

## A Community-based Approach for Youth Justice System Services

Riverside County's Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council (JJCC) is tasked with approving and overseeing Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA) funding and programs as well as county and other funding sources. To achieve and accomplish its stated intentions, the JJCC must be data and outcome-driven and adhere to the research on "What Works" to reduce youth system-involvement, recidivism, and improve community safety. Accordingly, with respect to the legislative intent and requirements of the JJCPA, the JJCC is obligated to fund programs that have been effective in reducing system-involvement. Further, the JJCPA process and criteria for funding programs are intended to examine program outcomes (funding only those that show promise or are effective) and align funding and programs with the County's Local Action Plan. The JJCC has continued to fund programs, in particular at the county agency level, irrespective of need or outcomes, and since there has not been a robust analysis with community input of the County's Local Action Plan, the JJCC appears to have drifted from the legislative intent of the JJCPA and its program funding requirements.

Given the above, we have outlined recommendations consistent with the Ventura model we intend to follow, based on our analysis of the current funding allocations, data collection mechanism, decision-making process, and priority areas. The funding and priority areas outlined below provide a critical and necessary step in Riverside County's JJCC achieving and making good on its stated intentions to support a multi-sector, multi-agency, and community-based approach to assess and reimagine youth justice in Riverside County; and to also support restructuring Riverside County's youth justice system by using a public health approach to address the underlying conditions that create violence.

### A. Implement a new funding formula to increase investments in community-based organizations (CBOs).

JJCPA funding is intended for "programs and approaches that have been demonstrated to be effective in reducing delinquency and addressing juvenile crime."<sup>1</sup> Riverside County's JJCPA funding allocation for 2021 was as follows:

- Riverside County Probation – \$3.58m
- District Attorney – \$2.75m
- Public Defender – \$1.28m
- Riverside County Office of Education – \$42,234
- CBO's – \$1.76m for 13 CBOs (ranges from \$18,800 to \$401,400)

JJCPA funding for CBOs ranges from \$18,800 to \$401,400, averaging roughly \$100,000 per CBO, per year. The county's JJCPA budget is overwhelmingly invested in county agency-led programs. These agencies receive 81.3% of the budget, leaving only 18.7% for CBO's.

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<sup>1</sup> JJCPA-YOBG Program, [https://www.bscc.ca.gov/s\\_jjcpayobgiuviuscrimeprevact/](https://www.bscc.ca.gov/s_jjcpayobgiuviuscrimeprevact/) (last visited Nov. 3, 2022).

Furthermore, the distribution of JJCPA funds is not equitable across all communities in Riverside County. For example, in 2021, 0% of youth were served in roughly seven towns in the Coachella Valley.<sup>2</sup> The Coachella Valley, particularly the Eastern region, has suffered from decades of disinvestment and dire need of funding and resources for youth. Layers of disparities and inequities prevalent in these communities directly impact the children and youth that live in them, placing them at risk of system-involvement.

This year, the *National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges* issued a publication with justifications about why and how to prioritize community-based alternatives to incarceration and system-involvement. The publication states, “Dispositional alternatives, especially community-based and family-centered programs, have proven to be successful for young people who have serious problems. These programs meet the needs of justice-involved youth and should be greatly expanded.”<sup>3</sup>

**Recommendation I:** Riverside County should increase JJCPA funding of CBO programs to support the recommendations set forth and increase the availability and capacity of community-based approaches. A dedicated amount of at least 50% for CBO-led programs will help ensure that children and youth benefit from accessible, community-led, and culturally-responsive programs that are effective as proven by extensive research.

**B. Implement a consistent data collection mechanism to report program outcomes.**

WestEd, the county’s evaluator for JJCPA programs, in partnership with each CBO that received JJCPA funding, developed a data collection tool known as Client Data Tracker.<sup>4</sup> CBOs tracked and reported extensive data pertaining to the outcomes of youth who were served by JJCPA funding.<sup>5</sup> This data included the type of services provided, number of youth served, youth demographics, program completion rates, and outcomes of youth.

The evaluation report does not describe the creation of a data collection tool to track and report the number of youth served, youth demographics, and outcomes of youth served by county agencies who received JJCPA funding. The lack of consistent oversight through data collection across all groups funded by JJCPA has created gaps in tracking and understanding the outcomes of youth who were served by some county agency-led programs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pedroza, V., Lam, A., Carter, C., Russo, S., & Tran, J. (2022). *Evaluation of Riverside County Probation Department’s Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act programs: 2021 evaluation report*. WestEd.

<sup>3</sup> National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, *Judicial Leadership for Community-Based Alternatives to Juvenile Secure Confinement* (June 2022), <https://www.ncjfcj.org/publications/judicial-leadership-for-community-based-alternatives-to-juvenile-secure-confinement/>.

<sup>4</sup> Pedroza, *supra* note 2, at 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 33-73.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 4-24.

State law requires each county to submit an annual report to the state describing the JJCPA expenditures, program descriptions, strategies, and system enhancements in order to assess their effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> Counties must also analyze and explain how these programs, strategies, and enhancements contributed to the county's juvenile justice trends.<sup>8</sup> The *California State Auditor* reinforced this requirement in a 2020 state audit of five counties that did not meet this requirement, noting that the state reporting template asks this question directly.<sup>9</sup> An equitable, robust evaluation system that tracks each JJCPA funded program, the demographics of youth served by each program, and outcomes that each program produces is necessary to meet the state-mandated reporting requirement regarding juvenile justice trends. Not only is this essential to meeting the law's mandates, it is also essential to the community's understanding of these trends and overall effectiveness of the county's JJCPA investments.

**Recommendation II:** The JJCC should implement a consistent and equitable mechanism for data tracking, accountability, and oversight of all programs funded by JJCPA. Data produced and reported should clearly describe the outcomes of youth served by JJCPA programs and how programs are achieving the JJCPA's intent to reduce system-involvement of youth and improve community safety.

C. Establish workgroups or subcommittees for transparency, accountability, and inclusivity.

**Recommendation III:** The JJCC should establish workgroups that are accessible to the public to attend and schedules should be shared with all JJCC members. The groups should also provide updates during the regularly scheduled JJCC meetings for feedback. To increase the involvement of JJCC members and support collaboration, JJCC meetings should occur more frequently and be scheduled every other month rather than quarterly, as is now. Lastly, the JJCC should open access and welcome the input and leadership of individuals with direct lived experience, including justice-involved youth.

D. Adopt and invest in the following priority areas to ensure youth and families are fully supported and have their needs met.

**Recommendation IV:** To move forward in the right direction, we suggest that the JJCC establish a strategic framework with priority areas of funding and attention as follows:

Priority Area 1: Youth, Family, and Community Wellness

Riverside County JJCC should make the holistic wellness of youth and families a priority by investing in programs that are community and health-based.

- The community/family system is the foundational support system for preventing and reducing the occurrence of youth involvement with law enforcement, and creating high-achieving young people.

<sup>7</sup> Government Code Section §§ 30061(b)(4)(C)

<sup>8</sup> Government Code Section §§ 30061(b)(4)(C)(iv)

<sup>9</sup> *Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act, Weak Oversight Has Hindered Its Meaningful Implementation*, Auditor of the State of California (May 2020), <https://www.auditor.ca.gov/reports/2019-116/summary.html>.

- Wellness is an active concept that describes living a healthy lifestyle and supports youth in reaching their full potential. Youth learn that maintaining an optimal level of wellness is crucial to living a higher quality of life. In turn, their well-being directly affects their actions and emotions.

#### Priority Area 2: Prevention and Early Intervention

Riverside County JJCC should identify and fund promising practices for prevention and community-based intervention as a top priority for Riverside County youth with two focus areas:

- Diversion Programs: Funding to build well-established and effective community-based diversion programs will be a well-worth investment toward long-term, positive impacts for youth in Riverside County and communities as a whole. Youth who are placed in pre-arrest and pre-petition diversion programs offered in the community have better recidivism rates than youth who are formally involved in the court system.<sup>10</sup> Also, diversion programs that are designed with a focus on diverting youth who are disproportionately impacted by the juvenile justice system, such as Black and Brown youth, are effective at reducing racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, diversion programs are less costly than formal court involvement and will save significant taxpayer dollars.<sup>12</sup>
- Community-based Youth Centers: JJCPA funds should be invested toward long-term strategies and plans that will build community-based alternatives to detention and incarceration. For example, in Los Angeles County, the Youth Justice Work Group (YJWG) composed of juvenile justice stakeholders such as the Juvenile Court, District Attorneys, Defense Offices, and Probation, are planning “Home-like, Community-Based Therapeutic Housing and Reentry.”<sup>13</sup> These centers will offer youth a home-like environment to live in while receiving holistic, restorative, and healing support as well as re-entry services.

#### Priority Area 3: An Integrated and Coordinated Systems Approach

Riverside County JJCC should improve the coordination of programs, services, and funding for a more equitable distribution across communities and to ensure priority areas are met.

- Continuity of services after release/re-entry: An increased investment in CBOs should support an expansion of community-based programming and services to prevent recidivism and as a result, increase community safety.
- Structured family and youth-serving agency budgets: Family and youth-serving agencies should establish multi-disciplinary service teams to treat families and youth, avoiding duplication of services while leveraging resources and funding. Research affirms that the youth and families we serve have multiple risks and needs across multiple domains. Therefore, no single program, agency, or system can adequately address the multiple risks and needs of families and youth.

<sup>10</sup> The Sentencing Project, *Diversion: A Hidden Key to Combating Racial and Ethnic Disparities* (Aug. 2022).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 4.

<sup>12</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), *Diversion From Formal Juvenile Court Processing* (Feb. 2017).

<sup>13</sup> W. Haywood Burns Institute, *Los Angeles County: Youth Justice Reimagined* (Oct. 2020).

#### Priority Area 4: Family Support and Community Capacity Building

Riverside County JJCC should ensure a prioritization of the capacity-building needs of youth, families, and CBOs to become active leaders that will meaningfully inform the county's direction on youth justice.

- Parents/guardians and supportive adults are key change agents: Parents/guardians and supportive adults are in the ideal position to influence youth's positive adjustment powerfully and should be supported to increase their capacity and tools to do so.
- Community capacity-building: Investments to build the capacity of youth, community members, and CBOs organized around a set of objectives aimed at establishing community protective factors and reducing risk factors that contribute to justice-involvement is fundamental and a more productive way to sustain service intervention. It aims to bring about change by bringing resources into the neighborhood and mobilizing or reorganizing existing resources and assets. Community capacity building places a premium and priority on involving youth, in particular justice-involved youth, in the mobilization effort. Rather than serving as "objects" of research and intervention, these youths are "subjects" and "initiators" of their own research and intervention. Thus, they serve to enhance their neighborhood's capacity to establish new norms and values that increase the likelihood of the neighborhood achieving its overall aim of increasing protective factors and decreasing risk factors.

#### Priority Area 5: Prosocial and Skill-Building Opportunities

Riverside County JJCC should support the prioritization of community-based services and programs that teach youth tools and skills to exit the system successfully and support them to grow into self-sustaining, thriving young adults.

- Life and vocational skills training for youth: Social training and skill-development help youth learn skills necessary for successful social interaction, which are expected in turn to increase adaptive and prosocial behavior, helping them become better at controlling social situations resulting in positive outcomes by teaching the participants what to do, allowing them to replace problematic behaviors with positive alternatives.
- Mentors/coaches/credible messengers: A mentor or credible messenger can serve as a positive role model for youth, provide reassurance to the youth's new prosocial identity, and expose the youth to positive experiences outside of the youth's immediate social environment. Credible messengers are individuals who have directly experienced similar situations that justice-involved youth have experienced, such as navigating the juvenile justice system earlier in their lives. The *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)* has defined them as "Mentors who have passed through the justice system and sustainably transformed their lives... [who] are able to break through to younger, justice-involved people and form powerful, transformative, personal relationships."<sup>14</sup> Credible messengers have been proven to be effective at connecting

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<sup>14</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), *What Does It Mean To Be Credible? | Interrupting the Cycle of Youth Violence* (Nov. 2022), <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/media/video/33471> (last visited Nov. 3, 2022).

with youth, building trusting relationships, and preventing violence.<sup>15</sup> To be effective and true to the intent behind credible messengers, these mentors should be available to youth in their community. CBOs should be funded to hire and build the capacity of credible messengers.

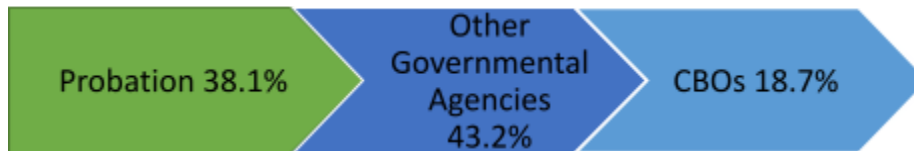
**Conclusion: The Means to Reaching the Priority Areas - JJCPA Funding Allocation**

Riverside County JJCC should rethink its JJCPA funding allocation. Consistent with targeting the priorities outlined in this letter, expanding and implementing community-level interventions and solutions will require a different funding approach similar to the Ventura model. Moreover, county agencies are already funded through other funding streams. JJCPA funding should primarily be directed at CBOs.

Recommended JJCPA budget allocation:



Current (from 2022/23 approved budget):



Respectfully,

Community-based organization representatives:

Jessica Aparicio, Sigma Beta Xi, Inc.

Jitahadi Imara, Student Nest

Rebecca Acevedo, Neighborhood College

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<sup>15</sup> *Id.*