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CALIFORNIA JUVENILE JUSTICE REALIGNMENT SERIES

Nonprofit Community-Based Organizations:

Central Partners in Service Delivery and Systems Reform

Report No. 1 | California Juvenile Justice Realignment Series
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California's juvenile justice system has undergone a profound transformation with the closing of its large state-run youth correctional facilities in 2023. A steady decline in youth arrest and incarceration rates, teamed with the transfer of responsibility to counties through juvenile justice realignment, has created a new imperative to build community-based systems of care. For these systems to be rehabilitative and equitable, they also must be rooted in the communities most affected by the justice system.

I. THE REALIGNMENT MANDATE: WHY COUNTIES NOW LEAD

From State Institutions to County Communities

For much of the twentieth century, California's juvenile justice system relied heavily on large state-run correctional facilities. These institutions were long criticized for their failure to rehabilitate, their disproportionate impact on youth of color, and their high costs. Most have been substantially downsized or closed. Their closure echoes decades of research demonstrating that institutional confinement is harmful, disrupts education and family ties, and does not produce lasting reductions in delinquent behavior.

California's juvenile justice realignment legislation transferred fiscal and programmatic responsibility for most justice-involved youth to the county level. Counties now bear primary responsibility for designing and operating juvenile justice systems—including supervision, service delivery, and placement decisions. This shift created both the opportunity to build more responsive, community-centered systems and the challenge of doing so with varying levels of local capacity, funding, and infrastructure.

The Central Role of the Community

Realignment was premised on a core insight: communities including families, schools, neighborhoods, and local organizations, are more effective sites for youth rehabilitation than distant state institutions. Research consistently demonstrates that meaningful behavioral change occurs most reliably in youth's natural environments, within the relationships and social contexts that shape their daily lives.

This insight elevates community-based organizations from peripheral service vendors to essential partners in the juvenile justice enterprise. CBOs constitute the primary infrastructure through which rehabilitation, reintegration, and long-term stability are achieved. Crucially, CBOs are embedded in the same communities from which justice-involved youth come — and because of those ties, they are positioned not merely to deliver services, but to address the environmental conditions that generate justice involvement in the first place.

II. WHAT MAKES A CBO GENUINELY COMMUNITY-BASED

Beyond Physical Location

Community-based does not simply mean non-institutional. Programs can operate outside secure facilities while functioning as extensions of institutional logic—surveilling youth, enforcing compliance, and expanding system control without delivering meaningful rehabilitative benefit. This phenomenon, known as *net-widening,* is one of the most persistent risks in juvenile justice reform.

Authentic community-based services share several core characteristics. They are:

- Embedded in the communities and neighborhoods where youth live, with close linkages to local schools, families, and cultural institutions.

- Focused on growth, skill-building, and relationship formation rather than surveillance, punishment, or compliance monitoring.
- Responsive to family, cultural, and community context; reliant on sustained relationships with caring adults who remain involved over time.
- Locally accountable, governed with genuine community input and answerable to the neighborhoods they serve, not merely to government contracts.

Key Distinction: Authentic CBOs vs. Corporate Nonprofits

Authentic CBOs are founded by and for the communities they serve. Their leadership, staff, and boards reflect the cultural and lived experiences of youth and families. Corporate-style nonprofits, by contrast, are typically headquartered outside the communities they contract to serve, governed by professional boards with limited community accountability, and oriented toward contract growth and profit rather than deep community investment.

The Problem with Commercialized "Evidence-Based" Services

Counties increasingly encounter vendors marketing programs as "evidence-based." While evidence-informed practice is a genuine standard, the term has been widely commercialized. Many such programs were developed in specific research contexts that differ substantially from conditions in California counties, and the primary evidence for their effectiveness is often generated by their own developers.

When counties contract with national vendors for prepackaged interventions, local CBOs can be displaced in favor of providers that can certify "fidelity" to program protocols. This produces services that are technically replicable but relationally hollow. The pursuit of evidence-based status must not become a mechanism for displacing authentic community capacity.

III. WHY YOUTH ENTER THE SYSTEM: ENVIRONMENT, NOT DEFICIENCY

The Root Causes: Poverty, Discrimination, and Institutional Failure

Any serious analysis of juvenile justice must begin with an honest account of why youth come into contact with the system. The evidence is unambiguous: juvenile justice involvement is not primarily a product of individual deficiency, moral failure, or inherent dangerousness. It is overwhelmingly a product of poverty, racial discrimination, community disinvestment, and the chronic failure of public institutions to support the most marginalized families and neighborhoods.

Youth who enter the juvenile justice system are disproportionately drawn from communities characterized by concentrated poverty, inadequate schools, unstable housing, limited employment opportunities, and exposure to community violence. They are disproportionately youth of color,reflecting not differences in behavior but instead differences in how systems respond to behavior based on race and class. A white youth from an affluent family who engages in the same conduct as a youth of color from a low-income neighborhood is far more likely to receive an informal response, diversion, or no system contact at all.

These structural realities shape what effective reform must look like. If the conditions producing juvenile justice involvement are environmental—rooted in poverty, discrimination, and institutional neglect—then responses must also be environmental. Interventions that focus exclusively on changing individual behavior while leaving those conditions undisturbed will not produce lasting change.

Environment Shapes Behavior: Opportunity, Relationships, and Place

Decades of sociological and criminological research have demonstrated that justice-involved behavior is fundamentally shaped by social environment. Access to meaningful opportunities such as quality schooling, stable employment, safe housing, supportive adult relationships, and participation in community life, is among the most powerful predictors of whether a young person becomes involved in the justice system. The absence of these opportunities is what drives most juvenile justice involvement, not individual pathology.

Community-based organizations are uniquely positioned to perform this work precisely because they operate within the environments where these conditions are both most lacking and most recoverable. They can address not just individual circumstances but the community conditions that create the context for justice involvement in the first place.

Positive Youth Development: Building Environments That Work

Positive Youth Development (PYD) provides a framework grounded in this environmental understanding. PYD asks what kinds of environments promote healthy development, pro-social engagement, and long-term stability. The answer is clear: youth flourish when they have access to caring relationships with adults who believe in their potential, meaningful opportunities to contribute and develop skills, safe and supportive community environments, and a sense of belonging and positive identity.

These are not luxuries; they are the basic environmental conditions that most young people in privileged communities take for granted, and that justice-involved youth have most often been denied. PYD also directly challenges juvenile justice practices that rely on static risk labels or permanent

classifications. Community systems of care grounded in PYD emphasize creating the conditions for growth—not fixing youth in place through risk categories and surveillance.

IV. CORE FUNCTIONS OF CBOS IN COUNTY SYSTEMS OF CARE

Behavioral Health and Trauma-Responsive Services

Justice-involved youth experience disproportionately high rates of trauma exposure, mental health needs, and substance use challenges. These conditions are products of institutional neglect, poverty, and community violence characterizing the neighborhoods most impacted by the justice system. CBOs deliver trauma-responsive counseling, family therapy, and substance use treatment in community settings that are more accessible, less stigmatizing, and more conducive to sustained engagement than institutional care.

Critically, CBOs are often better positioned than formal agencies to deliver these services because of trust. Youth and families who are reluctant to engage with law enforcement or court-linked systems may readily engage with community organizations that share their cultural backgrounds, employ people from their neighborhoods, and are not perceived as extensions of the justice system.

Family Engagement and Support

Family relationships are among the strongest predictors of youth outcomes. CBOs work directly with caregivers to address the structural conditions contributing to system involvement. This work looks like strengthening communication, reducing conflict, and connecting families to concrete supports with housing assistance, food, and more. Rather than treating families as peripheral, authentic CBOs recognize family engagement as central to youth rehabilitation.

Education and Workforce Development

Educational disruption is a common consequence of juvenile justice involvement, while educational failure is one of the strongest predictors of continued system involvement. CBOs support school reengagement, credit recovery, high school completion, vocational training, and employment readiness. By maintaining relationships with schools and employers, CBOs serve as connective tissue between youth and the institutional opportunities they need, helping youth establish legitimate pathways to adulthood and economic stability.

Mentoring and Pro-Social Relationships

Sustained relationships with caring adults who believe in a young person's potential are among the most powerful environmental supports available to justice-involved youth. CBOs provide mentoring and youth development programming that fosters positive identity, belonging, and community connection.This creates a sense of support and belonging that many justice-involved youth have never experienced in schools, child welfare systems, or other public institutions.

Reentry and Aftercare Continuity

For youth returning from residential or secure care, CBOs play a critical role in maintaining service continuity. Research demonstrates that reentry outcomes improve significantly when community providers engage youth prior to release and maintain involvement afterward. By engaging youth during custody and sustaining relationships after release, CBOs reduce service gaps, support reintegration, and lower the likelihood of system reentry. Reentry is best understood as a process—not a discrete event at the end of confinement—and CBOs are uniquely positioned to sustain that process.

V. CBOS AS ADVOCATES: SERVICES AND SYSTEMS REFORM

Individual Advocacy: Fighting for Services Youth Need

The role of nonprofit CBOs in California's juvenile justice system extends well beyond service delivery. At the individual level, CBOs routinely identify gaps in available services and fight to fill them. When a youth returning from placement has no housing, no school placement, and no mental health provider, it is often the CBO that pursues the concrete supports needed to make reintegration possible.

This service advocacy is unglamorous and essential. It is work that CBOs are uniquely positioned to do because they are accountable to the youth and family in front of them, not to a government contract or an agency risk calculus.

Systems Advocacy: Expanding Resources and Driving Reform

At the systems level, CBOs serve as indispensable advocates for expanding the range and quality of services available within county juvenile justice systems. Because they work directly with youth and families navigating those systems, they possess firsthand knowledge of where services are absent, inadequate, or structurally inaccessible. They know which neighborhoods have no mental health providers, which schools refuse to reenroll youth returning from placement, which county contracts are going to large outside vendors rather than community providers.

This knowledge, brought to budget hearings, legislative testimony, and policy forums, constitutes a form of legitimacy that no government agency can provide for itself. Because CBOs work towards positive outcomes for youth, families, and neighborhoods rather than to government agencies, they can speak with a credibility and independence that formal system actors cannot.

Community Accountability as a Check on Institutional Drift

Research on organizational behavior (Lipsky, 1980) demonstrates that large public bureaucracies—including county probation departments—tend toward stability, risk aversion, and preservation of established routines, even in the face of reform mandates. This *punitive drift* means that reform-oriented language and policy changes often produce symbolic rather than substantive change.

Independent community advocacy provides a structural counterbalance to this institutional inertia. CBOs that maintain ongoing relationships with youth and families are positioned to document whether community-based systems are genuinely rehabilitative or merely extend institutional logic into community settings. Their voice in policy forums, budget processes, and oversight bodies is essential to holding county systems accountable to the promise of realignment.

VI. CBOS AND PROBATION: COMPLEMENTARY BUT DISTINCT

The Importance of Role Clarity

Probation is responsible for court-ordered supervision and legal accountability. CBOs are responsible for service delivery, relationship-building, and community support. When these roles are clearly defined and appropriately coordinated, the division of labor strengthens outcomes. When they are blurred—particularly when CBOs are required to function as compliance monitors or enforcement agents—rehabilitative effectiveness is significantly diminished.

The independence of CBOs is not merely a preference—it is a structural necessity. CBOs that are operationally independent from enforcement agencies can engage youth and families in relationships grounded in trust rather than coercion. When that independence is compromised through funding control, reporting requirements, or blurred roles, the therapeutic value of the CBO relationship is undermined and youth disengage.

The Risk of Probation-Controlled Funding

When probation departments exercise excessive control over CBO funding and performance requirements, community-based organizations risk being transformed into 'mini probation departments.' CBOs under probation control shift their orientation from support and development toward monitoring and enforcement—undermining the trust-based relationships that make community-based care effective. This in turn increases the risk of net-widening.

An Alternative Vision: Defense-Led Disposition Planning

A model pioneered in San Francisco integrates public defender social workers into juvenile defense practice. Social workers embedded within public defender offices conduct comprehensive assessments and develop alternative disposition plans in partnership with community-based organizations. Rather than relying solely on probation-prepared recommendations, judges are presented with well-developed, community-based intervention plans that emphasize rehabilitation, family engagement, and service continuity.

Evidence from this model suggests it can substantially reduce reliance on institutional placement—and that incarceration itself, by severing youth from family, community, and opportunity, undermines the very conditions most associated with lasting change. Effective community-based intervention planning should not be controlled by probation departments.

VII. CHALLENGES AND CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

Funding Stability

Short-term contracts and inconsistent funding are among the most significant barriers to CBO effectiveness. Many community-based organizations operate on annual contracts that do not provide the stability necessary to recruit and retain skilled staff, maintain quality programming, or develop organizational capacity. This can often be the case for small, locally rooted providers. Counties committed to community-based juvenile justice must invest in stable, multi-year funding structures.

Contracting and Accountability Frameworks

Overly rigid performance metrics that are focused narrowly on compliance rates, attendance figures, or program completion—incentivize risk avoidance and superficial engagement rather than meaningful work. Accountability frameworks should instead be designed around developmental outcomes: educational engagement, family stability, housing security, pro-social relationships, and youth and family wellbeing.

Equity and Capacity Variation

Community capacity varies significantly across California counties and within them. Without intentional investment to address these disparities, reliance on CBOs can reproduce rather than mitigate inequities in service access. State and county funding strategies must include explicit attention to building CBO capacity in historically underserved communities.

Protecting CBO Independence

The most significant structural threat to CBO effectiveness is the gradual erosion of organizational independence through funding control and role blurring. Counties must establish clear policies protecting CBO independence—including limits on the use of CBO staff for compliance monitoring and restrictions on the scope of information reporting

requirements, consistent with California's juvenile confidentiality statutes.

VIII. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

Designate CBOs as Primary Service Delivery Partners

Counties should explicitly recognize nonprofit CBOs with authentic roots in communities as the primary infrastructure for youth service delivery. Probation departments should be reoriented toward coordination and court accountability, with direct service delivery transferred to independent CBO partners.

Recommendation 2

Invest in Local CBO Capacity

Counties should prioritize investment in locally rooted CBOs over large national or corporate-style providers. Procurement processes should evaluate community embeddedness, governance structures, cultural competence, and history of community accountability alongside program fidelity.

Recommendation 3

Establish Multi-Year Funding Structures

County juvenile justice funding should be restructured to provide multi-year contracts—of at least three years. Contracts should include provisions for organizational capacity support including administration, supervision, and staff training.

Recommendation 4

Design Accountability Around Developmental Outcomes

Performance metrics should reflect developmental goals: educational engagement, family stability, housing security, pro-social relationships, and youth and family wellbeing. Compliance-based metrics should not constitute the primary basis for contract renewal or funding decisions.

Recommendation 5

Protect CBO Independence from Enforcement Functions

County policy should explicitly prohibit the use of CBO staff for compliance monitoring or enforcement functions. Information-sharing requirements imposed on CBOs should be strictly limited to the minimum necessary for service coordination, consistent with California's juvenile confidentiality statutes.

Recommendation 6

Support Defense-Led Disposition Planning

Counties should explore public defender social worker programs that provide independent, community-based alternatives to probation-prepared disposition recommendations. This would expand the range of credible alternatives available to courts.

Recommendation 7

Build Cross-System Coordination with Clear Boundaries

Cross-agency coordination should be structured with explicit role definitions, purpose-limited information sharing protocols, and safeguards against net-widening. CBOs should participate in coordination bodies as equal partners.

Recommendation 8

Prioritize Equity in CBO Investment

Funding strategies should include explicit equity provisions ensuring investment in CBO capacity reaches historically underserved communities. This includes both rural counties with limited infrastructure and urban neighborhoods disproportionately affected by juvenile justice system involvement.

CONCLUSION

California's juvenile justice realignment has created a genuine opportunity to build juvenile justice systems that are rehabilitative, equitable, and effective. Realizing this opportunity requires clarity about what the juvenile justice system is actually dealing with. Youth do not come into contact with the justice system primarily because of individual deficiency. They come into contact because of **poverty, racial discrimination, inadequate schools, unstable housing, community disinvestment,** and the failure of public institutions to provide adequate support to the most marginalized families. **These are environmental conditions that require environmental responses.**

Community-based organizations are the institutions best suited to provide those responses. They are embedded in the neighborhoods where these conditions are most concentrated. They employ people from those neighborhoods. They are accountable to those communities in ways that county agencies, state bureaucracies, and national service vendors are not. And when properly funded and protected from co-optation by enforcement agencies, they can deliver the relational, culturally responsive, and opportunity-building services that move youth and communities toward long-term stability.

Building that CBO infrastructure requires stable funding, appropriate contracting structures, clear role differentiation, and protection of CBO independence from the institutional pressures that inevitably push toward surveillance and control. The measure of realignment's success is not compliance rates or narrow recidivism statistics alone, but the health of the communities from which justice-involved youth are drawn and to which they return.

This report is the first in a series examining California's juvenile justice realignment. Subsequent reports will address the roles of probation departments, the courts, juvenile defense, information systems, and equity accountability in building effective county-based systems of care.

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California Welfare and Institutions Code § 202; §§ 827–828.

AI Disclosure

This report was prepared with the assistance of AI tools. All analysis, conclusions, and editorial judgments are the author's own.