

## PRESS RELEASE

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December 8, 2022

### **Reinvestment in community services offers a new path for safety and well-being of justice system-impacted youth, report finds**

A new report from Columbia Justice Lab's [Youth Justice Initiatives](#), *Process Matters: Reflections from the Development of Harris County's Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund and Recommendations to Guide Future Efforts*, describes how Harris County created a first-of-its-kind Youth Justice Reinvestment Fund (Fund) in Texas earlier this year. The Fund concept emerged in Summer of 2020, as government stakeholders and community providers reflected on how to provide youth in the County's most highly incarcerated areas with access to needed community-based supports and services.

Harris County's Youth Justice Reinvestment Fund was established amidst a tumultuous time for youth justice in Texas. Reports of [horrendous conditions](#) at state-operated facilities have been widespread across the state, and the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) is currently [under investigation](#) by the U.S. Department of Justice to determine whether the children under TJJD's custody are protected "from physical and sexual abuse by staff and other residents, excessive use of chemical restraints and excessive use of isolation." In light of this, [advocates are now pushing for closure of all youth facilities](#) across the state in favor of diversion, treatment, and community service programs. The lessons and approach taken in Harris County, the report suggests, could point the way forward in how to do this.

The Fund builds off of the County's earlier work to reform youth justice, including a 50 percent decrease in referrals to the Probation department and a 31 percent reduction in the number of youth detained between 2017 and 2021. Meanwhile, the number of kids who have been diverted or served in community programs has increased over time, from 12.5 percent annual cases in 2017 to 31.6 percent in 2021, without jeopardizing public safety. Despite this progress, however, Black youth continue to be overrepresented in cases referred to probation and in detention, accounting for more than half in both scenarios.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 compelled system stakeholders to work collaboratively with community partners to move youth out of the path of the deadly virus and support them safely in their own homes and communities. This work revealed many of the gaps that existed in the various neighborhoods and communities where youth in custody lived, catalyzing youth, families, and providers to come together and advocate for more resources and support.

The report goes behind-the-scenes to share how this process unfolded, including what it takes to accelerate change while navigating the complexities of system-community partnerships. In particular, it reflects on the challenges community stakeholders faced while establishing the Fund and provides recommendations for future reinvestment efforts in other jurisdictions in Texas and across the country.

“As the Fund launches, it will be crucial for community members most impacted by the system to hold Harris County officials accountable for making investments that truly listen to and represent what youth, families, and communities want and need,” said Vidhya Ananthakrishnan, Co-Director of the Justice Lab’s Youth Justice Initiatives and co-author of the report. “Hopefully, the Fund offers a proof of concept that investment-based approaches are essential in moving away from incarceration. We hope other jurisdictions will learn from Harris County and pursue similar efforts nationwide.”

As [the first fund of its kind in Texas](#), the creation of the Fund required significant time and effort to set up, including careful design and building will for its approval and enactment, as well as actually getting it running. Stakeholders, including the newly-created Redefining Youth Justice Coalition envisioned a new approach to community safety and youth justice; one which would center the input and support of Harris County communities which are most affected by violence and incarceration. The report offers an in-depth look at some of how this was done, including how the county learned from Colorado's experience and adapted to its own context; bringing community members into the process of building support; and setting up ways to garner and engage folks in the process of design.

"Transforming the Youth Justice System requires us to reverse and correct the historic de-investment in Black and Brown communities that undermined the social safety net for young people and their families," said Dr. Assata Richards, Community Coordinator, Redefining Youth Justice Coalition. "We hope that this funding opportunity will start repairing the damage that has been done and begin healing generational trauma."

As other jurisdictions strategize to recreate similar reinvestment efforts around the country, the report recommends the following teachings for implementation:

- Start with a clearly defined purpose and parameters, and a process driven by data, values, and that is community-informed;
- Build in meaningful opportunities for youth and adult community members to help guide implementation;
- Educate everyone involved or impacted by the fund about how it will operate and expected outcomes, and communicate successes, challenges and lessons learned in real-time;
- Establish processes to measure, monitor, and evaluate the fund; and
- Lay the groundwork for significantly scaling the fund beyond its pilot.

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*The Youth Justice Initiatives (YJI) leads action-research projects focused on ending the use of a punitive youth prison model in favor of a more community-centered approach. We recognize that it is possible to keep youth in their own homes and communities, with the support of their families, all while promoting safety, fairness, and accountability on all sides.*