

Designing Youth Diversion & Development in Los Angeles County



A Collaborative History Told With Youth Leaders

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May 2022



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The WHY (and How) of YDD (Youth Diversion and Development)

In 2019, after years of youth and community advocacy, Los Angeles County launched a youth diversion initiative. This is the story of how we got here.

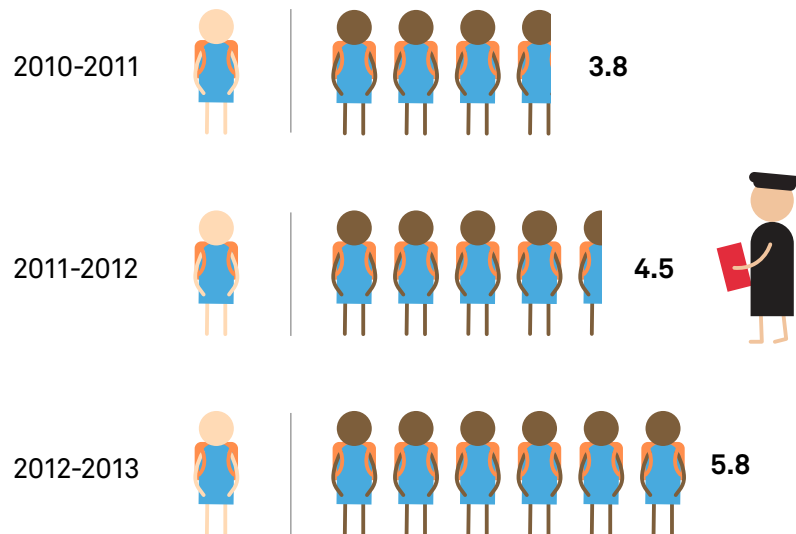


Message to readers from around the country: Los Angeles County is steering thousands of young people away from the legal system and into community-based services. The county's diversion model is based on evidence that avoiding arrests and formal court processing typically improves youth well-being and leads to fewer harmful outcomes. This booklet tells our LA County story to peers across the country who may be seeking to significantly expand diversion for young people, and center and uplift youth leadership in the process.

Why We Needed To Do Something

Young people in LA County have been pulled into the justice system at alarming rates. This has been disproportionately happening to young people of color.

From 2010-2013, Black students were given criminal citations 3 to 6 times as often as White students and these ratios got even worse if you looked at further levels of justice-involvement like arrests and court appointments.



Most of these citations were for things that could have been diverted (for example, being late to class or jumping a turnstile).



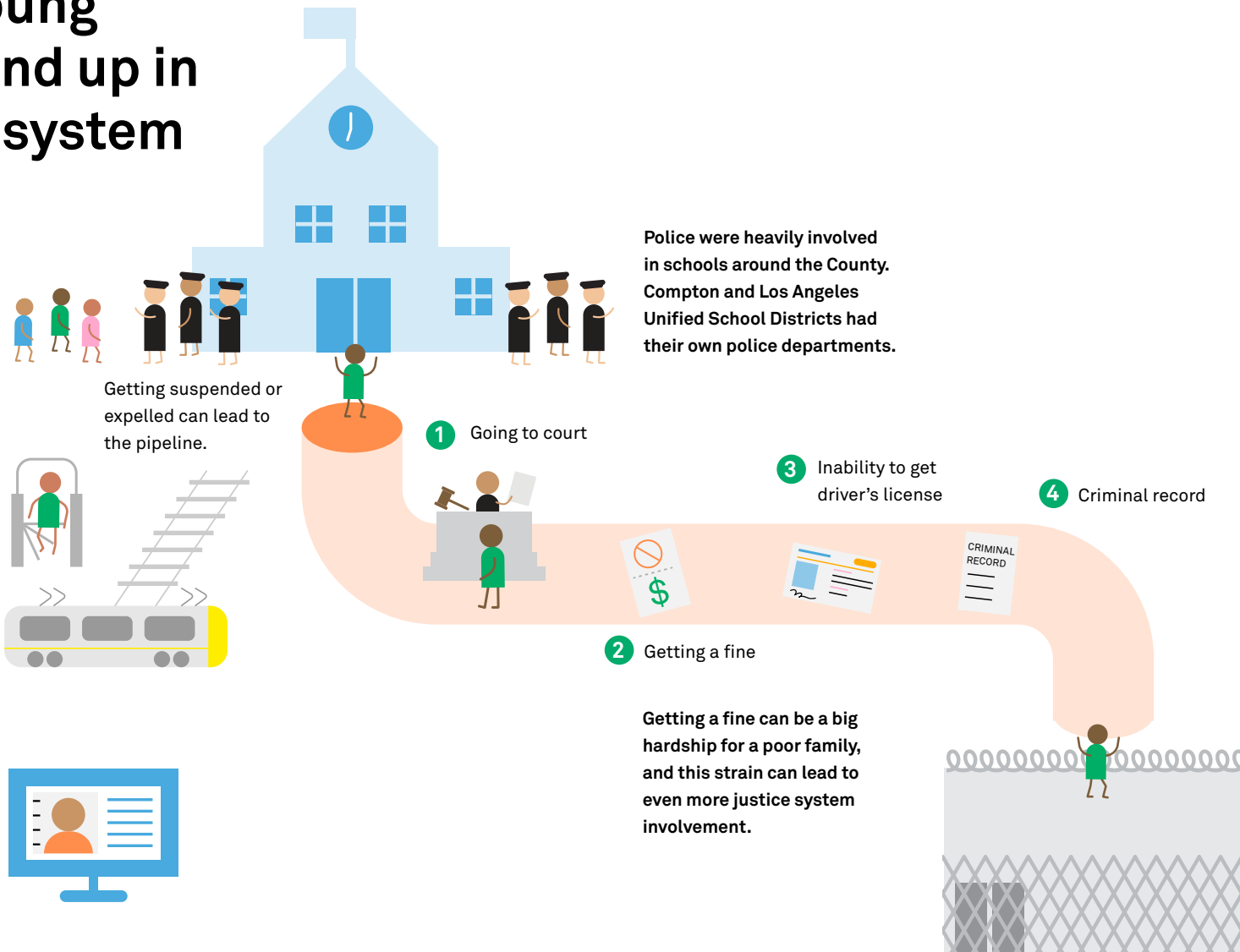
Read [this report](#) on the School to Prison pipeline and Disproportionality by the Labor Community Strategy Center

There are too many ways for young people to end up in the justice system

A citation for missing school could lead to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Some students couldn't afford public transportation so they had to hop subway gates in order to get to school. This could result in citations that would follow them for years to come.

Other kids were placed onto a gang database due to violating curfew laws.

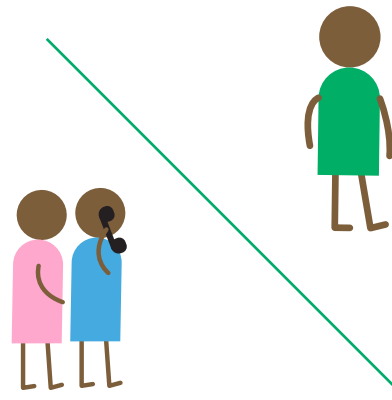


Justice system involvement and exclusion from school without any counseling or support led to harmful rather than restorative impacts

Before YDD was established, even when young people were referred to “diversion” programs, there was no central definition or oversight so they did not always get connected with programs that were effective or supportive. Depending on where a young person was, they may have been referred to “boot camps” or other program types that research shows can lead to worse outcomes for youth.



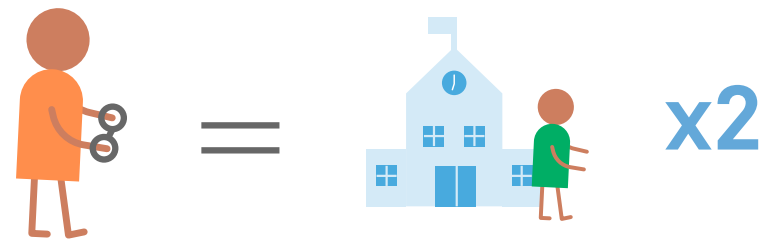
This boot camp didn't support my development. Instead, it made me feel scared and traumatized and kept me from feeling safe enough to grow.



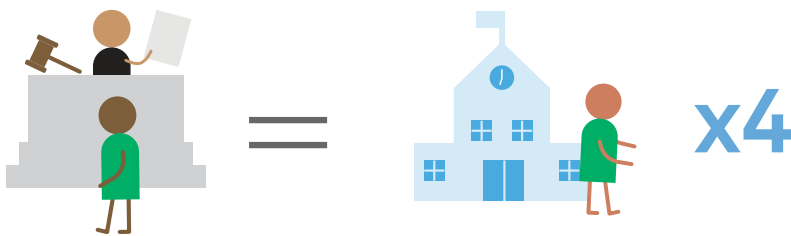
Parents were often not included in or informed about what was happening to their child.

Young people's needs were not being met.

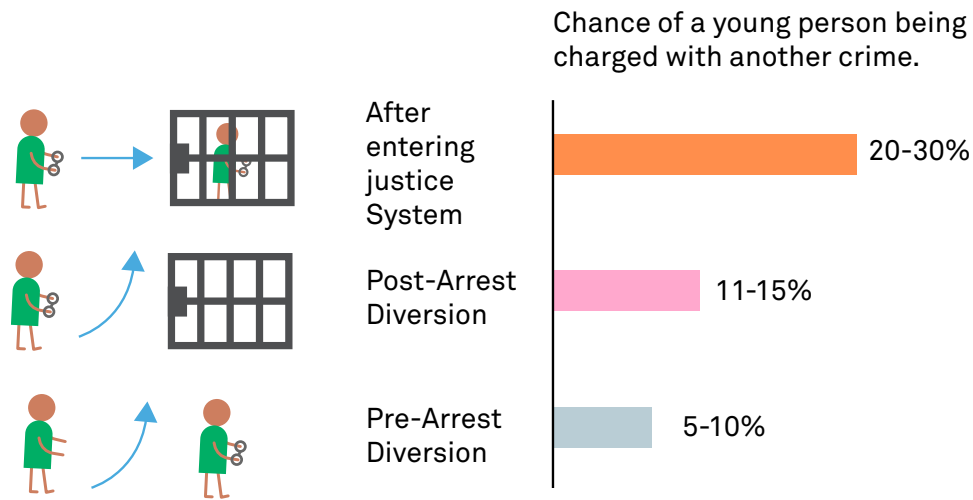
Being involved with the justice system can lead to many other negative outcomes



Even a first-time arrest doubles a young person's odds of dropping out of high school.



A first-time court appearance quadruples it.



Youth who are arrested are more likely to be charged again than similar youth who are referred to diversion.

Something had to change, and young people had to be a part of it

The solution had to be something that wasn't just diversion but development and support. Before 2017 there were not many spaces, if any, for young people to have influence or say in youth services. Youth leaders have been working to create more spaces for youth voice and fulfill the need for youth leadership.



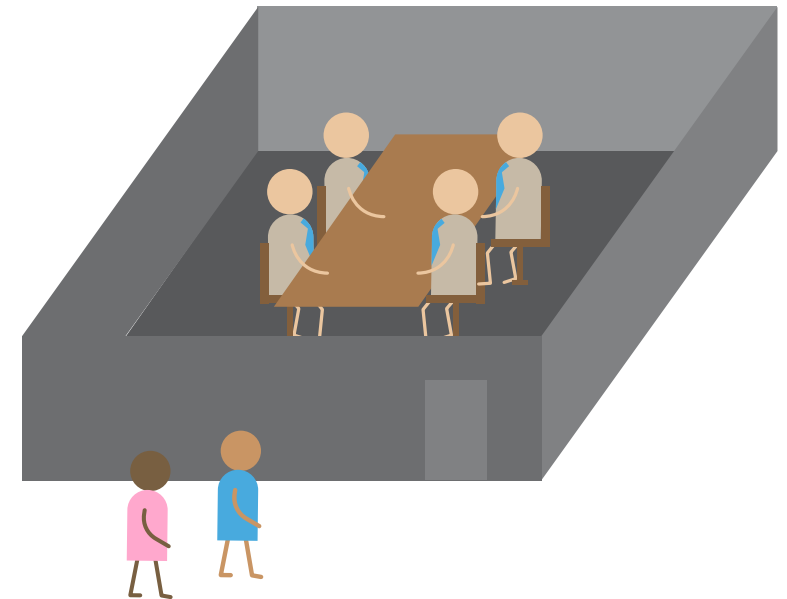
How YDD Came To Be

Community organizations and young people demanded change for decades to get where Los Angeles County is today.

In 2016, activism on school truancy and school discipline led to the County's creation of a multidisciplinary planning committee tasked with answering the question "How should Los Angeles County divert youth away from the justice system?"

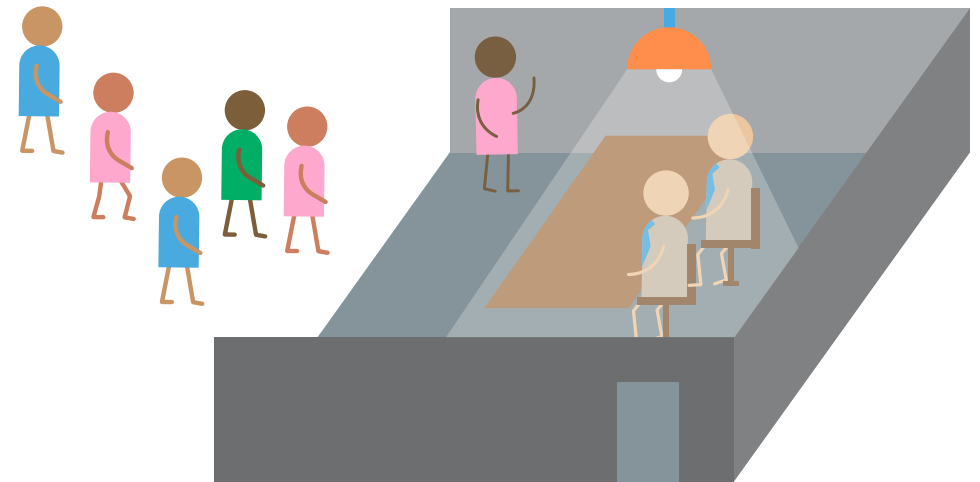


Organizations like the Youth Justice Coalition, Public Counsel, Anti-Recidivism Coalition, Children's Defense Fund California, Urban Peace Institute, CADRE, Community Rights Campaign, ACLU, and agencies like the Department of Public Health, Chief Executive Office, Los Angeles County Office of Education, Los Angeles Unified School District and School Police, Los Angeles County Police Chief's Association, District Attorney's Office, Public Defender's Office, Alternate Public Defender's Office, Probation Department, Department of Children and Family Services, Parks and Recreation, Arts Commission, and others were part of the initial planning committee.

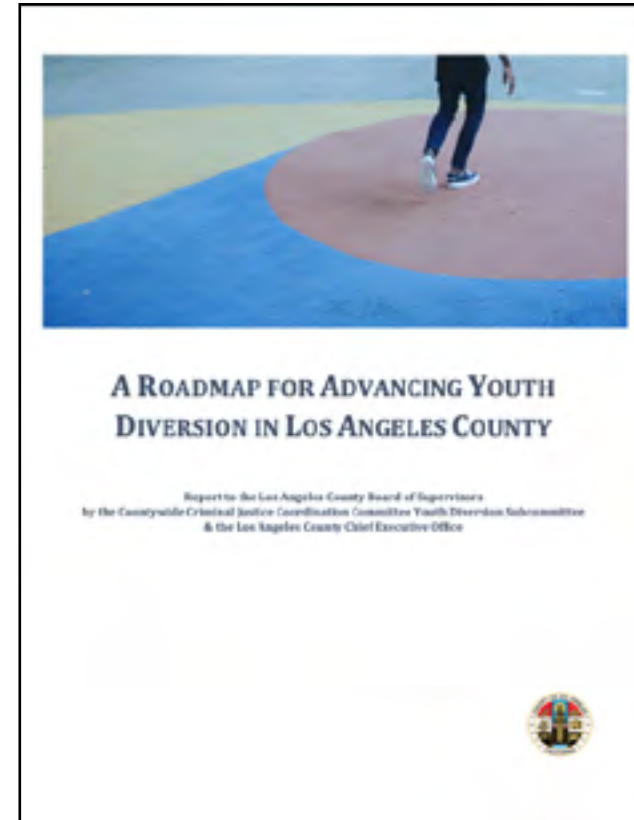
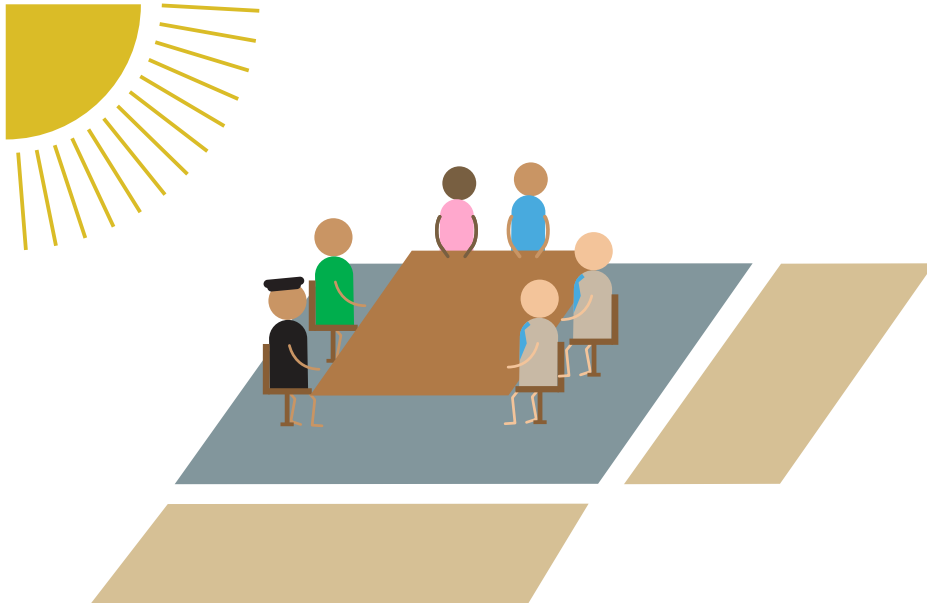


Community advocates were members of that multidisciplinary planning committee and they made sure there was space for youth to be there too. They pushed for more youth representation, stipends to compensate youth for their time, and staff support for youth participation in spaces that felt safe and supportive.

Over time, the youth participating in this collaborative committee brought the work of these meetings out of dark, traditional County boardrooms and into more light.



Young people and community members guided the County Board of Supervisors to create the Division of Youth Diversion and Development in 2017.



The creation of YDD was one of many recommendations produced in this document: [A Roadmap for Advancing Youth Diversion in Los Angeles County](#)

The 2019 Youth Development Summit was a critical event that galvanized the YDD approach.

In 2019, YDD partnered with youth and community to hold events where people could learn more about youth development and express their vision. But we still have a long way to go to center youth and community leadership and decision-making.



What if we gave young people the support that they needed instead of citations?

We wanted to create a system of community-based organizations that young people could be referred to.

We believe that all young people should have what they need to thrive and grow **and** that there are many ways to improve the youth justice system. Many can be found in a vision document called [Youth Justice Reimagined](#).

Some examples:

A model of youth diversion in which youth can be supported instead of arrested



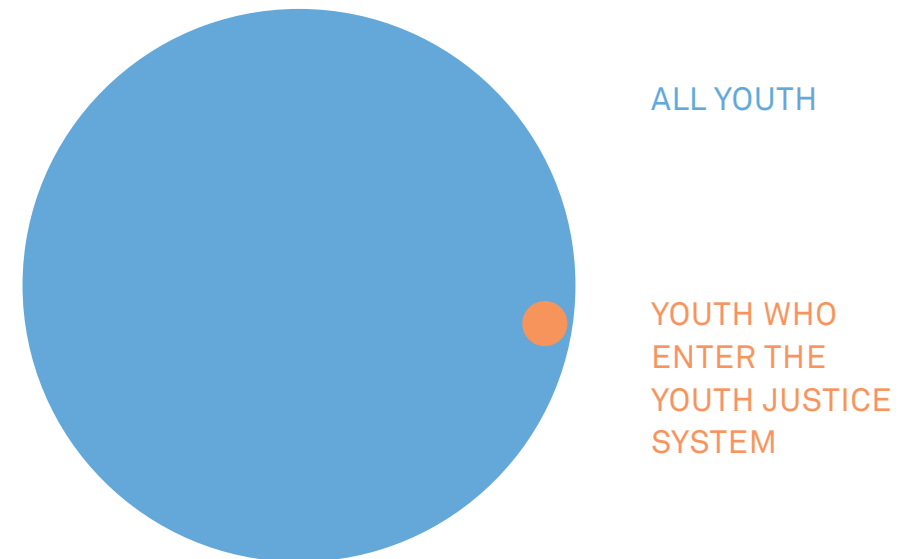
Youth centers in communities all around the County

Non-carceral support for young people who have court cases

Support for young people who can't return home

One important first step is that you have to shrink the number of people who enter the youth justice system at all.

Pre-arrest diversion made possible by YDD is an approach to shrinking that population and instead referring young people to community-based organizations for healing, support, and youth development opportunities. This addresses the root causes of what lands young people into having justice contact.



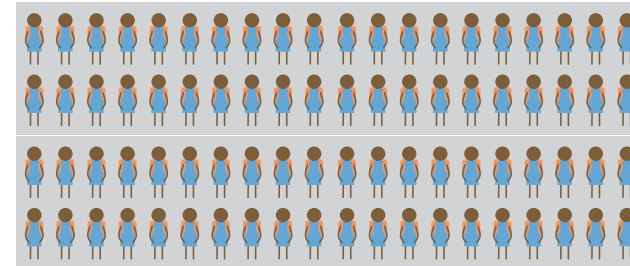
Big decision: Who is eligible for diversion?

One of the first difficult decisions that the collaborative designing the YDD Model had to make was who would be eligible for referrals to diversion.

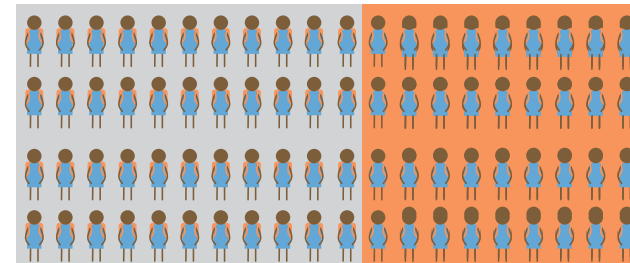
Some people wanted to see every young person have the opportunity for diversion. Other stakeholders felt that diversion should only be for young people who were cited or arrested for very low-level alleged offenses (such as alleged status offenses and petty theft).

The data showed us that Black and brown youth are disproportionately charged with felonies. If we didn't make felonies eligible for YDD diversion, we would be increasing the disproportionality of an already lop-sided system.

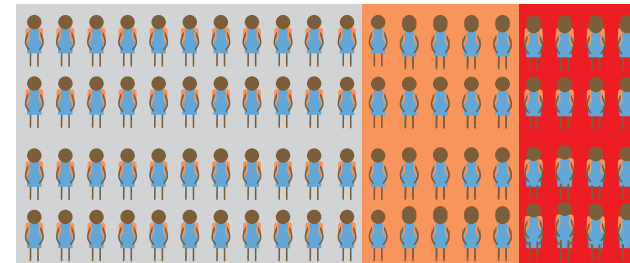
Not everyone agreed about which felonies should be eligible. After a lot of discussion, the collaborative decided to include all young people except for those that had charges listed in a specific state code*.



YDD ACCEPTS REFERRALS FOR YOUTH WHO WOULD OTHERWISE BE CHARGED WITH A CRIME



INCLUDING YOUTH WHO WOULD HAVE BEEN CHARGED WITH A FELONY

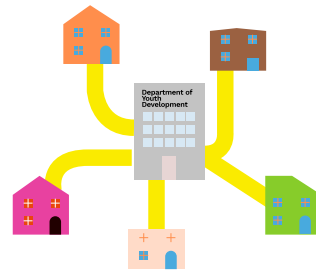


BUT NOT YOUTH WHO ARE CHARGED WITH A 707b FELONY (these cannot legally be diverted)

* From the beginning, YDD decided to make eligibility policy guided by California's Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) 625.3. Youth are eligible for diversion unless they are 14 years of age or older and have been taken into custody by an officer for the personal use of a firearm in the commission or attempted commission of a felony or for any offense listed in subdivision (b) of Section 707.

Other critical decisions for the diversion model

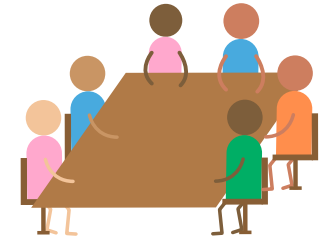
Instead of having County staff provide diversion services, we decided to contract with local community-based organizations. Staff of local organizations are more likely to reflect young people culturally and have knowledge of local resources and networks.



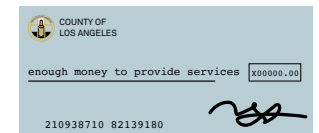
Young people work with supportive adults to set their own goals for diversion. They are successful once they substantially complete their goals. Community-based providers consider a young person's circumstances from a holistic standpoint to define completion.



The County facilitates a learning community among diversion service providers, where providers are encouraged to share best practices and policies. Rather than developing rules behind closed doors, the County brainstorms with and gathers feedback from this shared learning space.

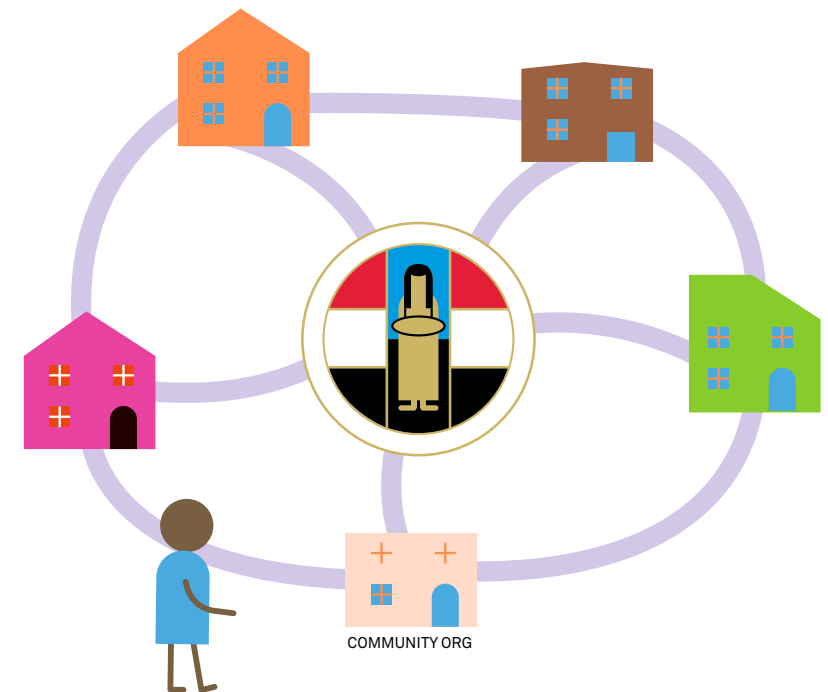


Contracts are designed to be as supportive as possible, with upfront payments and flexibility around spending.



We created the Division of Youth Diversion and Development (YDD) to shrink the number of youth who enter the criminal justice system, and to give youth and communities the resources they need

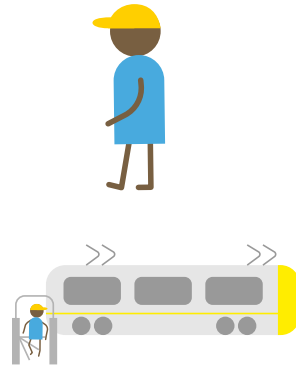
Once established, the Division of YDD selected a first cohort of referring law enforcement agencies throughout the county based on youth arrest rates and agency readiness. YDD began working with the first cohort of community-based service providers and law enforcement agencies in 2019.



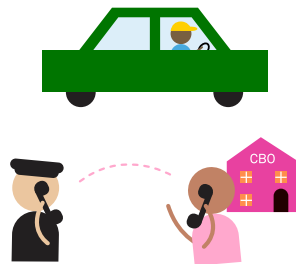
How YDD Works (as a young person would experience it)

Let's say a young person has an encounter with the police after committing a crime.

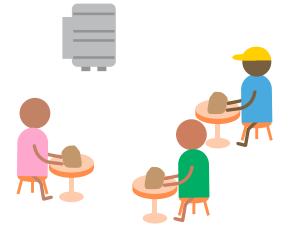
If it's a low-level alleged offense like jumping a turnstile, they might be informally referred by the police officer to a community-based diversion provider.



1 But if it's a high-level alleged offense like grand theft or assault, they may be formally diverted. Since this police department is a partner of YDD, the police officer who stops them lets them know they can work with a community-based organization located close to where they live.



2 In the old system, even a minor offense could lead to court, fines, and getting a criminal record. Now with YDD, they might instead be able to participate in a restorative justice process, receive support from a case manager, and engage in arts and recreation activities.



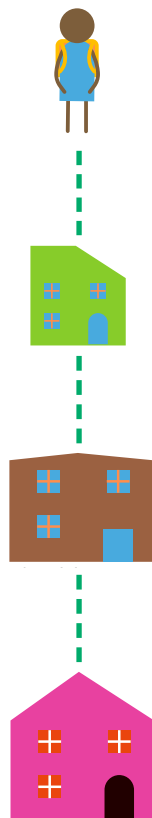
3 Within the next few days, someone from the community-based organization reaches out to them and their parent/guardian, lets them know they were referred by the police department for diversion, and sets up a time to meet.



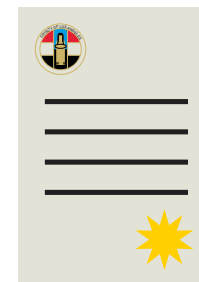
- 4 The youth meets and gets to know a case manager in the following weeks. They share their strengths, interests, passions, and challenges with the case manager, and they work together to develop a care plan to work through over the next several months.



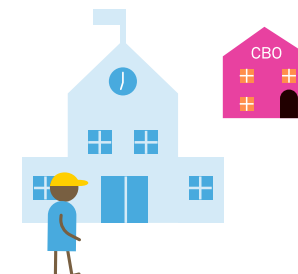
- 5 Throughout the next 6-12 months, they meet with their case manager about once per week. The case manager connects them with meaningful services (for example, educational supports, therapy and treatments, arts and recreation, and/or job development).



- 6 After they complete everything in their care plan, they graduate from their diversion program. They receive a certificate saying that they will not have any criminal record related to the incident that took place.



- 7 They continue to be in touch with the community-based organization and can call on them for support when they need it. They attend some of their classes and events from time to time, and they're part of their community network.

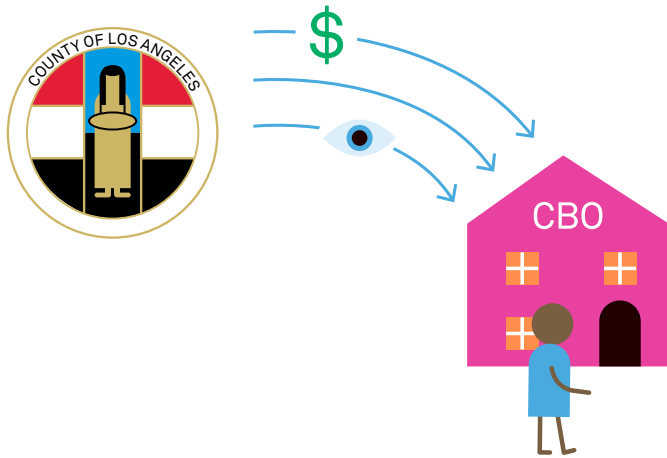


- 8 After experiencing this process, they might be able to use their first-hand knowledge to participate in shaping other youth diversion and development work in the County.

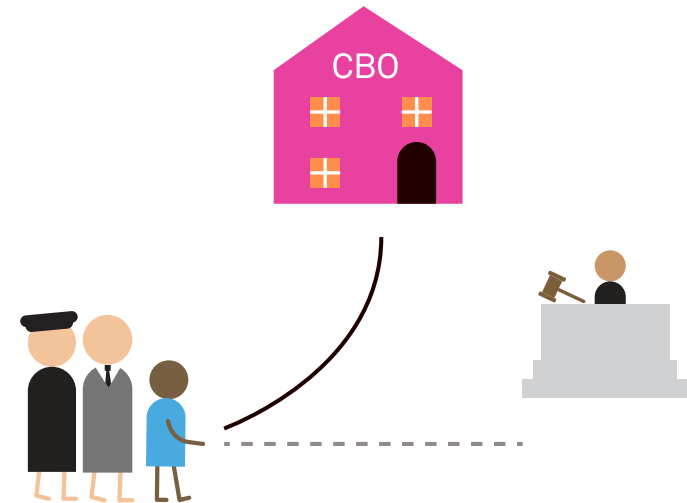


How YDD works (as a system)

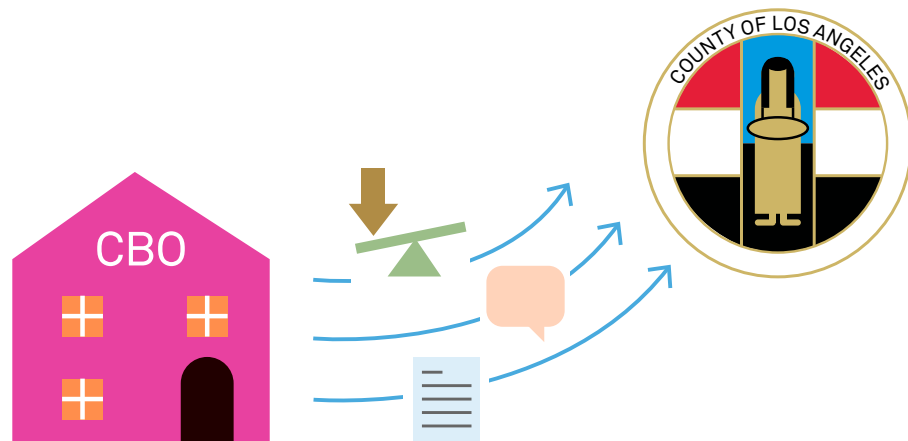
The County YDD Division funds community-based providers who provide diversion and development services to young people. YDD coordinates partnerships between those community-based providers and law enforcement agencies, probation, and the DA, who refer young people in lieu of arrest or filing a petition.



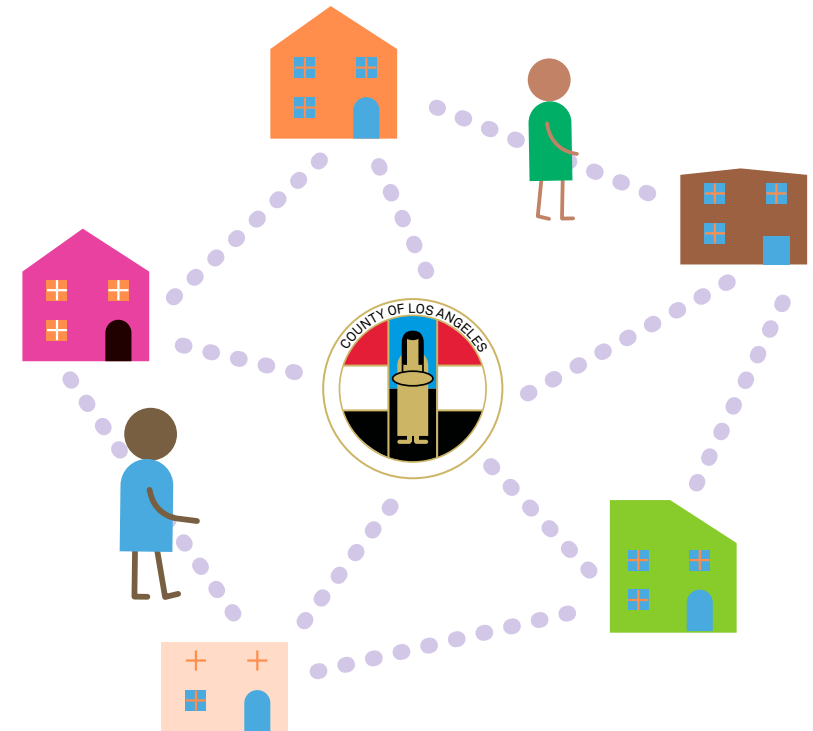
- 1 YDD provides funding, coordination, and oversight to community-based organizations (CBOs) on the ground while gaining local knowledge, expertise, and feedback from community experts.



- 2 Law enforcement agencies, the DA's office, and the probation department refer youth to partnering CBOs pre-arrest, pre-bookings, or before filing a petition. Law enforcement agencies and CBOs work together and develop a relationship.



- 3 Community-based providers are on-the-ground support systems and advocates for youth, receive coordination and resources from the County, and gain leverage to make changes at the County level.



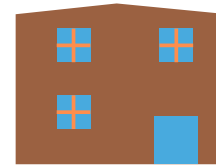
- 4 A network of partners throughout the County are available to provide youth development opportunities and supports to youth referred by YDD providers.

YDD prioritizes an individualized approach for each young person

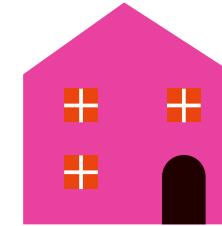
Young people are connected to community-based organizations who listen to their goals and co-design their unique YDD plans.



Mental Health Counseling



Job Training at Worksource Center



Beats & Rhymes Workshop

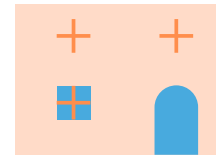
The first eight CBOs in the YDD network:

- Alma Family Services
- Asian Youth Center
- California Conference for Equality and Justice
- Centinela Youth Services
- Champions in Service
- Flintridge Center
- New Earth
- Soledad Enrichment Action

One youth may benefit from three months of art classes while another receives 12 months of restorative justice circles along with tutoring to prepare for college.



Anger Management

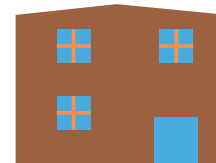


Restorative Justice Circles

Each community-based organization has their own program design and when needed, youth and the case managers that serve them can tap into resources offered by another CBO.



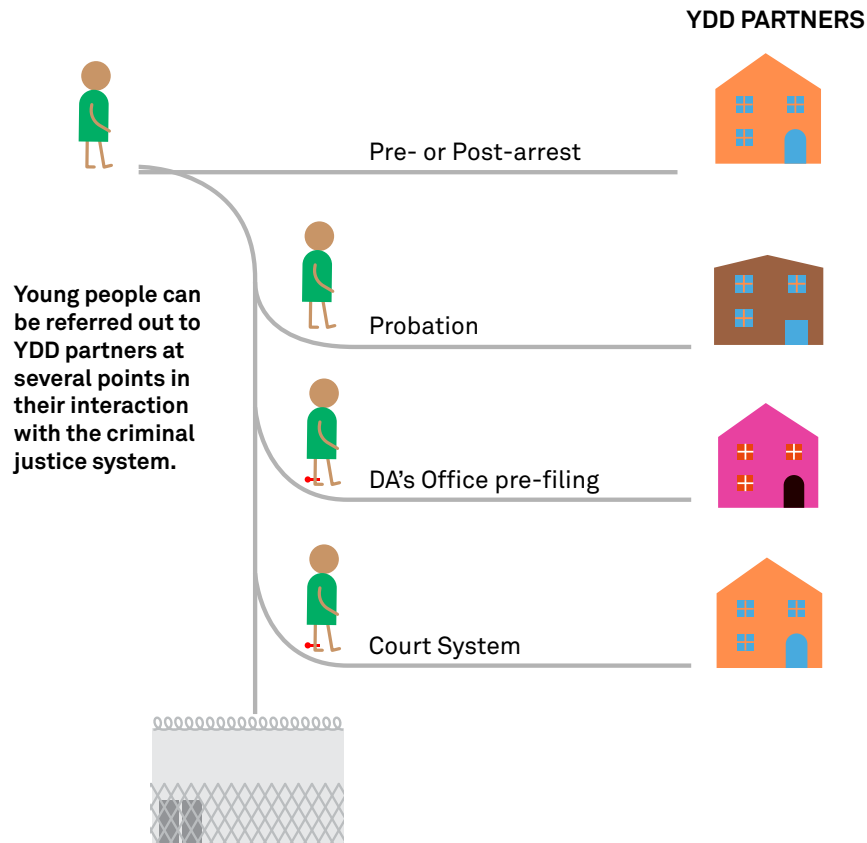
College Prep



Job Training at Worksource Center

YDD has many entry points

Youth can be referred to YDD by law enforcement agencies pre-charge or post-arrest, or even later in the process by the County District Attorney.



YDD values collaborative decision-making

Community-based organizations funded by YDD are coordinated and engaged in collaborative decision-making. They work with YDD to use data to help ensure programs are effective and equitable.



YDD invests in youth AND communities

YDD aspires to re-think how public money is spent on youth justice and youth development. Investing in community organizations that support youth development gets at the root causes of criminal justice involvement.

What could you do with \$10,000 for youth justice?

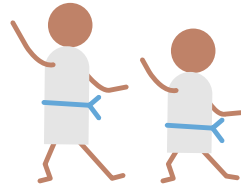
For instance, rather than paying for a kid to be housed in a detention center for 5 months,



5 months of probation and detention



diversion dollars could go toward pairing a young person with a martial arts mentor, creating a relationship that lasts many years.



5 years of work with a community martial Arts mentor



YDD also creates opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles and become civically engaged for a lifetime.



a lifetime of youth leadership and civic engagement

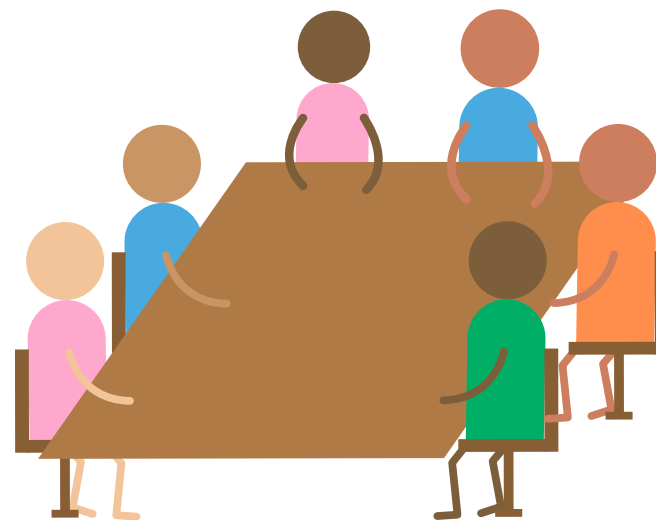


What's Next?

The second cohort of diversion partnerships (community-based service providers and law enforcement agencies) came on board in early 2022.

Now, with the commitment of additional resources in fiscal year 21-22, YDD is growing staff capacity, accelerating further expansion, and strengthening law enforcement referral partnerships. YDD will offer youth diversion Countywide in 2022.

There is still much work to do as we build off the lessons learned from the inside of government, the outside community, and the collaborative experience that made YDD possible in the first place. Los Angeles County will launch a new Department of Youth Development with the goal of transitioning the County's youth justice system into this new department. (Legislative change will be needed to accomplish some of this.) This is the latest step towards transforming how Los Angeles County works with young people – away from the criminal justice system and towards community support.



Our Biggest Takeaways

1. **Collaboration is a constant practice**, and it requires County partners who will truly hold themselves accountable to youth and community, and create space for these voices at every stage possible.

2. It also requires attention to research and local evidence to **continually explore what works**, what doesn't, and for whom.

3. **Uplifting youth leadership** and centering system-impacted young people in program and policy design and oversight is also a constant practice. There should be a dependable **process for checking in with young people** to ask what they need to feel supported and engaged and address that need.

4. When collaborative planning and oversight breaks down, it is **the County's responsibility to take meaningful steps to rebuild trust** and find a transparent way forward.

"Having some strong allies in the space changes it all up. And having more space and more thought in how to integrate youth voices. It's an evolving process – we're not where we should be but we did well in creating space for community voice."



Zoe Rawson, Arts for Healing and Justice Network

Challenges and Growth Opportunities

There are still serious barriers to meeting our goal of supporting all young people.

1. We still want to **expand** YDD services to young people who don't have any law enforcement contact.

2. Law enforcement does not always refer **everyone who is eligible**, and some law enforcement agencies have struggled with low referral rates.

3. Some community-based partners haven't felt ready to serve young people with **really complex charges** yet.

These are some of the things the Department of Youth Development will tackle next.

"I believe youth with charges that classify them as high risk offenders are the ones that need to be provided with unique/specialized services which are tailored for them to enhance their youth development."



Kyuane Mckibbins, Anti-Recidivism Coalition

Ideas on How to Center Youth Voices from YDD's Youth Leaders

Offer young people a variety of roles and opportunities to contribute throughout any decision-making process, and allow young people to define their own roles and to contribute even if they don't hold a defined role

Ensure discussions and materials illuminate structural racism and how systems perpetuate racism

Work to connect young people who participate in these spaces to long-term jobs

Honor and respect youth feedback and treat young people like the experts they are

Ensure information shared and the way it is communicated is clear and age-appropriate

Acknowledge harms done and take accountability for repairing and transforming the harms in collective ways

Lift up the notion that young people are positive roles models for other young people

Tell real stories of young people and their personal transformations

Maintain transparency

Ensure facilitators of youth spaces are caring, genuine, patient, understanding, and thoughtful about supporting youth in navigating decision-making processes and systems

Intentionally include young people most impacted by the system

Compensate young people financially for their time and contributions

Appendices

A. Timeline

B. Drawings and sketches from the YDD Chronicle Working Group

A. Timeline



2006 – CADRE convenes South LA People’s Hearing, leading to LAUSD’s adoption of School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support practices.



2011 – Centinela Youth Services (CYS) and Los Angeles Police Department partner to launch the first pre-booking diversion program in California. Data later illustrates that this diversion initiative is an effective response to alleged felony offenses and leads to a dramatic decrease in recidivism.



2012 – Advocates work together to amend Daytime Curfew law to include new protections for students.



2013 – Community Rights Campaign releases ‘Black, Brown, and Over-Policed in LAUSD Schools’ to show massive disparities in school discipline tickets and arrests using LASPD data.



2013 – Los Angeles Unified School District bans suspension of students deemed “willfully defiant”



2013 – The California Conference for Equality and Justice (CCEJ) begins the first restorative justice diversion program in LA County bringing together responsible youth and impacted parties to address the harm caused and create agreements to build meaningful justice.



2013 - 2017 – Youth Justice Coalition conducts numerous successful actions urging the County and City of Los Angeles to fund infrastructure for youth development.



2015 – Landmark LAUSD School Climate Bill of Rights adopted to reverse “zero tolerance policies”.



2016 – The Board of Supervisors establishes the Youth Diversion Subcommittee of the Countywide Criminal Justice Coordination Committee and directs the group to develop the County’s model for youth diversion.



2016 – CDF, YJR, ARC, UPI, release report detailing the disproportionate use of LA County Probation’s “Involuntary Probation” activities related to California’s WIC 236 and form the Los Angeles Youth Uprising Coalition (LAYUP).



2017 – The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors establishes the Division of Youth Diversion and Development proposed by the Youth Diversion Subcommittee. The Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council structure overhauled in response to community pressure to add community members.



2017 – The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors establishes the Division of Youth Diversion and Development proposed by the Youth Diversion Subcommittee. The Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council structure is overhauled in response to community pressure to add community members.



2018 – Los Angeles County Probation Department suspends use of WIC 236 Involuntary Probation.



2019 – The new Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council overhauls the Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act spending plan.



2019 – YDD contracts first cohort of community-based service providers and providers begin offering diversion services to youth in lieu of arrest.



2019 – The Board of Supervisors establishes a Youth Justice Work Group tasked with assessing whether it would be possible to transition the County's youth justice system away from Juvenile Probation and to another care-first system.



2019 – New Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council boosts Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act spending plan.



2020 – The Youth Justice Work Group includes youth and community leaders on the expert consultant team and develops a vision and model that is unanimously adopted by the Board of Supervisors to begin to implement “Youth Justice Reimagined” in phases over the next five years.



2020 – The Los Angeles County Youth Commission is established by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and is the official youth advisory body to the County. Its members have experience in the foster care, juvenile justice, and homelessness systems. The Commission provides a forum for youth perspectives, empowering Commissioners to impact the systems that are intended to serve and support them, their families, and their communities.

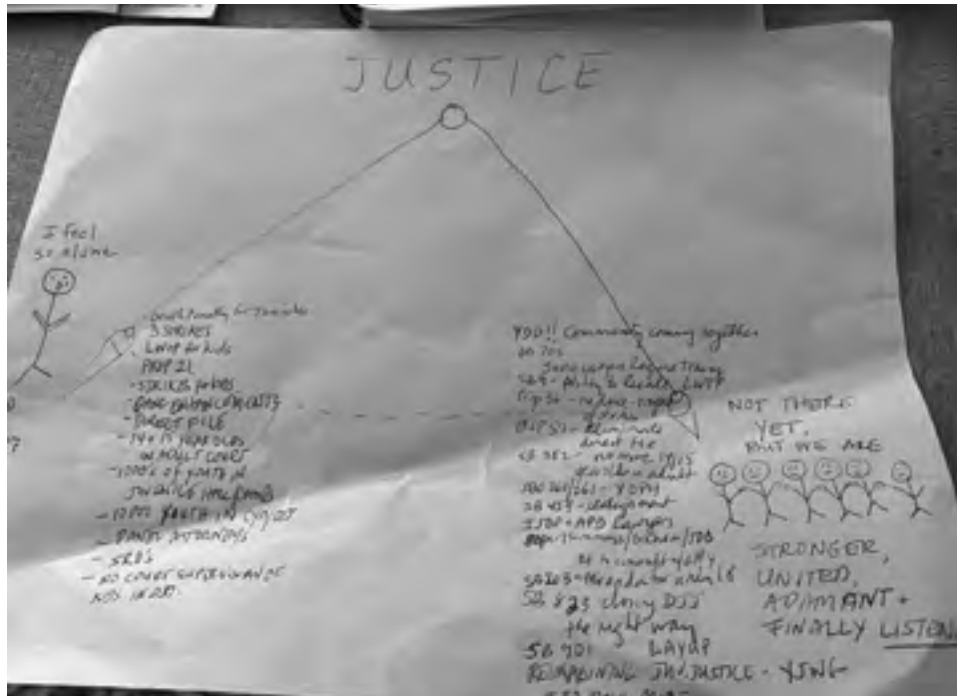


2020 – Newly elected Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascon issued a directive stating that youth accused of misdemeanors will not be prosecuted and if necessary and appropriate, will instead be referred to pre-filing, community-based diversion. In addition, his directive ended the practice of sending youth to the adult court system and included other policies for keeping youth out of the juvenile justice system and using trauma-informed and youth development approaches.



2022 – Youth, Community, and County partners work together to launch a Department of Youth Development. The collaborative experiences delays and challenges and youth and community push to try to keep the process inclusive and make sure youth leadership is more prioritized.

B. Drawings from the YDD Chronicle Working Group



**Maureen Pacheco, LA County Alternate
Public Defender's Office**

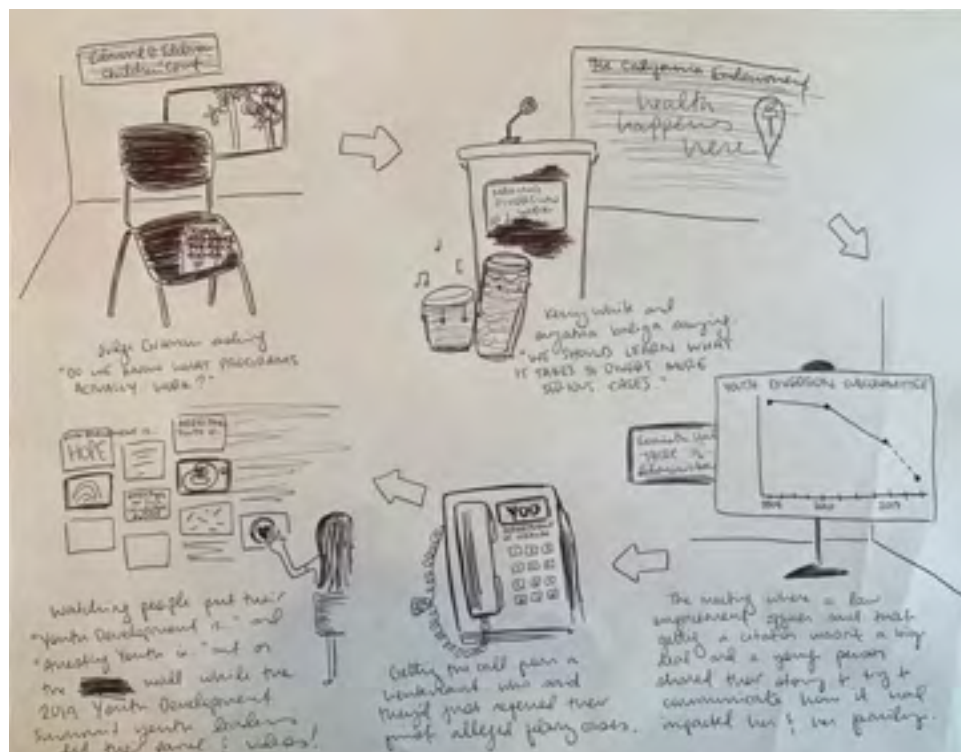
"I really see this work as a long pendulum swinging towards justice. I used to feel quite alone in this work and now I feel surrounded by peers."

This documentation project was begun during the pandemic. We used zoom calls and collaborative drawings to reflect on how the process of creating YDD felt to us, what our roles were, and how change happened.



**Kent Mendoza,
Anti-Recidivism
Coalition**

“So what’s happening here at the end is we’re bringing all these ideas to the sheriff’s office but they’re saying ‘we don’t have space for all these ideas yet!’”



Taylor Schooley, formerly
with the LA County Division
of Youth Division and
Development

“This shows a story of the different physical spaces that reflect the evolution of our collaborative planning process and shows the ways in which young people helped shape the spaces that informed our learning and design more and more as time went on.”

Credits

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