



————— Sample Blog Post —————

Commonsense Juvenile Justice Tips the Scale Toward Good Outcomes for All

This blog post uses a diversion policy proposal as an opportunity to discuss adolescent brain development, an issue about which the American public has little understanding. It begins with an appeal to the tested Value of Pragmatism, discussing how improved public safety depends on our investment in practical juvenile justice reforms that work. The blog post then explains the relationship of public safety to children’s healthy development outcomes. The use of the Metaphor Brain Architecture illustrates brain development as a construction project with phases whose outcomes affect the long-term integrity of the structure. It extends this explanation by applying the Metaphor Air Traffic Control to show why treating adolescents as adults and sending them into detention has negative consequences for their healthy development. An explanation of diversion programs and detention alternatives gets an explanatory boost from the Metaphor Justice Maze, before a closing nod to the Value Pragmatism to remind readers that practical solutions are available and easily implemented.

America is nothing if not a nation of problem-solvers, and that’s the tradition we must put to work to restore common sense to our juvenile justice system. Improving public safety depends on finding practical, proven responses to youth crime. Responses that work are those that focus on what’s best for young people’s long-term outcomes and keep them from becoming repeat offenders as adults. Model diversion programs, which keep youth out of detention and get them back on track, should be a high-priority resource investment in our communities.

Building strong societies requires helping all of our young people to get on a path to healthy, productive lives. And that’s its own kind of construction project. Children’s brains develop the way houses get built: foundation first, and in phases of varying lengths and intensity. The quality of the materials that go into that project—health care, education, supportive relationships, nutrition—determines the overall outcome. Nowadays, people commonly understand that what happens in children’s earliest years, when basic brain functions are being built, has long-lasting implications for their future well-being. But what many don’t know is that adolescence is a similarly critical phase, a time when the brain is developing important skills and abilities that people need to do well in adulthood. One such set of skills is the brain’s air traffic control system, or what experts call “executive function.” Just like real air traffic control at a busy airport, executive function is what helps us to process information, set priorities, and make good decisions. In teenagers and

young people, that part of the brain isn't fully built yet, and as a result, their decision-making abilities are not as good as adults'. That means when they get off track, we need to respond in ways that support, rather than derail, their healthy development if we want them to turn out well in the end.

Here's the problem: our juvenile justice system is still treating too many of our young people like adults, and that doesn't make sense. Putting children and youth in detention removes them from a healthy development path and plops them down into the bewildering maze of a system that has few exits. It deprives them of the supports they need—the high-quality materials—to finish building strong brains and solid executive function. Instead, it sets them up for a life of dead ends: poorer brain functioning, lowered educational attainment, and worsened mental, physical, and financial health.

In the long-term, that's bad for these youth, and it's also bad for our country, costing us the contributions that healthy, functioning adults provide to families, communities, the workforce, and our democracy.

Diversion programs, on the other hand, present a real solution to the problem of youth crime. These programs keep youth on a healthy path by keeping them out of the juvenile justice maze in the first place and providing them access to resources that can support and guide their progress. For instance, Youth Engaged in Service (YES!) is well known among advocates as an effective alternative to detention for young offenders. The program engages young people in a coalition of community-service organizations, training them to be youth leaders and teaching them the process of identifying a local need and then creating and implementing a plan to address it. The program is designed to give participants direct, hands-on learning opportunities that foster the development of their decision-making and prioritization skills and promote their social and emotional health. Unlike custodial punishments, this program strengthens the air traffic control in young people's brains. Participants are paired with an adult mentor and counselor, who works with them individually and in group settings to identify mental health problems and coordinate age-appropriate responses. YES! graduates have a considerably lower recidivism rate, higher graduation rate, and higher college admission rate than their peers who enter detention—reliable markers of an individual's life course and outcomes.

If we really are committed to our communities' safety and well-being, then we need to stop trapping youth involved in crime in the system's maze and instead use every tool at our disposal to build more effective and practical diversion programs like YES!, so that all of our young people get what they need to construct a healthy future for themselves . . . and for us all.