



Juvenile Deflection: Meeting Youth Where They Are

Catching Up With COSSUP, June 2023

Experts consider youth in America to be in the middle of a mental health crisis. Youth mental health has been negatively impacted not only by the COVID-19 pandemic and the related lack of prosocial activities but also by negative interactions experienced through technology (e.g., cyberbullying) and by issues such as climate change, income inequality, racial injustice (including the deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police officers and increased violence against Asian Americans), the opioid epidemic, and gun violence.¹

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, behavioral health systems in the United States had not kept up with the demand for adequate care and treatment options in every community, especially communities that have been historically marginalized, such as low-income and racial and ethnic minority communities.

But there is light at the end of the tunnel: law enforcement and juvenile justice systems have started to focus their attention and resources on the underlying factors impacting youth mental health, substance use, and co-occurring behavioral health disorders. A failure to address them could result in long-lasting negative consequences for affected individuals, including justice system involvement.

The Need for Juvenile Deflection

Approximately 70 percent of young people in detention centers or correctional settings have a preexisting mental health disorder.² Juvenile justice-involved youth and their families suffer a multitude of consequences during justice system involvement: decline in school attendance while incarcerated, disruption of household functions (e.g., the affected child may be the caregiver for siblings while the parent[s] work), busy and possibly overwhelming schedules (probation officer visits/reports, multiple system evaluations, reporting center mandates), unresolved crime victim and community trauma, and more. Importantly, the resulting criminal record impacts future education and/or employment prospects.

Deflection and pre-arrest diversion are upstream preventative or interventive approaches to addressing issues related to addiction and mental health, including drug-related crime, that preempt the need to wait for an overdose, a crisis, or an arrest. Since the last decade, deflection initiatives have been increasingly implemented nationwide to connect people with substance use and co-occurring behavioral health disorders to community-based treatment and services. Although deflection was primarily created for adults, juvenile deflection initiatives have been increasingly implemented. One such juvenile deflection program, Project Hope, in Menomonie, Wisconsin, was launched in 2015 to deflect youth away from justice system involvement through school-based intervention.



A billboard in North Menomonie, Wisconsin, advertising Project Hope, a juvenile deflection program

Project Hope: Menomonie, Wisconsin

Data show that from January 2015 through May 2019, the Menomonie Police Department (MPD) referred 881 juveniles for criminal violations including drugs and violence. At the same time, the county human services department was seeing an increase in the number of children who were removed from homes and impacted

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by parental methamphetamine and opioid use. In March 2020, the City of Menomonie and the Menomonie Area School District partnered to begin an initiative called Project Hope.



Project Hope utilizes a juvenile review team (JRT) made up of two school liaison officers and a behavioral health officer (all sworn law enforcement officers), three school counselors, a school psychologist, and a social worker. The team meets biweekly to proactively discuss youth who may be eligible for diversion or deflection. Once

eligibility is determined, a team member contacts the youth and their family in the field. After learning more from the youth about challenges they may be experiencing, the parent or guardian is contacted to collaborate on a plan to address relevant needs. The JRT uses a variety of methods to meet the needs of youth, including mentoring, counseling/therapy, food resources, shelter assistance, case management, and academic tutoring. "We consider those early interventions a part of our deflection initiative," stated Eric Atkinson, former MPD police chief and manager of the initiative.

Project Hope also offers deflection opportunities for youth who engage in criminal behavior or activities that could result in citation. Deflection is voluntary; if the youth or guardian declines to participate, the officers follow protocol and refer the youth to the juvenile justice system. If they accept, the youth must complete Project Hope's evidence-based online education initiative. According to Chief Atkinson, the completion rate of this initiative is more than 90 percent.

Another component of Project Hope is its utilization of the Botvin LifeSkills training program, a groundbreaking substance use and violence prevention initiative. In addition to teaching youth skills to prevent substance use, it helps reduce violence and other high-risk behaviors. A community education component also provides parents with tools to help enhance their children's decision-making

skills in areas including substance use, self-esteem, and bullying.

Since implementing its deflection and diversion practices, the MPD now averages approximately 50 juvenile referrals per year. The program plans to evaluate the impact of Project Hope on juvenile recidivism and attitude changes. Project Hope is just one example of how communities can collaborate to engage youth and address the impact of mental and behavioral health issues.

Endnotes

1. United States Office of the Surgeon General, 2021, *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.
2. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2017, "Intersection Between Mental Health and the Juvenile Justice System," *Literature Review*, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/Intersection-Mental-Health-Juvenile-Justice.pdf>.