

Bridges to Education & Employment for Justice-Involved Youth

The Urban Institute's May 2019 report presents findings on the implementation and participant outcomes of NYC Justice Corps, following the program's 2016 redesign. The mixed-methods evaluation was designed to describe the strengths and challenges of the program as perceived by program staff, participants, and stakeholders; to assess participants' education and workforce outcomes; and to identify actionable recommendations and considerations for future programming.

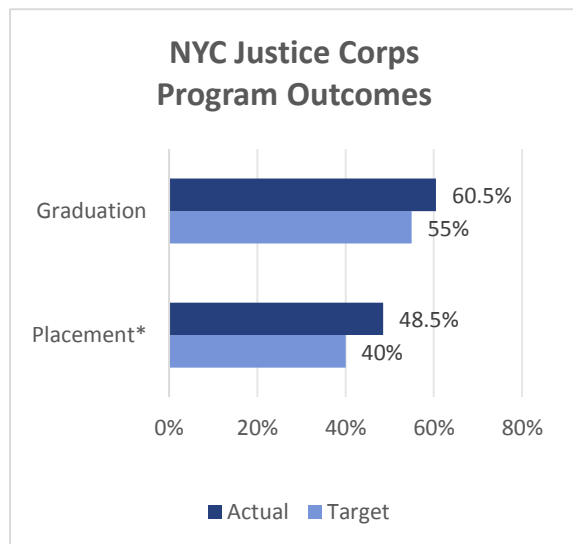
Key Findings

- The 2016 redesign was credited with improving service delivery by increasing flexibility within the program model.** Changes included the expansion of placement options, allowing for early placement with ongoing access to program services, and placement into 'next level' youth development programs. Providers also had increased autonomy over therapeutic service delivery and community benefit project execution. This flexibility allowed providers to infuse their organizational missions into program operations and enabled more responsive support for participants.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy helped teach conflict resolution and communication skills.** Participants and staff reported that these skills helped in reducing participants' criminal behavior and improving their relationships with program staff, peers and beyond.
- Work readiness services and certifications offered tangible, practical skills to support career advancement.** Participants indicated that access to free vocational training and occupational certification opportunities was an important draw to NYC Justice Corps.

About NYC Justice Corps

NYC Justice Corps was a cohort-based workforce development and recidivism reduction program that served justice-involved youth ages 18 to 24 years. Through a multi-phase approach, NYC Justice Corps offered sector-focused work readiness services and occupational training, Community Benefit Projects (local renovation, beautification and civic engagement projects designed and executed by participants), case management to support stabilization, cognitive behavioral therapy, stipends and incentives to support engagement, and alumni services.

NYC Justice Corps was managed by the Prisoner Reentry Institute at the City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and was operated at four sites by local nonprofit service providers. Launched in 2008 by the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity and expanded in 2012 by the Young Men's Initiative, the program underwent a redesign in 2016. NYC Justice Corps ceased operation in June 2018 upon the natural end of existing program provider contracts.



*Placement types included employment, education, vocational training, and youth development programs

“For young people whose brains are still changing, we not only need to be able to provide them with programs, but adapt programs [to fit] those individual needs”

--Cynthia W. Roseberry, JD, Former Federal Defender, Former Manager of Clemency Project 2014

Challenges

- **Sector focus constrained service provision.** Introduced in the 2016 redesign, NYC Justice Corps workforce services were tailored to specific sectors, including construction, customer service and retail. Research has shown that a sector focus can improve workforce outcomes. However, providers reported that this approach unnecessarily narrowed the scope of services and limited participants' opportunities to explore different career pathways.
- **Dual enrollment created logistical strain.** The early placement option introduced in 2016 allowed simultaneous enrollment in NYC Justice Corps alongside additional programming or employment. This option was generally viewed positively by providers, but some participants found it difficult to juggle the programmatic responsibilities and manage transportation demands of multiple commitments.

Considerations for Future Programming

- **Service provision must strike a balance between model fidelity and provider flexibility.** One of the major strengths of the NYC Justice Corps program, as noted by program staff, was the flexibility they had while implementing the redesigned program. This flexibility created opportunities for each provider to incorporate their organizational mission into the program offerings, and to utilize their staff's expertise and knowledge of local resources when implementing program activities.
- **Partnerships with other service providers can help programs leverage additional supports.** Formal collaboration with local organizations can enable providers to address identified participant challenges that fall outside the scope of core program services, such as child care.
- **Family services enable youth stability.** Participant family members are often also in need of stabilization, education and workforce services. Future programming should include services focused on positive family relationships, referrals to employment resources, assistance with resume writing and job applications, parent support groups, or other case management support for youth's family members.
- **Structured aftercare supports participants following program completion.** Youths' service needs often persist beyond the program timeframe. Ongoing engagement and support from program staff and peer support from other alumni can help youth to overcome challenges they may face after formal program completion, and foster prosocial networks in the community.

Looking Ahead

New York City is embarking upon multiple cross-cutting justice system reform efforts, including comprehensive enhancements to reentry services through Mayor de Blasio's Jails to Jobs initiative, as well as plans to replace the Rikers Island jail complex with borough-based facilities, a strategy that requires significant expansion of community-based services. NYC Opportunity and YMI will continue to partner with the Prisoner Reentry Institute and other justice system stakeholders to consider the findings and recommendations presented in this evaluation, which will serve to inform future programming for justice system-involved young adults.

Further Reading:

Urban Institute, 2019, "Bridges to Education and Employment for Justice-Involved Youth: Evaluation of the NYC Justice Corps Program." https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/evidence/NYCJC_Final_2019.pdf