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Building on Strength: Positive Youth Development in Juvenile Justice Programs

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Introduction

The traditional juvenile justice system is deficit based. Policies and programs are designed to identify youth problems and to implement strategies for reducing those problems. Youth are classified by the seriousness of their problems, including the offenses they commit, the level of risk they present to the public safety, and their service needs. The treatments used to reduce the effects of their problems include behavior modification, cognitive therapies, and interventions that address school failure, substance abuse, sexual offending, and family conflict. This problem-focused juvenile justice system is designed to protect public safety by incarcerating youth or closely supervising their behavior (*incapacitation*), imposing sanctions for their past offenses (*deterrence* and *retribution*), and reducing the likelihood of future offenses (*rehabilitation*).

In a growing number of communities, however, practitioners are beginning to question the effectiveness of the traditional deficit-based model of juvenile justice. They are adopting a perspective that focuses on what is right with youth rather than on what is wrong with youth. This approach involves working with families and communities to enhance the positive social supports and opportunities that may improve a youth's chances of developing to his or her fullest potential. The new perspective arises from two innovative frameworks for working with youth—*positive youth development* and *strength-based practice*. Both frameworks are beginning to spread to juvenile justice settings. Rather than focusing solely on problems, these new frameworks encourage juvenile justice agencies to identify the positive aspects of a youth's life and to design individually tailored interventions that build on those strengths and interests while still holding youth accountable for their offenses.

Adopting a strength-based, positive youth development perspective in juvenile justice settings requires a major shift in organizational culture. Programs that attempt such a shift may encounter resistance from outside critics as well as from their own staff and stakeholders (Mendel, 2008). Unfortunately, practitioners who wish to undertake such an effort will find very little guidance in the academic or professional literature. To date, researchers have not adequately documented how this cultural change takes place, let alone whether it produces effective results for youth, families, and communities.

This report summarizes our observations and conclusions from an exploratory study of six juvenile justice programs that are attempting to improve their intervention approaches by using a strength-based, positive youth development perspective. The study included a series of site visits to youth programs around the United States. Programs were selected because they described themselves as working within a strength-based positive youth development approach.

The study, conducted between September 2006 and July 2007, had the following objectives:

- Identify juvenile justice programs throughout the United States that are working to incorporate a strength-based, positive youth development approach in their services and interventions with youthful offenders.
- From this population of programs, select a small, purposive sample of sites representing a range of geographical locations and a variety of program types, including prevention, detention, probation, residential, and reentry services.
- Arrange a site visit to each program. Interview key administrators, staff, and stakeholders. Supplement interviews with personal observations and record reviews.
- Analyze all information from the interviews, observations, and documents. Identify factors that appear to facilitate or impede the incorporation of strength-based, positive youth development principles in juvenile justice settings.

Traditional Organizational Culture in Juvenile Justice

In the United States, juvenile justice programming seems to shift continually between the competing goals of public safety and punishment on the one hand, and offender rehabilitation on the other (Bernard, 1992). In recent decades, public safety goals have generally prevailed, as juvenile justice policies across the country reflected a get-tough posture that was at least partly in response to a surge in youth violence that occurred during the 1980s and early 1990s. Although juvenile crime rates fell dramatically after 1994 (Butts & Snyder, 2006), these get-tough policies remain on the books. In many jurisdictions, juvenile justice interventions remain deficit based and the efforts of program managers and staff are concentrated on security and control. Even a cursory internet search for news items about juvenile corrections turns up dozens of examples in which juvenile facilities have been accused of mistreating youth in their custody.

In recent years, for example, troubling allegations of physical and sexual abuse were made against staff in the Mississippi juvenile system (Halbfinger, 2003), including facilities designated for young females (Mohr, 2007). Six workers were fired by a Tennessee facility for beating youth in their care with leather restraining belts (Buser, 2007). A formerly incarcerated youth successfully sued the state of Maine for the physical abuse and excessive restraint he suffered while in a public juvenile justice facility (Hench, 2004). A supervisor at a Las Vegas detention center was arrested after an investigation revealed that he had broken the wrist of a mentally disabled 16-year-old in his custody (McCabe, 2007). In Florida, a youth was beaten to death by staff members at a juvenile boot camp (Graham, 2006).

The Challenge of Cultural Change

Focusing on strengths and facilitating the social development of young offenders is outside the mainstream of juvenile justice policy and practice in many jurisdictions. The authors do not underestimate the challenges that face juvenile justice programs as they try to move toward a strength-based positive youth development orientation. The following examples of traditional juvenile justice culture were observed during site visits conducted for previous studies. These interactions may not represent all juvenile correctional institutions, but they are not unusual.

Observations from Previous Studies

On a hot, dusty summer day, our tour guide led us to a brick building near the center of the campus of one of his state's largest juvenile correctional facilities. The living unit we were about to enter was reserved for the most difficult youth at the training school. These youth had behaved so badly in the less-restrictive units that they needed to be separated from the rest of the population.

We walked in the door and found ourselves standing in a large cement-lined open corridor, flanked on either side by two levels of single cells. Hard surfaces amplified every sound. We learned that this obviously high-security unit had an even more secure section, separated from the main area by a heavy door. Inside this door were six individual holding rooms that could only be described as cages, with a narrow slit at the bottom of each door designed for passing food trays to the occupant.

This was the facility's isolation unit. It housed the most disruptive youth in the facility. They stayed here around the clock, for days or weeks at a time except for one hour of exercise daily. Our guide, a wiry, elderly man who had worked at the facility for many years, let one boy out of his cage for a moment to speak with the visitors. The man asked the youth if he thought he could stay out of trouble after he was released to go home. The boy looked at the ground, shuffled his feet, and said, "I think so, sir." Our guide responded, "No, you know you won't. You'll end up back with the same crowd, do the same stupid things, and we'll see you back here again."

The skepticism displayed by the staff member of the juvenile institution is common among juvenile justice staff, especially those who have worked in such facilities for many years. An experienced female case manager in the same correctional facility estimated that half the youth released from the institution would be recommitted soon for subsequent offenses. Some youth, according to the case manager, do not want to leave at the end of their confinement. They are sometimes more afraid of returning to their home communities than they are of staying in a secure correctional facility. Before her visitors leave, the case manager points with pride to a large metal yardstick in her desk drawer. She keeps it there for quick retrieval when she needs to enforce a more respectful attitude from the youth with whom she meets.

In another facility in a different state, our tour is led by the state juvenile department's deputy director for programming. The visitors ask the facility's program director if a particular cognitive-behavioral curriculum is used with the youth. The program director laughs before saying dryly, "Not really." A staff member in the same facility is asked if consistent records are kept on each youth's progress and behavior. "Yes," he offers, adding a qualifier, "some [staff] do and some don't; the same ones, consistently."

At yet another institution in another state, the staff had been having problems with a particular young person. They were relieved when a court order arrived indicating that he could finally be released on a particular date. At exactly 12:01 a.m. on the designated date, the staff woke the youth, hurried him to the front gate, handed him his bag of clothes, and watched him go out into the darkness.

The most dramatic stories of abuse in recent years emerged from the state of Texas. A series of investigative reports documented numerous allegations of physical and sexual abuse by staff at state facilities: "According to official documents obtained by The Dallas Morning News, many prison staffers at the West Texas State School complained about possible sexual abuse of inmates to their immediate bosses and to Texas Youth Commission officials in Austin. But, for more than a year, no one in charge did anything to stop it" (Dallas Morning News, 2008). In the past decade, numerous allegations of sexual abuse were lodged against facilities operated by the Texas Youth Commission (Ward, 2007).

These disturbing stories are not uncommon in the news media, but even academic researchers find widespread overcrowding and poor conditions of confinement in juvenile justice facilities, as well as numerous instances of abuse and neglect (Cannon, 2004; Deschenes & Greenwood, 1998; Lerner, 1986; Lispsey, 1992; Parent, et al., 1994; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999; 2006; Steinberg, Chung, & Little, 2004). In such an environment, trying to build juvenile justice programs around the concepts of strength-based practice and positive youth development could seem naive at best and irrelevant at worst. Discouraged reformers could be excused for assuming that juvenile justice settings are populated by staff that dislike or fear the youth in their care, either by temperament or as a result of working too long with very little support, recognition, or a belief that their efforts make a positive difference. Perhaps the best that can ever be expected of the juvenile justice system is to maintain order and control.

Positive Youth Development and Strength-Based Practice in Juvenile Justice

Some innovative juvenile justice programs are trying to do more than ensure order. They are restructuring their efforts around the concepts of positive youth development (PYD) and strength-based practice. The leadership of the principal juvenile justice agency in Washington, D.C., for example, has announced that agency's intention to make youth development its guiding framework in working with young offenders (e.g., Mendel, 2007). As more agencies begin to shift in this direction, administrators and practitioners will need to understand exactly how such a transformation occurs and how to avoid the most common obstacles and pitfalls that await them.

Practitioners in child and adolescent mental health services, child welfare services, and special education were among the first to concentrate their efforts on promoting supports and opportunities to foster positive developmental outcomes. Some of their work occurred at the community level and it often applied to primary prevention efforts rather than to interventions for youth who have already had contact with social services and youth justice authorities (see for example, Connell, Kubisch, Schorr & Weiss, 1995). One exception was the "system of care" and wraparound service approach that is now highly popular in the children's mental health sector (Pumariega & Winters, 2003; Stroul & Friedman, 1986; VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996).

Like the system of care and wraparound approach in children's mental health, the positive youth development framework and strength-based practice offers a sharp contrast to a deficit-based, medical model of juvenile justice. In a strengths paradigm, youth and families are full partners in developing and implementing intervention plans. These plans build on existing strengths within and around youth, families, and their communities to help youth achieve positive developmental outcomes. Strength-based

service plans rely on identifying and mobilizing informal supports as much or more as they do on professional services (Saleebey, 2006).

Several scholars have advocated the incorporation of the strengths perspective in juvenile justice, and there have been some isolated attempts to do so. Many of these efforts have struggled with implementation challenges, however, and this has limited the extent to which this perspective can be said to have been fully implemented. As yet, practitioners have no evaluation research or even case studies from which they can glean practical guidance about how to implement this perspective in a juvenile justice setting. This study is an attempt to begin filling that gap.

Evolution of Juvenile Justice Policies and Practices

The nation's first juvenile court was established in Chicago in 1899, ostensibly to act in "the best interests of the child." In the ensuing century, the juvenile justice system has vacillated between its dual emphases on rehabilitation and punishment (Bernard, 1992). By the time youth violence rates peaked in the early 1990s, the policy pendulum had clearly swung to the punishment side, with greater numbers of youth who were transferred to criminal (adult) court, wider acceptance of mandatory sentencing and zero tolerance policies, and longer periods of confinement (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

At the same time, however, some juvenile justice leaders have continued to advocate alternatives. For example, the "balanced approach," developed by Maloney, Romig and Armstrong (1988) and adopted by some state and county systems, is helping policymakers articulate a rational middle ground between punishment and treatment. Advances in assessment practices and the emergence of evidence-based interventions are aiding these efforts. The influence of the restorative justice paradigm has also increased in juvenile justice settings (e.g., Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Bazemore & Umbreit, 1995). The growing use of practices such as family group conferences and victim-offender mediation suggest that accountability can be achieved by methods that are potentially more cost-effective than sanctions and punishment.

Recent theoretical and empirical advances have converged to provide a more compelling understanding of the causes and correlates of delinquency and other risky behaviors by youth. One body of research points to a set of risk and protective factors, at various ecological levels (intra-individual, interpersonal, community), that increase or decrease the likelihood that problem behaviors will emerge among youth (Fraser, Kirby & Smokowski, 2004; Hawkins, et al., 2000; Howell, 2003; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001).

Another set of studies examines *resilience*, or what prevents the occurrence of problem behaviors even in the presence of considerable risk (Anthony, 1987; Rutter, 1985;

Werner & Smith, 2001). Effective programs tend to target the reduction of risk factors and the promotion of protective factors (Andrews, et al., 1990; Aos, Phipps, Barnoski, & Lieb, 2001; Lipsey, 1992; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998). Fraser and Terzian (2005) outline three basic practice principles from the risk and resilience framework: (1) strengthen protection and reduce risk (both must be addressed); (2) understand the effect of the social and developmental context on protection and risk; and (3) identify and disrupt risk mechanisms (the “sequencing of events that elevate risk”) (p. 20).

Despite these advances in understanding the role of protective factors and resilience, most juvenile justice programming remains principally concerned with managing risks and service needs, and with employing a deficit-focused, “medical model” of diagnosis and treatment. Preadjudicatory detention and postadjudicatory residential placements are still heavily used, although they routinely fail to reduce recidivism and are often plagued with overcrowding and deplorable conditions as noted above. Professional interventions are still favored over community resources. Youth and their families are relegated to passive roles in the process.

Positive Youth Development

Much of the available research on risk and protection uses the presence or absence of delinquency as the primary dependent variable, but preventing antisocial behavior is not the only goal of resilience-based interventions. The PYD framework encompasses a broader set of goals common to all youth, whether or not they have engaged in problem behavior. If the juvenile justice system were to embrace PYD goals and successfully design its practices to provide the supports and opportunities to achieve them, the resulting positive outcomes could prove effective in preventing subsequent offending.

Of course, it is not easy to define the appropriate targets of a PYD approach. One cannot simply define PYD goals as whatever encourages positive adult outcomes. People and communities would likely differ on the specific indicators of adult success. As Eccles and Gootman (2002) point out, cultural groups vary in what they value for their members (e.g., some value autonomy and individuality while others value cooperation and collectivity). The PYD perspective needs to be framed in terms general enough to permit cultural variability.

Hamilton, Hamilton, and Pittman (2004) provide a set of clear principles for positive youth development that encompasses goals (all youth gain competence and character), practices (youth participation in decisions; healthy relationships with adults, peers and younger children; relationships changing and enduring as developmentally appropriate), and system characteristics (community-wide partnerships that develop inclusive, coherent, connected, and enduring systems).

Others frame positive youth development differently. Pittman and Irby (1996) define the four tasks of adolescent development in terms of “4 Cs”: competence, confidence, character, and connections, to which Benson and Pittman (2001) add a fifth C, contributions. Connell, Gambone, and Smith (2001) prefer to describe the tasks of adolescent development as learning to be productive, learning to connect, and learning to navigate. Still others describe positive youth development as acquiring a sense of competency, usefulness, belonging and influence (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 2000). The Search Institute (Scales & Leffert, 1999) defines youth development in terms of 40 social and developmental assets that encompass eight dimensions. Regardless of the acronym or specific terms, all PYD frameworks stress a combination of attributes, skills, and relationships related to healthy, productive, and satisfying outcomes in adulthood. All frameworks agree as well that to increase the likelihood of positive developmental outcomes for all young people, communities need to provide a range of supports and opportunities far beyond what is found in many American communities today.

Eccles and Gootman (2002: 90-91) provide a useful list of characteristics that communities and programs seeking to promote positive youth development should have. These elements include the following:

- Physical and psychological safety – Safe and health promoting facilities; and practices that increase safe peer group interactions and decrease unsafe or confrontational peer interactions.
- Appropriate structure – Limit setting; clear and consistent rules and expectations; firm-enough control; continuity and predictability; clear boundaries; and age-appropriate monitoring.
- Supportive relationships – Warmth; closeness; connectedness; good communication; caring; support; guidance; secure attachment; and responsiveness.
- Opportunities to belong – Opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one’s gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities; social inclusion, social engagement, and integration; opportunities for sociocultural identity formation; and support for cultural and bicultural competence.
- Positive social norms – Rules of behavior; expectations; injunctions; ways of doing things; values and morals; and obligations for service.
- Support for efficacy and mattering – Youth-based; empowerment practices that support autonomy; making a real difference in one’s community; and being taken seriously. Practices that include enabling, responsibility granting, meaningful challenge, and that focus on improvement rather than on relative current performance levels.

- Opportunities for skill building – Opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional and social skills; exposure to intentional learning experiences; opportunities to learn cultural literacy, media literacy, communication skills, and good habits of mind; preparation for adult employment; and opportunities to develop social and cultural capital.
- Integration of family, school, and community efforts – Concordance; coordination; and synergy among family, school, and community.”

Traditional views of young people often reflect a sharp dichotomy. On the one hand, schools and some community organizations (e.g., Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCAs, YWCAs, etc.) exist to provide opportunities for all youth. Faith-based organizations provide opportunities to young members of their congregations and, increasingly, to other youth in their neighborhoods and communities. These opportunities are intended to promote positive youth development in a wide array of settings. Others, notably human services and justice agencies, view their missions as dealing with “youth problems,” which is often translated as dealing with “problem youth.” The problem perspective tends to result in programs and policies that do not promote positive youth development, but rather seek to isolate and control problem youth. The juvenile justice system is perhaps the most extreme example of this mindset.

In recent years, the proponents of PYD have advocated a paradigm shift in how families, communities, and agencies should think of young people, emphasizing that young people are assets to be valued rather than problems to be controlled. They have called for the mobilization of community resources to provide supports and opportunities that will enable all young people to achieve the goals of positive youth development. Communities in the U.S. and abroad are increasingly mounting comprehensive initiatives to create the supports and opportunities necessary to promote positive youth development (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006).

One weakness of the PYD movement has been its relative inattention to theory. It is long on moral imperatives and short on articulated theories of change (Weiss, 1995). Some exceptions include the work of Eccles and Gootman (2002, especially Appendix B) who ground positive youth development in the theories of John Bowlby (1991), Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), and Erik Erikson (1963), as well as the work of Connell and colleagues (Connell, Gambone & Smith, 2001; Connell & Kubish, 1998; Connell, Kubish & Schorr, 1995) who offer a detailed conceptual framework that links community strategies, supports and opportunities to short- and long-term youth outcomes. Insights from other research on risk, resilience, and protective factors may yet provide useful guidance for new “theories of change” that link PYD strategies with developmental outcomes.

The Strengths Perspective

Focusing on the achievement of PYD goals would be a critical improvement in many juvenile justice settings, but unless the PYD framework is joined with a strength-based orientation, such reforms could still end up as part of a deficit model of intervention. The strengths perspective (C. Rapp, 1998; Saleebey, 2006) stands in sharp contrast to the deficit-based, or medical-model approach to human services practice, and is most appropriate for efforts to promote PYD goals among justice-involved youth.

Saleebey (2006) lists key principles of the strengths perspective, including recognizing that “every individual, group, family and community has strengths” (p. 16), that practitioners “best serve clients by collaborating with them” (p. 18), and that “every environment is full of resources” (p. 19). Rather than basing service plans on diagnostic assessments of client deficits or needs, a strength-based practice uses the assessment process to discover strengths and engage clients in collaborative planning (Cowger & Snively, 2002, C. Rapp, 1998). According to R. Rapp (2002), “a strengths-based assessment provide[s] clients with the opportunity to examine their personal abilities and the role those abilities can play in solving problems” (p. 127). Strength-based practice rests on the fundamental assumption that people are more likely to change when they are fully engaged as partners in the process of identifying goals and strategies for their attainment than when they are the objects of change efforts initiated by others.

As yet, there is no real evidence that a strength-based PYD approach to practice can be truly implemented in juvenile justice settings. A number of daunting challenges face those who would attempt to do so, as pointed out by several writers (Barton, 2004; 2006a; 2006b; Schwartz, 2001; Torbet & Thomas, 2005). The dominant juvenile justice culture is correctional in nature, with an emphasis on youth deficits and a high priority on surveillance and control. Such an environment is not naturally amenable to a strength-based paradigm. It is unlikely that a strength-based PYD approach can be accomplished without effective and prolonged collaborations among the many public and community-based agencies involved in the juvenile justice system, and these collaborations are difficult to manage and sustain.

Despite the many challenges, there is growing interest in a marriage of risk/resiliency and strength-based positive youth development concepts as applied to juvenile justice (Clark, 1997; 1998; Franz, 1994; 2001; Northey, Primer, & Christensen, 1997; Maruna & LeBel, 2003; Van Wormer, 1999; 2001; Wilson & Anderson, 1997). NPC Research in Oregon has developed strength-based assessment tools for juvenile justice (Mackin, Weller, Tarte, & Nissen, 2005; Nissen, Mackin, Weller, & Tarte, 2005). Strength-based wraparound programs, such as the Dawn Project (Indiana Behavioral Choices, Inc., 2001) and Wraparound Milwaukee (Kamradt, 2000), report promising results in terms of

reduced residential placements and lowered recidivism. An evaluation of an innovative probation program employing strength-based case management techniques produced promising results in terms of reducing recidivism (Kurtz & Linnemann, 2006). The Boys & Girls Clubs of America is attempting to incorporate some strength-based practices in its juvenile reentry initiative (Barton, Jarjoura, & Rosay, 2004). Chapin Hall has established an emerging research and policy initiative focusing on the link between positive youth development and juvenile justice (Butts, Mayer, & Ruth, 2005).

There are likely many more efforts already in place around the country to infuse the juvenile justice system with strength-based positive youth development principles, but few have been documented in the research literature. The juvenile justice field would benefit from a compilation of the lessons learned by practitioners in their attempts to improve policies and practices for youthful offenders. This is the goal of this study.

Methodology

The principal author of this study began the investigation by developing criteria for the selection of programs. We searched the professional and academic literature for descriptions of programs that were attempting to implement strength-based, positive youth development practices in juvenile justice settings. Additional programs were identified through personal contacts with colleagues who were in a position to be aware of such programs. A small, purposive sample of programs was chosen to represent different regions of the country and different components of the juvenile justice system (e.g., community-based, detention, post-adjudicatory residential, reentry, etc.). These programs were then invited to participate in the project. Data collection tools (observation checklists, interview guides) were developed for use in later site visits and other program contacts.

The principal author eventually selected six programs to participate in the data collection phase of the study and arranged and conducted site visits with each participating program. The site visits included interviews with key staff and stakeholders, reviews of program documents, and direct observations of program activities. The focus of all data collection activities was to determine the following: the extent to which strength-based, PYD-focused practices were actually occurring; the structural and functional aspects of each organizational setting that were (or were not) aligned with these practices; and the range of factors that appeared to be facilitating or hindering implementation of these practices.

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The transcriptions and all notes resulting from the direct observations were reviewed in a thematic content analysis. The key themes examined for the study included program goals and objectives, routine procedures

and client services, the role of program mission statements and their compatibility with PYD principles, staff training, leadership, the importance of collaborative agency relationships, funding mechanisms, and any ongoing evaluation efforts. The results of the initial analysis informed a written summary of findings for each program site. A preliminary draft of the written case study was provided to each participating program for “member checking,” a qualitative research technique that allows participants to review the accuracy of factual details and to comment on themes suggested by the researcher. The case studies were then compiled into a single manuscript that summarized the findings around implementation themes that could be useful to other organizations attempting to incorporate PYD principles into their programs.

Program Selection and Recruitment

A program was considered for inclusion in the study only if it met each of the following conditions:

- The program served youth in or at the boundaries of the juvenile justice system, including youth diverted from formal court processing, those held in pre-adjudication detention, on probation, involved with community service providers on contract with the juvenile court to provide services, local or state residential programs for adjudicated delinquents, or juvenile reentry programs.
- The program had publicly stated its intention to use some aspects of strength-based practice and a positive youth development orientation in working with justice-involved youth.
- The program agreed to participate in the study.

Among the programs initially identified as meeting these criteria, a small group was purposively selected to represent different stages in the juvenile justice process and to represent different geographical locations. In the end, six programs were selected from jurisdictions in Alaska, Florida, Michigan, New York, and Oregon.

Site Visits

Site visits lasted for one day, and included a tour of the programs, observations of program activities where feasible, interviews with administrators and key staff at various levels of the organizations, and a review of several program documents, such as assessment tools, case plans, and evaluation reports. All documents reviewed were stripped of youths’ names and identifying information. The number of individuals selected for interviews in each program varied, depending upon the size and complexity of the program, but always included the program director and representative supervisors and line staff. All persons interviewed were adults.

Study Sites

Program	Location	Type	Auspice
Johnson Youth Center Treatment Unit	Juneau, Alaska	Secure Residential	State
Washington County Juvenile Dept.	Hillsboro, Oregon	Intake/Detention/ Probation	County
Associate Marine Institutes, Youth Environmental Services (YES)	Wimauma, Florida	Staff Secure Residential	Private
Clackamas County Juvenile Dept.	Oregon City, Oregon	Intake/Detention/ Probation	County
Tompkins County Department of Social Services and Probation	Ithaca, New York	Intake/Detention/ Probation	County
The Guidance Center, Juvenile Justice Program	Southgate, Michigan	Community-Based Placement	Private

A semi-structured, open-ended interview guide was designed to elicit respondents' understanding of positive youth development and strength-based practice; their perception of when and how their program came to adopt these principles, facilitating factors and obstacles to implementation; and their awareness of formal or informal collaborative relationships with other agencies. Each respondent signed an informed consent statement and granted permission for the interview to be audio-recorded. The typical interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. (A copy of the interview guide is provided in Appendix A). In addition to the interviews, program documents were examined to see if and where strength-based, positive youth development concepts were embedded in the routine work of the program. If the agency had evaluation summaries, these were reviewed to see if there were any changes in outcomes associated with the implementation of the strength-based positive youth development programming.

Study Results

Johnson Youth Center Treatment Unit (Juneau, Alaska)

The Johnson Youth Center (JYC), operated by the Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice (ADJJ), has embarked upon a major effort to change its organizational climate from a predominately punitive correctional culture to one based on the strengths perspective and positive youth development principles. Such attempts in secure juvenile correctional facilities are rare, or at least not widely reported in the literature. The JYC transformation has been initiated by the leadership of the ADJJ—especially the Superintendent of JYC—with a view to extending it to other facilities in Alaska if it proves successful. This top-down approach has its drawbacks. Resistance from veteran staff, for example, was initially formidable. There has also been substantial staff turnover since the JYC began a training program to support the transformation, not necessarily unwelcome from the

perspective of those who support the new approach. The detention and probation components of the JYC were also slow to embrace the new perspective.

The JYC Treatment Unit is a juvenile justice complex in Juneau that includes probation, an 8-bed secure detention unit, and a 20-bed secure treatment unit. The secure treatment unit, which opened in 1999, is in a separate building at the rear of the complex. The cafeteria/gymnasium and classrooms are located in an adjacent building. The superintendent's office is by the front door of the unit. The living unit contains a large dayroom and two wide corridors with 10 single rooms each. There are comfortable tables and chairs in the dayroom and in each of the corridors. Three private offices line the dayroom: one for the unit supervisor, one for the counselor, and the third is currently vacant. A staff observation console with a small office behind it sits at the junction of the dayroom and the two corridors.

Staffing in the treatment unit consists of a superintendent (who also administers the detention unit), treatment unit supervisor, mental health counselor, three floor supervisors and seven line staff. Other staff (teachers, medical staff, etc.) serve both the detention and treatment units. The facility houses males between the ages of 15 and 18 who have been adjudicated for a variety of moderate to serious offenses such as assault, theft, robbery, arson, burglary and misconduct involving controlled substances (Heafner, 2006a). In fiscal year 2006, the treatment unit's average daily population was 16 and the average length of stay was 13 months. Approximately half of the youth were Alaska Native, 39 percent were Caucasian, and 11 percent were African American.

A new superintendent was hired at the Johnson Youth Center in late 2005, and shortly thereafter a veteran program coordinator from another ADJJ facility was enlisted to conduct a program assessment and provide technical assistance. The assessment revealed a number of problems surrounding assessment, case planning and documentation, and service brokerage with community resources (Heafner, 2006a; 2006b). Among the recommendations was that JYC introduce strength-based assessment as a key element in case planning. Accordingly, ADJJ arranged for two days of training for JYC staff to be conducted in September of 2006 by Juliette Mackin from NPC Research (Northwest Professional Consortium, Inc.). Mackin is the lead designer of the Youth Competency Assessment (YCA), a strength-based assessment protocol developed specifically for use in juvenile justice settings (Mackin, Weller & Tarte, 2004).

Mission Statement

The mission statement of the Division of Juvenile Justice is prominently displayed near the outside entrance to the treatment unit visited during this study. It is also printed on the back of staff business cards. It reflects the agency's adoption of the balanced and restorative justice framework.

The mission of the Division of Juvenile Justice is to hold juvenile offenders accountable for their behavior, promote the safety and restoration of victims and communities, and assist offenders and their families in developing skills to prevent crime.

The training was facilitated by Juliette Mackin with Michael Buttice, a juvenile services worker from Washington County, Oregon—an experienced user of the YCA. All available JYC treatment unit staff attended the training, along with the ADJJ statewide training director, a Boys & Girls Club staff member and a staff person from the Alaska School Board Association. The ADJJ director attended the opening of the training, and emphasized the division’s commitment to the strength-based approach. The training began with a didactic overview of the strengths perspective, with theoretical underpinnings based on the work of Gordon Bazemore (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Bazemore & Umbreit, 1995), Laura Nissen (Nissen et al., 1995), and the Search Institute (Scales & Leffert, 1999). After introducing and explaining the YCA itself, at the end of the first day the trainers directed the attendees to go back to the JYC and practice using the instrument.

During the next morning’s debriefing, nearly all the staff reported that they had learned something new about the youth, even those who had been at JYC for several months. Sample quotes from staff include the following:

We tend to ask them about what [crime] they did – deficit based – this tool [YCA] gives a good way to change this.

At first my kid didn’t like it, but by the end he said that he’d talked about more things about himself than he usually did, and he liked it.

The difference between the information I got and what was in the file ... will make a big difference in our relationship.

I thought I knew a lot about this kid, but I learned some new things about him.

My kid thanked me.

Participants at each table were asked to develop an intervention plan for one youth based on the information gleaned from the YCA. The suggestions were creative and appropriate, and quite different from those usually found in their case plans. For example, one youth was found to be a talented musician who liked to do research and had college aspirations. New ideas for working with him emerged, including having him teach guitar to another youth, play piano for nursing homes, do research on college opportunities, make an appointment with a guidance counselor, and volunteer at the local planetarium. [Note: JYC youth are permitted off grounds for community service activities.] Another youth had been on the high school wrestling team before being committed to JYC and had a strong relationship with his coach. During the YCA administration, he said that he felt like he let his team down. Staff ideas for him included having him contact his former

teammates to make an apology and to volunteer as a wrestling coach in the community. Staff frequently mentioned mentoring and meaningful community service as strategies that would be helpful to many of the youths.

JYC Unit Staff Meeting

All JYC unit staff from all shifts attended a meeting that was observed for the study. Chaired by the unit supervisor, the meeting began with a report of concerns from a student representative.¹ These concerns were 1) access to ice; 2) a request for hooded sweatshirts or hats for colder weather movement between the living unit and the school; 3) a request for alarm clocks for all youths on all steps (levels) of the program; and 4) reconsideration of the policy on whether or not youth could have drawings in their rooms, and if so, how many. After presenting the concerns, the student was excused. The staff then discussed these concerns for most of the meeting. Staff quickly agreed that alarm clocks should be made available for purchase on the unit to encourage independent responsibility. The other items generated considerable debate, with some staff calling attention to the congruence or incongruence between policies and the emerging strengths perspective while others focused on security and/or behavior management concerns. Near the end of the meeting, one of the staff members proposed that the monthly birthday days be considered sacred, and that the activities should be available to all youth including those who might be on behavioral restrictions at the time.² Comparing it to Christmas, this staff member wanted to start a tradition of a positive unit experience that all youth could look forward to each month. Most of the rest of the staff were opposed to this, focusing on the need to hold youth accountable. They did not reach a decision on this issue during this meeting. The discussion seemed to underscore the struggle between the newly emerging strength-based perspective and the traditional way JYC has operated.

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were held with the superintendent, unit supervisor, two floor supervisors (juvenile justice officers 3), and two other unit floor staff (one JJO 2, and one JJO 1). The interview participants reflected the range of staff ranks and experience levels at JYC.

¹ When asked, staff indicated that there are weekly student government meetings facilitated by two unit staff. Attendance is voluntary and sporadic. Concerns are then reported at staff meetings by the student representative.

² Understanding that some youth did not like to draw attention to their birthday while incarcerated, JYC staff had set aside the third Tuesday of each month as a birthday day to recognize all the youths. Birthday day celebrations typically included cake and ice cream and a movie or other evening entertainment activity.

During the individual interviews, most of the respondents were able to articulate some degree of understanding of the strength-based approach and positive youth development frameworks. Many also perceived a connection between these concepts and the principles of restorative justice. However, not all could recall the name of the strengths assessment instrument on which they had just been trained. They recognized the superintendent as the initiator or champion

of the new approach with the support of the division leadership. They also perceived that a change of this magnitude would take time, and would meet with substantial resistance from staff accustomed to doing things the old way. All of the respondents indicated that the JYC had some collaborative community partner agencies and they were generally open to expanding that list.

The superintendent expressed a strong commitment to the cultural transformation at JYC but acknowledged major challenges with some of the staff, particularly with some of the more experienced staff. Some personnel changes had already occurred, and he anticipated that more changes might occur in the near future. He viewed the strength-based approach as “trying to use the relationship skills of staff rather than the secure physical environment to affect behavior,” and was looking at revising “all policies and procedures” as necessary to be congruent with this approach. His strategy for implementing the change involved (1) the YCA training, (2) offering feedback individually to staff, (3) expecting accountability following the training, (4) moving people around as needed (e.g., moving people committed to the change into supervisory roles), and (5) periodic re-trainings to reinforce the changes. His long-term vision extended to the entire state agency, and he supported the idea of integrating the strength-based transition and aftercare process throughout Alaska.

Responses from the supervisory staff interviewed (unit supervisor and JJO 3s) indicated that they understood what had been presented at the training and were willing to try to effect changes, but only the most recently appointed staff person expressed genuine enthusiasm about the ideas, albeit coupled with some anxiety. One respondent was concerned that as a result of the announced changes some programs at the JYC could “lose the accountability portion. Staff may overlook this and because of their enthusiasm just look at strengths and become touchy-feely.” He also thought that the use of “a lot more individualized treatment plans ... will make consistency difficult.”

Measuring Outcomes

Just prior to the YCA training in 2006, a mental health consultant administered the Correctional Institutional Environment Scale (Moos 1974; 1987) to both the staff and youth.

The CIES was administered again in March and September, 2007. An analysis of staff and youth data showed significant improvement on several climate dimensions. The number of complaints and incidents at the facility also declined markedly after the introduction of the YCA, and length of stay decreased. Complete results are reported elsewhere (Barton, Mackin & Fields, 2007).

On the other hand, another was more optimistic, suggesting that the changes could result in staff “thinking outside the box ... we could implement new programs ... [such as] developing art programs. Staff members have the ability to develop rapport – this should strengthen that.” He concluded, “It’s going to be an interesting plane ride. We’re on board. I’m looking forward to it.”

Among the floor staff, one who had only recently started working on the unit exhibited a limited grasp of the strengths perspective and positive youth development. When asked for a personal definition of the term “positive youth development,” this person replied, “getting a juvenile on the right track.” This person also recognized that “It’s easy to focus on the negatives with juveniles; it’s more work to focus on the positives,” and added “the form [YCA] is kind of fake.” This respondent appeared open to the changes, but requested “more examples of how to do things strengths-based [more training].”

Another highly experienced staff member observed that “this [YCA] is like a welcoming tool—it gives us information about some positive things. We’ll include the things they tell us [about strengths] to help motivate them.” The same respondent was cautiously optimistic, acknowledging that, as a result of the changes, “we’re going to have to have more reviews of things, more staff meetings, follow-up trainings, self-evaluation,” and adding, “we have to be careful not to change too fast, but we’re headed in the right direction.”

Washington County Juvenile Department, Hillsboro Oregon

The Washington County, Oregon, Juvenile Department was one of three sites in the pilot study of the Youth Competency Assessment (YCA) instrument. Since then, the strength-based approach has permeated the culture of most of the Washington County Juvenile Department. A strong commitment from leadership, extensive training and technical assistance in use of the YCA, intentional hiring of staff who embraced the philosophy, and positive feedback in terms of youth outcomes have all contributed to the development and sustainability of the approach. At the time of the 2006 site visit for this study, the director of the juvenile department believed that the strength-based culture was stable and could be sustained through future leadership changes.

The population of Washington County, Oregon, located 30 miles west of Portland, has grown rapidly in recent years. The county is a mix of affluent suburbs, such as Beaverton and Hillsboro, and less-affluent rural areas. The juvenile department is housed along with the juvenile court in a building across the street from the county courthouse. A curved reception desk is flanked by a metal detector through which all must pass and a small waiting area with about 18 comfortable seats. A corridor leads past the courtroom to

department staff offices. Another corridor leads to conference rooms, “conciliation offices,” and more department staff offices.

The juvenile department staff has 75 full-time equivalent positions spread over six divisions. Services include:

- **Juvenile crime prevention** – This is school-based intervention with high risk youth through contracts with community agencies.
- **Admissions** – 24-hour access for law enforcement agencies, public information, crisis intervention and transport to the Donald E. Long Detention Center in Portland.³
- **Assessment** – Intake counselors conduct personal interviews with youth and parents to gather information and determine appropriate action. Options at this stage include referral to community resources, participation in early intervention (see below), or petition for a court hearing. Decisions are based on assessment of risks and strengths.
- **Early Intervention** – This includes supervision and services for youth with multiple risk factors whose offense history does not require court intervention. Services include assessment, individual case plans, intensive supervision, and cognitive skills learning.
- **Formal Court Services** – Counselors supervise youth awaiting court hearings, gather background information, prepare reports, and make recommendations to the court.
- **Probation** –
 - A field unit* provides supervision and services for youth placed on formal probation by the Juvenile Court.
 - A diversion team* provides intensive supervision and services to youth on formal probation and at high risk of commitment to a youth correctional facility. Some of these youth are at home; others are in residential placements.
 - Breaking the Cycle* is a program for youth involved in sex offenses.
- **Substance Abuse Options and Alternatives Program** – For youth referred for drugs or alcohol, a program coordinator and counselor provide a graduated range of sanctions and services including assessment, education, parent support, and referral to community resources for treatment. The program includes a drug court component.
- **Community Service** – A range of opportunities to perform community service work at a variety of nonprofit sites and on supervised work crews is provided. Some youth earn credit that translates into direct payment of restitution to victims.

³ Washington County does not have its own secure detention center. It contracts with neighboring Multnomah County (Portland) for a small number (14) of secure beds.

- **Victim Services** – Information and support to victims are provided, with a focus on restitution and victim rights.
- **Pre-trial Supervision: Detention, Shelter Evaluation, Home Detention** – Alternatives to secure detention (contracted beds in Multnomah County) including a non-secure shelter and home detention.
- **Juvenile Day Reporting** – Operated by Lifeworks Northwest, this contracted program supervises 20 youth on probation or parole. Program elements include supervision in afternoon and evening hours, cognitive skills learning, education and vocational support, parent participation, and treatment through community resources.
- **Conciliation Services** – These services assist parents in conflict over child custody and parenting time.

Individual Interviews

Researchers conducted individual interviews with the director of the juvenile department, the director of the department's substance abuse program, a juvenile counselor in the substance abuse program, the assessment counselor, and a juvenile services manager with the shelter program. A joint interview was conducted with two juvenile counselors at the shelter.

The infusion the strength-based approach in the juvenile department began shortly after the director of the department learned about the Youth Competency Assessment at a conference in 2001. As part of a pilot study with Portland-based NPC Research, the staff was trained in using the Youth Competency Assessment in addition to using risk/needs assessments as an aid to developing case plans.

The department incorporated a modified version of the YCA into its standard assessment procedures, and training in strengths assessment was integrated into the department's standard staff orientation process. During the site visit for this study, the director of the

Mission Statement

A formal statement of the Departmental "vision" is displayed in the public waiting area of the building in Hillsboro, Oregon.

At the Washington County Juvenile Department individual differences and contributions are respected and valued. We acknowledge the goodwill of others and are committed to working together to create a safe environment where all members are heard and conflict is addressed in a productive manner.

Reports and brochures distributed by the Department describe the agency's purpose: ("Increase responsible behavior among youth") as well as its core values:

- Respect for persons
- Public safety
- Responsibility and accountability
- Individual needs of youth and families
- Parent and family involvement
- Interests of victims of crime
- Prevention and Early Intervention
- Learning and development
- Partnership with the Community
- Research and evaluation

Source: Washington County Juvenile Department, 2006, pp. 2-3).

department reported that most programs had adopted the strength-based approach, including the shelter (along with Moral Reconciliation Therapy), the substance abuse and drug court program, the assessment unit, the sex offender unit, and the court program in its case planning. The field probation unit appeared to be least supportive of using the YCA.

Most respondents interviewed in Washington County expressed a general, but sound understanding of strength-based assessment and case planning, and believed that they and others in the department implemented such practices. When asked what the term *strength-based* meant to them, typical responses included:

It's a philosophy, a mindset, part of who we are, how we talk to each other, create a work environment ... all part of this philosophy.

A way to work with people, respectful, collaborative, assist clients to become what they are capable of, assist them in accessing strengths and using those to develop the case plan ... seeing people as people, not a charge

Looking at a youth not so much in a punitive way ... but to find interests and things they do well and incorporate those

We build on the things they do well, even if it's something negative that they do well, we try to refocus it

Strengths-based means acknowledging that every person has some strengths within them ... and their environment. Strengths-based approaches allow us to uncover those.

Most respondents identified the director of the department as the principal champion of the strength-based approach, and credited him with using a parallel style of empowerment management. In the words of one respondent, "[The director] is an incredible strength-based director, empowers and supports staff." The substance abuse program director indicated that the approach mirrored what she had been trying to do all along, and she has become a strong advocate, even becoming a conference co-presenter with NPC researchers. She described how the approach had influenced aspects of the substance abuse program, including helping youth to see a positive future for themselves, breaking down goals for youth into doable and developmentally appropriate steps, matching community service to youth skills, supporting restitution, providing scholarships for college, arranging internships in the community, and having program youth serve on advisory committees in the community.

Other examples of strength-based practices were mentioned by respondents, including the following:

- Having a small pool of funds to pay for things that promote positive youth development (e.g., riding lessons for a youth interested in horses; guitar lessons)
- Working with a vocational education program's business track for a girl whose dream is to be a business owner
- Arranging for a ride-along with a police officer for a youth who is interested in law enforcement as a potential career
- Internships in culinary training

One of the key factors that seemed to facilitate the development of strength-based practices, in the view of the department director, was the general attitude of the staff, which he described as “historically conducive” to the approach.

He also cited the culture of the community that tends to look at people as resources. Judges have also been supportive of the strengths approach to social services.

In addition to crediting the director, other respondents noted the department's extensive community partnerships, its support of staff training, the availability of flexible funds, intentional hiring of staff who embrace a strength-based approach, and the value of ongoing feedback from data systems that show the effectiveness of the department's efforts. As one respondent said, “We've had a positive impact in the community and you see it in the data.” Added another, “Counselors are seeing that it works ... makes the job more fun and satisfying.”

Of course, the department has also encountered obstacles. The director admitted that “it's a little fuzzy what strengths-based programming really is. It takes a lot of energy, time, explanation, and tolerance to integrate strength-based practices throughout the system.” He and other respondents noted occasional objections from some law enforcement officers, some school officials, and one of the county's two deputy district attorneys. One

Measuring Outcomes

Delinquency referrals to the Washington County Juvenile Department have declined in recent years. The rate of delinquency referrals (per thousand youth population) dropped from 48 per thousand in 1998 to 30 per thousand in 2005.

National statistics show declining rates of juvenile justice involvement in much of the country during this period, but the magnitude of the decline in Washington County was strong.

By 2004, the rate of delinquency petitions (i.e., formal charges) in Washington County (9 per thousand youth population) was substantially lower than in any of the other large counties in Oregon, including Clackamas (13 per thousand), Lane (15 per thousand), Marion (36 per thousand), or Multnomah (15 per thousand) (Stahl, Livsey, & Kang, 2007).

Washington County also made stronger gains in reducing youth recidivism compared with the state as a whole. Recidivism in 2004 (defined as a subsequent delinquency referral within one year of the initial referral) was 26% in Washington County compared with 31% statewide. This represents an improvement over 1997 when the figure for one-year recidivism was 37% in Washington County versus 38% statewide.

Source: Washington County Juvenile Department, unless otherwise noted.

shelter staff respondent also mentioned that the short-term nature of the program made it difficult to develop a sufficiently close relationship with youth and cited the lack of transition programming (aftercare) as an impediment. Another referred to high staff turnover and limited opportunities to reinforce the approach beyond the initial training, especially with staff who work the later shifts. Finally, one said that it was “hard to identify appropriate community linkages for all kids [because the] rural parts of the county have limited resources and accessibility.”

[AMI YES Program, Wimauma, Florida](#)

Associated Marine Institutes (AMI) is a large, nonprofit organization, with headquarters in Tampa, Florida, that operates 59 juvenile services programs in several states. Some are residential programs and some are day programs. AMI also runs Infinity programs in Florida that serve school board youth, not necessarily adjudicated youth. About half of the AMI programs are in the state of Florida.

Youth Environmental Services (YES) is a staff-secure residential program serving up to 33 adjudicated, moderate-risk males (defined as youths with third degree or higher felonies with prior commitments or a history of assault) between the ages of 14 and 18. It is located in Wimauma, Florida, in Hillsborough County, about 40 miles south of Tampa. It is currently rated by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) as the best residential contract service provider in the state. The average length of stay for youth in the program is six to nine months.

AMI employs an intervention model for all its programs that it calls the *Unified Approach* (UA). The model was developed by two employees of the organization. There are three major components of the model: education, treatment, and behavior modification. Each component contains elements drawn from research literature. The treatment component includes assessment of risk and protective factors and targets factors for change through the use of cognitive behavioral programming and motivational interviewing. The education component includes individualized computer-assisted instruction, the typical curricular areas, and special education support. The behavior modification component consists of an elaborate point system and rank system (to be described in more detail below). The model attempts to link the three components synergistically. Descriptions of the model obtained from AMI also mention its reliance on a strengths perspective, along with reality therapy and an emphasis on family work, although these are not core elements.

The YES program is in a relatively rural part of Hillsborough County. The physical setting consists of one-story, rectangular wood buildings surrounding an outdoor basketball court and exercise equipment area. The buildings include an administration

building, a science and computer lab, a large-group meeting space, a shop building, a kitchen/dining building, and several classrooms and living units.

Program Tour

Our tour guide was one of the program youths who had reached the second-highest rank. Our tour began in the large-group building. Every day begins with a large group meeting, and the building is also used for afternoon group sessions (e.g., Thinking for a Change, tai-chi, meditation, aerobics) and for Saturday night movies on a big-screen TV. The room also contained a somewhat beat-up foosball table. The mission statement, rules, and other announcements are prominently posted on the side walls. The front wall displays photos of all the youth ordered by rank and point card status (explained in more detail below). Senior youth are paired with junior youth and act as dorm mentors.

Mission Statement

YES is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping troubled youth develop into responsible and productive citizens. YES's mission is to protect the public and positively impact as many youth as possible without compromising our standards of effectiveness. YES works in partnership with the Department of Juvenile Justice, other youth agencies, local communities, and individual families.

Much of the available space in each living unit is occupied by nine double bunks, with attached shower/bathroom facilities. The beds are arranged in two rows, and there are obvious differences in mattress thickness. As youth achieve more advanced ranks, they are rewarded with more comfortable mattresses. There is a small table at one end for the unit staff, a large TV and bookshelves containing just a few books.

Classrooms are small. During the site visit for this study, we observed math, English, science, and history classes underway, and there were between four and ten youth in each classroom. Whenever visitors enter a class in session, classroom activity stops immediately and the youth get up and individually greet each visitor, stating his name, shaking hands, and saying "Nice to meet you." Classroom activity may then resume.

As we toured the kitchen/dining building, our guide said that the youth take turns assisting the cook with food preparation. Three-person crews changed each week.

We noticed a group of youth marching and shouting out an improvised cadence as they moved from one building to another. We were told that the youth always march when they move between buildings. The marching and the policy that all new students must shave their heads until they reach the sixth of seven ranks are elements typically found in a boot-camp approach. However, nothing else about the atmosphere of the program resembled a boot camp. For example, staff never yell at or berate the youth.

Our tour guide explained the elaborate rank and point systems. The lowest rank, for incoming students, is called *recruit*, followed by *tenderfoot*, *scout*, *brave*, *ranger*, *chief*, and, *graduate*. Promotions in rank can be earned and requested by the youth, who must

not only perform consistently well in the daily point system, but also complete special essays. Essay topics include “how my crimes affected my family,” “plans for when I leave the program,” “consequences of my crimes,” “things you appreciate that you didn’t before,” and “apology letter to the victim(s).” An apology letter is required to reach the graduate rank, and a copy is included in each youth’s file. Attainment of the rank of ranger means that a youth can begin a 60-day transition (reentry) program.

Points are constantly awarded by staff for small acts. A youth receives two points for any behavior that meets expectations, three points for behavior that exceeds expectations, and one point for behavior that fails to meet expectations. At the end of each week, the youth receives a colored card: blue if he has received mostly 3s, white if he has received mostly 2s and red if he has received mostly 1s. The card colors are used to determine privileges or penalties for the week, such as the length of telephone calls, lights-out time, and eligibility for movies or occasional off-campus events (such as games of the nearby National Football League team, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers). A youth who acquires three 1s in a day receives an immediate work detail. In addition to these points, staff can award bid points, extra reward points that can be exchanged weekly for snacks, special toiletries, batteries, etc. Youth receive a detailed handbook that outlines this behavior modification system.

The YES program includes a Youth Advisory Board, made up of the more advanced-rank youth, who can make suggestions for program or facilities improvements. One practical suggestion emerging from the Youth Advisory Board was to install a screen around an exercise equipment area to deter insects during warm weather.

YES employs 27 staff members: six administrative staff (executive director, director of operations, case manager, mental health therapist, and administrative assistants), two shift supervisors, two cooks, a vocational instructor, a lead teacher, four teachers, a special education support person, and ten direct-line staff. Teachers also provide supervision to youth in the living units during part of the day. Each staff member is assigned to be the lead/advisory staff for three youth, and serve as the primary program liaison with their families as well. The treatment team for each youth consists of the lead teacher, counselor (advisory staff), mental health counselor, the director of operations, and the case manager. Treatment teams meet monthly, and also respond to requests for promotions in rank.

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with the executive director, operations director, case manager, lead teacher, and clinical director. All respondents seemed highly enthusiastic about the YES program, expressed a genuine caring for the youth, and were able to describe the importance of the *Unified Approach*, evidence-based programming,

and the program's behavioral management system. The executive director, who had been with AMI for 10 years and director of YES for 6 years, said that the program had always operated as it does now, but that the *Unified Approach* gave staff terminology to more clearly describe what they do. The clinical director noted the same thing. Most respondents valued the role of central AMI administration in developing the *Unified Approach*, and some noted that AMI had done this in response to increased pressure from the state juvenile justice agency for quality assurance, use of evidence-based programming, and accountability for outcomes.

The clinical director, in particular, explained the importance of the behavioral management component, stating that "a strong foundation of behavior management allows the other aspects of the program to occur." He cited the stability of staff and the strong vocational and educational components as strengths of the program. He also mentioned that the absence of a fence helped to foster self-control among the youth because they know it is their choice to stay or leave, and that leaving brings negative consequences.

Several respondents indicated that they and other staff were highly committed to the program. The lead teacher said "Everybody here cares about children. We have staff who come in early, stay late, and come in on weekends." Others noted that they brought their own children with them on weekends to interact with the program youth.

None of the respondents was familiar with the term *positive youth development*. When asked what the term meant to them, several mentioned aspects of the behavioral management system, e.g., "having to do with the growth of a youth using positive reinforcers;" "What we do different is we do positive reinforcement."

Other comments were at least congruent with the concept of positive youth development, even if the person was unaware of the origins of the idea. For example, one person suggested that the YES program focused on, "getting a student thinking in a positive way ... surround him with positive people doing positive things;" "pulling the best out of the kids to enhance strengths." Some respondents were slightly more familiar with strength-based concepts. When asked to define the term, staff responses included, "utilizing a student's strengths, vocational, academic, artistic, to develop those areas to wean him away from negatives," and "positive reinforcement based on the gifts they bring, not deficit-based."

Others responses were a bit wide of the mark and respondents were clearly improvising. One staff member asked to clarify the meaning of strength-based practice observed that "we are progress-based." "Our job is to find out the needs and strengthen him."

When asked what specific trainings staff had received regarding positive youth development or strength-based practice, most mentioned AMI trainings related to assessments and the *Unified Approach*. One mentioned receiving training in motivational interviewing, a technique sometimes associated with strength-based practice, and another mentioned training in adolescent development. One of the assessment tools used by YES (and other DJJ providers) is the PACT (Positive Assessment Change Tool), derived from the Washington State model. The PACT is intended to highlight a youth's criminogenic needs, but is notable for its explicit inclusion of protective factors. Respondents did not indicate that YES staff developed individually tailored service plans from this or other assessments, although one said that he kept a "cheat sheet" with him that lists each youth's individual interests.

The YES program appeared to have relatively few collaborative relationships with other agencies. Respondents mentioned collaboration with DJJ, since YES operates through a contract with DJJ. The Hillsborough School District provided funding for the educational component and provided additional special education support. Some churches provided volunteers. Other entities, such as the Sun City Retirement Community and the Hillsborough County Parks and Recreation Department, and the Chamber of Commerce served as sites where youth could perform their community service. The Tampa Bay AIDS network provided training for YES staff and students.

YES is a well-run residential program serving moderately high-risk males. All indications are that it is a strong program. Despite the residual trimmings, YES does not fit the stereotypical boot camp model because the atmosphere for youth appears to be relatively relaxed. During the visit for this study, we observed interactions among youth and between youth and staff that were calm and respectful.

Measuring Outcomes

AMI produces an annual recidivism report covering all of its programs, permitting an examination of trends over several years. Recidivism is defined as "any adjudicated (convicted) new law violation within either the juvenile or adult system within one year following release from the program...."

The youth cohort included in the 2006 report included youths released between July 1, 2002 and June 30, 2004. The recidivism figure for YES has fluctuated around an average of 43 percent since 1997. In 2005 the figure was 54 percent and in 2006 it was 50 percent (Kritch, 2006).

The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice produces an annual evaluation summary of its contracted programs. A recent report included data for several years beginning with Fiscal Year 2000-2001. According to this document, the YES recidivism figure is traditionally at or below the statewide average for moderate-risk males.

The DJJ report shows YES recidivism averaging about 42 percent, with higher rates in FY 2002-03 and 2003-04, matching the data from AMI. In FY 2004-05, recidivism among YES youth dropped to 30 percent.

The DJJ report rates programs on contract compliance, substantiated incident rates, and quality assurance. On all indicators, the AMI YES is rated excellent or above average.

Source: Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, Quality Assurance Indicators for YES.

From our review of case records, YES also documents its work in great detail. All aspects of the educational and behavioral programming are carefully noted and compiled. The *Unified Approach* is a recent addition, but it appears to be congruent with historical staff attitudes and practices. Although the model includes strength-based elements, these do not seem to have permeated the culture of the entire program.

Several aspects of the program would appear to be consistent with the positive youth development perspective, although the staff does not explicitly recognize them as such. Among the characteristics of settings that promote positive youth development, the YES program is strong on physical and psychological safety, structure, supportive relationships, opportunity for youth belonging, positive social norms, and opportunity for youth skill building. Like other residential programs, the YES program may not be as strong in providing youth with support for efficacy, empowerment, autonomy, and the integration of family, school, and community efforts. Although families are permitted to visit, not all live within easy reach of the program site and the program does not seem to emphasize partnering with parents. The program has some links to the community in terms of service opportunities, but it could do more to encourage two-way partnerships with community agencies to enhance programming and experiential opportunities. Given the organizational culture of YES and AMI, conditions seem to be favorable for a more intentional focus on strengths and positive youth development.

[Clackamas County Juvenile Services Department, Oregon City, Oregon](#)

Like the Washington County program, the Clackamas County Juvenile Department was one of three sites that participated in the YCA pilot project run by NPC Research. The department is located in Oregon City, about 20 miles southeast of Portland, and is housed along with the juvenile court in a small building tucked behind other county offices and the main courthouse. Visitors to the juvenile department pass through a metal detector to get to a small waiting area with a reception desk behind a glass partition. A door leads past a courtroom to department staff offices.

The staff includes nearly 50 full-time positions, including the director and three supervisors. Most of the direct-service employees are counselors, deployed over several units:

- Probation services (19 FTE).
- Intake and Assessment Center (6.5 FTE). The center provides 24-hour access for law enforcement agencies, public information, and crisis intervention. When secure

detention is required, the sheriff's office provides transportation to the Donald E. Long Detention Center in Portland.⁴

- Diversion services (3 FTE).
- Dependency (1 FTE).

In addition to ten administrative staff, other staff members include a drug court coordinator, a tracker, and two human service coordinators, one that develops and delivers intervention curricula and one that coordinates community service placements.

Individual Interviews

During the site visit for this study, interviews were held with the director of the department, two supervisors, two human service coordinators, and four probation counselors. It was clear from these interviews that the strength-based perspective is integral to the culture of the department, in part due to staff involvement in the YCA pilot project conducted by NPC Research. The multi-year pilot included extensive training and technical assistance, along with the collection of process and outcome data to support the NPC evaluation of the implementation and the effect of the YCA on departmental practices.

Since that time, the items in the YCA have been incorporated into the Clackamas Juvenile Department's initial assessment protocol, which also includes an assessment of risks and needs. All of the department's paperwork, from action plans to court reports (called reformation plans), explicitly reference strength-based elements derived from the assessment. Several interview respondents indicated that staff participation in the pilot project marked the introduction of strength-based practice into the agency, but that most of the staff had already been operating that way previously without having the terminology to make it explicit. As the director noted, "It [strength-based practice] fit my personal and our staff's philosophy." Or, as one of the supervisors said, "Folks already had this balanced approach; when we started with [NPC Research], it put a new label and focus on it."

Mission Statement

It is the mission of the Clackamas County Juvenile Department to provide fair and just sanctions to juvenile offenders, to protect the community from the criminal actions of juvenile offenders, and to hold offenders responsible for their actions and accountable for the consequences of those actions.

The Department's mission statement does not contain language promoting positive youth development or strengths. The statement focuses on the public safety protection and accountability dimensions of the balanced approach (Maloney, Romig, & Armstrong, 1988), without mentioning the competency development dimension.

Source: Brochure obtained from the Clackamas County Juvenile Department.

⁴ Clackamas County does not have its own secure detention center and does not operate a nonsecure shelter program. Like Washington County, it contracts with neighboring Multnomah County (Portland) for a small number (14) of secure beds and contracts with local providers for shelter beds as needed.

All interview respondents were able to articulate the strength-based philosophy clearly, as the sample comments below indicate:

Strengths-based is working with children and youth in a way that builds on their strengths in making positive change instead of focusing on problems and risks.

Supporting, reinforcing, even developing positive, prosocial activities or involvement for youth in several domains—school, family, community.

Helping the adolescent develop based on their positive attributes rather than focusing on the negative things.

Capitalizing on what they take an interest in—sports, vocational area, art or you name it. Also, help them identify things they didn't even know they were interested in.

Positive youth development, on the other hand, was an unfamiliar term to most interview respondents (“It’s not a term we use a lot in this county.” “We don’t use that term.”) When asked what the term meant, most replied with a description of the strength-based approach. A few respondents, however, were able to connect the concept to the Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets. According to one respondent, “The developmental assets, both internal and external, boost their self-esteem, involvement in the community for positive outcomes.” None of the respondents was able to identify a specific model of positive youth development

Few respondents were able to name a specific strength-assessment instrument used by the department (e.g., the YCA). It seemed as if the department had internalized the strength-based approach so thoroughly and had developed procedures based upon the approach so systematically that many staff members see the strengths approach and the assessment tools it requires as simply how they do their work. The historical details are forgotten.

Some staff members recognize that the department’s participation in the NPC pilot was the key event that ushered in the strength-based perspective, and most see the director and one or more supervisors as the champions of the approach. Beginning with commitment from the top, the department seized upon the opportunity to participate in the NPC pilot project. A volunteer committee met frequently and became familiar with the strength-based approach, began using it, worked out the kinks, and then served as cheerleaders and internal trainers for the rest of the staff. As the director noted, “Peer staff support was critical [to making the change happen].”

Being a pilot site in the NPC Research project supported the change. Several respondents mentioned the value of being able to discuss what was working and what needed further development with colleagues from the other participating counties. The department even continued to provide training opportunities after the pilot had been completed. Often, these trainings were mandatory. Individual staff members were also encouraged to seek out additional training opportunities to reinforce these practices and the department offered to cover the costs.

The Clackamas County Juvenile Department appears to have accomplished a major cultural change. The staff embraced the strength-based approach and then reengineered its policies and procedures accordingly. As described by one supervisor:

[We focus on strengths] from the very beginning in the intake session, developing relationships with parents. In the reformation plan we have sections on repairing harm and community connections. Consistent through informal conditions of probation ... [and] action plans – all look at interests, involvement and repairing harm.

In the words of one counselor:

It starts at the very first interview. I don't even address the charge. After explaining the department, I start with what's been going right. [This] establishes rapport, families get engaged and empowered. Everything I do, all my paperwork, court reports are strength-based. Everything is positive-negative-positive.

A supervisor noted:

In case reviews we're always asking about what positive things or interests the kid has – music, sports, animals. We encourage kids to get jobs, not just to earn to pay restitution or fines, but as an opportunity for a kid to be successful. A paycheck is an acknowledgement, an affirmation [that the youth has done something successfully].

Some staff members were reportedly not eager at first to adopt the changes, but the immediate and positive feedback they received in the form of less conflict with youth and families—and apparent decreases in recidivism—eventually convinced them.

As one counselor noted:

I've seen a decrease in probation violations, a decrease in placements out of the home and a decrease in recidivism.

By the time of the site visit, the cultural change appeared to be nearly complete. When asked, our interview respondents indicated that most agency practices were in alignment with the strength-based approach. It is simply the way the department operates now.

One supervisor observed:

As management, I've taken it [the strength-based philosophy] to a management style as well, to engage staff and becoming more solution-focused.

Another counselor said:

Partly it was force-fed from leadership. A deadline was set. [We] changed the paperwork to become strength-based Reviews with supervisors became strength-based. Good counselors have always been doing some strength-based things, so this gave them license. It's the fun part of what we do.

In the words of another:

Our management being on board [helped]—the trainings, the process of working through committees to [work with] the rest of the staff and other agencies.

According to another counselor:

I don't know how we could do our job without it [the strength-based approach]. It's just the right way to do juvenile justice, the right way to work with youth and families.

Other than recognizing that change doesn't happen overnight, and that some staff took longer than others to get on board, the interview respondents did not list many obstacles to the implementation of the strength-based approach. Although the sex offender unit appeared to be less eager to adopt the perspective than the other service units, and there was some initial resistance from schools, the court, and the district attorney, now it seems that the court is fully supportive and the department's relationship with the schools has improved. Only the district attorney's office remains skeptical.

One respondent mentioned that some families were initially resistant. "It throws families over the edge because they're defensive and want the department to solve their kids' problems." On the other hand, most respondents said that the strength-based approach works well with families. It involves them in setting goals and action plans, and the initial strength-based assessment shows them that their kids have positive qualities and interests

and that, despite problems, the families do some things well. This engagement carries over into the case plans as well when families are given assignments such as “do something fun together as a family this week.”

As it pursues full implementation of the strength-based approach, the juvenile department has also had to broaden its partnerships. The department has developed deeper relationships with community agencies, in addition to the expected ones with other public agencies (law enforcement, child welfare, the Oregon Youth Authority, etc.). Some of the key collaborations mentioned by staff included Habitat for Humanity, the Environmental Youth Corps, the Humane Society, Todos Juntos (an outreach group for Hispanic youth and families), Gleaners, Kiwanis Club, various faith organizations, and local chambers of commerce.

Many of these partners serve as sites for youth community service activities. The department has one staff person who arranges community service placements from a service learning perspective. Assignments are based on current or potential interests of youth. Several respondents described these placements by contrasting them with stereotypical community service hours spent doing trash pickup. Youth sometimes even continue volunteering with agencies after completing their community service.

As one supervisor noted:

It’s easy to sign up a kid for community service—[it] takes a little more energy to make it strengths-based, but the benefits are much greater because it’s self-sustaining.

The department’s community connections coordinator added:

I can’t begin to describe what I’m hearing from the kids. [For example, regarding a Habitat for Humanity placement, a youth said] “this is the most significant thing I’ve ever done.”

In contrast, some counselors do not directly identify or engage community partners to become involved with youth. The preferred approach for these counselors is to give youth the “homework assignment” of identifying and approaching relevant community

Measuring Outcomes

Despite a growing county population, delinquency referrals to the Clackamas County Juvenile Department have declined in recent years.

Between 1998 and 2006, the number of youth referred for delinquency charges dropped from 3,573 to 2,447.

Recidivism, defined as the proportion of youth referred for new delinquency charges within one year, was relatively stable at around 30 percent between 1996 and 2001. It then dropped steadily, reaching 22 percent in 2004, the lowest rate in the state.

Source: Clackamas County Juvenile Department.

resources themselves. This suggests the department still has some work to do in fully implementing the strength-based approach.

Department of Social Services and Department of Probation and Community Justice, Tompkins County, New York

Ithaca and Tompkins County in upstate New York are dominated by the presence of Cornell University and Ithaca College. The county's population is approximately 100,000, with about half residing in Ithaca. The Tompkins County Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Tompkins County Department of Probation and Community Justice are co-located in a large office building in Ithaca.

According to the laws of the state of New York, the juvenile court exercises original jurisdiction for all criminal law violations by children until they reach their sixteenth birthday. In 2005, the state modified its laws and raised the maximum age for juvenile court jurisdiction for PINS (Persons in Need of Supervision, or status offenses) from 16 to 18, and it required the development of diversion services.

The probation department serves all youth placed on probation for delinquency or status offenses, but it also coordinates diversion services for youth identified as PINS and for youth designated by schools as being at risk (or pre-PINS), although these services are voluntary.

The staff of the probation department includes more than 40 positions spread across six units. The family court unit deals with juvenile justice and child welfare matters. The supervisor of the unit oversees two senior probation officers and four probation officers. Each officer is responsible for 35 to 50 youth. The probation department views its services as making up a continuum from voluntary pre-PINS, to PINS diversion, PINS adjudication, delinquency diversion, and delinquency adjudication.

Referrals for pre-PINS services come from schools or parents concerned with a youth's truancy or minor behavioral issues that seem to indicate a pattern. Pre-PINS services begin with a team meeting including the youth, school staff, parents, a probation officer, and a member of the Community Dispute Resolution Center (CDRC) who acts as a mediator. The team creates a plan to address the behavior of concern, building on family strengths and including community resources as needed. The program typically lasts three to six weeks.

PINS diversion services are more formal, not voluntary, and are generally intended to keep youth from entering the family court system. PINS Diversion services operate much like the Pre-PINS program, beginning with a team meeting for planning and regular supervision as long as needed. PINS adjudication requires a court petition, and can only

be filed in consultation with a probation officer. These services are more formal, and have specified terms of six months to two years.

Delinquency diversion cases result from police issuing an appearance ticket to youth for the commission of a delinquent act. Tickets are used for first-time, lower- to middle-level offenses. All five interested parties (police, parents, probation, victim, and child) have to agree to give the youth a chance at diversion, which usually consists of two to four months of probation supervision with stipulations. If all five parties do not agree to diversion, if the offense was more serious, or if the youth had an extensive prior history with the probation department, the case is typically petitioned to court. Youth who are adjudicated delinquent may be placed on probation for six months to two years.

A designated assessment system (DAS) is used for every PINS intake. The DAS includes a team of staff from county social services, probation, and mental health as well as members of the family. The intake assessment interview process done by social services or probation staff incorporates items from the Youth Competency Assessment (YCA). The DSS (probation) representative conducts this assessment interview. Following the assessment, the team gives feedback to the probation officer and if the family is open for preventive or foster care services at DSS, DSS develops a Family Assessment Service Plan (FASP), which specifically includes a strength-based section.

Tompkins County has created a Single Point of Accountability (SPOA), a community-based group that convenes to address specific families as needed. SPOA is coordinated by the Youth Advocates Program (YAP, which is a separate community agency) and includes representatives from social services, probation, parent advocates, schools, law enforcement, guardians ad litem, and family members. The SPOA group uses the CANS assessment (Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths) along with a YAP strengths assessment, and brainstorms with families regarding what community resources could be accessed for each youth. SPOA meets weekly, with two slots available each week.

Mission Statement

The Tompkins County Department of Social Services displays its mission statement in the lobby of its offices:

To efficiently provide benefits and services for the residents of Tompkins County that both care for those unable to meet their needs, and encourage opportunities for independence.

The mission of the Tompkins County Department of Probation and Community Justice is described in the Department's 2005 Annual Report:

It is the mission of this Probation Department to provide the community with mandated and voluntary criminal and family court services which reduce reliance on incarceration and the courts by attempting to access factors, monitor behaviors, and facilitate the rehabilitation of individuals, in a manner which promotes personal responsibility, improved family functioning, and public safety.

Source: Tompkins County, New York

In recent years, New York had engaged in a statewide effort to have all its juvenile justice agencies use a common assessment instrument, the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI™). The Tompkins County probation and social services departments, however, both opposed the use of the YASI, arguing that it was not sufficiently strength-based. They searched for alternative assessments, and discovered the Youth Competency Assessment. The county then engaged NPC Research in Portland, Oregon to provide training to staff from both departments.

Individual Interviews

As part of this study, individual interviews were held with four staff members from the social services department (the director of children's services, a case supervisor of youth and family services, a senior case manager who serves as a liaison between the department and contract providers, and another senior case manager responsible for intake and assessment) and three staff members from the probation and community justice department (the supervisor of the family court probation unit, a probation officer who runs the pre-PINS program, and another probation officer who handles a regular caseload).

All interview respondents were able to articulate a clear understanding of strength-based practice. Sample comments included the following:

Working with a person's strengths and resources to help them grow.

Identifying family strengths and needs, and using the strengths to help them develop coping skills and achieve positive outcomes.

Pulling out what someone excels at or something that they like to do, or their strengths as a family, and using them to develop their service plan and goals.

Strength-based means to look at what the youth has going for them that is positive and try to build off of that, using youth's current resources and maybe adding to them.

Strength-based means that you try to work off of what the client brings to you—build on their strengths, family and community resources.

On the other hand, most were unfamiliar with the term positive youth development. When asked what that term meant to them, typical responses were either a good definition of the strengths perspective, or a long pause (e.g., "Well, I would say [pause] this is a tough one"), followed by a comment such as: "Doesn't mean that much to me—haven't heard it before." A few responses came close, such as: "Giving young people an

opportunity to focus on positive attributes to be successful and to promote healthy development within a community context.”

All respondents indicated that these Tompkins County departments, especially social services, have operated from a strengths perspective for a long time. Most acknowledged the commissioner of social services, the probation director, and the director of children’s services as being the champions of the strength-based approach.

Nearly all credited the general Ithaca culture as being most responsible for facilitating the adoption of the strengths perspective. Sample comments included the following:

This is a very strengths-based county.

Ithaca just seems to have a different mentality. [It’s the] influence of the university and who the county is made up of. We have a lot of resources available.

I think it’s just the philosophy that happens here. We’re a college-based area ... progressive thinking.

In addition to the general community culture and leadership within the departments, other facilitating factors were noted as well:

- A statewide push to develop community-based alternatives to residential placements
- The statewide evaluation and technical assistance involvement of the Vera Institute in promoting the use of evidence-based practices
- The availability of resources and community-based programs
- The PINS reform legislation noted above
- Support from the judiciary
- Trainings in strength-based practice

Respondents had difficulty in identifying obstacles or challenges to implementing strength-based practice. Among the few mentioned were:

- The County Attorney (prosecutor)
- Victims and victim advocates

Measuring Outcomes

Between 1998 and 2004, the rate of cases handled by the juvenile court in Tompkins County dropped from 21.5 cases per thousand youth to 15.1 cases per thousand youth, a decline of 30 percent.

The decline in the number of delinquency cases from Tompkins County outpaced the state of New York as whole. The rate of delinquency cases statewide fell 26 percent between 1998 and 2004, from 19.2 to 14.3 per thousand youth.

Source: Stahl, Livsey, and Kang (2007).

- Schools and mental health agencies that operate from a different perspective
- Some parents want a more punitive approach

Several respondents commented that one challenge of strength-based practice was the amount of time and effort required to do it well:

It's definitely time consuming. You have to put some thought into it. You have to meet with the families, get engaged, and have collateral contacts.

The paperwork – the volume of cases.

Despite the close working relationship between social services and probation, several respondents acknowledged that the two did not always agree. For example, a social services respondent said, “Probation feels that they have an obligation to inform the court about probation violations.” A probation department respondent noted, “Sometimes we clash with DSS because we look at different aspects.”

In addition to that close working relationship, interview respondents mentioned the importance of other formal and informal relationships among agencies in the county. These included schools, courts, Good Hope Detention in Mecklenburg, New York (Tompkins County contracts with them for two nonsecure beds), county mental health, police, hospitals, the Greater Ithaca Activities Center, the Southside Community Center, the Mental Health Association, the Day Care Council, Franziska Racker Centers (for special needs children), the William George Agency (which was a residential provider for delinquents and now operates on-campus school and afterschool services for high-risk boys), the New York Office of Family and Children, the Learning Web (a Cornell program providing internships for youth), the Youth Advocacy Program (YAP), Dispositional Alternatives Program (DAP), Therapeutic After School Program (TAP), Liberty Resources (provides multisystemic therapy), Community Dispute Resolution Center (family mediation services), and Bridges (works with runaways, crisis counseling, host homes and also provides Anger Replacement Training).

[The Guidance Center – Juvenile Justice Program, Southgate, Michigan](#)

The Guidance Center (GC) is a large private, nonprofit agency in Southgate, Michigan that offers a variety of intervention and prevention programming for children, youth, and families. Southgate is in southwestern Wayne County, downriver from Detroit. The area historically has been home to auto workers, and is predominantly white and lower middle class. The Guidance Center operates about 40 programs and has more than 600 employees. Among the services provided are outpatient mental health services, substance abuse counseling, early childhood education, developmental disabilities programs, family

resource centers, supported employment, and juvenile justice interventions. The Juvenile Justice (JJ) Program is one of the Guidance Center's larger programs, accounting for about 10 percent of the agency's revenues.

In Wayne County, juvenile justice programs are coordinated by Bridgeway, a case management organization that receives referrals from the juvenile court and subcontracts with the Guidance Center and another agency to provide services to the youth based on their geographic catchment areas. These are youth who have been adjudicated, placed as wards of the county, and assessed by a Juvenile Assessment Center. The GC Juvenile Justice Program staff consists of a program manager, administrative assistant, 2 supervisors, 13 juvenile justice specialists (JJS), 3 therapists, and 6 program assistants. The JJS workers function as probation officers, and provide case management to three types of youth: those in county-based residential programs (including aftercare), those on probation, and those placed in the community (a more restrictive disposition than regular probation). The program has grown in recent years, now serving an average of 250 to 300 youth. The average length of stay in the program has increased to nearly two years.

Recently, the agency's director of children's services drafted a proposal to incorporate positive youth development into the juvenile justice program through the introduction of strength-based collaborations with youth and families and asset-building service components. The proposal included individualized treatment plans, online educational programming (PLATO Learning System), culinary arts programming, and community partnerships with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) related industries for vocational skill building. The proposal targeted those youth in the program (about one in four) that did not have active major psychological or substance abuse problems. Implementation occurred in phases, with the culinary arts program introduced first.

At the time the site visit for this study, the culinary arts program and a life skills curriculum were the only PYD components in operation. A literacy pilot was just beginning. The GC had made some additional resources available to the JJ Program, and staff were being realigned to support the PYD programming more effectively (e.g., one supervisor was assigned to support PYD implementation and one JJS was assigned to

Mission Statement

The Guidance Center's website includes the following description of its mission:

The Guidance Center provides a broad range of highly effective services that help children, adults and families unlock potential and build better lives. Services spanning treatment, prevention and growth and education are delivered with excellence and professionalism in an atmosphere of caring, hope and respect. Our programs reflect an ongoing commitment to practical innovation, measurable results and client empowerment.

Source: <http://guidance-center.org/index.html>

PYD curriculum development). The director of children's services and other program staff outlined detailed logic models for the overall JJ Program, for the PYD components in general, and for the culinary arts program in particular.

The culinary arts program was still the most fully developed component at the time of our site visit. The program was chosen primarily because the GC had kitchen facilities and staff for the Head Start program on campus already that could be used for the culinary arts program as well. Eligible youths were those on the juvenile justice caseload that scored below 100 on the Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS) and whose voluntary applications to the program were accepted by staff.⁵ The JJ Program required that youth apply for all PYD components to enhance their commitment. The culinary arts program consisted of nine sessions during which youth learned to prepare a variety of meals, including purchasing the ingredients. The meals (such as pizza, pasta with sauce, omelettes, enchiladas, soup, bread, etc.) were consumed by youth at the end of each session. Additional portions could be taken home and shared with families. Activities are chosen to address Equipped for the Future (EFF) job-related skills, which in turn are related to PYD domains (physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social development) and CAFAS domains. The program developed a table linking activities in each session to each of the EFF skills.

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were held with six JJ program staff: the program manager, a therapist who runs the life skills group, the PYD coordinator, the program assistant who runs the culinary arts program and two juvenile justice specialists (one whose caseload consists of youth in residential placements and one whose caseload consists of youth in the community).

When asked what the term **positive youth development** meant to them, some respondents articulated a clear understanding of the concept. For example:

Skill building—trying to give youth skills they will benefit from long term. Equip them for adulthood.

Trying to prepare the kids for the next step in their life. Trying to get them ready for independent living by moving them in a more positive direction.

Capitalizing on assets of youth and moving them to be better able to utilize those assets.

⁵ The CAFAS (Hodges, 2003) measures impairment in functioning in children and adolescents. It has been widely adopted in Michigan.

Others seemed to blend their understanding of PYD with strength-based practice. For example:

Positive youth development from my understanding is ... basically to say looking at the youth as a whole. With juvenile justice, trying to work on their deficits but also their strengths.

Taking the youth's strengths, building on them, offering services that build on or add to those strengths.

Not surprisingly, then, when asked what the term *strength-based* meant to them, most respondents said much the same thing.

Somewhat the same [as the response to the previous question] ... my mind goes to the way treatment is delivered—programming that uses the strengths already in place.

Working with the skills that they have—what they can do really well and what can we do to make them even better.

Taking somebody's skills, building on it, teaching them new ways to utilize them in other areas.

Identifying what assets, strengths they already have going for them that they can build on.

All respondents understood that the program had formally adopted the PYD approach and that the director of children's services had been the primary initiator or champion of the idea, although some mentioned the influence of the program manager as well, and one indicated that staff had been requesting something like this for a while.

Sample comments included:

[The director of children's services] really is the one that came up with the grant proposal and did the leg work.

[The director ... initiated the PYD emphasis]. We'd been working toward that [PYD] without having a label.

Other facilitating factors identified included the agency's having some extra money in its budget; the enthusiasm of upper-level administrators for emphasizing PYD; a recognition that although they already had a good program, some youth were still re-offending, and thus something was missing; and staff's general openness to the idea.

Respondents identified a few obstacles or challenges to implementing the PYD approach:

Limited time to fully implement the programming. [Lack of] transportation [Not] having the staff to implement all the components—but we’ve added vehicles and staff.

Measuring Outcomes

Because PYD programming has only recently been implemented, it is too soon for the Juvenile Justice Program to have outcome evaluation data. However, the Guidance Center routinely collects recidivism, client satisfaction and other data from youth and parents at 6-month intervals. In combination with the program’s well-developed logic models, evaluation information should be available in the future.

Since we already had a fully functioning program, now there’s resistance to being asked to do something more or different.

Not always having a clear, consistent communication of the vision.

We don’t have a strengths assessment—a limitation. We can only help with culinary arts, reading—don’t have a program resource for music, arts, and so on.

It’s overwhelming for a case manager to do what has to be done, such as drug screens, and add on strength-based stuff.

The youth themselves [can be obstacles]. They’re difficult, defiant, and don’t always willingly participate in the programming.

What’s all exciting to us as adults that they [the youth] need to know, you have to shove it down their [the youths’] throats. [It’s a challenge] making it interesting enough for the kids.

According to respondents, the program was not based on a specific model or approach to positive youth development or strength-based practice. Because youth come to the program already having been assessed with the CAFAS, the juvenile justice program does not perform any additional assessments. In particular, no systematic assessment of individual strengths is used, although the staff is in the process of trying to identify one.

Staff report having received little if any specific training in positive youth development or strength-based practice. There were a few meetings among interested staff during which the basic ideas of positive youth development were presented and contrasted with current practices. Staff have shared some basic readings, and have been self-taught from manuals such as those for the Daniel Memorial Life Skills Inventory or the Ansell Casey Life Skills Inventory.

Respondents noted a number of formal or informal collaborative relationships that were becoming important to the program although they recognized that these needed to be further developed to support the full range of intended PYD components, especially for job internships and mentors. Among those mentioned were Bridgeway (case management), Southwest Solutions (another provider coordinated by Bridgeway), National City Bank (supporting the life skills component related to money management), Taylor Teen Health Center (teen parenting program), Kairos Healthcare (substance abuse treatment provider), University of Michigan (for research projects), Southeast Guidance Center (individual and family counseling), and local schools.

Most staff members appeared to be enthusiastic about the new PYD emphasis in the Guidance Center's Juvenile Justice Program, and the agency's leadership is supportive of and committed to the change. As one respondent said, "Right now I'm on a high because we're right in the middle of things. Having high up administrators excited is a cool thing." Implementation of various PYD components is, by design, being phased in gradually. The organization is in the process of realigning its staffing structure to better support the PYD components. Staff could probably benefit from more systematic training in PYD and strength-based practice, and the program would be enhanced by the inclusion of a strengths assessment that informed individualized intervention plans.

Discussion

This is a small, exploratory study of a few juvenile justice programs that have attempted to implement some aspects of practice that are strength-based and focused on positive youth development. These programs may not be representative of all programs that have attempted to undertake this form of innovation, and the information collected in the site visits conducted for this study cannot provide a full or comprehensive assessment of the implementation of strength-based, PYD principles. In particular, although the programs selected for the study were intended to represent diversity in geographic location, auspices and type, several are in communities that do not deal with many chronic or seriously violent offenders.

Nevertheless, the results of the study offer some encouragement that it is possible to implement the principles of positive youth development and strength-based practice in juvenile justice settings and that such implementation may be associated with staff enthusiasm and perhaps even positive outcomes for youth. Clearly, however, much more evidence would be needed to substantiate such claims.

Among the programs included in this study, some common themes can be extracted regarding facilitating factors and challenges that are likely to be relevant for others who might seek to adopt these approaches in working with youthful offenders.

Facilitating Factors

Hospitable Community Culture

Although the juvenile justice system may be somewhat isolated from other parts of the community in many places, it is not immune from the general culture of the community. Thus, it is not necessarily a surprise that a strength-based, positive youth development approach might find some traction in relatively progressive communities such as Ithaca, New York, or the suburbs around Portland, Oregon. This does not mean that it is impossible for these programs to emerge in communities with less hospitable cultures, but it may require greater effort and attention to some of the other facilitating factors discussed below.

Commitment of Leadership

One of the most important factors that appears to facilitate successful implementation of these innovations is the commitment, credibility, and competence of leadership. As seen in several of the programs included in this study, the top administrator was responsible for establishing a vision for strength-based, positive youth development; allocating resources to support implementation; empowering, encouraging, and/or requiring adherence to the new model; and championing the approach with external stakeholders. Bardach (1977) highlighted the central role in implementation played by a “fixer,” someone with sound knowledge of an innovative approach, the ability to troubleshoot, and the credibility to elicit cooperation from staff and stakeholders. In most of the programs visited for this study, the chief administrator served in this role, sometimes aided by the enthusiasm of early adopters.

The Strengths Perspective as the Practice Model to Foster PYD Goals

The strengths perspective and positive youth development are distinct conceptual approaches that are not inextricably linked. However, they are synergistic, especially in the context of facilitating a culture change in juvenile justice. The strengths perspective encourages staff to view youth in a more positive light. Strength-based practice also provides an opportunity for staff to develop stronger relationships with the youth, and such relationships are the cornerstone of any successful interventions with youth. The information obtained from strength-based assessments, if used fully and properly, can lead to creative, individualized case plans that incorporate positive youth development goals and strategies for their attainment involving the kinds of supports and opportunities described in the PYD literature.

Internal Early Adopters

In several of the sites, a few staff eagerly embraced the new approach and were empowered by their directors to implement it even before it became program-wide practice. Their shared enthusiasm and ability to learn from their experience positioned

them to become role models for other staff. Their success was noted by others. In some cases, they even provided direct training to other staff.

Training and Retraining

Most employees of juvenile justice programs have not been trained in strength-based practice or in positive youth development principles. There are enormous differences in the assumptions, theories, and practices associated with these approaches versus traditional juvenile justice practice. Training needs to have multiple foci: (1) how to think about the youth; (2) assessment, including strengths discovery; (3) individualized case planning incorporating strengths; (4) cultivating community collaborations; (5) reframing problems with case plan implementation from “youth compliance failures” to “revising the case plan;” (6) documenting case management activities; and (7) evaluating outcomes. Periodic “booster” trainings should be considered, not only as a result of inevitable staff turnover, but to prevent continuing staff from slipping back into the old ways of doing business. There can be great value in bringing in outside trainers who can cast a fresh eye on an agency’s culture and practices.

Intentional Hiring

The relatively low salaries of juvenile justice line staff will continue to limit the hiring pool for programs such as those in this study to relatively young and inexperienced people who are unlikely to remain with their programs long. Hypothetically, a program with a strength-based approach should have a more positive organizational culture that reduces staff turnover, but high rates of turnover are always expected in human services. When staff vacancies occur, programs can seize the opportunity to hire individuals who either are already familiar with strength-based positive youth development principles, or who can at least be trained in them from the beginning without having to unlearn the more traditional approach.

Integration into the Bureaucratic Processing

Integrating strength-based assessment and case-planning into the routine paperwork of an organization can help to institutionalize the approach. Staff will be reminded regularly that they need to identify and record youth strengths, demonstrate that these strengths are incorporated into case plans, and follow up to discuss progress on these in case reports.

Consistent Reinforcement through Supervision

The supervisory staff of an agency needs to adapt management practices to reinforce the strength-based positive youth development approach and to support other staff members as they struggle to implement these reforms. Staff may need help in coming up with creative strategies to link youth with supports and resources to build on their strengths and develop long-term competencies. Supervisors must review staff’s case plans to be

sure that they are truly individualized and don't revert to the cookie-cutter style so prevalent in traditional juvenile justice settings.

Collaboration with Other Agencies; Organizational Permeability

Perhaps more clearly than any other juvenile justice practice model, the Intensive Aftercare Program (IAP) explicitly addresses the desirability, if not the necessity, for long-term success of replacing juvenile justice system control of youth with that of the natural community (families, neighborhoods, schools, and other community resources) (Altschuler & Armstrong, 1994a; 1994b; 2001). A similar view characterizes the wraparound approach to practice (Goldman, 1999; VandenBerg & Grealish, 1996). An agency seeking to adopt the strength-based positive youth development approach to juvenile justice must develop collaborative relationships not only with provider agencies (e.g., mental health centers, substance abuse treatment providers, etc.) but with a wide variety of community agencies, such as schools, parks and recreation departments, conventional youth development agencies (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs), mentors (e.g., Big Brothers/Big Sisters; local colleges), community arts organizations, neighborhood organizations, and many others that may become apparent after considering specific youths' interests. Some of these may serve as community service sites; others may be engaged for skill building with particular youth. These kinds of collaborations bring benefits not only to the youths, but to the program generally by "opening up" the traditionally closed culture of juvenile justice to other perspectives and influences.

Using Feedback from Data on Youth Outcomes

In several of the programs visited for this study, staff reported with considerable pride that the implementation of a strength-based positive youth development approach was accompanied by reductions in youth recidivism. This kind of feedback is not only reinforcing to program staff, but can help sell the approach to other stakeholders who may at first be skeptical. As with any evaluation data, in the event that results are not so obviously favorable, programs can still use the data to explore what aspects of the program may need improvement.

Challenges

Resistance from Staff

Few people embrace change readily. Veteran staff in traditional juvenile justice settings may find the strength-based positive youth development approach quite alien, and may view it as yet another attempt to restrict their ability to control dangerous youth. The new approach is more likely to take hold in a new program in which supportive staff can be purposefully hired. Where that is not possible, leadership can appeal to the residual idealism of staff and/or introduce the changes gradually, as a pilot, and hope that early success will breed acceptance among the staff.

Additional Demands on Staff Time and Creativity

It takes more time to do a thorough assessment that includes strengths discovery, to schedule and conduct meetings of individualized teams and to develop detailed, individualized case plans than it does to do traditional assessment and case planning. Staff must also be more creative in thinking of ways youth interests and assets can be matched with specific supports and opportunities, often involving resources outside of the juvenile justice system. It is also challenging for staff to learn to view problems that may arise in implementing case plans not necessarily as a youth failure, but as a plan that failed and needs to be reworked.

Making Meaningful Links between Assessments and Plans

Even in some of the programs visited in this study, case plans often failed to show a meaningful connection to the strength-based assessment. Most interventions, such as curricula and therapeutic models, have been developed to address risks or needs, so it is not unusual to find case plans that include them. Plans fostering strength-based positive youth development rely more on establishing connections between the youth and adults or organizations in the community that can help the youths make use of, explore, or further develop strengths or interests. A potentially valuable focus of future research might be surveying and collating exemplary case plans.

Staying the Course

Implementation of any initiative, whether a new program or a major programmatic change, is inevitably challenging. Unexpected obstacles or unintended side effects prompt modification of initial plans. In juvenile justice, one highly publicized incident in the community can engender fierce political pressure to stop an innovation dead in its tracks. To succeed, the initiative requires leadership that can maintain the vision and that is prepared to withstand pressure to return to the traditional approach.

Obtaining Buy-In from Others in the System: Judges, Prosecutors, and Police

By the nature of their roles, police and prosecutors are primarily concerned with the public safety goals of juvenile justice. The role of judges may result in their embracing a more balanced view of system goals, but, as they are most often elected officials, they are sensitive to public concerns about crime. In order for these stakeholders to embrace a strength-based positive youth development approach, they must be convinced that public safety will not be compromised. Theoretically and hypothetically, the strength-based positive youth development approach should enhance public safety, especially in the long run, but strong evidence has not yet accumulated to support that claim. In the meantime, programs seeking to adopt this approach must engage judges, prosecutors, and police from the beginning and provide relevant information to them, not only about details of the approach, but about case outcomes. Enlisting outside experts and advocates of the

approach who are their peers from jurisdictions that have had some success may be one effective strategy.

Initial Resistance from Families

To be effective, the strength-based positive youth development approach requires a partnership with families or other natural supports in the community. Staff in some of the programs visited for this study reported that some parents were initially resistant. These parents were frustrated and sometimes angry as a result of not being able to control their child's behavior and looked to the system to fix their child. They expected the system to punish or control the child, and were taken aback by the attitude of staff who looked to identify the youth's strengths and interests and engage the parents in becoming partners in the problem-solving process. Some staff reported that they could overcome this resistance eventually in some cases, by inviting families to remember times when things had gone well for them or by reminding them through the strengths discovery that their child had many good qualities.

Next Steps

As is clear from the list of facilitating factors and challenges above, the introduction of strength-based positive youth development principles into juvenile justice settings requires both political will and a technical way, as is true of any policy or program innovation (Barton, 1994). Although it is far from universal at this time, the political will may be growing, as these principles are increasingly permeating other systems, such as mental health and child welfare, and more and more jurisdictions are looking at ways to better integrate the various systems that affect children, youth, and families.

Within juvenile justice, the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, has now reached 87 jurisdictions (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007, October). Although the JDAI focuses on a detailed set of prescriptive practice reforms to limit the overuse of secure detention, "wherever JDAI has been successfully implemented it has proven to be a powerful catalyst for broader reform" (Mendel, 2007, p. 20). Successful implementation of JDAI requires the development and maintenance of an informed collaborative infrastructure, including mobilization of stakeholders; strong, committed leadership; and data-driven decisions. As a result, JDAI jurisdictions have a forum for examining other aspects of their juvenile justice systems beyond detention and have adopted a set of values that makes reform and innovation more likely. Strength-based positive youth development principles are much more congruent with such a climate.

As to the technical way, the strength-based positive youth development approach is clearly science based in terms of adolescent developmental research and compatibility

with the growing literature on risk and resilience. However, it cannot yet be described as evidence based. To achieve such a status, more programs using a strength-based positive youth development approach will need to participate in rigorous evaluations that generate data on intervention fidelity and youth outcomes. Greater research investments are clearly indicated.

Finally, there is still no blueprint or operational manual for implementing juvenile justice programs that are consistent with a strength-based positive youth development approach. In one sense, because the approach requires a great deal of individualized flexibility and creativity, full manualization may never be possible. Nevertheless, general guidelines for implementation must be developed for practitioners and program managers, especially those in agencies embracing this perspective for the first time. The results of this small, exploratory study are intended as a contribution to the eventual development of such guidelines.

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Appendix A

YD & JJ Project: Interview Guide

Person Interviewed Name: _____ Date: _____

Title: _____

Organization: _____

What does term “positive youth development” mean to you?

What does the term “strengths-based” mean to you?

1. When did this program adopt a Positive Youth Development or Strengths-Based approach?
2. Who initiated or championed this YD/Strengths approach?
3. Is this program based on a specific model of Positive Youth Development? Whose model is it?
4. What kind of strengths assessment(s) are used in this program?
5. What specific training has staff had in Positive Youth Development or Strengths-Based practice?
6. Can you provide some examples of how this program incorporates Positive Youth Development and Strengths?

[Probe for links to any of the following characteristics of settings that promote positive youth development]

- a. Physical and psychological safety – safe and health promoting facilities; and practices that increase safe peer group interactions and decrease unsafe or confrontational peer interactions.
- b. Appropriate structure – limit setting; clear and consistent rules ...; and age-appropriate monitoring.
- c. Supportive relationships – warmth, closeness; connectedness
- d. Opportunities to belong – opportunities for meaningful inclusion regardless of ones’ gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities ...; support for cultural and bicultural competence.

YD/JJ Interview Guide:

- e. Positive social norms – rules of behavior, expectations; ... values and morals; and obligations for service.
 - f. Support for efficacy and mattering – youth-based; empowerment practices that support autonomy; making a real difference in one's community; and being taken seriously
 - g. Opportunities for skill building – opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional and social skills
 - h. Integration of family, school, and community efforts – concordance; coordination; and synergy among family, school and community.
7. Does your program have formal or informal collaborative relationships with other agencies? Which ones?
8. What factors, such as events, resources, people, or circumstances would you say helped this program adopt Positive Youth Development/Strength-Based principles?
9. On the other hand, what factors have made it difficult or challenging to implement these principles?
10. What strategies have you used to deal with these obstacles?
11. Have there been any outcome evaluations conducted for your program? If so, what were the findings?

Chapin Hall Center for Children

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