

## POSITION STATEMENT

# Complex Care of Juvenile Justice-Impacted Youth (JJIY)

Approved by the NPJS Board of Directors September 2, 2025

**THE  
PARTNERSHIP**  
National Partnership for Juvenile Services

## PURPOSE

Youth involved in the Juvenile justice systems (JJIY) have complex histories, varied needs, and often have challenging family circumstances and dynamics, making it necessary to bring all systems such as education, child welfare, mental health, substance abuse, etc. to the table to coordinate care and address critical needs. (OJJDP, 1996)

National Partnership for Juvenile Services (NPJS) recognizes the necessity of working collaboratively and inclusively across systems and taking a comprehensive, individualized approach with youth to develop effective programming and promote positive outcomes for youth, families, and communities.

The juvenile justice system has embraced trauma-responsive care practices that can lead to a reduced need for emergency behavioral responses or physical interventions (See NPJS Position Statements – [A Call For Trauma Informed and Trauma Responsive Practice in Juvenile Justice](#) and [Emergency Behavioral Interventions In Juvenile Justice](#).) These ongoing efforts still require a comprehensive and integrative approach to addressing the strengths, interests, and needs of our youth in juvenile justice systems.<sup>1</sup> This paper addresses that necessity and builds upon previously developed positions by elaborating on fundamental assertions that are supported by evidence.

## STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

Because of a primary historical focus on dynamic risk factors (aka criminogenic needs), the juvenile justice system has not been consistently effective in responding to the strengths, interests, and other needs of JJIY. This paper urges juvenile justice practitioners to approach youth in a more holistic manner, in part by seeing youth needs in the context of an adolescent development framework and by identifying strengths that can be leveraged in the service of needs.

A young person's legal system involvement is often directly connected to an accumulation of lived experiences. This includes challenging personal and family dynamics, as well as broader social, racial, ethnic, cultural, gender-related, emotional, economic, academic, and systemic barriers to opportunity. (Shader, 2003) Rarely does a young person engage in significant anti-social, criminal, or other harmful behavior

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<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the JJ system has expanded to ranging developmentally from early adolescents to young adulthood. We will use the term youth or juvenile to reflect the developmental ranges.

without first facing any number of adverse childhood experiences and developmental challenges. These adversities may include any combination of the following:

- mental health issues,
- substance use,
- impaired intellectual development,
- brain injury,
- learning disabilities,
- abuse and neglect,
- exposure to violence,
- physical health issues.

NPJS defines a “complex case” as one in which a youth presents with significant or multiple adversities that impair healthy functioning. While consideration of these problems does not absolve a youth of responsibility for their behavior and the harm it causes, it does provide an important context for understanding the interrelated variables that may be influencing their behavior. As juvenile justice practitioners, this knowledge should inform the development of responsive, comprehensive, and holistic treatment and service plans.<sup>2</sup> Fragmented care delivery or over-emphasis on only one area of need, could result in additional harm or negative outcomes for the youth.

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<sup>2</sup> A definition for multiple and complex needs of youth in a juvenile setting is: “Children and adolescents with profound and interacting needs in the context of issues on several life domains (family context, funding, and integration into society) as well as psychiatric problems. The extent of their needs exceeds the capacity (expertise and resources) of existing services and sequential interventions lead to a discontinuous care delivery.” (Van den Steene, et al., 2019)

## NATURE OF THE CHALLENGES

- Overall rates of adjudication, confinement, and out-of-home placements for juveniles have dramatically decreased over the last two decades, often resulting in a higher concentration of youth with complex needs in the deeper ends of the juvenile justice system. (OJJDP, 2020)
- While the causal factors for decreased incarceration rates and increased complexity of needs are still being evaluated, one factor appears to be prioritizing residential placements for the most behaviorally complex cases. (Desai et al., 2006). More needs to be done to improve access to diversion programs and services for youth with complex needs.
- Systemic shifts which involve investment in administrative support for quality improvement (i.e., recruitment and staff development, cross-system collaboration-care coordination, inclusive practices that advance cultural competency) have proven successful in addressing complex care. Elevating administrative priorities to include leadership, guidance, and coaching in this area can enhance our understanding and responsiveness to complex cases.
- Identifying interconnected historic and ongoing challenges and needs is critical for the successful treatment and rehabilitation of each young person. The interactions between multiple problems experienced by a youth and their family systems compound negative outcomes.
- Siloed funding streams and limitations to cross-system funding continue to interfere with care for justice-involved youth.
- As family members often have complex histories and challenges as well, engaging and supporting the family through a family systems framework is crucial in addressing the needs of justice involved young people. Agencies must engage family and other natural supports as partners from the onset.
- Engaging a variety of social service safety nets and other multi-faceted child-serving systems necessitates extensive collaboration and coordination. Engaging these partners from the onset increases the likelihood that youth have access to appropriate supports, thus preventing further penetration into the system. Partnership between treatment providers and educational systems to address the needs of youth with learning disabilities as one example of an essential collaboration.
- Application of the Risk Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model for Assessment and Rehabilitation Transition from jail to community (Bonta & Andrews 2007) has significantly improved treatment planning in the juvenile justice system. This position paper emphasizes the need for improved understanding and development of resources specifically focused on how services are matched to a young person's development, intellectual functioning, personality and learning style with appropriate program settings, approaches, and individualized accommodations.

These ‘Responsivity’ factors are often significantly heightened for youth with complex needs.

- Agencies that practice RNR by employing valid assessments to identify needs and inform the use of evidence-based practices are best positioned to support positive outcomes and potentially decrease the utilization of deep-end carceral settings. However, access to tools and training to employ RNR with fidelity continues to be a barrier for many jurisdictions. This process requires more staff with higher levels of training and experience, supported by appropriate levels of funding.
- Successful behavior management programming in juvenile justice settings improve health and well-being for young people whose needs and behavior present risks to personal and public safety. It is important to prioritize staff training that increases understanding of issues, builds on youth strengths and improves a youth’s ability to benefit from the services. This training often needs to be tailored to the agency’s areas of focus. For example, probation training to screen for responsivity factors will look different than training for clinicians to evaluate and treat, or training detention staff to manage a residential living environment.
- Unlike other treatment systems that can choose whether or not to accept ‘clients’ based on admission or exclusion criteria, the juvenile justice system is mandated to serve all youth placed in our care. This can present a unique challenge of responding to youth with a broad range of complex needs in a context of compulsion, which can significantly impact their motivation to engage with the services.
- While independence from the justice system may be the ultimate goal for JJY, transition planning is essential throughout the youth and family’s journey. Juvenile court oversight is generally time limited. Systems of care need to coordinate ongoing services for youth and families beginning at intake and extending beyond a court order or residential sentence. Aftercare services are critical to support and address the ongoing needs of youth and provide them with the greatest opportunity for success.

# POSITION STATEMENT

The National Partnership for Juvenile Services (NPJS) acknowledges that changes in the approach to juvenile delinquency and juvenile justice system intervention have resulted in reductions in the number of incarcerated young people. However, an unintended consequence of this overall reduction is the increased concentration of complex needs among youth who are placed in residential facilities by local courts. This provides both the opportunity and challenge for thoughtful, informed and engaged practitioners to work together in collaboration with family members and other stakeholders to bring about positive outcomes.

NPJS advocates for a prioritized focus on collaborative partnerships that leverage multi-disciplinary expertise to support young people's needs at every stage of their involvement with juvenile justice systems.

This begins with developing a plan that includes trauma assessment at the earliest stage of probation involvement. NPJS advocates for additional resources to better identify responsivity factors that are critical in the development of a Risk, Needs Responsivity assessment for youth entering the system and used to inform behavior management interventions throughout the youths' justice involvement. Additionally, investments in training for staff to ensure assessments are applied with fidelity, that services are linked to the specific needs of the youth and that youth strengths are lifted to ensure interventions are engrained into the youths' behavioral responses. Legislative and public policy advocacy is required to remove barriers to effective intervention of underlying physical, emotional, psychological, and developmental needs. Improved access to comprehensive care increases opportunities in the community and can allow youth to be closer to their family and local supports to help them thrive beyond their involvement with the juvenile justice system.



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\* [Youth and the Juvenile Justice System: 2022 National Report | Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention \(ojp.gov\)](#) (See Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, & Sickmund 2022)

\* [Module 5: Section 2. The Risk-Need-Responsivity Model for Assessment and Rehabilitation | Transition from Jail to Community \(nicic.gov\)](#) (See Bonta & Andrews 2007)

\*Reference no longer accessible at the original digital location. See suggested alternate access.



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