

JUVENILE JUSTICE



Evolution Youth Services

Denver, Colorado

65–80

Average number of students served during the school year

95%

Students from low-income families

Main funding sources:

- ▶ Grants
- ▶ Local government
- ▶ 21st Century Community Learning Centers
- ▶ For-profit business donations
- ▶ Fee for services from referring agencies

Serving as a diversion program that provides an alternative to juvenile detention

In the United States, involvement with the juvenile justice system can have a long-lasting negative impact on one's life. For young people placed in detention facilities, their education, their ties to society, and their lives are disrupted. Involvement with the justice system—regardless of incarceration—can have implications for one's future earning potential and career trajectory, limiting access one has to educational opportunities, career fields, and available supports.

Afterschool and summer learning programs can mitigate risk and support the development of protective factors that help keep young people out of the juvenile justice system. The afterschool field can also serve as alternatives to detention that keep youth from re-offending. Through programming opportunities, partnerships, and coordinated efforts, afterschool programs keep young people safe, connect them to the supports they need, and help build protective factors and positive social connections that lead to bright futures.

Overview

Evolution Youth Services is a diversion program that provides juvenile justice-involved youth with therapeutic support and mental health intervention through Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. Young people referred to Evolution Youth Services are required to attend at least 12 weeks of programming, where they learn emotional regulation, discipline, self-confidence, and resiliency skills through the grappling-based martial art.

A typical day for students

Every class at Evolution Youth Services begins with a check-in, which may take a few minutes or the full session, often posed as a question or a discussion topic that asks youth to explore and process the different emotions or situations taking place in their lives. Once the group's check-in has finished, they move into warm-ups and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu instruction. As Brazilian Jiu Jitsu is a physical activity, like wrestling, it can often put students into uncomfortable positions. The instructors strive to help participants understand the emotions they are experiencing and how to deal with those emotions in real time. Youth develop the ability to solve problems, develop anger management skills, and build resiliency in a cooperative-competitive environment as they work through different moves and skills and learn to spar. By combining a therapeutic approach with Brazilian Jiu

Jitsu, Evolution Youth Services works to combat the stigma surrounding mental health services that can prevent youth from accessing the support they need. Most participants attend the program two to three times per week.

Outcomes

Evolution Youth Services has been an effective method of connecting justice-involved youth referred to their program—many of whom have been charged with assault/public fighting and drug possession—with the supports they need. As one prevention social worker reflects, “This program not only plays a tremendous role in helping youth recover from trauma to reclaim power and confidence in their lives, it also helps to instill discipline and self-regulation for youth that have been labeled ‘unreachable’ and ‘out of control.’” Additionally, the program has had a positive impact on future behavior; 71 percent of youth were offense-free in the 12 months after leaving the program.

Program characteristics

Evolution Youth Services works closely with the Denver juvenile justice system and local department agencies to provide an alternate to incarceration for Denver youth. Youth are referred to Evolution Youth Services through the Denver probation office, Department of Human Services, and the Juvenile Services Unit; in Police District 1, Northwest Denver, patrol officers and sergeants are able to provide on-site referrals to youth they come in contact with in the community, rather than issuing a ticket or citation, especially in low-level cases.

Classes are limited to 12 students and are co-ed by design, led by one male and one female instructor who model positive peer-to-peer relationships and teamwork. Instructors serve as mentors and support systems for young people going through the program.

All instructors have training in Crisis Intervention for Youth, a law enforcement-based training where instructors learn how to respond to adolescents in crisis. Staff also complete Youth Mental First Aid, in which staff learn how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness and substance use disorders in youth to best support program participants with self-regulation, emotional processing, and resiliency. Evolution Youth Services also works with a licensed therapist to provide youth and their families in-house counseling. The relationships that form between participants and instructors are critical to the success of the program, as young people are able to rely on a consistent, trusted adult figure who is committed to their wellbeing. For example, staff have attended court proceedings with students at their request and attended IEP (Individualized Education Program) meetings at their schools to advocate on behalf of the youth.



Challenges

Each component that helps determine one’s prospects in life—education, employment, and future involvement with the justice system—can be adversely affected by involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Educational attainment. Youth in detention are more likely to be below grade level in academic achievement, suspended or been held back a grade in school, and suffering from learning disabilities. Young people who are incarcerated are also less likely to graduate from high school and involvement with the juvenile justice system may preclude youth from entrance to colleges and universities and access to financial aid.

Employment. A juvenile crime record can have an impact on young people’s future earning potential and future employment, as many employers consider prior criminal involvement when evaluating candidates. Prior criminal records are a contributing reason why 71 percent of young people aged 17 to 24 are ineligible to serve in the military.

Future incarceration. Young people involved with the juvenile justice system are up to 16 percent more likely than their non-involved peers to be incarcerated as adults.

Read [*From Prevention to Diversion: The Role of Afterschool in the Juvenile Justice System*](#) to learn more.

The varying degree of roles that afterschool programs play

Afterschool programs can assist youth at-risk or involved with the juvenile justice system in many ways. Their role can vary depending on a number of factors, including the program's capacity, structure, and partnerships with other groups working with at-risk or justice-involved youth. Broadly, this involvement exists on a spectrum, with prevention being the most expansive category of activities and diversion focusing more specifically on one form of prevention; each of the three categories outlined build off of each other.

UNIVERSAL

Afterschool programs can help keep youth out of the juvenile justice system by supporting the development of protective factors (such as positive self-concept, interpersonal skills, and ability to make responsible decisions, and providing protective factors) including access to caring mentors and a safe and supportive environment. Programs may also employ specific prevention curricula.

PREVENTION

SPECIALIZED

Afterschool programs can target their outreach and programming to connect with at-risk youth in the community and prevent them from getting involved with the juvenile justice system. For example, through partnerships with community stakeholders, such as schools, social workers, juvenile justice courts or probation offices, and/or law enforcement agencies, programs may receive referrals to reach youth who are in need of their services and supports.

TARGETED PROGRAMMING

INTENSIVE

Afterschool programs can serve as an alternative to out-of-home placements or typical probation program and focus on connecting youth with resources and supports that help address root causes of their behavior, redirect them, and prevent future offending. Programming is intentionally designed for this purpose and youth are explicitly referred to the program.

DIVERSION

Program history

Dave Stokes, who holds over 12 years of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu training and has worked in the mental health field since 1997, founded Evolution Youth Services in 2016 after working with adults in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and recognizing the need for Brazilian Jiu Jitsu among the young people he encountered who lacked an outlet for their anger and aggression. The program was developed over the course of two years as Stokes established partnerships with local mental health and juvenile justice organizations by explaining the evidence-based connection between Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and supporting youth mental health.

Recommendations

for serving as a diversion program that provides an alternative to juvenile detention:

- ▶ Establish a positive and productive community of respect between participants and staff members. This is critical to build the trust that will ultimately result in more engaged participants and more effective programming. Programs should encourage their staff to take a significant role in the day-to-day life of participants, through check-ins, visits to schools, or connecting with families.
- ▶ Focus on fostering ongoing connections with community partners beyond the initial contact. For example, invite referring parties to participate in your program, so they can see for themselves the impact you're having on youth.



Afterschool Alliance

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