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# Reducing disproportionate minority contact in the juvenile justice system: Promising practices

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## Abstract

Since 1988, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act required states receiving funding under the act to determine whether the proportion of juvenile minorities in confinement exceeds their proportion in the general population (Public Law 93-415, 42 USC 5601 et seq.). The 1992 Congressional amendments made it a “core requirement” that states demonstrate their efforts to reduce DMC. Despite mandates, little systematic attention has been given to how DMC reductions should be achieved. States and local communities face ongoing challenges to reduce DMC rates in ways that are strategic, effective, and enduring. This article reviews and synthesizes national best practices for successfully reducing DMC in the juvenile justice system. Common practices and emerging strategies for effectively lowering DMC rates include: (a) data review and decision-point mapping; (b) cultural competency training; (c) increasing community-based detention alternatives; (d) removing decision-making subjectivity; (e) reducing barriers to family involvement; and (f) cultivating state leadership to legislate system-level change.

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In 1997, the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) reported that minority youth represented 34% of the juvenile population in the United States, but 62% of the nation's detained youth (Hsia, Bridges, & McHale, 2004). Poe-Yamagata and Jones (2000) documented that African American youth, while representing 15% of the total youth population, accounted for 26% of youth arrested, 31% of youth referred to juvenile court, and 44% of youth detained. National (Leiber, 2002; OJJDP, 1999; Puzanchara, Stahl, Finnegan, Tierney, & Snyder, 2004) and state (Bishop & Frazier, 1996; Ekpunobi, Wilson, Chunn, Huang, & Davis, 2002; Pope, Lovell, Stojkovic, & Rose, 1996) data consistently reveal system-wide disproportionate minority contact (DMC). In fact, the majority of studies included in two comprehensive meta-analyses have detected race effects in the juvenile justice processing of youth (Pope & Feyerherm, 1990; Pope, Lovell, & Hsia, 2002).

Since 1988, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act required states receiving funding under the act to determine whether the proportion of juvenile minorities in confinement exceeds their proportion in the general population (Public Law 93-415, 42 USC 5601 *et seq.*). Congressional amendments in 1992 made it a "core requirement" that states demonstrate their efforts to reduce DMC. Despite these mandates, little systematic attention has been given to how DMC reductions should be achieved: "What is not reflected in the literature is a systematic assessment of the impact of these efforts on the level of DMC within the affected communities or a systematic effort to identify characteristics of programs that appear to reduce DMC levels" (Pope et al., 2002, p. 9).

One of the greatest challenges for communities attempting to address DMC is accepting that DMC is a multi-layered problem, manifesting at every stage of juvenile justice processing, and its effects compound over time. When Puzanchara et al. (2004) examined county and state-level juvenile court data provided by courts with jurisdiction over 71% of the nation's juvenile population in 2000, as well as judicial trends since 1985, they found that case volumes varied by race and across time. While the overall number of delinquency cases increased for all race groups between 1985 and 2000, the percentage increase was greater for black youth (61% increase) and for youth of other races (93% increase) than for white youth (36% increase). This increase resulted in an overall delinquency case rate for black youth of 95.6, more than twice the rate for white youth (46.3) and nearly three times the rate for youth of other races (32.5). When researchers examined case disposition by age, black youth were twice as likely as white youth and three times as likely as youth of other races, within any age subgroup, to be disposed for public order offenses, such as probation violations, disorderly conduct, and weapons offenses. Black youth were also more likely than white youth or youth of other races to receive formal delinquency petitions, although they were less likely to be adjudicated delinquent. Following adjudication, black youth (27%) were more likely than white youth (23%) or youth of other races (22%) to receive a disposition of out-of-home placement (e.g., secure detention, youth development facility, mental health facility). These findings illustrate the insidious nature of DMC and the extent of racial inequities at every decision point in juvenile justice processing.

Like many multifaceted and far-reaching social problems, DMC is resistant to change, for a number of reasons. Acknowledging that the very systems established to ensure equal justice for all systematically disadvantaged minority groups raises uncomfortable questions about a community's commitment to racial and ethnic equality and challenges its moral foundations. When justice inequities burden a community's children and adolescents, an implicit urgency is laid upon any mandate for change. However, communities are finding that the issues perpetuating DMC are not quickly or easily resolved. As Soler (2005) asserts, any plan for change must begin with frank discussions about racial and ethnic inequalities and the community's commitment to its youth (see also full report, *Building Blocks for Youth*, 2005). Commencing such honest discussions remains a challenge for most communities confronting the problem of DMC (Hoytt, Schiraldi, Smith, & Ziedenberg, 2002).

In 2005, Building Blocks for Youth organized one of the first large-scale initiatives to document strategies, models, and ideas which have proven effective in reducing justice inequities for youth (*Building Blocks for Youth*, 2005). The work of researchers, juvenile justice advocates, and community leaders contributing to this project culminated in a summary report outlining successful approaches to reducing DMC in sites served by Building Blocks or the Youth Law Center. Fundamental strategies included coalition-building among local, state, and national leaders, policymakers, and organizations; analyses at pivotal decision points such as point of arrest, detention, and disposition; direct advocacy through legislation and litigation; as well as an information-sharing system to relay accurate and current messages to impacted communities.

Although this vital initiative provides an important initial evaluation of strategies that can effect positive change in the lives of youth, more research is needed to identify DMC reduction plans that work. States and local communities face ongoing challenges to reduce DMC rates in ways that are strategic, effective, and enduring. Our work is intended

to enhance and expand analyses begun by Building Blocks for Youth. Rather than analyzing the overall effectiveness of comprehensive individual DMC reduction plans, this review focuses on those strategies which have proven successful across multiple sites. The main objective of the present research is to review, catalog, and synthesize national best practices for successfully reducing DMC in the juvenile justice system. Although this work focuses exclusively on policies and practices that reduce racial discrepancies in juvenile justice processing, any initiative which improves the lives of minority youth provides a guide for transforming entire communities in ways which elevate the life chances of all youth.

## 1. Review of best practices

An overview of effective, documented procedures for reducing DMC was compiled from multiple sources such as federal (OJJDP) publications, state DMC assessments and publications, published book chapters and journal articles, foundation reports, relevant web sites, and contact with prominent DMC training, technical assistance, and advocacy stakeholders. Thematic analysis was used to identify strategic elements common to sites that have been successful in reducing DMC. Only those sites that have collected data to substantiate their progress in effecting change were included in our analysis.

Our review of these sources identified some common practices for effectively lowering DMC rates. Emerging strategies include: (a) decision-point mapping and data review; (b) cultural competency training; (c) adding more community-based prevention and intervention programs as detention alternatives; (d) removing decision-making subjectivity through standardized screenings and protocols; (e) reducing barriers to family involvement; and (f) cultivating state leadership to legislate system-level change. Each of these major areas is described in more detail below. Throughout our review, we discuss and report indicators of effectiveness, such as pre and post intervention statistics; however, as most researchers have asserted, documented success is rarely the result of solitary policy or procedural changes. In most cases, combinations of approaches have resulted in noted reductions in DMC.

### 1.1. Data review and decision-point mapping

Data review and decision-point mapping consistently emerge as critical initial steps in DMC reduction efforts, for these tools often set the stage for the change process (Nellis, 2005). “Data identify how DMC looks and how it operates in a system, without resorting to anecdotes or emotionally charged debates over individual bias” (Hoytt et al., 2002, p. 14). For example, in Santa Cruz County, California data were gathered on a quarterly basis by the probation department to determine exactly who was being arrested, detained, and placed in programs, and to assess where minority-over-representation occurred. By gathering data at each decision point, agencies were able to map where the system appeared to fail minority youth. They found that 64% of youth in detention in 1997 were Hispanic. Measures were put in place to address cultural and language issues which inflated that number. And by 2000, that number dropped to 50%, which represents a 22% decline in less than three years (Hoytt et al., 2002).

When Multnomah County, Oregon mapped juvenile justice decisions in 1993, it found that detention processing and police referrals, in particular, were major factors contributing to minority overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system (Hoytt et al., 2002). Between 1993 and 2000, a new, racially and ethnically neutral risk assessment instrument was introduced to guide detention decisions. When this instrument was first introduced, African American and Hispanic youth were nearly twice as likely as white youth to be detained, but by 2000, they were only slightly more likely to be detained. Moreover, the overall average daily detention population dropped from 92 to 33, representing a 64% decrease from 1993 to 2000. Moving to a new assessment instrument was just one of multiple strategies, including the development of detention alternatives and agency wide diversity training, implemented by Multnomah County to measurably reduce racial and ethnic discrepancies in juvenile justice processing.

In 1995, in Cook County, Illinois, data review revealed that 98% of all juveniles arrested were brought to court, although less than half of all cases resulted in a trial and adjudication (Hoytt et al., 2002). As well, African American youth were disproportionately represented in those figures since they were being detained at a rate which was 15 times greater than the rate for white youth. In light of these findings, Cook County decided to focus on core detention reform as the most effective approach to reducing justice discrepancies in a county where 90% of youth admitted to detention were minorities. Detention reform strategies were implemented at multiple levels and included system wide cultural sensitivity training, revision of their detention intake tool, improved judicial representation, and the development of a

continuum of detention alternatives. Through these efforts, between 1996 and 2000, Cook County reduced its average daily detention population from 694 to 478, representing a 31% drop in the detention population, primarily benefiting minority youth (Hoytt et al., 2002).

### *1.2. Cultural competency training*

Cultural competency training for key juvenile justice decisionmakers is a promising strategy across multiple sites (Nellis, 2005). In Multnomah County, Oregon, new police officer training incorporates components addressing the problems of disproportionate minority contact and the community's new focus on detention reform. The goal of training was to heighten officers' awareness of the problem of DMC before they began working with juveniles in the community. Such training underscored law enforcement's commitment to supporting their county's mission to eliminate unnecessary juvenile detentions. Further, it explicitly put forth the agency's expectations of officers as they interacted with minority youth in the community. Training officers early in recognizing the issues surrounding disproportionate minority contact has helped to divert many youth who would otherwise be routinely referred to juvenile detention (Hoytt et al., 2002).

The DMC committee in Cook County, Illinois implemented cross-agency cultural diversity and communication training. With the assistance of a consultant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Cook County established a "train-the-trainer" model to create staff training capacity in each agency. This model teaches participants to recognize the ways in which racial stereotyping and decision-making bias perpetuates disparities. Since 1997, the police department, the judiciary, the public defender's office, the detention center, the state attorney's office, and juvenile probation and court services have trained staff members (Hoytt et al., 2002).

DMC task force members in Sacramento County developed a "cultural audit" survey to assess the juvenile justice system's overall understanding of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. They mailed surveys to more than 1000 community leaders, including judges, probation officers, deputy sheriffs, assistant district attorneys, and public defenders. Data analysis found that many decision makers were white and older, with little cultural competence and awareness of the systemic problem of DMC, and that there were significant inter-departmental misunderstandings. The task force used these findings as the basis for cultural diversity training (Hoytt et al., 2002).

Two-day cross-agency cultural diversity training was scheduled for key staff members to establish broader understanding of issues contributing to racial disparities in juvenile justice processing and to promote information sharing across departments. By 1997, 111 staff members from the juvenile courts, the probation department, the public defender's office, the sheriff's department, and the district attorney's office had participated in this training. More than 90% of participants surveyed believed diversity training had increased their awareness of intercultural communication issues (Hoytt et al., 2002).

### *1.3. Increasing community-based detention alternatives*

Numerous explanations are given for maintaining detention as a primary means of controlling and punishing undesirable behavior; however, some studies suggest that effective alternatives to detention for juvenile offenders offer important advantages over detention, not just for minorities, but for all youth. For example, in 2004, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy evaluated the effectiveness of its state's juvenile delinquency prevention programs by conducting a cost-benefit analysis. Measuring cost-savings in terms of reduction in criminal offending, improvement in youth education, and reduction in substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and child abuse or neglect, Aos, Lieb, Mayfield, Miller, and Pennucci (2004) found that effective programs, such as individual and family therapy, saved tax-payers exponentially (as much as \$31,243 per youth enrolled). Conversely, ineffective programs, such as supervised probation and standard parole, yielded costs greater than the expense of the program itself (as much as \$12,478 per youth enrolled).

Most alternatives to detention incorporate one or more of the following elements: house arrest with frequent unannounced visits and phone calls by probation officers or other supervisors; structured day programs that provide more intensive supervision; and shelters for youth who have run away, are homeless, or otherwise need 24-hour supervision (Rust, 1999). For example, in San Francisco, staff from the Detention Diversion Advocacy Project (DDAP) monitor youth who would otherwise be placed in secure detention. Youth are intensively monitored in their homes and agency representatives work with youth and their families to address underlying issues. Approximately 80% of youth

enrolled in this program do not reoffend and appear at their court hearings. Very few participants are sentenced to youth development facilities or residential treatment programs, and an evaluation by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention found that these youth were half as likely as detained youth with similar backgrounds to reoffend and one-third as likely to commit serious or violent offenses (Mendel & Middaugh, 2003).

In Bernalillo County, New Mexico, several detention reforms have been implemented to address the identified needs of the youth population. Finding that 63% of youth referred to detention centers suffer from emotional or behavioral problems, the detention center opened a fully licensed mental health clinic in late 2001 and saw 395 children during its first year of operation. Nearly all referrals came from the probation department and the detention center. Similarly, detention staff have been reassigned to a new “community custody” program which also began in 2001. In this program, three detention officers supervise 30–35 youth in their homes or in unlocked halfway houses. Other detention staff members supervise youth at a “youth reporting center” where they attend school during the day and extracurricular activities through the early evening, and return home to their families before bedtime. The goal of these programs is to prevent youth from returning to the detention center because their needs have not been met (Mendel, 2003).

In Multnomah County, the Youth Reception Center at Portland’s Central Police Precinct is operated by a nonprofit social service agency and is open 24 h a day, seven days a week. Youth who have immediate needs can come here for food, shelter, clothing, and medical attention. Within a few days, youth are assigned a case manager who works to return them to their parents, school, or some other social service agency (Rust, 1999).

In the mid-1990s, Chicago implemented evening reporting centers which by 1999 served about 3800 youth, 92% of whom were arrest free during their tenure in the program (Rust, 1999). Initially implemented by the Westside Association for Community Action network, Chicago’s centers operate from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m., the hours when working parents are not at home and kids are most likely to get into trouble. The centers are run by community-based agencies located in high-referral, minority neighborhoods; and youth participate in programs for five to 21 days. The first evening reporting center began with a capacity for 20 and now seven centers serve at least 165 youth. A recent evaluation found that 60% of youth admitted to the ERCs in 1997 would have otherwise been admitted to detention (Hoytt et al., 2002). Offering a range of educational and recreational activities, the centers provide transportation and meals, as well as opportunities for informal counseling and meaningful relationship building with caring adults. Between 1999 and late 2002, the average daily detention population had fallen from 543 to 440 (Mendel, 2003).

Sacramento County established the Home Supervision Program for nearly 80% of youth who have been diverted from detention. In this program, low-risk youth are confined to their homes unless accompanied by a parent or guardian, and probation officers make unannounced daily visits to monitor compliance. Some moderate-risk youth may be admitted to this program as well, but they may be required to wear a tracking device and cannot leave their homes without court permission (Rust, 1999).

In 2000, Wayne County, Michigan, began contracting with five “care management” facilities to supervise delinquent youth who would ordinarily be sentenced to youth development centers. Under this type of supervision, nearly half of the youth on the county’s caseload remained in their homes in 2002, and over 40% were housed in lower moderate-security group homes or residential treatment centers. Between 1996 and 2001, the number of youth committed to state custody dropped from 906 to 119 (Mendel & Middaugh, 2003).

#### *1.4. Removing decision-making subjectivity*

From the moment a youth enters the juvenile justice system, officials make judgments about how likely a youth is to endanger the community, to reoffend, or to elude justice (Bridges and Steen, 1998). When these assessments are influenced, even unintentionally, by perceptions based on race, the level of DMC throughout the system is impacted. When Bridges and Steen, (1998) examined reports written by juvenile probation officers in a western state, they found racial disparities in officers’ assessments of a youth’s risk for reoffending, as well as in sentencing recommendations. Inequities appeared to reflect different causal attributions for crime. Officers more often blamed external forces, such as difficult living situations, neglect, or abuse, for offending by white youth, but attributed offending by minority youth to internal forces, such as poor socialization or weak morals.

To reduce racial disparities in detention decisions made by intake staff and probation officers, several counties have developed race-neutral risk assessment instruments. These new tools assess a youth’s probation status, history of appearing in court, prior record, and the seriousness of the charge, without giving undue weight to social factors that increase the likelihood that minority youth will be detained more often than white youth. For example, instead of

asking if a youth resides with both parents, a situation that is less common among African American youth, a race-neutral assessment might ask if two adults capable of supervising a youth live in the home. Based on their responses to intake questions, youth are assigned low, moderate, or high risk scores which suggest their likelihood of reoffending or failing to appear in court. The risk assessment score is used to guide decisions about the most appropriate level of supervision for each youth (Rust, 1999).

The process of creating risk-neutral intake instruments is time-consuming and involves progressive revisions. For more than a year, a team comprised of judges, attorneys, detention counselors, school officials, probation officers, and researchers in Multnomah County, Oregon developed and pilot-tested a new risk assessment instrument before introducing it as a guide for detention decisions. The new instrument was designed to eliminate racial and ethnic bias and to better indicate when detention is appropriate. They replaced criteria which might be biased against African American youth, like “good family structure,” with more race-neutral criteria like responsible adult willing to ensure youth’s appearance in court. Similarly, “productive activity” was added to “school attendance” as a mitigating factor since part-time employment and skills-training can also be considered important indicators of the appropriateness of community placement for youth (Hoytt et al., 2002). Multnomah County continually evaluates the effectiveness of their risk assessment instrument and revises accordingly. In 1999, using its third version, Multnomah found that the reoffense rate for youth not detained prior to their hearings was about 13% and the failure-to-appear rate was about 7% (Rust, 1999). Other sites have taken similar measures to revise intake questions which unnecessarily disadvantage minority youth. For instance, the new risk assessment instrument developed by Cook County, Illinois reduced the weight given to criteria more often associated with minority arrests, like prior police contacts or living in a single-parent household (Hoytt et al., 2002).

Multnomah County also created a unique sanctions grid to reduce the number of youth detained for simple probation violations and to provide consistency in detention decisions. While the grid established a range of discipline options to be used depending on the youth’s risk score and the seriousness of the violation, staff could not select sanctions outside the grid’s ranges, and other options had to be tried before detention was imposed. Finally, any detention decision made for probation violations must be approved by an “alternative placement” committee. The detention population was immediately reduced as a result of the new sanctions grid (Hoytt et al., 2002).

Some sites have worked to reduce racial and ethnic bias in detention decisions even before a youth reaches intake. In Sacramento County, the Juvenile Justice Initiative developed a one-page tool with detention guidelines for law enforcement officers to use in the field to help them decide when citing and releasing youth to responsible adults may be more appropriate than taking them to detention (Rust, 1999). Similarly the Seattle Police Department revised its booking policy to reduce arbitrary detentions. Under the new protocol, before bringing a youth to detention, officers are required to call the detention center to see if the youth meets intake criteria. Only youth meeting all criteria can be brought to the detention center. In addition, police officers now carry wallet-sized cards listing criteria for detention and the phone number for the detention center (Soler, 2005).

### *1.5. Reducing barriers to family involvement*

For many families with youth who have entered the juvenile justice system, maneuvering through legal bureaucracy for the first time is an intimidating and often demoralizing experience, wrought with confusion and frustration (Frabutt, Kendrick, Arbuckle, & Cabaniss, 2005). Many caregivers feel ill-equipped to prepare or defend their child, and youth often do not know how to conduct themselves advantageously in court. To address these concerns, in 1996, the Public Defender’s Office in Cook County, Illinois established the Detention Response Unit, comprised of two paralegals who interview and prepare detained youth for their custody hearings. In these meetings, the paralegals tell youth what to expect at the hearing, offer advice on how to behave in court, and confirm their community ties. Moreover, if families do not accompany youth to these meetings, paralegals contact parents or guardians on their behalf, to emphasize the critical importance of their presence at the court hearing (Hoytt et al., 2002).

When Santa Cruz discovered that they had too few Spanish-speaking intake and case management staff to effectively evaluate the appropriateness of returning youth to their families, the county established a goal of employing as many Spanish-speaking staff as the proportion of Spanish-speaking youth in the detention center (Hoytt et al., 2002). Now, parents of Hispanic youth are called by intake officers who speak Spanish. When the county found that language and cultural differences also meant few Hispanic youth were participating in detention alternatives, the intake department partnered with a community-based agency to assist Spanish-speaking parents in assuming and

demonstrating supervisory responsibility for their children in ways that met the expectations of the court. As a result of these efforts, more than twice as many youth have been diverted from detention to new programs, many of which were specifically designed to meet the needs of Hispanic youth (Hoytt et al., 2002).

### *1.6. Cultivating state leadership to legislate system-level change*

Engaged leadership is central to building momentum for DMC reductions and is critical to sustaining broad-based reduction efforts and lasting change (Devine, Coolbaugh, & Jenkins, 1998). Underscoring this point, Hoytt et al. (2002) noted that “historically, the most successful sites in virtually all major juvenile justice reform efforts were places where the top-level policymakers clearly and forcefully embraced change and challenged their colleagues and staff to join them in the transformation process” (p. 14). In 1989, the Florida state legislative leadership established a statewide eligibility criteria that restricted the use of detention to situations “where there is clear and compelling evidence that a child presents a danger to himself or the community, presents a risk of failing to appear, or is likely to commit a subsequent law violation prior to adjudication” (Rust, 1999, p. 6). Routine pretrial detention was explicitly prohibited for punishment or convenience. Only youth charged with serious offenses or who had a record of missing court hearings could be held; all others were given court summons and returned to their parent or guardian or to a social service agency. Annual statewide detention admissions decreased by 13% in the first three years after Florida’s legislative reforms (Rust, 1999).

Then, in 1994, the Florida legislature established the Juvenile Justice Accountability Board charged with evaluating the outcomes of youth in the juvenile justice system and assessing how well the policies and practices of the executive and judicial branches support these legislative reforms. In response, the board engaged key community stakeholders in a collaborative process to design a valid and reliable evaluation system. One of their first tasks was to develop a strategic vision for the juvenile justice system and to determine what program outcomes they expected. By including the community in this process, the board was able to add credibility to evaluation studies and provide objective information about the effectiveness of their own programs. Data gathered by Florida’s Juvenile Justice Accountability Board and partner research affiliates continue to offer empirical support for policy development (Brown, Maxwell, DeJesus, & Schiraldi, 2002).

In 1993, Ohio’s General Assembly established RECLAIM (Reasoned and Equitable Community and Local Alternatives to the Incarceration of Minors) Ohio as an alternative to juvenile detention. RECLAIM Ohio, which began formal operations in 1995, allocates funds to all state counties to provide effective community-based services like counseling or electronic monitoring for nonviolent young offenders or, on occasion, to purchase supervisory care from the state. As an incentive for counties to seek creative alternatives to state care, counties are charged more against their allocation for state custodial care than for community placements. Any unused funds may be used by counties to develop additional services for juvenile offenders. In its first year in operation, RECLAIM Ohio served approximately 8600 juveniles in community programs, and youth development center commitments dropped, despite an increase in felony convictions (Brown et al., 2002).

## **2. Summary and conclusion**

What is clear from our review of effective strategies to reduce DMC is that the challenges and issues confronting communities as they work to resolve racial disparities in the juvenile justice system are generally very similar across sites. Communities across the nation all struggle to acknowledge the extent of racial disparity in their juvenile justice systems. Racial and ethnic inequality has a long history in the United States, and in contemporary society, no institution wants to be seen as perpetuating oppression. However, communities are finding that addressing justice disparities for minority youth requires broaching a difficult conversation about race and ethnic relations as well as one about the value the community places on its youth. Often, those conversations are made easier when discussions focus on objective data outlining the extent of the problem. Every location we examined collected and reviewed data at key decision points in juvenile justice processing in order to assess the level of DMC. In some ways, communities can transcend the emotionally charged atmosphere that often envelops discussions of social injustice by reviewing data and decision point maps that clearly outline the extent of the problem. Moreover, data analysis allows communities to focus more specifically on key points where the justice system fails youth. Most sites that we analyzed incorporated cultural diversity training as a critical initial step in raising awareness of the issues surrounding the problem of DMC before

enlisting support for more comprehensive DMC reduction plans. Other sites encounter challenges reconciling community demands for public order and safety with simultaneous calls for compassion and leniency for youth offenders. Most locations we examined devised creative alternatives to detention that concurrently redirected the behaviors of youth offenders and addressed social and individual factors, which may have contributed to their offenses. Other locations have found that the system begins to fail youth at the point of detention intake.

When risk assessment instruments use outdated, Eurocentric criteria in making detention decisions, the intake instrument actually perpetuates race bias. Similarly, when detention admission policies are not clearly understood by police officers, decisions to detain youth seem arbitrary and unfair. Other sites have learned that the justice system itself can become an obstacle when youth do not understand how to maneuver through it and families are intimidated by its complexity. Still other sites find that system-wide change can only be realized through legislation and have cultivated strong state leadership committed to protecting the rights of youth. While our review finds that communities across the nation are all struggling in similar ways to confront racial disparities in the juvenile justice system, it also identifies solid practices that are lowering the level of DMC. Communities are creating workable solutions that are effecting positive change in the lives of youth while strengthening their overall commitment to the ideal of justice for all.

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