



**PIERCE COUNTY
JUVENILE JUSTICE
ASSESSMENT**

August 2025

Acknowledgements

Contributors

Alya Azman, MPH

Kathryn Cunningham, PsyD

Anna Duncan, MPH

David Garavito, JD, PhD

Noah Gubner, PhD

Jean Hernandez, BA

Robyn Metcalfe, PhD

Rachel Porter, BA

Santiago Pedraza Arenas, UW law school student

Meli Sameh, MPH

Sarah Cusworth Walker, PhD

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INTRODUCTION

Following a 2024 County Council request, the Pierce County Performance Audit Committee contracted with the CoLab for Community and Behavioral Health Policy at the University of Washington to conduct an audit of the county's juvenile justice system against national and research best practice. The assessment is intended to guide future county investments in preventing and responding to youth crime, particularly youth violence, and to inform current policy discussions around the need to invest significant county funds into a renovation or reenvisioning of the current Juvenile Justice Court and Detention Center (Remann Hall).

Approach

The University of Washington's CoLab for Community and Behavioral Health Policy and colleagues from the UW School of Law took a multiple methods approach to gather and synthesize information with the aim of identifying gaps and opportunities in structure, practices, and programming. The UW team followed a scope of work outlining specific points to address in the review: 1) Identification of the Obligations and Functions of the Court and Court Partners; 2) Analysis of Factors Contributing to Youth Violence (full contract scope of work in the appendices).

Methodologies to address the scope of work included rapid evidence reviews (RERs) of the academic literature, interviews with court personnel, document review, data analysis, and interviews with legal system partners across the continuum of justice response in Pierce County.

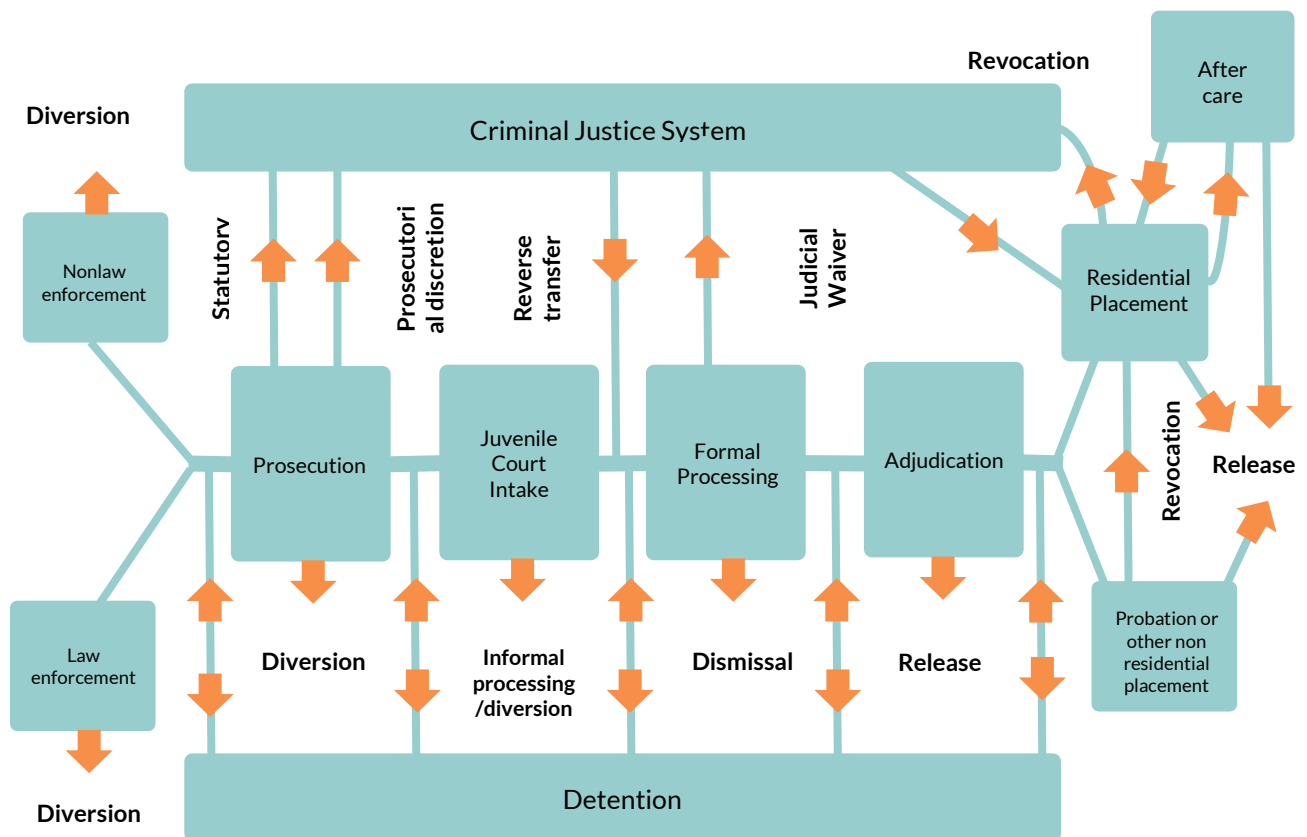
Interviews with court staff included six program supervisors and division leads to obtain qualitative information about availability, accessibility, and equity across programs. Additionally, supervisors and leads provided reflections on areas for improvement. Document review was used to identify any additional programming, alternatives to incarceration, behavioral health needs, performance measurement, and program equitability that was not covered in the focus group. Data review and analysis provided quantitative information about court programming, specifically recidivism, program completion rates, and equitability of enrollment. Legal system partner interviews were completed to gain insight into frameworks for system involvement, cross-system participation, and decision making points throughout a youth's episode of justice involvement.

The report begins with a summary assessment organized by legal decision point along the continuum of justice response. The longer technical report reports findings by data gathering type. The technical report includes additional information on the details of data gathering and analysis.

SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

The term juvenile justice system in this report is taken to encompass all points of legal decision-making that determine how long a youth remains under legal jurisdiction. This includes arrest and referral (law enforcement), charging (prosecuting and defense attorneys), adjudication/sentencing (judges), detention (judges, court), probation monitoring (court), and long term incarceration (judges). Diversion can occur at any point in this system depending on local agreements and programs. Below we report insights from relevant statutes, previous reports on the juvenile justice system in Pierce County, and interviews with Pierce County professionals working within these specific decision-points.

Juvenile Justice Continuum



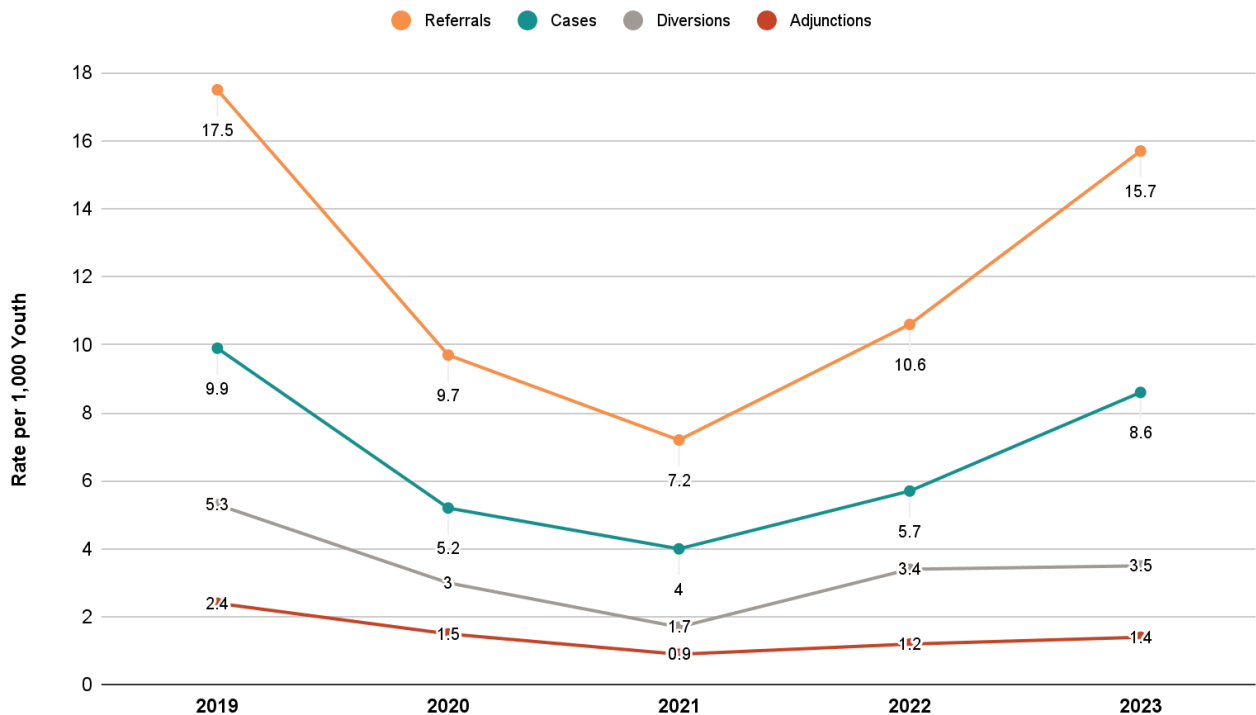
Source: *Juvenile Crime, Juvenile Justice*, National Academies Press, 2001.

Underlying Crime Trends and Court Effectiveness

Trends in youth referrals to law enforcement in Pierce County are consistent with national averages. The nation, as a whole, saw a peak of juvenile referrals in the mid 1990s with subsequent declines, reaching a low in 2019.¹ In the last two years, rates of referral have climbed across the country but have not exceeded 1990 levels nationally. Pierce County saw a similar U-shaped referral pattern from pre-and post 2019.²

Pierce County | Referrals, Cases, Diversions, & Adjudications

Filtered by | Gender *All Genders | Race/Ethnicity: *All Races | Age group: *All Ages | Offense Category: *All Offenses



Source: [Juvenile Court Dashboard](#), Washington State Center for Court Research

While the increasing and decreasing trends of referrals are consistent with state and national trends, Pierce County’s rate of referrals is high compared to similar

¹ Charles Puzzanchera et al., *Juvenile Court Statistics 2009*.

² Washington State Center for Court Research, “Juvenile Court Dashboard - Washington State Youth (Ages 8-17): Referrals, Cases, Diversions, and Adjudications.”

Washington State counties. Pierce County refers 15.7 youth per 1,000 to the juvenile court (after law enforcement contact) compared to 14.3 in Spokane, 6.4 in Snohomish and 3.8 in King County (2023 data is most recent).³ Referrals represent a number of factors including true underlying frequency of crime and policing practices. As Pierce County also has higher rates of violent arrest and referral for adults in the state,⁴ we can be fairly confident that the county has a higher incidence of youth criminal activity than comparable counties.

At the same time, the Pierce County juvenile court appears to outperform state averages in reduced youth reoffense rates (recidivism) following justice system involvement (defined as new filings from the prosecutors office). A study of PCJC recidivism by the Administrative Office of the Courts in 2023 found that within 12 months of being charged and placed on probation, 18% of youth had committed a new crime.⁵ This is lower than available, published rates of recidivism across the state although differences in time to follow up mean that direct comparisons should be interpreted with caution. The most recent Washington State recidivism study (2018) found that 23% of youth who appeared in juvenile court reoffended within 18 months and 54% of youth who were incarcerated in one of the state's Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration facilities reoffended within 18 months.⁶ PCJC's recidivism rates also outperform other states and jurisdictions. A study of national youth recidivism rates across multiple states found an average 12 month recidivism percentage of 34% for youth assigned to probation.⁷ Taken together, we can be fairly confident that current PCJC practices are yielding recidivism rates around 47 to 50% lower than other jurisdictions.

However, as we will outline in the following brief summary, Pierce County lags behind other counties in violence prevention efforts focused on multicomponent, community based interventions. We heard from multiple departments across the legal continuum (law enforcement, prosecutors, and court services) that earlier services and diversion efforts are needed to manage the flow of cases and connect youth and families to services earlier in or prior to the legal process. We summarize these findings across the legal continuum below.

Community Violence Prevention

The safety, predictability, and supportiveness of a youth's environment exerts a substantial influence on the likelihood of their becoming involved in serious criminal activity. Family factors count heavily in this equation with high parent wellbeing,

³ Washington State Center for Court Research, "Juvenile Court Dashboard."

⁴ Campo, *Violent Crime Trends and Geographic Variations*.

⁵ Administrative Office of the Courts, *Recidivism - Pierce County Juvenile Court*.

⁶ Washington State Center for Court Research, *Juvenile Recidivism in Washington State: A 2013 Court Cohort and 2014 Juvenile Rehabilitation Release Cohort*.

⁷ Robertson et al., "Recidivism Among Justice-Involved Youth: Findings From JJ-TRIALS."

stable housing, and high family cohesion acting as buffers for other potential risks (e.g., low income, neighborhood safety). Coordinated efforts to strengthen communities, in addition to individual and family programs, are the most effective approach to prevention of youth crime and violence.

Best practices for community violence prevention include multicomponent initiatives. These include efforts aimed at strengthening the built environment (safe parks, walking spaces, community recreation opportunities), youth programs (afterschool, employment training), family programs (groups, family education, family assistance) and ongoing continuous improvement and learning processes. Examples of studied models include:

- Fit2Lead Park-Based Afterschool Program: This program in Miami-Dade, Florida focused on preventing violence and promoting mental health, and was found to reduce youth arrest rates. This study used a prospective cohort design and difference-in-differences models, comparing neighborhoods with the Fit2Lead program to matched areas with other after-school programs.⁸
- The Safety Net Collaborative: In Cambridge, Massachusetts, this community-based intervention integrated mental health professionals, police departments, schools, and human services. It observed a 50% decrease in community arrests among at-risk youth. This finding was based on a pre- and post-implementation comparison of arrest rates in the community.⁹

An effort is underway in Pierce County to develop a strategic plan to address youth violence that appears to align with recommended best practices. The approach, Peace Point, is supported by the nonprofit Imagine Justice, and includes the Youth Services Agencies Network (YSAN), a county collective of youth serving agencies across the county focused on preventing and interrupting youth violence. Apart from this approach, our study did not identify other systematic, coordinated efforts to address youth violence prevention that aligned with recommended best practices.

⁸ D'Agostino et al., "Association of a Park-Based Violence Prevention and Mental Health Promotion After-School Program With Youth Arrest Rates."

⁹ Barrett and Janopaul-Naylor, "Description of a Collaborative Community Approach to Impacting Juvenile Arrests."

Interviews with court services, prosecutors and law enforcement staff reinforced the value and need for more upstream, coordinated prevention efforts:

“I think as a community, there’s a lot of opportunity to have better policies around early childhood development, investing at the front end. Policies that say you will have services during the summer, after school... I think there could be more things done with the health department and other systems cross-collaborating in a more powerful way. I think there could be more things done in more neighborhoods, smaller settings, hub-type things.”
- Court Services Staff

“We have tended to become the default for places that also don’t have resources, or their responses are inadequate, and then it comes to us by default rather than giving, you know, giving the police, for example, some resources on how to navigate a DV situation and a place where that young person can get some separation for the family members involved rather than coming to jail.”
- Court Services Staff

Informally, the prosecutor’s office receives many calls from parents or community individuals about issues that are non-criminal (e.g., “my child is dating a ‘bad seed’,” “my child won’t do their homework or chores,” etc.) or that have not yet involved a police report (e.g., “some kid slashed my tires”). In general, the prosecutor’s office expressed a need for mental health or other resources that could be available prior to the involvement of law enforcement.

Law Enforcement Referral

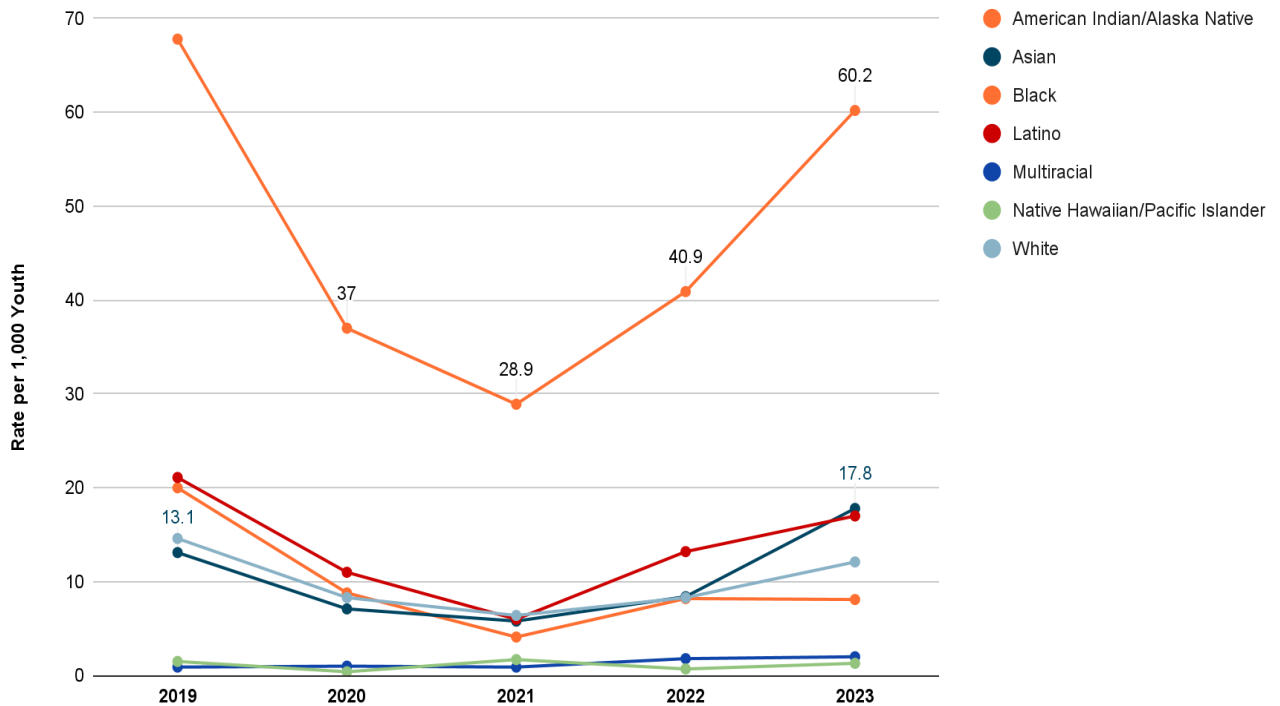
Youth in Pierce County come into contact with law enforcement through referral from family, community members, police, school officials, or a school resource officer. The Tacoma Police Department and Pierce County Sheriff’s Office handle a large proportion of youth arrests and referrals. When a youth becomes known to law enforcement through one of these avenues, the officer has a number of legal options: they can make an arrest and take the youth into their own custody, they can decide to take the youth to the youth county detention center (Remann Hall) or to a different

location (e.g., take the youth home), they can pass along a referral to the prosecutors' office without an arrest, they can cite the youth (a warning), or they can decide to not take any action. Interviews with law enforcement revealed a significant degree of discretion as well as variability in how individual officers handle these cases. A contributing issue in decision making for many officers is their perception of how effective a formal referral will be, particularly for misdemeanors which are often dismissed by the prosecutor's office, as compared to giving the youth a citation.

Interviews with law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges highlighted a shared interest in establishing a more formal diversion process for assessing the needs of youth at first contact, particularly for misdemeanors. Schools are one of the most frequent referral sources to law enforcement. Some in the Pierce County area are finding success with pilot studies aimed at handling cases that would otherwise be referred to police offices, including School Resource Officer programs and/or direct referrals to community based organizations. Currently, School Resource Officers have a greater ability than police officers to assess other contextual factors surrounding a youth's behavior and make more informed decisions when considering referring youth to the prosecutors. The Bethel School District is observing significant success with a program that refers youth exhibiting behavioral problems directly to community based organizations in the district's geographical area.

Referrals in Pierce County filtered by

Gender: Female & Male | Race/Ethnicity: American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black and 4 more | Age Group: 8 - 11, 12 - 14, 15 - 17 | Offense Category: Multiple Selected



Source: Juvenile Court Dashboard, Washington State Center for Court Research

Establishing an upstream diversion process that refers youth to community services is an effective way to reduce long term crime. A study by Cauffman et al. (2020) found that youth who were informally processed (e.g., diverted to community service) after their first arrest experienced significantly better long-term outcomes, including reduced re-arrests and incarceration, compared to those formally processed.¹⁰ In an additional longitudinal study by Cauffman et al. (2024), the authors found that youth informally processed (e.g., diverted to community service) after their first arrest experienced significantly better long-term outcomes over a nine-year period, including reduced re-arrests and incarceration, compared to those formally processed.¹¹

¹⁰ Cauffman et al., “Crossroads in Juvenile Justice: The Impact of Initial Processing Decision on Youth 5 Years after First Arrest.”

¹¹ Cauffman et al., “Adolescent Contact, Lasting Impact? Lessons Learned From Two Longitudinal Studies Spanning 20 Years of Developmental Science Research With Justice-System-Involved Youths.”

Charging (Prosecutors) and Adjudication (Judges)

Prosecutors have legal discretion in how they choose to manage referrals from law enforcement, including whether to divert, dismiss, or charge youth and refer them to a court process. Our interviews revealed that prosecutors would welcome a court-monitored diversion process that took in referrals from law enforcement and triaged cases for pre-filing diversion or recommending filing by the prosecutors.

If cases remain pre-file and do not involve detention, the court can provide an evaluation and assessment to guide program decisions without needing defense attorney review as long as the youth and guardian consent to the assessment voluntarily in lieu of charging. Interviews with staff across the legal continuum suggested or alluded to the need for legally allowable assessment and services prior to formal charges.

“My wish would be that we can have [competency] evaluations and representation in the diversion realm, that you shouldn’t have to get formal charges to be evaluated properly.”

-Court services staff

“Sometimes our kids end up in detention and the judge is asking for resources and the resources are saying, ‘Until they’re out, we can’t provide resources.’ So you’ve got that gap of two different systems working against each other.”

-Court services staff

In Washington State, Clark County runs a probation-managed diversion system that takes referrals directly from law enforcement and triages cases that go to formal review by the prosecutors. Other jurisdictions outside of Washington state have implemented similar processes, often through Juvenile Assessment Centers, which are described in more detail in the appendices. Our interviews across law enforcement, judges, prosecutors, and court staff yielded uniformly enthusiastic interest in expanding diversion programs. Notably, there were no concerns about the detention center being underused (i.e., interviewees feeling that more youth should be detained than are currently).

Court and Probation Services

Pierce County juvenile probation services run programs aligned with the research evidence for the most effective approaches, including family-based services and wraparound mental health services. Much of the court's success is likely due to their extensive community partnerships and triage process to encourage the best match between youth and family need.

"We've tried to solicit partnerships with diverse agencies in the community that serve different populations, we have gender-specific programs for young women and also for young men only."

-Court services staff

"We try to utilize the data to see which populations of youth are most at risk and have the highest needs so we can target the services to them."

-Court services staff

However, interviews and document review suggested some areas of recommended investment and improvement. Staff highlighted limited capacity and transportation issues with many community and court-sponsored programs. Most programs are located near the urban center of the county in Tacoma and there are limited spots for in-demand mental health and counseling programs.

"The number one [barrier to services] is transportation."

-Court services staff

"We shouldn't have to be bringing kids who live in Yelm or Bonney Lake or Eatonville to Tacoma for a program. It just doesn't make sense."

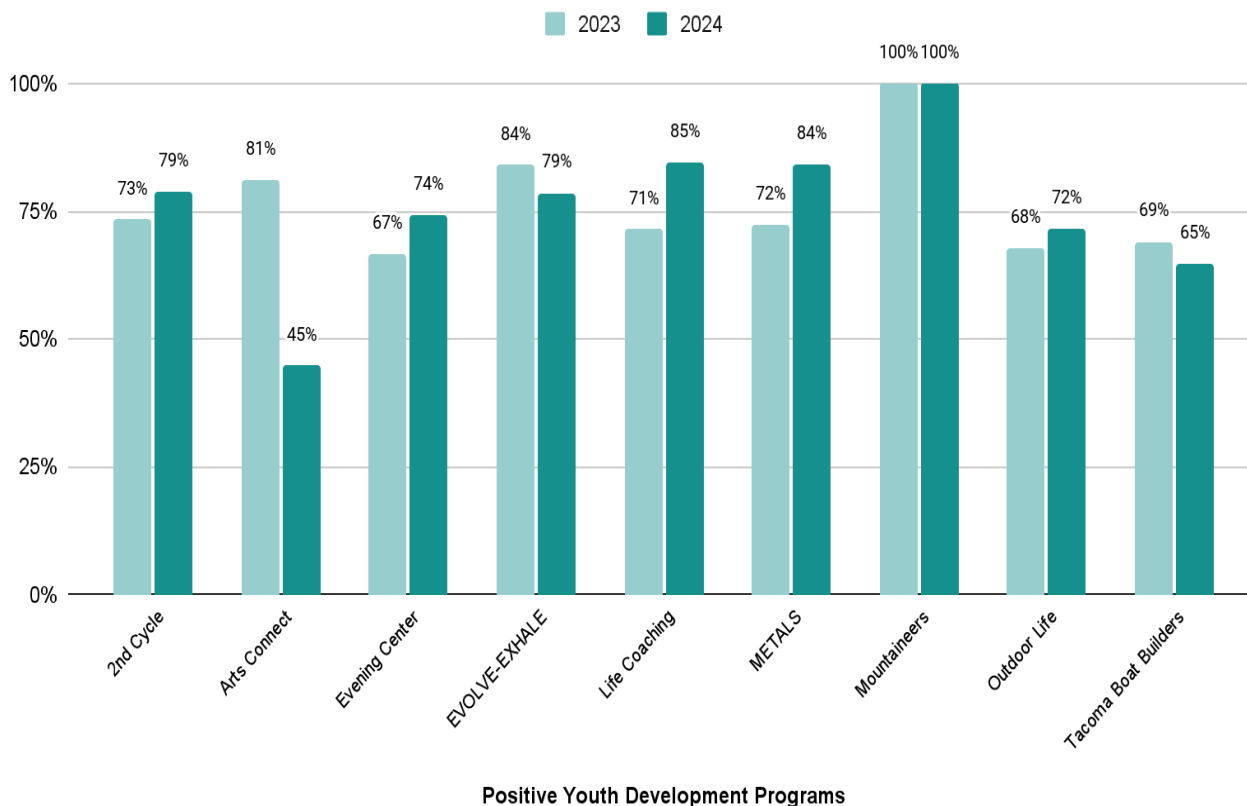
-Court services staff

"We have limited space for counseling."; "Alliances only has a capacity for 15. There are a lot more youth with mental health challenges that we serve, so it's a resource issue."

-Court services staff

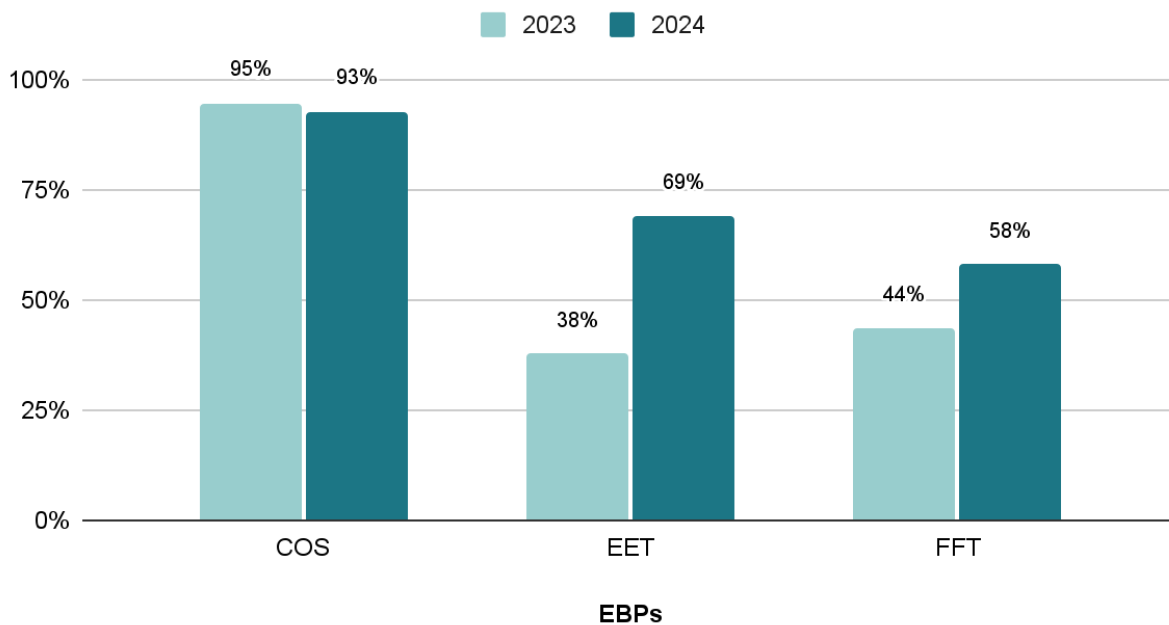
Program completion for PCJC services is higher than comparable jurisdictions. The PCJC probation program completion average is around 75% across services. Average program completion for nationally studied probation programs ranges from 22 to 45%.¹² Within PCJC services, completion is higher for positive youth development activities than family-based services. While family-based services completion is comparable to national averages (PCJC completion ranges from 38 to 58%), more investment and support for family completion of these services could yield further recidivism reductions.

Completion Rates of PYD Programs in 2023 and 2024



¹² Nelson et al., “Conditions of Successful Treatment Referral Practices with Justice-Involved Youth: Qualitative Insights from Probation and Service Provider Staff Involved in JJ-TRIALS.”

Completion Rates of EBPs in 2023 and 2024



A meta-analysis found that family-based treatments resulted in modest but long-lasting effects for youth when compared to services as usual, no-treatment control groups, or alternative treatment conditions.¹³ These effects were still evident 2.5 years after treatment completion, demonstrating the longevity of the intervention's impact. Effective family therapy interventions and family involvement are consistently identified in juvenile probation studies as core components in reducing juvenile delinquency.¹⁴

Recommendations

Engage public health, human services and other county departments in investing and implementing coordinated prevention approaches. The notably high incidence of youth crime and referral in the county combined with the strong performance of the justice system following legal response suggests Pierce County should focus its policy efforts on community-based crime prevention prior to referral, adopting multicomponent models found to be effective in other communities across the country. These efforts are typically led by public health and/or human services departments and involve the coordination of diversion programs to align a continuum of response.

¹³ Dopp et al., "Family-Based Treatments for Serious Juvenile Offenders: A Multilevel Meta-Analysis."

¹⁴ Aazami et al., "Risk and Protective Factors and Interventions for Reducing Juvenile Delinquency: A Systematic Review."

Prioritize coordinated prevention efforts in areas of high justice referral and adopt culturally responsive approaches. Given high rates of race disproportionality in arrest and referral (Black youth are referred to the court 5 times more than White youth), community prevention efforts and resources should prioritize geographical areas of high racial diversity and high rates of referral to the juvenile court.

Develop law enforcement-to-probation diversion programs. Law enforcement, prosecutors, judges and court staff were consistent in recommending more diversion opportunities from law enforcement to court-run programs, bypassing formal legal involvement while retaining appropriate legal protections. Overall, the analysis suggests the county focus its resources on building front-end community resources and diversion options, reducing the footprint of formal court operations, while maintaining the judge's and court's oversight role in ensuring diversion options are working effectively.

Focus probation reforms on expanding and strengthening family-based programs while retaining youth programs. Completion was lower for family-based programs, though consistent with program engagement rates among justice populations nationally. Given the literature support for family-based services and the opportunity to improve completion, the county should consider additional investments to strengthen and expand these programs.

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TECHNICAL APPENDICES BY INFORMATION GATHERING METHOD

[Interviews from the Youth Legal Continuum in Pierce County and RCW review](#)

[Evidence Review](#)

[Court and Diversion Interviews and Document Review](#)

Interviews from the Youth Legal Continuum in Pierce County and RCW review

Methods

People from the following organizations were interviewed: Puyallup School District, Pierce County Sheriff's Office, Tacoma Police Department, Pierce County Prosecutors Office, Pierce County Department of Assigned Counsel, Pierce County Superior Court, and Pierce County Probation Department. Individual interviews were conducted over Zoom between the interviewee and the members of the interview team. The interview team was composed of two people: Professor David Garavito, JD, PhD, and Santiago Pedraza Arenas, a current professional student pursuing his JD at the University of Washington School of Law. For each interview, the team members asked the interviewee for consent to record the interview. If consent was given, then the interview was subsequently recorded via Zoom. Regardless of whether the interview was digitally recorded, both members of the interview team took notes in order to pull themes from the discussion and compared later when compiling overall summaries. Each interviewee was interviewed once for at least an hour, though all interviewees consented to additional questions from the interview team sent via email if necessary. After an interview was completed, both members of the team shared their finished notes to pull the most prevalent themes from the discussion. Each member of the interview team also independently reviewed the recording, if applicable, to pull additional themes and to confirm the accuracy of the summary document. The summary document was composed by compiling the pulled themes and finalized notes of each interview for each separate department, in combination with additional information pulled from reviewing applicable legal statutes, as well as previous reports from the Pierce County Juvenile Courts.

Referral from Schools through School Resource Officers

The first interaction that juveniles will have with the juvenile justice system is through law enforcement. Instead of simply relying on local police, school districts may choose to have a School Resource Officer (SRO) on campus. State law says there must be a written agreement each year that outlines what the SRO can do.

Washington law dictates that non-criminal discipline must be handled by the school, not the SRO. RCW § 28A.320.124(1)(a)(i). Principals and other school staff oversee discipline for non-criminal behavior. Under RCW § 28A.600.020, only school staff may suspend or expel students for serious or repeated non-criminal behavior. SROs cannot discipline students with suspensions or expulsions. Interviews with school district administrators suggest there is general support for SROs with concerns expressed by teachers and parents for the role SROs may play in increasing youth legal involvement. The biggest limiting factor to implementation of SROs is funding.

Although SROs do not have authority over non-criminal discipline, they do have full police powers on campus and can investigate crimes, arrest students, and give citations. Washington law states that an SRO's job is also to help keep students out of the court system when possible. RCW § 28A.320.124. Nevertheless, according to the juvenile division of the prosecutor's office, about one third of criminal referrals come from school districts. Whether SROs have an effect on reporting rates is unknown and merits further study.

SROs have a tremendous amount of discretion with regards to how to handle an incident. They might give a warning or make an arrest depending on the situation and their department's rules. If a crime may have been committed, such as an offense including drugs or weapons, the SRO oversees the investigation. Proponents of SROs and former SROs claim that SROs are more likely to have necessary context, allowing for more informed use of discretion when compared to regular police officers. Nevertheless, there are limits on the investigatory power of SROs similar to those of general law enforcement (see below). For example, SROs are not allowed to question a juvenile without an attorney present. RCW § 13.40.740.

As an alternative to involving law enforcement at the start, some school districts have tried to directly engage with community resources. Interviews with leaders in the Bethel School District indicated that direct school to community service partners, without engaging law enforcement first, is facilitating quicker access to services and showing positive outcomes. Similarly to SRO programs, the biggest limiting factor for expanding or sustaining community organization service partners is funding.

General Law Enforcement

Outside of School Resource Officers, the other primary entrance into the juvenile justice system is through law enforcement, typically the Pierce County Sheriff's Department or the Tacoma Police Department. For any law enforcement interaction, there must be some justification before someone is detained or arrested. For a detention, that justification must be reasonable suspicion; for an arrest, probable cause. This is true for juveniles as well as adults. However, individual officers do have discretion in how they respond to certain events. For example, as with SROs, officers have the discretion to decide whether to warn the juvenile, release the juvenile to a parent, or arrest them and begin formal booking (given that the officer has probable cause).

In our interview with a representative of the Pierce County Sheriff's Department, they highlighted an important difference between SROs and other law enforcement: SROs may have more knowledge about key context surrounding the juvenile. Under RCW § 13.40.740, police may not question juveniles without an attorney, whether an SRO, a deputy, or a police officer. According to the Sheriff's Department, this makes it significantly harder to get information and necessary context required for individualized treatment.

The Sheriff's Department indicated that there is significant variation in how officers make decisions regarding juvenile offense. Some officers arrest all individuals if there is probable cause that a crime was committed. Other officers, however, may decide not to arrest based on the context of the individual's actions or a perception that the incident will not progress further in the legal system (e.g., would not be filed by the prosecutors). Any time a juvenile is arrested or cited, the officer files paperwork with the Deputy Prosecuting Attorney.

Additionally, the Sheriff's Department emphasized that discretion does not play a role for certain crimes. This exception to the general permission to use individualized discretion comes up when a statute uses language such as "shall be arrested". In such cases, an officer has no discretion and must make an arrest if probable cause of that criminal offense (and any other necessary circumstances) exists.

Given the above discussions, one potential change suggested by law enforcement was the ability to expand discretion to allow officers to directly send a juvenile into a diversion program. This is a potential third option, as opposed to simple warnings or full arrest. Desire for another option stemmed from officers' frustration with their inability to address the needs of juveniles and the community without fully engaging the juvenile justice system, and that juvenile justice system referrals were often potentially to no avail based on beliefs about the frequent dismissal of misdemeanors.

Pre-Charging Defense Attorney

Before charges are officially filed, a juvenile may, but is not required to, speak to an attorney. A juvenile does not have to invoke the right to remain silent, and Washington state law also guarantees the right to an attorney. If the juvenile does not have financial resources, the attorney will be provided free of charge. This early discussion can be very influential on the juvenile's subsequent decisions, especially when thinking about accepting diversion or going to court.

Prosecuting Attorney

At some point after a juvenile is arrested, law enforcement will formally refer the case to the Pierce County Prosecuting Attorney's Office (PAO). Most often, referrals come from Tacoma Police Department or Pierce County Sheriff's Department. A representative from the PAO also indicated that the Office receives many calls from parents or community individuals about issues that are non-criminal (e.g., "my child is dating a 'bad seed'," "my child won't do their homework or chores," etc.) or crimes that have not yet resulted in an arrest and subsequent police report (e.g., some kid slashed my tires).

The PAO reported taking a generally anti-prosecutorial stance with juveniles. For example, the first 3 referrals that are misdemeanors or gross misdemeanors (i.e., typically minor non-violent crimes) are automatically sent to diversion, which is consistent with the practice of many county prosecutor departments in Washington state. For non-misdemeanor referrals, an individual prosecutor has discretion to send those cases to diversion as well. Outside of diversion, a prosecutor has the discretion to not file charges at all (i.e., dismissing the case entirely). Under RCW § 13.40.070(10), the prosecutor may decide to opt out of this decision, instead bringing in a Pierce County Probation Officer (see later section) to decide if the case should go to diversion.

These early triage decisions may be informed by several factors, including the individual prosecutor's methods and beliefs, the desires of involved parties (family, SROs or other law enforcement knowledgeable of relevant context, etc.), and the needs of the community. The exact methodology is up to the individual prosecutor, but the office does try to be uniform and discuss cases together in office meetings. Only in extreme cases does the judge question the prosecutor's decision to bring a case forward. According to the prosecutor's office, judges rarely push back.

Court diversion involves engagement with services that are supposed to address the needs of the juvenile and can last up to 90 days. If a juvenile violates the diversion contract, then the case will be returned to the prosecutor, who will still have the discretion to add any relevant charges, continue with the case, dismiss the case, or attempt diversion again.

Consistent with the interview with the Pierce County Sheriff's Department, one suggestion proposed by the PAO to improve the system was a direct path from law enforcement, specifically SROs, to the Probation Department and diversion programs or other intervention programming. This suggestion seems to be based on both the volume of cases that get redirected to diversion (or otherwise dismissed), as well as the limited resources of the courts and PAO. In general, the PAO expressed a need for mental health or other resources that could be available even before the involvement of law enforcement. The PAO acknowledged the "Youth at Risk" programming, but reported that many parents were frustrated with that program and complained about a lack of mechanisms to compel cooperation as well as about the time required from parents for hearings, organization, etc.

If a prosecutor decides to take a case to trial, as opposed to diversion or dismissal, then the case will move ahead to the Pierce County Juvenile Court. Juvenile Court has original jurisdiction over all juvenile cases. However, cases involving serious violent crimes (e.g., murder) may result in declination (i.e., moving to adult court and charging the juvenile as an adult). Declination is automatic for 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds who have committed specific violent crimes. For 15-year-olds and younger, declination is discretionary. According to the Court, discretionary decline of jurisdiction is controversial and has been lessened in the past few years (especially since 2019). The discretionary declination process needs to be motioned by the PAO, including detailing out the specific justifications for declination. Some factors that come into play are the length of time that the juvenile court may have jurisdiction over a juvenile (up to age 21), as adult court allows for a broader range of potential punishment, reform, etc. If approved by the judge, the case will be removed from the jurisdiction of Juvenile Court.

In addition to the above decisions, prosecutors also have discretion in terms of their recommendations to the assigned judge in a particular case. There is no jury in juvenile cases, so the judge is the sole fact-finder and decision-maker. According to the PAO, these recommendations typically are related to sentencing after an adjudication. The exact recommendations are dependent on the individual prosecutor, and the judge has discretion to approve such a recommendation, alter it, or reject it outright.

Defense Attorney

As mentioned earlier, juveniles have a right to an attorney. After charges are filed, a juvenile must have legal representation. This right exists “in any proceeding where the juvenile may be subject to transfer for criminal prosecution, or in any proceeding where the juvenile may be in danger of confinement.” RCW § 13.40.135(2). Additionally, should the juvenile be unable to afford an attorney in these circumstances “without causing substantial hardship to himself or herself or the juvenile's family,” an attorney will be appointed. *Id.*

Defense attorneys in general have discretion with regards to the legal strategies that may best serve their client(s). Only through their legal strategy and communications with the prosecuting attorney and judge can the defense attorney influence the outcome. How a particular strategy (or any aspect thereof) may be deemed in the best interest of the client depends on the circumstances of the case, characteristics of the juvenile (and the juvenile's state of living), etc.

Juvenile Court Judge

If a youth's case is diverted by the PAO, then a judge never sees the case, nor any details from the case. A judge only is brought onto the case after an arrest by law enforcement and decision to bring the case to trial by the PAO.

At the start of a case, the judge decides if a juvenile should be held in detention or released before trial. This decision is solely up to the judge's discretion and may be influenced by the severity of the crime, the home environment of the child, etc. In our interviews with the PAO and the presiding Superior Court Judge at Juvenile Court, there was a general aversion to holding juveniles in detention absent extreme circumstances. However, there was also acknowledgement that detention was sometimes the only option, if only because of the hazardous home lives of certain juveniles.

Juvenile trials do not have juries; the fact-finder and sole decision-maker is the judge. The judge decides what evidence is relevant, reviews all evidence and the arguments provided by the prosecution and defense, and decides if the juvenile should be adjudicated as delinquent. Judges have a tremendous amount of discretion that can impact the outcome of a particular case both in terms of the adjudication outcome and any possible sentencing. For example, judges can, but are not obligated to, approve plea deals that were negotiated between the prosecution and defense. Judges may adjust sentences or change release conditions. Such decisions are reviewed on an “abuse of discretion” standard, which is very difficult to meet on appeal, assuming the prosecution or defense oppose the judge’s decision(s).

If the juvenile is adjudicated delinquent, the judge “shall impose a determinate disposition within the standard ranges” RCW § 13.40.160(1)(a). The standard ranges which constrict the discretion of the judge depend on the offense committed. RCW § 13.40.0357. If the judge sentences a juvenile within the standard range, no party can appeal that sentence. RCW § 13.40.160(2). The presiding Superior Court Judge at Juvenile Court indicated that, in the past, Pierce County had a reputation of mandating high sentences for juveniles and a greater tendency of sentencing juveniles to adult court. These patterns were a result of the “superpredator” fears of the late 20th century. The Judge indicated that attitudes have significantly changed since that time and that there is presently a strong attitude against incarceration or detention of juveniles. These attitudes aligned with the interviews with other representatives of the juvenile justice system.

The judge is not obligated to sentence a juvenile within the standard range and has discretion to deviate from the standard ranges in certain circumstances. The most common of these circumstances arises if the judge determines, by clear and convincing evidence, that the range would result in “manifest injustice” to the victim(s), community, and/or juvenile. *Id.* The presiding Superior Court Judge at Juvenile Court indicated that alternative sentencing discussions originate after an evaluation of the youth’s mental health to determine if a juvenile is competent to stand trial. There are two other circumstances where the judge has the discretion to deviate from standard sentencing towards alternative sentencing programming.

The first circumstance exists when a juvenile is found to have committed a non-violent sexual offense and has no history of sex offenses. RCW § 13.40.162(1)(a).

In such cases, the judge may order that the juvenile be evaluated for compatibility with the special sex offender disposition alternative. RCW § 13.40.162(2). The judge

may order such a diversion regardless of whether the defense or prosecutor requested such an outcome. *Id.*

The judge has the discretion to order a second examination or to approve the prosecutor's or defense's motion for a second examination if so desired. RCW § 13.40.162(2)(c). After the examinations, the judge then has the discretion to determine whether to suspend the disposition on condition of successful completion of the special sex offender disposition alternative. RCW § 13.40.162(3). The presiding Superior Court Judge at Juvenile Court reported that this programming has the highest level of success among the alternative sentencing programming.

The other disposition alternative is available to juveniles "in need of substance use disorder, mental health, and/or co-occurring disorder treatment". RCW § 13.40.165(1). This programming is related to existing sentencing alternatives for adults: Drug Offender Sentencing Alternative (DOSA), per RCW § 9.94A.660. In addition to the presence of a mental health or substance use disorder, eligible juveniles must also be under threat of 36 weeks or fewer of confinement based on the standard guidelines and must not have committed certain serious offenses. RCW § 13.40.165(2). Upon evidence that a juvenile may qualify for such treatment, the judge may order an examination by a substance use disorder counselor or other mental health professional. *Id.* As with the special sex offender disposition alternative, the judge has the discretion to order a second examination or to approve the prosecutor's or defense's motion for a second examination if so desired. RCW § 13.40.165(5). An Axis I diagnosis under the DSM and a treatment plan are required to qualify for this alternative sentencing programming, regardless of if the justification is due to a substance use disorder or a separate mental health disorder. After reviewing the examination(s), the judge has the discretion to suspend the disposition for up to a year on condition of successful completion of mental health, substance use, or other relevant treatment. RCW § 13.40.165(6)(a-b).

The presiding Superior Court Judge at Juvenile Court noted several issues that the juvenile justice system is dealing with at the moment. Attitudes are tending to shift away from the adult detention of juveniles tried as adults and shifting towards detaining these youth in juvenile facilities. Regardless of which system is housing youth, the system needs support to determine when and if these youth are ready to reenter society. Currently, this process involves petitioning the sentencing judge for re-sentencing and, according to the Judge, the actual output of such petitioning varies depending on the judge, county, etc., resulting in inequitable outcomes. Further, he reported that the process can devolve into a "battle of experts," with each side hiring doctors to support their respective side, with research on child

development, for example. The Judge strongly advocated for a system that features indeterminate sentencing and a discretionary parole board.

Another issue mentioned by the Judge was the state of the current juvenile detention facility. Although he acknowledged that there should always be resources and facilities for detention, he indicated that the existing facility is outdated and was built during an era that emphasized harsh punishment and incarceration rather than rehabilitation (incompatible with contemporary beliefs in the system). For example, he noted that while multiple actors in the juvenile justice system in Pierce County believe that juvenile mental health crises are big causes of criminal behavior, this relationship is not addressed by the current facility. The Judge acknowledged that the biggest obstacle lately has been funding, not enthusiasm on the part of any actors within the system. This observation aligned with our interviews with other actors in the juvenile justice system. In an ideal world, the Judge indicated that he would suggest repurposing part of the existing facility to allow for programming for at-risk violent youth, featuring mentors and counselors who may address the source of violent and/or criminal tendencies. In line with what was suggested by the PAO and the Sheriff's Department, the Judge suggested that this programming could exist as a part of a non-criminal pipeline from law enforcement. Additionally, the Judge suggested that the facility could better use space outdoors for recreation (basketball, gardening, etc.) or therapeutic programming and activities.

In sum, judges possess an extraordinary amount of discretion concerning adjudication, sentencing diversion, etc. A tremendous amount of this process is dependent on individual judges, and inconsistency is part of the reason that the presiding Superior Court Judge at Juvenile Court would like to see certain decisions given to other bodies (parole boards, law enforcement to send directly to community diversion programming, etc.). Such a shift, according to the Judge, may mitigate the pressure on judges from voters who may believe in myths related to mental health or substance misuse. Other actors outside of judges or political offices, in the Judge's opinion, may be better positioned to make such decisions (and help spread "blame" across multiple sources).

Juvenile Probation Counselors

If the juvenile is adjudicated delinquent and placed on supervision, a probation counselor is assigned to manage the juvenile's case. The probation counselor acts as both someone to enforce the agreement between the court and the juvenile (i.e., making sure the juvenile follows court orders) and a resource to help the juvenile obtain necessary services. As mentioned earlier, under RCW § 13.40.070(10), a

prosecutor may opt out of the decision whether a case should go to trial or diversion and, instead, assign this decision to a probation counselor.

If a juvenile has potentially broken a condition of the supervision, the probation counselor has the discretion to notify the court or deal with the potential violation themselves. The probation counselor will gather information (possibly with the help of law enforcement, if they know more information about the potential violation). If the probation counselor decides that the court should be notified, the juvenile may face additional sanctions due to the violated terms of release.

Diversion Program

As mentioned earlier, a Deputy Prosecuting Attorney screens each juvenile case with discretion to select a case for diversion. The Prosecuting Attorney's Office reports that they generally favor diversion. Pierce County's diversion program allows eligible juveniles to avoid trial and possible adjudication. The meetings within and outcomes of diversion are not made public.

If a case is diverted, a group of trained Juvenile Probation Counselors, Case Monitors and on a smaller scale, staff at a community-based organization meet with the juvenile and their family. Together, this group sets a contract with obligations such as community service or counseling. The juvenile must agree to the drafted contract to participate in diversion, and the juvenile may talk to an attorney before deciding. If the juvenile follows the rules and conditions stipulated in the contract, the juvenile's case will be dismissed without any formal adjudication on their record. If the juvenile refuses or breaks the contract, the case goes back to the prosecutor, who may, but is not required to, file charges.

In addition to this formal Diversion process, Pierce County Juvenile Court also offers pre-file diversion for youth referred to the court for the first time for in-home violence (most commonly Assault in the 4th degree) or drug and alcohol- related offenses. These early intervention opportunities are designed to address behavior without formal processing or charges, provide access to services and support upfront, with a limited footprint in the system. Participation in pre-file diversion helps young people avoid deeper system involvement while still being held accountable in a developmentally appropriate manner.

During the interview with the Pierce County Sheriff's Department, there was some frustration noted regarding the supposed efficacy of this program. Specifically, there is a perception within law enforcement that the diversion program was not necessarily tailored to the needs of the individual juvenile. Instead, the perception is

that the standard diversion program is an online course that can be easily completed with few, if any, true attention checks. Thus, it is easy for a juvenile to get their record wiped, allowing for nearly automatic diversion without real rehabilitative methods to address the actual developmental (or other) needs of the juvenile.

Overall Summary

There are multiple actors whose decisions impact an individual juvenile's trajectory throughout the juvenile justice process. If a school district employs an SRO, that student might be more likely to interact with law enforcement. However, possessing additional context from the school environment might result in an SRO simply warning the juvenile, as opposed to starting a formal arrest and processing the juvenile. Once a juvenile enters the system, a prosecutor will tend to send most cases to diversion or otherwise keep them in juvenile court (as opposed to adult criminal court). However, individual prosecutors may decide to dismiss the case outright or to send the case outside of juvenile court. Judges have the most discretion once a case is actually brought to adjudication, and this is where politics may have the biggest impact, especially with stigmatized alternatives to disposition concerning mental health or substance misuse.

Overall, every person that was interviewed was highly supportive of and enthusiastic about diversion and alternatives to detention. Although there was acknowledgement that detention should always be an available option, there were no opinions that detention is being underused. This lines up with observations that there is no shortage of enthusiasm for further reform in Pierce County. Multiple actors suggested improvements to and expansions of diversion, including increased programming and expanded routes to diversion without requiring formal interaction with the juvenile justice system. Nevertheless, there was also acknowledgement of the limited amount of resources and the difficulty of renovating the existing facility to allow for broader rehabilitative or preventative programming.

Evidence Review

Method

The aim of the evidence review was to determine the most well-supported factors contributing to youth criminal legal involvement as well as the most effective services across the justice continuum (prevention through incarceration) for preventing youth criminal behavior. We conducted an umbrella review (review of reviews) using a rapid evidence review strategy (RER). RERs are a form of knowledge synthesis that accelerate the process of informing policy decisions in a responsive

timeframe. RERs represent a landscape of the best available evidence obtained through systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and other key resources. A team of one masters-level (MPH) and one doctoral-level (PhD) researcher completed the RER for this evaluation with consultation from two PhD-level content experts in juvenile justice research. This RER focused on two key questions: 1) What ecological factors contribute to youth violence and juvenile legal system involvement, including both risk and protective factors; and 2) What is the current evidence on the effectiveness of justice system involvement and alternatives to incarceration in preventing or reducing youth violence, including interventions targeting repeat offenders?

A search strategy was developed to capture studies addressing the review's primary research questions. The search string targeted three key concepts: 1) terms for adolescents and young people, 2) terms for the legal system or legal involvement, and 3) review types. The RER synthesized findings from systematic reviews, meta-analyses, seminal studies, and relevant gray literature from the past ten years.

This rapid evidence review identified peer-reviewed research published from 2015 to 2025 that met specific criteria across the following domains: language, study type, focus area, and relevance to the U.S. juvenile justice context.

1. **Language:** Only studies published in English were included.
2. **Study Type:** This review prioritized systematic reviews and meta-analyses, as they synthesize large bodies of research, often include quality and bias assessments, and reduce duplicative efforts. These study types are particularly well-suited for rapid reviews given their efficiency in distilling extensive evidence within a limited timeframe.
3. **Focus Area:** Studies must address one of two central domains: (1) ecological factors that contribute to youth violence and juvenile justice system involvement (e.g., individual, family, community, or structural determinants); or (2) intervention strategies designed to prevent, reduce, or respond to youth justice involvement, including diversion, community-based programs, or alternatives to incarceration.
4. **Relevance:** Studies must be situated in the United States or in a context with directly applicable juvenile justice structures. International studies were excluded unless their findings demonstrated strong relevance to U.S. policy and practice. Highly specialized topics (e.g., knife violence in London, studies focusing solely on sex offenders or intimate partner violence) or studies

focused on specific racial or ethnic populations were excluded to maintain generalizability to Pierce County's diverse population and goals.

Search Strategy

A search strategy was developed to capture studies addressing the review's primary research questions. The search string targeted three key concepts: 1) terms for adolescents and young people, 2) terms for the legal system or legal involvement, and 3) review types. See Table 1 for specific search terms used.

The search strategy used ESBCOHost Academic Search Ultimate and PubMed, which were identified as academic databases with extensive peer-reviewed literature on youth violence, youth violence prevention, and juvenile legal systems and programs. Citation searching and google scholar were used to identify seminal articles that may have been missed in the rapid evidence review search strategy or were published prior to 2015. Gray literature was also reviewed for relevant reports from community-based organizations, policy advocates, and leaders in reducing youth violence and incarceration.

After completing the search strategy and removing duplicates, title and abstract review were completed for all articles to assess relevance. For studies that met inclusion criteria, we conducted full-text reviews to determine inclusion in the final analysis.

Search Strategy Syntax

(teen OR adolescent OR youth OR young OR juvenile)

AND

(justice OR delinquency OR detention OR detained OR corrections OR correctional OR custody OR incarcerated OR incarceration OR recidivism OR criminal OR crime OR legal OR offenders OR prisoners OR court OR legally OR probation OR violence)

AND

(meta-analysis OR systematic review)

Search 1: What ecological factors contribute to youth violence and juvenile legal system involvement, including both risk and protective factors?

Fourteen articles were included in the review of ecological risk factors that contribute to youth violence and legal system involvement. Key findings are summarized below. Risk factors are grouped by characteristic category: (1) childhood experience characteristics, (2) family based characteristics, (3) personal & behavioral characteristics, and (4) environmental context.

Childhood Experience Characteristics

A large and growing body of evidence has found that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and childhood trauma are associated with legal system involvement (Ayano et al., 2024; Astridge et al., 2023; Folk et al., 2021; Pires et al., 2024; Yohros et al., 2023; Zaverdinou et al., 2023; and Zettler et al., 2021).

While both ACEs and trauma are related, ACEs should be considered as an important risk factor that is distinct from trauma (Bartlett & Sacks, 2019). Trauma is one possible outcome of exposure to an event that is perceived as harmful or frightening (e.g. ACEs). Certain types of childhood adversity are especially likely to cause trauma reactions in children, while others have more variability in children's reactions. ACEs and trauma affect each child differently and two children who experience the same adverse event may respond in different ways. A growing body of research has begun to identify multiple pathways through which ACEs and trauma increase risk of violence perpetration (e.g. negative emotionality, problem behaviors, impaired cognitive functioning because of early trauma, and emotional dysregulation).

Family Based Characteristics

Family conflict and dysfunction along with neglect and maltreatment were identified risk factors, while positive parental relationships (with either parent) were identified as protective factors (Aazami et al., 2023; Ayano et al., 2024; Ullman et al., 2024; Mroczkowski et al., 2021; Scott 2018). Aazami et al., 2023 found "family conflict and dysfunction" and "neglect and maltreatment" were the two primary predictors of juvenile delinquency. Girls may be more vulnerable to fluctuations in their parents' behaviors (i.e., switching between warmth and hostility) than boys. Aazami et al., 2023 and Ullman et al., 2024 found strong and positive parental relationships were found to be protective against delinquency among at-risk youth. Youth who experienced inconsistent parental discipline and placement in a substitute care child welfare setting exhibited worse behavioral and criminal justice outcomes. Having a high-quality parental relationship, whether with a mother or father figure, was associated with a decrease in violent offending behaviors. This highlights having positive family relationships and support as important protective factors.

Personal & Behavioral Characteristics

Youth involved in the criminal legal system have a higher incidence of certain types of mental health disorders and problematic substance use (Ayano et al., 2024; Geerlings et al., 2020; Livanou et al., 2019; Wibbelink et al., 2017; Ullman et al., 2024; Scott et al., 2018; Mroczkowski et al., 2021). Livanou et al., 2019 found a high prevalence of mental disorders and symptoms was found amongst incarcerated youth, highlighting the need for robust mental health services in custody settings.

Emerging personality disorders (borderline personality disorder: 21%; 95% CI: 13-28%; antisocial personality disorder: 62%; 95% CI: 39-82%) were higher in incarcerated youth populations than the general public. Males had higher prevalence rates for conduct disorder and emerging antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) than females.

Emerging ASPD was the most common disorder among young male incarcerated youth, with a pooled prevalence of 81%, while, 35% incarcerated female youth presented with emerging ASPD. Females had higher prevalence rates for depression (29%), separation anxiety disorder, and suicide. A higher pooled prevalence of conduct disorder was found in young females (pooled prevalence for males was 68% and for females 66%). More female incarcerated youth (42%) presented with emerging borderline personality disorder symptoms than males (15%).

Environmental Context

Academic engagement/performance, peer group membership, and prior legal system involvement were identified as risk factors for criminal legal involvement. Educational success and employment reduced the likelihood of legal involvement (Aazami et al., 2023; Ayano et al., 2024; Mroczkowski et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2018; Ullman et al., 2024).

Search 2: What is the current evidence on the effectiveness of justice system involvement and alternatives to incarceration in preventing or reducing youth violence, including interventions targeting repeat offenders?

This synthesis reviews the effectiveness of court-involved and non-court community-based interventions in reducing youth violence and recidivism. Custodial sanctions like incarceration are consistently linked with poor outcomes, while community-based alternatives, such as family therapy and trauma-informed cognitive behavioral interventions, show stronger evidence of impact. Restorative justice and wraparound programs offer additional promise, though implementation quality varies. Notably,

few interventions show universal effects; success often depends on youth risk level, context, and program fidelity. Given gaps in long-term and comparative research, a multi-layered, trauma-informed, and relationship-centered approach remains the most supported strategy for reducing youth violence.

Individual Therapeutic Interventions

Individual therapy programs are interventions that address trauma, regulate emotions, and support behavior change. These often include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), trauma-focused CBT (TF-CBT), and psychotherapy. Multiple meta-analyses demonstrate the effectiveness of CBT in violence reduction for at-risk and justice-involved youth (Olaghere, Wilson, & Kimbrell, 2021). Comparison groups varied across studies, including treatment as usual, waitlist controls, or other therapy types.

Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral approaches (TF-CBT) are also commonly used, with evidence showing they effectively reduce trauma symptoms, depression, and behavioral problems in youth compared to other (non-CBT) trauma-informed treatments (Zettler, 2021). These approaches aim to reduce youth violence by mitigating trauma symptoms. Some evidence also suggests interventions with cognitive restructuring or trauma narrative components are more effective at reducing youth violence (Olaghere et al., 2021). Broadly, there is a vast evidence base examining individual therapeutic interventions for youth violence, which includes large variations in outcomes depending on therapy type, setting, and population. A nuanced exploration of this landscape is beyond the scope of this review, but research trends indicate individual therapy and therapeutic approaches more broadly are an evidence-based approach to reducing youth violence (Lipsey, 2009; Zettler, 2021).

Psychosocial and Skill Development Programs

Psychosocial and skill development programs are interventions focused on the development of emotion regulation, establishing safety, identifying strengths, positive relationship-building, and trauma psychoeducation (Zettler, 2021). Overall evidence for direct violence reduction from skill development programs is mixed, indicating a need for more research (Zettler, 2021). While an initial systematic review by Olsson et al. (2021) on noninstitutional psychosocial interventions found no significant overall effects on recidivism, a re-analysis by DuBois (2021) found mentoring, a varied intervention often implemented in community settings, to be significantly effective in reducing recidivism. Mentoring programs, which often include skill development components, show promise in reducing juvenile crime and justice system involvement. Big Brothers Big Sisters and Credible Messenger mentoring programs are commonly utilized, evidence-based, community-based program models for reducing youth violence (Fagan & Catalano, 2012; Mendel, 2023). One promising example of an evidence-based, social-cognitive skill development intervention for youth is *Becoming A Man (BAM)* (Heller et al., 2017). BAM is

implemented in schools, and teaches youth to pause automatic responses and make reflective decisions about their thinking and relational patterns (Heller et al., 2017). The results of four, large-scale randomized control trials found that BAM shows promising reductions in violence compared to control groups who did not receive the intervention (Heller et al., 2017; Office of Research and Evaluation, Corporation for National and Community Service, 2018).

Family-Based Interventions

Family-based interventions engage caregivers to strengthen relationships, improve communication, and support positive youth behavior. Family therapy approaches (e.g., Multisystemic Therapy [MST], Functional Family Therapy [FFT], Multidimensional Family Therapy [MDFT]) are among the most effective strategies to reduce youth recidivism (Aazami et al., 2023). A meta-analysis found that family-based treatments resulted in modest but long-lasting effects for youth when compared to services as usual, no-treatment control groups, or alternative treatment conditions (Dopp & Borduin, 2017). These effects were still evident 2.5 years after treatment completion, demonstrating the longevity of the intervention's impact. Family therapy interventions and family involvement are highlighted as core components in reducing juvenile delinquency (Aazami et al., 2023).

Community and Place-Based Interventions

Community and place-based interventions are rooted in neighborhoods, schools, and local systems, focusing on environment, access to supports, and place-based or wraparound approaches. The current review did not find any systematic or meta-analytic reviews specifically on place-based or community-based interventions, only individual studies of effective community-based interventions within broader systematic reviews (Aazami et al., 2023). This significantly limits the generalizability of the findings, but does provide examples of community-based interventions to explore. There are several single-study example place-based interventions that emerged from this review: 1) Fit2Lead Park-Based Afterschool Program: this intervention, located in Miami-Dade, FL, focused on preventing violence and promoting mental health through various afterschool park-based activities, and was found to reduce youth arrest rates. This study used a prospective cohort design and difference-in-differences models, comparing neighborhoods with the Fit2Lead program to matched areas with other after-school programs (D'Agostino et al., 2020); 2) Moving to Opportunities Demonstration: this initiative provided housing vouchers and monetary incentives for families to move from highly disadvantaged neighborhoods to safer, higher-resourced neighborhoods. The intervention showed mixed effects, including initial reduced arrest rates for boys, reduced arrest rates for only girls after six years, and an increase in property crime arrests among boys in the experimental group (Fagan & Catalano, 2012); 3) The Safety Net Collaborative: In Cambridge, Massachusetts, this community-based intervention integrated mental health professionals, police departments, schools, and human services. It observed a 50% decrease in community arrests among at-risk youth. This finding was based on a

pre- and post-implementation comparison of arrest rates in the community (Barrett & Janopaul-Naylor, 2016). Finally, trauma center-based youth violence prevention programs, though delivered in medical settings like emergency departments and inpatient units, function as part of a community's local system for tertiary violence prevention. A systematic review by Mikhail (2016) synthesizing eligible control trials and observational studies found that strategies like case management and brief intervention showed improvement in outcome measures, indicating that trauma centers are viable settings for these efforts at individual, relationship, and community levels.

Restorative Justice

Restorative Justice (RJ) interventions focus on repairing harm by engaging youth, victims, and the community. Key principles of RJ include healing, accountability, and empowerment. A review of 57 unique studies by Kimbrell et al. (2023) found statistically significant, small-to-moderate reductions in future delinquent behavior for youth compared to traditional juvenile justice approaches. The population of studies eligible for this review included experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations of a juvenile justice program that incorporated an RJ component compared to a group treated in a traditional fashion (e.g., juvenile court) (Kimbrell et al., 2023). Limitations in defining what RJ is poses challenges for replicable empirical measurement, and there were large differences in how these programs were defined, developed, and implemented across studies (Kimbrell et al., 2023). There is modest empirical support for RJ interventions, with inconsistencies across individual studies (e.g. more rigorous studies had lower effect sizes, raising concern around rigor of findings) (Kimbrell et al., 2023).

Positive Youth Development Programs

Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs aim to strengthen protective factors through youth development, relationships, and pro-social experiences. Theory suggests that PYD fosters self-regulation via diverse experiences and caring relationships (Bonell et al., 2016). A systematic review by Melendez-Torres et al. (2016), including three randomized control trials, did not find evidence that PYD interventions reduce violence among young people compared to no-intervention control groups. Many PYD evaluations do not measure or report implementation fidelity or test the theory of change, limiting the ability to determine the true effectiveness of the interventions evaluated (Dickson et al., 2018).

Sports

Youth sports are often thought to promote prosocial behavior. A meta-analytic review of sports participation and juvenile delinquency by Spruit et al. (2016) demonstrated no consistent findings showing association of sports with reduced or increased

delinquency. In contrast, an umbrella review by Fazel et al. (2023) examining the effectiveness of violence prevention interventions in the general population found that sports were one of the stronger, evidence-based approaches to reducing youth violence. However, they found that the evidence primarily supports traditional martial arts training, which facilitates and centers internal reflection, breathing techniques, and meditation. The authors hypothesized that these internal reflection techniques built from ancient wisdoms may be the mediator for positive interventions effects rather than the physical activity itself (Fazel et al., 2023). The evidence suggests that the type of sports matters regarding effectiveness.

Awareness Programs

Juvenile awareness programs are typically designed to deter at-risk youth from future criminal behavior by exposing them to the realities of the justice system, such as prison facilities or interactions with former inmates. A meta-analytic review by Van der Put et al. (2021) found no significant overall effect of awareness programs on reducing offending behavior, aligning with prior research that demonstrates a potential relationship between awareness programs and increased delinquency. However, the study did observe a positive effect on reducing antisocial attitudes, with effects becoming larger over longer follow-up periods (Van der Put et al., 2021). There is a continued lack of recent, rigorous randomized controlled trials directly measuring behavioral outcomes. Therefore, while these programs might influence attitudes, the evidence directly supporting their effectiveness in reducing juvenile delinquency behavior remains weak and requires more robust and updated research.

Technology-based Interventions

Technology-based interventions leverage digital tools to address behavioral issues in young people. A systematic review by Esposito et al. (2023) of digital interventions for youth violence prevention, including interactive games, video training, and online activities, found promising potential in addressing general aggression, bullying, and intimate partner violence by targeting skills like conflict resolution, prosocial attitudes, self-efficacy, and empathy. However, findings for bullying were mixed, and the review highlights a need for more rigorous evaluations, strategy refinement, cultural considerations, and improved accessibility to strengthen the evidence base in this emerging area of interest.

Court-based Interventions

- **Incarceration**

Custodial sanctions include incarceration and youth detention of youth. Custodial sanctions are associated with higher recidivism compared to community-based sanctions or case dismissal, and youth incarceration specifically has not been found to be associated with decreased recidivism and may actually increase risk for rearrest (Afkinich, 2024; Koops-Gueze &

Weerman, 2023). Detention has limited research on long-term impact, with existing literature suggesting potential harm (Gilman et al., 2021).

- **Teen Court**

In Teen Court, youth are judged by peers in a simulated court process. It is typically intended as a diversion strategy facilitated by the court system. A meta-analysis by Bouchard & Wong (2017) reviewed 14 studies, and found teen court resulted in no significant difference in recidivism compared to formal processing or other diversion models. However, teen court may have benefits outside of recidivism that were not measured in the reviewed studies (Bouchard & Wong, 2017). It is also important that future research tailors interventions with risk level and population.

- **Mental Health Court**

Mental Health Court (MHC) is a specialized court for youth with serious mental health conditions that provides structured treatment in lieu of incarceration. A meta-analysis of 38 studies by Fox et al. (2021) from 1997-2020 found mental health courts were linked to strong reductions in recidivism for high-need youth. These studies primarily compared participants in mental health courts to individuals who went through the traditional court and corrections system. Specifically, 31 out of the 38 effect sizes came from "between groups" designs, directly comparing a treatment group (MHC participants) to a control group (traditional court system). The remaining 7 effect sizes were derived from "within individuals" designs, where participants served as their own control before and after intervention. These findings controlled for criminal history, race/ethnicity, and gender, and were consistent across time.

- **Community Sanctions**

Community Sanctions are non-custodial, court-ordered consequences such as community service or behavioral interventions. In an analysis of 23 studies by Koops-Geuze (2023), community sanctions like community service and behavioral interventions were associated with significantly lower recidivism compared to custodial sanctions (i.e., incarceration). When compared to dismissals, community sanctions showed no statistically significant difference in recidivism on average, but results still leaned slightly in favor of community sanctions (Koops-Geuze, 2023). Additionally, a study by Cauffman et al. (2020) found that youth who were informally processed (e.g. diverted to community service) after their first arrest experienced significantly better long-term outcomes, including reduced re-arrests and incarceration, compared to those who were formally processed. In an additional longitudinal study by Cauffman et al. (2024), the authors found that youth informally

processed (e.g., diverted to community service) after their first arrest experienced significantly better long-term outcomes over a nine-year period, including reduced re-arrests and incarceration, compared to those formally processed. This further supports the positive impact of non-custodial, diverted options on youth trajectories over time.

- **Aftercare and Resettlement Programs**

Post-incarceration aftercare and resettlement support programs are designed to help youth reintegrate into their communities and reduce reoffending by addressing barriers related to education, employment, mental health, and social needs. A systematic review by Wong et al. (2024) found no consistent benefits or harms of aftercare and resettlement programs on recidivism, arrests, or convictions for children and youth compared to control groups who did not receive aftercare/resettlement services after incarceration.

The evidence was mixed across program types and populations, with a notable gap in high-quality evaluation studies on aftercare/resettlement and its cost-effectiveness (Wong et al., 2024).

This evidence provides context but there is additional research needed to understand possible differences in types of programs.

Cross-Cutting Components and Principles of Effective Interventions to Inform Successful Program Development

Cross-cutting components are program elements that contribute to effectiveness regardless of setting, appearing in both court and non-court interventions. Programs designed to reduce juvenile delinquency often do so by influencing specific intermediate outcomes, such as improved family functioning, better mental health, or stronger peer relationships. When these outcomes are empirically linked to reductions in delinquent behavior, they are referred to as change levers (Wilson & Lipsey, 2024). The framework below offers a way to move beyond broad program categories and instead focus on the specific mechanisms of change most likely to produce positive results. For entities like Pierce County Court, understanding these change levers can help predict which program designs are most likely to succeed in reducing youth violence and promoting positive trajectories, even in contexts where direct evaluations of specific programs are limited (Wilson & Lipsey, 2024).

Strengthening familial and community relationships

Family and community support are critical buffers for youth involved in the court system (Aazami et al., 2023). Interventions that function to strengthen bonds across familial and community levels and promote the development of safe and healthy relationships are an evidence-based core component. This aligns with meta-analytic findings identifying improved family functioning as a robust “change lever”

significantly associated with reduced delinquency (Wilson & Lipsey, 2024). Many listed interventions use relational strengthening as a key component, including: individual therapy, mentoring, psychosocial skill development programs, family therapy, community-based/place-based solutions, and restorative justice. Authors suggest that interventions should consider the influence of family, peers, neighborhood, schools and larger community (Aazami et al., 2023).

Therapeutic Intervention Philosophy

A therapeutic intervention philosophy is a critical factor for effective programs with juvenile offenders. This approach encompasses strategies such as counseling, skills training, and restorative practices, with meta-analytic findings indicating strong positive effects, particularly for interventions like cognitive-behavioral therapy, mentoring, and group counseling (Lipsey, 2009). Beyond the intervention type, program effectiveness is also strongly linked to serving high-risk youth and the quality of implementation.

Trauma-informed principles

A systematic review by Folk et al. (2021) identified trauma-informed principles as a core component of effective interventions. These principles, derived from existing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) literature, emphasize the implementation of trauma-informed interventions, addressing multiple levels of the continuum of juvenile justice involvement, and integrating prevention and early intervention efforts, including screening for risk factors such as ACEs.

Reducing contact with the legal system across the continuum of care

Reducing youth contact with the criminal legal system lowers juvenile delinquency and can help address racial and ethnic disparities (Afkinich, 2024). Two decades of evidence demonstrates that formal processing and incarceration increase the risk of future justice involvement and poorer long-term outcomes, while diversion tends to produce better results—particularly for youth of color (Cauffman et al., 2020; Cauffman et al., 2024). However, few strategies directly target disproportionality. One effective approach is requiring court-employed decision-makers to document reasons for detention, which can reduce bias and improve equity (Afkinich, 2024).

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Court and Diversion Interviews and Document Review

CoLab staff met with court administrators to determine appropriate court personnel to participate in the focus group. Two doctoral-level (PsyD and PhD) research staff then conducted a virtual focus group with six program supervisors/division leads at

Pierce County Juvenile Court, with one leading the interview and one focused on technology support, supplemental notetaking, and logistics. They used a semi-structured interview format using predetermined interview prompts to gather information from participants. The interviews were transcribed by Zoom and manually cleaned using the recorded video and audio files. The interviews were then qualitatively coded based on research aim and emergent themes. Research staff further requested any available documents or prior reports about alternatives to incarceration, gaps in programming, behavioral health needs of juveniles, performance measurement of programs (including recidivism), and equitability across programs, which were reviewed and coded based on broad evaluation goals to supplement interview data. The following documents were reviewed as a part of this process:

- Pierce County Finance Department (2025). Youth violence prevention: Needs assessment. Pierce County.
- Pierce County Juvenile Court (2025). Policy and Procedures. Pierce County.
- Pierce County Juvenile Court (2025). Program menu. Pierce County.
- Tacoma-Pierce County Community (2023). Peacepoint: The community driven plan for youth safety. Pierce County.

What alternatives to incarceration and charging are used by the Court? How are they used?

Interviews

Alternatives to charging and incarceration happen at various stages during a youth's legal involvement. For example, the county has two programs that can be accessed without prior system involvement or referrals/offenses, namely through their At-Risk Youth (ARY) petition and Child in Need of Services (CHINS) petition. The ARY petition can only be accessed by a caregiver/parent, while CHINS can be initiated by the child, caregiver/parent, or DSHS. These programs are specifically designed to support young people and families in crisis who are at risk of becoming court-involved. The goal is to prevent future court contact by providing access to needed services. This serves as an alternative to incarceration by creating an intervention point for youth, often prior to any formal court involvement.

Additionally, several options are available for pre-diversion before formally going through the diversion process. These are available in specific situations, such as first-time referrals when the victim is a family member or youth are in possession of

drugs or alcohol. In these circumstances, youth are connected with appropriate seminars/classes and treatment options.

Many young people are eligible for diversion, as the only exclusion criteria is if the youth is charged with a serious felony. Benefits of diversion include: youth's record remaining confidential, requirement of only one appointment with diversion staff (compared to multiple court hearings in formal sentencing), fewer assignments/tasks to complete than those going through formal court involvement, ability to destroy the record at age 18 if conditions are successfully completed (compared to only the possibility of sealing a formal court record), and can report no history of conviction. Additionally, individuals in diversion are still able to access all of the same positive youth development (PYD) programs and evidence-based (EBP) programs. Youth completing diversion also have the unique opportunity to have their restitution paid by the Milgard Fund after completing a required number of community service hours. Participants noted contracting work to community resources with a focus on culturally responsive options.

In terms of alternatives to incarceration for youth who have been formally charged by the court, staff highlighted their specialized probation programs. These include:

- **Specialized Sex Offender Dispositional Alternative (SSODA):** A two-year sex offense-specific treatment program where youth stay in the community while receiving tailored therapy by licensed providers.
- **Pathways to Success:** Team-based (probation counselor, care coordinator, family members, mentors) probation option specifically for Black boys who have been identified as underserved.
- **Alliances Program:** Specialized probation with wraparound care for youth with mental health concerns.

Court staff also noted that the court attempts to prioritize keeping youth in the community when possible through Option B sentencing. This allows for youth to remain at home with a suspended sentence. They noted the importance of community support and prevention of the trauma of being removed from their home.

Participants highlighted the importance of connecting youth to overall wellbeing support and behavioral health care to support them safely remaining in the community. In probation (or diversion), young people are connected to services close to home. These include a number of evidence-based practices and positive youth development activities (see Document Review section below for comprehensive list). Mentors with lived experience are an important part of many of the probation programs. Allowing for youth to complete programming outside of the formal court system protects young people from some of the unintended, but negative, consequences of legal involvement. It also prevents further disruption to school

completion. Electronic Home Monitoring is also an alternative to incarceration that is used by PCJC.

Document Review

- **Pierce County Program Menu:** The program menu reflects the following services as of 2025:
 - **Building New Bridges (Coordination of Services – COS)**
 - **Program Type:** Evidence-Based Program (EBP) – COS Model
 - **Description:** A 2-day interactive seminar focused on strengthening the relationship between youth and caregivers
 - **Target Population:** Court-involved youth and their caregivers
 - **Educational Employment Training (EET – Stepping Stones)**
 - **Program Type:** Evidence-Based Program (EBP)
 - **Description:** A 5-7-week employment preparation program
 - **Target Population:** Youth ages 15-18 on probation or diversion
 - **Functional Family Therapy (FFT)**
 - **Program Type:** Evidence-Based Program (EBP), Family-Focused Therapy
 - **Description:** Short-term (8-12 sessions), in-home intervention for families experiencing conflict
 - **Target Population:** Youth and families identified through PACT
 - **Pathways to Success**
 - **Program Type:** Specialized Probation, Wraparound Services for Black Youth
 - **Description:** A culturally responsive probation program for Black male youth that includes mentorship
 - **Target Population:** Black male youth on probation
 - **Alliances Program**
 - **Program Type:** Specialized Probation, Wraparound Services for Youth with Mental Health Needs

- **Description:** Intensive wraparound supervision for youth with significant behavioral health needs
 - **Target Population:** Youth on probation with complex mental health challenges
 - **Suspended Sex Offender Dispositional Alternative (SSODA)**
 - **Program Type:** Court-Mandated Dispositional Alternative
 - **Description:** Court-authorized supervision for youth adjudicated of a sex offense. Youth remain in the community while receiving therapy from licensed treatment providers.
 - **Target Population:** Youth adjudicated of a qualifying sex offense
 - **Positive Youth Development Programs**
 - Arts Connect
 - Evening Center (YMCA Partnership)
 - 2nd Cycle – Youth Bike Program
 - Big Homie Program
 - Evolve for Girls
 - Families Supporting Families
 - Life Coaching – Our Sister’s House
 - New Directions – Our Sister’s House
 - Evolve – Youth + Caregiver Series
 - LOCOS – Art Therapy & Pop-Up Experiences
 - James Matthew Commission – Evening Empowerment Center
 - Mountaineers Outdoor Adventure Series
 - NAMI Family-to-Family
 - Still I Run – Youth Running Program
 - Tacoma Boat Builders (TBB)
 - Family Council
 - Housing Stability for Youth in Court (H-SYNC)
- **Pierce County Policy and Procedures:** This document provides guiding principles, procedures, and timelines for referral and documentation for selection of and referrals to services.

What are the current gaps in programs used by the Court?

Interviews

A number of themes emerged highlighting gaps in access to services. These included:

1. **The need for additional community resources before the courts are involved.** Young people would benefit from increased access to community resources as both a preventative strategy to decrease legal involvement and a holistic treatment approach for those who have already had court contact. Many families and youth are unaware of or unable to access programs prior to court involvement.

Representative quotes:

“I think as a community, there’s a lot of opportunity to have better policies around early childhood development, investing at the front end. Policies that say you will have services during the summer, after school... I think there could be more things done with the health department and other systems cross-collaborating in a more powerful way. I think there could be more things done in more neighborhoods, smaller settings, hub-type things.”

“We have tended to become the default for places that also don’t have resources, or their responses are inadequate, and then it comes to us by default rather than giving, you know, giving the police, for example, some resources on how to navigate a DV situation and a place where that young person can get some separation for the family members involved rather than coming to jail.”

“A gap is around the gun violence and how unsafe many of our youth feel in the community... Access to weapons is extremely easy in this community... we haven’t been able to help young people feel safe in our community.”

2. **Lack of flexibility to address the individual needs of youth.** Some evaluations and programs are only available to youth who are formally court-involved. The inverse is also true: sometimes youth are unable to begin treatment or programming until they are released from detention or are no longer formally court-involved. It would be beneficial to allow young people to access programming, treatment options, and evaluations earlier in the continuum, prior to formal involvement. Additionally, the court should prioritize working collaboratively with community organizations to allow for program involvement prior to release or termination of probation.

Representative quotes:

“My wish would be that we can have [competency] evaluations and representation in the diversion realm, that you shouldn’t have to get formal charges to be evaluated properly.”

“Sometimes our kids end up in detention and the judge is asking for resources and the resources are saying, ‘Until they’re out, we can’t provide resources.’ So you’ve got that gap of two different systems working against each other.”

“It’s challenging for government agency that wants to reduce its footprint and create more opportunities to contract with the community, the procurement process, particularly in our county, the risk management and all the red tape... the overall process creates a lot of limitations on programmatic options you want to have as a part of your menu.”

- 3. Excessively punitive systems.** Overall, the court system tends to criminalize behaviors that are somewhat normative for adolescents. Many behaviors that land youth in detention could reasonably be handled in the community through other tactics that emphasize accountability and behavior change. This would mitigate iatrogenic effects of legal involvement while increasing accountability and community safety.

Representative quotes:

“We really need a good definition of what accountability is. Some people don’t consider mental health counseling as accountability, addressing the root of the problem.”

“Behaviors are criminalized or dealt with in our system that are unnecessary and an overreaction.”

“Our commitment rates to JR have drastically increased. You know, we used to be in 17, low 20s, we’re back up to 60s last year. We’re on trend for that again... I think many of [the kids], we could have made a case to have them stay in this community, but... we’re one stakeholder in a system. The prosecutors have a lot of discretion and power to make sentencing recommendations and plea offers... I think we’re gonna see in a few years all of the unhealthy things that have happened from that.”

“We’ve been working with a school district that’s our highest referrer into the court system, [...] and bring[ing] the data to them to show the disparity, show how their policies contribute to that disparity, being very vulnerable and transparent,

saying, “Your policy of [no pre-diversion for drug possession], they don’t want to change that even though it makes no sense. It feels good and it feels like they’re doing what they need to do in the moment because that’s the way they’ve always done it. Even though with their numbers, their trajectory, they still have a drug problem in their schools. What they’re doing isn’t working.”

4. **Lack of awareness of alternatives to incarceration.** This is evident at multiple levels. Families often turn to incarceration as a last resort when they believe they have exhausted all other options. JPCs are sometimes unaware of new programs that could be beneficial for youth on their caseload. Prosecutors and judges send youth to detention in an effort to teach accountability and increase community safety. However, involvement in community programming, treatment programs, and positive youth development activities is not only more effective in terms of behavior change, but is also more cost effective. People in the community and throughout the legal continuum must fully understand all alternatives to incarceration.

Representative quotes:

“I notice there are JPCs that have their go-to programs. They have a connection, they’ve been there, they’ve worked in the program, so they will naturally veer to something [familiar].”

“For the families that are just expressing that they’ve tried many things and nothing’s working so now they feel like jail is the only option for their young person. [We have to] educat[e] ourselves about all the different programs that we can suggest to families to get connected with.”

“[We have] now changed our policy, where we’re booking [misdemeanors] into detention. A misdemeanor, first time referral. What are we doing here?”

5. **Lack of geographic diversity of programming/transportation.** It would be beneficial to engage more programs/services further away from Tacoma in order to better serve all youth involved in PCJC. Alternatively, increased access to reliable and safe transportation services could be considered.

Representative quotes:

“The number one [barrier to services] is transportation.”

“We shouldn’t have to be bringing kids who live in Yelm or Bonney Lake or Eatonville to Tacoma for a program. It just doesn’t make sense.”

- 6. Capacity of programs.** In order to better meet youth needs, Pierce County must increase capacity of programs available in the community (to be accessed prior to legal involvement, pre-diversion, diversion, and probation). Young people would benefit from Pierce County Juvenile Court expanding resources to pre-diversion, diversion, and probation programs so that more youth can access the available programs.

Representative quotes:

“We have limited space for counseling.”

“Alliances only has a capacity for 15. There are a lot more youth with mental health challenges that we serve, so it’s a resource issue.”

“I’m not sure [any programs are] underutilized because we fill them.”

“We’re going to strategize about who’s going to get those spots, to who’s more statistically likely to entrench in the system.”

- 7. Equity concerns.** Disproportionate minority contact (DMC) is a well-established construct in the youth legal system. In Pierce County, this is particularly evident in referrals to the specialized mental health specific probation program, Alliances. Increasing measures to ensure equity across referrals from pre-diversion to formal sentencing would help decrease DMC.

Representative quotes:

“Racial disparities undermine our justice system.”

“A lot of the referrals that we get for our behavioral health or mental health is white youth. But... that doesn’t mean that Black youth don’t have... we know that they deal with trauma, high ACE scores, so I think stigma is a barrier to access services, too.”

What are the primary behavioral health needs of juveniles?

Interviews

Participant responses reflected several important behavioral health needs for youth in Pierce County, including:

1. **Formal resources before the justice system gets involved with families.**
Schools are an important system to find additional ways to support and fund, as they are often one of the first to identify mental and behavioral health problems in young people.

Schools that are well-funded and well-resourced have the ability to provide prevention and early intervention for mental health concerns before youth become involved with the legal system.

Representative quotes:

“Schools... they’re not following the IEP, they don’t have what they need, and it turns into a criminal offense... I think a lot of schools are ill-equipped to deal with [mental health concerns].”

“They don’t have the social workers and counselors there to notice the signs and attend to them... having people in the school districts that are able to notice the signs and have the support and warm handoff to give before they end up in our system.”

“These are children who need help and support. We don’t need to further traumatize them and victimize them. It’s just [a] mark that you leave on them once they enter our system. So we’re causing more harm by put[ting] them into our system.”

2. **Access to specialty and culturally responsive mental health services.**
Washington state, and Pierce County specifically, do not have enough mental health care providers or facilities for the current level of need. Culturally responsive and individualized care is particularly important when working with youth of color. Trauma-specific therapy is often indicated for youth who are legally-involved; trauma is a risk factor for illegal behavior.

Representative quotes:

“We see a lot of young people that have been exposed to significant trauma. The young men seem to have witnessed violence or been the victim of violence in their communities... [on the] clinical side of it... they need to engage in therapy and healing. It’s tough to get them to fully engage because of what they’ve experienced.”

“How many dual diagnosis facilities are there in the state? Very limited and you’re lucky to get in to even be looked at...”

“We’re trying to be responsive to [the needs of youth]... so that our family and our youth have access to people who they can relate to... they provide telehealth, they provide [substance use treatment].”

- 3. Increased natural supports in the community.** Community-based supports including organizations such as churches, mentorship programs, and informal but trusting and positive relationships are protective and healing for young people. Strengthening local infrastructure for these programs and organizations is likely to be instrumental in youth wellbeing.

Representative quotes:

“I think mentoring ... chang[es] the way they think and view their circumstances, creating hope.”

“The social aspect that could [help them build] skills that help the youth find relaxation and connection with their peers and adults and their community.”

“I think one of the things we’re trying to explore [...] faith community is really big out there but I’m not sure what kind of services they offer.”

- 4. Increased community knowledge and awareness about mental health and adolescent development.** Community education about mental and behavioral health is needed in order to increase referral to appropriate resources and services. Many behaviors that are developmentally normative for adolescents are criminalized, leading to a greater response than is likely necessary given the behavior. Young people who engage in more significant criminal behavior often have significant trauma histories, high Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) scores, and thus, are likely better served through specialized mental health care than incarceration.

Representative quotes:

“Stakeholders don’t necessarily understand adolescent development and how it... connects with behavior so I think they don’t understand and there’s not a lot of tolerance either for things that are normal developmentally... we’ve been encountering less tolerance for those throughout the years that I’ve been here. I’ve seen that as a trend.”

“[Communities need support in] getting that education [about mental health] before they enter the system and learning more about the stigma and what to look for, what to report.”

“Most crimes are done by adults. I think policy members really need to remember that... It’s a very small group of young people that live in Pierce County that get referred to juvenile court, that come from marginalized backgrounds, high exposure to trauma, adverse childhood experiences, have oftentimes been victims multiple times in their life.”

Document Review

- **Pierce County Youth violence prevention: Needs assessment** - This document highlights youth violence exposure and bullying as potential intervention points for the prevention of future youth violence, as well as emphasizing variable access to teacher support based on schools and the importance of school-based programming.
- **Peacepoint: The community driven plan for youth safety** - Based on engagement with 200 community members including youth, this document reflects the following priority domains for youth wellness and the prevention of youth violence:
 - Improving communication, coordination, and collaboration across service providers. (E.g., incentivize coordination meetings, create opportunities for collaboration, central database for service providers, hire violence prevention coordinators at various agencies who can come together to share information.)
 - Improving school environments by ending exclusionary practices and increasing on-site support for students. (E.g., Increase number of caring adults at school that reflect the identities of students, allocate staff time or hire consultants to engage with families in reviewing current procedures to amend exclusionary policies, think tank to analyse school funding formula, build a coalition of parents.)
 - Break down access barriers for youth and families. (E.g., Free or sliding scale drivers education in high schools, explore funding for public transportation, promote existing transportation resources, fund a second set of school buses for after-school programs, expand free public transportation, use a ‘no wrong door’ service model, analyze current barriers including for specific marginalized populations, bring programs into neighborhoods.)
 - Provide more activities for youth with a focus on safe, free, and unstructured spaces. (E.g., Explore use of digital space, engage youth in planning and decision-making, build local partners, review procedures, reduce funding barriers.)

How are programs currently evaluated in terms of performance? What other measurements could be used?

Interviews

Participants highlighted strengths and challenges of their current program evaluation. Strengths included a formal evaluation system and a commitment to using data to enhance the performance of their programs. Specifically, successful program completion is tracked across programs. Staff could theoretically also request data from the Administrative Office of the Courts to determine whether risk levels changed from beginning to program completion. Challenges included rapid changes in the community that make it difficult to make up-to-date decisions based on data, inconsistent access to outcome data across programs, and lack of comprehensive data (which does not include information about barriers to services).

Representative quote:

“We’re constantly reacting to our changing landscape. I can’t answer who’s better off for our services because I can’t get data live, in the moment, all the time. There’s a lot of fundamental challenges that all our systems have that I think make it hard for us to demonstrate how good we’re doing. We’re constantly reacting because we’re not aligned and trying to work towards a common broader goal.”

Behavioral health outcomes of youth involved in the juvenile justice system are not specifically measured. Youth engagement is tracked while young people are involved in programming, as are any reoffenses and discharge dates. However, there is not an easily accessible dataset with this information, which would largely be located in individual documentation. Staff reported youth have the option of filling out wellbeing measures at the completion of a program, but not everyone submits these.

Document Review

Evidence-based programming and Positive Youth Development programming data were shared with the analysis team.

To what extent are programs equitable in terms of implementation?

Interviews

Several themes were identified in terms of equity of service delivery, including:

1. **A department-level goal of equity and cultural responsiveness.** Staff in diversion and probation programming are committed to enhancing cultural responsiveness and equity. They regularly rely on data to help determine how to prioritize access to limited resources.

Representative quotes:

“We’ve tried to solicit partnerships with diverse agencies in the community that serve different populations, we have gender-specific programs for young women and also for young men only.”

“We try to utilize the data to see which populations of youth are most at risk and have the highest needs so we can target the services to them.”

2. **Systemic barriers that influence access to services or willingness to engage.** Identifying and addressing barriers to attendance and participation (e.g., transportation, not culturally responsive programming) has the potential to increase equity and successful completion of programs. Increasing the number of culturally responsive services will allow for youth of different backgrounds to access services, thus increasing equitability.

Representative quotes:

“Even in diversion... we know that [there are] systematic barriers to having people show up for an appointment.”

“There are certain programs that there’s less African American youth [who] will be inclined to go to that program versus others.”

“There are a few programs based on their risk management where there’s certain offenses they won’t be able to take, but that’s pretty limited.”

“A lot of families have been pushed out to the outer county area which lacks a lot of resources... a lot of our programs have been based in the city...”

“There’s not one decision maker, or anyone that works with youth and looks at data that doesn’t know, that new area from Hawthorne out to Parkland, Spanaway, then you dip into South Hill Puyallup 98374 and 98375, that that is an area of significant need... you have all these different entities that recognize the need, they’re all working independently but there’s not much alignment.”

3. **Disproportionate impact of policies and decision points on certain populations.** Youth of color, specifically Black youth, are negatively impacted by systemic racism that allows for disproportionate minority contact to be

evident at every level in the legal system. Increasing practices aligned with equitable decision-making would help mitigate this harm. Pierce County would benefit from development of culturally-specific programs for Latinx, Asian-American, and Pacific Islander populations. Additionally, pre-teen youth do not currently have access to as many PYD programs as their elder peers, thus, they do not have the opportunity to benefit as much from diversion and probation services.

Representative quotes:

“I think we do an amazing job and it’s really important work and it’s also insufficient. The group that has been most burdened by our system over the years, as long as I have been here, have been Black children. As far as some of the advancements we’ve been able to make and progress at different decision points, Black children are still three times more likely to be referred in court than their white counterparts. If you go out to any decision point in the system, they’re overrepresented. It gets worse the deeper you go. All the work that we’ve done still hasn’t been able to eliminate the disparities that exist. There have been some years where it’s gone down, we’ve made some gains, but when you look at the bigger picture, there’s still a huge problem there. And I imagine that if we looked at socioeconomic [status], it would be that for poor children and other groups that we don’t have great data on it. So, doing cool stuff, still insufficient as a system.”

“We get the ten, eleven, and twelve-year-olds and they’re coming in with really complex issues. There isn’t enough [Positive Youth Development Programs] for them, a good outlet, a structured outlet for them.”

“It seems we have had an uptick in Hispanic youth and Asian and Pacific Islander youth who are entering our system and also in on serious offenses. We don’t have the same sort of wraparound program that we do for our Pathways.”

Juvenile Assessment Centers: A Brief Overview

Definition

Juvenile Assessment Centers (JACs) are procedural and, often, brick-and-mortar alternatives to formal juvenile justice involvement for youth. The JAC approach can be traced to Hillsborough County, Florida in the mid-1990s when community leaders wanted an effective alternative to incarceration to address the increase in youth arrests during that period (Robinson, 2017). Today, there are at least 85 Juvenile

Assessment Centers around the United States, according to the National Assessment Center Association (NAC; National Assessment Center Association, 2021).

While the approach has grown in popularity, research on JACs remains limited to process and early outcome evaluations. Here, we summarize common guiding frameworks and highlight available research insights.

According to the NAC, Assessment Centers are intended to prevent further involvement in the justice system for youth who come into contact with law enforcement through arrest, court summons, or status offenses (e.g., running away, truancy). Structures typically include places where youth can be held until a case plan or decision about diversion eligibility can be made. Individual JACs operate uniquely, but with the following common aims:

- Conducts interviews and uses validated tools to identify needs, strengths, safety concerns, and underlying issues such as trauma, mental health challenges, or unmet basic needs
- Recommends diversion options to avoid deeper justice system involvement
- Coordinates with courts, probation, and pretrial services to support case planning
- Connects youth and families to appropriate community-based supports

The NAC offers toolkits, training, and technical assistance to support a community in establishing and maintaining JACs. Currently, Washington State does not operate any recognized Assessment Centers.

Effectiveness

The evidence for the effectiveness of JACs is currently strongest in case studies, impact stories, and process evaluations during start-up phases (typically under three years). Dembo et al., (2008) conducted a recidivism analysis of the JAC in Miami-Dade County, Florida and found it reduced recidivism for first-time, non-violent offenders. Common themes across available process evaluations include 1) the value of establishing strong community service partnerships early on to facilitate program referrals; 2) the value of establishing clear procedures for screening, assessment, referral, and monitoring; 3) the value of establishing good communication and shared goals across multiple sectors (e.g., schools, police, courts); and 4) staffing adequately to avoid operational problems (e.g., long wait times). Below are

independent evaluations we drew from for this analysis. The NAC also has multiple resources describing lessons learned from its JAC coalition partners.

Butts, (2011). Process Evaluation of the Chicago Juvenile Intervention and Support Center. Report.

This process evaluation describes the development and early outcomes (three years) of Chicago's Juvenile Intervention and Support Center. Development of the JISC was informed by the following principles: 1) early intervention; 2) interagency service coordination; 3) graduated sanctioning; 4) community justice and problem solving; 5) restorative justice, 6) positive development. However, at the time of report writing, three years after it opened, the site was still working towards full implementation of programs and resources. The JISC primary operations included the reception/intake of youth dropped off by law enforcement. JISC staff completed assessments and case plans and most cases were offered a deferred arrest if case plans were completed. The evaluator notes that conflicting philosophies around how to manage youth crime using punitive vs. reward-based approaches hampered clear communication, community buy-in, and operations. Key difficulties included developing working partnerships with needed services for case management and ensuring internal operations (e.g., wait times) were working smoothly.

Cocozza et al. (2005). Diversion from the Juvenile Justice System: The Miami-Dade Juvenile Assessment Center Post-Arrest Diversion Program.

Dembo et al. (2008). Evaluation of an Innovative Post-Arrest Diversion Program: 12-Month Recidivism Analysis. Journal of Offender Rehabilitation.

This summary of the Post Arrest Diversion Program (PAD) in Miami-Dade County, Florida highlights the development of the program after three years of operation. The PAD was developed using the following principles: 1) systematic and standardized screening and assessment of youth, 2) reduction of the depth of entry into the juvenile justice system (e.g., expunging charges upon successful completion), 3) utilization of holistic, family-centered interventions, 4) development and use of a wide network of community-based service providers. The PAD operated as a referral option as part of the Juvenile Assessment Center, the "detention center" for Miami-Dade. Youth referred to the PAD had first-time, nonviolent offenses and received service plans in lieu of referral to the prosecutor. Noncompletion led to referral back to the prosecutor for charging considerations.

Dembo et al.'s (2008) evaluation of the PAD program found that it was successful in reducing recidivism (being re-arrested) for the served group (nonviolent, first-time offenders).

Howat et al. (2021). Initial Impact of Juvenile Assessment Center on Youth Pretrial Detention. Journal of Crime and Criminal Behavior.

This early outcomes evaluation of the Lafayette Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC) describes the core operations of the center and early results on avoided detention time. The JAC is a separate facility from the regional detention center and, during operating hours, is the primary location for processing all juvenile justice drop-offs from law enforcement. Youth taken into custody outside of JAC hours are taken to the detention center. The JAC operations include youth eligibility for post-arrest diversion. If eligible, the youth receive a diversion offer and plan. Youth who refuse the plan or do not complete the plan are referred to the prosecutor's office. The evaluation found the approach was effective in avoiding expensive and potentially harmful pre-trial detention placements.

Relevance to Pierce County

The JAC approach fits well with the audit recommendation to establish more opportunities for pre- and post-arrest diversion that allow for full assessment and service opportunities for youth and families. The legal procedures for establishing a JAC would be informative and helpful for Pierce County regardless of the county's capacity to establish a brick and mortar center to manage law enforcement drop offs. Resources for post-arrest diversion would require the development of working agreements between law enforcement, prosecutors and the court, materials and legal guidelines for the JAC, and agreements with referral programs around information sharing.

Given the primary recommendation of the audit that Pierce County focus its efforts on multicomponent violence and offending prevention programs, it is important to note that a JAC would not be an adequate intervention for community prevention on its own. However, in concert with a coordinated network of prevention and early intervention services, a JAC would be a critical component of a more effective system of care.

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