



Transformative  
Youth Justice

Community-Centered Support and Diversion

***Transformative Youth Justice:  
Trauma Informed Practices for  
Youth & Emerging Adults in  
Diversion Programs***

Judge Denise D. Hernández  
Travis County Court at Law #6  
Transformative Youth Justice Program



# OBJECTIVES

01

Neurodevelopment for youth and emerging adults

02

Community-centered partnerships and trauma-informed frameworks

03

Key takeaways to implement Trauma-Informed practices and structures





# TRANSFORMATIVE YOUTH JUSTICE





# Transformative Youth Justice

*Community-Centered Support and Diversion*

## TRANSFORMATIVE YOUTH JUSTICE IN TRAVIS COUNTY

Transformative Youth Justice (TYJ) is a court-led youth diversion program for individuals between the ages of 17-20.

The program utilizes a holistic community-centered approach to provide participants with developmentally-appropriate support, intervention, and mentorship.

The goal and vision of TYJ is to reduce recidivism and increase public safety by building a continuum of care centered in holistic community support for all program participants.





# **THE NEED FOR YOUTH-FOCUSED, TRAUMA-INFORMED DIVERSION**



# THE PROBLEMS WE'RE ADDRESSING

**2X**

**Youth and Emerging young adults (17-24 yrs old) are incarcerated at double their representation in the adult populace.**



**This age group is developmentally distinct from fully developed adults and require different justice system responses.**



**Individuals between the ages of 17-24 have the highest recidivism rates of any age cohort.**



# KEY ELEMENTS TO REDUCE RECIDIVISM



## **Change the Traditional Docket Setting**

The best way to reduce justice system involvement for individuals 17-20 years old is to involve community-based approaches, largely outside the formal justice system.



## **Trauma-Informed and Developmentally Appropriate Support**

During emerging adulthood, young people are expected to reach key milestones, such as educational attainment and meaningful employment. These milestones build on one another, fostering a young person's process of becoming an adult and "growing out" of reckless, impulsive behavior.



## **Community-Centered Support**

Strengthening cross-systems collaboration helps ensure that young adults have the tools they need to succeed by providing a continuum of care outside the justice system.



# NEURODEVELOPMENT FOR YOUTH AND EMERGING ADULTS



# ADOLESCENT NEURODEVELOPMENT



**Adolescence is an important time for brain development.**

- The brain finishes developing and maturing in the mid-to-late 20s.
- The part of the brain behind the forehead, called the prefrontal cortex, is one of the last parts to mature. This area is responsible for skills like planning, prioritizing, and making good decisions.

**Adolescents have an increased likelihood to take risks.**

- The normative neural changes that characterize adolescence are associated with increased risk taking.
- Compared to adults, adolescents are less able to consider the consequences of their actions, plan for the future, control their impulses, and regulate their emotions



# BRAIN SCIENCE IN ACTION



## Major turning points in an adolescence's life can shape the trajectory of their adulthood.

- Adolescence is considered the final period of developmental plasticity, when large-scale transformations in brain circuitry transpire (Galván, [2014](#)).
- Neurological research on developmental plasticity has highlighted how the social environment and "turning point" events can shape adolescent brain development and as a result, the trajectory of a youth's life (Dow-Edwards et al., [2019](#)).

## Justice interventions must capitalize on the opportunity of adolescence through developmentally supportive practices

- Experiences with the justice system can either support or undermine healthy psychosocial development away from risk taking.
- Justice interventions must capitalize on the opportunity of adolescence through developmentally supportive practices rather than undermining development by providing an environment uncondusive to growth.



# SYSTEM-IMPACTED YOUTH EXPERIENCE SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER TRAUMA THAN NON-SYSTEM-INVOLVED PEERS

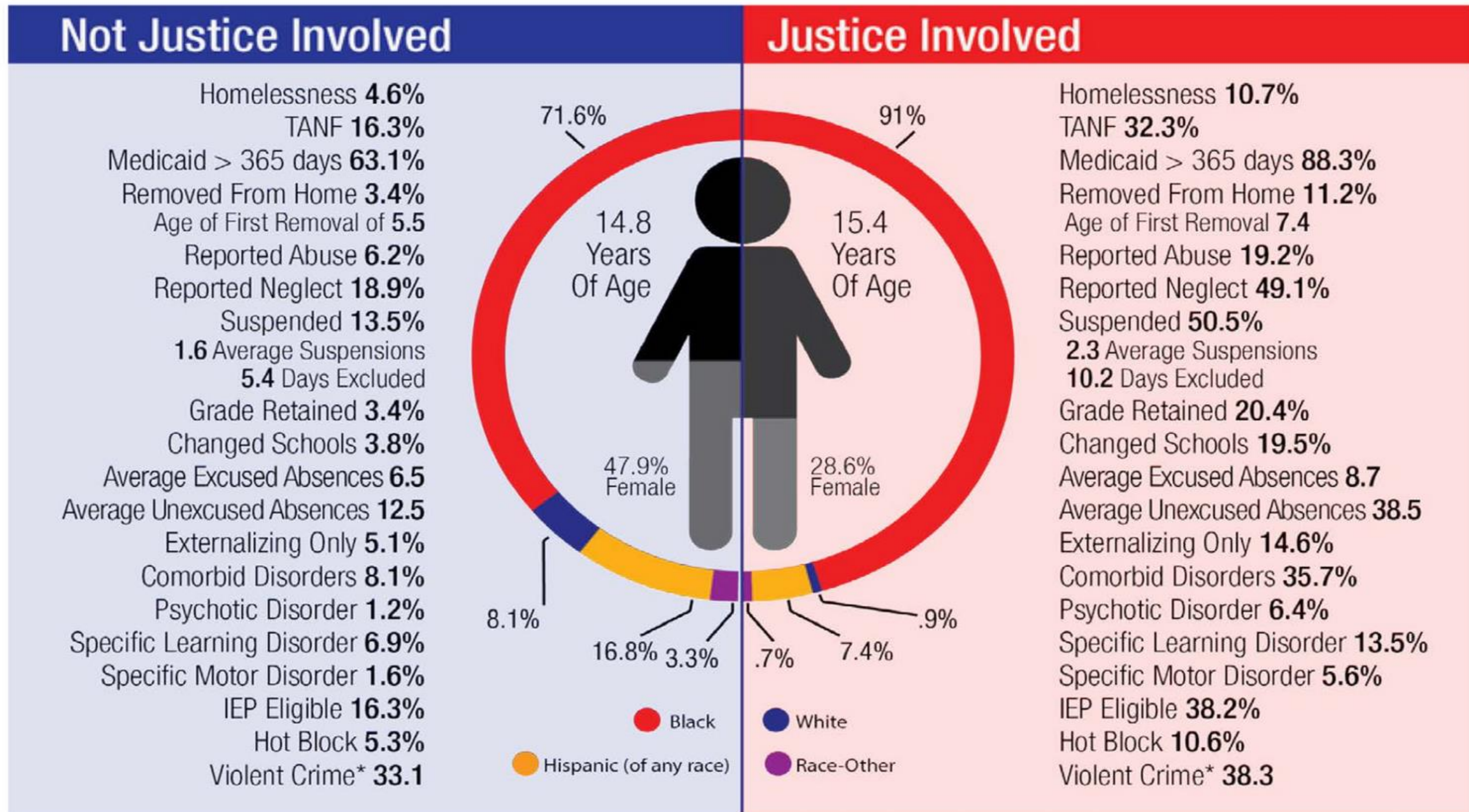


Figure 2: Significant Differences Between Not Justice Involved and Justice Involved Youth

\*Reported incidents within 1/4 mile of residence

[https://justicepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SFA015\\_JPL\\_YRA\\_Rd8\\_OO\\_FuII.pdf](https://justicepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SFA015_JPL_YRA_Rd8_OO_FuII.pdf)



**COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS  
CENTERED IN TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES**



# PROGRAM FRAMEWORK CENTERED IN COMMUNITY

## EDUCATION:

TYJ works with several organizations to expand educational opportunities and support for participants. This includes technical education, college enrollment, education advocacy, financial aid support.

## MENTAL HEALTH:

Mental Health support is an important component of TYJ Programming. Participants are connected to therapy via partnerships with local organizations. This includes substance use support, mental health interventions, and group therapy classes.

## FINANCIAL LITERACY:

Ensuring participants learn about credit scores, financial health, and financial planning is essential to their financial stability. This includes learning about entrepreneurship and business grant opportunities.

## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLNESS:

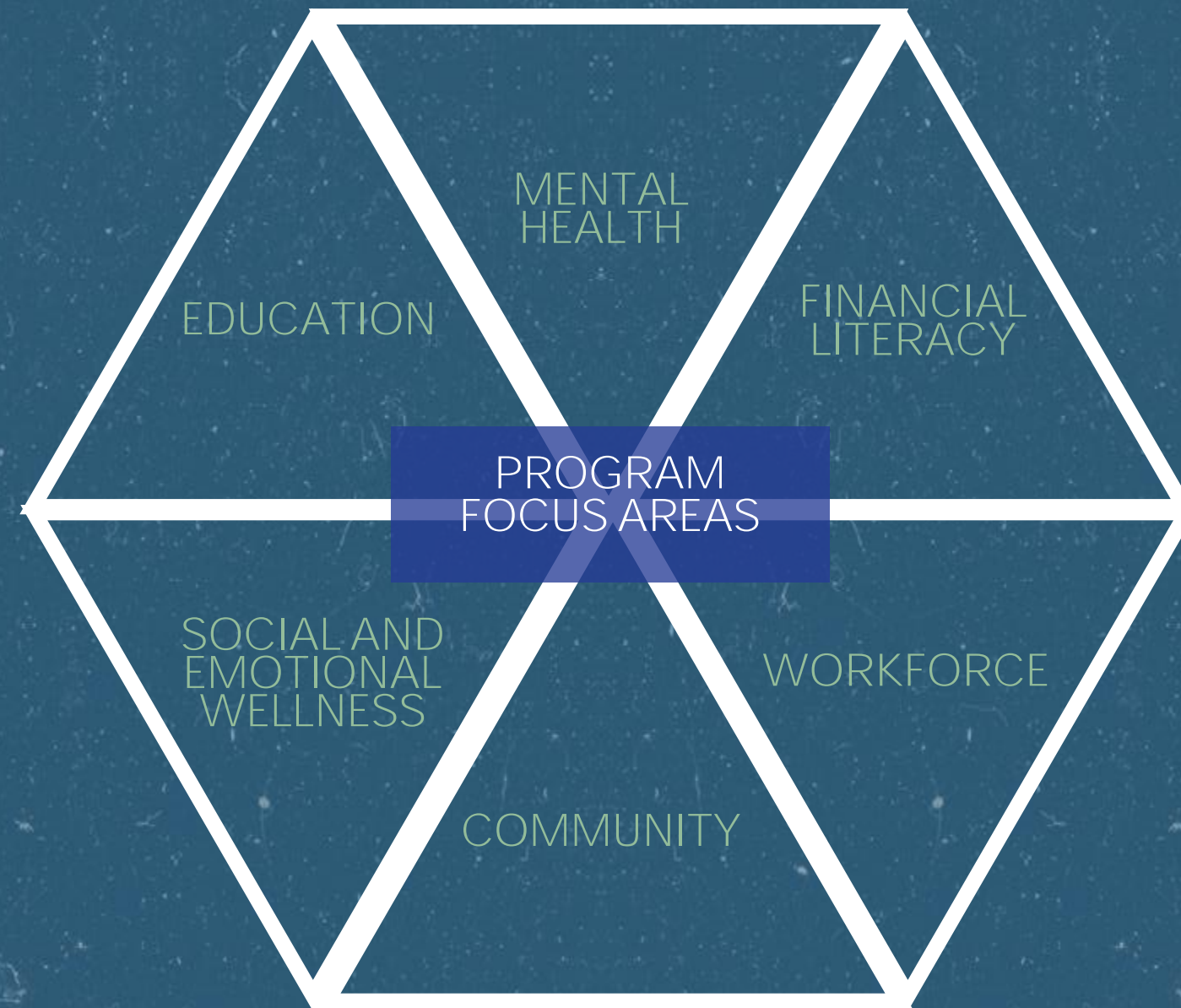
Participants are connected to restorative healing circles to expand their conflict resolution skills and to develop a deeper understanding of their social and emotional wellness. Restorative justice programming provided by Life Anew, a nonprofit organization.

## COMMUNITY:

TYJ provides mentorship, peer support training, and wraparound services support including transportation, caregiver support, medicaid assistance, housing support, and legal advocacy.

## WORKFORCE:

TYJ Programming includes career readiness, resume building, and workforce development. Partnerships provide participants with job training, job placement, and other employment services to help participants find jobs.





# PROGRAM STRUCTURE



# TYJ ONBOARDING PROCESS

## REFERRALS



Justice Involved Youth (ages 17-20)

Pre-adjudication. No requirement to plea guilty or waive constitutional rights.



Youth Review Docket

TCAO reviews cases and determines eligibility. Program is voluntary.



Onboarding Docket and Needs Assessment

Upon entering program, all participants take a needs assessment and social determinates of health assessment.

## PROGRAM



Individualized Plans

Programmatic decisions and services are tailored to the needs of the participant.



Cases Dismissed

Upon completion of program, case is dismissed and expunctions are expedited in partnership with County Attorney.

CROSS-SYSTEM COORDINATION AND SUPPORT



# PROGRAM STRUCTURE



## Individualized Plans

Program requirements based **on State's** recommendations and individual needs



## 3-12 Months of Monthly Programming

Attend monthly meetings at community center organized by Court and Court partners



## Bond Conditions, Counseling, Mental Health Support

Substance use assessments, Mental health engagement, and connection to counseling and treatment, if necessary



## Cases Dismissed

Upon completion of program, case is dismissed and expunctions are expedited in partnership with County Attorney.

CROSS-SYSTEM COORDINATION AND SUPPORT



# ACCOUNTABILITY IF VIOLATIONS OCCUR



Violation

Staffing

Check-in Docket

Accountability  
Plan



# KEY TAKEAWAYS TO IMPLEMENT TRAUMA- INFORMED PRACTICES AND STRUCTURES





# 01. INTEGRATE TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

- Acknowledge widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths for recovery through trauma-informed support
- Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in participants and respond with de-escalation tools
- Build policies and practices that actively resist re-traumatization





# **EXAMPLES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED PRINCIPLES THAT YOU CAN ADOPT**



## Six Principles of a TIA

- 1 Safety**  
Safety in physical settings and interpersonal interactions
- 2 Trustworthiness and Transparency**  
Operations are conducted and decisions are made with transparency, consistency, respect, and fairness so as to build and maintain trust
- 3 Peer Support**  
Support from those with lived experiences of trauma or, in case of children with history of trauma, their family members
- 4 Collaboration and Mutuality**  
Partnering, leveling of power differences between and among staff and clients
- 5 Empowerment**  
Individuals' strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon
- 6 Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues**  
Organization moves beyond the cultural stereotypes and biases



**ADOPT TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE**



**LANGUAGE THAT DEMEANS  
YOUNG PEOPLE**

**LANGUAGE THAT AFFIRMS & HUMANIZES**

**CONSIDER USING  
LANGUAGE THAT**

**Delinquent**

Youth's first name (or preferred name)  
Youth adjudicated of delinquency

**Felon  
Convict**

Youth's first name (or preferred name)  
Youth with a felony adjudication

**Offender**

Youth's first name (or preferred name)

**Juvenile**

Youth's first name (or preferred name)    Minor    Kids  
Youth    Young person  
Children

**Perpetrator  
Perp**

Youth's first name (or preferred name)  
Youth adjudicated delinquent

**Respondent**

Youth's first name (or preferred name)



**Does not reduce a youth to their criminal status; avoids labeling and permanently stigmatizing**



**Affirms the presumption of innocence**



**LANGUAGE THAT DEMEANS  
YOUNG PEOPLE**

**LANGUAGE THAT AFFIRMS & HUMANIZES**

**CONSIDER USING  
LANGUAGE THAT**

**Aggressive**

**Assertive about opinions**

**Defiant  
Non-compliant**

**Struggling to manage some of our expectations**

**Disrespectful  
Oppositional**

**Appears to be frustrated by what is being expected  
Appears to be having difficulty meeting certain expectations**

**Incorrigible**

**Requires additional support and guidance**

**Loud**

**Impassioned response**

**Manipulative**

**Eager for a specific outcome  
Trying to figure things out**

**Resistant**

**Struggling to connect**



**Recognizes normal  
adolescent behavior  
& trauma**



# 02. INSTILL ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH TRANSPARENCY AND AUTONOMY



- A fundamental premise is that young people will take responsibility for their choices when empowered and supported to do so.
- Build collaborative approaches to success that are built on mutual understanding and consent
- Be transparent and upfront about consequences



<b>TRANSPARENCY AND NOTICE</b>	Clearly state consequences of program violations, provide tips on how to avoid violations by encouraging upfront communication, and provide examples. Be Mindful of tone and language.
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF ACT</b>	If violation occurs, Start with reminding participant of the notice provided and then directly acknowledge the harm or act without placing judgment.
<b>AGENCY/CHOICE</b>	Acknowledging agency is highlighting that decisions have led to a certain outcome, and that different decisions could lead to different outcomes. You can ask participant why they made a certain decision and ask them what decisions they will make in the future to change the outcome in similar situations.
<b>IMPACT/HARM</b>	Go over the consequence without using shame or anger. Remind participant of notice provided. Ask how did decision impact them or community. Focus should be human-centered not rule-centered.
<b>MUTUAL COLLABORATION AND CONSENT</b>	Ask participant what future success on this issue looks like to them and develop a plan and roadmap for success and improvement. Empower the participant to recognize their internal power to make good choices in the future, and ensure there is an agreement of understanding.



# 03. NERVOUS SYSTEM REGULATION IS KEY TO LONG-TERM SUCCESS

- By developing healthy coping skills, individuals learn alternative ways to manage their emotions without resorting to violence, drug use, or alcohol.
- Enhancing system-involved youth's ability to self-regulate can enable them to meaningfully engage in honest self-reflection and empathic dialogue, as well as help them successfully assume the responsibilities of being in community.





# 04. COMMUNITY BUILDING

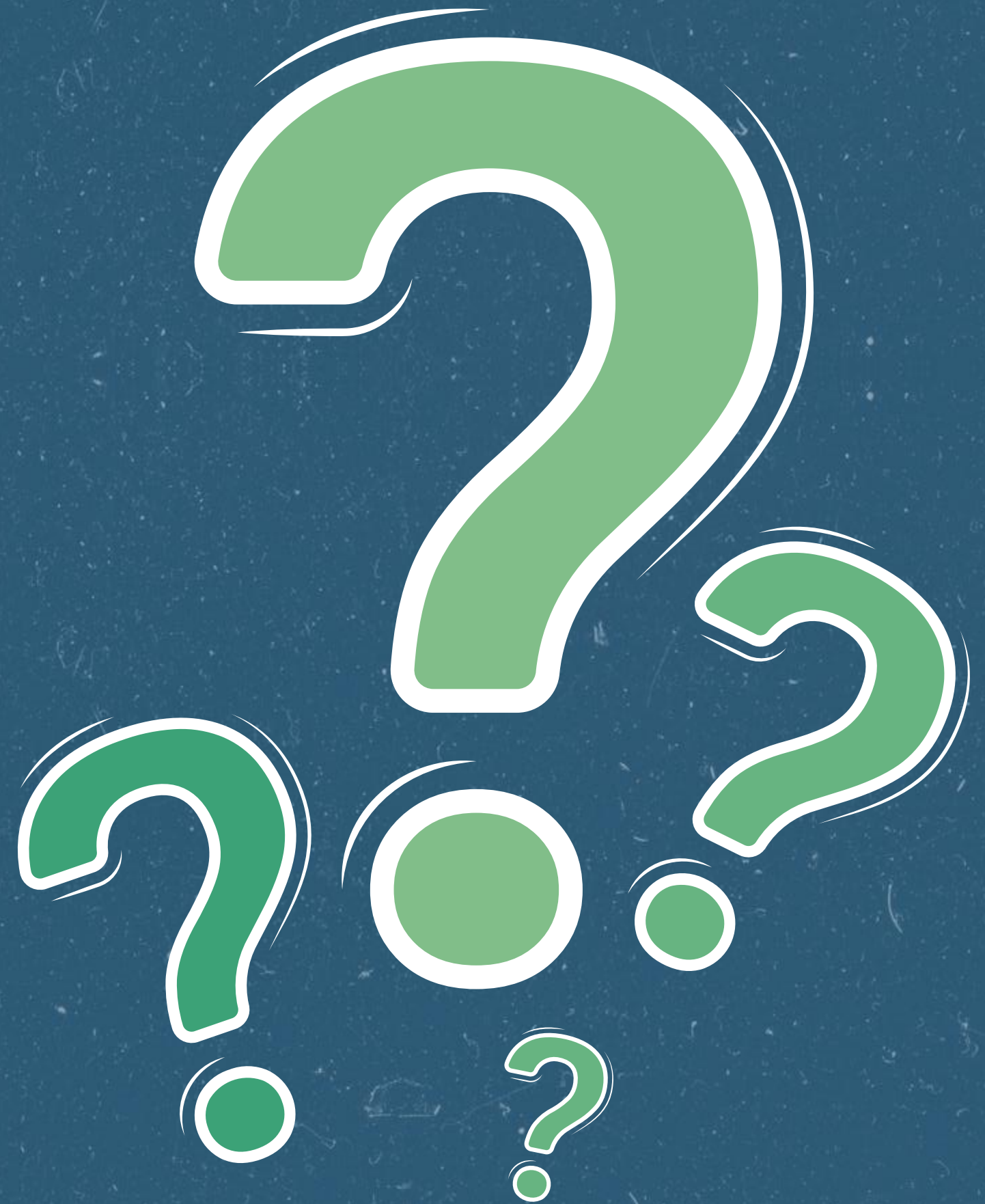
**Communities play the primary role in preventing system involvement for youth.**

- Using community as a unit of analysis shifts attention from individual incidents of crime to community responses to justice involvement amongst youth.
- Many young people feel a deep sense of alienation and disconnection from their own communities, contributing to a lack of self-esteem. Youth need opportunities to establish their self-worth and receive affirmation of their place and role within the community.





**QUESTIONS?**







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