

By Daniel Pollack



Forging a Partnership Between Police, Youth, and Human Services Agencies

This is a time of mounting concern regarding the overlap of children in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.¹ Indeed, this group of children is now termed “crossover youth,” referring to youth who started in the child welfare system, often transitioning to foster or residential care, and then landing in the juvenile justice system. This overlap encompasses many family members, is intergenerational, and commands a sizable portion of agency resources.

Longstanding and newer programs are designed to enhance communication and build relationships between youth and police in a casual way. Best known is the Police Athletic League (PAL). Their “century-old history is founded on the principle that the police and the communities they serve both benefit when they have positive and productive relationships with one another.”² A newer program, founded in 2009, Strategies for Youth (SFY) is a national organization that “exists solely for the purpose of improving police–youth interactions, advancing the cause of training public safety officers in the science of child and youth development and mental health, and supporting communities partnering to promote strong police/youth relationships.”³ SFY’s “Policing the Teen Brain” trainings invite five types of youth-serving community-based organizations (YSCBOs) to meet with officers. The goal is to shore up law enforcement officers’ awareness of these programs in the communities they serve, as well as to encourage them to refer youth to the program staff. By promoting conversation and personal connections during



the trainings, SFY seeks to provide officers with alternatives to arrest and the means of finding community-based options for youth in need of additional supports.

How can human services agencies better collaborate with police and agencies like PAL and SFY? Bearing in mind that both the traditional and community policing models are not monolithic, and a one-size-fits-all approach is assuredly not the answer, here are some suggestions:

- Periodically hold meetings between police and human services agencies in order to serve as a bridge

between youth, the community, and agencies. In some cities, the mayor’s cabinet includes law enforcement and meetings are conducted with the expectation that service agencies will work directly with law enforcement.

- Formally develop an understanding of shared roles and responsibilities with a view to pinpointing those responsibilities that fit best, given their respective statutory charges and specialized knowledge. This is often best accomplished through

See Police on page 37

cross-training opportunities that use scenario-based training to demonstrate the limits of roles, the legal obligations of the actors, and the ways they can support each other.

- Honestly identify the strengths and challenges of working together.
- Identify evidence-based policies and practices that promote safety and mutual understanding.
- Identify and prioritize knowledge and research gaps that need to be addressed.

Cary Friedman, co-founder of the Centers for Tactical Resilience and Ethical Policing, and a consultant to the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI, observes, “Police officers, as a group, are well placed in every community and eager to help in this area. They are all too aware of the reactive ‘damage control’ nature of their jobs. Although people always possess the freedom to choose whether to become criminals, there are a host of factors—familial, social, economic, and societal—that predispose a person to consider and engage in unlawful behaviors or that tend to limit access to lawful options. Police, more than anyone else in our society, understand that these underlying systemic causes contribute to the creation of criminals—they see it every shift—and it frustrates them that they can’t address those causes more often or more directly. It’s particularly painful when they see it happening to children who, it seems, ‘never even had a chance.’ Enlist police participation in giving young people a real chance to take a different, healthier path, and

you’ll have an army of well-placed, dedicated professionals eager to make a positive difference in people’s lives.”

“When we read the training evaluations, we find officers across the country are upset that they are not aware of the array of resources available to youth,” says Lisa H. Thurau, founder and executive director of SFY. “When we expose them to after-school engagement, competence-building and peer leadership programs, to mental health/crisis intervention and immigrant services, they react with relief to know that there are partners in the community eager to work with youth, to get them off the street, and to support officers’ efforts to keep youth safe and on productive tracks. For many officers, this aspect of our training is the highlight. Increasing partnerships with YSCBOs is something we recommend to all law enforcement agencies. Without them, policing youth is simply less effective.”

Every community has its own concerns and needs, and so, the

The current success of diversion programming, especially where it succeeds in reducing reliance on locked detention for youth, has demonstrated a tremendous impact in reducing recidivism and pushing youth into the deeper ends of the system.

multidisciplinary police/human services approach will be different for each one. If we have learned anything, it includes the idea that policing strategies cannot only be reactive. The current success of diversion programming, especially where it succeeds in reducing reliance on locked detention for youth, has demonstrated a tremendous impact in reducing recidivism and pushing youth into the deeper ends of the system. As the history of policing and human services can attest, both disciplines need to keep evolving in order to best serve their mutual clients—juvenile populations and the broader community. Partnerships are key to serving youth, families, and communities wisely—and doing so in a cost-effective manner. 📌

Reference Notes

1. Petro, J. (2010). Juvenile justice and child welfare agencies: Collaborating to serve dual jurisdiction youth survey report. Child Welfare League of America. Also see Finkelhor, D., Ormrod, R., Turner, H., & Hamby, S. (2012). Child and youth victimization known to police, school, and medical authorities. Office of Justice Programs.
2. See <http://www.palnyc.org/police-and-community/>
3. See <http://strategiesforyouth.org/about/>
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html

Daniel Pollack is a professor at Yeshiva University’s School of Social Work in New York City. He can be reached at dpollack@yu.edu; (212) 960-0836.

Traditional Policing	Community Policing
Highly centralized authority	Cooperative policing involving individuals and groups
Role focused primarily on crime control and law enforcement. The department’s role is to “fight crime.”	Involvement of private and public organizations
Reactive	Developing and maintaining relationships with citizens, businesses, schools, and community leadership and organizations
Arrest is a primary tool	Improved intelligence gathering with emphasis on patrolling on foot, and by bicycle and scooter