



Position Statement on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

To address juvenile justice concerns, the NPSC advocates for the use of evidence-based preventive interventions in state and local jurisdictions, with state, federal and private investments for building capacity for their rigorous implementation and data-driven accountability. There is overwhelming empirical evidence for preventative approaches that balance the goals of public safety while also improving youths' lives and earning potential, and saving tax dollars. Effective prevention necessitates the adoption of a continuum of coordinated, developmentally-appropriate interventions that are monitored by community stakeholders for quality implementation to achieve intended results (e.g., reduced crime and problem behaviors). Prevention science aligns with federal leadership's goals for relying on local decision making and management of public resources while expecting high standards for accountability and effectiveness.

To date, the predominant emphasis of "crime prevention" approaches is on the timeframe after a crime has occurred. Less often considered are approaches that address underlying risk factors in emergent problem behaviors as the results are not evident until later; it is more difficult to establish what has been prevented than to intervene after the fact and show improvement. In contrast, prevention science has established that targeting a broad range of functional domains—from child and adolescent development, family functioning and community supports and system change—has the greatest potential to avoid juvenile justice involvement altogether. ***Effective prevention of a range of problems requires fostering environments from the prenatal period onward that nurture successful child and adolescent development.*** In particular, reducing exposure to adversity and traumatic experiences, and addressing its negative consequences are critical to prevent the development of behavioral health problems. This overarching strategy is within the purview of juvenile justice, but must be coordinated across multiple systems designed to promote healthy development and well-being. ***And importantly, community members, including youth, ought to be given the opportunity to review and actively choose the range of evidence-based practices and programs that are adopted.*** This practice increases the likelihood of local buy-in and the emergence of local champions. It also increases the likelihood that the program's principles are culturally syntonetic with the community's values. By focusing on prevention and earlier intervention in collaboration with education, primary care, workforce development, public health and the community and its youth, juvenile justice systems can avert the development of lifelong offenders through cost-effective strategies.

Juvenile delinquency is influenced by high rates of concentrated poverty, unemployment, decaying infrastructure, inadequate affordable housing, low educational attainment, negative school climate (e.g., overly punitive discipline; bullying), drug and alcohol abuse, fragmented service systems and disconnected neighborhoods. In disadvantaged urban areas, youth are exposed to chronic adversity and trauma which produces a normative view of risk behaviors. In fact, concentrated neighborhood poverty is the single most detrimental influence on child developmental outcomes, which increases susceptibility to a variety of poor outcomes, including violence. Chronic adversity leaves its mark in the form of developmental, cognitive, and academic deficits that can impact brain function, emotional regulation, and problem solving skills. Furthermore, these youth often lack the protective factors that are developed through engaging in positive and prosocial relationships with adults and peers. These disadvantages pose significant challenges to children, youth, and parents/guardians in breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Findings from prevention science and the use of evidence-based programs can play a key role in interrupting cycles of delinquency and violence before crime and tragedy occur. This approach shifts our attention away from a reactive and more punitive stance, which fails to achieve intended results; e.g., incarceration is associated with increased recidivism and is about 4-7 times more expensive compared to effective community-based programs. Rather, scientific approaches more directly address the underpinnings of risk behaviors, including neglect, trauma, early signs of behavior challenges, family discord, poorly equipped educational systems, and under-resourced communities. Approaches that intervene before criminal behavior begins and target high risk groups using data-driven approaches have a particularly high return-on-investment. Specifically, assessments of

youths' needs, strengths, risk and protective factors can identify youth who would most benefit from specific interventions, or inform the use of services and supports for youth already involved in service systems (e.g., foster care youth are at high risk of juvenile justice involvement).

Despite exposure to risk factors, delinquent behavior tends to decline naturally as youth age. Adolescents' brains are not fully developed, reducing their ability to inhibit impulses and control emotions. This knowledge presents both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, incarceration can stunt adolescents' cognitive and socio-emotional development and deny vulnerable youth the opportunity to successfully transition into adulthood (e.g., developing healthy relationships, completing school and entering workforce), which likely exacerbates criminal and violent behavior. On the other hand, ***it presents many opportunities for intervention which has the potential to measurably bolster development of neurological pathways that control judgment and behavior regulation, leading to reduced propensity to delinquency.*** Considering this body of neurobiological research consistently showing protracted neurodevelopment of self-regulatory systems, we also recommend that the age of waiver from juvenile to adult jurisdictions should be raised. The most effective approaches employ a therapeutic intervention philosophy (e.g., counseling, skill building and case management) coupled with restoration to victims and acceptance of personal responsibility for misbehaviors. There is also a dire need for mental health training for first responders, with a particular emphasis in understanding trauma, developmental capacities, and mental illness.

Although juvenile incarceration is generally detrimental to public safety and taxpayer budgets, the NPSC acknowledges that incarceration of some high-risk juvenile offenders may be necessary. In such circumstances, ***recidivism can be reduced through community reentry strategies, including those that build prosocial and workforce skills, and support juvenile offenders' substantial needs for mental and behavioral health services (e.g., Medicaid enrollment).*** Also, small and local incarcerative facilities are generally more humane and effective than large and distal facilities, discharge planning efforts should be coordinated with families and local communities as soon as a young person is incarcerated, and creating a continuum of trauma informed systems and programming to prevent retraumatization is critical. And consultation with judges and attorneys should incorporate these strategies (see http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/trauma_20bulletin.pdf). Successful reentry is aided by quality case management, facilitating pre-release discharge planning, support and supervision during readjustment, coordinated services, family engagement, and permanency planning. However, additional research is needed to evaluate and refine related interventions.

For sustainable change, it is critical that child- and family-serving agencies work closely with researchers, community organizations, and residents (including youth) and are led by federal agencies to develop data-driven infrastructure and dynamic service systems that include a continuum of prevention programs designed to meet the aspirations and needs of vulnerable youth. Better system collaboration is needed; e.g., shared goal setting, braided funding, etc. Overall, research has documented how prevention science and evidence-supported interventions can significantly reduce and prevent delinquency. Proven effective are opportunities for and access to evidence-based programs designed to support parents, promote children's, socio-emotional and behavioral control, enhance self-efficacy, and improve school climate and educational quality. An interdisciplinary, interagency, intergenerational approach is needed to drive and sustain change at all levels and sectors of the community.

Please see our website at www.npscoalition.org for further information or contact us at one of the addresses below. We look forward to continuing and expanding our consultation, resources, referrals, and other tasks required to implement and scale effective programming.

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