

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/it-takes-a-village-blog-series/it-takes-a-village-collaboration-is-key-to-keeping-kids-out-of-the-juvenile-justice-system>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

15-year-old J.B. is involved in a minor scuffle at a park. Instead of arresting him, police call a local crisis response program to address the behavior. J.B. receives counseling and is enrolled in an action plan to improve his grades, joins an ROTC program, and begins working student concessions at basketball games. His academic and extracurricular experience improves, he stays out of trouble, and sets a baseline for future success.

A young man and his mother have many conflicts at home. She doesn't know where to turn, so she calls the police. Her son is connected with a therapist and other methods that will help him control his frustration. It works. Without all the services the therapist connected us with, it would be tragic, the mother says. This has been a blessing.

Too often, stories like these don't have happy or productive endings. Youth misbehavior, like running away, skipping school, violating curfew, or fighting with siblings or parents is sometimes part of typical adolescent development. But it can also be a symptom of more serious underlying issues such as mental health needs, substance abuse, coping with a disability, or, in some cases, dealing with trauma or abuse. Arresting and locking up youth for these behaviors, instead of providing resources and coping mechanisms, is harmful for young people and does little to make their families and communities safer. Rather, it can increase tensions in communities and families while also placing strain on police officers increasingly called on to serve as, but not trained to be, social workers.

In the Center on Youth Justice (CYJ)'s report, [*It Takes a Village: Diversion Resources for Police and Families*](#), Vera explores strategies that help families and communities address problem behavior while avoiding contact with police or courts. These community-based strategies include implementing multi-agency resource centers for police, families, and young people; developing crisis mediation teams including therapists who aid in deescalating conflicts; and creating Crisis Intervention Teams for Youth (CIT-Y), which train officers to identify and react to adolescent development and mental health issues.

Early diversion before or at the first point of contact with law enforcement can help youth and their families get the support they need and stay away from the front door of the juvenile justice system. It can also provide resources and support for police officers and allow them to focus their efforts on keeping communities safe. Such strategies are most effective when government and community stakeholders work together to build and sustain them.

To further explore these strategies, CYJ will interview stakeholders from diversion programs in an upcoming series of blogs. We will discuss:

The conversation on youth diversion strategies and their implementation across the U.S. is an important aspect of juvenile justice reform. Stay tuned for more.

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