



# WHY DETENTION IS NOT THE ANSWER: AN ALTERNATIVE THROUGH ASSESSMENT CENTERS

## Why Detention Is Not the Answer

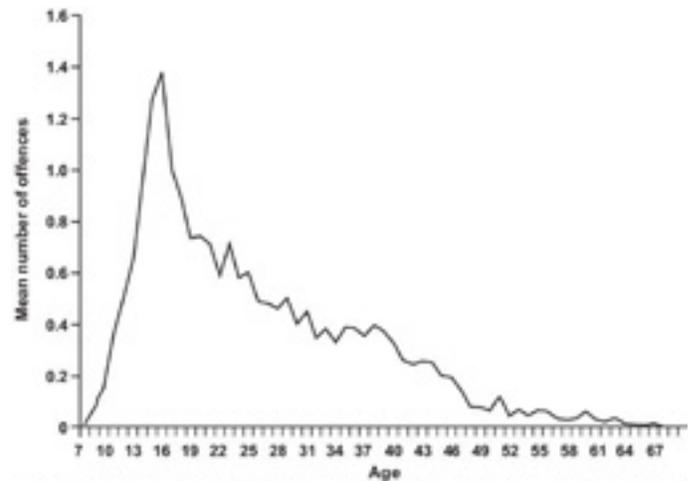
Delinquency among youth is a complex issue that can cause disruption within communities and in some cases create victims of crime. Our approach and response to delinquent behavior is the single most important factor to whether or not it will happen again. For some, the notion of “holding youth accountable” and fixing the delinquency problem means locking them up, but here is what we know about detention:

According to the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), a stay in pretrial juvenile detention increases a young person’s likelihood of felony recidivism by 33% and misdemeanor recidivism by 11%. Why does locking up youth increase recidivism? First, congregating youth who have engaged in delinquent behavior has negative impacts on future behavior and increases their chance of re-offending ([Justice Policy Institute](#)). One study cited in the Executive Sessions on Community Corrections series (2016) found that correctional environments can facilitate the accumulation of “criminal capital” and might actually encourage offending by serving as a “school of crime” and increasing post-release earnings from crime.

Second, incarcerating youth means they are removed from their community and educational supports, which makes reentry and reengagement more difficult. [Educational researchers](#) have found that upwards of 40% of incarcerated youth have a learning disability, and they will face significant challenges returning to school after they leave detention. What’s more, the U.S. Department of Education study showed that 43% of incarcerated youth receiving remedial education services in detention did not return to school after release, and another 16% enrolled in school but dropped out after only five months ([Justice Policy Institute](#)). Why do we care if youth aren’t involved with school? High school dropouts are three-and-a-half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested, and more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated as adults. Across the country, 68% of state prison inmates have not received a high school diploma ([Bureau of Justice](#)).

Third, we know most youth will age out of delinquent behavior. The prevalence of offending tends to increase from late childhood, peak in the teenage years (from age 15 to 19), and then decline in the early 20s ([National Institute of Health](#)).

Last but not least, it’s expensive! The average state cost for the secure confinement of a young person is now \$588 per day, or \$214,620 per year ([Justice Policy Institute](#)).



The Gluecks' delinquent sample: actual mean number of offenses for total crime (total events = 9,548); ages 7 to 70

Source: Lash and Sampson (2003), *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives*, Fig. 5.21, p. 36.

## But What About Community Safety?

Detention centers do serve a role by temporarily supervising the most at-risk youth, but that’s not what they are being used for. According to the [Prison Policy Initiative](#), on any given day in 2019, a little over 27,600 youth were held in detention or long-term secure facilities. Only 45% of those were arrested for crimes against persons. The remaining crimes ranged from property, drug, public order offenses to technical violations and status offenses, or behavior that is illegal only because someone is underage (i.e. runaway, truancy, etc.). These youth are not considered a serious risk to public safety and would be better served through community-based alternatives.

These statistics demonstrate the ineffectiveness and unnecessary cost of incarceration. This may have you thinking: there has to be a better way to address delinquent behaviors.

## An Alternative Through Assessment Centers

### ASSESSING AND ADDRESSING NEEDS

What we know to be more effective and less expensive is diverting youth from the justice system while simultaneously addressing the underlying factors that are contributing to their behavior. This means a holistic approach working with a young person, their family, and their support systems.

Assessment Centers serve as a neutral, unbiased organization identifying needs that exist for the youth and family. These needs could

be undiagnosed and/or untreated mental health or substance use issues, trauma experienced by the youth, or simply a lack of access to prosocial support. If a need is identified through the screening process, Centers follow up with a more comprehensive assessment to pinpoint the drivers of behavior. Based on the assessment, an individualized plan is created in partnership with the youth and family. The plan outlines what services and supports are best suited to meet their needs and ultimately address the behavior.

### REDUCED RECIDIVISM AND INCREASED PREVENTION

Assessment Centers have been proven effective. Recidivism rates among youth served by Centers in [Miami-Dade, Florida](#), and [Clark County, Nevada](#) (Las Vegas), are at 5% and 7%, respectively. The [Multi-Agency Resource Center \(M.A.R.C.\)](#) in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana, has seen a 42% reduction in court petitions and a 22% increase in diversion since their opening in 2014. The [Juvenile Assessment Center](#) in the 18th Judicial District in Colorado saw a 94% engagement rate (meaning youth and families that accessed services) among youth and families who were referred to them as a preventive measure.

### COST SAVINGS

The Assessment Center process and their facilitation of access to community-based services and supports saves communities money.

For one Assessment Center in Kansas, the total cost to detain a youth averages \$3,015, compared to the cost to serve youth through their Assessment Center, which is \$818. Additionally, a study has shown that if youth and family are connected to supportive services, the community receives quantifiable benefits to taxpayers due to reduced costs of crimes. For example, providing multisystemic therapy resulted in a \$13 benefit for every dollar spent ([Justice Policy Institute](#)). Finally, Centers in both [Miami-Dade, Florida](#), and [Douglas County, Nebraska](#), have completed cost-benefit analyses that have shown that they save their communities \$20.3 million and \$1.9 million *per year*, respectively.

Currently, there are 83 Assessment Centers in the United States working to divert youth from the justice system. The [National Assessment Center Association](#) (NAC) supports Centers by providing a Framework, complete with guidance and standards, that allow Centers to apply best practices, research, and a trauma-informed approach to serving youth and families. As more and more communities recognize the ineffectiveness and high price tag of detention, the Assessment Center model can serve as an effective approach in establishing a new way to support youth and families.

Visit the [National Assessment Center Association](#) to learn more!

## NAC Member Centers

