



San Diego County Juvenile Justice System Guiding Principles

Partners: San Diego County Probation Department, Juvenile Court Bench, District Attorney’s Office, San Diego County Health & Human Services Agency – Behavioral Health, Public Defender’s Office, County of San Diego Public Safety Group, San Diego County Office of Education, and The Children’s Initiative

Our Guiding Principles are grounded in over twenty years of national research and evidence-based practices aimed at improving outcomes for youth while ensuring community safety. We prioritize prevention and early intervention programs and services for at-risk youth to redirect delinquent behavior and support healthy development. Acknowledging the critical roles of families, we engage them throughout our initiatives to strengthen support systems. We are committed to providing comprehensive treatment options to address mental health, substance use, and trauma, while also facilitating successful reentry for youth returning to their communities to reduce recidivism. Additionally, we recognize the importance of supporting victims impacted by youth crime, incorporating victim services that promote healing and restoration. By integrating family engagement, treatment, reentry, and victim support, we aim to create a holistic approach that enhances community safety and promotes positive outcomes for youth.

1. Youths Are Fundamentally Different from Adults

Research has proven that youths are fundamentally different from adults due to the ongoing development of their brains, particularly in the areas critical for responsible judgment and impulse control. This developmental stage makes youth more prone to risky behavior, act impulsively, and overlook long-term consequences of their actions,^a but it also means they have a greater capacity for rehabilitation.^b Research demonstrates that interventions within the juvenile justice system should be carefully tailored, focusing on rehabilitation rather than punishment, especially for those at low risk of reoffending.^c

2. Rehabilitation Over Punishment

The juvenile justice system should prioritize rehabilitation, education, treatment, and skill-building rather than punishment. The juvenile justice system is fundamentally rooted in the principles of rehabilitation, support, and fair treatment, with a primary focus on helping youth successfully reintegrate into society.^d In order to promote fairness and equity, research demonstrates that a validated risk and needs assessment can ensure objective decision-making across diverse youth populations.^e Our approach to probation centers on individualized, strength-based, and trauma-informed case planning, which involves open dialogue among youth, their families, and probation officers.^f We recognize that probation terms, conditions, and services must be tailored to suit individual youth’s needs.^g

Research has shown that probation terms and conditions should reflect the unique needs of each individual youth, and that positive behavior should be incentivized, which can enhance outcomes and lower costs without compromising public safety.^h Our policies and programs are designed to align with the developmental needs of adolescents,ⁱ and we emphasize accountability through graduated response systems that encourage constructive behaviors.^j Lastly, we affirm that evaluating the performance of juvenile justice systems and services using data-driven insights are critical strategies for ensuring public safety and ensuring effective decision-making.^k

3. Early Prevention and Intervention

Early prevention and intervention are foundational to the juvenile justice system, aiming to address risk factors before they lead to delinquent behavior. Research consistently demonstrates that proactive strategies not only reduce the likelihood of youth entering the juvenile justice system but also yield significant societal and economic benefits.^l Intervening early in a youth's life, especially at the first sign of delinquent behavior, can help prevent future involvement with the justice system.

4. Limiting the Utilization of Detention Facilities

Research has shown that the utilization of detention facilities should be limited to youth who pose a threat to themselves or the community,^m and that placement in such facilities does not effectively reduce reoffending behaviors and can have negative impacts on the future health and success of young people.ⁿ Environments within these facilities should be homelike, supportive, trauma-informed and centered around positive youth development principles.^o

5. Keeping Youth in the Community – Diversion

Transforming the juvenile justice system is essential for achieving better outcomes for youth and enhancing public safety. Youth involved in low-level offenses often do not require court oversight or sanctions and may instead benefit from community-based services that address their key physical, behavioral, health, and educational needs.^p This transformation emphasizes the importance of diverting low-risk, low-level offenses away from traditional judicial processes^q through the utilization of diversion program. By implementing diversion programs, we can prevent unnecessary incarceration and instead provide guidance and support to youth in a manner that encourages rehabilitation.^r

6. Programming is Important for Youth Success

Programming is essential for the success and well-being of youth. It is crucial to provide opportunities for learning, participation, attachment, and belonging,^s particularly for those at high risk of reoffending.^t Our programming should be tailored to meet the individual needs that contribute to delinquent behavior, ensuring that each youth receives the support necessary for their development. Research shows the importance of facility programs that build positive relationships with pro-social adults, helping youth navigate essential developmental tasks.^u

7. Family and Community Engagement is Essential

The successful reentry of youth is fundamentally supported by the active involvement of family and community resources, highlighting the importance of collective support in the youth's transition. Agency leaders can enhance the perception of families by implementing mission statements that are grounded in strength-based and family-centered principles.^v Public systems can be beneficial in creating positive futures for disconnected youth, but the most significant and lasting influences come from their families and communities.^w Involving families and caregivers in the development of care plans is essential, and their engagement throughout the clinical process including during assessment, treatment planning, and transition planning should be prioritized.^x

A broad and inclusive definition of "family" is essential to encompassing not only biological or legal relationships, but also significant relationships – mentors, teachers, positive peers – who can support a young person's journey towards a crime-free and productive adulthood.^y

8. Youth Voice

Listening to the voices of youth goes beyond simply acknowledging their stories and recognizing their insights; it requires working with them to find solutions. This collaborative effort builds trust, empowers youth, and fosters accountability within justice initiatives. By engaging youth in meaningful dialogue, we can better understand their needs and aspirations. Every young person deserves the chance to shape their own lives and contribute to their communities.^z

9. Academic Growth and Opportunity

Research has shown that education within correctional settings is essential for reducing recidivism and fostering positive long-term outcomes in both educational achievement and employment.^{aa} Technology should complement and enhance the essential role of teachers and in-person instruction rather than replace them.^{bb} Juvenile detention facilities should foster a safe and supportive environment that prioritizes educational opportunities and addresses the unique needs of all youth, including those with disabilities and English learners, to receive the individualized behavioral and social support services they need to thrive.^{cc}

10. Individualized Treatment and Care

Every youth entering the juvenile justice system should receive a mental health screening as soon as possible, with follow up screenings if they reenter the system or experience significant life changes.^{dd} It is essential to have policies, procedures, and training in place to effectively respond to these screenings, ensuring that all youth, particularly those with co-occurring mental and substance use disorders, receive appropriate assessments, emergency responses, and referrals for treatment.^{ee}

Every youth with behavioral health needs should have a comprehensive and personalized treatment plan that responds to their individual strengths, concerns, and circumstances, identified during the assessment process.^{ff} Practitioners are encouraged to employ evidence-based practices and tools that are applicable within correctional environments and can be executed with fidelity.^{gg} Facilities should emphasize the continuity of care, ensuring that the treatment provided during custody seamlessly transitions into the process of reentry.^{hh}

11. Reentry Planning Starts Day One

Effective reentry planning for youth and young adults should commence at the moment of the youth's admission to a facility or out-of-home program.ⁱⁱ This planning should be anchored in cognitive approaches that align with adolescent brain development,^{jj} ensuring that the youth receive the support they need during this critical transition. Research demonstrates that collaboration among stakeholders is essential to develop comprehensive policies and procedures tailored to the specific needs of youth, including the development of education transition plans and improved communication for immediate school placements and enrollments.^{kk} Fostering community-based care and nurturing positive relationships outside of institutional facilities is essential for helping youth feel secure and supported during their reentry journey.^{ll} Ensuring that secure and stable housing options are available to youth as they reintegrate into their communities is crucial for their successful transition and overall well-being.^{mm} Additionally, well-structured reentry plans not only promote success and decrease future interactions with the justice system, but also lay the groundwork for achieving broader life goals.ⁿⁿ

12. Listening to and Supporting Victims

Every victim of crime deserves to be treated with the utmost dignity and respect. Their experiences should be acknowledged and validated, ensuring that they feel heard and understood. Programs that incorporate restorative justice principles, such as victim-offender dialogues and community conferencing, have been shown to increase victim satisfaction, enhance perceptions of fairness, and reduce future delinquent behavior among youth offenders.^{oo} It is essential to provide access to comprehensive support resources that empower victims in their journey toward healing and justice. Victims should be provided the opportunity to be actively involved in the justice process and receive access to support services that empower them on their path to healing and justice.

Conclusion

By prioritizing these Guiding Principles, we can create a juvenile justice system that effectively addresses justice-involved youth, empowers youth to make constructive choices, and ultimately reduces recidivism rates, thus paving the way for promising futures. It is essential to embrace a compassionate and rehabilitative approach that focuses on understanding individual circumstances, rather than punitive measures that may not address the underlying issues. We believe in the potential for growth and change within our youth. By cultivating an environment that promotes healing and transformation, we can disrupt the cycle of reoffending and inspire safer communities for all stakeholders involved.

- ^a Weber, Umpierre & Bilchik. Transforming Juvenile Justice Systems to Improve Public Safety and Youth Outcomes (2018), 4.
- ^b Barry Holman & Jason Ziedenberg. The Dangers of Detention: The Impact of Incarcerating Youth in Detention and Other Secure Facilities (2006)
- ^c Mendel, Bishop & Cookus. Transforming Juvenile Probation/A Vision for Getting it Right (2018)
- ^d Mendel, Bishop & Cookus. Transforming Juvenile Probation/A Vision for Getting it Right (2018), 8
- ^e Tim Decker. A Roadmap to the Ideal Juvenile Justice System (2019), 12
- ^f Mendel, Bishop & Cookus. Transforming Juvenile Probation/A Vision for Getting it Right (2018), 36
- ^g David Muhammad. A Positive Youth Justice System (2019), 12
- ^h Mendel, Bishop & Cookus. Transforming Juvenile Probation/A Vision for Getting it Right (2018), 17
- ⁱ NCJFCJ Resolves to Help Modernize Approach to Juvenile Probation with Better Understanding of Adolescent Brain Development. NCJFCJ News. 8/21/17. Accessed April 4, 2025, <https://www.ncjfcj.org/news/ncjfcj-resolves-to-help-modernize-approach-to-juvenile-probation-with-better-understanding-of-adolescent-brain-development/>
- ^j Weber, Umpierre & Bilchik. Transforming Juvenile Justice Systems to Improve Public Safety and Youth Outcomes (2018), 13
- ^k Weber, Umpierre & Bilchik. Transforming Juvenile Justice Systems to Improve Public Safety and Youth Outcomes (2018), 24
- ^l Justice Policy Institute. (2009). *The Costs of Confinement: Why Good Juvenile Justice Policies Make Good Fiscal Sense*. https://justicepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/09_05_rep_costsofconfinement_jj_p5.pdf, 12
- ^m : Development Services Group, Inc. 2014. "Alternatives to Detention and Confinement." Literature review. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/AlternativesToDetentionandConfinement.pdf> , 1-2
- ⁿ Mendel, Bishop & Cookus. Transforming Juvenile Probation/A Vision for Getting it Right (2018), 15
- ^o Tim Decker. A Roadmap to the Ideal Juvenile Justice System (2019), 27
- ^p Weber, Umpierre & Bilchik. Transforming Juvenile Justice Systems to Improve Public Safety and Youth Outcomes (2018)
- ^q Mendel, Bishop & Cookus. Transforming Juvenile Probation/A Vision for Getting it Right (2018), 28
- ^r Mendel, Bishop & Cookus. Transforming Juvenile Probation/A Vision for Getting it Right (2018), 8
- ^s Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators and Center for Juvenile Justice Reform. Youth in Custody Practice Model: An Abbreviated Guide (2016), 14
- ^t Weber, Umpierre & Bilchik. Transforming Juvenile Justice Systems to Improve Public Safety and Youth Outcomes (2018), 24
- ^u Umpierre, Dedel, Marrow, & Paksereht. Youth in Custody Practice Model (YICPM): An Abbreviated Guide. (2016) 30
- ^v Umpierre, Dedel, Marrow, & Paksereht. Youth in Custody Practice Model (YICPM): An Abbreviated Guide. (2016) 10
- ^w Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Family-Engaged Case Planning: A Practical Guide for Transforming Juvenile Probation*. (2022), [aecf-familyengagedcaseplanning-2022.pdf](https://www.aecf.org/familyengagedcaseplanning-2022.pdf), 12
- ^x Office of Youth and Community Restoration. (2024). *Practice Guidelines for Treating Behavioral Health Disorders in SYTFs and Other Facilities*. Sacramento: Office of Youth and Community Restoration.
- ^y Weber, Umpierre & Bilchik. Transforming Juvenile Justice Systems to Improve Public Safety and Youth Outcomes (2018), 22
- ^z Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. (n.d.) Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth Adult Partnerships. Jim Case Youth Opportunities Initiative. [JCYOI-AuthenticYouthEngagement-2012.pdf](https://www.jcyoi.org/authenticyouthengagement-2012.pdf).
- ^{aa} Office of Youth and Community Restoration. *Building Higher Education Pathways for Youth in Secure Treatment Facilities in California: A call to Action*. Sacramento: s.n., 2024,(23).
- ^{bb} Duncan, A., & Holder, E. H. (2014). *Guiding principles for providing high-quality education in juvenile justice secure care settings*. US Department of Education and US Department of Justice
- ^{cc} Duncan, A., & Holder, E. H. (2014). *Guiding principles for providing high-quality education in juvenile justice secure care settings*. US Department of Education and US Department of Justice
- ^{dd} National Center for State Courts. (2022, March). *2022 Newsletters*. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://www.ncsc.org/>: <https://www.ncsc.org/newsroom/behavioral-health-alerts>
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- ^{gg} Office of Youth and Community Restoration. (2024). *Practice Guidelines for Treating Behavioral Health Disorders in SYTFs and Other Facilities*. Sacramento: Office of Youth and Community Restoration.
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- ⁱⁱ Wright, F. (2024). *Supporting Crisis Stabilization for Youth and Young Adults during Reentry*. The Council of State Governments Justice Center
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- ^{mmm} Coalition For Juvenile Justice. (2024). *Reentry Toolkit: A Resource for State Advisory Groups*. Coalition for Juvenile Justice.
- ⁿⁿ Duncan, A., & Holder, E. H. (2014). *Guiding principles for providing high-quality education in juvenile justice secure care settings*. US Department of Education and US Department of Justice. 3
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Glossary

Adolescent Brain Development: Refers to the physical, emotional, and cognitive changes that occur in the brain during the teenage years, typically between ages 10 and 25. This period is marked by significant growth and restructuring, particularly in areas related to decision-making, impulse control, emotions, and social behavior.

Community-based Program: A program providing treatment, services, and/or supervision to youth under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court as a part of a diversion program or as part of a youth's probation conditions. The program is "community-based," because it provides services in the community where the youth live, rather than in detention or in a secure confinement. (Judicial Council)

Constructive relationships: Positive, supportive connections that help youth rehabilitate, reintegrate into society, and reduce the likelihood of reoffending. These relationships can exist between the youth and a variety of actors in the juvenile justice system, including probation officers, social workers, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), mentors, family members, and even peers.

Data-driven: Practice of using accurate, timely, and objective data to inform decisions, policies, and interventions aimed at improving outcomes for youth in the justice system.

Delinquency: Refers to acts committed by minors (typically under age 18) that violate criminal laws or legal norms that bring the youth under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system.

Detention Facility: A secure facility used to confine youth who pose a threat to society or themselves. (YTC/East Mesa)

Diversion: Redirecting youth away from the juvenile justice system into alternative programs or supports.

Evidence-based practice: Policies, programs, and interventions that are grounded in systematic, scientific research demonstrating their effectiveness to reducing youth offending and improving outcomes for justice-involved youth.

Family (Broadly Defined): Recognizing diverse family structures, including pro-social chosen families along with extended families in supporting youth.

Re-entry: Planned process of helping youth successfully transition from a juvenile correctional facility or placement back into their family, school, and community life.

Trauma-informed care: An organizational structure and system framework that involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to traumatic stress reactions and the effects of all types of traumas. Trauma-informed care also emphasizes raising awareness and providing resources about trauma and the impact of trauma on youth, family members, and staff. (Title 15)