

PRACTICE GUIDE

Transforming Juvenile Probation

Restructuring Probation Terms to Promote Success

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Transforming Juvenile Probation: Restructuring Probation Terms to Promote Success

Jurisdictions across the country are changing how they administer juvenile probation and better aligning policy and practice with developmental science and positive youth development to improve outcomes for youth, families, and communities.¹ These changes often advance two goals: divert most youth from system involvement altogether and shrink probation caseloads, and change probation structure to focus less on surveillance and compliance and more on research-informed strategies that promote effective behavior change for the few youth on probation supervision.² This guide builds on that work and goes a step farther, articulating a new, time-limited approach in which probation officers function as resource bridges focused primarily on connecting or reconnecting youth with community-based resources to support them in the long term. This approach is especially critical for jurisdictions working to address the systemic racism that exists in the juvenile justice system and is reflected in the lack of investment in communities impacted most acutely by overpolicing, surveillance, and incarceration.³ Taken together, these structural factors have led to youth of color being overrepresented and disproportionately harmed at every point in the justice process, including probation.⁴

This guide provides a framework for how to define and structure youth probation terms to reduce the harm inherent in probation supervision, leverage community partnerships, and build community capacity to wrap youth and their households with any supports, resources, and services needed to promote success.⁵ Probation-system improvements have gained momentum over the past several years and a continued need exists to translate research and best practices into concrete recommendations for probation policy and practice that consider risk and potential harm to youth and promote community safety.⁶ This guide is intended to fill that gap by summarizing relevant research, offering practical guidance for implementing changes, and highlighting real-world examples from youth probation agencies across the country. This resource is focused specifically on youth probation terms and does not cover other critical system improvements, including strategies to decrease the number of youth placed on probation by diverting most youth from formal system involvement of any kind (box 1 includes more information on resources from the Annie E. Casey Foundation on transforming juvenile probation).

BOX 1

The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Vision for Transforming Juvenile Probation

This guide is one of several practitioner-oriented products funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. As it [articulates](#), “The Casey Foundation’s vision for juvenile probation transformation rests on two pillars: reducing probation caseloads by diverting a greater share of cases from the juvenile court system and refashioning probation into a more strategic and effective intervention for the much smaller population of youth who will remain on supervision caseloads.”^a

In addition to this guide, which provides guidance for juvenile probation agencies on probation terms, there are resources and tools on the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s [website](#) related to [other aspects of probation transformation](#), such as [expanding the use of diversion](#) from the juvenile justice system and [eliminating confinement as a response to probation rule violations](#).

^a The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Transforming Juvenile Probation: A Vision for Getting It Right* (Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018).

Why Shorten and Restructure Juvenile Probation Terms?

Shortening and restructuring juvenile probation terms promotes both probation transformation goals: reducing the population of youth on probation, and using their time on probation more effectively. In short, there are three primary reasons to shorten and restructure probation terms.

The first is to **minimize harm to youth**. Justice system involvement of any kind negatively impacts youth,⁷ and probation supervision in particular is a form of correctional control that imposes onerous requirements on youth and families that can include frequent meetings and costly fines and fees.⁸ Probation requirements can prevent youth from leaving their homes to socialize with friends, dictate who they can and cannot interact with, and subject them to invasive searches without cause.⁹ Further, traditional probation models that focus on surveillance and compliance put youth at risk of revocation and deeper system involvement, pushing them into out-of-home placements and contributing to the overincarceration of young people across the country.¹⁰ Even administrative or informal probation, though often less burdensome, exposes youth to risk of additional justice system contact, including risk of revocations. All frontline professionals—including probation officers working hard to operate with the best interests of youth in mind—have perceptions and biases about how families should work and how youth should behave and respond to their interactions. Frontline professionals interpret—and respond to—behaviors and actions through that lens, and their actions can inadvertently harm young people. Youth probation policy and practice must take these risks into account and consider the

potential negative impact of lengthy probation terms. Though some jurisdictions have shifted their focus toward treatment and rehabilitation, they often still rely on long probation terms that put youth at risk of deeper entrenchment in the juvenile justice system and subject them and their families to significant state intervention. The resource bridge approach to restructuring and shortening probation terms acknowledges that risk and helps young people avoid deeper or longer justice involvement and associated harms.¹¹

The second reason is to **use limited resources efficiently**. Shortening and restructuring probation terms promotes more efficient use of resources both inside and outside the justice system. Shrinking caseloads by reducing the overall number of youth on probation frees up time and resources for probation officers to forge stronger relationships with youth and families, improve and streamline casework, develop community partnerships, and build community capacity to support the full continuum of youth and family needs. Shrinking probation caseloads can also free up resources that could be redirected outside of the justice system to support community-based organizations better suited to meet the multifaceted needs of youth and families.¹² Centering solutions on young people and their families involves acknowledging that the root causes of harmful behavior and the most effective ways of addressing them exist outside the justice system.¹³

The third reason to shorten and restructure probation terms is to **advance racial equity**. The resource bridge approach to youth probation can advance racial equity by improving youths' access to any community-based supports and services they need and reducing the likelihood of justice system entrenchment for youth of color. Justice system harms disproportionately impact groups that have faced persistent structural discrimination and insufficient access to resources, including young people of color, people who identify as LGBTQ, and people with low incomes.¹⁴ For example, youth of color are *less likely* than white youth to have access to supports, services, and opportunities that promote healthy development in their communities; *more likely* to become involved with the juvenile justice system (including probation); and *more likely* to receive harsh sanctions (including out-of-home placement) in response to noncompliance.¹⁵ Identifying, connecting with, and investing in culturally responsive supports, services, and opportunities in communities disproportionately impacted by incarceration and other forms of justice system control provides the scaffolding and structure that youth need for healthy development.

The resource bridge approach to probation can advance racial equity by improving youths' access to any community-based supports and services they need and reducing the likelihood of justice system entrenchment for youth of color.

A New Vision for Juvenile Probation Terms: Time-Limited, Community-Centered Terms to Promote Success and Reduce Recidivism

Acknowledging the potential harm of lengthy probation terms and thinking critically about the appropriate and most effective role of probation in youths' lives leads to an approach that focuses less on "fixing" youth and more on wrapping them and their caregivers with needed, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive supports in their homes and communities that help them reach developmental milestones and individual goals. The ultimate goal is to shift to a community-owned safety infrastructure in which all youth have the support and resources they need to grow into adulthood without being exposed to risk of incarceration or state control. Limiting probation terms is key to reducing the footprint of probation and working toward more youth-centered communities of care. Many jurisdictions are collecting the resources and building the infrastructure necessary to provide wraparound services to youth.¹⁶

To be clear, accountability for misbehavior and harm is still central to this approach. Restorative approaches that focus on acknowledging the harm caused by one's actions and providing opportunities for youth to repair harm *directly and, where appropriate, personally with those impacted* are effective strategies for reducing recidivism and building individual and collective accountability.¹⁷ Probation officers can play a role in connecting youth with those opportunities and helping youth understand the impact of their actions and take responsibility for making amends. Importantly, though, many accountability structures and some of the most effective interventions and solutions exist entirely outside the justice system.¹⁸ In many cases, the best way to uphold safety and foster positive youth outcomes is to facilitate and support community responses to harm without justice system intervention.

The ultimate goal is to shift to a community-owned safety infrastructure in which all youth have the support and resources they need to grow into adulthood without being exposed to risk of incarceration or state control.

BOX 2

Promoting Accountability and Safety through Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement

One of the biggest challenges in reforming youth justice is figuring out how to help young people take responsibility for causing harm, particularly in cases of serious crime and violence. Roca is a strong example of how to do that successfully through a trauma-informed approach. As it [articulates](#), “Roca’s mission is to be a relentless force in disrupting incarceration, poverty, and racism by engaging the young adults, police, and systems at the center of urban violence in relationships to address trauma, find hope, and drive change.” Through its work in Maryland and Massachusetts, Roca centers the experiences of young people, ensures that people from all youth-serving institutions—including probation—work from the same understanding of human development, trauma, and behavior change, and makes accountability a core component of its work with young men at highest risk of engaging in or being a victim of violence.^a

Through peacemaking circles, Roca has created a structure and safe space *outside of the justice system* for people and their communities to acknowledge and restore harms and to allow young people to learn from their mistakes and practice responsibility.^b In parallel, Roca continuously engages youth through intensive contact, stage-based programming, and relationship building to address past behavior and promote future success. The results speak for themselves: in Massachusetts, where it has been engaged longest, four out of five young men participating in the program between 2012 and 2019 stopped engaging in violent crime and only one in three recidivated within three years, significantly fewer than the state average.^c

^a “Our Story,” Roca Inc., accessed March 25, 2021, <https://rocainc.org/about/our-story/>.

^b Carolyn Boyes-Watson, *Peacemaking Circles and Urban Youth: Bringing Justice Home* (St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2013).

^c “Outcomes,” Roca Inc., accessed March 25, 2021, <https://rocainc.org/impact/outcomes/>.

This guide outlines a new way of thinking about probation term lengths and termination processes and provides research-informed guidance for term structure. Simply stated, probation terms should be only as long as is necessary to connect youth with any needed supports and services in their communities, and should be designed to minimize disruption to young people’s lives and development.

In this approach, the probation officer provides a *time-limited bridge* toward longer-term, community-based solutions rather than *being the change agent or solution* for the youth. This has important implications for the length of probation terms. When the primary aim of probation is to link youth with community resources to support healthy development, longer terms are not necessary because the goal is not to fully address the youth's needs or achieve rehabilitation goals during the probation term. Rather, the goal is to work together to map the supports and resources that can help them move forward. Relatedly, metrics of success would be different in this new approach. Although one central goal would remain the same (i.e., the youth not returning to the system), short-term success would also be measured by the number of prosocial supports and resources the youth connects with and by their progress toward personal goals. In addition, probation completion would not be tied to youth completing specific treatment or programs. Long-term success in this approach is measured by positive developmental outcomes for individual young people (e.g., educational attainment, steady employment, etc.).

Simply stated, probation terms should be only as long as is necessary to connect youth with any needed supports and services in their communities, and should be designed to minimize disruption to young people's lives and development.

This approach recognizes that probation exists in a broader community context and relies on developing systems of youth-centered community care and accountability that serve all youth without relying on punishment or control. In the long run, probation agencies should be working to bolster and reinforce community capacity to meet the needs of youth and their families and promote public safety without relying on the juvenile justice system and its associated risks to achieve positive youth outcomes. Probation officers can be critical advocates for community partners to receive the resources and coordination needed to best serve youth and their families. Forging partnerships, coordinating efforts, and sharing resources with existing child- and youth-serving entities (such as schools) can be important ways to begin building a coordinated infrastructure. In short, probation officers can be the strongest champions for the young people they work with when they are also champions for the community-based services and support systems in their communities.

Fully adopting this approach will require a significant shift for juvenile probation agencies that still focus on punishment, surveillance, and compliance, as well as for those that have adopted a more

treatment-oriented model and use longer supervision terms designed to advance youth rehabilitation. Transformation of this magnitude requires significant changes to policy and practice as well as support of stakeholders outside of probation, including judges, who have primary control over the length of probation terms.¹⁹ It also requires organizational commitment to implementing research-informed probation practices, and most likely requires that agency budgets be assessed and reallocated to support community partnership building and community-led interventions. A culture shift in how agencies think about the purpose of probation, their missions, community partnerships and stakeholder engagement, and their commitment to equity is also central.²⁰ Even when other system actors are hesitant to adopt large-scale change, probation agencies can play a critical role in piloting key changes and jump-starting broader discussions. None of that work is easy or quick, but it is necessary for creating community-based continua of care and opportunity that promote success for all youth (box 3 provides resources for implementing a change approach in juvenile probation).

BOX 3

Strategies for Implementing a New Approach in Juvenile Probation

Change is difficult, and sometimes the hardest things to change are those we cannot see. An organization's culture, norms, and values can all impact the success or failure of efforts to implement a new way of doing things. Moving toward the community-centered approach outlined here may require agencies to rethink their missions, their goals, and the metrics they use to assess performance. That can be a lot to tackle on top of ongoing work, but there are resources to support these efforts. In 2019, Urban published *Bridging Research and Practice: A Handbook for Implementing Research-Informed Practices in Juvenile Probation*, which translated implementation science strategies specifically for juvenile probation. Though the Bridge Project probation model focused on probation officers more as counselors than as resource bridges, the organizational change elements are the same. Effective change management requires leadership to anticipate barriers; develop and implement effective communication channels; define a clear mission; coordinate with external partners; align and build staff competencies; revise and align policies, practices, and data management systems; and implement a continuous quality-improvement process to drive and assess the entire effort. See the [project page](#) for the Bridge Project for a range of resources developed specifically to support this work in juvenile probation.

How to Advance Time-Limited, Community-Centered Probation: Two Guiding Principles for Structuring Juvenile Probation Terms and Strategies for Implementation

The resource bridge approach to probation outlined here is based on two core principles. The first is to limit probation terms to the minimum time needed to collaboratively identify the family and community connections that will support youth beyond court involvement. The second is to make it as easy to shorten terms and as difficult to extend them as feasible. In the rest of this guide, we provide specific guidance for operationalizing these two principles and outline a three-phased framework for juvenile probation terms.

Principle One: Limit Probation Terms to the Minimum Time Needed to Connect Family with Community Supports for Youth

WHY IS THIS PRINCIPLE IMPORTANT?

One of the most central questions probation practitioners grapple with is: How long does probation take to be successful? Although there is no national standard for juvenile probation term length, practitioners can work to align probation terms with what we know about supporting positive youth outcomes. For example, research on the impact of justice system involvement and best practices to promote long-term behavior change provides critical lessons about how to best structure terms to minimize harm to youth, families, and communities. As explained above, we know that system involvement of any kind—including probation—is harmful to youth.²¹ Further, longer probation terms are no more effective than shorter terms in preventing future offending behaviors, and can increase the likelihood of revocation.²² Revocation carries a risk of incarceration, which disconnects youth from critical supports, interferes with prosocial development, and is generally less effective at preventing recidivism than well-designed community-based alternatives.²³ Incorporating these lessons can help probation practitioners improve outcomes for youth, reduce the number of youth on probation, reduce probation officers' caseloads, and use resources more efficiently.

BOX 4

A Note on Risk and Needs Assessments

Many jurisdictions use risk and needs assessment tools in their juvenile probation practices, including to determine probation term length. For the following reasons, probation term length should *not* be based on the results of risk and needs assessments:

- Risk and needs assessment tools can perpetuate and exacerbate racial and ethnic disparities, resulting in longer terms, heightened risk of supervision violations, and further justice system involvement for youth of color.^a
- Risk assessment tools are not designed to supplant legal decisionmaking, including dictating length of time under correctional control.
- Risk assessment tools can inform decisions about “who” (i.e., which young people are more likely to be rearrested), and needs assessment tools can inform decisions about “what” (i.e., what specific interventions might effectively address youth needs), but neither tool speaks to the “how”—that is, the question of whether juvenile justice or nonsystem/community-based interventions will better support positive youth outcomes. Linking assessment findings directly to justice interventions (e.g., using findings to determine probation term length) can preclude community-based approaches that may produce better outcomes.

Instead, probation officers can use a variety of assessment information to inform collaborative goal-setting with youth and to make appropriate connections to community-based supports and resources.

^a Victor St. John, Kelly Murphy, and Akiva Liberman, “[Recommendations for Addressing Racial Bias in Risk and Needs Assessment in the Juvenile Justice System](#)” (Washington, DC: ChildTrends, 2020); Development Services Group Inc., “[Risk/Needs Assessments for Youth](#)” (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2015).

HOW CAN THIS PRINCIPLE BE OPERATIONALIZED?

Ensure that each youth receives a determinate probation term ceiling rather than an indeterminate term.

This provides transparency and promotes procedural justice and equity.

Base term length on the minimum time needed to achieve the following:

- Work with youth to identify and understand their strengths, challenges, and existing support systems, and to collaboratively establish goals.
- Identify and connect youth and their families or caregivers with any needed supports, treatments, and opportunities in their communities that bolster their strengths and address challenges.

- Establish or reinforce links to community supports that can advance shared goals.

Identify barriers that can delay case processing. Examples of these barriers include the following:

- burdensome paperwork and court appearance requirements
- large caseloads/limited time
- competing, time-sensitive court activities and casework requirements that occupy probation officers' time and can delay initial meetings and fact finding (e.g., unanticipated court hearings, emergency youth placement needs, court-ordered evaluations, paperwork and document preparation, etc.)
- difficulty connecting and meeting with family members/caregivers
- limited availability or waiting lists for needed treatment/services, particularly in more rural areas
- transportation-related barriers to accessing services or meeting probation conditions

Minimize delays in assessment and case processing that extend probation time frames. Probation officers can minimize delays by doing the following:

- Verify that initial screening and diversion are effectively preventing the majority of youth from entering the probation stage, including all youth with less serious offenses.
- Conduct a case processing audit, in collaboration with probation officers, to identify each step in the process and the time each step could take.
- Consider eliminating or scaling back steps that add processing time and delay connecting youth with community supports.
- Ensure that required meetings and/or check-ins are actually necessary, are structured to efficiently advance probation goals, and allow flexibility for virtual communication if it is less burdensome and can accomplish the same goals as in-person communication.

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

How Jurisdictions Are Setting Short, Definite Probation Terms

Allowing flexibility within limited probation term ranges. Utah implemented reforms following H.B. 239 (2017) that set statewide presumptive juvenile probation terms of one to three months for intake probation and four to six months for formal probation.

Setting goals for shorter probation terms. Youth probation terms in **Kansas** are legislatively directed. Intensive supervision probation can last up to 12 months, but stakeholders articulated that their goal is 9 months for youth exhibiting good behavior. At the end of a probation term, the case is closed without further action.

Sources: Probation practitioners, interviews with Urban research team conducted between September 2020 and November 2020.

Principle Two: Make It as Easy as Possible to Shorten Probation Terms and as Hard as Possible to Extend Them

WHY IS THIS PRINCIPLE IMPORTANT?

Even limited justice system involvement can be harmful and disruptive for youth, so it is critical to minimize their time in the system.²⁴ It is also important to use what we know about effective behavior management to rethink how to structure probation terms. For example, an overemphasis on compliance actually leads to worse outcomes;²⁵ in fact, incentives are more powerful than sanctions in shaping choices and behavior.²⁶ Offering youth incentives to shorten their probation terms allows them to exercise agency in determining their progress and outcomes. Notably, research shows that early termination from probation is the most powerful incentive.²⁷

Shortening terms through incentives also reduces caseloads by decreasing the number of youth on probation and allowing probation officers to spend time on high-quality casework (because they are working with fewer youth on each caseload), including community resource mapping and relationship building. In addition, replacing lengthy and complex probation conditions with clear, targeted expectations and collaboratively established short-term goals sets youth up for success, whereas more conditions and stricter enforcement of those conditions (e.g., drug tests) can demoralize youth and increase their risk of violations.²⁸ Developing requirements and expectations in partnership with youth and their families and caregivers can also promote buy-in and lead to fewer violations.²⁹

HOW CAN THIS PRINCIPLE BE OPERATIONALIZED?

Develop limited, relevant probation rules and requirements in partnership with youth and families (broadly defined to include all supportive adults identified by youth). This promotes buy-in and increases the likelihood of success. Practitioners can achieve this by doing the following:

- Focus supervision expectations on a few short-term priorities that are most important for each young person.

- Reduce or eliminate control conditions that increase young people’s chances of being legally punished for normal adolescent transgressions (e.g., skipping school, staying out past curfew, missing regular drug screens, etc.).
- Make sure expectations are written in clear and developmentally appropriate language and in each youth’s native language, and that there are multiple opportunities for youth and families and/or caregivers to ask clarifying questions about any requirements.
- Make sure expectations are realistic and align with what we know about adolescent development.
- Provide additional flexibility for, and consider the unique needs of, youth with behavioral and/or mental health challenges.

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

How Jurisdictions Are Engaging Youth and Families and Streamlining Conditions

Engaging youth and families. In **Fairfax County, Virginia**, families and caregivers are involved in case planning, and their involvement is even part of supervision conditions. Thus, the initial planning with each youth and their family is essential for ensuring all parties understand expectations, and it ensures that the plan is strength-based and individualized to the youth and their supports. Moreover, **Pima County, Arizona**, has significantly improved the inclusion of youth in the probation process. For example, youth and families have consistent team meetings. The county also provides documents for youth in their native language and offers translation services.

Streamlining probation conditions. **Hawaii** cut the number of standard probation conditions by roughly 40 percent after research showed lengthy conditions increase the risk of violations. In addition, probation agreements are written in the language best understood by each youth, and language access support is available for those who need it. Stakeholders cite decreased probation violations as an indicator that this strategy may have succeeded.

Sources: Probation practitioners, interviews with Urban research team conducted between September 2020 and November 2020.

Note: See the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Family Engagement in the Juvenile Justice System: Guidance Framework* for practical tips and tools for partnering with families effectively.

Give youth pathways to shorten their time on probation and provide as many opportunities as possible for them to exercise that agency. Ways to do this include the following:

- Work with youth to identify and set explicit, achievable, short-term goals for probation and develop a plan for recognizing and rewarding their partnership and progress toward goals.
- Focus on the primary reward of shortening probation terms when progress toward identified goals is made. This can be paired with other incentives as needed.

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

How Jurisdictions Are Incentivizing Youth to Shorten Their Own Terms

In **Kansas**, monthly court reports are given to youth on probation, their parents/caregivers, their attorney, the prosecutor, and the judge. The reports provide a summary of how much good time has been earned and the resulting release date. Incentives are calculated through each local probation department's system; youth can earn seven days in good time a month. This reform is based on evidence that incentives for progress shape behavior more than sanctions for setbacks.

Marion County, Indiana, has created a unique system with visual displays that turn rewards into a competition for youth on probation. Youth are awarded points or tickets for attending probation meetings, and after three points, they can earn the first incentive. Probation officers work with youth to create posters tracking their progress to help them visualize progress toward their end goal (examples of these visualizations include a raceway, a football field, Pac-Man, or other metaphor of interest defined by the young person).

Sources: Probation practitioners, interviews with Urban research team conducted between September 2020 and November 2020.

Implement departmental policies that limit the circumstances in which probation terms can be extended (to the extent possible under existing law). This could be done in the following ways:

- Develop clearly documented policies that identify the limited circumstances in which probation terms can be extended, and consider limiting or prohibiting extensions, lengthy extension periods, multiple extensions, and extensions to complete treatment/programming or to finish logistical processes (e.g., collecting fines/fees, finalizing paperwork).
- Create policies that require additional review and approval to extend probation terms.
- Create policies that require revocations and technical violations to go through multiple levels of approval and limit the kinds of situations revocations and technical violations can be filed in.
- Build and reinforce probation officers' capacity to counter extension requests by other stakeholders.

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

How Jurisdictions Are Limiting Probation Term Extensions

Though it is a model for incarceration rather than probation, the organizing framework around Illinois's youth corrections model incentivizes positive youth development by offering young people many opportunities to earn reductions and limiting opportunities to add time to their placement terms. After restructuring its discipline process, the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice restricted the circumstances in which misbehavior could trigger extensions to placement terms and added layers of review to prevent repeated extensions. Consequences focus on rectifying behavior rather than punishing misbehavior, consistent with research. Placement terms are only extended for the most serious incidents, and even then only after several layers of review.

In **Pierce County, Washington**, young people are placed on probation for as long as is necessary for them to engage in services that address criminogenic risk factors and connect them to community supports. To limit overserving young people, the county tries to avoid extending supervision term lengths.

Sources: Probation practitioners, interviews with Urban research team conducted between September 2020 and November 2020.

Incentivize probation officers to work with youth to build community connections and shorten probation terms. Ways to do this include the following:

- Track average probation term length as a performance metric, clearly articulate shortening terms as a goal, and track progress regularly.
- Build and implement a robust training, coaching, and oversight system to ensure all probation staff understand
 - » the role of probation (i.e., as a time-limited bridge to community supports);
 - » the core goals of probation (i.e., understanding needs, collaboratively helping people change, and linking them to long-term community services and resources);
 - » the reasoning behind making probation terms as minimally disruptive and brief as possible; and
 - » the strategies they can use to make probation minimally disruptive and brief, including sharing information with other juvenile justice system stakeholders and community stakeholders.

- Set explicit goals for probation officers' community connection work, including forging and strengthening community connections and supports.
- Consider using a visual resource (e.g., a football field, a hot air balloon race, or a road course) in the probation office to capture the progress officers are making in connecting youth with community supports, and encourage healthy competition among probation officers with rewards for those who help youth on their caseloads build the most robust connections and/or move through the probation process most efficiently.

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

How Jurisdictions Can Incentivize Probation Officers to Focus on Term Length

In 2019, **Marion County, Indiana**, created the Change Agent Challenge. Probation officers have a list of 30 items they can complete to earn points toward monetary rewards like gift cards. All items are related to using evidence-based practices and interacting with youth in ways that make them change agents rather than compliance officers. Marion County has incentivized staff to focus on best practices in a way that mimics the strategies they are using to promote long-term behavior change with youth. In effect, the jurisdiction is applying research on effective behavior change to reshape its probation agency's approach to probation.

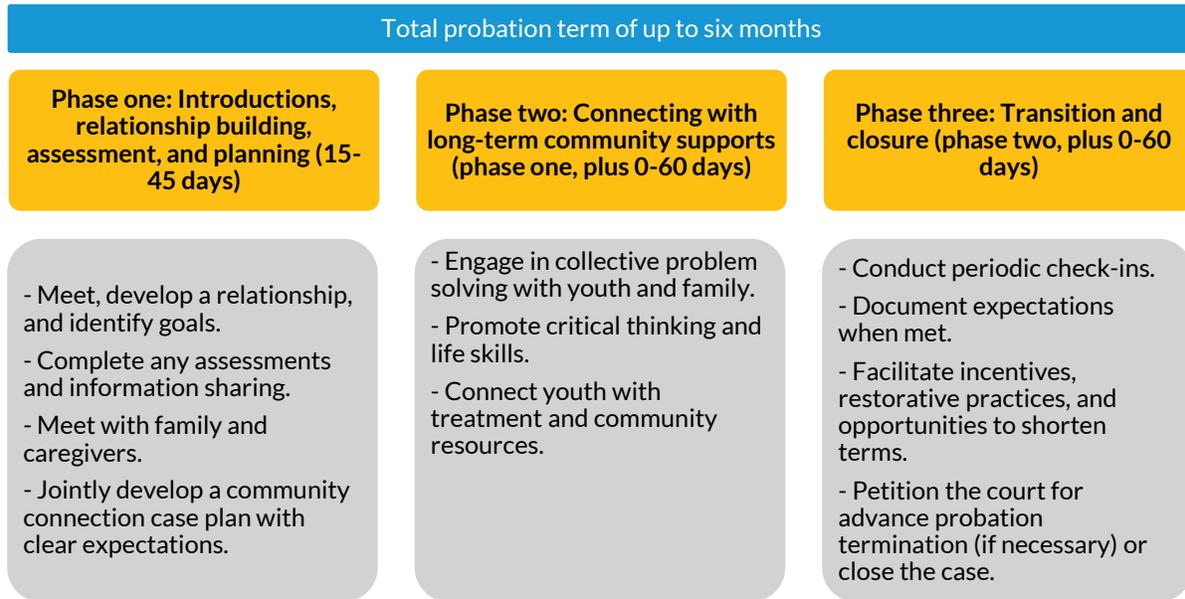
Source: Probation practitioners, interviews with Urban research team conducted between September 2020 and November 2020.

Bringing It All Together: A Framework for Time-Limited, Community-Centered Probation

To operationalize a new framework for probation that centers community connections, agencies can structure probation terms into three phases (figure 1). Though there may be *rare* exceptions, with the appropriate structures and supports, most youth and their probation officer(s)/case team can accomplish all three phases in six months or less, and more quickly in many cases. For example, phases two and three can follow in quick succession, particularly for youth who already have strong connections to resources and supports.

FIGURE 1

Proposed Structure and Timeline for Time-Limited, Community-Centered Probation



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Source: Urban research team.

Phase One: Introductions, Relationship Building, Assessment, and Planning

Phase one concludes approximately 15 to 45 days after probation engagement begins. During this phase, probation officers do the following:

- Invest the time needed to meet with the youth, build a relationship, and jointly identify goals and aspirations (efforts must balance expediency and efficiency with meaningful and effective case management strategies which should not be compromised).
- Complete relevant assessments (e.g., assessments for risk and needs, trauma, mental health and substance use needs, strengths, etc.).
- Meet with family members/caregivers to inquire about young people’s needs and circumstances and identify other natural supports in their communities, to share information about probation structures and processes, and to understand their concerns, needs, and goals.
- With young people and their caregivers, begin to develop a community connection case plan to guide probation engagement that sets clear and attainable short-term expectations, and long-term goals to guide connections to community services.

Phase Two: Connecting with Long-Term Community Supports

Phase two is completed between 0 and 60 days after the end of phase one. During this phase, probation officers do the following:

- Continue to build rapport with each youth and engage in collective problem solving with them and their families/caregivers.
- Continue to build out the community connection case plan, tailoring it as needed.
- Provide incentives and positive reinforcement for progress, no matter how small.
- Identify processes and opportunities for youth to accept responsibility for their actions and directly and personally repair any harm inflicted on others.
- Create opportunities for youth to develop, practice, and apply critical thinking and other life skills.
- Use empathy, motivational interviewing strategies, and restorative practices to support self-directed accountability and change.
- Work with the youth, their family and caregivers, and community partners to identify plans for long-term success and people who can support them on their journey.
- Connect youth with necessary treatment programs or other support programs that meet immediate needs (e.g., mental health, substance use, family intervention, etc.), ensuring that they are linked with culturally relevant and responsive interventions and that adjustments are made when mismatches occur.
- Connect youth with community resources that will support them long after their time on probation.

Phase Three: Transition and Closure

Phase three is completed approximately 0 to 60 days after the end of phase two. During this phase, probation officers do the following:

- Schedule periodic check-ins (in person, virtually, or over the phone) to assess progress toward short-term case plan goals and provide necessary support or adjustments.
- Facilitate opportunities for youth to earn incentives and shorten their probation terms.

- Remain in contact and maintain collaborative relationships with community partners and supports.
- Document when probation expectations for community connection have been met.
- Petition the court for advance probation termination (if necessary) or officially close the case.

Strategies to Advance Equity by Building Relationships with Community Partners

To implement this approach successfully, probation agencies and practitioners need to identify and connect with community partners in general and to advance racial and geographic equity. Strategies other jurisdictions have used to accomplish this include the following:

- Map community assets in partnership with community leaders and stakeholders, including people with lived experience in the justice system.
- Prioritize hiring probation officers from the community in which young people on probation live, who are familiar with the resources available there, and who have knowledge of common challenges and opportunities for young people.
- Build and convene an open network of community providers that includes organizations with and without formal partnerships with probation.
- Codevelop policy, practice, and programs with community partners.
- Create an infrastructure for probation officers to share community resources with one another.
- Ensure probation officers have and take time to meet with community partners to build relationships and understand offerings.
- Build community familiarity and engagement into expectations for probation officers' career advancement.
- Understand service providers' resource structures and needs.
- Advocate for direct public investment in child- and youth-serving supports, and in resource streams that do not flow through the juvenile justice system.
- Allow for creative and flexible service delivery strategies, particularly in communities with few providers, and consider partnering with a wide range of child-serving entities such as schools

and other educational institutions, houses of worship, and people who could serve as informal mentors.

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

How Jurisdictions Can Build Relationships with and Champion Community Partners

Pima County, Arizona, is one of the jurisdictions leading the way in community partnership in juvenile probation. Its juvenile court has done intentional outreach to cultivate community partners, including by holding quarterly meetings to advance collaboration (which 60 to 70 people attend) and managing a resource list that has served as “COVID rapid response.” It also maintains an email list with 200 community members as part of a vision for a reciprocal relationship between the court and the community, and anyone is welcome to join regardless of whether they are in a formal relationship with the court. Stakeholders in Pima County described this community collaboration as central to their racial equity work.

Pierce County, Washington, is partnering with communities in an explicit effort to address racial and ethnic disparities. Targeted data analysis revealed not only that African American youth were overrepresented in probation, but that they also had very different experiences on supervision than white youth. White youth who were revoked and placed out of home typically had committed a new crime whereas African American youth were more likely to end up in placement for a series of less serious violations that culminated in revocation. In short, it was clear that the system was not working for African American youth, who were experiencing entrenchment in the system. With that new understanding, the county actively decided to be a “multicultural, anti-racist, inclusive organization” and to develop strategies to address persistent racial and ethnic disparity. It quickly became clear that true partnership with the community was critical to success and that policy change was insufficient. As one staff member put it, “You have to get down to the roots of the tree.” That partnership resulted in the Pathways to Success program, specifically designed for African American youth. In this program, youth and families work together with a support team and play a central role in deciding what will work best to meet each youth’s unique needs.

Sources: Probation practitioners, interviews with Urban research team conducted between September 2020 and November 2020.

Conclusion

By definition and design, probation imposes significant requirements on youth and their families/caregivers, and puts them at risk of revocation, placement, and deep entrenchment in the juvenile justice system. Probation agencies and other justice stakeholders working to determine

appropriate probation terms must consider this risk and other harms associated with community supervision. Though they are well intended, probation reform efforts that envision probation officers primarily as counselors in young people’s lives can expand the role of officers and result in lengthy supervision terms in the spirit of treatment and rehabilitation. Like all youth, justice-involved youth learn and grow best when they are heard and when their needs—including the need for ongoing support while learning from their mistakes and achieving their goals—are met. The approach we summarize in this guide refocuses probation terms and termination structures on strengthening family and community connections that can provide long-term support, and on minimizing disruption and harm to young people’s lives.

Shortening and restructuring juvenile probation terms maximizes efficient use of limited resources and advances racial equity. For probation agencies, adopting this approach involves a significant shift in practice and will not happen overnight. But jurisdictions across the country are providing examples of how to operationalize the principles we describe in this guide, and resources are increasingly available to help agencies build and identify community connections and collaborate to support the many needs of young people.

Notes

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- ² The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Transforming Juvenile Probation: A Vision for Getting It Right* (Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018).
- ³ Dafna Gozani, Laura Ridolfi, and Anna Wong, *Ending Endless Probation* (Oakland, CA: National Center for Youth Law and W. Haywood Burns Institute, 2021).
- ⁴ Josh Rovner, *Racial Disparities in Youth Incarceration Persist* (Washington, DC: Sentencing Project, 2021); Joshua Rovner, “Racial Disparities in Youth Commitments and Arrests” (Washington, DC: Sentencing Project, 2016).
- ⁵ We use the terms young people and youth interchangeably to refer to people roughly ages 10 to 24. Though this guide is focused specifically on juvenile probation, which typically includes youth under the age of 18, many principles and best practices are relevant for young adults as well.
- ⁶ See the Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Transforming Juvenile Probation: A Vision for Getting It Right*; Samantha Harvell, Hanna Love, Elizabeth Pelletier, Chloe Warnberg, Teresa Derick-Mills, Marcus Gaddy, Akiva Liberman, ... and Constance Hull, *Bridging Research and Practice in Juvenile Probation: Rethinking Strategies to Promote Long-Term Change* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2018); Samantha Harvell, Teresa Derrick-Mills, Chloe Warnberg, Megan Russo, Constance Hull, Andreea Matei, Mary K. Winkler, Hanna Love, Janeen Buck-Willison, and Akiva Liberman, *Bridging Research and Practice: A Handbook for Implementing Research-Informed Practices in Juvenile Probation* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2019); Hanna Love, Samantha Harvell, Teresa Derrick-Mills, Marcus Gaddy, Akiva Liberman, Janeen Buck-Willison, and Mary K. Winkler, “Understanding Research and Practice Gaps in Juvenile Justice: Early Insights from the Bridge Project” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2016).
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- ⁸ Brogan, McPhee, Gale-Bentz, Rudd, and Goldstein, “Shifting Probation Culture and Advancing Juvenile Probation Reform.”
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- ¹⁰ Michelle S. Phelps, “Ending Mass Probation: Sentencing, Supervision, and Revocation,” *The Future of Children* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2018), 125–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26641550>; Gozani, Ridolfi, and Wong, “Ending Endless Probation.”

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