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## Community-based Alternatives to Detention: Implementation Evidence on Evening Reporting Centers

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*Evening reporting centers are an emerging best practice in community-based alternatives to detention. We ground our discussion of Alameda County (CA)'s evening reporting centers within an understanding of youth development theories, including the social cognitive career theory. Alameda County is a diverse county in California's San Francisco Bay Area that includes Oakland. We used diverse sources of administrative data to describe the implementation of the evening reporting centers and report on outcomes of youth involved. We find that evening reporting centers are aligned with youth development theory. For example, they offer an opportunity for disadvantaged youth to build positive relationships with adults, which can contribute to positive youth development.*

**Keywords:** alternatives to detention, community-based, juvenile justice, social cognitive career theory

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### Community-based Alternatives to Detention: Implementation Evidence on Evening Reporting Centers

In the U.S., a federal law states: “youth charged with status offenses shall not be placed in secure detention or correctional facilities.” (JJDP, 1974; 2002). Yet, many continue to be placed inappropriately in detention, partly due to few viable non-secure alternatives to detention. Detention exposes low to medium risk juveniles to harmful unsafe conditions, including

participating in programming with high risk offenders who are charged for murder or rape (Austin et al, 2005). During and post detention, numerous studies found worse psychosocial and behavioral outcomes for detained youth, with detrimental educational and employment implications as well as increased likelihood of re-offending with more violent crimes.

Compared to adults, detained youth on average are 7.7 times more likely to commit suicide, 5 times more likely to be sexually assaulted, 50% more likely to be attacked with a weapon, and 2 times more likely to be assaulted by staff (Austin et al, 2005). Thus, short-term detention comes at a high cost to the individual youth, public safety and cost to the system. As a possible solution, policymakers and practitioners are increasingly interested in community-based alternatives to detention that offer developmentally appropriate programs to juvenile offenders.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, through its Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiatives (JDAI), supported 23 evening reporting centers (ERCs) across the U.S. to provide supervision and structure for youth offenders (AECF, 2017). In addition to evening reporting centers, alternatives to detention can range from house arrest and electronic monitoring to shelter care and intensive supervision programs (Austin, Johnson, & Weitzer, 2005); the shared goal is to address the legal implications while also providing appropriate and safe supervision. Assessing level of risk can inform the most appropriate program pre-adjudication, and then post-adjudication programs should also be aligned with the court's goals (i.e., rehabilitation, sanction).

In the last 5 years, ERCs have been promoted as a promising alternative to detention, yet there is limited evidence to support a comprehensive design, model, implementation and evaluation (Garland, Moore, Stohr, & Kyle, 2016; Latessa, Listwan and Koietzie, 2014). Evening reporting centers are informed by the wraparound approach's systems of care (Swift, 2013). Garland et al. (2016) recently did a review of 7 ERCs and concluded that we need more evidence of ERC implementation and impact. This paper provides practice-based evidence drawn from implementation of ERCs in Alameda County, CA.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

There is growing interest in applying developmental theory to juvenile justice reform (Sullivan, Piquero, & Cullen, 2012). The ecological-developmental framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) are particularly relevant for our study of juveniles transitioning through the juvenile justice system. Both provide an important conceptual basis for understanding what may be important protective factors essential to support success of low-risk juvenile offenders. Several researchers have alluded to developmental theory; however, we specifically emphasize the importance of the interaction between environment including system, policies or community with the growing youth.

In addition, social cognitive career theory (SCCT) recommends building relationships between youth and supportive adult mentors, engaging parents, and ensuring education and employment opportunities and experiences. SCCT is particularly fitting to the juvenile justice context because it accounts for the interactions between the conflicting external and internal factors that many marginalized youth face in their lives (Ameen & Lee, 2012). SCCT suggests that a young

person's individual characteristics and contextual background inform the learning experiences afforded him or her which in turn affect his or her self-efficacy beliefs (ability to persist despite obstacles) and subsequently career outcome expectations (belief about what will happen as a result of their actions) (Lapan, 2004). These belief systems *both* impact the formation of career interests, goals, and actions.

### **ERCs: A Promising Community-Based Alternative to Detention**

While juvenile justice reform has begun across the country to operationalize some of the youth development principles and practices (Jain et al., 2018; Jain-Aghi et al., 2018), change within secure facilities is slow. Using community-based alternatives to detention to meet the various needs of at-risk youth through individualized community-based programming, including ERCs, is emerging as a critical area for practice (Austin, Johnson, & Weitzer, 2005; Carr, Thies, & Penelton, 2006; Garland et al., 2016; Thomas-Witfield, 2011). Most of the ERCs mentioned in the literature were part of the JDAI initiative (e.g., Nellis & Richardson, 2010). Many of the positive learning experiences emphasized by SCCT, such as access to treatment in real-world context, continuity of education, and positive intergenerational relationships, are all components of the ERC model.

### **Evening Reporting Centers in Alameda County: Program Design**

Since 2005, there has been tremendous system-wide reform in juvenile justice in Alameda County. However, despite progress made, high rates of recidivism, disproportionate minority contact, and limited community-based alternatives to detention continued to persist. In 2010, out of 4,094 unduplicated youth referred to probation, 43% were sent to the juvenile justice center, a secure detention facility. Of these, 509 were violations of probation (27%) booked into detention, of which 69% were African American and 20% Hispanic. Similarly, 834 were Failures to Appear in court, of which 72% were sent to detention

Initiated in 2011, and expanded under the State Title II grant for 2012-2014, there were three (3) Evening Reporting Centers (ERCs) in Alameda County, each located at an existing community-based organization with a track record of providing youth-centered services: Eden Youth and Family Center in Hayward (EYFC), YMCA (for the first part of the funding period) and then Peacemakers in West Oakland for the rest of the funding period, and Youth Uprising in East Oakland (YU). ERCs were designed to serve non-violent youth, status offenders, and youth who have Violations of Probation, Failures to Appear, and/or Bench Warrants and who do not require secured confinement. The vision of ERCs was to make fundamental systems change to (1) reduce the number of low to moderate risk court-ordered youth who are detained, (2) reduce the average length of stay in detention for justice-involved youth, and (3) operate as part of the service-delivery continuum of programs matched to the unique needs and risk levels faced by system-involved youth.

In the past, the Alameda County Probation Department used an ad-hoc practice of secure detention for violations of probation, which was at the discretion of Deputy Probation officers, and which lacked a consistent system of policies, protocols and procedure. ERCs also sought to reduce costs: in Alameda County, while detention cost approximately \$400 per day per youth,

ERCs cost less than \$100 per day per youth. Each youth participated for approximately 21-30 days in the Alameda County ERCs.

## METHODS

We used qualitative and quantitative administrative data collected for the purposes of program evaluation and grant reporting to report on the implementation and outcomes of Alameda County's evening reporting centers. Given our focus on implementation, the design of this study was primarily a process evaluation. Although we were interested in the outcomes of ERC participants, we followed them over time and did not do a formal impact evaluation design that would have allowed us to assess the causal impact of participating in an ERC.

### Data Sources

We had multiple sources of data about the participants. The ERC Referrals Database used a Juvenile Division Standard Referrals Form. We also had documents and referrals tracking sheets from the Probation Department, narratives about particular participants written by ERC employees, and PRISM data from the Probation Department. Missing data was quite prevalent for certain variables; in those situations, we report the fraction of participants for whom data were missing as part of our reporting on that variable. ERC staff also wrote the research team with case examples of particular ERC participants using a semi-structured form.

We also collected data about the program implementation. This included semi-structured key informant interviews with Alameda County Probation Department (ACPD) administrators (e.g., the juvenile division director and deputy Probation Officer (DPO) to detail the referral process), meeting minutes from the ERC oversight team, and other ERC-related documents.

### Data Analysis

For the quantitative participant data, we calculated descriptive statistics (e.g., averages, proportions) to report on the population of participants. For the qualitative participant data, we did descriptive content analysis and identified case examples to feature.

For the program implementation data, we did narrative analysis for the documents collected and interviews conducted to weave together a comprehensive story about the ERC process.

## FINDINGS

### Youth Served

On average, there were approximately 5 to 15 youth per month served by each of the three ERCs; the numbers ranged due to the size of the existing youth services and the quantity of referrals from Probation. Most of the ERC participants were male (84%). The majority (59%) of participants were African-American; 25% were Latino and 16% were white or another race/ethnicity. Participants were ages 14-18 years. Most (89%) were unemployed when they entered the ERC program. Few had gang affiliation (16%). The majority of the youth referred to ERC were medium risk or lower according to the probation risk assessment tool (this instrument included measures such as failing grades and fights on campus): 55% of the youth were either

low or medium risk, 9% were high risk, and 37% had an unknown risk assessment score. The most common reason for referral to an ERC was that the individual had violated probation. Most of the referrals (77%) originated from the deputy probation officer; the rest either came from a court (17%) or were unknown (6%).

### **Services Received**

ERCs typically provided four hours of programming daily: usually after-school early evening hours (4-8pm) during the school year and afternoon hours (12:30-4:30) during the summer. Each site had an ERC coordinator, and 2-3 staff either part-time or full-time. Each site was unique yet staff shared strong affinity to youth development principles and philosophy. ERC staff members were experienced in working with high-risk youth and familiar with county probation system and compliance requirements. Each ERC provided a clear structure including a schedule of activities, processes and procedures for effectively engaging youth, information on how to build caring relationships with adults/staff there, and how to complete specific tasks during the short time of stay. In addition, each ERC ensured a positive supportive youth-friendly environment and culture, and staff members were committed to the principles of positive youth development. Staff worked closely with the youth to understand their needs and goals and together identify activities to help them achieve their aspirations. However, staff reported that the time youth spent at ERCs was not sufficient to substantially influence youth outcomes or recidivism.

All three ERCs provided academic support including tutoring and career readiness. Each also had site-specific programming including such things as media/arts, gardening, nutrition/food classes; social/emotional support groups or counseling, and sports (basketball, wrestling). ERC staff noted that ERCs provide temporary structure and supervision year-round, supporting the youth's educational goals, ensuring that school work is not interrupted (as it would be if the youth was in detention).

Youth stayed for 30 days on average in the program, with an estimated cost to serve each youth at about \$350 per week. In general, ERC youth received education (tutoring) and career readiness programming at all three sites. There was other programming specific to each site. At EYFC, all ERC participated in media/film/music and youth mentoring options. At the YMCA, youth received arts and/or nutrition/food programming. At Youth Uprising, ERC participants had opportunities in nutrition/food, recreational/sports, and some participated in arts/media activities; they also offered employment opportunities to participants, which was particularly valued.

*Family engagement:* All ERCs engaged families, using diverse tactics. One ERC invited family members to the graduation ceremonies held for youth when they successfully completed their ERC requirements. Another ERC did home visits to welcome families and share information about the ERC program with the intent to create a supportive, mutually beneficial partnership with parents. They emphasized that since the duration of involvement in the ERC is short, the role of family members to support continuation of specific activities and a warm-hand off that continues to build specific skills and supportive environment is critical.

### **Implementation Challenges and Changes**

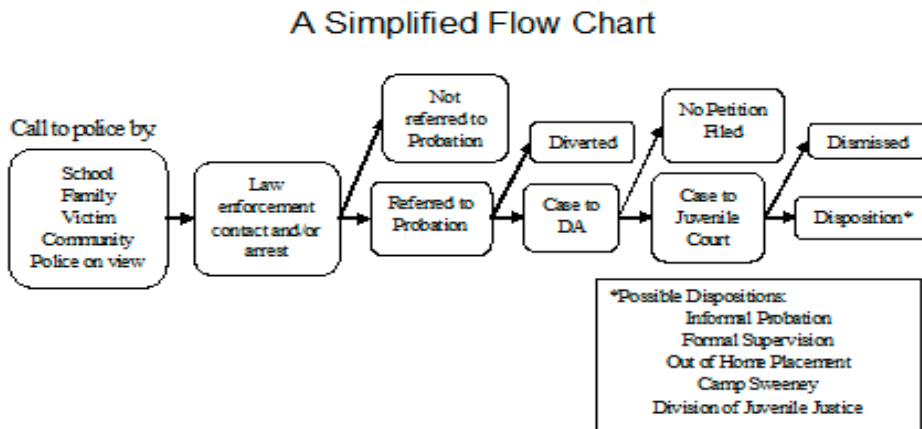
The main barriers to full-scale implementation were related to transportation logistics and the referral pipeline for participants. Transportation issues included the high cost, reach within the county, and various ways to sustain the current transportation system. Transportation was particularly difficult given that Alameda County is relatively large geographically and youth do not always attend school near their home. Additionally, ERC youth tended to have changes in housing or residence, so the transportation provider had to be able to accommodate changes or instability in living situations to ensure consistent participation. Originally, the transportation provider was an outside contractor. Based on lessons learned from the ERC and other program experiences, the probation department decided to develop a more cost-effective internal system of providing transportation. In the new internal system, each ERC did the transportation themselves.

The other main implementation challenge that emerged was related to the referral pipeline. Each of the ERCs was prepared and staffed to serve up to 20 youth at any point in time, and it was intended that youth who had violations of probation, bench warrants, or failures to appear would be selected. However, each ERC served substantially fewer youth (on average 2-10 per month), with significant variations by site and by month, and in 2012 only served 65 youth across all three ERCs. This was in part due to difficulty in finding eligible juvenile justice youth who lived in the catchment areas who were already not receiving at least some services. The main sources of referral were courts or parents through the Alameda County Transition Center (3-5 referrals/month) and deputy probation officers (DPOs) (2-3 referrals/month). One DPO with a caseload of 80 youth reported that very few youth (only 3 in his case) met the eligibility criteria to be enrolled at the ERC.

According to the key informants interviewed, referrals to the ERCs were made primarily after disposition as an element of supervision caseloads. True alternatives to detention would imply that a referral is made after arrest, prior to disposition. In the fastest case scenario, i.e., for a youth brought into custody, this would be about three (3) weeks from first contact with the justice system to arrival at an ERC. Also, the ERCs are distributed by region such that DPOs with primary responsibility for a particular region would typically only make referrals to a single ERC. Figure 1 is a schematic of the county's referral processes for ERCs.

Figure 1: Alameda County Juvenile Justice Referrals Process

## An Overview of Youth Contact and Involvement with the Juvenile Justice System



Although ERCs had been designed as an alternative to detention for violations of probation, bench warrants, or failure to appear, none of the ERC youth had documented bench warrants or failures to appear; approximately half had violated probation and the status of the other half (51%) was not documented in ACPD records. This suggests that there may have been some selection by the referrers to only choose the youth most likely to succeed; in particular, ERC program staff thought these selected youth may have been part of the half who had no documented reason for referral. Most of the cases (77%) were referred by DPOs; the rest were by the court (17%) or unknown to ACPD (perhaps parent or self-referred).

A DPO reported that DPOs primarily make referrals to organizations that they are most familiar with, whose leadership and staff members are well-known and respected in the community, and who have existing relationships with the community and probation youth. Given this reality, ERC staff may need to increase their efforts to raise DPOs' awareness of ERCs and ERC eligibility criteria, particularly given how important organizational reputation and relationship is when DPOs make referrals. An ERC Coordinator was also placed at the Transition Center, and helped courts and parents make referrals to the ERCs. She shared information about the ERCs, through a flyer and face-to-face conversation with the parents at the time of discharge. Additional ways to reach the parents or judges included: a short video about the ERCs was developed by the probation youth at EYFC and/or YU and was played in the background at the Transition Center Waiting Room.

### Youth Outcomes

Overall, youth were very satisfied with the services provided at the ERC. One participant said, "My favorite thing about the program is that I don't have to go to jail." Of all the youth surveyed, 100% reported high satisfaction with the ERC's services.

Reviews of case files showed declines in youth risk behaviors, including using profanity and acting out. For example, a case report of one youth mentioned his frequent use of profanity at the beginning, including after receiving warnings from staff, as the center has a “no profanity” rule. While he was evasive and avoided contact with other youth and staff at first, he became more and more engaged in the music studio, and began to respect the “no profanity” rule. He also invited friends not involved in the ERC to join him in the music studio, which staff saw as a step towards being able to positively shape his own social influences, including after his participation in the ERC concluded. This youth fully internalized the prosocial norms emphasized at the ERC. One day, he exited the music studio and cursed after having several profanity-free days. A staff member reported that “when the kids heard this, everyone just gasped and looked at him, and where he would have once [been] hostile and needed to be disciplined, the group reaction made him apologize, run back in the studio, and re-exit as he rephrased his sentence and the youth applauded him for trying again on his own accord.” The ERCs also provided youth with opportunities to make positive life choices. One ERC participant received educational support and mentorship that helped him focus on boosting his grade point average so that he would be eligible to graduate on time. An ERC staff member recounted the story of another participant: “When he first came to us, he was disenfranchised, disgruntled and on GPS [geographic monitoring] with little hope for the future. Once he realized what this program was, he began showing a positive attitude and fully participating. He is now employed at a local college earning a paycheck and getting a taste for a different lifestyle. He came back for a workshop and expressed how big of a difference the (ERC) program made on him in a short time. He was glad to have his first job and to be off probation and show his younger brother that life has much more to offer.”

Youth also developed pro-social behaviors. An ERC staff member described one participant who was “very withdrawn” and “to himself” upon his arrival, but got interested in the photography and film activities available on site and began to engage with peers and converse with mentors about making better life choices. A judge also recognized the Eden ERC for building positive relationships between the youth participants and the ERC staff. Another ERC participant ended up joining the youth advisory board for a youth leadership initiative at one of the sites after his participation in the ERC had concluded (Black, 2012).

Often times, these outcomes occurred simultaneously for a single individual. One participant graduated early (after 30 days, whereas his original assigned commitment was 45 days) after obtaining employment. He was a higher-risk participant than the typical ERC participant identified in the criteria: he came to the ERC program after having been convicted of several crimes that could have otherwise sent him to jail. He had stopped going to school to help his mother recover from a health issue, and so he entered the ERC hoping to get his GED and subsequently enlist in the military. He prepared to take the GED through a course offered at his ERC site. Additionally, in the daily ERC workshops, he expressed enthusiasm for learning job skills and pursuing higher education. He also reduced his risky behaviors: he reported at the beginning of his ERC time that he occasionally drank and used drugs, but over his time in the ERC, stopped using those substances. He also began participating in pro-social activities, including hoping to join a local baseball team to formalize those commitments.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the evidence reported here, we argue that juvenile justice systems should use evening reporting centers and other rehabilitative alternatives to detention to promote positive youth outcomes. Not only can ERCs be cheaper than traditional detention, they can lead to more positive youth outcomes. We emphasize that, importantly, ERC participants viewed their ERC experience as formative and positive. Specifically, having a caring relationship with adults, along with programming that supports the development of other protective factors, are critical for positive youth development (Bowers, Geldhof, Schmid, Napolitano, Minor, & Lerner, 2012), particularly for the highest-risk youth (Jain & Cohen, 2013). Our evaluation shows that ERCs can provide a setting for young people to have a caring relationship with an adult. Achieving positive relationships within the traditional detention setting is often difficult (Marsh, Evans, & Williams, 2010), but ERC staff members were better suited for this work given the community-based settings and their professional experiences in youth programming. ERCs also promoted family engagement to have additional opportunities for caring relationships. Additionally, ERCs provided educational and employment opportunities that were appreciated by participants and helped promote community reintegration.

Others have noted links between stable educational environments, including consistent school attendance, and positive youth development (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2010; Keeley, 2006; Sullivan, 2004). In Savitz-Romer and Bouffard's (2012) discussion of SCCT, they emphasize that the career interests and options of young people are shaped by "social" influences. It is within a supportive environment that people are able to set more challenging goals, feel capable of achieving them, and hold positive expectations that their actions will lead to the desired outcomes (Savitz-Romer and Bouffard, 2012). We observed multiple ERC youth setting higher goals for themselves (e.g., GED preparation, employment) and achieving them with the support of the ERC infrastructure.

The positive outcomes for ERC participants we observed were for a smaller sample than originally intended. This was primarily due to transportation and referral challenges during implementation. However, we posit that scaling up the ERC program could actually reduce these transportation and referral challenges, because the underlying limitation related to both referrals and transportation was geographic catchment area. For example, the Peacemakers ERC, which was added later in implementation, was next door to a high school, and so was able to overcome transportation limitations by serving only students from that school. This, however, limited referrals to a smaller subset of individuals. If all schools had a nearby ERC, transportation issues would be a non-issue and referrals would not be limited to a small subset of Alameda County youth. This could also lead to partnerships with school districts, since one of the positive outcomes we saw among ERC youth was reintegration into the school system among previously disengaged youth.

### Implications for research

We have several recommendations for future research. First, there remain lots of questions about how to best implement ERCs. As more municipalities pilot and roll out such programming, we encourage them to do similar evaluations documenting their successes and challenges so that we

can collectively build a body of knowledge that will lead to more promising practices for ERC implementation. We are also interested in experiences of implementing ERCs at scale—what is required to successfully scale up ERCs, and how do outcomes change when ERCs are fully scaled up?

Second, there is growing interest in understanding and addressing the school-to-prison pipeline (e.g., Welch, 2017). Researchers should follow cohorts of young people, beginning before any involvement in the juvenile justice system, to see if participation in ERCs leads to better longer-term education and justice outcomes than participation in traditional detention.

Third, we encourage future researchers to explore if and how ERCs can serve as a bridge between the juvenile justice system and other youth-serving agencies, including school systems and also community-based organizations serving youth. What can foster inter-agency collaboration? What can deter such collaboration?

### **Implications for practice**

Reforms to the detention system, including an increase in alternatives to detention like evening reporting centers for lower-risk youth, may help create prosocial environments for youth, which will likely in turn promote positive life trajectories to reduce recidivism. These alternative approaches are necessary for meeting the developmental needs of adolescents. We encourage greater evidence and evaluations of ERCs and other alternatives to detention as they impact rates of detention, disposition and positive youth development.

ERCs can provide an opportunity for collaboration between probation and juvenile justice staff and outside education systems. We highlight that two of the ERCs included in this work (Youth Uprising and Peacemakers) were directly adjacent to a public high school, and geography can help foster collaboration. Beyond geographic constraints, we encourage school districts and probation departments to develop professional development materials for education personnel to help improve schools' abilities to serve students who have been detained or otherwise involved with the juvenile justice system. This could help teachers and staff prepare youth for their simultaneous involvement in both school and ERCs (or, if they're detained, their return to school), and help address those students' unique needs. Overall, such professional development could help schools prevent students feeling any further alienation from school, which could in turn reduce the students' risk of re-offending, which could in turn help break the school-to-prison pipeline.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, we conclude that evening reporting centers are a promising practice as an alternative to juvenile detention that can support the positive development of youth. We encourage others to build upon our experiences reported here to implement similar programs elsewhere.

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