



Pre-Publication Discussion

Does Keeping Youth *Close to Home* Really Matter?

A Case Study¹

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Background

In 2012, with authorization from the Governor and New York State legislature, New York City took jurisdiction over children adjudicated delinquent (JDs) and ordered into placement by the court.² Known as the *Close to Home* initiative (C2H), when youth from New York City are placed, it is now in small facilities near their home communities. C2H also expanded community-based, non-residential alternative to placement resources and required that the city's Probation Department utilize a risk-based system for making recommendations to the court. By keeping youth "close to home," it was theorized, they would remain connected to their families, their schools, and positive community activities, rather than being disconnected by placement in youth prisons distant from their homes. By 2016, New York City no longer had *any* JD-adjudicated youth in state Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) facilities. The 182 youth who were placed out-of-home were placed into small (6 to 18 bed) C2H facilities in or near the city. In addition, the overall placements of youth dramatically declined following the implementation of C2H. Between 2012 and 2016, overall placements of JDs decreased by 68 percent.

Through interviews with stakeholders involved in the planning, implementation and advocacy for C2H, and analysis of C2H and other juvenile justice outcome data from city and state sources, this case study documents the impact of the *Close to Home* initiative. It examines what *Close to Home* and other city juvenile justice reforms that preceded it represent within the larger context of juvenile justice reforms – at the national, state and city level.

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² Being "adjudicated delinquent" is the family court equivalent of being convicted and being "placed" is similar to being incarcerated as an adult.

Precursors of Reform

To date, our key findings regarding the precursors to reform include:

- *Close to Home* is part of an array of juvenile justice reforms occurring at the national, state and local levels that are increasingly eschewing the use of youth prisons in favor of community placement.
- New York City is itself a leader in comprehensive reform, starting in 2003 with the Probation Department’s “Project Zero;” continuing through the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice’s (MOCJ) development of a Risk Assessment Instrument and detention alternatives that drove down detention rates; the Administration for Children’s Services’ (ACS) Juvenile Justice Initiative (JJI); and the city’s use of risk assessment to guide placement decision-making and development of a continuum of Alternative to Placement interventions and programs through its Dispositional Reform Steering Committee.
- The need for reform was prompted by reports documenting horrific conditions in OCFS facilities, including a U.S. Department of Justice letter regarding findings from its investigation of OCFS conditions. OCFS itself, along with a gubernatorial commission, acknowledged the appalling conditions and embraced the need to reform the system.

There were also administrative/organizational changes taking place that helped set the stage for *Close to Home*, most notably the 2010 merger of the city Department of Juvenile Justice into ACS, signaling a more therapeutic approach for youth. Also, in 2011, New York City closed the Spofford Detention Center, long known for its poor conditions and harsh treatment of youth.

Close to Home was built on these wide-ranging reforms, but unlike the others, C2H required city-state agreement. Our interviews to date reveal a remarkable level of cooperation between city and state juvenile justice officials over the two years that it took to negotiate and pass the legislation. This cooperation persisted even in the face of initially intense disagreement and city-state litigation. Interviewees thus far attributed this to a shared purpose to create a system that would be more responsive to youth needs than the then-current approach while ensuring public safety. This willingness and ability to focus on the well-being of young people was strengthened by eye-opening visits by the Governor and the Mayor to OCFS facilities in upstate New York.

Close to Home also benefitted from a changing policy climate and scientific advances regarding adolescent brain development and youth development approaches. Contrary to alarmist predictions offered during the 1990s “superpredator” era, juvenile crime was steeply declining, leaving policymakers room to innovate.

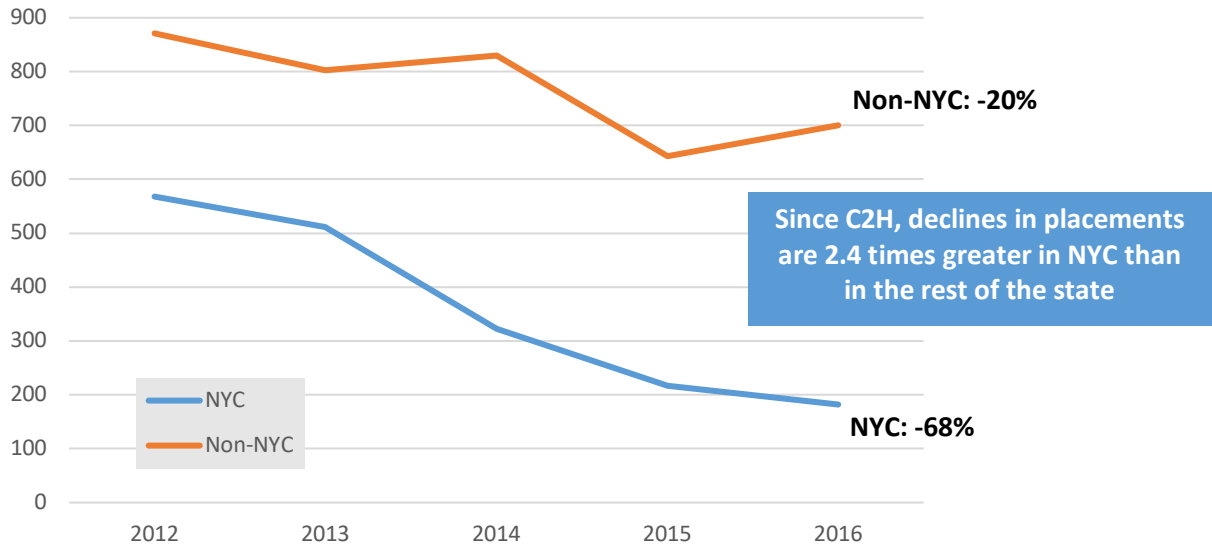
Key Indicators

We found several key indicators of positive youth development and public safety improvements since the advent of C2H, notably:

- 53% decline in youth arrests 2012-2016 (vs. -41% in the rest of state and vs. -24% in the four years preceding C2H)
- 37% decline in youth detention 2012-2016 (vs. -31% in the rest of the state)
- 68% decline in out of home placements 2012-2016 (vs. -20% in the rest of the state)
- Complete elimination of placing JD youth in state OCFS facilities

- 41% reduction in the number of youth absconding from C2H facilities
- 91% of C2H youth passed their academic classes (2016-2017 School Year)
- 82% of youth transitioned from C2H to a parent, other family member or guardian (2016)
- 91% of youth who transitioned from C2H were enrolled with community-based programs (2016)

Figure 1: Placements in New York City and rest of state, 2012-2016.



Source: NYS Division of Criminal Justice Services, Office of Justice Research and Performance.

Figure 2: Percent Change in Juvenile Arrests in New York City, 2008-2012 versus 2012-2016.



Source: New York City Police Department (NYPD) and DCJS Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) System.

Challenges

The implementation of *Close to Home*, particularly in the first two years, was not without challenges. In the months following C2H's passage, New York City contracted with residential providers who would have to quickly locate and outfit small facilities to house the first wave of youth who would have otherwise been placed in OCFS non-secure facilities.³ While the providers had extensive child welfare system experience, some were not experienced in working with youth in the juvenile justice system. The collapsed time frame from legislative authorization to the opening of *Close to Home* doors (approximately 5 months) affected training and the development of supervision and management protocols. Initially, there were high rates of absconding and re-arrest of some young people who left their *Close to Home* facilities without permission; some of these arrests were for violent crimes.

Both providers and ACS faced these challenges head on, strengthening policies, improving training, and providing closer and more rigorous monitoring. In some cases, ACS ended contracts with providers who did not appear to be equipped to work with the youth population. Our preliminary findings show that AWOLs and program failures have declined considerably since these fixes were put in place.

Close to Home is a young program, with non-secure homes operating less than five years and limited-secure settings open for two years. The challenges going forward will be to maintain and build on management improvements and expand youth development opportunities both during and after discharge from *Close to Home*. There is also a need to track and analyze recidivism data.

The immediate challenge is to prepare the *Close to Home* initiative for 16- and 17-year-old youth who will be adjudicated in the youth justice system under the state's new raise the age law. Part of the legislation that raises the age of New York's Family Court, these changes will begin to go into effect in October of this year. This challenge is exacerbated by the unexpected financial shortfall presented by the proposed loss of all state funding that was part of the initial C2H cost-sharing agreement between the state and city (up to \$41.4 million allocated in last year's budget).

Conclusion

In the final analysis, *Close to Home* is a model worthy of consideration for replication by other jurisdictions. It entirely eschews the use of large youth prisons for delinquent youth in favor of in-home services and small, home-like facilities close to youths' families. The city and state budget issues should not detract from the outcomes of a program that, at this stage of our review, appear to have contributed to the near-complete deinstitutionalization of youth adjudicated in New York City's Family Court and to substantial improvements in their educational outcomes, and which have corresponded with a dramatic drop in the city's youth arrest rate.

Methodology

Research for this case study is ongoing and includes stakeholder interviews, literature and document reviews, and data analysis, which will culminate in a final report to be released in fall of 2018. The aim of the case study

³ The limited secure facilities opened in December 2015.

is to examine the process and outcomes of reform for a jurisdiction that has substantially reduced its reliance on the youth prison model. New York City was chosen, in concert with a steering committee and out of several possible jurisdictions, as the focus of this case study. Interviews are conducted with key stakeholders who were involved in the negotiation, planning, implementation and advocacy for *Close to Home*. Literature and document reviews include media coverage, state and city agency reports, and evaluations and reports conducted by third parties. Data being reviewed and analyzed include *Close to Home* and other juvenile justice outcome data from city and state sources, such as the New York City Police Department (NYPD), New York City Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), and the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS).

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