

MARCH 2024

**GETTING TO  
THE HEART  
OF YOUTH**

**TRANSFORMATION**



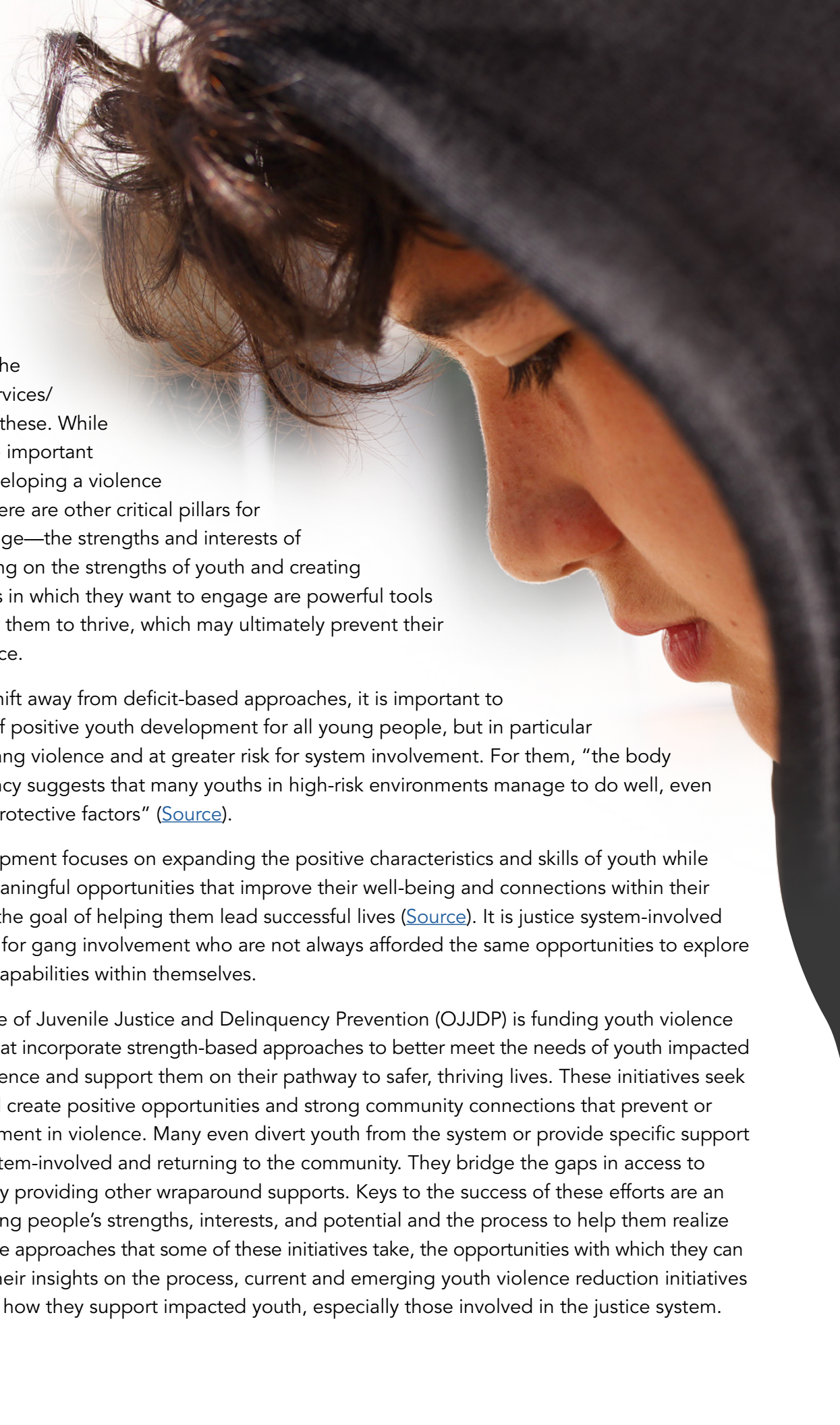
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violence prevention and intervention often hinges on the risks associated with involvement or the immediate needs of the young person and services/strategies to address these. While these two aspects are important to consider when developing a violence reduction strategy, there are other critical pillars for transformational change—the strengths and interests of young people. Building on the strengths of youth and creating positive opportunities in which they want to engage are powerful tools for opening space for them to thrive, which may ultimately prevent their involvement in violence.

With the continued shift away from deficit-based approaches, it is important to recognize the value of positive youth development for all young people, but in particular those impacted by gang violence and at greater risk for system involvement. For them, “the body of research on resiliency suggests that many youths in high-risk environments manage to do well, even thrive, as a result of protective factors” ([Source](#)).

Positive youth development focuses on expanding the positive characteristics and skills of youth while engaging them in meaningful opportunities that improve their well-being and connections within their community—all with the goal of helping them lead successful lives ([Source](#)). It is justice system-involved youth or youth at risk for gang involvement who are not always afforded the same opportunities to explore those strengths and capabilities within themselves.

A priority of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is funding youth violence reduction initiatives that incorporate strength-based approaches to better meet the needs of youth impacted by gang and gun violence and support them on their pathway to safer, thriving lives. These initiatives seek to build up youth and create positive opportunities and strong community connections that prevent or mitigate their involvement in violence. Many even divert youth from the system or provide specific support for youth who are system-involved and returning to the community. They bridge the gaps in access to these opportunities by providing other wraparound supports. Keys to the success of these efforts are an understanding of young people’s strengths, interests, and potential and the process to help them realize these. By exploring the approaches that some of these initiatives take, the opportunities with which they can connect youth, and their insights on the process, current and emerging youth violence reduction initiatives can refine or reassess how they support impacted youth, especially those involved in the justice system.



# OPPORTUNITIES PROVISION AS ONE PIECE OF THE PROCESS >>

Opportunities provision is only one approach out of the comprehensive network of approaches needed. The provision of opportunities as a part of a program or initiative should be driven by the interests and goals of young people and can include not only those focused on education, training, employment, and reentry but also other activities for youth to explore their interests, develop their capabilities as leaders and peer mentors, and safely cultivate their skills.

It is important to recognize, for new or growing youth violence reduction initiatives, that providing opportunities is also rarely the first step. It is “a base of physical, emotional, and psychological safety [that] sets the stage for supportive practices that are developmentally appropriate to scaffold and support learning and development” ([Source](#)). Most youth at risk for gang or system involvement will have other needs that must be met first to ensure their safety or immediate well-being and will need a support system of trusting adults, whether family members, mentors, credible messengers, or street outreach workers, to help them access and maximize the benefits from key services and opportunities.

These trusting relationships and connections within a youth violence reduction initiative are particularly important when trying to understand a young person’s interests that will guide the development and identification of opportunities. Some young people may not be ready or willing to share this level of information with an unfamiliar person. It takes rapport building through trust, vulnerability, and consistency to build a relationship with the youth and not only develop a better understanding of their goals but also help them through the process of achieving them.

# UNDERSTANDING THE INTERESTS AND STRENGTHS OF YOUTH >>

It is key that youth are involved in this process of assessing their needs, identifying their goals, and designing supports for them. For initiatives, this process can involve a combination of formal and informal approaches. However, it should always start with “allowing the youth to have a voice. Youths . . . have an understanding of things they want to successfully achieve. They need the proper guidance and leadership to pursue that” (Cleve Williams, Lead Youth Prevention Specialist, Gang Alternative, Inc.). Engaging youth perspective can happen through a conversation or one-on-one meetings, but it can also look like “includ[ing] students in the planning process . . . [or engaging their input through] evaluations, post-day evaluations, and pre- and post-surveys” (Amber Govan, Founder/Project Director, Carter’s Crew).

## Examples of Other Assessment Tools

- ▶ [VIA Assessments](#)
- ▶ [CareerOneStop](#)
- ▶ [Career Exploration and Skill Development](#)
- ▶ [Self-Awareness—SEL Toolkit](#)
- ▶ [Child & Adolescents Needs & Strengths](#)

Initiatives also commonly use strengths-based assessments or other tools for determining interests and character, especially when enrolling a new youth into their program or when evaluating changes in their situation over time. For example, Project Imagine in Danville, Virginia, aims to better understand the needs and interests of youth through its 15-hour orientation, which includes the Clifton Strengths-Based Assessment; goal setting; and other preparedness activities related to life skills, financial literacy, and workforce readiness. Partnership for Child Health in Jacksonville, Florida, also leverages a strengths and needs assessment.

Regardless of what the initial process looks like, interests can always change, so it is important to create an environment or process through which youth feel comfortable providing their feedback and input.

## **BRINGING YOUTH INTERESTS TO FRUITION –INNOVATIVE OPPORTUNITIES PROVISION APPROACHES FROM THE FIELD >>**

Taking input from youth and bringing their interests to fruition is not an easy task. It requires funding or access to in-kind support, the efforts and expertise of program staff, buy-in from parents/guardians and other stakeholders, strong partnerships to bridge gaps that the initiative cannot, and the involvement of youth and families themselves. It also requires intentionality. It is rare that the trajectory of a young person's life shifts as a result of engaging in one activity. The greatest value often lies in the processes of preparing the youth for an activity or opportunity and of their actual engaging in a given activity or opportunity. It is imperative to build their confidence, their social and emotional skills, their ability to respond to challenges/obstacles, and their self-efficacy. For example, Danville's Project Imagine aims to provide youth with information needed to change their behavior and "create a positive image in the mind of the youth so that he or she can imagine a life without gangs or crime" (Robert David, Violence Prevention Manager, City of Danville).

The following activities highlight the unique and innovative ways that current OJJDP-funded community-based programs are building up youth; encouraging them to engage in opportunities of interest that explore their strengths; and providing them with the ability to impact their own lives, the lives of their peers, and their community. It is important to remember that these examples are uniquely designed or selected by or for the youth within these initiatives. They showcase the power of turning the visions of youth into a reality and the range of different overarching approaches to opportunities provision.

### **Leveraging Digital Media and Entertainment Platforms**

With increased opportunities to express themselves or explore careers through digital media, there is growing interest from youth in this medium.

Cognitive Creations, a program under Project Imagine, is one example. According to Robert David, Violence Prevention Manager, this youth-led audio/video program provides young people with avenues to express themselves through media and entertainment. With access to studio time, they can express themselves how they choose (as long as it aligns with the positive standards of Project Imagine). Before entering the studio,



happy birthday ii appreciate you for letting me be in your program and y'all showing me how to become a bigger and better person and actually be who i am and staying out of trouble y'all are really some real ones in danville that actually help out with us young ones when we need it and when we need a safe place to talk to someone [Robert David](#)

*Social media post of Project Imagine participant sharing impact of program*

which empowers youth to recognize and know that they are in charge of their lives, promotes self-efficacy, and assists youth in moving toward that change. They are also encouraged to journal their thoughts on their progression out of the gang or criminal lifestyle and the process for utilizing their strengths to improve their lives. This process is pretherapeutic and prepares youth to become acquainted with talking about their feelings, which may lead to openness about formal therapy. The program also acts as a workforce

youth are required to attend an eight-week course based in the Transtheoretical Model of Change,



development opportunity for youth with an interest in media, as all content produced and released is screened by staff trained in media production.

Other initiatives exploring the use of digital media as a way to build the confidence and capacity of youth include the Baltimore, Maryland, [Center for Hope's](#) Kujichagulia Program ([listen to their recent podcast with NGC](#)) and the [Osborne Association](#) in New York, New York.

## Exploring Job and Workforce Development

Workforce development is another form of opportunities provision of interest to and effective for youth at risk for gang involvement. Initiatives, through their own efforts or collaborations with partners, are often able to offer support for youth to prepare them for the workforce or access to internships, certifications, and other job-related opportunities.

Partnership for Child Health connects older youth with an employment specialist to receive training on employment skills and support when seeking employment, recognizing the difficulties that can arise for youth from disadvantaged communities when applying for and accessing job opportunities.

Gang Alternative, Inc., in South Florida, leverages virtual reality tools (through [Transfr](#)) for its career exploration programming to give youth space to experience different fields, such as hospitality and tourism, automobile mechanics, first responder and emergency medical services, and farming. This program helps youth freely explore opportunities for the future but also provides them with immediate skills that they can apply.

## Enhancing Social and Emotional Skills

Opportunities for youth to expand their social and emotional skills are also critical, especially for individuals who have experienced significant trauma or adverse childhood experiences, which is the case for many gang-impacted or system-involved youth. Partnership for Child Health implements [Preventing Long-term Anger and Aggression in Youth](#) (PLAAY) to address racial trauma and anger in youth of color and improve their coping skills through physical activities and other interventions.

## Encouraging Leadership/Peer Mentoring

For youth who show an inclination toward leadership, opportunities in which programs can support youth in those roles in positive settings can be very impactful.

At [Cure4Camden](#) in Camden, New Jersey, youth who complete the program or who are considered credible can receive training in peer mediation and use their skills by facilitating mediations with Cure4Camden's staff. Youth are also given an option to become members of the Steering Committee. A representative of Cure4Camden shared that "through these efforts and other programming, youth develop a strong sense of self-efficacy . . . a sense of resiliency and understanding that they can tackle life challenges without violence. They form a sense of commitment to their interests and activities. They learn they are not a product of their circumstances and given the skills they can be survivors."

Carter's Crew, in Little Rock, Arkansas, has launched the [Ivy League Leadership Program](#), in which exceptional young people in the juvenile justice system receive the training and tools needed to enhance their firsthand experience and help them become mentors to their peers and leaders in their community. The comprehensive leadership training takes place in a residential setting and focuses on topics related to effective communication, decision making, teamwork, mental health first aid, and self-reflection. Following the program, youth return to their communities equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to serve as peer mentors and to provide guidance and support to other youth navigating the juvenile justice system. According to the project director of Carter's Crew, Amber Govan, "the peer mentor program [was] created because there was an influx of Black males coming through the criminal justice system. Youth discussed peer support with us. And [Carter's Crew] created the program." Carter's Crew also convened the [Empowering Youth Voice Summit](#) in July 2023 with more than 1,800 attendees to provide youth with access to workshops and resources needed to be advocates in their communities.

## Engaging at the Community and System Levels

Initiatives can help pave the way for youth to engage at the broader community and system levels to voice their perspectives and engage in opportunities to initiate change. For Project Imagine, that has looked like establishing a [community ambassadors' group](#) from youth who have graduated from the program to engage in the city's decision-making process. For Carter's Crew, that has meant providing youth with opportunities to share their stories publicly, participate in federal listening panels, or serve as co-facilitators at national

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One of our enrolled youth was on the verge of not participating in any of his senior activities including graduation if he got into any more trouble in schools. [After participating in PLAAY,] he finished his senior year without any additional referrals.

**Korey O'Neal**  
Program Manager,  
Partnership for Child Health

events, when youth have expressed an interest. Several other programs have been able to support youth as they advocate at the city and state levels for policy changes on issues that impact them, including Honolulu, Hawaii's [Adult Friends for Youth](#).

These are only examples from a few OJJDP-funded initiatives, but there are several others who engage in this form of youth-led, intention-driven opportunities provision, including the following sites and other OJJDP-funded grantees (Comprehensive Youth Violence Prevention and Reduction Program [[CYVPRP](#)]; Youth Violence Prevention Program [[YVPP](#)]):



Photo courtesy of Cure4Camden



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The Carter’s Crew is driven by the kids who other people might have given up on, who truly want to change, and they just need direction and help on how to get there . . . That’s what we’re trying to provide them.

**Amber Govan**  
*Director, Carter’s Crew*

[Brotherhood Crusade](#) in Los Angeles, California, implements a model that prepares youth to succeed in life and school by collaborating with them to address trauma and strengthen their mindset before initiating change through opportunities to learn, thrive, connect, lead, and work. One example of its innovative programming is the [Bolt Academy](#) career training and leadership program for youth with an interest in growing their leadership skills or exploring sports-related careers.

[CHRIS180](#) in Atlanta, Georgia, intentionally engages youth as leaders in their community and involves the community in initiating change.

[Tampa Housing Authority Supportive Initiative](#) in Tampa, Florida, promotes opportunities for youth to learn, grow, and achieve academically. In addition to several opportunities that the initiative provides, its partnership with the Patel Conservatory Straz Center connects youth to performing arts experiences.

[Violence Intervention and Prevention](#) in Fort Worth, Texas, provides recreational and educational opportunities to program participants.

[Adult Friends for Youth](#), in addition to connecting youth to a network of opportunities, also convenes PEARL Conventions, which provide awareness and training to youth in response to bullying and violence.

The [Mayor’s Office of Children and Family Success](#) in Baltimore, Maryland, involved youth in the planning and implementation of summer activities through Bmore.

[Neighborhood Resilience Project](#) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, provides training to youth to enhance their capacity to serve as peer mentors and leaders in their community.

[Allegheny County Health Department](#) in Pennsylvania engages youth perspective through a youth advisory council and has also implemented a youth-designed resiliency room in a local high school.

[Youth ALIVE!](#) in Oakland, California, provides several unique opportunities for young people, in particular its [Teens on Target](#) initiative.

[Unity House of Troy](#) in Troy, New York, recently opened a youth center, which was designed with feedback from youth.

Center for Justice Innovation in New York implements several youth-led [opportunities provision activities](#), including opportunities to uplift youth as peer leaders.



**These opportunities are the vehicles through which youth, who are not typically afforded the same chances, can safely explore their interests, strengths, and abilities. They, as a part of the framework of a comprehensive youth violence reduction strategy, forge positive connections for youth within their community or with their peers and encourage their self-efficacy. These examples and successes serve as encouragement to the field as initiatives continue to work with youth toward impactful individual transformation as well as broader system transformation.**



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