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PROCESS MATTERS

Reflections from the Development
of Harris County's Youth Justice
Community Reinvestment Fund and
Recommendations to Guide Future Efforts



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017, concerned about the increasingly crowded carceral conditions at its local detention center, county officials in Harris County, Texas, the nation's third-largest county and home to Houston, proposed constructing a new 320-bed youth facility.¹ However, in 2018, Harris County Commissioners Court did not move forward with the new construction, saving over \$75 million in construction and design costs.² Rather than reflexively replacing an old facility – albeit one clearly not well-suited to provide care and services for youth – with a new and improved one, the newly-elected County Judge and first-ever Latina in that office, Lina Hidalgo, committed to examining the current system and chart a new path forward.³

This commitment laid the groundwork to define a new vision for youth justice in Harris County, guided by numerous stakeholders both inside and outside of the legal system and built on past and ongoing local reform efforts. In March 2020, after an intensive planning process, the County was set to launch a Task Force on Youth Justice charged with reviewing the current system and developing recommendations to reduce incarceration and

1 Meagan Flynn, "Harris County Jails Hundreds of Juveniles Each Year for Minor Probation Violations," *Houston Chronicle*, January 1, 2018, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Harris-County-jails-hundreds-of-juveniles-each-12538140.php>.

2 Ted Oberg, "After Spending \$2 Million Designing a New Jail, New Judge Seeks to Scrap Contract to Re-Think Juvenile System," *ABC 13*, June 4, 2019, <https://abc13.com/harris-county-juvenile-facility-juvi-houston-design-ted-oberg-investigates/5328756/>.

3 Ted Oberg, "Harris County Scraps Plan to Build New Juvenile Jail, Pledges Millions for Repair," *ABC 13*, June 4, 2019, <https://abc13.com/harris-county-juvenile-facility-juvi-houston-design-ted-oberg-investigates/5330469/>.

build out a community-centered approach. Unfortunately, these plans were upended when news of the COVID-19 global pandemic broke.

While the pandemic derailed the Task Force’s launch, the public health crisis further mobilized folks towards reform. Local officials and community members began working together to support youth and their families during this harrowing time, and eventually, a new vision for community investment began to take shape. Developed by the newly-created Harris County Justice Administration Department (JAD) and in collaboration with the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department, other system actors, and a Coalition of community members, the Harris County Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund (the Fund) was approved by a unanimous, bipartisan vote of support by the Harris County Commissioners’ Court in February 2021.⁴ The Fund – the first of its kind in Texas – launched in 2022.

This case study synthesizes and documents how this process unfolded and what it took to make the Fund a reality. It shares the successes, the difficulties, and the key reflections and lessons from this work, including its evolution in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also weaves in spotlights on related topics as well as access to primary source resources from Harris County where possible to provide opportunities for further learning.

An essential part of the effort to develop the Fund was a commitment to key values, including equity, collaboration, and community partnership. By sharing this case study, we aim to provide a sense of the challenges and promises inherent in creating a vision of youth justice that integrates and partners with communities, and just how much effort and intentionality – namely, the time and resources to build relationships and will to shift the normal course of business – that can require.

This report primarily documents the experiences and reflections of many individuals who were involved in the Harris County youth justice reform

⁴ Laura Isensee, “Harris County Will Spend \$4 Million To Prevent Youth Incarceration,” Houston Public Media, March 29, 2021, <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/criminal-justice/2021/03/29/394576/harris-county-to-invest-4-million-in-community-programs-as-an-alternative-to-youth-incarceration/>.

work that occurred from the spring of 2019 through the spring of 2022. This includes representatives from County Judge Lina Hidalgo's office, the Redefining Youth Justice Coalition, the County's Juvenile Probation and Justice Administration Departments, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Staff from the Columbia Justice Lab's Youth Justice Initiatives (YJI) team collaborated with these partners to develop this report. The report is structured as follows:

SETTING THE SCENE:

Understanding the Context for this Report

Setting the Scene: Understanding the Context of this Report provides background and context for the reform story chronicled in this report. It details how this report was developed and the key players involved in developing the Fund. It then discusses the research on community investment, community cohesion and collective efficacy that undergirds the broader movement towards reinvestment. Finally, it provides a 5-year data snapshot of Harris County's youth justice system, illustrating the County's dedicated and sustained effort to downsize their youth justice system.

SECTION 1:

A Changing Landscape Offered New Opportunities to Rethink Pathways to Safety

Section 1 details how the development of a shared set of values and principles served as a compass and solid foundation for the reform work. Furthermore, it discusses how the pandemic swiftly brought into focus many of the existing challenges facing the County's youth justice system and how this served as a catalyst for reflection and change.

SECTION 2:

Reinvestment Fund Emerges as a Way to Shift Resources to Impacted Communities

Section 2 explains the steps taken in Harris County to plan and gain approval for the Fund. Specifically, this section highlights the value of learning from other jurisdictions, collaborating with multiple system actors, and importantly, building support and buy-in for the work within the community.

SECTION 3:**Engaging and Partnering with Communities to Establish the Fund was Complicated and Required Ongoing Adaptation**

Section 3 chronicles the County's journey from gaining approval for the Fund to selecting an intermediary to operationalize the Fund. This includes work undertaken to elevate community voice in the selection process, to deepen relationships with and learn from community organizations that may be poised to operate such a fund, and to lay the groundwork for meaningful accountability measures to ensure it achieves its intended goals and assuring ongoing involvement by the community.

SECTION 4:**Learning from Harris County to Inform Future Reinvestment Efforts: Recommendations for Implementation**

Finally, the report concludes with Section 4 which offers a set of implementation-focused recommendations for stakeholders to consider as they get this initiative up and running. While the recommendations are offered in the spirit of supporting the County in its ongoing work to set the Fund up for success, many will be applicable to other jurisdictions interested in pursuing a similar strategy.

Against the backdrop of the national movement to abandon youth prisons and shift power and resources from the criminal legal system to communities most impacted, along with the recent increase in adult and youth crime coinciding with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Fund's development is notable. While the Fund was just getting off the ground at the time of publication and its impact remains unknown, the process that led to this moment underscores how a focus on equity, collaboration, and community partnership can help pave the way towards a new vision for youth justice. By sharing the various twists and turns of this process, the intention is to inspire and inform other jurisdictions charting new visions of youth justice against a backdrop of constant change—ones that strive to advance true safety, healing, and well-being by investing in the inherent strengths and capacities of communities.