



ANALYSIS

September Spotlight on Criminal Justice: What Works to Reduce Juvenile Crime?

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Juvenile crime has captured headlines and consumed policymaking conversations in recent months. In fact, six out of 10 major city mayors say juvenile crime is a problem in their city. But despite the temptation to “get tough” on all children who run afoul of the law, the research is clear: Harsher punishments, trying youth as adults, and over-incarceration do not make communities safer. In fact, they often make things worse by increasing the likelihood that a young person will reoffend.

Rather than using it as the default for all juvenile delinquency, harsh punishment should be reserved for young people who pose a real public safety threat. Given how many myths still dominate the conversation around juvenile crime, finding effective solutions that truly address and prevent juvenile crime is important.

Fortunately, there are proven alternatives—approaches that combine accountability with trust, healing, and support. Three stand out: community violence intervention (CVI), multi-disciplinary deflection, and restorative justice. Each offers a limited-government solution that strengthens public safety without expanding costly and ineffective systems of punishment.

Community Violence Intervention

When it comes to youth crime, the data tell us something striking: A small percentage of young people drive the majority of violence. In Boston, researchers found that 74 percent of serious violent incidents occurred on just 5 percent of city blocks. In the 1990s, that insight drove a groundbreaking CVI initiative called Operation Ceasefire to focus on small groups of youth at the highest risk for violence, pairing accountability with outreach. The results were dramatic—youth homicides fell by more than 60 percent.

Often, the secret to effective violence intervention is the messenger rather than the message. Instead of prosecutors or police officers, trusted community members—people who have credibility with young people—deliver the intervention to at-risk youth. This “credible messenger” approach has grown into the modern CVI movement, which treats violence as a contagion and works to interrupt its spread at the source. For limited-government advocates, the lesson is powerful. Focusing narrowly on the small group driving violence produces outsized results without expanding the size and scope of government or leading to more incarceration.

Multi-Disciplinary Deflection

Oftentimes, youth who lose their way end up bouncing between fragmented systems or government agencies and programs that seldom communicate with one another. Schools, child welfare systems and social workers, court systems, and police and other law enforcement often touch the same youth, but with little coordination. That is why Cambridge, Massachusetts, built the Cambridge Safety Net Collaborative: to make multi-disciplinary deflection a reality in their community.

By linking law enforcement, psychologists, social workers, and schools, the Cambridge Safety Net Collaborative offers 360-degree support that steers young people away from the justice system and into services. Evaluations show that participants are arrested less often, reoffend more slowly, and get needed treatment more quickly than their peers. This model reflects the best kind of limited-government policy in that instead of creating a new bureaucracy, it aligns existing resources to work more efficiently together to produce better community outcomes.

Restorative

Finally, restorative justice flips the script on how we think about accountability. Instead of treating crime only as a violation of the law, restorative justice sees it as a rupture of relationships between the young person, the victim, and the community. Programs like “Make it Right” in California’s Alameda County bring those parties together to discuss the harm, craft a plan for repair, and follow through.

The results are compelling. A 2022 randomized controlled trial found that youth participating in restorative justice were 20 percent less likely to be rearrested than those in the traditional system. Beyond the data, restorative justice honors the voice of victims, gives young people a chance to make things right without the lifelong consequences of a criminal record, and fosters real community healing and resiliency.

A Smarter Path Forward

Although youth crime in America has been in long-term decline since the 1990s, it is still a concern in communities across the country—and rightly so. But to address the issue constructively, we must resist outdated calls for harsher punishments and invest in what works: trusted messengers, coordinated deflection, and restorative justice. These three limited-government solutions are grounded in evidence, rooted in community, and reduce youth crime to build stronger, safer communities.

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