers with the Same Goal — 'Brothers'

> "I think there are many times it helps because as I'm going through my program, *I were always with this group of people where we go out together*. …The relationship becomes very prosocial. *So, I start to lead a very prosocial life because of the people around me*. You know they guide me to lead a prosocial life, exercising, jogging, dinner, sleeping early. I start to build a very disciplined life."

Hope from "Successful" Desistors

> "Sometimes you will just ask yourself — whether can you make it? But when you see someone else… that comes from the same background… actually did it. You know that's possible. *I saw hope from all their lives*. And it gives me hope."
>
> "So, it's very *intentional to have this type of relationship*. You know, very intentional to have this type of accountability … somehow, when they approach you and they talk to you, then they said that 'you know, last time I also like that, but now…' Waaa, then… *It opens my eyes*."

Inspiration from His Role Model—a Fellow Desistor

> "I don't want one day when I die, people will just say… John is a desistor that changed his life. … I want people to say that John is a desistor that changed his life, and *he impacted my* life. Because that's what I will say of my Pastor… *He is one person I want to model after*."

Theme 2: Identity Reconstruction and the Development of a "Redemption Script"

The interview revealed a clear process of identity reconstruction, with the participant moving from a criminal identity to that of a desistor and then a future mentor. His narrative also illustrated a significant spiritual transformation that led to the adoption of new moral values, such as forgiveness, gratitude, and a desire to help others. This was aligned with Maruna's (2001) concept of "redemption script", and shown through how the participant reinterpreted his past experiences considering his current prosocial identity.

Former Identity of a Gangster and Drug Abuser

> "… I don't know anything except gangsterism, drugs, prison, vices. Because from 13 years old I've been like that … I want fame, I want money, I want girls, want everything la! But now, I think I learn how to be contented… the more I think, I tell myself that why am I still taking on the identity of a gang? I don't want to be gangster anymore ah. I want to change eh."

A Spiritual Turning Point

> "Everyone was just praying, and suddenly I got this, flashback of a lot of the wrong things I've done in the past... And I felt what a horrible person I am... But at the end, I'm very sure that, you know, I felt God speaking to me that you know, he forgives me, and he loves me a lot... The devotion experience was what made me really want to make a change, but the process is gradual."

"Redemption Script" — Using His Lived Experience to Connect with Other Justice-Involved Youth

> "... going back to prison as a trainer, it helps me. It is something that I never imagine, never will happen. But now as I go back it just let me know that, you know, *I am a positive impact*. I'm able to positively impact someone's life. Bring hope to someone's life. As a trainer who has been in prison before, I feel that I am able to relate and empathize with the inmates."

Theme 3: A Prosocial Lifestyle, Community Engagement and Uncertainty

John highlighted how a change in his lifestyle from an antisocial to a prosocial one helped in sustaining his desistance. Peers engaged him in prosocial routines, including exercise, meals, movie outings, and organized travel, which replaced his past antisocial behaviors and habits. These included mentoring others, participating in religious activities, and pursuing employment and education.

Shift Towards Prosocial Lifestyle and Structure

> "...my priorities have changed. As long as I'm dressed appropriately. I'm dressed. I might not have a lot of money but I'm sufficient. I'm contented..."
> "I was always involved in drug and illegal activities. Waking up at night and sleeping in the morning. Currently I wake up at 6am and sleep by 11pm. Apart from working, I am also studying night classes."

Low Self-Confidence in Making Changes

"It was uncertain because I don't know what to expect. I don't know how long I will last before I go back to prison... I don't know what it means to change and will I be able to change. *I was just taking a day at a time*."

Theme 4: Reintegration Challenges and Strategies in Maintaining Long-Term Desistance

John described various challenges in maintaining desistance, including managing anger, resisting temptations, and overcoming societal stigma. He also outlined his strategies for addressing these challenges, such as self-reflection, seeking support from his community, and focusing on personal growth.

Difficulty Assimilating into Prosocial Norms and the Importance of Community Support

> "When I'm in prison, I felt at home because I can communicate with people, I know how to talk to them... But once I come out here, *I hear the other things that people are doing in their lives. I felt that I don't know anything*... No secondary school life, no working life, no positive memories... So, I felt very lost. I think that was a very low point in my life when *I realized that I know nothing*... They tell me, actually they also went through the same journey. When they first come out, it was also like that."

External Temptations from Antisocial Peers and the Value of Self-Reflection

> "I do have friends who still contact me, asking me, why don't you come out and work for me? Both legal and illegal. Then I remind myself to think, that I was swayed to join them because I'm loyal to the values — loyalty and commitment. But no matter what, I know what I want now. I'm committed to staying here (at the halfway house). If not, if I get distracted when I go out, I might lose this healthy community that I have."

Internal Struggles with Managing Frustrations, Anger, and the Impact of Peer Support

> "I went to learn driving, I was actually with this driving instructor, who was very rude to me. And I shouted back at him: 'You want to shout at me? We can die together then.' Then I adjusted the car, I want to ram the car against another car. I was very angry. ... I want to leave the halfway house already. I want to beat him up, and live outside, I don't want to stay already. But then my friends down there (at the halfway house) stopped me. They told me: 'Don't la'. They encouraged me, they hold me back. They processed with me. If I went down that day, I think I will not be here now already."

Lifelong Nature of Active and Conscious Desistance

When John felt discouraged about repeatedly acting upon his impulses and having to apologize for it, his friends reflected with him how the frequency of him doing impulsive actions had reduced over time.

> "My friends show me the timeline. You see, initially it was like that (gesturing to a shorter period). Now it is like that, a longer period."
>
> "Every time I tell myself that I'm going to take ownership for my actions, I'm going to change from it. The period gets longer and longer, and I think until two years or three years ago, and until today, I never lost my temper already. I managed to overcome it, and I see things very differently. I realized that it means only one thing — learned behavior can be unlearned."

Analogy of the Desistance Journey

> "The journey of change is like a rollercoaster ride. At the start of the ride, when it began to make the ascension, it is uncomfortable and scary. But then still enjoying the process because it is still slow and steady. But then, suddenly you plummet downward, experiencing twists, turns, and drops, symbolizing our setbacks, failures, and challenges (the downward drop). Yet, we emerge from the darkness, and the rollercoaster begins to climb again, signifying our resilience, adaptation, and newfound strength (the upward climb). The ride continues, with ups and downs, but with each cycle, I learn more and see more."

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the desistance journey of a young Singaporean desistor, focusing on the interplay of personal, relational, and societal factors. A narrative inquiry approach is valuable to address this curiosity, because it provides an analytic space in which the role of relational and societal factors in fostering desistance could be understood. The analysis reveals a multi-faceted journey of identity reconstruction, aligning with the concept of redemption scripts (Maruna, 2001), and illustrating the interconnected nature of tertiary and relational desistance (McNeill & Schinkel, 2024). Central to this narrative is the role of generativity — an individual's desire to contribute positively to future generations (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). This desire was seen through John's story,

the sub-theme of *Inspiration from His Role Model — a Fellow Desistor*, where it allowed insight into John's ability to persevere in his desistance journey by seeing himself play the role of desistor for future justice-involved youth. In times when it could be challenging, it seemed to remind him of his new prosocial identity as it carried a meaningful purpose for others. It is suggested that the role of generativity to be further explored and developed on how it reinforces tertiary desistance.

This study also highlights the crucial role of community support structures, in facilitating the rehabilitation and reintegration of justice-involved youth, as posited by Barry (2007). In Singapore, reintegration of justice-involved individuals (both young and adult) is characterized by several support structures with the aim of enhancing capacities to rebuild family connections and secure gainful employment, enabling them to become contributing members of society. The New Charis Mission (TNCM) is a halfway house that offers support to supervisees and other beneficiaries in the community through a voluntary residential rehabilitation program. The program consists of three phases: early recovery, restoration, and reintegration, where residents receive counselling, close mentoring, and family support.

Through John's narrative, we can observe the development of a non-criminal identity (secondary desistance) and perhaps tertiary desistance. McNeill's (2015) concept of tertiary desistance proposes that at this stage of the desistance process, individuals actively seek acknowledgment from the broader community as reformed and rehabilitated members of society. Facilitated by TNCM's employment, John's involvement in mentoring and conducting programs in correctional settings, both in and out of prisons, serve multiple purposes: reinforcing a non-criminal identity, facilitating integration into mainstream society, and fulfilling generative needs by actively contributing to impart knowledge and support others.

John's story highlighted a salient factor, particularly for a young person, — the vital role TNCM and the network of desistors called 'Brothers' that provided mentoring support and guidance. Studies had shown how peer mentors are vital in the desistance process, as they foster hope, self-worth, trust, motivation to change, and increased self-esteem (Elisha & Shachaf-Friedman, 2023; Kirkwood, 2023; Moak et al., 2023). Others have also highlighted situations where lived experience were valued over learned expertise (Creaney, 2020; Nixon, 2020; Perrin, 2022). Through the supportive community at TNCM, John was able to navigate through challenges faced during the desistance journey, strengthening the critical role that peer mentoring has for a justice-involved youth.

There were similarities in John's narratives with those reported in earlier studies (Presser, 2009). The importance of family, mentors, and peers — core aspects of relational desistance — is highlighted, with many of these prosocial bonds initiating and maintaining change. John's journey described peers from TNCM who had similar experiences, creating a supportive community that reinforces the commitment to change. This shared experience further enabled a sense of belonging to a community in the relational desistance process, reinforcing tertiary desistance. This may reflect a cultural emphasis on mentorship and collective responsibility, which enhances the desistance process by fostering a sense of belonging and purpose among justice-involved youths.

Implications

This case study highlights the importance of personal narrative (redemption scripts), social

recognition (tertiary desistance), interpersonal connections (relational desistance), and generativity in the journey towards sustained desistance and societal reintegration. In particular, the generative aspects of one's actions, supported by a holistic approach, serve as a powerful mechanism for solidifying a prosocial identity, gaining community acceptance, and finding meaning in post-offending life through contributive roles. Seen in the lived experience of a young desistor, it seems to imply that the concept of generativity is applicable for both young and adult desistors. In addition, John's experience highlighted the powerful impact of mentoring, both through access to a supportive group of mentors and through the opportunity to give back by serving as a mentor himself, demonstrating the life cycle effect of generativity.

Although majority of John's change narrative began when he was released in the community, parts of his story could also inform institutional programming interventions. The existing reformative training regime focuses on exploring prosocial interests, enhancing family relationships, developing academic and vocational capabilities, and introduction of positive peer befrienders. To further strengthen rehabilitation efforts, it would be valuable to explore additional avenues for augmenting the self-esteem of justice-involved youths, such as exposing institutionalized youths to contemporary topics and experiences that are relevant to mainstream youths.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study was limited by its reliance on a single youth desistor volunteer — with challenges and strategies potentially unique to those residing in halfway houses — it offers an in-depth understanding of the desistance mechanisms experienced by a Singaporean justice-involved youth. Future research with comparative case studies to explore similarities and differences in desistance narratives across diverse youth profiles or longitudinal approaches to track identity transformation over time, capturing the dynamic nature of desistance are recommended to provide further insight into the desistance journey of justice-involved youths.

Conclusion

Juvenile delinquency is a major social issue, with less known about how justice-involved youths desist from crime. Desistance theories identify three dimensions: behavioral change (primary desistance), identity transformation (secondary desistance), and societal reintegration (tertiary desistance). A particularly influential concept in understanding desistance is Maruna's (2001) theory of redemption scripts. This study applied the theory in a Singaporean context through a life story narrative inquiry, revealing four key themes: supportive relationships; identity reconstruction and the development of a 'redemption script'; lifestyle changes and uncertainty; and multi-faceted reintegration challenges alongside strategies to overcome them. The findings of this study align with recent desistance theories, highlighting the processes of primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance. Relational desistance was particularly evident in the case study, with mentoring and community belonging playing a pivotal role in supporting desistance. This may reflect a cultural emphasis on mentorship and collective responsibility, which enhances the desistance process by fostering a sense of belonging and purpose among justice-involved youths. A deeper understanding of desistance can inform policies and interventions aimed at supporting youths' transition and reintegration into society, with each desisting youth potentially creating a multiplying positive impact.

Annex A
Positionality Statements of the Research Team

Angeline Tay

I conduct this research as part of a practice research project and played the role of interviewer. I worked at the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) as a Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist (CRS) for 17 years. At the time the study was conducted, I oversee a team of CRS, with the primary client population being reformative trainees (RTs) serving their sentences in the Reformative Training Centre (RTC). Andrew did not attend any of my counselling sessions and we did not have any interaction although both of us were in RTC during the period of his incarceration. In addition to being a CRS who worked with justice-involved youths, I am a Chinese woman and mother of three teenage children. I am aware of the possible power dynamics at play during the interview and interactions with interviewee. To minimize the power imbalance, the interview was conducted with another interviewer, who would listen to the interview and point out any gaps or curiosities not pursued, due to possible biases and assumptions. These factors facilitate rapport and contextual understanding of Andrew's stories and his reflections as he answered the interview questions.

Ace Ong

As a Chinese female CRS with experience in Singapore's mental health and rehabilitation services, I recognize how my cultural background and my training in psychology shapes my understanding of the emotional and psychological aspects of desistance and rehabilitation. While I have experience working with justice-involved adults, I acknowledge my limited experience in working specifically with justice-involved youths. This lack of direct experience with youths presents both a challenge and curiosity for the research study, which I play the roles of interviewer and completed the data analysis. My professional role focuses on providing empathetic and individualized support, and I remain aware of potential biases as I strive to understand the diverse experience of the participant.

Goh Ruo Ting

As a Singaporean female with a background in psychology, my approach to this research is shaped by both my academic training and my professional experiences. As a Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist in the correctional setting within the government service, I work directly with incarcerated individuals and collaborate with community partners and desistors to provide rehabilitation support to prisons. This role has provided me with firsthand insight into the complexities of desistance and reintegration, as well as the critical role of systemic and social support in sustaining long-term desistance.

Quah Feng Ling

As a female Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist with over a decade of experience in Singapore's correctional system, I recognize how my professional role and background influence my perspective. My social work training shapes my understanding of systemic support in desistance, yet I remain aware that my institutional perspective modified by personal experiences prompts curiosity about the subject's experiences in rehabilitation. While my professional lens values correctional interventions, I remain mindful of potential biases as I explore how the individual navigates desistance beyond formal structures.

Andrew Ho
As a Chinese male desistor, my personal experiences within Singapore's correctional system deeply influence my perspective on desistance and rehabilitation. My time in the correctional system has shaped my views on the challenges and opportunities faced by justice-involved persons seeking to reintegrate into society. I am excited and volunteered to be part of this research project as it could give me insight into my personal struggles and also understand how to better support other justice-involved youths to stay away from crime. I remain aware of potential biases stemming from my own journey and did not intentionally speak favorably of TNCM, my current employer. My commitment to understanding and supporting others in their desistance process is informed by both my lived experiences and how my family and religious values had guided me.

Ewen Thai
I am a Chinese male Senior Correctional Unit Officer with over 20 years' experience in correctional work and father to two youths. For more than a decade, I've rehabilitated male justice-involved youths by facilitating counseling, education, and skills upgrading. I use time with them to foster self-reflection and build self-awareness, with the aim to help them overcome negative influences and set positive personal goals. I am committed to fostering an environment of discipline and order, supported by evidence-based intervention, where justice-involved youths are empowered to rewrite their narratives.

Annex B
Adapted Interview Protocol for Research on Tertiary Desistance from Crime

Introduction

"This interview is designed to explore your story, focusing on your journey toward desisting from crime. We aim to understand what contributed to your desistance and your perception of helpful and unhelpful elements. The interview will cover key life chapters, significant scenes, and reflections on your past, present, and future. There are no right or wrong answers. We are here to learn from your experiences."

A. Life Chapters

"Imagine your life as a book with different chapters. Please outline the main chapters that describe your life, especially those related to your desistance journey. Give each chapter a title, briefly describe what it covers, and explain how one chapter led to the next. As a storyteller here, what you want to do is to give me an overall plot summary of your story, going chapter by chapter. You may have as many chapters as you want, but I would suggest having between about 2 and 7 of them. We will want to spend no more than about 20 minutes on this first section of the interview, so please keep your descriptions of the chapters relatively brief."

Guiding questions:

1. What were the **pivotal periods** in your life?
2. **Positive Childhood Memory**
    - "Think back to a positive memory from your childhood or teenage years. Describe an experience that stands out as especially happy or meaningful.
    - What happened, where and when did it occur, who was involved, and what were you thinking

  and feeling?
  - What does this memory say about you and how it might have influenced your journey toward desistance?"
3. **Negative Childhood Memory**
   - "Now, think of a challenging or negative memory from your childhood or teenage years. This could be an experience that was sad, frightening, or difficult.
   - What happened, where and when did it occur, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling?
   - How do you think this experience impacted your later life and your journey toward desistance?"
4. **Vivid Adult Memory**
   - "Describe a vivid or particularly meaningful memory from your adult life (not including your high point, low point, or turning point scenes).
   - What happened, where and when did it occur, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling?
   - Why is this memory significant, and what does it say about you and your path toward desistance?"

B. Key Scenes in the Desistance Story

1. **High Point**
   - "Describe the high points in your desistance journey — the particularly positive or empowering moments.
   - What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Why was it significant for you?"
2. **Low Point**
   - "Identify the low points or significant challenges in your journey. Even though this event is unpleasant, I would appreciate your providing as much detail as you can about it.
   - What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? How did you cope with it? How did it affect your path toward desistance?"
3. **Turning Point**
   - "Discuss the turning points that marked an important change in your life and desistance process.
   - If you cannot identify a key turning point that stands out clearly, please describe some event in your life wherein you went through an important change of some kind.
   - Again, for this event please describe what happened, where and when, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Why was it impactful?"
4. **Religious, Spiritual, or Mystical Experience**
   - "Have you had any religious, spiritual, or mystical experiences that were meaningful during your desistance journey?
   - Describe what happened, when and where it occurred, who was involved, what were you thinking and feeling, and how it influenced you."
5. **Wisdom Event**
   - "Describe an event in which you displayed wisdom or provided wise advice during your journey.
   - What happened, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? What does this

event say about you and your desistance process?"

6. **Reflections on Change Journey**
   - "Looking back, what do you think contributed/supported your desistance? It can be something that you have not mentioned.
   - Were that any activities that you did that contributed to the desistance journey? If so, what were those activities?
   - Were there any specific person/s that have been inspiring or meaningful to you in this journey?
   - What did you think were the most important factors?"

C. Future Outlook

1. **Next Chapter**
   - "What do you see as the next chapter in your life?
   - How do you envision your future with your continued desistance and reintegration into society?"
2. **Hopes and Plans**
   - "What are your plans or dreams moving forward?
   - What would you like to achieve that supports your non-offending identity and sense of belonging?
   - How do you plan to achieve it"

D. Challenges

"This section focuses on significant challenges, struggles, or problems you have faced in your life. We'll look at general challenges and specific areas where people often experience difficulties. Please share your experiences related to these aspects and how they impacted your desistance journey."

1. **Life Challenge**
   - "Reflecting on your life, what do you consider to be the greatest challenge you have faced?
   - How did this challenge develop, and how did you address or cope with it?
   - What significance does this challenge hold in your overall desistance story?"
2. **Health-Related Challenge**
   - "Have you or a close family member faced a major health problem or crisis that impacted your journey?
   - Please describe what the health issue was, how it developed, and how you managed it.
   - What effect did this health challenge have on your desistance process and your overall life story?"
3. **Loss**
   - "Think about an important loss in your life — such as the death or separation from someone significant.
   - What was this loss, and how did it unfold?
   - How did you cope with it, and how has it influenced your journey toward desistance?"
4. **Failure or Regret**
   - "Everyone experiences failures and regrets.
   - Can you describe a significant failure or regret you have faced in any area of your life?
   - How did this experience come about, and how did you cope with it?
   - What effect did this failure or regret have on your journey toward desistance and your view of

yourself?"

E. Personal Insights and Ideologies

1. **Religious or Spiritual Beliefs**
   - "Reflect on the role of religious or spiritual beliefs in your life.
   - Can you describe your religious or spiritual values and how they may have influenced your journey toward desistance?
   - If these beliefs are not significant to you, please share your overall approach to life and its meaning."
2. **Social or Moral Values**
   - "What are the main social or moral values that guide your life?
   - How have these values evolved over time, particularly during your journey of desistance from crime?
   - How do these values influence your decisions and actions today?"
3. **Values and Beliefs**
   - "How have your experiences shaped your beliefs and values?
   - How have these changes affected your desistance journey?
   - What else can you tell me that would help me understand your overall philosophy of life?"
4. **Lessons Learned**
   - "What lessons have you learned through your journey?
   - How do these lessons influence who you are today?"

F. Life Theme

- Looking back over your entire desistance story with all its chapters, scenes, and challenges, and extending back into the past and ahead into the future, do you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story?
- What is the major theme in your life story? Please explain.

G. Other

- What else should I know to understand your desistance story?

End

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About the Authors

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Ace is a Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist with the Singapore Prison Service (SPS), where her role encompasses rehabilitating and reintegrating justice-involved individuals. Ace has conducted assessments, developed intervention plans, and delivered psychology-based counselling programs for justice-involved individuals such as youths and drug use. Ace holds a Master of Science with Distinction in Forensic Psychology and Mental Health from Coventry University and completed her Bachelor of Social Sciences (Honors) in Psychology from the National University of Singapore. Ace's research interests lie in offender rehabilitation and cognitive processes among justice-involved individuals. Passionate about evidence-based rehabilitation, she contributes to the field through program development and frontline engagement with justice-involved populations.

Ruo Ting is an executive at the Singapore Prison Service (SPS), where she collaborates with community partners and desistors to implement programmes for SPS beneficiaries. Prior to this role, she served as a Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist at the Reformative Training Centre, providing counselling and conducting rehabilitation programmes for justice-involved youths. She has also worked with the Correctional Research Branch, contributing to studies on desistance, legislative perceptions, and short-sentence offenders. Ruo Ting holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology, and her research

interests include the desistance process, desistor generativity, and the role of community support in rehabilitation.

Quah Feng Ling is a Senior Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist with the Singapore Prison Service, serving as the Assistant Director of the Correctional Rehabilitation Services (Reformative Training) unit. With over a decade in correctional rehabilitation, she has worked with diverse inmate populations and contributed to developing rehabilitation structures. Beyond direct work, she is deeply committed to building capacity in the field, training staff in rehabilitation competencies, risk assessment, and restorative practices. Trained in social work, she understands that desistance is not an individual journey but one that thrives on the support of families, communities, and meaningful interventions.

Andrew is a Program Executive with The New Charis Mission (TNCM), working in the program and community service department to support rehabilitation and community outreach. With a Diploma in Social Service, Andrew is currently pursuing a Degree in Counselling with Flinders University. Andrew facilitates group counselling programs for RTs in RTC, a mentor to youths in schools, and organizes recreational activities for elderlies in the community. Passionate about second chances, Andrew believes strongly in the potential for justice-involved youths to reform and build a better future.

Ewen is a Senior Correctional Unit Officer with the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) and currently working at the Reformative Training Centre (RTC). He oversees the safe custody, humane treatment, and rehabilitation of Reformative Trainees. Half of Ewen's 20 years of experience in SPS was spent working with justice-involved youths. On a daily basis, he carries with him compassion and jail craft experience for effective and efficient management of inmates under his charge. Ewen believes in the power of active listening and observation to help justice-involved youths reflect, accept accountability, and discover their purpose as they navigate through life. He takes pride in working with a dedicated team, committed to guiding justice-involved youths toward positive change for a safer Singapore. Holding a degree in Management Studies, he enjoys analyzing behavior through an economics and game theory lens.

AN EVIDENCE-INFORMED WAY FORWARD: BUILDING RESEARCH CAPACITY AT TEXAS JUVENILE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT

Rosemary Ricciardelli, Evan Norton, Claire Boudrot & Alejandro Ramirez-Cano

Abstract

There are two purposes to every employee, to do their work and to improve how their work is done. At Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD), the desire to support the youth and employees runs deep into the organization. To better able TJJD to support the youth and staff, we strove to develop a research strategy that 1) provides usable evidence to inform practices and respond to identified needs while 2) building a research capacity within the organization that enables change from within to address the complexities TJJD faces now, in 2025. In the current article, we detail our strategy, outlining how data collection is to be streamlined to fight survey and analysis fatigue and increase effectiveness, how research is to include mixed methods approaches, and how we will build research capacity by empowering the frontline through MicroResearch. The benefits to the operations of TJJD, for the youth, and for the staff are discussed.

Introduction

Despite the increased scholarly attention directed toward correctional workers in adult correctional systems, there remains a large gap in knowledge of how to optimize services for correctional workers who are in the juvenile correctional system. For example, there is a vast increase in public and scholarly attention toward work-related posttraumatic stress injuries (PSIs) among adult correctional workers (Ricciardelli et al., 2024). However, little remains known about work-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and PSIs or occupational stress injuries (OSIs) among juvenile correctional workers. In youth correctional services, there is consensus: the need to ensure the youth and employees are socially, physically, and psychologically healthy is undeniable. To do so, the staff must engage with youth at their level and in response to their needs, while also understanding the many organizational, operational, and individual stressors to which staff are exposed. However, for any change in policies and practices to be effective, they must be evidence informed, referring to applying evidence in a cultural context rather than simply base reformation on evidence imported from other jurisdictions. Often, people will make casual connections between outcomes and practices – like when an allergy is attributed to the wrong thing, so the symptoms persist despite an intervention. Thus, for practices to be effective and policy able to safekeep, evidence is required to inform decision making. Interventions should be evaluated to learn their positive and negative effects as well as how they can be improved. Evidence informed practice – when asking the right questions – can produce effective and efficient organizational and individual change, even transformation. Research produces evidence; however, only with understanding research can one identify the merit of the published research and the quality or robustness of the research itself.

Historically, in research, at the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD), data was abundant, however, either unanalyzed or not systematically collected in ways that could sustainably inform evidence-informed decision making and practices. In response, we developed a sustainable research strategy with clear goals. First, to analyze usable collected data; second, streamline data collection in the future to be systematic with the capacity to be longitudinal, tied to administrative data, and near ready for analysis; third, to build research capacity at TJJD, including among the front line who can best identify needs; fourth, to ensure the research program analyzes all data collected and does so annually – thus being a sustainable process that is not dependent on a person, just a role; fifth, to have ingrained knowledge translation practices (academically, organizationally, and to practitioners) to support change implementation; and six, to further build capacity through partnering with Texas universities to help people learn how to work in partnership in hierarchical organizations while providing student internship opportunities to that effect. The overarching goals of the TJJD research strategy are to inform practice and increase public safety, improve the wellness of TJJD employees, service users, and collateral impacts (loved ones of all), to learn how to protect against occupation and posttraumatic stress injuries, to address recruitment and retention, and, among other factors, to focus on youth needs and those of their loved ones.

To illustrate these objectives, we first explain the research history at TJJD for context, and then our strategy—specifically, how we will meet our six goals. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of our progress in the first year of the strategy building relationship and speak to our hopes for the future for the youth, employees, leadership, and TJJD as a whole.

Context

TJJD, as an agency, came into existence in 2011 and, unsurprisingly, was not focused on research initiatives. However, Texas's efforts at juvenile justice first started in 1887, with State Schools for youth. This was followed by decades of tumult as Texas and agency leaders attempted to identify the best way to address juvenile crime in the state.

Shortly after passing into a new millennium, a major attempt to reform emerged with Texas's 80th Legislative Session in 2007. SB 103 allowed youth to get credit for time spent in pre- and post-adjudication locations, established the Release Review Panel, established the Office of the Inspector General as an independent sister agency tasked with investigating crimes committed by youth and staff in the Texas Youth Commission facilities, established the Office of the Independent Ombudsman as an oversight entity for the Commission, and required a 24 hour hotline to report abuse, neglect, and exploitation of youth in custody (T.X. Legis. Assemb, 2007). The bill actually laid the groundwork for the current TJJD research initiatives.

The goal coming out of the state legislature in 2007 was to reduce the Texas Youth Commission's commitments. The trend continued as the Texas Youth Commission merged with TJPC in 2011, the idea of "regionalization" being pushed by SB 1630 in 2015, and Governor Greg Abbott continuing to push for reductions in state secure populations through 2018.

As a response to the push for change, Executive Director Camille Cain (2018-2022) rolled out the Texas Model of Reform in 2019. The Texas Model was a plan founded on the principles of Trust-Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®)(empowering, connecting, and correcting; Purvis et al., 2009) with an emphasis on the three pillars of trauma-informed care: felt-safety, emotional regulation, and connection (Bath, 2008). Practically, the implementation included creating consistent schedules for youth, creating safer physical environments for youth, training staff on emotional regulation, emphasizing the importance of proper hydration and nutrition, implementing body-worn cameras on correctional staff, teaching staff and youth how to connect in meaningful and healthy ways, and training staff on IDEAL response strategies (Purvis, 2009; Texas Juvenile Justice Department, 2020). All of this served to meet youth's physiological and safety needs to help youth work on their belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs - as defined by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The intention being to achieve personal fulfillment and re-enter the community with the necessary pro-social skills.

In 2019, the first true research position was implemented within TJJD. Specifically, the role of "Manager of Texas Model Research", which differed from the very small team of research specialists and data analysts who are responsible for legislatively mandated reports of data collected via a series of forms. The Manager of Texas Model Research role was meant to analyze the efficacy of the Texas Model implementation plan. The team of one, the person in essence, put together two major surveys: the Texas Model Youth Survey to run twice a year and the Texas Model Staff Survey to run once a year. The Texas Model Youth Survey measured domains such as physical needs, perceived and actual social support, emotional regulation, affect, self-efficacy, and physical safety by adapting well-known and validated tools for youth. The Texas Model Staff Survey measured domains similarly to the youth survey – such as self-efficacy and safety – as well as staff-specific domains such as burnout, job satisfaction, collective efficacy, and organizational commitment. Both surveys evolved with each

new iteration, constantly being tweaked to try to better measure these domains within the TJJD ecosystem. These surveys would run, then the Manager of Texas Model Research would quickly churn out some basic statistics, deliver those back to the executive team, and move on to the next project. With only one person working with all the collected data for the first four years of data collection (2019-2022) – and a slew of other ad hoc survey projects constantly being requested – there was a limited capacity to do a full, connected analysis of the data.

To add to this, research was pushed lower on the priority list when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March of 2020. Safety for youth and staff became a major issue with COVID-19 regulations, sweeping sicknesses, and many staff quitting to protect their own health. The direct effect of COVID-19 was a major wave of resignations, a period TJJD refers to as the Great Resignation. Staff were burnt-out due, at least in part, to the resultant major staffing crisis. Staff did not have time to take surveys or facilitate them to youth; they hardly had time for bathroom breaks. Research became about urgent snapshots of data and trying to inform how to retain staff.

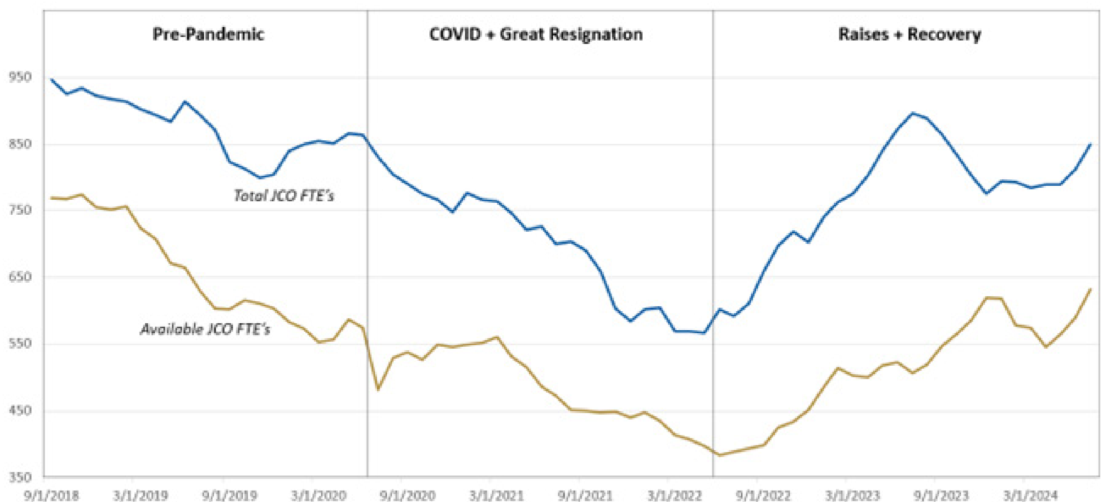

Figure 1: JCO Staffing Levels from September 2018 to July 2024

Once staffing levels started to stabilize, around 2022, research reemerged anew as a priority. The research team grew with a second permanent Research Specialist, which allowed the Manager of Texas Model Research (now the Director of Research) to delegate and have some additional time for analysis (not much however). Although an entirely person-dependent process, this was the start to learning of the needs of the agency. The team could deliver immediate basic descriptive statistics and the executive could react. In the Summer of 2023, the research model was re-envisioned with staffing changes. Thus, it became evident, the research team required a research process that was systematic and sustainable without being person dependent.

In essence, the strategy is now an effort to anticipate and absorb shocks against research in the future (i.e., another staffing crisis, leadership change). In 2024, research continued to be prioritized and the team grew, to a group of four, currently working to make sustainable impacts at TJJD with a strategy to which we now turn.

The Strategy

Part 1: Providing Evidence to Inform Practices and Respond to Needs

Plan to Address Collected Useable Data

Our main purpose over the last half year was to document all available collected data, to determine what is usable to inform TJJD practices and policies, and to analyze (or start to analyze) the usable data. Of the 41 identified data collection sources, we categorized each by the time required to analyze the dataset in light of its size and complexity (i.e., how many years of data were collected, qualitative versus quantitative) before having the Executive team rank the datasets by priority. Datasets with problems (i.e., too small sample sizes, too much missing data) were discussed and removed from the ranking when analysis was not feasible or possible. Thus, we have 11 datasets to work with, ranked, and have made progress already on almost all analyses of datasets, resulting in reports for the executive team, public presentations at a conference, and articles in preparation. In this phase we also started to discuss an internship program with a university to have students trained and supported in helping with the analysis of existing datasets. We also started ethical approval processes.

The next half of the year, while disseminating findings, will also involve creating the data collection tools necessary to moving forward. This will involve combining all TJJD created surveys into one for staff and one for youth, thus creating conciseness by eliminating designating previous iterations of surveys as defunct The surveys are to be designed with largely quantitative items to 1) align with administrative data; 2) to have analytical models with syntax preorganized for speedy analysis; and 3) to ensure all data collected is used (i.e., not to take time of participants to collect any data which will not be analyzed); and 4) to allow for longitudinal data analysis over time (with administrative data inputs). The revamped survey will be ready for administration in January of 2026.

New Data Collection Efforts

Our data collection timeline, starting in part 2 of our plan, will include running the employee survey every January, the youth survey in February, conducting data cleaning analysis through to July, and then using the data to select a qualitative focused project to learn more about glaring area(s) of need as revealed in the survey data. The quantitative survey data will be prepared into two annual reports—one on employees and one on youth. The qualitative research plan will be built off an interview guide constructed based on survey outcomes, and the data collection processes approved through ethics. Thus, every two years, always determined by survey data, we will complete one focused qualitative study, often an institutional or community correctional service in-depth study. Our experience reveals we require two years to fully collect, transcribe, code, and analyze qualitative data and prepare a meaningful report.

Moreover, reports will always be presented to the executive and translated into knowledge for the relevant employees/branches of TJJD. Only after such practices, will we translate report knowledge into articles or presentations for practitioners and the academy to support empirical, theoretical, and practical developments in youth justice. TJJD will always be given an opportunity to add a paragraph or two or a slide or two about how they have implemented findings from the research and make recommendations for future data requirements. Infographics of key findings for easy consumption may also follow depending on capacity and creativity.

The intention here is to create a robust research strategy that is sustainable and not dependent on any person. For example, if our team who created the surveys move on, the models and syntax remain to ensure continued data collection and analysis remains and a manual will be constructed to support new employees in continuing the research. Experience cements that people do leave positions in correctional services, thus, preparing for personnel change is key to our research strategy. Moreover, the plan is to have engrained knowledge translation practices (academic, organizational, practical) that support the implementation of innovations toward positive change with evaluation potential always. In addition, we are creating and documenting "good knowledge management" practices to explain why the research is invaluable to ensure, with changes in leadership, the processes continue and a research culture is sustainable.

Part 2: Building Research Capacity

Internship Process and Partnering with Universities in Texas
Starting year 1, we began working with Texas universities to build an internship process. Our intention is to provide students at all levels with opportunities to learn to work in partnership with TJJD – working with raw deidentified and anonymous data, and to develop research skills. All students working on projects are supervised by a TJJD employee and a faculty member at their institution to build knowledge, collaboration and for sustainability in the internship process. In addition, to teach knowledge translation and implementation science, all findings must be presented and reported to the TJJD Research Division, then the Executive Team, before any academic presentation or publication. This process ensures TJJD can do good with the knowledge created, and knows what knowledge has been generated. TJJD will also be invited to document how knowledge was used to make change to support TJJD's core value of transparency and ensure impacts happen. Thus, we will address the following questions: 'who from where should be informed about outcomes, in what order, how, and to what end?' and 'what are TJJD's obligations with this information?' Knowledge translation includes consultation, discussion, and holding all (i.e., leadership, operational staff, rehabilitative practitioners) accountable for using knowledge to create positive change.

An additional task desired is help conducting an environmental scan of all literature published (gray or peer-reviewed) on TJJD, youth correctional services in the United States, and then youth correctional services internationally. Participating in collecting data for topics within this scan will help onboard interns as they review literature for the area of study, they will be working on with TJJD data. This environmental scan will also work as a growing library of relevant literature to inform our research processes and interpretation of findings at TJJD (i.e., we will create a Zotero database of youth correctional literature). At present, an MOU is being developed with the first university in Texas to provide research internship opportunities.

Building Research Capacity and Empowering the Frontline to Impact Positive Change: Future Steps
TJJD will use MicroResearch (www.microresearchinternational.ca) to build internal research capacity and the ability for personnel to learn how to use evidence to inform how they do their job. MicroResearch has been active in the Uganda Prison Service—from whom much can be learned in the North (see Ricciardelli et al., 2025) –in health and community focused research since 2008, with proven successes. MicroResearch TJJD (MR) will provide TJJD employees across the organization, in any position who are interested, an opportunity to learn about research, how to conduct research,

and how to translate findings into action. MR enables employees to study whatever is front of mind – stressors, challenges, problems, barriers, opportunities, warranted efforts – by working as a team to generate evidence to tackle a need. Said differently, we will equip those experiencing the need to determine where to focus attention to create evidence-informed resolution (i.e., they determine the research question). Moreover, the teams of employees, after deciding on their research question, create a proposal which, after a peer review and revision process, is awarded a "microgrant" to conduct the research under the mentorship of a local and international coach – with the support of MR International facilitators and founders (i.e., Professors Emeritus Noni MacDonald and Robert Bortolussi; Professor Rosemary Ricciardelli; Doctorate Candidate Stanley MacLellan). Thus, with MR TJJD, employees learn how to do research, how to translate research to communities and create policy change, and how to use evidence to inform their work. In 2024 and 2025, MR would have trained 7 police teams, 2 paramedic teams, and 1 prison team internationally, beyond the many community and health teams trained.

Day	Discussion	Activities
1	Introductions and Objectives, Finding data and evidence and Defining a research questions	Participant select a question
2	Principles Clinical Research (Research Toolkit- 1 (qualitative) , Pitfalls in Research	Groups Formed Discuss Project Ideas
3	Project topic report by each group: exercise Research Toolkit- 2 (qualitative), Getting started	Project Proposal Reporting Meet coach, refine question
4	Research Toolkit 3 (sampling, basic statistics) How to get published -what editors are looking for	Refine Proposal
5	Basic and local Ethics Community engagement & exercise	Refine Proposal
6	Oral & poster presentations &exercise Developing a Research Budget & Time Management	Refine Proposal
7	Knowledge Translation & exercise Research into policy & exercise	Refine Proposal
8	Writing an abstract & exercise Writing a report	Refine Proposal
9	Applying for MR grant and how reviewed	Prepare for Presentation
10	Presentations by Teams and adjudication	Certificates and awards handed out

Figure 2: The MR Workshop Lesson Plan

For context: The creation of Professors MacDonald and Bortolussi, MR International, originated in Africa and was brought to Canada to teach community members how to find solutions to local problems. These solutions must fit the community, culture, context, and local resources to improve the lived experiences of local communities. Here, we recognize TJJD as a community. By the end of the 10-day workshop, the teams present their projects to a panel of judges and special guests, who provide constructive feedback. The participants receive a certificate of attendance. The workshop itself is accredited by the College of Family Medicine and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons for 40 maintenance of competence credits.

Overall, MR provides TJJD with an opportunity to start growing research capacity within their

organization from people not tied to research but keen to learn. In addition, it builds relationships and frontline understanding between the research team and the other employees.

Discussion

Progress to date includes having analyzed, in full, data from three studies resulting in three completed reports on TJJD leadership, staff perceptions of remote work, and the feedback from the 2025 annual staff survey – with more analysis in progress, and reports nearing completion. More importantly, through this work we have learned about why employees leave TJJD, what the needs of leadership are, and we have gotten a feel for the climate in 2025 among employees and youth. Employees value their work and working with youth, however, do have struggles (i.e., feeling youth and colleagues are not always held accountable for their actions, adjusting to a milieu based mental health treatment program and policy for youth, and general concerns for safety due to the rising acuity of youth violence and mental health treatment needs). Youth struggle with prison food (i.e., growing teenagers do report dissatisfaction and hunger at times); however, positively, the movement to dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) has resulted in youth developing prosocial coping skills. In fact, nearly all youth surveyed could name a DBT skill they use without prompting – most naming a few they depended on. Our way forward is to translate this knowledge into articles and presentations to share what we learn at TJJD for healthier and more effective youth justice systems – both nationally and internationally.

Future research is necessary to consider how different jurisdictions can customize a research solution that works for their organization/service. Moreover, as we gain knowledge, TJJD is an organization willing to share and support other agencies focused on youth correctional services.

Correctional services today face recruitment and retention challenges, are marked by short/under staffing, and TJJD is no exception. The objectives and aims are hefty but the research team at TJJD believes we are starting a way forward that can work by empowering people with frontline experience to apply evidence informed realities to their day-to-day work. At TJJD, there is a need for research intended to contribute to an understanding of how to improve the community and institutional work environments. Of course, our strategy has limitations – it is in process and we do not yet know how well it works, however, there is excitement and dire need to do well for the youth and employees of TJJD, thus giving hope and motivation for the future.

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SMOKING BEHAVIOURS, NICOTINE DEPENDENCE AND USE OF NICOTINE REPLACEMENT THERAPY IN YOUNG PEOPLE ENTERING AUSTRALIAN YOUTH DETENTION – A RETROSPECTIVE CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

Leigh Haysom, Nahla Kashem & Penelope Abbott

Abstract

Smoking behaviours, nicotine dependence and use of nicotine replacement therapies (NRT) in young people in Australian youth detention have not been studied for a decade, and not since the rapid rise of youth vaping. This study analysed youth detention reception data regarding vaping, cigarette smoking, cannabis use, nicotine dependence and use of NRT. Health leaders in Australian youth detention jurisdictions reported on the barriers and enablers to NRT use in their settings. In comparison to previous studies, cigarette smoking was significantly reduced, cannabis use was unchanged and vaping rates were high. Barriers to NRT provision in youth detention settings included staff concerns about misuse, a lack of identified need and low acceptance amongst the youth.

Introduction

Tobacco smoking is a leading cause of preventable disease in Australia, however over the last decade smoking behaviours have significantly changed, particularly in young people. Rates of daily cigarette smoking in Australian youth have almost halved since 2019, but this has been associated with a concerning rise in use of e-cigarettes (vapes)(AIHW Vaping, 2024). Prior to the introduction of regulations in 2024, vapes were readily available in Australia and contained nicotine and other harmful substances. There are also concerns that vaping is a 'gateway' substance to other smoking behaviours in young people (Soneji et al, 2017).

Cannabis use is another public health issue and remains the most frequently used illicit drug among young Australians (AIHW Cannabis, 2024). In 2023, almost one in ten (9.7%) youth aged 14 to 17 reported using cannabis in the past 12 months, and over one third of these young people used cannabis in moderate-risk and high-risk ways (AIHW, 2024). Cannabis is the leading cause of drug-related arrests in young people, and is strongly associated with use of tobacco, alcohol and other illicit drugs, increasing the risk of poly-substance dependency and other harms (AIHW, 2024).

Incarceration and contact with the criminal justice system are strongly associated with all smoking behaviours (AIHW, 2023). New South Wales (NSW) is the most populous Australian state, and has the highest numbers of incarcerated young people, with a fifteen times overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in youth detention settings (ABS, 2025). In the '2015 NSW Young People in Custody Health Survey' (2015 NSW YPICHS, conducted prior to the emergence of vapes), young people reported high rates of daily cigarette smoking (85.4%), cannabis use (76.0%) and co-smoking behaviours prior to entering youth detention (YJNSW, 2022; Indig & Haysom, 2012). Despite nicotine dependence being common, there was poor uptake of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) in nicotine dependent youth who were assessed within 24 hours of reception to custody (Haysom et al, 2017).

Smoking behaviours in this cohort have not been studied for a decade, and not since the introduction of vapes in Australia. This study aimed to describe the prevalence of all smoking behaviours, nicotine dependence and use of NRT in young people entering youth detention in NSW, and to report on the Australian youth detention jurisdictional approaches to supporting young people in the smoke free environment of youth detention.

Methods

A retrospective cross-sectional study was conducted of routinely recorded health assessment information collected within 24 hours for all young people entering the six youth justice centres in NSW. On admission to youth detention, a trained registered nurse used an electronic standardized and evidence-based Initial Assessment tool to record self-reported demographic and health-related data from all young people (RACP, 2011). Because of the retrospective study design, the requirement for consent from young people was waived. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Justice Health Human Research Ethics Committee (approval G689-23) and the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Ethics Committee (approval 2092/23). The study was also endorsed by the Baabayn Aboriginal Community Advisory Group. A full copy of the Initial Assessment tool can be provided on request.

Demographics

Age was calculated from date of birth and date of the Initial Assessment. Sex and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status were self-reported.

Smoking Behaviours

Young people were asked, "do you smoke tobacco/cigarettes?", and "do you use cannabis?", "do you mix tobacco with your cannabis?". Young people were also asked "do you vape?" and "what do you vape?" with choices being nicotine and non-nicotine vapes. Co-smoking was defined as participating in more than one type of smoking behaviour (for example, smoking cigarettes as well as vaping). 'Smoking debut' was defined as the first type of smoking behaviour the young person engaged in.

Time to First Use, Nicotine Dependence and Use of Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT)

For young people who smoked and vaped, 'Time to First Use' (time to first vape or smoke after morning waking) was determined according to the following categories: within 5 minutes, 6 to 30 minutes, 31 to 60 minutes, and over 60 minutes. Nicotine dependence was determined by the modified Fagerstrom Test for Nicotine Dependence screening tool (Prokhorov et al, 1996), with young people scoring 4 or more classified as having moderate or greater nicotine dependence, and at risk of nicotine withdrawal. In line with a Nurse-Initiated Medication protocol, young people classified as nicotine-dependent were offered a daily 24-hour nicotine patch for up to 2 weeks. For young people with a body weight greater than or equal to 45 kg, a 14 mg patch was prescribed; for weight less than 45 kg (or lower tolerance), a 7 mg patch was prescribed.

Jurisdictional Consultation

During Australian Youth Detention Interjurisdictional Committee meetings from July 2024 to December 2024, the eight youth detention health services from Australian states and territories discussed approaches to smoking cessation, including Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT). The jurisdictional feedback is summarized in Table 4 according to screening tools used for nicotine dependence, NRT management, issues and observations.

Analysis

Quantitative data were stratified according to smoking behaviours. Chi squared analyses and odds ratios (with 95% confidence intervals) were used to compare categorical independent variables between groups (Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Corporation 2018). Probability values < 0.05 were considered significant.

Results

Between 28 February 2024 and 15 July 2024, 474 young people participated in an Initial Assessment. Twelve young people declined to answer any questions and were excluded from the analysis. There was no difference in age, sex and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status (hereafter referred to as Aboriginal) between the excluded young people and the overall study cohort. Table 1 shows the characteristics and smoking behaviours of these young people.

Of the 462 included young people, 373 (80.7%) were male, 288 (62.3%) were Aboriginal with an age range of 11 to 20 years and an overall mean age of 15.7 years. Age was dichotomized into younger (11.0 to 15.9 years) and older (16.0 to 20.0 years) age groups, with 197 (42.6%) in the younger age group.

Table 1: Smoking Behaviours of Young People on Entry to Youth Detention in NSW from February 2024 to July 2024.

Characteristics (N=462, 100%)	Cigarette Smoking (N=223, 48.3%)		Cannabis Use (N=281, 60.8%)		Vaping (N=283, 61.3%)		Co-Smoking (N=342, 74.0%)	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes(%)	No(%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sex								
Female (N=89, 19.3%)	46 (20.6)	43 (18.0)^	58 (20.6)	31 (17.1)^	63 (23.0)	24 (13.4)*	89 (26.0)	0 (0)**
Male (N=373, 80.7%)	177 (79.4)	196 (82.0)	223 (79.4)	150 (82.9)	218 (77.0)	155 (86.6)	253(74.0)	120(100.0)
Ethnicity								
Aboriginal (N=288, 62.3%)	160 (71.7)	128 (53.6)#	194 (69.0)	94 (51.9)*	176(62.2)	112 (62.6)^	222 (64.9)	66 (55.0)^
Non-Aboriginal (N=174, 37.7%)	63 (28.3)	111 (46.4)	87 (31.0)	87 (48.1)	107 (37.8)	67 (37.4)	120 (35.1)	54 (45.0)
Age groups (years)								
11.0 to 15.9 (N=197, 42.6%)	92 (41.3)	105 (43.9)^	114 (40.6)	83 (45.9)^	134 (47.3)	63 (35.2)*	121(35.4)	76(63.3)**
16.0 to 20.0 (N=265, 57.4%)	131 (58.7)	134 (56.1)	167 (59.4)	98 (54.1)	149 (52.7)	116 (64.8)	221 (64.6)	44 (36.7)

Abbreviations: SD, Standard Deviation.

^ = no significant differences between groups at p<0.05.

* = significant differences between groups at p<0.01.

#= significant differences between groups at p<0.0001

** = significant differences between groups, p<0.00001.

Almost one half of all young people reported cigarette smoking (48.3%), 60.8% reported cannabis use, 61.3% vaped and 74.0% co-smoked. Most cannabis users (82.4%) mixed tobacco with their cannabis. Only 5 young people (1.1%) did not participate in any smoking behaviours, and all of these were young men.

Compared to young men, young women were almost twice as likely to vape (OR 1.93, CI 1.15-3.21, p=0.01) and more than eight times more likely to co-smoke (OR 8.44, CI 3.34-21.32, p<0.0001). Compared to non-Aboriginal young people, Aboriginal young people were twice as likely to smoke cigarettes (OR 2.20, CI 1.50-3.24, p=0.0001) and use cannabis (OR 2.06, CI 1.40-3.03, p=0.0002). Compared to the older age group, the younger age group was almost twice as likely to vape, and one-third as likely to co-smoke (OR 0.32, CI 0.21-0.49, p<0.0001).

Overall, 317 young people self-reported on their debut to smoking behaviours and this is shown in Table 2. Cannabis use was the most common debut smoking behaviour (39.1%), followed by cigarette smoking (35%) and vaping (25.9%). Compared to young men, young women were more than twice as likely to debut to smoking behaviours through vaping (OR 2.33, CI 1.31-4.16, p=0.004). Compared to non-Aboriginal young people, Aboriginal young people were almost five times more likely to debut through cigarette smoking (OR 4.46, CI 2.58-7.71, p<0.0001) and were half as likely to debut through vaping (OR 0.50, CI 0.30-0.82, p=0.01). Even though there appeared to be a higher likelihood of young people debuting through vaping (compared to the older age group), this result was not statistically significant (OR 1.46, CI 0.88-2.43, p=0.14).

As shown in Table 3, there were 123 young people screened as nicotine dependent on reception to youth detention, representing 26.6% of all young people admitted over the study period. However, according to the 'Time to First Use' question, 188 young people (40.7% of all young people admitted to custody) had their first vape or smoke within 30 minutes of waking, with 122 young people first vaping within 5 minutes of waking.

Table 2: Smoking Behaviour Debut of Young People on Entry to Youth Detention in NSW from February 2024 to July 2024.*

Characteristics (N=317, 100%)	Cigarette Smoking Debut (N=111, 35.0%)		Cannabis Use Debut (N=124, 39.1%)		Vaping Debut (N=82, 25.9%)	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sex						
Female (N=65, 20.5%)	23 (20.7)	42 (20.4)^	28 (22.6)	37 (19.2)^	26 (31.7)	39 (26.6)*
Male (N=252, 79.5%)	88 (79.3)	164 (79.6)	96 (77.4)	156 (80.8)	56 (68.3)	196 (83.4)
Ethnicity						
Aboriginal (N=191, 60.3%)	90 (81.1)	101 (49.0)#	80 (64.5)	111 (57.5)^	39 (47.6)	152 (64.7)*
Non-Aboriginal (N=126, 39.7%)	21 (18.9)	105 (51.0)	44 (35.5)	82 (42.5)	43 (52.4)	83 (35.3)
Age groups (years)						
11.0 to 15.9 (N=129, 40.7%)	42 (37.8)	87 (42.2)^	48 (38.7)	81 (42.0)^	39 (47.6)	90 (38.3)^
16.0 to 20.0 (N=188, 59.3%)	69 (62.2)	119 (57.8)	76 (61.3)	112 (58.0)	43 (52.4)	145 (61.7)

*Data incomplete, N=317

^ = no significant differences between groups at p<0.05.

* = significant difference between groups at p<0.01

= significant difference between groups at p<0.0001

Table 3: Nicotine Dependence and Use of Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) in Young People on Entry to Youth Custody in NSW from February 2024 to July 2024.

Characteristics of Nicotine Dependent Young People (N = 123)	Offered NRT N = 60 (48.8%)		Accepted NRT N = 35 (58.3%)	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sex				
Female (N = 29, 23.6%)	15 (25.0)	14 (22.2)^	11 (31.4)	18 (20.5)^
Male (N = 94, 76.4%)	45 (75.0)	49 (77.8)	24 (68.6)	70 (79.5)
Ethnicity				
Aboriginal (N = 70, 56.9%)	38 (63.3)	32 (50.8)^	18 (51.4)	52 (59.1)^
Non-Aboriginal (N=53, 43.1%)	22 (36.7)	31 (49.2)	11 (48.6)	42 (40.9)
Age groups (years)				
11.0 to 15.9 (N=44, 35.8%)	21 (35.0)	23 (36.5)^	13 (37.1)	31 (35.2)^
16.0 to 20.0 (N=79, 64.2%)	39 (65)	40 (63.5)	22 (62.9)	57 (64.8)

Abbreviations: NRT, Nicotine Replacement Therapy; SD, Standard Deviation.

*Nicotine dependence defined as a score of 4 or more on the modified Fagestrom Nicotine Dependence Test.

^ = no significant differences at p<0.05.

Less than half of the nicotine dependent young people were offered NRT (N=60, 48.8%), with just over half of those offered NRT accepting it (N=35, 58.3%). There were no significant differences across sex, ethnicity or age in the likelihood of nicotine dependent young people being offered NRT and accepting NRT.

Table 4 shows the feedback from the eight youth detention health services across the Australian States and Territories on screening and management of nicotine dependence in young people in these smoke-free settings. Only one service (Jurisdiction 1) consistently offered NRT, screening all youth for nicotine dependence using a validated tool and offering counselling, lozenges for up to 12-weeks and add-in patches if required. Jurisdiction 6 offered limited prescriptions of lozenges to a small number of targeted young people; Jurisdiction 8 screened all young people for nicotine dependence and inconsistently offered counselling and low dose nicotine patches for two weeks. Barriers to NRT use included reported low rates of smoking and withdrawal symptoms in young people, concerns about misuse of NRT, and poor uptake of NRT by young people.

Discussion

This novel study has confirmed that young people in contact with the NSW criminal justice system have high rates of all smoking behaviours, with vaping now being the most common smoking behaviour. The younger age group were more likely to vape than the older group and nearly three quarters of the demographic engaged in co-smoking, with the older age group being more likely to co-smoke. This is consistent with national findings that dual use of cigarettes and vapes is most common in the 18 to 24 years age group (Aust Gov, 2023).

Cannabis use remains similar to previously reported rates in 2015 (YJNSW, 2022); however, cigarette smoking rates have dropped by almost half. This is consistent with national trends since 2019 that reflect an increase in vaping rates by four-fold in Australians 18 to 24 years (5.3% to 21%) and five-fold in those 14 to 17 years (1.8% to 9.7%) and a significant decrease in daily cigarette smoking (AIHW, 2024). Factors contributing to the rapid rise of vaping in young people include assertive marketing tactics with appealing flavours and packaging, ease of access, limited awareness of harm compared to tobacco products, and social acceptability (McCausland et al, 2024). In response to concerns about youth vaping, strict regulations were introduced across Australia in 2024 (just after this study's conclusion), including restrictions on vape flavourings, packaging, nicotine levels and accessibility, with vapes available only on prescription or over the pharmacy counter to adults 18 years and above (Aust Gov, 2024).

Young women entering youth custody are a group of particular concern, being more likely to vape, to vape from a younger age, and to debut to smoking behaviours through vaping when compared to young men. Additionally, all the young women co-smoked compared to two thirds of the young men. In 2018, Triandafilidis confirmed that disadvantaged young women who reported high levels of psychological distress, relationship instability, and poor mental health were more likely to smoke and to "position their smoking as a way of coping with stress and negative emotions .... with smoking being a lesser evil [in the context of] domestic and family violence" (Triandafilidis, 2018). Psychological and welfare supports are likely to have impacts on smoking behaviours in these young women. The smoking trends of the young women in our study support the evidence that vapes have a 'gateway effect' by leading to later cigarette smoking among nicotine-naive young people (Soneji et al, 2017; Hair et al, 2021). The 2022-2023 Australian Secondary School Student's Use of Tobacco and E-Cigarettes Study demonstrated this effect with over two thirds (69%) of vaping students reporting a smoking debut through vaping, with 20% subsequently transitioning to cigarette smoking (ASSAD, 2023).

Table 4: Smoking Cessation Approaches across Australian Youth Detention Jurisdictions

Youth Detention Jurisdiction	Nicotine Dependence Screening tool used at reception to custody*	NRT Provision	Method	Issues/Observations
1	Yes	NRT managed by the Health Service or the visiting Aboriginal Health Service.	Nicotine lozenges provided over a 12-week program including counselling: Weeks 1-6: weekly packs; Weeks 6-12: fortnightly packs. Patches also provided if ongoing cravings.	NRT Patches to be phased out due to concerns about misuse. No extensions or top-ups of lozenges. Misuse of lozenges leads to removal. Excess lozenges must be returned to Health Service.
2	No	No NRT offered.	N/A	Reports that nicotine withdrawals in young people are not witnessed.
3	No. Smoking behaviours recorded at reception. A screening tool and counselling is used post-reception by D&A clinicians.	No NRT offered.	N/A	Reports of previous poor uptake of NRT and misuse issues. NRT is being considered for the future.
4	No	No NRT offered.	N/A	Reports of low rates of smoking behaviours in young people, lack of withdrawal symptoms and low motivations to quit. Concerns about misuse of NRT. Oral formulations of NRT may be considered in the future.
5	Yes	No NRT offered.	N/A	Reports of low rates of smoking behaviours in young people and previous misuse of NRT.
6	No	Medical officers recently authorized to prescribe NRT.	Only nicotine lozenges provided.	Reports of very few prescriptions for lozenges written.
7	No	No NRT offered.	N/A	Reported low rates of withdrawal in young people and NRT not seen to be of value.
8	Yes	NRT offered and managed by the nursing staff at reception with counselling.	Only lower dose NRT patches offered through a 2-week nurse-initiated medication procedure.	Reported reluctance to offer NRT due to concerns around misuse and poor uptake.

*Nicotine dependence screening tool validated for use in an adolescent population.

Abbreviations: D&A, Drug and Alcohol; N/A, not applicable; NRT, Nicotine Replacement Therapy.

The vaping and co-smoking rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young people in this study were similar, however Aboriginal young people were more likely to smoke cigarettes and use cannabis compared to the non-Aboriginal young people. The 2022/23 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey confirms these findings. Even though cigarette smoking rates have declined across Australia, Aboriginal young people still have double the cigarette smoking rates of their non-Aboriginal peers at 4.7% for 15- to 17-year-olds (NATSIHS, 2024). Cannabis use among Aboriginal Australians continues to be 1.2 times higher than non-Aboriginal Australians aged 14 years and over at 17% (AIHW, 2024). Aboriginal young people report 'normalising' influences such as smoking among family and friends. However, there are specific factors that impact their smoking behaviours such as "traditional tobacco use, colonization, experiences of intergenerational trauma and discrimination, and the role of cultural connection" (Heris et al, 2020).

As determined by the Fagestrom Nicotine Dependence screening tool, more than a quarter of young people were nicotine dependent on admission to youth detention (Prokhorov et al, 1996). The earliest and most important sign of physical dependency is the compelling urge to smoke (Branstetter et al, 2020). Accordingly, nicotine dependency in these young people is potentially much higher with just over 40% reporting their first vape or smoke within 30 minutes of waking, with most reporting this within 5 minutes of waking. Nicotine is an alkaloid that stimulates the reward system within the limbic system increasing cortex activity, dopamine release, and a pleasure response. When there is an abrupt disruption to habitual nicotine consumption, such as entering the smoke-free environment of the youth detention setting, individuals are at risk of acute withdrawal, with mood changes, irritability, diaphoresis, headaches, insomnia and difficulty concentrating (Berowitz, 2010). Adolescents have been shown to have similar rates of withdrawal symptoms to adults (Branstetter et al, 2020). However, nicotine withdrawal symptoms in incarcerated youth may be attributed to, and further compounded by, other substances, such as cannabis, alcohol, and methamphetamines.

NRT aims to alleviate withdrawal symptoms and cravings by providing controlled doses of nicotine in the form of gum, lozenges, inhalers, spray and patches. When combined with health promotion education, long-term smoking and vaping cessation in young people is more successful (Towns et al, 2017). NRT has been effective in supporting smoking cessation in smoke-free adult correctional settings. In a randomized clinical trial in a United States county jail, the participants offered counselling plus NRT (lozenges) significantly reduced cigarette consumption compared to the participants provided with brief health education alone (Winkelman et al, 2021). Another study in adult prisons showed that group-based counselling combined with NRT reduced smoking rates (Jayes et al, 2023). Nicotine dependent young people entering custody are vulnerable to problematic withdrawal symptoms at a time when they are having to adjust to custody, associate with a new peer group, and represent themselves at court. NRT may be particularly useful for this group.

Our study revealed that less than half of the nicotine dependent young people were offered NRT, with just over half of those offered NRT accepting it. Accordingly, most health services in Australian youth detention settings were inconsistent in their approaches to nicotine dependence and NRT. Only three of the eight jurisdictions had a public health approach in screening all young people on entry for nicotine dependence, with only one jurisdiction provided an evidence-based approach to treatment by offering a combination of rapid and slow release NRT in the form of lozenges and patches, combined with brief intervention counselling. Reported barriers to NRT provision were misuse of NRT, young

people's poor motivation for long-term smoking cessation, and a paucity of observed withdrawal symptoms. The lack of NRT access, NRT underdosing, and poor acceptance of NRT suggests staff and young people have low expectations of, and bias against the use of NRT in custody. The developing frontal lobes of youth can also significantly compromise decision-making around smoking cessation (Branstetter et al, 2020), and young people may find that lower-dose NRT patches are ineffective against cravings (Bittoun, 2021). A 2017 Cochrane review of smoking cessation interventions for young people found that group counselling and behavioural interventions were promising forms of psychological support for smoking cessation (Fanshawe et al, 2017). Behavioural strategies include cognitive behavioural therapy, motivational interviewing using the '5As approach' (Ask, Advise, Assess, Assist and Arrange), and acceptance-commitment based therapies where young people accept negative thoughts and commit to meaningful change in smoking behaviours (Simon et al, 2015; Fiore et al, 2008; Karekla & Savvides, 2021).

Limitations

This study had several limitations. Data collection involved the completion of an Initial Assessment form that was reliant on self-reported data. This may have introduced bias and limited the reliability of the study findings. Data collection was cross-sectional preventing the reporting of changes in smoking behaviours over time. The study did not explore the causes and motives for youth smoking behaviours and their ambivalence towards NRT use. This research was conducted prior to the Australian vaping legislation that was fully implemented in late 2024, significantly reducing young people's access to vapes (Aust Gov 2024). It is likely that smoking behaviours in young people have changed since this implementation.

Conclusion

This study highlights the high rates of all smoking behaviours in young people entering youth detention with many nicotine dependent and at risk of withdrawals. There is a lack of evidence-based smoking cessation support for these young people, with bias and barriers to provision of NRT with accompanying behavioural strategies. Addressing these systems issues may reduce unnecessary nicotine withdrawal in young people on entry to custody and improve rates of long-term smoking and vaping cessation. Young women and Aboriginal young people are groups of particular concern who need targeted approaches to smoking cessation. A follow-up study of smoking behaviours in this cohort is required since the vaping regulations were fully implemented in Australia. The staff and young people's ambivalence towards NRT needs exploration through interviews and focus groups. This future research could enhance our understanding and improve prevention and intervention strategies for all types of smoking among youth in custody.

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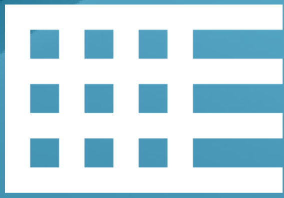

ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

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Practice Innovation for Juveniles

ENHANCING EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR YOUTH IN DETENTION FACILITIES THROUGH TECHNOLOGY: THE TRIANGLE SOLUTION

Sofia ALMEIDA[1], Heloisa BECKER & Claire MACHAN

Abstract

This paper explores the critical need for safe internet access in youth detention facilities to foster digital literacy, social skills, and successful reintegration into society. It introduces the Triangle Platform, a secure digital solution developed by organizations from Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal, offering structured and controlled online educational resources. The platform's implementation in Portugal highlights its potential to enhance personal development, employability, and social responsibility among institutionalized youth, while addressing security challenges and promoting digital inclusion.

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The Need for Safe Internet Access in Youth Detention Centers

In contemporary society, the presence of media is indisputable, thereby intensifying the processes of digitization and datafication that are now inextricably linked to daily life. Consequently, the evolving landscape of human and digital rights must consider the increasing integration of digital technology into young people's environments (Brites & Castro, 2022). This is particularly salient for institutionalized youths, who are excluded from digital opportunities due to the prioritization of security within detention facilities[1] (Brites & Castro, 2022). The exclusion of young, institutionalized individuals from digital engagement not only affects their current access to education and social skills development but also poses significant barriers to their reintegration into a digitally driven society upon release. This aligns with Reisdorf and Rikard's model of digital rehabilitation, which highlights the transformative role of structured digital access in overcoming digital exclusion and supporting the transition back into a connected world (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). By addressing these challenges, institutions can foster digital competencies that are crucial for both individual empowerment and societal reintegration.

Institutionalized young people who are deprived of liberty, as well as, subsequently, their digital and internet access, unsurprisingly encounter significant challenges that impact their digital rights both in their present circumstances and future opportunities (Brites & Castro, 2022). Researchers argue that this demographic is particularly marginalized in terms of digital skills (Lim & Suhaila, 2021), with the detrimental impacts countering the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice ("The Beijing Rules"), in particularly, going against the objective of training and treatment of juveniles placed in institutions: “to provide care, protection, education and vocational skills, to assist them to assume socially constructive and productive roles in society” (26.1; United Nations, 1985).

Additionally, in this digital era, characterized by continuous technological and software development, the offline environment of a detention facility can potentially result in further unintended consequences. This closed context, where young individuals are deprived not only of freedom but also of access to digital technology, highlights the growing gap between institutionalized youth and the digitally connected society they will re-enter. Research shows that such environments contribute to the deterioration of social skills and relationships, which are vital for successful reintegration (Toreld et al., 2018). The concept of the 'carceral web' further illustrates how digital exclusion intensifies these challenges by restricting opportunities for adaptive skill-building and fostering solidarity (Gurusami, 2019). Studies also emphasize the importance of equipping individuals transitioning from incarceration with digital literacy and privacy management skills to navigate a technologically advanced world (Seo et al., 2020).

In this sense, the need for safe internet access in youth detention centers has grown substantially in recent years, with digital literacy being recognized as essential for education, employment, and everyday life (McDougall et al., 2017). This aligns with broader European and national strategies, such as the EU’s Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), which aims to enhance digital skills across all sectors of society, and the European Commission’s ‘Digital Decade’ goal of ensuring that a minimum of 80% of the population possesses basic digital literacy by 2030. In Portugal, the National Digital Competences Initiative, e.2030 (Portugal INCoDe.2030), also emphasizes the importance

1 *In Portugal, the literal translation of ‘centros educativos’ is “education centres”.*

of developing digital competencies for social inclusion and personal empowerment. These policies highlight the critical need to provide safe and structured access to the internet, even within youth detention centers, to ensure that these young individuals are not left behind in an increasingly digital world. For young people deprived of liberty, this is crucial to develop their social skills, self-esteem, and the knowledge necessary for successful reintegration into society (Hein et al., 2020).

Rehabilitation in this context goes beyond traditional notions of reform and reintegration; it encompasses digital rehabilitation, which involves equipping detainees with the skills and competencies necessary to navigate a technology-driven society. Reisdorf and Rikard's (2018) model of digital rehabilitation emphasizes the importance of addressing the digital divide by providing structured access to digital tools and fostering digital literacy, which are essential for successful reentry into society. UNICRI's 2024 report 'Digital Rehabilitation in Prisons' further highlights the transformative potential of innovative technologies in correctional contexts, advocating for their use to provide access to education, vocational training, and communication tools in a secure and controlled manner. It underscores the need for a human-centered approach that prioritizes dignity, rights, and ethical implementation, ensuring that digital rehabilitation aligns with broader goals of reducing reoffending and fostering societal reintegration. These approaches not only foster personal development but also strengthen connections to essential pro-social support networks, including family, which are vital for reentry into society (Toreld et al., 2018).

However, providing this access presents numerous challenges, particularly concerning security, privacy, and potential misuse. These challenges are compounded by the distinctive needs of youth in detention, who require tailored approaches to digital inclusion that address their developmental stage, vulnerabilities, and circumstances (Knight & Van de Steene, 2020). Youth in such facilities are at risk of falling further behind in acquiring digital skills, which are increasingly critical for modern education and employment opportunities (Toreld et al., 2018).

While digital exclusion has been extensively studied in broader contexts, there remains a significant lack of research into how to address the logistical implementation challenges and specific digital needs of institutionalized young people. Existing research on digital exclusion has largely focused on general access to education in detention facilities, leaving a notable knowledge gap regarding the unique digital requirements for institutionalized young people (Brites & Castro, 2022; Lim & Zainal Shah, 2021).

Recent studies by Seo et al. (2022) and Blomberg et al. (2021) further highlight the importance of gender-responsive digital inclusion approaches. Although their work concentrates on women transitioning from incarceration, it underscores the necessity of addressing gender-specific challenges such as privacy management, digital literacy, and the social stigmatization associated with digital engagement. These insights suggest that responses for youth in detention must be similarly sensitive to gender dynamics, ensuring that digital inclusion efforts not only secure access but also build robust, contextually appropriate digital competencies (Seo et al., 2022; Blomberg et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic further illustrated the potential of technology to transform rehabilitation efforts, as temporary initiatives emerged to bridge educational gaps with digital solutions (Promoting Digital Inclusion, 2023). Recognizing this gap underscores the importance of adopting a needs-based

strategy that places young people's developmental and rehabilitative requirements at the center of digital inclusion efforts (Knight & Van de Steene, 2020). By addressing these unique challenges and leveraging technology effectively, institutions can better equip youth with the digital and social skills necessary for reintegration.

This article will delve into the critical role of digital inclusion in youth detention centers, with a focus on how the Triangle Platform addressed the challenges and opportunities inherent to this process. Alongside the comprehensive presentation of theoretical frameworks and practical applications, it will incorporate evaluation results that were pivotal in shaping the proposed recommendation to follow. These insights not only highlight the challenges faced but also provide a foundation for the development of effective, needs-based solutions aimed at empowering institutionalized youth in an increasingly digital world.

The Triangle Platform: A Secure Digital Solution for Youth Detention Facilities

To address the needs and uphold the rights of young people deprived of liberty to develop digital skills, as well as enhance their prospects for social reintegration, organizations[2] from three European countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal) have collaborated to design and implement the Triangle Project (2021–2024), funded by the European Commission's Erasmus+ program.

Within the scope of the project, a secure online platform was developed for use in closed institutions for young people in conflict with the law – with four distinct branches: Belgium, the Netherlands,

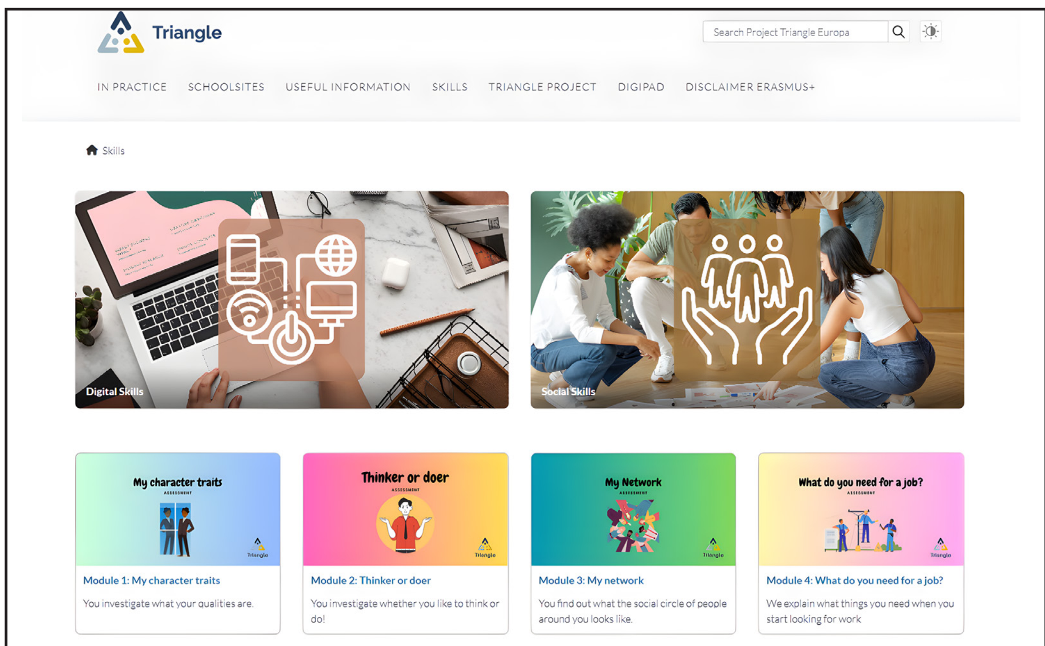

Figure 1: The Triangle European Hub Content

2 *The Triangle project consortium consists of organizations from: The Netherlands (Click F1, Defence for Children International, Eduvier & Foundation 180); Belgium (Federal Public Service Justice, Flemish Support Centre for Adult Education & Opgroeien); Portugal (IPS_Innovative Prison Systems & Aproximar).*

Portugal, and Europe. The content for each region-specific segment is adapted to address local needs, languages, and contexts, enhancing its cultural relevance and accessibility. To ensure the young people's needs were explicitly met and addressed, co-creation sessions were further held directly with the youth to gather their input on content and platform functionality. The European Triangle Hub, provided in English, contains broader content suitable for diverse cultural and educational backgrounds (see Figure 1).

Each Triangle platform branch presents an essential and innovative solution for providing secure, controlled digital access to education for young people in detention. By offering a highly structured and safe digital learning environment, it empowers incarcerated youth with educational resources, digital skills (in line with the EU Digital Education Access Plan (2021-2027), and guidance on available vocational trainings (tailored to national markets and youth skills levels, e.g. construction, transport/logistics, catering)—all within a framework that prioritizes security and controlled internet access. Central to its security design is a sophisticated system of website whitelisting and blacklisting. This system allows youth to explore pre-approved, educational websites while blocking access to inappropriate or unsafe content, ensuring they remain connected to the digital world without exposure to potential risks. The task of blacklisting was coordinated by ClickF1, an organization dedicated to developing and implementing educational programs for social organizations, governments, and institutions focused on the wellbeing, development, and education of children and youth. Each project partner in their respective countries identified websites requiring blacklisting, in collaboration with detention centers, which included sites with access to the outside, such as social media platforms, those requiring sign-ups for newsletters, and websites featuring pop-ups. Once compiled, ClickF1 integrated these restrictions into the Triangle platform for each country's context, ensuring a tailored and secure browsing experience for institutionalized youth.

This secure browsing model is not only beneficial for young detainees but is also pivotal for juvenile detention facilities security rules. The ability to manage digital access means institutions can safely provide internet resources and digital learning opportunities, knowing that potentially problematic websites and direct contact with the outside world are restricted. Insights from Farley et al. (2012) further support this approach, as their work in Australia demonstrated the effectiveness of using e-books to bridge the digital divide in juvenile detention facilities. They highlighted how structured digital tools can foster e-literacy skills and enhance educational engagement, even in restricted environments. Building on these lessons, secure browsing models can align institutional priorities with the developmental needs of young people incarcerated, creating a balanced pathway for digital inclusion.

Additionally, the Triangle platform offers structured guidance for staff, such as Triangle's Guide, which explains the platform's creation, implementation, and safe integration into the detention setting. This ensures that digital learning aligns seamlessly with institutional goals, allowing staff to support youngsters to pursue digital learning in a supportive, secure environment. Different pedagogical approaches were employed to encourage higher engagement, suit the end users' needs identified and the contexts of the partner countries. The platform allowed each country to tailor its delivery framework to meet the specific needs of institutionalized youth in their settings. In Belgium and the Netherlands, staff were trained on how to implement specific menu options with the young people, fostering a more traditional class-like environment where they could directly guide learning

activities, as well as draw on inquiry-based learning pedagogies as required. This highlights a key contextual difference, as the Portuguese framework focused on enabling young people to use the platform independently within the education centers' rules, drawing on students-centered learning and constructivist pedagogical approaches. These varying approaches ensured that the platform was tailored to meet the distinct institutional contexts of each country.

Both approaches nonetheless involve varying levels of self-directed digital learning, which research has shown is associated with decreased recidivism digital learning in youth from detention centers (McDougall et al., 2017), as well as improvements in community living and self-management skills (Badejo & Chakraborty, 2022; Kerr, & Willis, 2018). This underscored the platform's potential for positive, long-term impact on rehabilitation and reintegration into society when young people are able to explore the platform at their own pace.

The Portuguese TRIANGLE Platform

The Portuguese branch of the Triangle platform specifically features eight unique sections (see Figure 2), each designed to provide a comprehensive educational experience aligned to nationally specific end user needs:

1. Relationship Academy: Focuses on personal development, family issues, and parenting.
2. From 0 to 100!: Encourages lifelong learning and continuous personal growth.
3. Travel the World: Explores global citizenship and active engagement with societal issues.
4. Embrace Your Talent: Supports the preparation of young people for the labor market, with tools for CV writing and job applications.
5. Technology Genie: Covers digital literacy.
6. First-Aid Kit: Addresses health and well-being.
7. Money in Your Wallet: Focuses on financial literacy and entrepreneurship.
8. Guardian of the Planet: Covers sustainability and social responsibility.

These sections were developed through extensive research on relevant 21st-century competencies and digital skills within the Portuguese context. In designing the curriculum for the Portuguese Triangle Platform Menus (see Figure 2), a rigorous review of academic literature and direct engagement with youngsters in education centers were combined. Through complementary surveys and workshops with youths and education centers' staff, the unique needs and challenges facing Portuguese youth today were identified. As a result, key focus areas were carefully selected to address these issues, which included self-development, interpersonal skills, family dynamics, lifelong learning, citizenship, employability, digital and financial literacy, sustainability, and health. The platform's structure integrates socio-emotional learning with an emphasis on essential communication, teamwork, and basic English language skills.

Each area is presented through relatable titles and designed to resonate with young users, creating an accessible framework for exploring broader social and civic issues such as gender equality, active citizenship, and social responsibility. In addition, competencies in information and communication technology (ICT), economic awareness, financial literacy, and sustainable development are addressed to provide a holistic educational experience. The inclusion of family dynamics and parenting further reinforces the platform's cultural relevance, aiming to enhance both individual and community well-being in a way that aligns with the Portuguese social context.

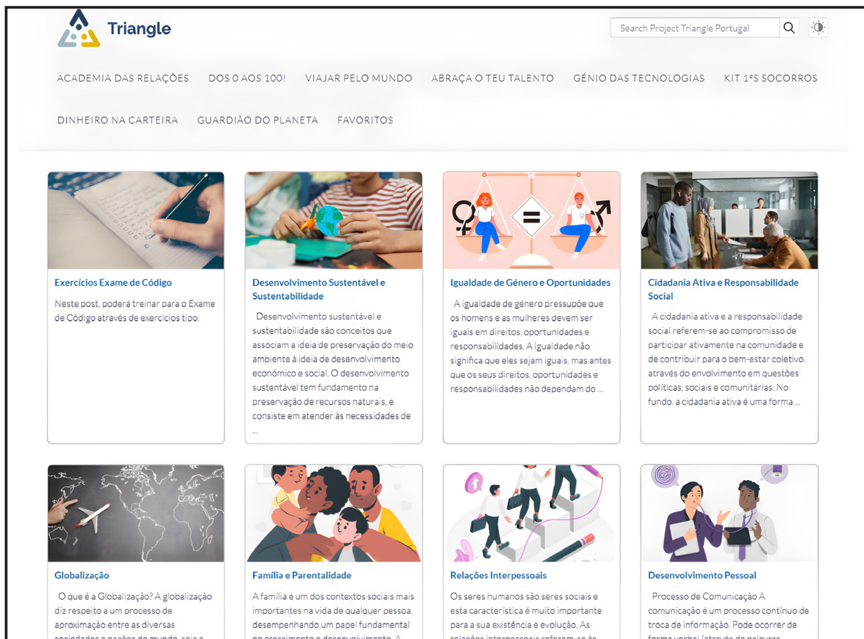

Figure 2: The Portuguese Triangle Platform Menus

Content across these sections is delivered through multimedia, practical activities, and interactive tests (see Figures 3 and 4). Young users are encouraged to explore the material dynamically and safely, utilizing pre-selected external resources that reinforce secure digital engagement. This multi-modal approach not only delivers essential information but also motivates young people to build the skills essential for a successful transition into adulthood and a productive role within society.

Regional Implementation and Evaluation of the Triangle Platform

The Triangle platform was piloted in three European countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal), to support digital learning and skills development among youth, particularly those in closed educational settings. Its pilot phase aimed to assess the platform's functionality, content relevance, and engagement level, with youth feedback collection revealing largely positive responses. For instance, a participant from Belgium described the platform as "*a very interesting step in the right direction for digital learning in a closed institution*," while a young participant from Portugal expressed that it was "*a useful platform for learning new things*". Youth feedback in the development phases of Triangle was key for ensuring alignment with the goals of the European Union Youth Strategy (Council of the European Union, 2018) – to enable young people to be the architects of their own lives and engage in building their meaningful civic participation. Such meaningful participation of youth in all aspects of their development has long been recognized by the United Nations as a fundamental right (UNICEF, 2003), which the partners wanted to exemplify when co-creating the platform with youths.

In Portugal specifically, the pilot phase began with workshops held in five Education Centers. These workshops aimed to understand the interests and motivations of at-risk youth or those in conflict with the law, focusing on identifying the types of content and skills-based programs that would

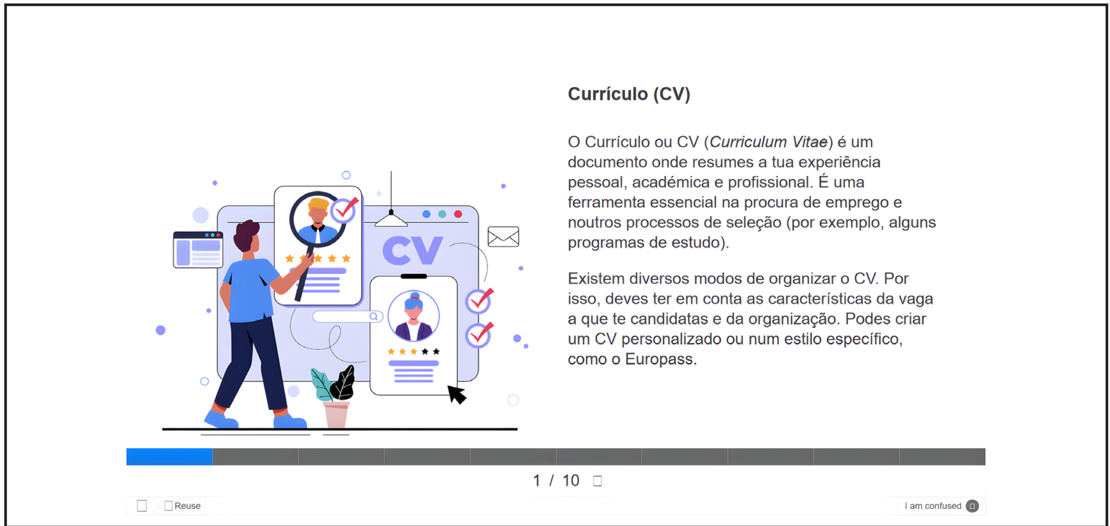

Figure 3: Slideshow on Key Essentials for Entering the Job Market – Part of the "Embrace Your Talent" Menu

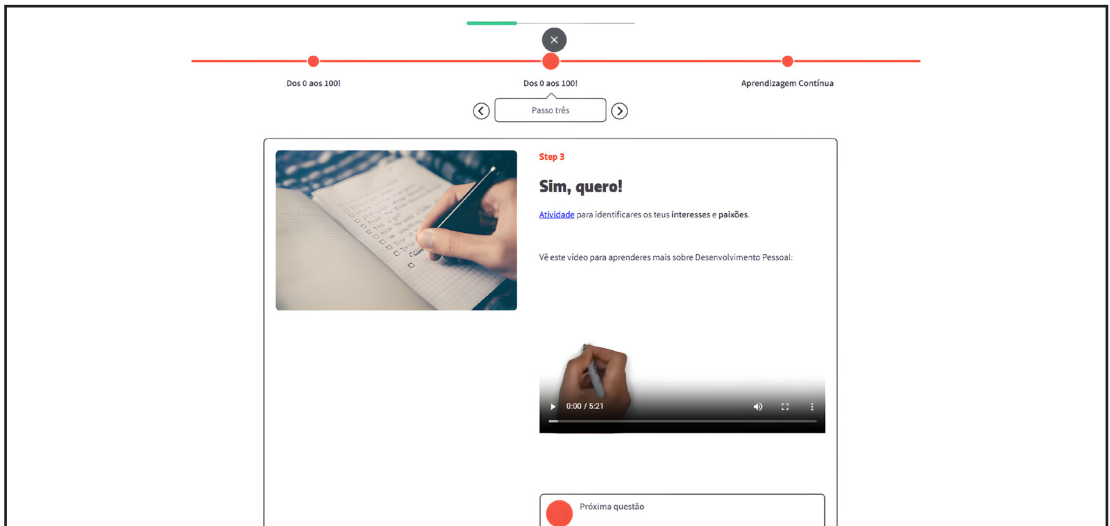

Figure 4: Pathway with Activities and Videos on Continuous Learning – Part of the "From 0 to 100!" Menu

engage these young participants, particularly content that promotes 21st-century competencies. A total of 73 young individuals participated, 53 of whom were male and 20 were females. The workshops served as an essential initial step in understanding user preferences and expectations, with the feedback collected during these sessions forming the basis for subsequent platform improvements.

Based on this feedback, the Portuguese Triangle branch was refined, both in terms of the platform's structure and content, to ensure it resonated with the intended users. Incorporating the voices of the youth themselves was crucial in guiding these refinements. Listening directly to the needs and preferences of the young participants allowed the development team to identify key topics of

interest, which were then expanded and adapted to be more relevant to this audience. For instance, the Active Citizenship and Social Responsibility submenu was enriched to provide a broader view of the Portuguese political spectrum, helping youth better understand civic concepts in a local context. Additionally, new topics were introduced, such as driver's education, road safety, and cybersecurity, to equip users with practical life skills they deemed essential.

The approach also prioritized understanding *how* young people preferred to learn. Feedback showed a strong preference for interactive and dynamic learning tools over traditional text-based materials. Responding to this, the platform was fine-tuned to include more multimedia components, such as videos, along with knowledge-assimilation tools like games and puzzles (see Figures 5 and 6). These adjustments significantly increased the platform's interactivity and accessibility, aligning its content delivery with youth preferences. However, text-based resources were also retained to ensure a variety of learning options, allowing users to choose the format that best suits their style. This inclusive design approach not only responded directly to the youths' voices but also made the platform more adaptable to diverse learning needs, fostering a more engaging and personalized learning experience.

The second phase of the Portuguese pilot was conducted at the Navarro de Paiva Educational Center (CENP) with nine young participants, involving a series of five sessions. In this phase, the participants had access to Chromebooks and engaged in guided navigation and free exploration of the platform. This structured and interactive approach allowed for in-depth usability testing and further evaluation of the platform's alignment with the educational needs and motivational drivers of the young individuals. The participants responded positively to the changes and adaptations made to the platform, expressing that the updates significantly enhanced their learning experience and enjoyment. They particularly appreciated the increased interactivity and the inclusion of multimedia resources, finding the platform much more engaging and accessible. These findings provide valuable insights into the efficacy of digital learning interventions tailored to these groups, emphasizing the importance of customization and responsive design in digital education platforms.

Moving Towards Change - Recommendations for Continued Digitalization

To ensure that young people in detention or education centers are equipped with the skills they need for modern life, policy and decision makers, as well as practitioners, must be informed of the benefits of digital inclusion and take responsibility for implementing effective strategies that promote equitable access to digital resources. Based on the Triangle project's findings, across the three piloting countries, several recommendations were developed and proposed, further serving as a potential guide for continued research and development:

1. Develop a Policy for Digital Education in Closed Institutions

A comprehensive policy for digital education in youth detention centers is essential. This policy should provide a unified framework that includes clear guidelines on hardware and software usage, internet access, security measures, and the roles of educators and staff. Digital coordinators should be appointed to oversee the integration of technology, ensuring all aspects of digital education are aligned with the institution's goals. Policies should also be tailored for open, half-open, and closed facilities to accommodate the unique needs of each setting.

Figure 5: Quiz on Driver's License Theoretical Exam Preparation

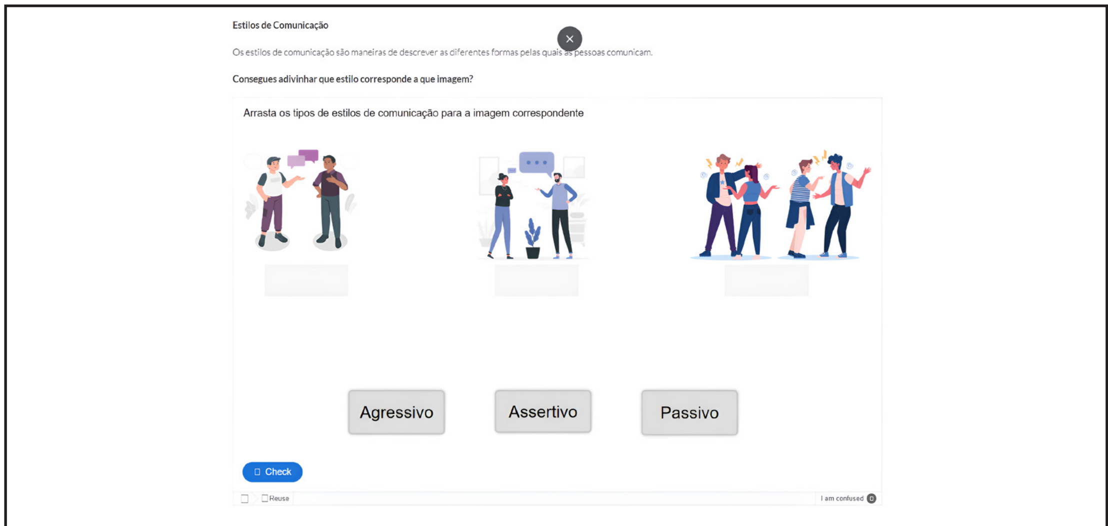

Figure 6: Interactive Activity on Communication Styles – Part of the "Relationship Academy" Menu

2. Create a Quality Digital Space

Secure, stable internet and well-maintained infrastructure are vital for supporting digital education initiatives. A dedicated budget should be allocated for this purpose, with clear responsibility assigned to relevant stakeholders (e.g., institutions, welfare services, educational services or inspectoral committees), ensuring continuous access to digital tools and resources, facilitating youth education and personal development. Specific roles, in terms of quality assurance regulation when implementing such digital education tools and resources, would nonetheless need to be explored on a country-by-country basis.

3. Implement Professional Development Policies
Teachers and social workers must receive ongoing training to familiarize themselves with the benefits and outcomes of new digital tools, like the Triangle platform. This training will empower them to effectively guide young people through their digital learning journey. Continued professional development should include opportunities to practice using digital resources, share best practices with colleagues, and develop new educational materials tailored to young people's needs.

4. Recognize and Minimize Security Risks
While digital platforms like Triangle are designed with robust security measures, internet access inevitably comes with risks. Instead of denying access, institutions should implement digital security policies and procedures that minimize these risks, while ensuring young people can safely access digital education. Regular monitoring of pre-approved websites, staff training, and communication with platform coordinators can help ensure that young people benefit from digital tools safely, without compromising educational opportunities.

In the long term, these efforts aim to facilitate the reintegration of young people into society by ensuring that their acquisition of digital and 21st-century skills is not impeded by their time spent deprived of liberty. By fostering strong digital literacy alongside stringent security practices, institutions can help young people become adept, responsible, and secure users of digital education and tools. This integrated approach ultimately supports their broader personal and career development, paving the way for successful societal reintegration and active participation in a digitally interconnected world.

5. Promote Creative Approaches to Learning
Interactive digital learning methods, such as puzzles, quizzes, and videos, are highly effective in engaging young people, particularly those who prefer digital formats over traditional text-based learning. Beyond these methods, the project emphasizes the co-production of content through dedicated co-creation workshops. Involving young people directly in developing and refining the platform's content not only enhances its relevance but also empowers them to take an active role in their own learning journey. This participatory approach fosters creativity, autonomy, and digital literacy while effectively bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

6. Improve Accessibility
Digital platforms must be accessible to all users, including those with disabilities or language barriers. Educational policies should ensure that digital tools cater to a diverse range of learning styles and abilities, promoting inclusivity and ensuring that no one is left behind.

7. Adopt a Multi-Sector Approach for Quality Digital Education
Collaboration between various sectors, including justice, vocational training, digital experts, and the young people themselves, is essential for developing a comprehensive digital education strategy. A multi-sector approach, bringing together different perspectives and stakeholders, will ensure that the diverse and unique needs of youth in detention are addressed effectively.

Conclusion
The potential for innovative platforms, like Triangle, to drive meaningful change in digital education

for youth in closed institutions is already visible in Portugal, where interest from prominent figures within the Juvenile Justice System and the Ministry of Justice has led to proactive efforts in drafting an action plan to implement them. Disseminating secure digital education-promising practices across Europe and globally is a pivotal step in scaling these efforts, enabling institutions to access and utilize resources effectively. By adapting these digital tools across juvenile justice systems, and importantly incorporating youths within such adaptations, institutions can introduce needs-based, consistent, structured digital learning opportunities, making these tools central to the education and rehabilitation of youth.

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VIRTUAL REALITY-ASSISTED THERAPY IN JUVENILE DETENTION[1]

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&

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Abstract

The use of virtual reality (VR) technology to assist therapeutic interventions (Flores et al., 2018; Palanques et al. 2025) and community reentry among incarcerated adults (Ticknor, 2019; Singer, 2023; Woicik et al., 2023) has grown rapidly in recent years. To date, however, little technical guidance has been published on how to best implement VR technology in detention environments. Furthermore, few have studied how VR can be used to aid the provision of mental health services in a juvenile detention facility. This article presents the exploratory findings from a pilot study adopting VR in a secure juvenile detention center in the Midwestern United States.

Keywords: virtual reality; juvenile detention; mental health; Liminal; Oculus Quest 2

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In the United States, youth in the juvenile justice system have complex needs, including diagnosable mental health conditions (Ryan, 2024), significant trauma histories (Asscher et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2021), and a variety of other adverse childhood experiences (Baglivio et al., 2014; Bender, 2010; Graf et al., 2021; Yohros, 2022). Early and repeated exposure to traumatic events may increase mental illness and behavioral problems in children, which may become more severe in adulthood (Baglivio et al., 2014) and are further intensified by deeper justice system involvement. (Yohros, 2022).

Nationwide, youth of color and youth living in poverty are overrepresented among justice system-involved juveniles (Abrams et al., 2021; Rodriguez & Goldman, 2024; van den Brink, 2024). This disparity is important given that multiple scholars have found that people of color and those experiencing poverty are far less likely to seek mental health treatment than their white and well-off counterparts (Breslau et al., 2017; Castro-Ramirez et al., 2021; Harris, 2005; Tambling et al., 2023), making justice-involved youth of color far more likely to enter detention facilities with unmet behavioral health needs. When people of color do seek treatment, a lack of providers who understand, and can respond appropriately to, their clients' cultural backgrounds results in many mental health conditions going undiagnosed or misdiagnosed (Burke, 2021; Garb, 2021; Jimenez et al., 2022). Because youth of color, who make up the majority of juvenile justice system populations, may be reluctant to mental health interventions, it is important for professionals working in the system to engage youth with known or suspected behavioral health issues in ways that are culturally appropriate and encourage continued engagement with treatment. One such avenue is virtual reality (VR) technology.

Use of VR Technology for Restorative Purposes

VR, can be defined as "any computer-generated environment that uses two- or three-dimensional (2D or 3D) visualization software and special transmission devices to provide user input within the virtual world" (Ticknor, 2019). Although VR is most widely known for its popularity in gaming, it has become a highly sought-after tool for use in various forms of psychotherapy to address conditions such as anxiety, ADHD, PTSD, and substance use disorders (Bordnick et al., 2009; Flores et al., 2018; Maples-Keller et al., 2017 North et al., 1997; Opri� et al., 2012; Parsons & Rizzo, 2008; Ticknor, 2019) as it simulates realistic environments for users to practice their developing skills in controlled conditions (Lee et al., 2022).

Despite evidence of its efficacy with various populations for a variety of mental and behavioral health-related conditions, few studies have examined its use for mental health care with detained youth. Most publications on the use of VR with incarcerated populations discuss adult participants engaging in life skills training designed to ease community reentry (Lee, 2021; Lewis, 2018; Singer, 2023) or describe theoretical options for engaging VR as a way to enhance mental health treatments, rehabilitation, and gender-responsive care (see, for example, Ticknor, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Ticknor & Tillinghast, 2011)[1].

In the past few years, two important studies were published that provided empirical evidence of the effectiveness of using VR within the context of mental health treatment for incarcerated adults and youth involved in the juvenile justice system. In 2023, researchers in the Netherlands (Woicik et al., 2023) found that VR is a useful mechanism to train skills for reducing aggressive behavior. In

1 *While the majority of existing literature highlights the benefits to be gained from using VR with justice-involved individuals, Moncada (2020) explored the concerning possibility of creating simulated punishments to enhance the punitive nature of detention, both generally and as a response to institutional rule violations.*

addition, the detained adult males who participated in virtual reality aggression prevention treatment had better emotional regulation and improved results on their post-treatment assessments (Woicik et al., 2023). Palanques and her colleagues (2025) reported similar findings in their use of VR with incarcerated juveniles in Spain. Specifically, they found cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) supported by VR technology reduced both the risk of recidivism and the predisposition to delinquency among juvenile offenders. Furthermore, the recidivism risk and delinquency reductions realized through this delivery technique were greater than reductions produced by the use of CBT alone (Palanques et al., 2025). These positive findings underscore the need for further research on VR use with juvenile populations in the United States.

Project Background

In the Midwestern State in which this project was based, secure detention is used to house pre-adjudicated youth charged in juvenile court, pretrial youth who are charged in the adult criminal justice system, and adjudicated youth under the supervision of the State Probation system who have lost a placement or are pending an administrative court hearing. As such, the primary mental health services offered to detained youth focus on short-term stabilization and medication management. This creates a need for the mental health delivery mechanisms in detention to be engaging and impart behavior management skills as quickly as possible given the relatively short length of time youth are in these facilities (during 2024, the average length of stay was 68 days, an increase from 61 days in 2021, when this project began).

In order to enhance the delivery of mental health treatment in juvenile detention and to increase the ability of young people to better internalize and recall de-escalation and self-regulation techniques when placed in stressful situations, we incorporated VR technology into mental health sessions. Specifically, we decided to add short (i.e., 3-7 minutes) VR experiences[2] at the beginning of traditional mental health sessions as an additional tool for our therapist to train and practice skills with youth. We believed exposure to de-escalation and self-regulation techniques through controlled VR experiences during traditional therapy sessions would promote better internalization of these skills among detained youth than traditional therapy, alone. We predicted youth who practiced with VR would be better equipped to recall and enact strategies to decrease heightened negative emotional states when placed in stressful real-life situations.

Our immediate issue, however, was we had no formal resources to guide our hardware selection, technological implementation, or usage protocol creation. We leveraged existing literature as a guide, and relied on local, national, and international partners using VR for various purposes to seek guidance, troubleshoot issues, and move our project from theory to practice[3]. We kept detailed records of our 18-month implementation journey, documenting each success and failure, to

2 *We are deliberate in our use of the word "experience" to refer to VR content used in mental health sessions. This terminology creates a separation from the use of VR for gaming or entertainment purposes and denotes it as a time-limited activity. It also sets up a platform for us to expand VR usage at a later time to incorporate content that is educational, vocational, and/or related to positive youth development without having to introduce new nomenclature.*

3 *Many special thanks to the following individuals and organizations for their guidance and collaboration: Dr. T. Hank Robinson and Joseph Rohleder with Metropolitan Community College; Randy Farmer and David Beatty with Lincoln Public Schools at the Lancaster County Youth Services Center; Dr. Kaylah Holland with BreakFree Education; Stephanie Savely with LYFT Learning, LLC; and Nick Busietta and Dr. Adam Barton with LiminalVR.*

create comprehensive guidelines that could be of use to others wishing to implement VR in secure detention environments. Therefore, this paper serves two purposes: first, to provide details about the considerations and decisions we made in order to deploy VR headsets, and second, to share results of our pilot use of VR with detained youth in a Midwestern State[4].

VR Hardware Adoption and Deployment

In order to successfully implement VR during mental health sessions, we had to resolve four matters: headset selection, Wi-Fi Connectivity, battery life, and sanitization and fitment protocols. We selected four VR devices for in-depth review, based on their functional ability to meet our project goals, cost-effectiveness, durability, and capacity to maintain institutional safety and security[5]. While each headset had its pros and cons, we eventually selected the Oculus Quest 2 because it did not require a smartphone to access VR content, was sufficiently durable to meet our safety concerns, had a large content library, and was available at a price point appropriate for our project budget. In addition, the strong brand recognition of the Oculus 2, relative to the other headsets, inspired confidence in the longevity of support for the device and the amount and diversity of VR content available in the future[6].

Once we purchased three Quest 2 devices for use among our project team members, we quickly realized we could not carry out this project without reliable, high-speed access to the internet through a secure network for regular device updates, to download VR content and access content unavailable for offline use, and to support the casting feature of the Quest 2 headsets[7]. Predictably, as we moved into areas with more physical barriers to Wi-Fi signal strength (e.g., lower levels, areas further from the external perimeter of the building), we experienced decreased network connectivity and device functionality. After many trials in various locations and with different device configurations, we found reliable connectivity in the mental health offices when only one headset was connected to the institutional network. Because the early stages of this project were designed around individual sessions with only one VR headset in use, we decided to move forward with the current Wi-Fi setup, knowing future improvements may be needed through the addition of signal extenders throughout the facility or a dedicated network for the VR headsets.

The Wi-Fi testing sessions also brought to light an unforeseen concern: device battery life. The Quest

4 *When we decided to adopt VR technology, we envisioned that a full-scale implementation with rigorous protocols for all newly admitted youth would occur once the equipment was operational. Given the various challenges we encountered during the testing process, we were concerned that technical difficulties on a facility-wide scale could decrease the willingness of youth to engage with VR during their mental health sessions. We decided it would be in our best interests to first conduct a small pilot implementation with flexible, semi-structured protocols so we could test VR functionality during treatment sessions and more easily troubleshoot any issues that may arise. Specific details about our pilot are discussed in later sections.*

5 *The devices we reviewed were Google Cardboard, Pico Neo 3, HTC Vive Focus 3, and Oculus Quest 2.*

6 *The Quest 2 is also compatible with multidevice management (MDM) software, which allows deployment of standardized content across multiple devices from a central platform. Though not a current component of our project, MDM compatibility will be important in the future if we expand VR usage to group-based settings or add more VR software options.*

7 *Casting allows the headset display to be mirrored an external device, such as an assigned laptop or iPad, so the therapist can see what the youth is viewing and record any relevant notes about the VR session. This is important to maintain institutional safety and security, and to identify specific VR content that is helpful and/or triggering for youth.*

2 headsets provide around 90 minutes of runtime on a full charge, which takes about 2.5 hours to reach. To safeguard against the possibility of therapeutic interventions being unable to incorporate VR during a session, being interrupted, or requiring the headset to be tethered by its charging cord, we explored ways to extend the device's charge. We found the best solution was purchasing third-party head straps with built-in battery packs. These replacements provided an additional two hours of runtime, and the design change from the standard head straps resulted in a more comfortable, and customizable, fit for users. The replacement we selected also had non-porous surfaces, making them easy to sanitize before and after each use to avoid the spread of contagious skin and hair conditions. We created a specific checklist of fitment and sanitization protocols for the therapist to follow for each VR-assisted mental health session in order to ensure a safe and comfortable user experience[8].

VR Software Adoption and Deployment

While working to ensure successful implementation of the Quest 2 hardware, we were simultaneously researching VR software and identifying experiences suitable for use in mental health sessions with detained youth. Each project team member created a Meta account using their work email address to explore programs and experiences available in the Meta Store for use on the Quest 2 headset. We limited our search to experiences that did not require unique user credentials or save personalized content (e.g., avatars, checkpoints) as it would not be feasible to create individual accounts for each youth. We started by exploring programs centered around virtual meeting spaces, such as Glue and Spatial, because we thought they could be used to replace the institutional environment and create a more comfortable setting for the youth and therapist. During testing, however, the therapist was in a "blinded" situation and unable to see anything happening in the room while wearing the headset. If both the therapist and youth were wearing headsets during a mental health session, security staff would need to be present in the room to ensure the safety of both parties. The safety and confidentiality concerns associated with this arrangement were not acceptable for our project, and we began looking for VR content designed specifically to facilitate the mental health activities we envisioned undertaking through this project.

We ultimately settled on two VR experiences: TRIPP and Liminal. We use the free demo experience of TRIPP, which is a guided meditation, during a youth's first VR exposure to orient them to being in a virtual environment. We found this experience to be an ideal introduction of VR in a therapeutic context for multiple reasons. First, it is about 9 minutes long, so we can assess a youth's receptivity to VR quickly. Next, the combination of aural instructions and visual cues provide youth with multiple examples of basic breathing and mental calming exercises that are useful in practicing mindfulness, self-regulation, and de-escalation. Even if the youth is not amenable to VR participation, the exercises to which they are exposed are simple enough for them to recall on their own if they encounter a stressful situation in the future. Finally, the demo provides a variety of physical sensations (e.g., remaining stationary, being in motion, situated on ground level, floating mid-air, increasing elevation), which are helpful in assessing a youth's potential for discomfort with VR exposure.

For youth who are amenable to VR-assisted therapeutic sessions, the therapist selects an experience from the Liminal software appropriate to meet the youth's mental health needs, as identified by their

8 *See Appendix A: Virtual Reality Pilot Program Protocol, which includes the full sanitization and fitment protocols.*

intake screening[9]. We chose Liminal because it is (to the authors' knowledge) the only mental health VR program designed by an in-house team of psychologists and neuroscientists, and it contains pre- and post-experience psychometric assessments. Because the goal of our project is to increase self-regulation and de-escalation skills among detained youth, the built-in psychometrics and scientific foundations underlying each experience's development were important considerations in our software selection. Furthermore, the enterprise license we elected allows us to obtain individual-level data and aggregate reports, which can be used in concert with institutional data to monitor the effectiveness of this intervention.

Pilot Design

In order to assess whether VR enhances mental health service delivery in juvenile detention and increases the ability of youth to more readily internalize de-escalation and self-regulation techniques, we conducted the pilot with girls[10] detained between January and March 2024 who had a Caution or

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

		n	%	Mean	Min.	Median	Max.
		Participants (n=10)					
Age	All Participants	10	100	15.6	13	15.5	17
Race/Ethnicity	Black	4	40				
	Hispanic	4	40				
	American Indian/ Alaska Native	2	20				
Total Time in Detention	All Participants	10	100	127.1	54	92	147
		VR Sessions (n=15)					
Length of Time in Detention at VR Exposure	All VR Sessions	15	100	78.7	7	70	147
		VR Exposures (n=27)					
Liminal Domain	Awe[a]	9	33				
	Calm[b]	11	41				
	Energy[c]	7	26				

[a] Awe experiences used were Boundless, Cosmic Flow – Awe, Emergence, and Visitor.
[b] Calm experiences used were Above the Clouds, Aureole Hypnosis, Cosmic Flow – Calm, Desert Breeze, and Hypnosis
[c] Energy experiences used were Big Break, Cannon's Roar, Colorgize, CyberPunch, Food Fight, and Splat!

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9 *Liminal contains six experience domains: Calm (stress reduction and relaxation), Energy (increased arousal and improved mood), Relief (pain relief), Awe (intense feelings of wonder and distraction from daily stressors), Focus (increase attention and combat for mental fatigue), and Sleep (sleep preparation and intervention). Appendix A identifies the primary Liminal experiences we designated for use with each MAYSI-2 domain.*

10 *We chose the female population because their population is relatively small and all girls are housed a single living unit in this detention facility, whereas boys are housed across multiple living units based on risk, behavior incentive plan level, and other factors. A pilot using only girls was easier, logistically, as we were able to test VR with a diverse group of youth in a single location. In addition, there is a relative lack of programs for girls relative to boys in the facility, due to their smaller number, so this pilot allowed us to fill a gap in services.*

Warning score on at least one MAYSI-2 subscale[11]. These girls were exposed to VR experiences as a part of their regular mental health sessions. In February 2025, Liminal provided us with an extract of individual-level data from all VR experiences associated with our user account between January 1 and March 31, 2024. Because no personally identifying information is collected by Liminal, these records were cross-referenced with hard copy documentation collected by the therapist during each session to record basic demographic information on participants and verify session details[12]. Sessions were only included in this analysis if reasonable matches could be made between the hard copy records maintained by the therapist and the Liminal extract[13]. When considering all valid records, 10 girls were exposed to 27 VR experiences in 15 sessions between January 23, 2024 and March 21, 2024[14].

As shown in Table 1, the average age of girls participating in VR-aided therapeutic sessions was 15.6 and all girls were non-White. With regard to time in detention, the mean total length of stay for girls in the pilot was about 127 days, and the mean time to their VR exposure was around 79 days post-admission. On average, pilot participants had 48 days before release to practice the skills they learned in their VR-aided therapeutic sessions. Of the 27 VR experiences used during the 15 therapy sessions, 9 came from the Awe domain in the Liminal software, 11 were from Calm, and 7 were from Energy.

Quantitative Data Summary

After each experience, Liminal asks users to rate their enjoyment on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot). As shown in Figure 1, the average enjoyment rating across all experiences was 4.1. Awe and Calm experiences had higher averages, at 4.4 and 4.3, respectively, while the average enjoyability score for Energy experiences was 3.6. This lower score may be due to the fact that a greater number of Energy experiences were used in this pilot, resulting in less consistency than the Awe and Calm domains.

Figure 2 displays the Awe experience ratings from this pilot study. After each Awe domain experience, users are presented with two questions. The first is a 7-point Likert scale (1 = none, 7 = extreme) for users to rate their greatest level of awe during the experience. Overall, girls reported an awe intensity of 78%. Users are then presented with one of four questions, chosen at random, and asked to rate on a 5-point scale (1 = disagree, 5 = agree) the degree to which they felt goosebumps, time slowing,

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11 *At intake, each youth entering detention completes the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument-2 (MAYSI-2), which contains seven mental health subscales (alcohol/drug use, anger-irritability, depression-anxiety, somatic complaints, suicide ideation, thought disturbance, and traumatic experiences). If the responses selected exceed the subscale cutoffs, youth will receive a score of "Caution," indicating possible clinical significance, or "Warning," which means a youth's score is exceptionally high relative to other youth in the juvenile justice system (Grisso & Barnum, 2000).*

12 *Appendix B: Intake Fitment Assessment is used by the therapist in each VR-assisted mental health session to ensure protocols are followed and to record details about the youth's participation in the Liminal experience.*

13 *Two sessions documented on hard copies were excluded: one for lack of identifying information and one for lack of corresponding Liminal records. Fifteen Liminal records were excluded, as they were experiences reviewed by the therapist and not used during a mental health session.*

14 *Our semi-structured protocols for this pilot required at least one VR experience per mental health session, and many girls participated in at least two Liminal experiences per session. The willingness of girls to participate in multiple experiences indicates that VR is an engaging means of delivering mental health treatment in a detention environment. By incorporating many different experiences into the sessions, the therapist was also able to collect information on which experiences participants rated as the most enjoyable and/or effective, to help inform full-scale implementation. Given the exploratory nature of this paper, the findings presented herein do not control for repeated VR exposures.*

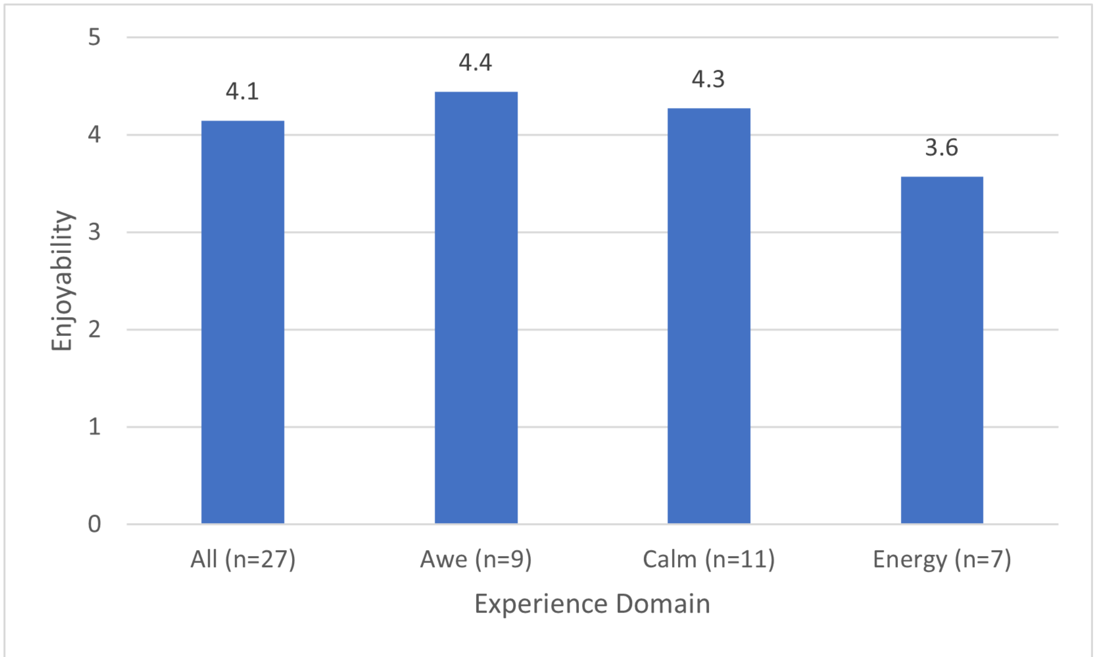

Figure 1: Average Enjoyability Ratings

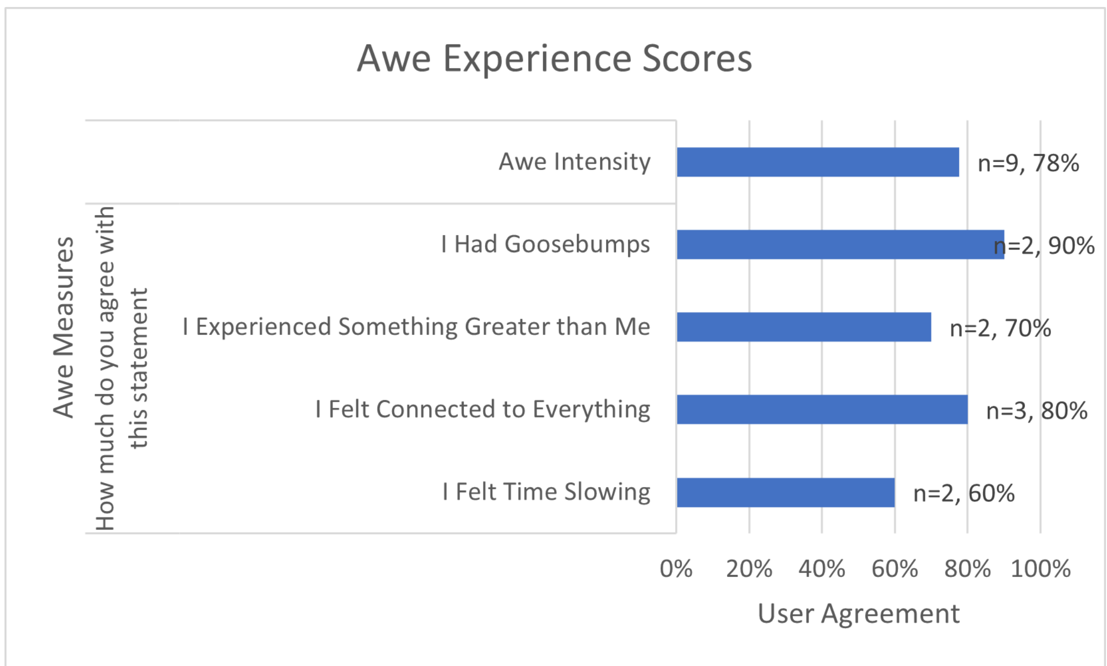

Figure 2: Awe Experience Scores

connection to everything, or something greater than themselves during the experience. These results are presented in Figure 2, though they should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.

For each experience in the Calm and Energy domains, Liminal collects pre- and post-experience information regarding the user's mood. Users are asked to select from one of nine mood options, then rate the extent of that mood on a scale of 1 (slightly) to 5 (extremely). For purposes of this analysis, the mood items were grouped into three categories: positive (relaxed, excited, cheerful, calm), neutral (neutral), and negative (irritated, anxious, bored, and sad). Figure 3 shows the changes in pre- and post-experience mood assessments. Taken together, girls who participated in Calm and Energy experiences during their VR-assisted therapy sessions indicated a decrease in neutral emotional states (from 39% pre-exposure to 22% post-exposure) and an increase in positive emotional states (from 39% pre-exposure to 56% post-exposure). The largest changes in positive emotions came from girls who participated in Calm experiences (45% pre-exposure to 73% post-exposure). Girls exposed to Energy experiences had no change in positive emotions, but did indicate an increase in negative emotional states (from 29% pre-exposure to 43% post-exposure). Again, caution should be used in interpreting these findings given the small sample size and the wider variety of Energy experiences used for girls, relative to the number of Calm experiences.

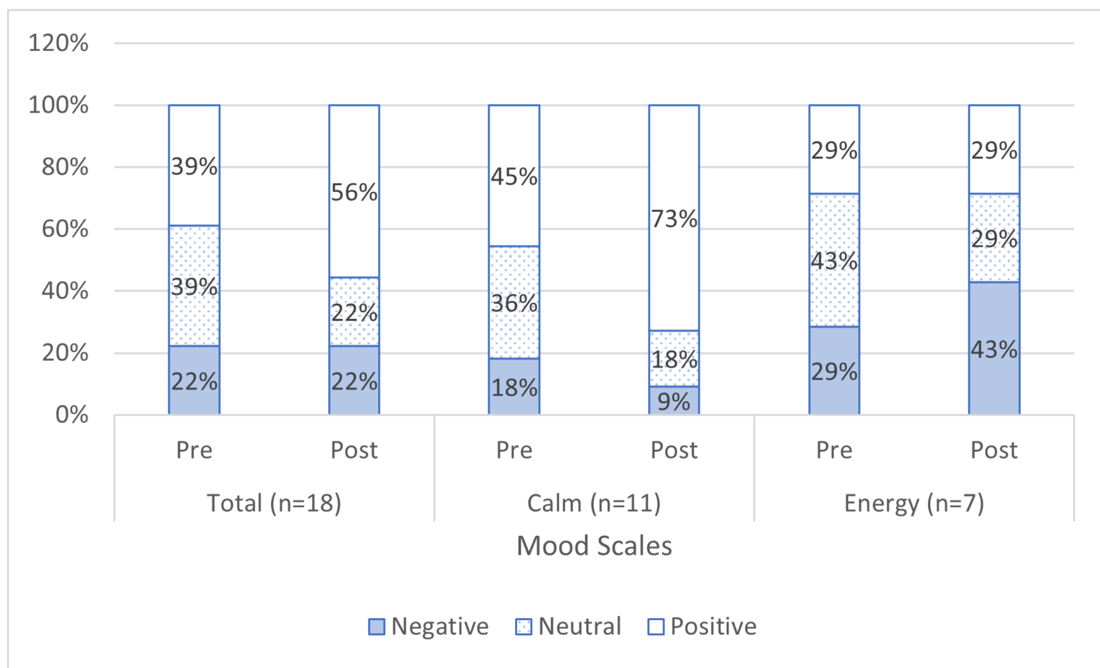

Figure 3: Calm and Energy Mood Scales

Participant Feedback Summary

In addition to the quantitative data from Liminal's native psychometric assessments, our therapist also collected qualitative data regarding the effects of VR-assisted therapy through clinical observations and direct feedback from participants regarding their experiences. Girls stated they primarily enjoyed passive and relaxing experiences, such as guided meditations, and viewed game-like experiences much less favorably. This is supported by the Liminal data, as shown in Figures 1 and 3. The therapist noted that once girls were oriented to the hardware and the use of VR during their mental health sessions, it was easier to build rapport and the girls were more forthcoming. Girls also started looking forward to their mental health sessions, asking the therapist and the housing unit staff when they would be able to use the VR headsets again. Perhaps the most promising outcome of the pilot study was a girl who engaged in a guided relaxation experience and returned to her next session, telling the therapist that she encountered a stressful situation on the housing unit but was able recall the visual breathing techniques of her session and de-escalate herself by imagining exhaling all of her negative emotions so she could think more clearly in the moment.

Discussion & Conclusion

The exploratory results of this pilot indicate that VR-assisted therapy has potential to engage detained youth in mental health sessions and increase their emotional regulation abilities. Our findings should be interpreted with caution, however, due to a number of limitations. As a pilot project, our sample was very small, consisting of only 27 VR experiences among 10 girls. Girls account for only about 10% of our detention population, and there may be gender-based differences in the responses of girls to the selected VR experiences, relative to boys. Because this was a pilot, we followed loose guidelines instead of strict protocols so we could test hardware and get input from youth on which experiences should be used. Finally, the only outcomes we reviewed were immediate user-reported mood changes as indicated by Liminal's psychometrics and conversations between the therapist and participants. We are unable to know how long these effects last or whether VR exposure may influence institutional outcomes, such as levels of misconduct or progression through behavioral incentive plans. We plan to overcome these limitations by implementing VR-assisted therapy with a larger population using strict protocols.

Despite these limitations, our results fill important voids in the literature. First, we provide a practical discussion of considerations necessary when implementing VR technology within a secure detention facility. This will aid others wishing to adopt VR for mental health, education, reentry, or other purposes. Second, although based on a smaller sample size, the results from our pilot align with recent findings (Woicik et al., 2023; Palanques et al., 2025), suggesting VR is an engaging and effective tool in equipping detained youth with skills to calm themselves in stressful situations instead of resorting to adaptive aggressive behaviors. By engaging with a realistic, yet controlled, virtual environment that simulates stressors and provides training on self-regulation techniques, youth can rehearse their reactions in a safe space and practice de-escalating heightened emotional states (Parsons & Rizzo, 2008; North & North, 2016). We look forward to future studies that examine how well internalization of these skills may translate to reductions in recidivism and increased public safety.

Appendix A: Virtual Reality Pilot Program Protocol

Intake Fitment Assessment

- **Preparing the Device:** prior to donning the device, ensure that it is working properly
    - Check Battery for Charge:
        - Power the device on to ensure it is adequately charged to complete the assessment
        - Check the head strap battery for adequate charge
    - Sanitize Headset: using an alcohol prep-pad, clean:
        - The rubber facemask
        - The outside of the device and head strap
    - Load the Experience: Launch the tutorial experience and check that monitoring is in place
    - Connect the device to tablet for monitoring: open the app on the table, and connect through settings on the device
- **Assess Immediate Level of Comfort:** Ensure comfort and safety prior to donning the device.
    - Assess for discomfort:
        - Assess for any negative emotional (e.g. anxiety, panic) or physiological (e.g. dizziness, vertigo) discomfort prior to beginning tutorial
            - If they endorse discomfort, review and discuss their willingness to attempt to complete the assessment:
                - If they are willing, continue the assessment and monitor closely for discomfort.
                - If they are unwilling, terminate the assessment.
            - If none, continue with the assessment.
    - Assess for ongoing comfort:
        - Instruct the youth to sit comfortably in a chair with enough space to move freely
        - Prior to donning the headset, inquire if the youth is feeling comfortable and willing to participate with the assessment.
            - Ask the youth if they have seen or used a VR headset before
                - If yes, ask if they had a positive or negative experience
                - If no, explain how the unit works and the purpose
            - Ask the youth if they are comfortable prior to initiating the tutorial
                - If yes, continue with fitment
                - If no, address concerns and prompt for willingness
                - If the youth refuses, terminate the assessment.
- **Ensure Proper Fitment:** Prior to beginning the experience, ensure that the device fits properly and that the youth is comfortable.
    - Donning the Headset:
        - With the youth seated in a chair, educate and/or demonstrate the proper fitment of the headset (adjusting primary and secondary straps, supports, or spacers)
        - Direct the youth to don the headset and adjust the head strap for a snug fit
            - If the youth wears glasses, install the spacer on the headset and check for fitment
            - If the youth is unable to view the headset clearly, adjust the lenses inside the headset (Lenses can be adjusted narrower or wider for improved comfort) and reassess
        - Adjust brightness, as needed
        - Adjust volume, as needed

- **Begin Tutorial:** Once the youth is comfortable, properly wearing the headset, begin the experience
    - Provide brief explanation
        - Instruct the youth to follow the prompts throughout the tutorial
        - Direct the youth to remain seated during the experience
        - Instruct the youth to verbalize any discomfort, if any
    - Pre-Experience Scoring:

Appendix A: Virtual Reality Pilot Program Protocol (cont.)

- Educate and orient the youth to the pre and post-experience scoring template (emoticons and Likert scale).
- Instruct the youth to complete the pre-experience scoring.

- Launch the experience:
  - Monitor for emotional and/or physiological discomfort
    - Is youth in any visible emotional distress?
      - If yes, ask if they would like to continue
      - If they say "no", discontinue use
    - Is youth in any visible physiological distress?
      - If yes, ask if they would like to continue
      - If they say "no", discontinue use
    - If the youth experiences negative emotional or physiological discomfort or distress lasting longer than 5 minutes ask if the youth would like to be seen by Medical.

- **Conclude Tutorial:** Once the youth has completed the experience:
  - Post-Experience Scoring:
    - Direct the youth to complete the post-experience scoring
  - Doffing the Headset:
    - Instruct the youth to remove the headset and return the controllers (provide assistance as needed)
- **Complete Assessment:** Discuss and review the experience and expectations for participation
  - Debrief the experience and discuss any concerns identified
  - Discuss the purpose for using the headset as an adjunct in their treatment
    - Review MAYSI-2 scores and correlated experiences
    - Prescribe appropriate experiences for youth participation per the MAYSI-2 results.
- **Clean and Return Device:**
  - Sanitize Headset: using an alcohol prep-pad, wipe down:
    - The rubber facemask
    - The eyeglasses spacer (if used)
    - The exterior body of the headset
  - Return Device:
    - Replace the device in the protective case and return to the BH Office.

MAYSI-2 Directed Experiences:

Alcohol/Drug Use
- Ecliptic

Angry-Irritable
- Alpha Bow

Depressed/Anxious
- Fruit Hoops

Somatic Complaints
- Meridian

Suicide Ideation
- Light Rush

Thought Disturbance
- Ecliptic

Traumatic Experience
- Equilibrium

Appendix B: Intake Fitment Assessment

Date: Time: ____________

Youth: Therapist: ____________

Experience 1: ____________
Experience 2: ____________

- Prepare the Device:
    - Check battery for charge
    - Create stationary boundary
    - Connect headset stream to monitoring device (Laptop, iPhone, iPad)
    - Check brightness & volume
    - Launch app and experience
    - Sanitize headset
- Assess Level of Comfort:
    - Assess for history of discomfort (e.g. carsickness, motion sickness, vertigo, etc.)
    - Assess for immediate discomfort (e.g. anxiety, panic, dizziness, vertigo, etc.)
    - Confirm comfort and willingness to proceed
- Donn the Headset:
    - Assist the youth with donning the device and adjust the fitment
    - Adjust lenses and/or use spacer for eyeglasses (as needed)
- Launch App:
    - Provide brief description of the experience and explain scoring procedure
    - Launch App

Relaxed Excited Irritated Anxious Neutral Cheerful Bored Sad Calm

1 Slightly **2** **3 Moderately** **4** **5 Extremely**

- Monitor Experience and Youth Comfort
- Complete Post-Scoring & Close
- Doff the Headset - Sanitize and Return Device to Charging Station

Relaxed Excited Irritated Anxious Neutral Cheerful Bored Sad Calm

1 Slightly **2** **3 Moderately** **4** **5 Extremely**

How Much Did You Enjoy This Experience?
1 2 3 4 5

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RISE AND SHINE: SUPPORTING THE DESISTANCE JOURNEY FOR YOUNG PERSONS IN HONG KONG THROUGH PSYCHOLOGICALLY-INFORMED INTERVENTION[1]

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Abstract

This paper describes psychologically-informed youth-responsive strategies that have been pioneered by clinical psychologists at the Hong Kong Correctional Services Department to support young persons through their desistance journey, beginning while in custody and extending with effective throughcare in the community. The treatment approach we have developed is developmentally informed, desistance-based and purposefully integrated to provide a smooth and supported transition from prison to the community. The approach is built around the three key stages of desistance: (1) promoting abstinence from crime through participation in the P.R.E.P. program[2], emphasizing family involvement and targeting interventions that both address criminogenic needs and utilize new technology to enhance motivation; (2) fostering non-offending identities through character strength interventions and narrative co-construction; and (3) facilitating social reintegration with narrative therapy and community connections. Though still in its early stage of development and therefore with limited evaluation data, initial positive responses received from both youth and family members suggests that this psychologically-informed and theoretically anchored approach warrants further development.

Keywords: Youth-responsive intervention, psychological service for youth, desistance, community throughcare, rehabilitative programming

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2 *P.R.E.P program is designed to prepare young persons in custody to lead a prosocial and thriving life upon discharge. P.R.E.P. stands for Prosocial Orientation, Resilience Building, Emotion Regulation, and Problem Solving – the four core treatment modules that form the foundation of the program.*

Introduction

Assisting justice-involved young persons to transform into productive members of society presents unique challenges due to the interplay of a host of developmental, psychological, and criminogenic factors that can contribute to their offending. Effective psychological interventions for these young people should therefore be developmentally attuned, evidence-based, and aligned with established rehabilitation models (Farrington, Gaffney & White, 2022; Maruna & Mann, 2019). This applies regardless of whether we are looking at designing interventions for young persons in custody (PICs) or post-release while they are supervised in the community. In this article, we discuss how psychologically-informed youth-responsive strategies have been designed to support local young persons in Hong Kong through different stages of their desistance journey, beginning in custody and following through in the community. In addition to aiming to reduce recidivism and helping to cultivate a safer and more inclusive society, these services are intended to empower young people towards personal growth, embracing the opportunity for a brighter future. This is a key aspiration we try to capture and encourage with the motto 'rise and shine'.

Developing desistance-focused psychological services

Desistance refers to the process by which individuals cease criminal behavior and transition toward prosocial lifestyles (Weaver, 2019). Early research sees desistance as a singular event – the permanent cessation of offending, whereas more contemporary perspectives identify the more nuanced process towards desistance from crime, involving the role of multiple factors such as personal agency, social relationships, and structural contexts in facilitating behavioral, psychological, and social transformations (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013). Qualitative research clarifies desistance as a gradual process with three stages representing progressive shifts in societal reintegration. Primary desistance refers to the temporary cessation of offending, though with possible relapses into criminal activity (Weaver, 2019). Secondary desistance involves a deeper transformation in self-identity, where individuals begin to perceive themselves as non-offenders with new values, roles and aspirations (Maruna, 2001). Tertiary desistance encompasses societal recognition and acceptance of the individual's reintegration, acknowledging their full return to prosocial norms (McNeill, 2016).

Considering that desistance is non-linear and characterized by progression and regression across these aforementioned stages, we believe there are important practice implications to attend to at each stage, including how to address the influence of factors such as personal motivation, social relationships such as delinquent peer influence, and structural barriers such as lack of community support. McNeill et. al. (2012) noted eight principles for developing responsive and effective desistance-focused interventions: building and sustaining hope, recognizing and developing strengths, celebrating progress, respecting self-agency, working with and through relationships, developing social and human capital, being realistic about the complexity of the process, as well as individualizing support for change.

The treatment approach we describe in this article is consistent with the principles outlined by McNeill (2012) and designed to support the 'change process' at each stage of desistance while also considering Hong Kong's unique sociocultural context. Recognizing that youth may have different needs and challenges in their desistance journey, effective interventions should anticipate and respond to these needs and challenges while ensuring motivation and engagement is kept steadily high.

Incorporating a developmental lens for youth-responsive treatment strategies
Beyond considering stages of desistance, in designing youth interventions we also have to acknowledge that adolescence represents a critical period of transition from childhood to adulthood. It is well accepted that during this period individuals undergo significant changes in their biological, cognitive, and psychological development. Adolescents need to navigate a variety of unique psychosocial developmental tasks and challenges, including cultivating a coherent sense of self and values, identifying with social groups, developing competence and commitment-making skills (Carvalho & Veiga, 2022). Even among well-adjusted youths, experimentation and risk-taking behavior alongside the process of physical maturity, intellectual advances and identity formation during adolescence may lead to difficulties (Hazen et al., 2008). When it comes to young PICs, these developmental tasks are further compounded by the presence of criminogenic needs, for example, substance abuse, criminal thinking, subcultural affiliations, and aggressive tendencies. Therefore, psychological services for young PICs should aim to help them tackle these criminogenic risk factors, embrace and navigate the developmental challenges on the path to adulthood, and help foster their growth as prosocial and thriving individuals.

There are other important neurodevelopmental issues that also need to be addressed. A local study indicated that about one-third of young PICs recalled having Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) manifestations during childhood as measured by the Wender-Utah Rating Scale which assessed retrospective childhood symptoms of ADHD. Many of these individuals, now over 18 years old, continue to experience adult ADHD symptoms (HKCSD, 2014). Clinical observations from psychologists further suggest that these young people often exhibit low tolerance for boredom, a strong desire for novelty, and engagement challenges.

To address these common neurodevelopmental difficulties – like issues with sustained attention and impulsivity - while taking into account their developmental needs and preferred learning styles, innovative treatment strategies tailored specifically for youth have to be designed. These approaches should incorporate youth-engaging, strength-based elements and experiential activities such as sports, technology, games, manga-drawing, artwork and interactive exercises, all designed to capture the interests of local youth. Every treatment session should be carefully structured to include opportunities for self-reflection and guided discussions, ensuring that the young PICs are not only engaged but also able to process their experiences meaningfully. These youth-responsive strategies should aim to enhance treatment responsivity and foster a deeper connection to the therapeutic process, ultimately supporting the growth and development of young PICs more effectively.

Recognising the developmental needs and learning styles of justice-involved youth, clinical psychologists design a range of psychological interventions using evidence-informed therapeutic approaches and youth-responsive strategies. These interventions support their transformation on the desistance journey, fostering growth and resilience.

Empowering youth in abstaining from offending - Primary stage of desistance
While incarceration can impede desistance by increasing criminal networks and negatively affecting self-image, restrictions on freedoms and dissatisfaction with life circumstances can promote positive behavioral change (McCuish et al., 2018). To leverage incarceration as a turning point, correctional programs for young PICs should begin as early as possible during custody.

P.R.E.P. Program

The P.R.E.P treatment program, grounded in developmental psychology and the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model (Andrews & Bonta, 2024), is tailored to young PICs' assessed risk levels and criminogenic needs. The structured program is delivered at three correctional institutions for young male and female PICs by a dedicated team of five clinical psychologists and seven correctional officers. These officers receive systematic training in offender psychology and counselling skills, along with on-the-job supervision by clinical psychologists. The program facilitates reflection on values and life goals, severance of ties with criminal associates and reconnection with family, motivating voluntary cessation of offending behavior that marks the primary stage of desistance. This positive behavioral change forms the crucial first step in the desistance process. The four treatment modules of the P.R.E.P Program addressing diverse criminogenic needs are summarized in Table 1. Each young PIC will participate in one to three treatment modules that tailored to their rehabilitative needs. Each treatment module consists of three to six sessions, supplemented by individual follow-up to reinforce progress. The number and intensity of treatment modules are determined based on a comprehensive assessment of individual's risks, needs, responsivity, and sentence length. A local study with 1069 young PICs serving sentences from 2015 to 2021 showed that attendees (of the

Table 1: A summary of the four treatment modules of the P.R.E.P Program

Treatment Module	Content
Prosocial Orientation (P)	• Identify important values and foster value-based living • Enhance cognitive flexibility by identifying distorted criminal thoughts and practicing prosocial cognitive skills • Cultivate empathy
Resilience Building (R)	• Support relapse prevention from substance abuse and other behavioral addictions • Plan and commit to a balanced and healthy lifestyle • Strengthen communication and relationship with family or significant others
Emotion Regulation (E)	• Gain understanding of emotions and improve adaptive emotion regulation skills • Learn anger management skills
Problem Solving (P)	• Master problem solving skills, including generation and evaluation of alternative solutions, navigating daily life challenges and improving decision-making in interpersonal situations

previously named Offending Behavior Program) had a two-year re-admission rate of 7.6% compared to 16.2% for non-attendees with matched re-offending risk, demonstrating significant program effectiveness in reducing recidivism (OR = 0.425, $p < .0001$) (HKCSD, 2025). The following sections elaborate on selected modules utilizing the newly introduced youth-responsive treatment strategies.

Challenging Criminal Attitudes

The transition from ambivalence and intermittent lapses into sustained behavioral change is particularly challenging in adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by unclear personal values and susceptibility to peer influence (Allen et al., 2022). Therefore, the P.R.E.P program includes core treatment components focused on challenging criminal attitudes and assertiveness skill training. To engage energetic and fun-seeking adolescents, role-playing, interactive games and experiential activities, alongside psychoeducation and guided discussion are incorporated to enhance participation. A local study of 496 young male PICs found that our criminal attitude-based intervention that challenge and modify distorted criminal thinking patterns, significantly reduced criminal attitudes which then effectively lowered the likelihood of recidivism. In the indirect mediation analysis, the intervention was negatively associated with post-intervention criminal attitude ($r = -.72$, $p < .001$), and post-intervention criminal attitude significantly reduced recidivism ($r = .14$, $p < .05$), yielding a standardized indirect effect of -.07 (95% CI: -.14 to -.01) after controlling for pre-treatment criminal attitude (Leung, 2019).

Learning to Resist Peer Pressure through Virtual Reality Intervention

Assertiveness training, including psycho-education, modeling, behavioral rehearsal, and feedback, has been shown to reduce anticipatory anxiety and boost self-confidence (Ardi & Sisin, 2018). Virtual Reality (VR) intervention, as a new state-of-the-art technology, incorporates gaming elements that improve treatment motivation in criminal populations (Ticknor & Tillinghast, 2011), allowing skill practice in a safe, immersive, and interactive environment.

As part of the P.R.E.P. program, young PICs engage in virtual simulations that expose them to peer pressure situations coercing them to illegal activities, specifically developed by HKCSD clinical psychologists to match local street scenes and colloquial language (Yeung, Pau & Cheung, 2022). Participants navigate these scenarios by verbally responding to virtual characters, practicing assertive rejection of their peers with feedback from the psychologist and other participants on their verbal responses and body language. Most participants, having no prior VR experience, have exhibited excitement in trying this innovative treatment modality. They recognize the immersive effect of the VR scenarios, which elicit feelings of anxiety and guilt when rejecting their peers. Improvement was observed in their verbal refusal skills and assertive body language across trials, as well as after receiving feedback from other participating PICs. Quantitative data will be accumulated to monitor the impact of VR intervention on skill acquisition and maintenance.

Emotion Regulation with Digitalized Psychological Program

Effective emotion regulation is essential for preventing impulsive behavior and reducing aggression, especially in emotionally unstable young PICs (Roberton et al., 2014). "Living with Heart", a mobile app-based psychological program developed by The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), aims to enhance self-regulation skills. Randomized controlled trials on the general population have shown its efficacy in improving mental well-being and reducing psychological distress at post-program and

3-month follow-up (Mak et al., 2018). In collaboration with CUHK, the digitalized self-learning program was adapted for institutional use. Through tablet-based sessions, young PICs engage with interactive lessons and guided exercises across three modules: balanced life, self-compassion, and mindfulness. The self-directed and self-paced digital learning approach aligns with their learning preferences and pace in the digital era. At post-treatment, young PICs appreciated the quiet, private and comfortable space which enabled them to focus on and regulate their emotions, a precious sanctuary in the stress-prone institutional environment.

Involving Family in Inmate-Parent Program (HeartStart)

Parental support, warmth, and supervision are critical in the desistance process, providing young PICs with prosocial role models, a structured environment upon release, and emotional attachment (Farrington, 2022). Alongside the P.R.E.P. program, the Inmate-Parent Program (HeartStart) is designed to empower parents by enhancing positive parent-child communication and effective parenting skills through Parenting Talks, self-help videos, and pamphlets provided from the early phase of incarceration. Active parental involvement is essential for supporting and monitoring young PICs' behavioral change during the primary desistance stage. Their love and acceptance can help facilitate the shaping of a new identity and support reintegration into the prosocial community in the subsequent desistance stages.

Cultivating youth's new, non-offending identities - Secondary stage of desistance

The P.R.E.P. Program, which primarily addresses criminogenic needs and skill deficits, has limitations when treatment goals extend beyond ceasing offending behavior to identity transformation at the secondary desistance stage. Even during crime-free periods, many young PICs or supervisees have a self-perception shaped by the loss of past friendship, social status, and recognition (Villeneuve et al., 2019). To address these challenges, strength-based approaches to build positive identities and strengths have been advocated (Van Ginneken et al., 2019). To this end, clinical psychologists in Hong Kong are pioneering the use of prominent therapeutic approaches, namely character strength intervention and narrative therapy, to help young PICs develop and strengthen positive personal identities while in custody and extending with effective throughcare in the community.

Integrating Character Strength Intervention with Sports Activities and Parenting Talks

Integrating Character Strength Intervention (CSI) into sports activities, MindSport, empowers young PICs to form new identities. CSI, an evidence- and strength-based approach widely adopted in schools, workplaces, and clinical populations, promotes awareness and use of positive traits, facilitating exploration, identity shaping, and engagement in therapeutic activities (Niemiec, 2018). Studies document CSI's effectiveness in promoting emotional well-being, prosocial behaviors, resilience, and self-efficacy while reducing problematic behaviors (Schutte & Malouff, 2019). Our MindSport program recognizes individual character strengths during workouts led by sports coaches from voluntary community agencies. Clinical psychologists guide young PICs in identifying their unique character strengths through the VIA Survey[1], experiential exercises, and feedback from others. Continuous application of character strengths and goal setting aligned with the new prosocial self are encouraged, advancing desistance. One PIC, for example, expressed gratitude to a sports coach, which reminded him to be grateful for his mother's regular prison visits despite long travel times.

1 *VIA Survey of Characters is a psychometrically valid, self-reporting inventory designed to measure 24 character strengths that are reviewed to be ubiquitous and universally valued (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).*

In parallel, character strength parenting was launched in the Parenting Talk of our Inmate-Parent Program (HeartStart) to help parents recognize and validate their children's character strengths, forming positive self-identities. Parents complete the VIA Survey to identify their children's signature strengths and recall specific examples. They are encouraged to recognize and reinforce their children's unique strengths in daily life. These filled-in questionnaires and observations are shared with their children in individual sessions, facilitating positive self-image and reinforcing effective use of character strengths. Parents were observed to become more active in sharing their children's strengths during the talks. Some parents became emotional when noticing character strengths in their children instead of solely focusing on problematic behavior, seeing hope for positive development. Young PICs are often surprised by observations from psychologists, correctional officers, other participants, and their parents, offering new perspectives on their positive qualities for developing positive self-identities.

During post-release phases, continuing character strength intervention is crucial for reintegration and identity transformation (Gu, 2023). In our community clinical practice[2], supervisees' character strengths are identified and reinforced through reflective discussions with their role models, strengths card sorting, writing letters to future selves, role-playing scenarios, and keeping a strength-spotting journal. These activities guide problem-solving and goal-setting, such as using kindness to help family members or perseverance to achieve savings goals through employment. Supervisees report greater self-understanding and appreciation of how strengths guide actions toward goals.

On a more systemic level, involving PICs and supervisees' families in character strength interventions is vital for positive youth development as family support is a key protective factor (Laub & Sampson, 2003). A trial-run Family Celebration Day facilitated mutual appreciation using strength cards, with 75% of participating supervisees recognizing 'forgiveness' as their parents' top strength. Setting shared goals, such as using fairness and love for open communication, is encouraged. Parents found these celebrations broaden their perception of their child's character and strengthen familial bonds.

Integrating Narrative Therapy and Manga Drawing to review Desistance Journey

Narration of one's lived experiences is key to identity construction. While young supervisees' narratives often highlight failure, deviance, and shame, reframing their identities with narrative therapy from "PICs" to more prosocial identities, such as "students," "workers," or "family members," can support their desistance journey (Ikonomopoulos et al., 2015). Narrative Therapy (White, 2007) is a valuable therapeutic approach that emphasizes re-authoring life stories, identifying positive narratives that align with one's intentions, values, dreams, experiences, relationships and strengths to collectively build a positive sense of self. Meta-analyses show that the mechanism of change lies in externalizing problems and reconstructing personal narratives (Ghavibazou et al., 2022). Referencing desistance principles of fostering self-agency and celebrating progress, Narrative Therapy empowers young PICs to take ownership of their stories, viewing themselves as active participants in shaping their futures.

To support supervisees' desistance journeys, we pioneered integrating Narrative Therapy with the engaging, interactive and expressive manga art - a Japanese comic style characterized by distinctive visuals such as expressive characters and dynamic compositions. This is a popular medium among

2 *In our clinical practice, supervisees attend one-hour individual sessions at flexible intervals, ranging from monthly to once every three months, depending on their motivation, assessed risk-needs level, and availability.*

Hong Kong youth for entertainment and self-expression (Chan, 2020). We co-created manga with supervisees to visually depict their desistance journeys, highlighting pivotal moments and turning points. The process included brainstorming the structure and content, deriving imagery of their lived experiences, drawing, writing captions, and naming their stories, during which clinical psychologists guide the supervisees to identify patterns driving their criminal behavior and link unmet childhood needs to their criminal lifestyle. Towards the end of intervention, some supervisees reported this approach allowed them to process experiences and facilitate verbalization of inner experiences. They gained a greater sense of hope, motivation, and determination for a crime-free life as their values, identities, strengths, and support systems were clarified.

A case illustration is presented in Images 1-6 that depict a young supervisee's manga titled 'Eternity and Guardianship', symbolizing his love and loyalty to family. Raised by his grandmother while his parents worked elsewhere, he felt lonely and compared himself to siblings who stayed with parents. Harboring resentment toward perceived abandonment, he lashed out at his mother during a dispute (Image 1). In primary school, he bonded with a lion dance teacher who became a father figure (Image 2). After high school, he worked at a sushi shop, facing financial struggles arising from grandmother's passing and post-mortem costs, and lending money to a friend (Image 3). Feeling desperate, he stole from the sushi shop he worked at, after his friend failed to repay a loan (Image 4). Arrested and admitted to a correctional institution, he felt guilty seeing his mother and sister cry during visits (Image 5). Determined to change, he started working in construction, saving money, and treating his family to expensive meals (Image 6). Through manga co-creation, the supervisee reported recognizing his family's support as a protective factor, exploring alternative ways to strengthen bonds through quality time and healthy communication instead of financial spending. Processing abandonment

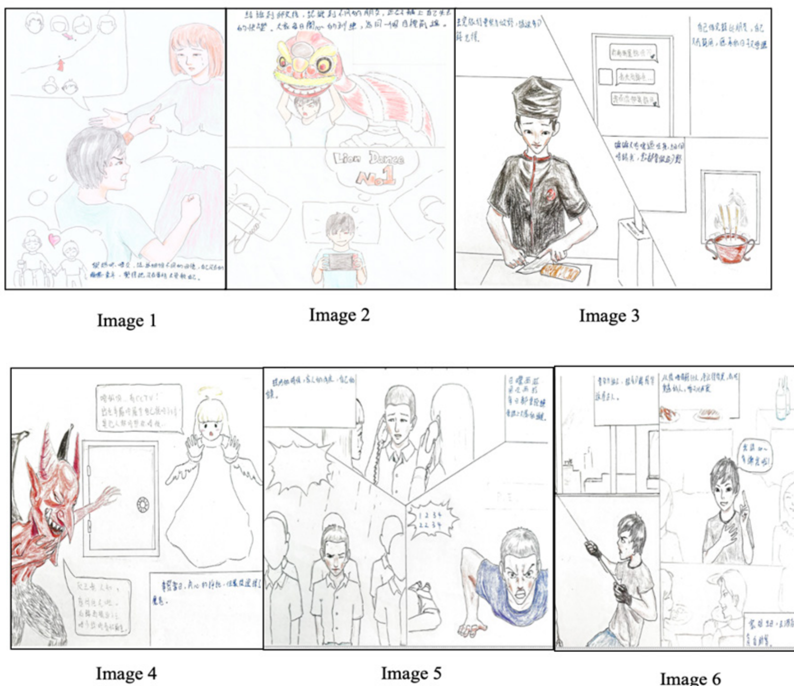

Figure 1: Manga drawing of a supervisee's life story in chronological order

trauma through drawing and verbalizing feelings, he linked his experience to strengths of empathy and forgiveness. Discussing personal growth from a current perspective, he integrated the event, navigating a purposeful life with resilience.

Fostering social reintegration, acceptance and sense of belonging - Third stage of desistance

Outsider Witness in Narrative Therapy: Sharing Desistance Journey with Stakeholders
Outsider witness is a key practice in Narrative Therapy, where individuals listen attentively and respond to a story by reflecting on how it resonates with their values, emotions, or experiences (White, 2007). Recent research on outsider witness conducted on Hong Kong youth, including young offenders and marginalized or stigmatized individuals, generated qualitative and quantitative data showing its effectiveness in enhancing positive self-perception (Chuk & Sek-Wing, 2018). Hearing affirming perspectives from outsider witnesses fosters a collaborative, socially engaged process of identity construction, allowing youth to feel more accepted and understood within peer and community networks (Denborough, 2014).

In line with the desistance principle of celebrating progress, we arranged Desistance Celebration Day to strengthen supervisees' developing prosocial identities as foundational milestones in their desistance journey. Witnesses, including family, psychological staff, and social workers from community agencies, were invited to hear supervisees' narration of their desistance journey, guided by psychologists. Delivery mode was flexible and agreed upon with the supervisee, such as sharing a life story manga as a "human book." Witnesses engaged in a "telling" process by reflecting on the supervisee's identities, strengths, values, and aspirations, as well as the story's impact on their own lives. The supervisees responded in a "retelling" process, giving feedback to the witnesses' comments. Supervisees shared that this practice helped them feel heard and validated, as the witnesses' reflections legitimized their transformation. Witnesses and psychologists observed that meaningful dialogue amplified supervisees' prosocial identities and self-acceptance through external validation and reinforcement, deepening mutual connections and acceptance among stakeholders.

Engaging with Supervisee's Family: Skills Trainings and Conjoint Intervention
To promote community reintegration, regular skills training and conjoint interventions have been organized for supervisees' families. Mindful parenting workshops aim to equip parents with self-compassion, relaxation, and emotion regulation skills. Conjoint interventions strengthen parent-child communication and develop effective parenting skills, in addition to exploring new interests, identifying each other's character strengths, and developing balanced lifestyle together. For supervisees with conflictual parent relationships, conjoint sessions provide structured space for open, active, and constructive communication, fostering familial bonds crucial for supporting desistance. Overall, these sessions allow parents to witness supervisees' efforts to take responsibility and change, promoting mutual trust.

Partnering with Community Agencies: Bridging Supervisees to Community Support
In the community phase, we support young supervisees in building healthy social circles and gaining access to resources by partnering with community agencies. Social workers serve as key facilitators, connecting supervisees with resources and opportunities that promote prosocial development, supported by research on local at-risk ex-offending youth (Cheung et al., 2018). Social workers build

rapport with supervisees in psychologists' presence through conjoint sessions, understanding their interests and needs. Workers then refer supervisees to relevant resources or programs. Supervisees have reported that participation in community activities like sports, arts, or community service helped them build healthier peer circles and explore new interests, gaining a newfound sense of achievement. A young male with ADHD continued with boxing training arranged by the community agency after statutory supervision.

Conclusion and Way Forward

This paper presents our pioneering initiatives in psychologically-informed, desistance-focused and youth-responsive interventions for young persons under the care of the Hong Kong Correctional Services Department. The desistance model offers a comprehensive perspective beyond preventing reoffending, aiming for fundamental changes in self-identity and community recognition. It complements the deficit-based RNR model and aligns with our vision as clinical psychologists to nurture prosocial, thriving youth who lead purposeful and meaningful lives.

Despite criticisms that desistance theories lack consensus on definitions and overlook the theories of change inherent in prominent psychological treatments (Weaver, 2019), we boldly apply therapeutic approaches namely character strength intervention and narrative therapy in guiding the desistance journey. Given the absence of validated measures to assess the non-linear and individualized desistance process, we focus on core themes of the desistance stages rather than rigid categorization for standardized treatment at each stage. During the community phase, individual sessions are arranged to address life challenges and high-risk situations of reoffending with a view to supporting the youth's rehabilitation and reintegration. While we are accumulating quantitative data for these new initiatives, initial positive feedback from youth and parents suggests that our intervention approach warrants further exploration and development. We hope our efforts bring better outcomes, empowering young individuals to rise above their past experiences and shine as they grow. Showcasing strong cultural sensitivity, our research holds global significance. Aspiring for a comprehensive range of evidence-informed rehabilitation services, we are conducting the first local desistance research on PICs and desisters in the community to identify factors that promote or hinder the desistance process, guiding strategic planning of effective offender rehabilitation in Hong Kong while contributing to the broader desistance literature. The accumulated quantitative evaluation data will also help investigate the effectiveness of interventions and underlying mechanisms for continuous service improvement in the correctional field.

Besides, the integration of character strength intervention to build a positive self-identity necessitates contextualized adaptation within Chinese culture. Based on our clinical observations, the cultural norms of Chinese-style modesty and the restrained use of praise in Chinese parenting often bring hesitation and embarrassment when a PIC is presented with his character strengths or receives compliments from parents during clinical sessions. Nevertheless, through sensitive navigation of these cultural norms and comprehensive psychoeducation, young PICs are able to overcome their struggles with self-affirmation while parents embrace a positive lens and language when interacting with their children. In other words, our experience hold promise for this strength-based approach in Chinese community.

Given that many Asian cultures tend to stigmatize discussions of emotional distress and traumatic

experiences (Kudva et al., 2020), our incorporation of story-telling elements to review their life enables youth to externalize their lived experiences, verbalize their associated feelings and reframe their narratives in a creative, personalized and less confrontational manner. This approach particularly facilitates rapport-building and treatment in correctional settings where youth may bottle up emotions due to their guilt and shame. Furthermore, we believe that the employment of Manga – a culturally resonant and increasingly popular medium that is originated in Asia – can further enhance this process and has the potential for worldwide application. By allowing youth to engage with a format they are familiar with and enjoy, we create a more relatable and inviting environment for self-expression and exploration, supporting their personal growth and development.

Envisioning the future, there is a plan to establish a "Human Library" in the community-based CHANGE Lab – a platform for narrating the lived experiences of young PICs and supervisees in their desistance journey to various stakeholders. The aim is to reduce stigma of the readers of these youth's life stories, enhancing societal inclusion in Hong Kong. With great determination, we believe our efforts will create a more accepting environment for those embarking and 'shining' on their desistance journey.

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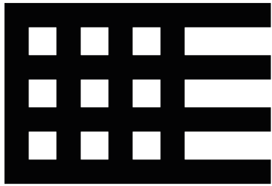

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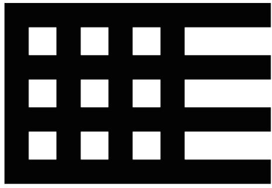

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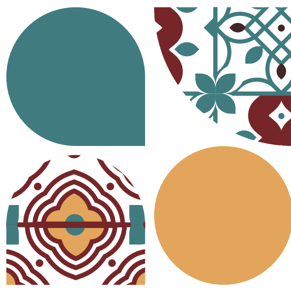

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