

CRIMINAL JUSTICE COORDINATING COUNCIL ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION FOR YOUTH

The Criminal Justice Coordinating Council is hosting a live webinar on promising practices in alternatives to incarceration for system-involved youth.

Moderator

Josh Rovner, Director of Youth Justice, *The Sentencing Project*

Panelists

Clinton Lacey, President & CEO, *Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement (CM3)*

Betsy Tolentino, Managing Director, Juvenile and Young Adult Justice Initiatives, *Roca Impact Institute*

Andrae Brown, Ph.D., President, *Heru Consulting*

Craig Jernigan, Regional Program Director (Baltimore/DC), *Youth Advocate Programs, Inc.*



Registration Link (Zoom)

Tuesday, August 29, 2023
11:00 am - 1:00 pm

Background

On August 28, 2023, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) convened a webinar to discuss “Alternatives to Incarceration for Youth”. In her opening remarks, Kristy Love, the Executive Director of CJCC, acknowledged the significant and pressing challenges the District faces concerning the surge in criminal activity among young individuals, including instances of violence. She recognized the existence of varying viewpoints on how to best respond to this upswing in youth-driven criminal behavior.

Ms. Love went on to explain that her decision to convene the CJCC webinar was motivated by a report issued by The Sentencing Project entitled *Effective Alternatives to Youth Incarceration*. The report explored appropriate and effective alternative strategies to address youth who pose serious risks to the community, particularly those youth who have been involved in violent offenses.

Panel

Joshua Rovner, moderator for the webinar, introduced the following panelists:

Clinton Lacey, President & CEO, *Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement (CM3)*

Betsy Tolentino, Managing Director, Juvenile and Young Adult Justice Initiatives, *Roca Impact Institute*

Andrae Brown, Ph.D., President, *Heru Consulting*

Craig Jernigan, Regional Program Director (Baltimore/DC) *Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. (YAP)*

Sentencing Project Presentation

Joshua Rovner, Director, Youth Justice, *The Sentencing Project*

Mr. Rovner commenced his remarks by affirming that practitioners engaged in youth intervention and prevention endeavors share a common goal: the well-being of children including meaningful personal growth, social engagement and personal development. He provided the statistic that 750,000 kids are arrested each year. It is imperative, he emphasized, that we focus on identifying effective strategies rather than resorting to the “convenient” but ultimately counterproductive practice of incarcerating youth.

Mr. Rovner described a trend popular in the 1980’s and 90’s of incarcerating so-called “super-predator” youth; that practice was not right nor effective. Further, he stated that Black and Brown youth are locked up 4.5 times more than White youth and the trauma associated with incarceration often leads to enduring negative consequences.

Mr. Rovner underscored the importance of systemic reform. He advocated for proven approaches, such as family-focused therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), the implementation of restorative justice practices, and the provision of essential wraparound services. He explained that the current juvenile justice system is dysfunctional and emphasizes punishment as opposed to rehabilitation. Importantly, he urged us not to give up on children who commit crimes because they have yet to achieve neural maturity.

Lastly, Mr. Rovner drew attention to the disparities that exist across racial demographics. He noted that White juvenile offenders are more likely to receive sentences that offer alternatives to incarceration, such as diversion or probation.

Panel Discussion

Craig Jernigan, Regional Program Director (Baltimore/DC) *Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. (YAP)*

Mr. Jernigan delivered a comprehensive overview of the Youth Advocate Program (YAP), a social justice and advocacy initiative. To set the stage for his presentation, he shared a personal insight, revealing that he had firsthand experience with the juvenile justice system during his youth in Baltimore, although he was fortunate not to have been detained. Instead, he was directed into a diversion program. In doing so, he underscored the intrinsic value of opting for alternatives to incarceration.

Additionally, Mr. Jernigan highlighted an innovative approach implemented by the state of Connecticut within their juvenile program. They integrated a wilderness behavioral therapy model as an alternative therapeutic strategy, further illustrating the commitment to exploring creative and effective alternatives within the realm of juvenile justice.

YAP focuses its efforts on youth and their families and utilizes high-impact social engagement programs as opposed to the traditional congregant care model. Their services revolve around a home-based approach, catering to a population of 17,800 families. Their clients are 70% people of color, 59% male, and 42% 14-17-year-olds in the Maryland and DC area. YAP relies on Individual Service Plans (ISPs) for their clients, and they promote a model that emphasizes unconditional caring for their clients. YAP dedicates 22.5 hours of direct service to each client per week and provides 24-hour client support. While they do not offer mentoring services, they are dedicated to providing direct services, including skill-building initiatives. Their track record reveals that 96% of their clients are not involved in any aggression-related activities while in the program, and 88% regularly attend school and graduate with a GED or receive alternative training. A critical element of their program involves the provision of wraparound services that extend to trauma-informed care. This approach acknowledges the traumatic experiences of both their clients and their family members and ensures that these challenges are addressed in an appropriate manner.

Along with the approaches described above, YAP also employs rapid engagement, advocate matching, and safety plans for those returning to high-risk or “hot” neighborhoods. They also offer scholarships through an endowed fund.

Betsy Tolentino, Managing Director, Juvenile and Young Adult Justice Initiatives, *Roca Impact Institute*

Ms. Tolentino gave an overview of the Roca Impact Institute, which currently operates in 21 cities and 9 states. Roca’s focus is on protecting justice-involved youth from the damage caused by incarceration, poverty and racism. She stressed that incarceration is inherently traumatic for youthful offenders, as well as their family members. For this reason, Roca prefers to avoid detention or incarceration tactics for youth, with the exception of particularly high-risk cases. For the past 23 years, the Roca Impact Institute has been providing direct services with the goal of creating safety and stability for young people for whom violent activities are a fact of daily life.

Roca strives to equip youth with the ability to navigate the challenges that confront them by employing tools such as CBT and the principles of brain science to change their thought processes and behavior. This approach is based on the premise that between the ages of 17-25, youth experience profound neural development, ideally shedding emotional and psychological immaturity. Roca believes it is possible to affect youth development and shape behavior in a positive manner.

Roca highlights the importance of developing cognitive flexibility skills that focus on empowering youth to apply restorative thought processes through incremental steps, such as acquiring self-discipline. Roca places a high emphasis on changing youth thought, behavior, and emotions. Credible messengers and CBT are applied on-the-go, meaning services can be provided in an ad hoc, non-clinical fashion.

Clinton Lacey, President & CEO, *Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement (CM3)*

Mr. Lacey challenged conventional thinking on youth incarceration, emphasizing its counterproductive nature for public safety, as it harms the developing psyche of young individuals. He noted the increasing trend of resorting to punitive legislative measures, calling for a shift towards effective strategies that prioritize public safety without demonizing or discarding young offenders.

His CM3 model relies on credible messengers, individuals with lived experiences who mentor troubled youth, particularly in helping them reintegrate into challenging neighborhoods. Detaining youth, Mr. Lacey argued, contributes to their future incarceration as adults. The

model incorporates principles of restorative justice, where offenders acknowledge harm and take responsibility.

Furthermore, the CM3 model leverages brain science, aiming to redirect young people's thoughts and behaviors with compassion and dignity, resulting in behavioral modification. New York City saw a positive outcome using restorative justice and credible messenger approaches with a 60% reduction in recidivism for the 16–24-year-old population who might otherwise have been placed on felony probation. During his tenure at the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) in the District of Columbia, he instituted 24/7 wraparound services and co-navigation approaches resulting in a 50% reduction in detention.

Mr. Lacey passionately advocated for decarceration and community-based approaches, emphasizing returning youth home and keeping them away from circumstances that could lead to re-incarceration.

Andrae Brown, Ph.D., President, *Heru Consulting*

Dr. Brown commenced his presentation by calling for a plan of action to address the incarceration of juveniles highlighting its traumatic effects. He said incarceration should not be the baseline for responding to youth criminality. Dr. Brown emphasized the futility of prevention and intervention once youth are emotionally and psychologically scarred, stressing that detention inflicts lasting damage, diminishing their sense of self-worth. He underscored the importance of developing strategies that convey to youth that the adults in their life hold continued faith in their potential.

As a psychologist, Dr. Brown advocated for holding young people accountable for their actions but also called attention to the shared responsibility of government institutions, families, and communities in this regard. He found it both unfair and cruel to try youth as adults, even in the face of advocate and defense counsel efforts to have them adjudicated as juveniles.

In conclusion, Dr. Brown emphasized the need for alternatives to youth incarceration to be rooted in a hopeful mindset that empowers all segments of the community.

Questions and Discussion

Accountability

The panelists were questioned about accountability for juvenile offenders and they offered the following insights

The consensus among the panelists was that accountability is multi-layered. While youth should be held accountable for their actions, the same standard applies to families and institutions. Notably, disparities were highlighted. For instance, when comparing White and Black youth in adjudication processes, White youth often receive opportunities for diversion

and placement in private educational institutions such as boarding or military schools, whereas Black and Brown youth are more frequently detained.

Ms. Tolentino-Fox pointed out that we require a lot of youth, but often do not provide them with the skills to navigate the adversity they encounter. Dr. Brown offered that practitioners must be held accountable for identifying tactics to change youth behavior over time, rather than solely addressing isolated incidents of illegal behavior.

Mr. Lacey underscored the need to shift the focus from isolated events to a holistic understanding of individuals who have committed crimes or caused harm.

Behavioral Change

During the discussion on applying the principles of restorative justice and fostering behavioral change, the panel offered the following insights:

Dr. Brown emphasized that the essential starting point is recognizing that no child is beyond repair. He called for an end to the practice of discarding youth when they transgress social norms and the law. He praised CBT as a viable approach that offers holistic support meeting individuals where they currently stand.

Mr. Jernigan stressed the importance of providing life coaches, as many clients have experienced arrested development, and comprehensive guidance can prove pivotal in their growth.

Mr. Lacey critiqued the arbitrary definition of adulthood applied to youth who commit crimes, asserting that institutionalization can harden them and impede their emotional maturity.

Ms. Tolentino-Fox contributed by noting that even as youth reach the age threshold of 25-26, they still possess the capacity to change their thoughts and behavior due to ongoing brain development. She cautioned against defaulting to preconceived notions regarding youth capacity for change, citing scientific evidence supporting the possibility of desired transformation.

Systemic Responses

The panelists all acknowledged that advocating for systemic change to reduce the emphasis on incarceration goes against prevailing norms. This resistance is largely driven by the belief, especially among victims, that severe punishment is the only way to successfully rehabilitate youth.

Dr. Brown stressed the importance of identifying effective approaches, underscoring the need for evidence-based practices.

Mr. Jernigan highlighted the transformative power of providing holistic support to both families and perpetrators. When youth offenders are assured of receiving compassion upon their return

to the community, they are more motivated to engage in positive actions in the presence of those they have harmed and other community members.

Additional recommendations included the implementation of holistic intake processes that tailor treatment plans to the unique needs and circumstances of individuals.

Community Responses to Returned Youth

The panelists unanimously stressed the importance of providing life coaches and credible messengers as valuable resources in rehabilitation efforts. They underscored the essential role of restorative justice practices for both individuals who have caused harm and those who have experienced it.

Dr. Brown's cautionary message centered on not returning youth to unhealthy circumstances, whether they are emotionally, physically, or socially challenged. He argued that since youth often endure "hellish" conditions during detention, it is imperative to transform the circumstances and environments that await them upon their release. Dr. Brown advocated for families to seize the period of detention as an opportunity to shift their mindset and improve their circumstances, thereby creating a welcoming environment for youth returning home. However, he emphasized the necessity of also having systemic and institutional support mechanisms in place to assist families and individuals on this journey. Above all, it is crucial to communicate to youth that the community welcomes them back.

Conclusion

Executive Director Kristy Love thanked all the webinar attendees recognizing the value in pursuing actionable strategies that incorporate credible messengers, CBT, focused therapy, restorative justice principles, and holistic practices as practical and viable alternatives to youth incarceration. She thanked staff for organizing the webinar, and principals and community members for their attendance.