

Introduction

Pursuant to New York City Local Law 33 of 2023, the Juvenile Justice Advisory Board (JJAB) was established to convene leaders from across governmental, community-based service, and advocacy sectors to provide recommendations to the Mayor, City Council and ACS on issues related to juvenile justice. This is the JJAB's second annual report.

Board Composition:

Chair: Deputy Commissioner Nancy Ginsburg, Administration for Children's Services
Rohini Singh, Director, School Justice Project, Advocates for Children of New York
Holly Catania, Senior Policy Advisor on Health Justice, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
Rev. Wendy Calderon-Payne, Executive Director, Urban Youth Alliance
Karina Christiansen, Deputy Executive Director, Mayor's Office to Prevent Gun Violence
Alex Griffith, Senior Director, Exalt Youth
Sandeep Kandhari, Director, Center for Family Representation
Dr. Akeem Marsh, Medical Director, The New York Foundling
Deborah Rush, Senior Staff Attorney, Legal Aid Society
Gabriela Silverio, Constituent

Ex Officio:

Speaker Julie Menin, NYC Council
Kamar H. Samuels, Chancellor, NYC Public Schools
Melissa Hester, Interim Acting Commissioner, Administration for Children's Services
Sharun Goodwin, Commissioner, Department of Probation
Sandra Escamilla-Davies, Commissioner, Department of Youth & Community Development
Deanna Logan, Director, Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice
Dr. Alister Martin, Commissioner, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

In its second year, the JJAB focused its efforts on the development of a survey tool to incorporate youth voice into the development of recommendations regarding mental health services for young people who are systems-involved. There were also several advances in educational services in detention, a secondary focus area of the JJAB.

Mental Health Services for Systems-Involved Young People

In its first year, the JJAB identified the need for a research study to incorporate youth voice into the development of responsive recommendations related to mental health services for systems-involved young people. The research study will collect de-identified information about their life experiences and stressors, experiences with services in the community, and the mental health conditions and challenges faced by young people in secure detention.

Over the past year, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), in collaboration with Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) and Bellevue Juvenile Justice Mental Health Services (BJJMHS), have been working to develop a mixed-methods study focused on the mental health and well-being of youth in secure detention in New York City (NYC). Youth come into secure detention with a very high rate of trauma exposure. Many had no access to or contact with mental health services in the community. As documented in the 2025 JJAB annual report, prior research¹ has identified significant gaps in the availability and accessibility of mental health treatment and care for youth with histories of juvenile justice involvement, particularly those who have been in secure detention. The researchers found that of the 177 mental health clinics throughout the five boroughs that are certified by the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) to provide outpatient services to children and adolescents, only 59 accepted youth with histories of juvenile justice involvement unconditionally, and another 57 clinics accepted such youth on a “*case-by-case*” basis. These findings underscore the needs for deeper inquiry into young people’s lived experiences facing mental health challenges, which this research study seeks to examine.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this mixed-method research study is to explore the perspectives of youth in secure detention on mental health and well-being, inclusive of their experiences with mental health services before and during detention, and their recommendations for mental health supports in the community. The study also intends to document youths’ insights, priorities, and suggestions for system improvements to better meet the mental health needs of youth who are in the juvenile justice system or at risk of juvenile justice involvement.

Findings from this study will be synthesized and summarized as data-informed strategies for improving mental health services for justice-involved youth in New York City. These strategies will be reported to the JJAB to inform their recommendations to the Mayor, City Council and ACS on improving services and resources for justice-impacted youth.

STUDY DESIGN

The mixed-methods study will employ a community-engaged approach grounded in participatory research principles to center the voices of youth in secure detention and meaningfully engage them throughout the research process.

¹ Martin, T., Karim, N., Whitney, E., Carter, T., Mattoo, R., & Horwitz, S. (2024). Mental Health Aftercare Availability for Juvenile Justice-Involved Youth in New York City. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 52(3), 286-293.

- The DOHMH Bureau of Health Promotion for Justice-Impacted Populations (HPJIP) will serve as the study leads and will be responsible for data collection, data ownership, storage, and management in accordance with data security and human subject protection protocols.
- ACS Division of Youth and Family Justice (DYFJ), which operates the juvenile detention facilities where the study will be conducted, is providing access to youth and staff and are actively involved in the development and implementation of the study.
- BJJMHS is the contracted mental health service provider for the DYFJ secure detention facilities. They will provide critical expertise in youth mental health, informing and shaping the mental health-related components of the study design, study content, youth engagement strategies, and ethical considerations to ensure the study is age- and developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed.

The study will be conducted in two phases:

Phase 1 consists of a qualitative study involving interviews with select youth from both secure detention facilities- Horizon and Crossroads. These interviews will explore youth’s lived experiences, perceptions of their health and wellbeing, interactions with mental health services, and other mental health-related priorities. Key themes will be identified and used to inform the survey development for the subsequent quantitative phase.

Phase 2 involves a quantitative study in which a structured survey will be administered to youth across both secure detention facilities. The survey, developed in collaboration with youth in secure detention and study partners, will build on findings from the qualitative phase by measuring the prevalence of key themes and identifying trends and priorities across a broader sample of youth in secure detention.

Findings from this research study will be synthesized and summarized as data-informed strategies for improving mental health services for juvenile justice-involved youth.

STUDY TIMELINE

Overall Timeline and Scope:

The study is planned as a multi-phase project over 24 months, with the primary objectives to:

- Conduct a qualitative inquiry of interview with youth in secure detention to explore lived experiences, perspectives on mental health and wellbeing, and barriers to mental health care.
- Develop and administer a quantitative survey to a broader youth population to quantify key themes and identify priorities and patterns.
- Engage youth and study partners throughout the study process to ensure findings are relevant and actionable.

Progress to Date:

Over the past year, the study team has focused on the following preparatory and planning activities:

Partnership Development

- Held biweekly meetings with ACS and engaged with BJMHS to plan and support study implementation.
- Collaborated with ACS & BJMHS to refine study scope and discuss protocol feasibility.

Project Planning and Proposal Development

- Conducted community program mapping to identify mental health and reentry support services available to youth with histories of juvenile justice system involvement.
- Drafted the research proposal and presented study overview to the JJAB.
- Obtained internal approvals to conduct the study from senior leadership and consulted with internal leadership (e.g., Institutional Review Board, Office of General Counsel) to understand the ethical review process and data use protocols.
- Consulted with internal experts (e.g., Bureau of Children, Youth and Families/Developmental Disabilities, Center for Health Equity and Community Wellness, Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Use) to review study design and key components.

Staffing and Resource Planning

- Identified staffing needs and roles required for study implementation.

Next Steps:

Over the next twelve months, the project will move into the implementation preparation phase, which includes engaging in the following activities:

- Preparing and submitting the Institutional Review Board and Ethical Review applications to DOHMH, ACS, and the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS).
- Finalizing and executing data use agreements with project partners.
- Developing a detailed project budget and budget justification (in process).
- Identifying and securing funding to support research implementation.
- Developing a semi-structured interview guide for Phase 1 qualitative data collection
- Developing informed consent and youth assent procedures and forms.
- Creating study recruitment materials (e.g., flyers, welcome letters, and recruitment scripts).
- Conducting staff training to prepare for youth engagement and data collection.
- Engaging youth at the secure detention facilities to prepare for study launch.

Education Services in Detention

Many young people in detention were disconnected from school prior to entering detention. 94% were chronically absent², with the average attendance at only 44% of school days. These students are very far behind with few, if any, credits, and some youth have not been to school at all in months or years. New

² The NY state Education Department defines “chronic absenteeism” as missing 10% of school days in one school year. <https://www.nysed.gov/innovation-school-reform/chronic-absenteeism>

York City Public Schools (NYCPS) and ACS partner to meet the needs of these youth. NYCPS is responsible for educational assessment, classroom instruction and curriculum. ACS is responsible for encouraging and escorting youth to school; tutoring services; after-school programming; vocational training; and arranging for and supporting opportunities for a college education.

Over the past year, ACS has continued to expand its capacity in support of the school day through the consistent integration of additional academic interventions and post-secondary opportunities, including: increased academic tutoring; assistance preparing students for the Regents and high school equivalency exam; offering of credit-bearing college courses, as well as career and college coaching; and the development of Education Associate positions to coordinate with NYCPS and support the delivery of supplemental educational services. Together with the ACS School Liaisons, the school-based team is responsible for encouraging young people to attend school and engage in other educational services, which has significantly improved student engagement, student attendance, exam completion, and graduation rates across both facilities.

TUTORING

Tutoring is beneficial for many of the youth in detention, specifically those who are preparing for a High School Equivalency (HSE) exam, a Regents exam, or who have low literacy or math skills. ACS's contracted workforce partners, The Children's Village (CV) and the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI), provide on-site tutoring four days a week for 40–50 youth during the school day, after school, and on holidays.

Tutors typically work with youth two times per week in sessions that last from 30-60 minutes, targeting specific areas identified through assessments and HSE practice exams. Tutors consistently work with the same students, building strong relationships that support the academic achievements of youth. CV and BPI collaborate closely with NYCPS administrators and the ACS education team to identify youth and subject areas in which they need additional support or individual assistance to prepare for Regents or GED exams. Creating an opportunity for one-on-one learning with an adult that they trust is particularly helpful for young people who have not had success in traditional school environments and addresses a wide range of learning styles.

This spring, through a new partnership with Neighborhood Educational Partners, approximately 40 students in secure detention will participate in a 13-week intensive small group and individual tutoring program to prepare for the Regents exam in Algebra in June 2026. This program directly addresses the low passing rates for Algebra Regents that have persisted in secure detention sites over the past few years. Students targeted for this program include those with one or more failing scores on Algebra Regents exams in the past and those close to graduation who are scheduled for Algebra Regents in June.

COLLEGE COURSES

Since the population in secure detention includes emerging adult students, ACS has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the City University of New York (CUNY) to make college courses available. Graduates in Horizon are enrolled with Hostos Community College and Crossroads graduates are enrolled with Borough of Manhattan Community College. At both facilities, students can complete in person college courses and earn transferable college credits. A range of college classes are offered, including Introduction to Anthropology, Introduction to Criminal Justice, Fundamentals of Public Speaking, Introduction to Sociology, Language and Power, and Introduction to Critical Thinking.

Next Steps

Over the next year, the JJAB's primary focus will be the continued development and implementation of the research study as outlined above. The results of this study will shape the continued work of the JJAB around improving and increasing mental health services for youth who are systems-involved or at risk of system involvement. The JJAB will also continue to review initiatives that are intended to facilitate the academic success of this population.