



County Innovation in Youth Justice: Probation

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Counties are central to youth wellbeing as purveyors of health, social services, education and local juvenile and criminal legal systems. The “County Innovation in Youth Justice” series will offer strategies and practices to enhance services, improve outcomes and strengthen communities.

Counties play a critical role in youth probation implementation, with authority that can include determining when and how probation is imposed and managing day-to-day supervision, services and sanctions.

Youth probation (i.e., juvenile probation) is court-ordered supervision requiring young people to follow specific rules and conditions for a set period, which can range from months to years.

While probation remains the most popular sanction in youth justice cases, many communities report that the compliance-based structure of probation does not lead to desired outcomes. Traditional youth probation can increase recidivism rates and push youth deeper into the justice system.¹ Recognizing the financial and societal costs of these outcomes, counties are implementing evidence-based practices and innovative measures that reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for youth and communities.

Promising Practices

The chart below outlines key county service areas in youth probation, highlights the county role and offers promising strategies counties can apply.

Service Area	County Role	Promising Practices & Potential Benefits
Administration & Supervision	Manage the day-to-day administration and supervision of youth on probation.	<p>Shifting the culture of probation from compliance-based supervision to community-centered support builds networks and strengthens connectedness, which are essential elements of positive youth development.</p> <p>Creating cross-system partnerships and implementing data-sharing agreements between service providers enables collaborative case planning and informed decision making.</p> <p>Partnering with youth and families to determine the terms of supervision, as well as actively soliciting, collecting and implementing feedback throughout service delivery, can improve community-based programs and resources.</p>

¹ Weber, J., Umpierre, M., & Bilchik, S. (2018). *Transforming Juvenile Justice Systems to Improve Public Safety and Youth Outcomes*. Georgetown University Center for Juvenile Justice Reform. Retrieved from <https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Transforming-Juvenile-Justice-Systems.pdf>

Service Area	County Role	Promising Practices & Potential Benefits
Sanctions & Interventions	Implement rewards, sanctions and therapeutic interventions for youth on probation.	<p>Integrating mechanisms such as (but not limited to) assessments to examine young people's risks and needs can reduce formal involvement in the justice system and determine eligibility for diversion to services.</p> <p>Offering therapeutic interventions and reward systems that motivate youth and create pro-social opportunities, rather than exclusively relying on punitive sanctions to redirect behavior, aligns research with practice and increases the likelihood of successfully completing probation terms.</p>
Diversion Programs & Services	Operate programs and services aimed at directing youth away from formal judicial proceedings.	<p>Implementing and expanding deflection and diversion programs can reduce costs, decrease re-offending and lower a young person's chances of getting involved in the criminal legal system.</p> <p>Monitoring outcomes and adapting models helps ensure these programs are effective in redirecting youth away from formal system involvement.</p>
Data Collection & Reporting	Manage data collection related to juvenile cases and reporting to state agencies.	Setting consistent demographic definitions and collection protocols across service systems streamlines reporting processes and evaluation capabilities.
Resource Allocation	Oversee the budget for local probation and other youth-serving services, including funding for staff, facilities and programs.	<p>Collaborating with communities to evaluate and revise solicitation processes for selecting providers helps address barriers to participation. Also, including these communities in resource allocation decisions can broaden county partnerships with service providers.</p> <p>Establishing pathways for youth with probation experience to review resource allocation and service offerings can create more responsive, effective programming.</p>



Learn More

For other resources in this series, please see NACo's Youth Justice page.

Strategies in Practice

Wayne County, Mich.

County Seat: Detroit

Population: 1.7 million

Wayne County is utilizing local authority to prioritize community-based interventions and reduce the involvement of young people in the youth justice system.



"By establishing a central intake system and connecting youth with agencies in their ZIP codes, we provided wraparound services for youth and their families within their communities. This culture shift not only saved the county money but also gave us greater control over youth outcomes."

Alisha Bell

Chair, Wayne County Commission

In 2000, Wayne County restructured its youth justice system and created the Community-Based Services Division to oversee youth probation and prevent young people from entering the formal court system. As part of this shift, the county contracts with an assessment center to serve as the single point of entry for all youth referred to or engaging with the juvenile justice system. At the assessment center's central intake, staff conduct a comprehensive needs and risk assessment within 24 hours to determine the appropriate level of supervision

and recommend services. Youth deemed "low risk" are directed to Youth Assistance Programs for diversion or referred to services addressing the root causes of their referral. Those requiring supervision are matched by their home ZIP code to one of the trusted community agencies contracted by the county. The community agencies provide local care, improving program completion rates and fostering continued engagement with services even after supervision ends.

For example, Growth Works, one of the Community Management Organizations, reports that:

- **92 percent** of youth completed all court-ordered requirements, including clean drug screens, community service and academic progress
- **98.4 percent** of youth remained free of felony convictions during program enrollment, and
- **93 percent** of youth were free of felony convictions two years after completing the program.

Wayne County's investment in the community-led probation model has significantly reduced probation caseloads, enabling more personalized care and collaboration with families and communities. Probation officers work closely with youth and their networks to identify strengths, reward positive behaviors and foster supportive environments. This strengths-based approach not only improves outcomes for young people but also enhances community safety and wellbeing.

This report is generously funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained above are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.