Research Report

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Evaluation of Workforce-Focused Programming for Probation Youth in Los Angeles County

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About This Report

The Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA) is administered by the California Board of State and Community Corrections and provides funding to counties to support programs that have proven their effectiveness in curbing crime among at-promise youth and youth involved in the juvenile justice system. In Los Angeles County, the Probation Department oversees the implementation of JJCPA-funded programs. These programs are approved by the county through the Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council, which comprises stakeholders from county agencies, city agencies, and community-based organizations. In 2019, the Probation Department selected RAND to provide evaluation and technical assistance services related to JJCPA-funded programs, including an annual gap analysis. This report presents findings from the evaluation of workforce programs for youth in juvenile camps/halls and probation youth in community settings in Los Angeles County. Results will be of interest to the Los Angeles County Probation Department, program staff, the Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council, and agencies in other locations implementing programs of this nature.

Justice Policy Program

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Acknowledgments

We thank our sponsor, the Los Angeles County Probation Department, as well as staff from the organizations interviewed for their time and support completing the study. We also thank our quality assurance reviewers, Maya Buenaventura and Faye S. Taxman, for their feedback on the report.

Summary

The Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA) provides funding to support youth in the juvenile justice system and youth considered at risk of contact with the justice system throughout Los Angeles County. One such program funded by JJCPA is a workforce program for youth detained in juvenile camps/halls and probation youth in community settings. The program is administered by the Los Angeles County Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) and implemented by contracted job centers via DEO and the Los Angeles City Economic and Workforce Development Department.

Key Findings

Our interviews with program leadership and staff revealed several key findings:

- The JJCPA-funded workforce program offers the same services to detained youth in juvenile camps/halls and to probation youth in community settings: 20 hours of professional enrichment training and 100 to 140 hours of paid work experience.
- The program operates somewhat differently based on whether the youth is in the camps/halls or in the community: Youth in camps/halls are supervised by Probation Department staff and matched with job opportunities within the camps/halls, while youth in the community are matched to varied job sites throughout Los Angeles County, such as businesses, government agencies, or nongovernmental organizations.
- Staff perceive the program to be enticing and beneficial to youth in juvenile camps/halls. However, these youth often experience barriers to fully completing the program, and they are limited by the need to achieve and maintain eligibility for the program, which is driven by their behavior in the camps/halls.
- Coordination of the Probation Department and workforce systems present a challenge for transitioning youth from detained settings to community settings. Although there is an official transition process that connects youth to services, few are successfully connected to the community-based program through this process. Challenges with coordinating the Probation Department and DEO administrative tracking systems lead to long referral times and a subsequent loss of engagement with youth.
- Few probation youth in community settings participate because of a lack of referrals, competing priorities (e.g., school, friends), disinterest, and community risk factors (e.g., safety).

To address these challenges, we recommend (1) improving the process of connecting eligible youth to the program during the camp-to-community transition process, (2) systematizing and improving coordination between the Probation Department and DEO, (3) allowing youth to start receiving workforce program services while they procure documents, and, if needed, (4) expanding the program

to include *at-promise youth* (the term that the State of California uses to refer to youth who have factors that place them at risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system).

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Employment has been identified as a key individual factor that could reduce the likelihood that youth involved in the juvenile justice system (referred to as *justice-involved youth* in this report) will recidivate (Ashford and Gallagher, 2019; Bullis et al., 2002; Mathur, Clark, and Gau, 2024). However, these youth are also more likely to face challenges to successfully obtaining employment because of disrupted educational time (Zajac, Sheidow, and Davis, 2015), limited opportunity to develop job-related skills (Dworsky and Gitlow, 2017), or employers' unwillingness to hire individuals involved in the justice system (Duane, Reimal, and Lynch, 2017; Kirk and Sampson, 2013; Pager and Quillian, 2005). Indeed, research has found that youth with histories of incarceration have difficulty finding employment (Carter, 2019), and this is exacerbated for youth with disabilities or a lack of academic credentials (Waintrup and Unruh, 2008). Also, justice-involved youth appear to be less successful in finding rewarding, satisfying jobs (Carter, 2019).

There are several ways in which promoting employment among youth might help to reduce the risk of juvenile justice system involvement. Similar to findings among justice-involved adults (Sampson and Laub, 2003; Visher, Debus, and Yahner, 2008), stable, gainful employment could reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Andrews, Bonta, and Wormith, 2006; Mathur, Clark, and Gau, 2024; Sheely, 2020). In addition, the structured routines and responsibilities associated with work might help youth develop prosocial motivations, foster a sense of personal growth, and improve their likelihood of being a competitive job applicant in the future (Burke-Miller et al., 2006; Gelber, Isen, and Kessler, 2016; O'Sullivan et al., 2020).

However, although research in this area is limited, there appears to be mixed evidence on whether employment is beneficial for justice-involved youth. Studies have suggested that the nature of the employment plays a role in youth outcomes. One such factor is the number of hours worked. For instance, some studies of high school youth have found that working longer hours (i.e., over 20 hours per week) was associated with increased delinquency, lower educational success, and higher rates of substance use (Bachman et al., 2013; Bachman et al., 2003), while others did not observe this outcome and suggest that socioeconomic status might mitigate these effects (Lee and Staff, 2007; Staff et al., 2010). One study that specifically involved youth with a history of offending suggested that youth who worked more than 20 hours per week reported a greater decrease in antisocial behaviors compared with unemployed youth but only when their employment was accompanied by school attendance (Monahan, Steinberg, and Cauffman, 2013). The study also found that there was no difference in aggressive, antisocial behaviors between youth with high- and low-hour employment and between youth with low-hour employment and unemployed youth.

Other factors that might affect youth outcomes include the complexity of the jobs and the characteristics of their coworkers. For example, although some theorize that jobs with high levels of cognitive complexity offer more opportunities for justice-involved youth to develop important job-

related skills (e.g., responsibility, time management, problem-solving [Cullen, Williams, and Wright, 1997]), studies involving large school-based samples of youth from adolescence to young adulthood have mixed results (Mortimer, 2010). There is also some evidence that employment could have adverse effects when it brings youth who are already at risk for juvenile justice system involvement into contact with others who engage in risky behaviors (Osilla et al., 2013). Together, these studies highlight the need for more research on the effectiveness of youth employment and the conditions that might be necessary for justice-involved youth to yield the most benefit from their employment.

Although evidence is mixed regarding the benefits of employment for at-risk youth, the past decade has seen an increase in workforce development and career mentorship programs for justice-involved youth (Cramer et al., 2019; Kessler et al., 2022). These employment programs vary widely in the types of vocational support services they provide, and they offer youth additional benefits beyond employment, such as career mentorship, workshops for building résumés, and job-related skill-building. There is limited research that helps explain the long-term impact of these programs on justice-involved youth. Although some of these programs resulted in improved recidivism and education-related outcomes (Espinosa et al., 2021; Mathur, Clark, and Gau, 2024; Schaeffer et al., 2014), rates of recidivism were not significantly different between the experimental and control groups. For example, Schaeffer and colleagues (2014) found that justice-involved youth who participated in a workforce development program were more likely to be employed and attend a general education development (GED) program than those in the control group. However, there were no significantly different results in arrest records or self-reported criminal activity. Other programs were more successful in their goals of reducing criminal justice contact and achieving employment outcome goals (Bullis and Yovanoff, 2006; Cramer et al., 2019). The New York City Summer Youth Employment Program, which offers summer jobs to youth through a lottery system, found that "at-risk" youth (i.e., those who had a previous arrest prior to the program) had a decrease in rates of arrest and conviction while participating in the summer program (Kessler et al., 2022).

In addition, it could be important to consider that many of these programs that provided vocational support often provided additional support services, such as mental health treatment or wraparound services, making it difficult to disentangle the effects of the vocational support from those of the entire program (Cohen and Piquero, 2010; Espinosa et al., 2021; Mathur, Clark, and Gau, 2024). Nonetheless, because it appears that these programs could provide at-risk youth with a variety of benefits related to reduced justice system contact and increased chances of future employment, an understanding of how these programs are implemented and whether they are effective is needed.

In Los Angeles County, one source of funding for juvenile justice-involved youth programming is the Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA). JJCPA funds are allocated to city and county agencies and community-based organizations to support programs for at-promise or juvenile justice-involved youth with the goal of preventing crime and delinquency (County of Los Angeles, 2023). Two of the agencies that received funding were the Los Angeles County Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO; formerly known as the Department of Workforce Development, Aging and Community Services) and the City of Los Angeles Economic and Workforce Development Department (EWDD). These agencies operate a workforce development program with funding

administered by the Los Angeles County DEO and direct services provided by contracted job centers, called *Service Centers* throughout this report.[1]

Programs that receive funds under JJCPA are subject to evaluation by the JJCPA evaluator: RAND. In our evaluation, we aimed to address the following questions using interviews with program leadership and staff:

1. How does the program operate? Specifically, we were interested in understanding such details as the program goals and services offered by the program.
2. What factors have shaped the implementation of the program? For example, what have been the barriers and facilitators to implementing the program?
3. Do program staff members perceive the program to be effective?

In this report, we describe the methods used for this evaluation (Chapter 2), present findings to evaluation question one by providing an overview of the program and the services provided (Chapter 3), present findings to evaluation questions two and three by discussing the factors that shaped the implementation of the program and staff perceptions of the program's effectiveness (Chapter 4), and present a summary of findings and our recommendations for optimizing the implementation of this type of program (Chapter 5).

[1] *Service Center* refers to specific entities that provide JJCPA-funded workforce programming. We discuss Service Centers in more detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2

Methods

We conducted semistructured interviews with staff members across the various agencies implementing the JJCPA-funded workforce program. We describe our process for recruiting participants and collecting and analyzing data in the following sections. This chapter provides detail on our research methods and has been adapted from other JJCPA-funded program evaluations published by our team, specifically Jones et al. (2025) and Matthews et al. (2025), because we used similar methods for each program.

Recruitment

We collaborated with program leaders from DEO and EWDD to recruit staff affiliated with the program. Of the 16 people invited, 15 people participated in nine interviews from December 2021 to June 2022. Staff included DEO and EWDD leadership and coordinators, Los Angeles County Probation Department staff, and Service Center staff directly implementing the program in community settings.

Interview Protocol and Methods

As described in our other evaluation reports, interviews followed a semistructured interview protocol adapted from the RAND-developed Program Implementation and Evaluation Readiness (PIER) model and the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR), informed by implementation science and program evaluation (Damschroder et al., 2009; Damschroder et al., 2022; Kaufman-Levy and Poulin, 2003). The protocol focused on topic areas related to program success, such as barriers to connecting with and recruiting clients, resources needed to implement the program, and strategies that staff members used to engage and support youth from a variety of backgrounds. We were flexible in our questioning and tailored our questions based on interviewees' responses to ensure that we captured details relevant to their experiences and central components of the program. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Participation was voluntary and all responses were kept confidential. Interviews were recorded with the permission of interviewees and professionally transcribed and anonymized.

Analysis

To analyze the interview data, we uploaded the notes to Dedoose, a qualitative data-analysis program. We developed a codebook deductively (i.e., based on our interview protocol) and inductively

(i.e., allowed for additions to the codebook once team members reviewed the data). Before individually coding, two team members coded one transcript together and then three transcripts separately using the blind coding feature in Dedoose. They met to review the coded transcripts and resolve disagreements. They continued this until they reached agreement (after three) on the meaning and use of the codes and to ensure consistency in coding. They then divided the remaining transcripts and coded separately, meeting weekly to discuss any challenges. When disagreements arose during this process, they discussed the issue until they were able to reach a consensus.

Once coding was complete, two team members divided the analysis by codes, and each member took the lead to analyze the results of the codes. Analysis was conducted, in part, using tools within Dedoose and Excel to assess the content of each code and to further develop themes. During this process, the team members conducting the analyses met weekly with the broader qualitative team to discuss processes, challenges, and preliminary findings.

We then mapped themes back on to the CFIR, which we used to develop interview protocols. CFIR provides a comprehensive and systematic framework for identifying and understanding implementation determinants and for targeting recommendations (Damschroder et al., 2022). CFIR involves the following five domains: *innovation* (i.e., the program characteristics itself), *outer setting* (i.e., the setting in which the program exists), *inner setting* (i.e., the setting in which the program is implemented, which includes the program's resources, infrastructure, and staffing levels), *individuals* (i.e., the roles and characteristics of the people who implement the program and receive program services), and *process* (i.e., the activities and strategies used to implement the program) (Damschroder et al., 2022). We summarized our findings with relevant quotes that we used to illustrate the broader experiences and perceptions of the interviewees.

Chapter 3

Program Description

In this chapter, we present findings to evaluation question one, describing program goals, funding and operation, and services offered. As an overview, JJCPA-funded workforce programs provide work opportunities for youth who are detained in Los Angeles County youth camps and juvenile halls (operated by the Probation Department and referred to as *camps/halls* for purposes of this report) and on probation in community settings. Eligible youth are offered a paid employment experience and professional enrichment training (PET) designed to provide participants with skills to attain and retain employment.

Program Goals

According to interviewees, the overarching goal of the program is to provide youth and young adults a workplace experience, employment-based skills, and connections to other programs or services related to youth academic or career goals (e.g., community college, internship programs). Staff stress that this experience is designed to be introductory because most program participants do not have work experience when they enter the program. Although many participants do find long-term employment or are connected to other employment opportunities through their experience in the program, the program itself is not designed for permanent employment. Rather, the program is designed to confer skills and practical experience so participants can apply those skills and learn how to conduct themselves with professionalism when interacting with their supervisors and coworkers.

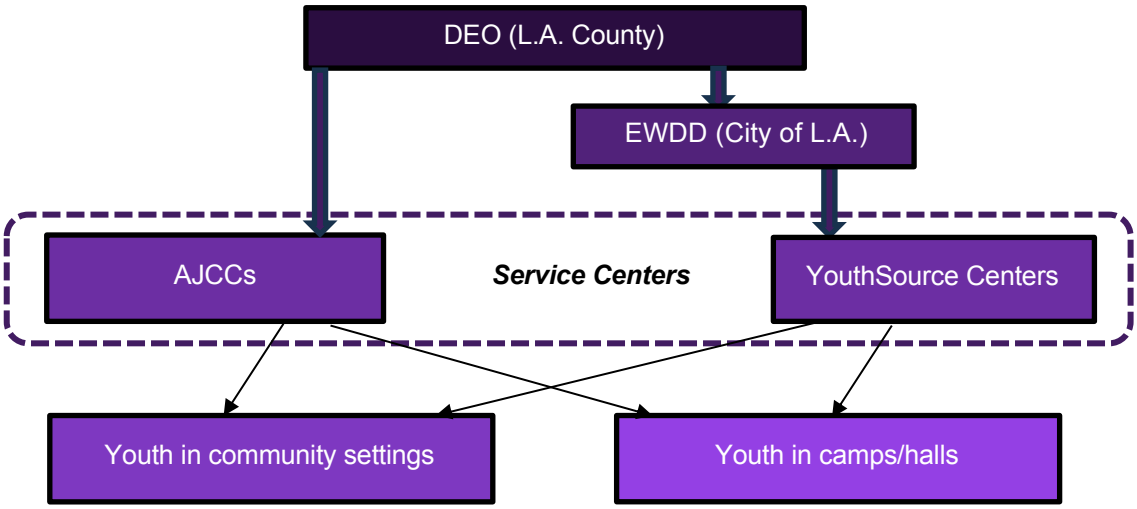
Interviewees also shared that the program is intended to provide youth with the opportunity to explore future career pathways and think about the professions that interest them. The program enables certain individuals to earn their high school equivalency certificate so they can enroll in vocational training or pursue higher education at a community college. Some interviewed staff indicated that, in the short term, youth in the program should experience increases in personal development, and others referenced longer-term outcomes, such as "put[ting] youth on a pathway to have a successful career," decreasing recidivism, and increasing engagement at school and in other programs.

Funding and Operation

JJCPA-funded workforce programs operate within an already well-established infrastructure of workforce programming in Los Angeles County. DEO administered and distributed JJCPA funding to contracted Service Centers within Los Angeles County under its Youth at Work programming umbrella. Funding goes to 17 America's Job Centers of California (AJCCs), which provide

employment resources to youth and adults, and to 28 City of Los Angeles contracted YouthSource Centers, which focus on youth ages 14 to 24 by way of EWDD (see Figure 3.1).[2] For the purpose of this report, AJCCs and YouthSource Centers are collectively referred to as *Service Centers*. At these Service Centers, JJCPA funds are applied to programs for youth who are either on probation in the community or detained in designated camps/halls.

Figure 3.1. Operation of Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act–Funded Workforce Programming



Program Services and Case Flow

Both services—those for probation youth in the community and for youth in camps/halls—are implemented by contracted Service Centers across Los Angeles County. These Service Centers provide the same or similar work experience programming not only to probation youth but also to a variety of populations. Service Centers hold all responsibility as the employer of record and provide compensation to program participants. They place youth on their payroll, receive their time sheets, and issue paychecks through their payroll systems.

All youth, regardless of whether they are in camps/halls or on probation in the community, receive the same core services: 20 hours of PET and 100 to 140 available hours of paid work experience.[3] Program referral and management depends on whether the youth is detained or on probation in the community (see Table 3.1). Therefore, we first describe the core elements of the program, which

[2] City of L.A. staff reported youth between the ages of 14 and 24, while county Service Centers defined eligible youth as being between the ages of 16 and 24.

[3] Interviews took place between December 2021 and June 2022; therefore, the number of hours may have changed since we conducted our interviews.

remain the same for both sets of youth. We then describe the differing case flows for each set of youth, those on probation and those who are in camps/halls.

Table 3.1. Program Flow

Program Stage	Community Settings	Camps/Halls
Referral	Youth may be referred via • transition from detention • Probation Officer • direct application.	Camp/hall staff identify eligible youth and submit referrals to DEO.
Program acceptance	Service Center staff confirm eligibility and accept youth into program.	
Confirm work eligibility	Service Center staff collect employment documents (e.g., tax forms, work permits for minors).	
PET	Youth are taught by Service Center staff.	Youth are taught by camp/hall staff.
Assess job fit	Youth are given an assessment to indicate their career path interest.	
Placement	Service Centers work with youth to review eligible jobs and determine fit.	Camp/hall staff place youth with available opportunities.
Work experience	Job sites could be in the public or private sectors, such as food banks, Boys and Girls Clubs, city halls, pharmacies, and grocery stores.	Work experiences take place within the camp or hall where the youth are detained.
Compensation	Service Centers compensate youth $15 per hour.	
Additional services	Service Centers provide connections and referrals for programs and services. They also offer resources, such as vouchers for clothing and transportation.	Camps/halls offer the ability to participate in the program twice: once in the camps/halls and again in the community (when released).

Core Services

All youth are provided with 20 hours of PET, which covers résumé writing, financial literacy, budgeting, and understanding debit and credit cards. As one interviewee described PET, it includes "the basic necessities that an adolescent needs to know." PET is based on the Transition-Age Youth World of Work (TAY WOW) curriculum, which is an evidence-based, trauma-informed curriculum developed by Columbia University. In the community, PET is taught by Service Center staff, and in camps/halls, it is taught by Probation Department staff.

Youth in both settings receive compensation for their participation in the program. They are provided minimum wage ($15 per hour) to complete 120 or more hours of work, which includes PET and paid work experience (for a total of $1,800 or more). Youth in camps/halls receive compensation following release, either by picking up a check from the Service Center or having it mailed directly to their home.

Youth in Camps/Halls

Eligibility and Referral

In the two halls and six camps located throughout Los Angeles County, interested youth between the ages of 14 and 24 that met specified behavior requirements were eligible to participate in the workforce program. Probation staff in the camps/halls identify eligible youth and submit referrals through the DEO's automated referral system (ARS), an electronic system that the DEO uses across programs and partners. Referrals are routed directly to a Service Center that the DEO has prematched to each camp or hall. The matched Service Center sends an application packet with employment documents to camp/hall staff via ARS. Once Service Center staff collect and process the paperwork, the youth is enrolled and given permission to begin the program. According to interviews, about 100 to 150 youth per year were referred from camps/halls, though we did not learn the approximate percentage of those enrolled.

Program Administration

Probation staff are responsible for collecting documents and timesheets, delivering PET, matching youth to a work experience, and supervising youth work experience. Service Centers train Probation Department staff on how to supervise youth according to the Youth at Work guidelines. The supervisor training follows a supervisor manual that outlines Probation Department staff job expectations, worksite agreements, supervision of youth at worksites, and collection of timecards and evaluations to ensure no workforce laws are violated. They are also trained on the TAY WOW curriculum and thereby certified staff to implement PET.

Program Services

Trained Probation Department staff deliver 20 hours of PET to enrolled youth participants. Youth are then assigned available work in the camps/halls. Work schedules and assignments in the camps/halls might vary; they are based on what is feasible for the youth and staff schedules. One staff reported allowing even just 30 minutes of work time between counseling sessions or other activities in camp. Some individuals spend their time working as tutors or unit librarians, landscaping or conducting ground maintenance, doing light custodial work, working as teaching assistants during on-campus instruction, or assisting in the kitchen.

Probation staff communicate with Service Centers throughout the process; youth do not have any direct contact with Service Centers until they are released from detention and pick up their checks (or, if they cannot pick up their checks, the Service Center mails them). Interviewees indicated that the lack of direct contact with Service Center staff was one primary difference between the camps/halls programs and the community programs.

Some youth might not complete their full hours, and there are several reasons why this might happen. Some exit early from camp or lack adequate time because of academic and other programming. In addition, the juvenile camps/halls follow a behavior management program that outlines rules and expectations for detained youth and involves a system of rewards and consequences that depend on a youth's behavior (Fletcher, 2023). Youth must have achieved a certain level within

the program to be able to participate in workforce programming, and, if there is a change in their behavior that results in a change in their level, they might no longer be eligible. Some youth also lose interest in the program. However, even if their participation is paused for any reason, youth can resume the program if they are still eligible (or regain eligibility) within the time frame designated by the agency (typically within the fiscal year). After being released, youth are given the opportunity to complete the program in the community.

Community

Eligibility and Referral

Any probation youth in the community in Los Angeles County is eligible to participate in the JJCPA-funded workforce programming. They must be referred by their Probation Officer via the Probation Department's standardized referral database, the Prospective Authorization Utilization Review (PAUR). According to our interviews, approximately 300 youth in the community were referred per year, and about 25 percent of those referred ended up enrolling. One Service Center reported serving about 15 to 20 JJCPA-funded youth during a typical year, accounting for only 5 to 10 percent of its clients.

Referrals come to the program from one of three potential avenues:

- direct from juvenile camps/halls
- via a Probation Officer (not directly leaving camps/halls)
- via an application on which the youth identifies that they are on probation, which triggers a reverse referral process.

Direct from Camps/Halls

Staff explained that all youth released from camps/halls participate in a transition process that includes the identification of aftercare services supported by a multidisciplinary team. If a youth participated in workforce programs in camps, the transition team flags the youth as eligible, and their Probation Officer is responsible for submitting the referral, which they can do prior to or following the youth's release.

Via Probation Officers

Probation youth do not have to start the process at a juvenile camp or hall. For community referrals, youth can be referred by Probation Officers, who submit a request form through PAUR. Once the Probation Department's PAUR unit confirms the youth is eligible, they send the referral to the DEO via the ARS, and the DEO assigns the youth to a Service Center on the basis of that youth's location. The Service Center contacts the youth directly to enroll them and initiate the workforce program. If the youth does not respond after three attempts, the AJCC sends a message through the ARS system for their Probation Officer or Department of Children and Family Services case manager to contact them.

Direct Applicants

Community referrals are primarily initiated through Probation Officers; however, there are some occasions in which a youth applies for workforce programming on their own and reports that they are on probation. In this case, the Service Center would make a reverse referral in which they would request that the Probation Department submit a PAUR. The request must be approved through the PAUR unit before the youth can be enrolled under JJCPA funding; interviewees say this process takes approximately three to ten days. During the referral process, Service Centers screen youth and ask them to provide eligibility documents and a work permit (if they are a minor). Qualifying youth are enrolled into the program. Service Centers provide workforce services to various populations; therefore, if a youth is no longer on probation, they might be eligible to participate via other funding streams.

Program Administration and Services

The Service Center provides program participants with 20 hours of PET and works with youth to identify job sites. The DEO has agreements with worksites that must be in place before the worksite is eligible to accept youth into the program. The agreements include safety walks and constant interaction between the worksite and the Service Centers. Individuals can be placed at worksites in the private and public sector (e.g., CVS, Grocery Outlet, city government, tech firms, retail, private businesses). Some organizations might do background checks that could prohibit probation youth from working there.

A Service Center might offer vouchers for participants to purchase clothing, shoes, or other items. They might also reimburse gas costs or offer L.A. Metro passes or ride share codes. The Service Centers might also refer participants to education or other training opportunities, such as earning their GED or high school diploma, attending community college, or enrolling in training programs.

Chapter 4

Implementation Findings

In this chapter, we present implementation findings for evaluation questions two and three based on our analysis of the interviews conducted with program staff members. We begin by presenting findings relevant to evaluation question two: themes related to factors shaping program implementation. We then discuss evaluation question three, focusing on staff perceptions of program effectiveness and opportunities for improvement.

Implementation Determinants

Interviewees were asked about factors that shaped the implementation of the program. These implementation factors fell under three categories: (1) completion of the program during the period of detainment, which included barriers related to the coronavirus 19 (COVID-19) pandemic; (2) coordination between Probation Department and workforce systems; and, relatedly, (3) efforts to engage probation youth in the community. The first category describes themes related to the experience of youth in camps/halls; the second category relates to processes between the agencies affecting both sets of youth, particularly those transitioning from the camps/halls to the community; and the third category relates to the experiences of youth in the community setting. Within each category, we mapped implementation determinants on to CFIR, presenting a table of barriers and facilitators within the five CFIR domains described in Chapter 2: innovation, inner setting, outer setting, individuals, and process.

Completion of Workforce Programs in Camps/Halls

Staff identified several barriers and successes to the implementation of workforce programming in the camps/halls. The primary challenge mentioned was the inability of youth to complete the program because of an unplanned transfer to another detention center, release from detention into the community, or the loss of program eligibility. To be eligible, youth had to achieve and maintain a specified score determined by their behavior, academic performance, and program attendance. If their score decreased under the threshold, their participation was paused until they achieved the score again. Staff also said that some youth simply lost interest and stopped participating.

There are also instances in which youth might be interested in the program but unable to participate because they do not achieve the behavioral score to be eligible. In addition, there are times that youth complete the program and could use more hours but are limited by the number set by the program.

Staff also reported challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, which was ongoing during the time of our interviews (December 2021 to June 2022). At that time, youth were required to be vaccinated

for COVID-19 to participate in the program, and some youth who were otherwise interested in the program refused vaccination and could not apply for medical exemptions. Service Center staff were restricted from visiting camps/halls during that time, which limited engagement. As one Service Center interviewee said, "In pandemic times, there's no interaction with the youth, it's just administrative." Lastly, staff indicated that the detained population was markedly different at the time of our interviews compared with before the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff speculated that this was because of the release and diversion of youth with lower crimes, which means there is a larger percentage of youth with higher needs in the system. Overall, staff say this led to decreased referrals for workforce programs and a higher number of detained high-risk youth with serious offenses in the program, though the impact of the latter is unclear.

Staff also discussed facilitators to the implementation of the program in camps/halls. One facilitator was the ability to coordinate work hours with other activities, such as school and other provided services. Staff also described efforts to provide equal access to undocumented youth in the camps/halls by creating a policy to ensure that undocumented youth could be enrolled and receive stipends, though they could not technically be considered employees.

As described previously, implementation determinants were divided into those that were challenges for implementation and those that helped the implementation succeed. Some barriers to program recruitment—such as youth release from detention and fewer referrals because of increased diversion practices—can be successes for the youth. These barriers were described simply as factors related to a decrease in participation; staff were not implying that the program hoped to have more youth in camps/halls. The challenges and facilitators are mapped to CFIR determinants in Table 4.1. Many program implementation challenges are related to the COVID-19 pandemic and likely do not affect the program at the time of this writing. Inner setting challenges are related to the nature of the program within camps/halls. Lastly, staff perceive processes to be facilitating program implementation.

Table 4.1. Implementation Determinants for Completion of Workforce Programs in Camps/Halls

CFIR Domain	Challenge to Program Implementation	Facilitator to Program Implementation
Innovation	• Youth are limited by the number of hours set by the program. • Youth are unable to complete the program because of losing program eligibility. • Many youth never achieve the behavioral score to be eligible.	• No themes emerged in interviews.
Individuals	• Youth lose interest and stop participating. • Youth refuse COVID-19 vaccination requirements.	• No themes emerged in interviews.
Inner setting	• Youth are unable to complete the program because of an unplanned transfer to another detention center.	• No themes emerged in interviews.

CFIR Domain	Challenge to Program Implementation	Facilitator to Program Implementation
	• Youth are unable to complete the program because of their release from detention to the community.[a]	
Outer setting	• The COVID-19 pandemic limited engagement from Service Center staff in camps/halls. • There were decreased referrals compared with pre–COVID-19 referral numbers (likely because of greater diversion).[a]	• No themes emerged in interviews.
Process	• No themes emerged in interviews.	• Youth have the ability to coordinate work hours with other activities. • Undocumented youth could participate and receive stipends via a policy provision.

[a] Though this is a challenge for program implementation, it is ultimately a positive experience for youth to be released to the community.

Coordination Between Probation Department and Workforce Systems

Interviewees particularly noted coordination challenges with the Probation Department and workforce tracking systems and processes, which affect the transition of detained youth from camps/halls to the community and affect probation youth in the community.

Staff explained that detained youth have an official transition process to create an official exit plan and prepare for release. Providers from all referred programs actively take part in this program; therefore, theoretically, youth who are eligible for workforce programs (or are already participating in them but have not finished the hours) should be connected to Service Center providers to introduce the program, conduct an assessment, and discuss the youth's job profile before they are released. However, staff note that this rarely happens. The reasons for the lack of coordination are not fully clear, but staff noted that there are barriers at every stage of this process. First, although staff explained that youth in camps/halls with incomplete workforce hours would be flagged as eligible for community participation, it was not clear how other youth might be flagged as eligible. As one staff member described, "I think that [in the] transition from camp to community, the kinks haven't been ironed out yet because the [staff] are supposed to identify and let me know. . . . That usually doesn't happen, it hasn't been very smooth." Second, it seemed as though the Probation Officer was responsible for reading the flag and making the connection to the Service Center, but interviewees said this was not always prioritized. Interviewees suggested that Probation Officers might not be well-informed about the program or might not believe their youth is a good fit for the program. One interviewee explained this may have to do "with some of the DPOs [Deputy Probation Officers] not knowing exactly the program because they don't deal with it day-to-day. That's where the issue comes in." The Probation Officer might think the youth is not ready for work experience or might urge the youth to focus on finishing school instead, even if the youth is interested in the program. Third, staff

noted that because each Service Center is assigned to a specific camp or hall, the closest Service Center to a youth's home is likely different than the one assigned to a particular camp/hall. Therefore, when youth are released, Service Center staff in those youths' communities do not have an appropriate funding mechanism to travel to the camp/hall to connect with them.

Another barrier to system coordination that interviewees discussed was the lack of synchronization between Probation Department and DEO administrative tracking systems. Both agencies require participants to be tracked using their own systems, which do not communicate with each other. This amounts to a lot of paperwork to make sure that each agency has all the appropriate data. It is time consuming to upload and scan eligibility forms, and if there are errors on either agency's side, they create a long process of corrections.

Staff made it clear that each system is needed, and workforce staff explained how their system made internal processes smoother by helping to input Probation Officer referrals to Service Centers in real time. This helped workforce staff save time and made the referral process more efficient. It also allowed staff to track which camps/halls had recruitment gaps and report the information quickly to the Probation Department.

The lack of coordination between these systems appeared to be especially salient when probation youth probation that were already in the community were identified as eligible to participate. As explained in Chapter 3, probation youth not referred through camp release must obtain a reverse referral, which interviewees note is an arduous and time-consuming process. During this process, probation youth can lose interest or become difficult to contact. Staff also report this process is relatively rare because it is difficult for workforce staff to find probation youth in the community: Probation Officers must either identify the youth and refer them, or the youth must show up and apply on their own. In the latter case, the application process would reveal that they are on probation, triggering JJCPA funding.

At the time of our interviews, workforce and Probation Department staff reported awareness of how their lack of coordination affected youth participation, and they were working to resolve the issue. Staff shared that the agencies formed a team to improve the camp-to-community transition for youth. Out of the partnership, the team added Service Center trainings on best practices for working with probation youth, and DEO implemented the Fair Chance hiring program to encourage hiring staff with lived experience. Service Centers were working with the Probation Department to inform Probation Officers about the program. DEO created a procedure for the Probation Department to reach out to nonresponsive youth in the community and encourage them to enroll in the program, and DEO hosted regional calls with the Probation Department twice a year to discuss challenges. Staff hoped to improve on this communication by increasing the number of meetings between the agencies. Staff reported that the partnership helped improve communication and facilitated their ability to share what helps and hinders the enrollment process for youth.

As with the program implementation determinants in the camps/halls, we divided determinants for the coordination between the agencies into challenges and facilitators and mapped them onto CFIR domains (Table 4.2). This category of implementation is distinct from the previous section on camp and hall settings and the upcoming section on community settings because the coordination is not a setting but a process. We present CFIR domains for understanding the implementation context but advise caution in comparing this table with Table 4.1 or Table 4.3, presented in the next

subsection. Although it could appear that the challenges related to coordination between the Probation Department and workforce systems are not as widespread because they are largely limited to the process domain, the process challenges listed here have wide and potent effects for all youth who receive (or who could be receiving) the program. Moreover, the challenges are at the process level, suggesting that there is a possibility for remediation.

Table 4.2. Implementation Determinants for Coordination Between Probation Department and Workforce Systems

CFIR Domain	Challenge to Program Implementation	Facilitator to Program Implementation
Innovation	• No themes emerged in interviews.	• No themes emerged in interviews.
Individuals	• No themes emerged in interviews.	• No themes emerged in interviews.
Inner setting	• Youth are unable to complete the program because of an unplanned transfer to another detention center.	• No themes emerged in interviews.
Outer setting	• No themes emerged in interviews.	• No themes emerged in interviews.
Process	• Eligibility for community referral is not clear. • Service Center staff cannot connect with youth in camps/halls that are different than the ones to which they are assigned. • There is a lack of synchronization between the Probation Department and DEO administrative tracking systems. • Reverse referrals are time-consuming, and youth are lost within this process.	• A team was formed to resolve coordination issues between the workforce and Probation Department, and it had multiple successes, including improved communications.

Engaging Youth in the Community

Even if the camp-to-community transition successfully connects youth to Service Centers, they can still face challenges in continuing with the program. For example, sometimes the assigned Service Center might be geographically distant from the youth—for example, if the closest Service Center in their area was at capacity or otherwise not accepting new clients. Staff also noted that gang involvement could keep someone from accepting services in areas where rival gangs are present.

It can also be difficult to recruit and keep probation youth engaged in the program because of lack of interest or competing priorities, such as school, counseling, and activities with family or friends. As one interviewee explained, "The world draws them back into the neighborhood or to their friends or whatever it was that they were involved with prior to going in." Additionally, caregivers might not want their child to work, or youth might recidivate and return to camp, truncating their program

participation. Youth might also face systemic challenges, such as being unhoused, having to worry about having their basic needs met, or experiencing violence or otherwise feeling unsafe. Because of these recruitment and retention barriers, few youth participate in the program in community settings.

Other barriers to engagement included time and administrative hurdles related to procuring the necessary documents to enroll (e.g., Social Security card, birth certificate). Some youth might be otherwise eligible but not able to participate because of their citizenship status or outdated documentation of citizenship. Staff also mentioned the barrier of lack of access to a computer for a virtual intake appointment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lastly, respondents noted that referrals were down by as much as one-half since 2019. Before then, sites were allowed to use JJCPA funding for at-promise youth who had never had contact with the justice system. They cited the change in eligibility as a barrier to program participation because, before the change, they were quite successful at recruiting and maintaining at-promise youth. One interviewee shared the successes that they saw for at-promise youth:

> It's definitely very helpful. We have a few success stories from individuals who got permanently hired from the job they were doing their 100 hours of work experience on. I definitely see it as something great. I saw it firsthand when we first started at the continuation school level when we first started with at-risk youth. We saw youth who were about to stop going to continuation school increase their attendance and increase their delivery of assignments so that they could be eligible to participate in the program. They didn't want to lose their place. We kept getting [questions like] "Can we participate again after the 120 hours? Can I work here? Can I work there? Can I work at the school?"

Staff highlighted some facilitators to engaging youth in community settings. They discussed the importance of being nonjudgmental toward probation youth and ensuring equal access to the program. Some worksites might require background checks and, thus, will not allow probation youth to work. To counter this, Service Centers purposefully partner with several worksites that do not require background checks, and they do not disclose probation status to worksites. Service Centers often provided direct resources—such as gift cards for professional clothing and transportation funds to travel to worksites—or connections to other resources as needed. One Service Center staff member described a specific training for working with probation youth that taught them how and why to give positive reinforcement, how and why to be specific (and follow through) in planning activities with the youth, and how to be nonjudgmental.

Table 4.3 depicts implementation determinants by CFIR domain. Here we see the greatest challenges at the individual (program recipient) and outer setting domains, which are more difficult to address. However, challenges with the coordination process, as discussed in the previous section, might exacerbate recruitment challenges seen at these domains.

Table 4.3. Implementation Determinants for Engaging Youth in the Community

CFIR Domain	Challenge to Program Implementation	Facilitator to Program Implementation
Innovation	• There was a change in eligibility to no longer allow at-promise youth.	• Service Centers purposefully partner with several worksites that do not require background checks, and they do not disclose youths' probation statuses to worksites.
Individuals	• Staff have difficulty recruiting and engaging because of youths' competing priorities (e.g., school, other activities). • Staff have difficulty recruiting and engaging because of youths' lack of interest. • Caregivers might not want their child to work. • Youth might recidivate, truncating participation. • Some youth could be otherwise eligible but not able to participate because of their citizenship status or having outdated documentation of citizenship.	• No themes emerged in interviews.
Inner setting	• No themes emerged in interviews.	• Service Centers often provided direct resources—such as gift cards for professional clothing and transportation funds to travel to work sites—or connections to other resources as needed. • Staff described the importance of having nonjudgmental attitudes toward probation youth and ensuring equal access to the program.
Outer setting	• Gang involvement might deter youth from accepting services in areas where rival gangs are present. • Youth and their families face systemic challenges (e.g., lack of access to basic needs). • Youth might have lacked access to a computer for virtual intake appointments during the COVID-19 pandemic.	• No themes emerged in interviews.
Process	• There are time and administrative hurdles related to procuring the necessary documents to enroll (e.g., Social Security card, birth certificate). • The geographic distance of a Service Center can be a challenge for youth.	• No themes emerged in interviews.

Staff Perceptions of Effectiveness

Perception of Program Effectiveness

Staff members largely believed that this program is effectively meeting the needs of the youth that it serves. Most staff members discussed the program benefits to youth and the positive feedback they received from youth on completion of the program. For example, staff members consider work experience to be valuable for probation youth, both in the community and in camps/halls. As one interviewee said, "They get to really jump in headfirst in their first real employment. It's a good opportunity for them, it's a real morale booster, and it does help with behaviors in the facilities as well."

Interviewees noted the financial benefit to youth, particularly because low-income youth are overrepresented in the justice system. They also believed the PET was a great resource for learning about financial literacy, valued skills in the workforce, and résumé and cover letter development. Some youth are placed in permanent positions on finishing the program, and staff members suggested that other youth demonstrate improvements in school performance.

Interviewees believed the program to be popular in the camps/halls, though they noted that there is a marked disinterest among probation youth in the community. According to staff, youth evaluation responses were also positive; youth expressed appreciation to the staff that introduced them to the program, a desire to continue participation beyond their hours, and gratitude for the opportunity to get paid.

Perceived Opportunities for Improvement

Most improvements suggested by interviewees involved streamlining the community referral process and the camp-to-community transition for youth. Staff recommended connecting youth to Service Centers and creating a plan for youth in camps/halls prior to release that would increase tracking and communication between Probation Officers, Service Centers, and the youth and their families.

Interviewees also suggested some loftier ideas for reforming the referral system, such as automating referrals directly from Probation Department's system to DEO's system, which they report some other agencies' systems permit. Alternately, they suggest returning to the previous referral process in which the Probation Officer would bring the youth to the Service Center and have them enroll on the spot. Others suggested that the county should mandate that the Probation Department show proof that youth are enrolled in the program on release to increase the number of youth enrolled and decrease the amount of time it would take to do so.

Some other recommendations included increasing the number of hours youth could work, adding related programming (e.g., degree-focused programs, arts programs), adding mentorship components, and hiring staff with lived experience or specialization in working with this population of youth. As one staff member said,

> [Staff] need to be better equipped to handle that specific population. Whether it's employing some DPOs on our program or ex-DPOs that might have more of an idea

> of the process would help so we can be a little more anticipative in terms of some of the challenges that the youth face or will be facing.

Staff also suggested that eligibility changes—specifically, increasing the scope to include at-promise in addition to justice-involved youth—could increase participation in the program. They also recommended that Probation Officers assist youth in the community to obtain their documents because it is challenging for youth to gather everything on their own.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendation

JJCPA funds workforce programming for youth who are detained in camps/halls and those on probation in the community. According to interviews, workforce programs operate well within juvenile camps/halls where youth have structured contact with program administrators, few distractions, and highly controlled schedules. Although eligibility criteria prevent many youths from participating, and others have barriers to consistent or complete participation, staff perceive the program to be enticing and beneficial to those who are able to participate.

Programming for probation youth in the community is more fraught; fewer youth participate, and there are many barriers affecting the implementation of the program. Coordination between workforce and Probation Department systems caused additional work for the agencies that led to lower enrollment. Probation Officers seem to have varying perspectives about whether the program is right for youths; this might stem from the Probation Officer's understanding of youth needs, but the program and the Probation Officer's perspective should be transparently discussed with individual youths and their transition teams. Moreover, once in the community, probation youth face competing priorities and community risk factors that might lead to a lack of participation. Previous iterations of the program had success engaging at-promise youth, suggesting that this is a target population that could be easier to serve in community-based settings.

When mapped to CFIR, it is clear that community setting recruitment challenges are within the least modifiable domains (individuals and outer setting), but when considering the camp-to-community transition and overall coordination affecting all settings (including community), challenges are distinctly within the process domain. This is important to note because these factors are more likely within the program's control.

Limitations

When interpreting the findings of this evaluation, it is important to keep certain limitations in mind. First, our interviews took place from December 2021 to June 2022. During this time, the COVID-19 pandemic still had a substantial impact on the functioning of the program. As the impact of the pandemic decreased, the nature of the implementation challenges and facilitators could have continued to evolve.

Another limitation was the lack of quantitative data available for this program. We did receive limited data on youth who had been referred to the program in fiscal years 2020 to 2021, 2021 to 2022, and 2022 to 2023, including date of birth, ZIP code, services to which youth were referred, and the date of the referral. However, we were unable to determine which of those youth had gone on to enroll in the program, and among those who enrolled, whether they received the specific services to which they had been referred. Because many of the themes identified through the qualitative work

centered around challenges engaging youth who had been referred, we opted not to include data on referred youth because they might not be representative of those youth who go on to enroll in the program and receive services. Improving the quality of quantitative data collected on this program will be important for future evaluation efforts.

Lastly, we were unable to interview youth participants. We worked directly with program leadership on the process and recruitment strategy but, given project resources and challenges with recruitment in previous evaluation efforts (Whitaker et al., 2024), we were unable to recruit program participants.

Recommendations

We identified the following recommendations for the program based on our findings.

Improve the process of connecting eligible youth to the workforce program during the camp-to-community transition. Youth released from detention should be actively screened for workforce program eligibility. The transition process already connects Probation Officers, youth and families, and service providers, so it is a natural place to add in the process of referring youth to workforce programming. If a given young person is eligible, the transition team, including the Probation Officer, the youth, and their family, should discuss whether the program is a good fit for the youth—and this should include consideration of the youth's interests, priorities, and goals. If the program is a good fit, they should be offered placement and connected directly to a Service Center during the transition process (prior to release). This process would provide a point of transparency for Probation Officers who might not know about the program to learn about it, and for Probation Officers who are unsure whether the program is a good fit to actively discuss it with the youth. It would also provide a concrete connection to the Service Center, helping both the youth and the Service Center track and communicate program activities. During this time, staff could endeavor to ensure that the Service Center location is appropriate for the youth. For Service Center staff to visit the camps/halls to meet and orient the youth prior to release, as is typically done by providers during the transition process, a mechanism must be put in place for Service Center staff to travel to the camp.

Systematize and improve coordination between the Probation Department and DEO. The Probation Department and DEO are large agencies that are unlikely to change or exempt policies for the referral and tracking systems that they use for their programs. Because there is no direct communication between the systems used by the two agencies, they must create agreed protocols to quickly enroll and efficiently track youth. At the time of our interviews, agencies had begun to resolve issues caused by the lack of coordination, but more-frequent and regular communication is needed. Agencies should meet at least monthly and determine specific data reports to be regularly presented and discussed at these meetings. The meetings should allow for a discussion of issues and solutions.

Allow youth to start receiving workforce program services while they procure documents. Youth who need to procure birth certificates and Social Security cards might struggle with the administrative processes and become disengaged. If they were allowed to begin receiving services while they obtain their documents, they would be continuously connected to the Service Center that could help them with administrative processes. They would also be receiving their work stipends, allowing

them to more easily overcome other obstacles they might be facing, such as transportation or administrative costs associated with the process of procuring documents.

If needed, expand the program to include at-promise youth. Every effort should be made to improve processes and coordination, as recommended previously, to increase program participation for eligible youth. If participation remains low, particularly if the recommendations result in finding that many probation youth in the community are not a good match for the program, then program expansion to include at-promise youth should be considered. If the program is expanded, DEO and Service Centers should be mindful of evidence about maintaining a low-enough rate of work hours so as not to disrupt any prosocial activities (e.g., youth sports, mentorship programs). Evidence suggests that youth employed more than 20 hours a week might experience adverse outcomes related to delinquency and other problem behaviors (Bachman et al., 2013; Bachman et al., 2003).

Abbreviations

AJCC	America's Job Centers of California
ARS	automated referral system
CFIR	Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DEO	Department of Economic Opportunity
DPO	Deputy Probation Officer
EWDD	City of Los Angeles Economic and Workforce Development Department
JJCPA	Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act
PAUR	Personnel Authorization Utilization Review
PET	professional enrichment training
TAY WOW	Transition-Age Youth World of Work

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