

Los Angeles Supervisors to Vote on Comprehensive, Countywide Youth Diversion Program

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LOS ANGELES – Los Angeles County Supervisors are scheduled to vote today on a [motion](#) determining whether or not they will give the go-ahead to a comprehensive plan for a countywide youth diversion program designed to redirect the trajectories of thousands of LA youth who would otherwise be headed for the juvenile justice system.

A committee established this year wrote a detailed, highly researched report on youth diversion strategy, with the goal of “minimizing youth contact with the juvenile or criminal justice system.”

The report, “[A Roadmap for Advancing Youth Diversion in LA County](#),” outlines a three-phase strategy that, according to one of its authors, could have the first stage of the proposed new diversion program up and running within 18 months – or even less.

If fully implemented, the roadmap has the potential to make Los Angeles County, which has the largest juvenile justice system in the U.S., one of the nation’s “most forward thinking counties” in improving the wellbeing of kids who might otherwise struggle with “the lifelong consequences of justice system involvement,” the report said.

Although there is a great deal of variation in diversion programming nationwide, a wide array of research has established that involvement with the justice system produces

long-lasting collateral damage for young people.

Justice contacts such as arrest, probation supervision and stays in juvenile lockups are not only stigmatizing but interrupt the young person's positive development and, lead to an increased risk for dropping out of high school, along with additional childhood trauma. Even one justice system contact reportedly greatly hikes the risk of further justice system contact.

This kite string of consequences too often follows kids into adulthood, affecting one's ability to earn, leading to increased family disruption and a markedly increased risk of adult incarceration.

About 11,000 youth arrests were reported throughout Los Angeles County in 2015, the report said, "including status offenses, misdemeanors, and low-level felonies," which would have been legally eligible for diversion in lieu of arrest or citation, under the California Welfare and Institutions Code.

Los Angeles County has made progress in reducing the number of arrests and citations for kids in the last 12 years. According to Department of Justice statistics, the total number of youth arrests and citations plummeted from 56,286 arrests and citations in 2005 to 13,665 in 2015.

This is in part due to a general long-term drop in youth crime, which was helped when, through the passage of [Senate Bill 81](#), the "Juvenile Justice Realignment Bill" signed into law in 2007 by then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, the state drastically reduced and reformed its scandal-plagued California Youth Authority (basically a prison system for youth), and directed that all but a very small percentage of law-breaking juveniles be kept in California's counties instead of far away from home in the mostly cleaned-up state facilities.

But, as the report points out, the statistical change was also

a product of a concerted effort by child advocates and others to reduce “youth involvement in the justice system” altogether, “through collaborative, data-driven efforts” to persuade county officials to treat low-level misbehaviors as a flag that a youth needs help, not a reason to call police.

LA County Probation is now [working to close](#) as many of its juvenile camps as is possible, and to turn those remaining camps and juvenile halls into therapeutic, research-guided, “trauma-informed” environments that help and heal, not punish. [Campus Kilpatrick](#), which opened this past summer, is the flagship and pilot for the department’s new ethic.

Juvenile facilities are expensive and have notoriously poor statistical outcomes. For instance, the cost per youth per year in an LA County juvenile probation camp is estimated at more than \$247,000, with a [recidivism rate](#) (as defined by rearrest within one year) of approximately 33 percent.

In contrast, there are successful community-based organizations such as [Centinela Youth Services](#), which has partnered since 2013 with the Los Angeles Police Department on a restorative justice diversion program that keeps youth who qualify out of the juvenile system if they break the law. This Juvenile Arrest Diversion Program, or JADP, costs an average of \$4,000 or less per youth, with a recidivism rate of 8 to 11 percent.

Another urgent reason for the new program to be voted on today, according to juvenile advocates, is the matter of racial disparities.

Even as juvenile arrests declined throughout LA County, racial disparities have grown. Youth of color continue to be disproportionately impacted at all stages of the juvenile justice system, when controlling for offense, and represent 95 percent of youth in the county’s probation camps and juvenile halls.

Early in the process, the ad-hoc Youth Diversion Subcommittee, supported by consultants from the nonprofit research center [Impact Justice](#), set out five basic goals for the new plan:

1. Increasing and improving collaboration between law enforcement, community-based organizations and other youth-serving agencies;
2. Reducing the overall number of youth arrests, referrals to probation and petitions filed;
3. Reducing racial and ethnic disparities in youth arrests, referrals to probation and petitions filed;
4. Increasing the number of youth who are connected to services that address their underlying needs without acquiring an arrest or criminal record;
5. Improving health, academic, economic and other outcomes for youth.

This story was written for [WitnessLA](#).