

PROJECT ZERO

Project Zero is a juvenile justice reform initiative of the NYC Department of Probation that has enhanced the Juvenile Justice system's rationality, reduced its over-reliance on costly detention and incarceration and improved public safety while serving the best interests of children and families.

In the NYC Family Court system, Probation advises the court on sentencing and supervises youth placed on probation. When Commissioner Martin F. Horn began his tenure at DOP in 2003, he inherited a system marked by an over-reliance on detention and incarceration, extremely high costs and very poor outcomes (males; 81%, females; 46% recidivism within 3 years of release).

As a result, Project Zero had five goals:

1. Demonstrate to Juvenile Justice System stakeholders that the "incarceration approach" was failing public safety and hurting children.
2. Create a philosophical approach to delinquency that promoted both public safety and child welfare.
3. Create consistency and rationality in determining which youth should be incarcerated.
4. Create a culture that values community-based, in-home solutions to delinquency and
5. Create a set of alternatives-to-incarceration for judges to use in adjudication.

Since 2003, DOP restructured its juvenile investigation and supervision functions, and worked with other stakeholders to improve the efficacy of the system in both the pre-disposition (case processing) and post-disposition (sentencing) phases:

Pre-Disposition

1. DOP enhanced the intake process and provided low-risk youth with non-judicial sanctions and services known as "adjustments." Enhanced intake allowed probation officers to make better decisions about whether to divert a youth from Family Court via a service "adjustment" or refer them for prosecution.
2. The Risk Assessment Instrument (RAI) was created to rationalize the decision to detain or release a youth while their case is pending. The RAI is an evidence-based assessment tool completed by DOP and used by the court.

3. A Continuum of Alternatives to Detention (ATD). In January of 2006, Commissioner Horn closed the previous ATD program. As a result, new ATD programs were developed that provide a true continuum of supervision and service options based on a youth's risk level.

Post-Disposition

1. Create a rational decision-making tool for sentencing: For youth who enter the Family Court system, the Investigation and Report is the seminal document used by the court in determining a sentence. DOP analyzed a large cohort of past probationers to identify risk factors and assets that predicted success or failure in completing probation and avoiding re-arrest. This analysis was used to create the Probation Assessment Tool (PAT), which assists PO's in determining a sentencing recommendation.
2. Probation also developed innovative "Alternative To Incarceration" options for youth. **Esperanza** is a community-based ATI for high-risk probationers who would otherwise be incarcerated. Each youth and their family receive six months of in-home counseling from an Esperanza field counselor, who works in a complementary fashion with the youth's probation officer. Esperanza's services help the youth and their family to communicate and solve problems using a variety of therapeutic approaches.
3. **Enhanced Supervision Probation (ESP)** provides an option for youth who are medium or high risk, low asset and are in need of extra attention and supervision. ESP Probation Officers have low caseloads and are provided with discretionary "wrap-around" funds to provide incentives and service support. For example, ESP PO's have purchased professional tutoring services when needed, and PC's for probationers without computer and Internet access.

Since launching Project Zero in 2003, Probation has:

1. Increased by over 100% the number of juveniles who receive community and social services (adjustments) instead of prosecution (from 1,000/year to over 2,000).
2. Decreased the number of juveniles who receive a recommendation for incarceration by over 50% as a result of the Probation Assessment Tool.

3. Reduced the number of juveniles incarcerated annually by 11% despite a 35% increase in juvenile arrests over the same period. Comparing March 2004 to March 2007, the average number of youth incarcerated monthly has decreased by 56%.
4. Enrolled over **1,700** juveniles in innovative, alternative-to-placement programs like ESP (1,100) and Esperanza (605).
5. Recidivism: Preliminary data indicates that ESP and Esperanza youth successfully complete probation at a higher rate (65%) than youth with similar risk profiles. 74% of Esperanza youth have remained out of incarceration within 9 months of release. Though not a perfect comparison, a 1999 study found that more than 50% of young people released from New York State OCFS facilities were re-arrested within 9 months.
6. As a result of Project Zero, New York City has incarcerated fewer juveniles with a potential cost-savings of over \$11,250,000. New York State OCFS in January 2008 announced their plan to close six underutilized residential facilities. This is a direct result of the trend change brought about by Project Zero.