

REDUCING YOUTH INCARCERATION INNOVATION GUIDE: *COMMUNITY CONFERENCING CENTER*

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



What was the problem the innovation sought to address?

Youth misbehavior is a normal part of adolescent development, but too often these problems are addressed outside of the family and community context. Bringing youth, families, community stakeholders and victims into a process that seeks to address these issues prior to or very early on in the juvenile justice process can help jurisdictions effectively deal with delinquency.

The voices of young people, families, and community are also often missing from dispositional and service delivery decision-making processes. This can inhibit matching appropriate services to the youth and leaves family and community concerns unheard and strengths untapped.

What is the innovation?

The concept of Family Group Conferencing being used as a formal practice by juvenile justice authorities dates back to 1989 in the New Zealand Youth Justice System.

According to the [Youth Court of New Zealand](#), "Family Group Conferencing aims to involve the young offender, the victim and their families in the decision-making process with the objective of reaching a group-consensus on a 'just' outcome. In this way they reflect some aspects of centuries-old sanctioning and dispute resolution traditions of the Maori of New Zealand. They also encapsulate restorative justice ideologies, by including the victim in the decision-making process and encouraging the mediation of concerns between the victim, the [youth] and their families as a means to achieve reconciliation, restitution and rehabilitation."

The [Community Conferencing Center in Baltimore, MD](#), is an adaption of Family Group Conferencing and has implemented their model in partnership with schools, police, and the juvenile justice system. The goal is to reduce recidivism by restoring the harm caused by offending through the involvement of families and communities in creative problem solving. The Community Conferencing Center has worked in partnership with the school system, the Department of Juvenile Services, police and the courts for over 10 years. Over 7,000 youth, victims and their respective supporters have safely and successfully resolved their own crimes and conflicts through Community Conferencing.

The Community Conferencing Center provides a process for those involved in and impacted by misbehavior and crime to resolve the problem, on their own, outside of the juvenile justice system. By giving families and communities an alternative to formal processing, Community Conferencing is an effective and powerful tool to both divert and prevent deeper involvement.

Why is this innovative?

Community Conferencing can be initiated prior to any formal involvement with juvenile justice authorities or early on in the juvenile justice process as a means to divert young people from further penetration into the system.

By hearing first hand from those affected by their actions, youth have an opportunity to understand the impact they have had on others, while being held accountable and given an opportunity to make amends. Finally, Community Conferencing provides an opportunity to build and strengthen community by giving youth, families, and communities a space and structure to resolve their conflicts without formal court involvement.

In most jurisdictions systems do not meaningfully use restorative justice as an alternative to formal system involvement. Yet in many instances the solutions for how to address crime and how to hold young people accountable for missteps sits within the community. The Community Conferencing Center helps school, police and juvenile justice authorities relinquish power and control and share decision-making with those most impacted by youth misbehavior.

Is There Evidence that this Innovation Works?

The Community Conferencing Center has conducted thousands of conferences throughout Maryland. This approach has prevented youth from entering the juvenile justice system and has kept others from penetrating deeper into it.

Research supports the efficacy of conferencing. "Re-offending rates for young offenders who went through Community Conferencing are 60% lower than for those who went through the juvenile justice system." Irvine, J. & Iyengar, L. (2005). Match-controlled study of diversion for young offenders: Community conferencing vs. juvenile services. Report of the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services.

Are there issues, limits or unintended outcomes to consider during design and implementation?

Community and Family Group Conferencing are often cited as a Restorative Justice practice. Given the powerful forces of the status quo, it can be challenging for systems to adopt this practice in a way that ensures the values and principles embedded in restorative justice are not lost. And as with any practice or program, there are challenges and complexities in implementing with fidelity to the model.

*"There isn't a recipe for implementation, there are core values.
When programs take it as a recipe some of the core values can get
lost. It's the difference between baking a cake by a recipe or
understanding the chemistry behind the recipe."*

-- Lauren Abramson

A report by the [Youth Court of New Zealand](#) states, "Unfortunately there is evidence that the young person's voice often seems to become subsumed within the family's." It should be noted however that even relatively low rates of involvement in conferences are still considerably higher than young people's involvement in conventional court processes.

Finally, Lauren Abramson emphasizes that conferencing can be over utilized on minor misdemeanor diversion cases at the expense of effectively addressing more serious offenses. Community Conferencing can and is being used on more serious crimes like auto theft along with some other felonies.

Links

- [Community Conferencing Center](#)
- [New Zealand White Paper](#)
- [American Humane](#)

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