

# Juvenile Justice Community-Based Programs and Partnerships: Possibilities for Collaboration and Community

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## Abstract

Community-based programs and partnerships are essential to holistically serving youth and effectively supporting staff in juvenile justice facilities. Such programs and partnerships can support positive facility learning spaces, use local resources and services to enhance youth outcomes, support staff educating and caring for youth, and provide resources to youth transitioning back into their communities. Using a reflective lens, this manuscript explores the development of a series of podcast-style discussions featuring juvenile justice facilities (JJF) and their self-identified community partners. The podcast-style discussions highlight a variety of juvenile facilities and their community partners in an accessible way that shows how their partnerships strengthen the facility learning spaces. Each episode showcases considerations and success stories related to forming and maintaining community partnerships, providing valuable insights for other facilities. The discussions highlight the demonstrated impacts that such partnerships have within JJFs, particularly in creating connections, sharing resources, improving youth outcomes, innovating approaches, and sustaining engagement. This manuscript highlights a novel approach of using a podcast-style discussion format to cultivate a sense of possibility for those involved in delivering community-based programs and partnerships in JJFs, and showing how those programs can evolve to meet the needs of justice-involved youth, juvenile justice staff, researchers, readers, current and prospective partners, and overall safety and engagement efforts.

There are approximately 29,000 youth residing in juvenile justice facilities (JJFs) in the United States (Puzzanchera et al., 2025). Juvenile justice settings encompass court, treatment, probation, and residential placement of youth under the age of 18 (Medlin et al., n.d.), and youth may be involved in the juvenile justice system for reasons such as status offenses or criminal offenses. Status offenses are crimes that can only be committed by minors (i.e., truancy, drinking underage, ignoring curfew; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2015), while criminal offenses may be perpetrated by someone of any age and can include, for example, theft, drug offenses, assault, and robbery (Kraut, 2024). To effectively serve these youth, facilities require a wide range of resources and expertise across disciplines (e.g., classroom teachers, recreational directors, mental health counselors, and security officers; Jolivet et al., 2020).

As part of an effort to support JJFs' resource- and expertise-based needs, the authors of this work

are engaged in multi-year, multi-state projects that examine how factors shape and influence JJF safety and learning environments and spaces. Within our work, learning environments and spaces can be broadly defined as the facility's "climate," referencing the "culture of an organization" and, when positive, one that helps to improve youths' outcomes within the facilities as well as when they reenter society (Jolivet et al., 2020). As a team of colleagues, we bring a range of expertise: most have extensive backgrounds in both juvenile justice and special education, and include a community development director, a school psychology scholar, and those serving as research methodologists, with one having qualitative and the other quantitative expertise. We synthesize these specialties to consider how JJF learning environments and spaces might effectively support both staff and youth. In doing so, we have actively addressed an essential but often overlooked resource: community-based programs and partnerships with JJFs and justice-involved youth.

## **What Are Community-Based Programs and Partnerships and Why Are They Important to the Overall Safety of the Learning Spaces and Engagement in Supporting Youth and Youth Learning?**

For the purposes of this paper, community-based programs and partnerships refer to formal and informal working arrangements between JFFs and individuals and/or organizations, and more specifically partnerships with entities outside of the JFF, that support the facility's learning environments, youth outcomes, and/or operations (Prewitt et al., in press).

Some of these community-based programs and partnerships support positive facility learning environments by enhancing learning and supporting overall positive development and engagement with historically disadvantaged justice-involved youth (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2006). Community-based programs and partnerships can also enhance the learning environment for youth who receive their education and all other services within a restrictive, residential setting.

The educational opportunities provided to youth in restrictive settings aim to offer safe and supportive learning contexts that are similar to or mirror the types of supports that their peers in non-restrictive settings are afforded, and offer re-entry support for youth moving back into their communities. These connections and collaborations are typically based on accessing local resources and partner relations, such as those within close geographic proximity of the facility and/or those with a history or a connection to the facility staff.

Community-based programs and partnerships may also represent academic-community partnerships or health partnerships (Schwartz et al., 2024). Prewitt and colleagues (in press) outline that community partnerships sometimes represent an organization or agency (e.g., school, library, health department, church, civic club) and/or membership in the partnership may depend on an individual's professional or personal capacity (e.g., parole officer, tribal leader, clergy, social worker). Community partners support the overall environments within JFFs, and the partners may include those in the field of education (e.g., city or county school systems, colleges, faculty, GED programs); governmental entities or individuals (e.g., health department officials, fish and wildlife personnel, department of youth services staff); healthcare organizations and professionals

(e.g., hospital workers, speech and language pathologists, animal therapy center staff); religious institutions, leaders, or services (e.g., pastors, churches); and businesses (e.g., banks, grocery stores, restaurants); as well as other supportive groups and volunteer services (e.g., retirees, veterans, Boys and Girls Clubs, family support programs) (see Chew et al., 2010; Graybeal et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2024).

Community-based programs/persons/entities and JFFs can partner with one another in several ways to meet their joint targeted goals (e.g., strengthening the overall safety of the learning environments and spaces, improving facility climate). For example, Gross and colleagues (2015) studied inclusive school and community partnerships and found these collaborative partnerships to be reciprocal in nature and that university, social services, businesses, and nonprofit partnerships in municipalities led to increased resources and supports "resulting from the development of trusting school-community partnerships" (p. 18). Additional partnerships for JFFs can include child welfare services, mental health entities, universities, and families (Graybeal et al., 2021; Humowitz, 2022; Mathur & Griller Clark, 2014). For example, Graybeal and colleagues (2021) outline campus-community partnerships using a "matrix of services" with a "list of programs designed to meet the needs identified" (p. 6), and offer recommendations as how to align needs with potential available community assets. For JFFs, many partnerships focus on youth re-entry targeted goals (Mathur & Griller Clark, 2014) with community partners that have resources and supports within the child welfare system, drug treatment and mental health services, and public school and/or vocational/technical college entities. Examining programs and partnerships is critically important to effectively utilizing and leveraging resources and enhancing the programs and partnerships in all settings—but especially those offered in JFFs as facility personnel often report lack of resources, staff, and supports to meet the complex needs of the youth being served. As Honeycutt and colleagues (2021) note, "successful collaboration goes hand in hand with implementing broader reform" (p. 430) involved with multiple systems.

## **How Did We Conceptualize the Podcast-Style Discussion Approach?**

We originally conceptualized our podcast-style discussions as a new professional learning

community for our JJJF partners and their community partners related to the goal of further strengthening the safety of JJJF learning spaces. We invited our JJJF-identified community partners to attend virtual live sessions and have facilitated conversations with one another to explore a variety of topics related to strengthening facility learning spaces, strategies and resources to do so, and improving overall youth outcomes. We wanted to showcase community partners supporting JJJFs and the youth served, build a professional learning community of colleagues who could share best practices with one another across time, and provide resources to community partners interested in deepening their engagement with JJJFs to improve the safety of the learning spaces. After offering many options over the course of several months, attendance and participation remained low. We reconceptualized the structure of the virtual sessions, shared the new structure with our JJJF partners for feedback when on-site with them, and then moved forward.

The new structure focused on the voices of JJJF administration and staff while allowing them to highlight their external community partners—those of their choice who support their facility’s efforts to provide safe learning environments that promote youth engagement and positive outcomes. The new structure allowed all of us to think about not only our relationship with each JJJF partner but also their other external community partnerships in a more expansive, creative, and novel way that was also flexible and inclusive of the changing dynamics between their partnerships, evolving JJJF schedules, and on-the-job commitments. The new concept provided structured yet flexible scaffolding, as well as an opportunity for the JJJFs and their external community partners to showcase new and established partnerships that were effective for their combined learning space goals—which could be helpful to other JJJFs seeking to build or reestablish community partnerships.

We, as one of the JJJFs community partners, facilitated the reconceptualized structure featuring JJJF personnel (e.g., counselors, teachers, principals, directors, unit supervisors) and their community partners as contributors for each episode. As a point of clarification: because these conversations functioned much like a podcast might, we refer to them as “podcast-style discussions” and, for shorthand, “podcasts” and “episodes,” although the discussions were not posted online as most podcasts are. We identified JJJF contributors based on their (a) involvement in our larger project

to strengthen the overall safety and positivity of their learning spaces, (b) sharing examples of their successful community partnerships to meet the learning needs of their youth, and (c) willingness to share their experiences with such partnerships (e.g., what constructed activities they have accomplished together, the benefit of the partnership for JJJF youth and staff) in an open forum where community members and other JJJF entities may join, listen, and ask questions—all to ensure that the discussions highlighted effective community-partner collaborations. The podcast-style approach to the discussions offered an accessible and relaxed format for the JJJFs and their community partner to share what was effective for them while also providing ideas for other JJJFs and community members in how to construct future partnerships. This approach also allowed us to amplify our JJJF partners’ voices so they may cultivate their own additional partnerships while sustaining current partnerships. Each episode provides other JJJFs considerations and success stories related to forming and maintaining community partnerships. The podcast also highlights the demonstrated impacts that such partnerships have within JJJFs, particularly in sharing resources, creating connections, improving youth outcomes, innovating approaches, and sustaining engagement.

The podcast contributors agreed to use the platform to highlight their work and to share both successes and challenges. Such transparency provided a realistic and comprehensive view of the featured JJJFs and their community partnerships. We also deliberately worked to include contributors from different geographical areas to ensure that highlighted partnerships were relevant to a broad audience and included plans for sustainability and future growth so that other JJJFs and communities might consider how to apply these discussions to their own developing partnerships. The audience for the podcasts included JJJF staff and administrators, the JJJF-selected community partner, other community partners interested in connecting with JJJFs, a variety of practitioners interested in learning more about the role of community partners, and university personnel.

The structure of each podcast includes three segments, starting with a welcome, and included basic guidelines and norms for conducting the virtual session. We allowed the audience to introduce themselves and rounded out the introductions with the facility staff and the community partners introducing themselves, including names and

professional roles, and in some instances sharing photos alongside their brief introductions. During the second segment, contributors started their conversations. These discussions covered the partnership's origins, practical examples, benefits and challenges, and ways that they regularly evaluated their partnerships with strong links to improving and strengthening facility learning spaces, building youth skillsets, and improving youth outcomes. This segment was truly their portion to craft a conversation or engage in storytelling between them in a way that would be helpful to the audience. We provided the following semi-structured questions as a guide for the conversation for partnership reflection:

- How and when did you start working together and/or when did your partnership begin?
- What are some examples of your partnership?
- What are some benefits related to your partnership?
- What are some challenges or opportunities related to your partnership?
- How are you assessing your partnerships for continuous improvement?

These questions prompted detailed discussions with the scope of the conversations extending well beyond the questions provided. For example, some described their recollections of joint efforts, including how they started, people who were involved at the start of the partnership, best practices from the partnership over the years, and limitations. Throughout the discussion, they regularly explored how these collaborations improved and strengthened youth outcomes and facility learning spaces.

Following that segment, there was a question-and-answer period. Most questions were technical or logistical in nature, such as how-to questions about generating or maintaining partnerships. In some instances, contributors were asked to elaborate on their partnership's future directions, the impact it has had on facility learning spaces, and how the partnership might look or work in the future.

We recorded the sessions and saved them as video and audio recordings, which were provided to contributors to check for accuracy and perform any redaction, if appropriate, before distributing. We posted the recordings on a cloud-based content management platform and only shared them with the contributors and those who attended, which was agreed upon prior by the contributors.

## **Reflections On the Podcast-Style Conversations**

Reflecting on our new structure—the podcast-style conversations—we offer some insights related to overall feasibility, effectiveness, and benefit to us as one of the JJF's community partners, to the JJFs themselves, and to a JJF in tandem with one of their other community partners. These reflections are purposefully broad in scope. For example, many of our JJF partners expressed that they had never had this type of opportunity to have a structured yet comfortable conversation with the people they work closely with—both from within their JJF and the community at large. By providing a platform and elevating our JJFs' voices, they were able to perceive and experience themselves as public resource experts on building, reconfiguring, and maintaining community partnerships as a means to strengthen safety of their facility learning spaces and engage youth learning. We learned more of the nuances of their partnerships as well as additional strategies they employ to ensure safe learning spaces for their youth. During the podcast sessions, the JJFs openly discussed multiple ways in which they help address youth behaviors, the safety of learning spaces, and the staff supports their community partnerships provide in positively shaping youth behaviors. As contributors described their partnerships, many reflected on the importance of having overall outcomes of improving youth behaviors, facility safety, and resourcing staff with tools. These partnerships were generally formed out of necessity (e.g., programming needs, youth-voiced needs, incidents), with a focus to equip their youth with real-life skills so they can better navigate life.

Contributors provided detailed accounts of steps taken to find resources, identify funding, or secure materials to ensure youth had exposure to real-life skills and programming which could help build lifelong skills (e.g., career and technical skills, online learning) and were prepared to return home with said skills that would sustain long-term success. The JJFs expressed a warm association with their colleagues and found it valuable to have a network of other people who could relate to their circumstances. Also, many of the JJFs considered the podcast experience a valuable resource—a place where they could offer resources and receive mutual benefit.

Overall, we learned additional effective ideas and strategies the JJFs were employing to improve the safety of their facility learning spaces that had not been shared in all our previous interactions. Through these podcast-style conversations,

the JFFs were able to share how adverse events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, unsafe youth behaviors, novel situations, ceased partnerships) promoted innovation and invention of how they conceptualized, utilized, and sustained their community partnerships. For example, across podcasts, the JFFs shared how they needed to be flexible, adaptable, creative, patient, solution-focused, and persistent with their community partners.

Given that the premise of any of their community partnerships was to provide JFF youth with educational opportunities and a safe learning environment like the ones afforded to their peers not incarcerated, we highlight two ways in which the JFFs leveraged their community partner relationships and resources for youth benefit. In one podcast, a JFF shared how their partnership with the local community college (their community partner) where a youth was working on a dual high school/college diploma positively impacted the youth but also opened doors for other youths. In this case, the youth did not have a family support system outside the facility and would be reentering society on their own. To celebrate the youth's educational achievements and model supportive "family" functioning and traditions, the JFF and community college decided to hold a joint barbeque. That activity benefited not only that youth but has now had longer-lasting benefits for the JFF: an improved facility learning space environment that provided all youth with an opportunity to imagine themselves beyond the facility's walls as educated and productive citizens, helping to facilitate a more therapeutic educational environment within the facility, and helping facility staff to better understand the importance of school safety and engagement. It also had benefits for the community partner: realizing the potential and promise in youth served in JFFs. Not surprisingly, this highlighted JFF and community partnership has blossomed and maintained over time with now more youth being able to access college courses and opportunities even though they reside in a secure facility.

In another podcast, the JFF stressed the need for persistence and solution-based idea generation to create safe educational opportunities for their youth. In this example, a sport-type activity was suggested which did not initially garner facility leadership support nor were the resources, space within the facility, and equipment available—even though the behavioral skills (e.g., goal-setting, self-awareness, self-regulation) taught in the activity

were aligned with the JFF's universal behavioral expectations and would be of benefit for the JFF youth. While JFF staff advocated for the activity and community partnership, the community partner voiced they had not taken into account the adaptations nor additional supports required for a partnership with a JFF to be successful, but was open to hearing the challenges (e.g., need for donated equipment, access and time at the sport facility, constant influx of new youth dependent on their length of stays, and displays of safe behavior) and moving forward from there. With open and prolonged communication, the JFF and community partner collaboratively overcame each challenge and secured JFF permissions, with this partnership now thriving for several years. This partnership was built on youth engaging in safe behaviors and their educational programming as eligibility criteria for participation, thus contributing to strengthening the overall safety of the learning spaces.

From the JFF's community partner lens, each spotlighted partner voiced a willingness to learn about potential challenges to the partnership, how working through such challenges would have direct benefit to the youth and facility as a whole, and how the community partner may benefit. The community partners voiced how to make their partnerships work with JFFs, how it took a lot longer to find solutions to challenges than anticipated, how accommodations needed to occur that differed from typical operations, and how ongoing flexibility was needed as circumstances (e.g., youth behavior, staffing) within the JFF at any given time may alter scheduled activities. However, the community partners described that they benefit from these partnerships too. For example, they can interface with a wider range of educational settings (typical K–12 through secure juvenile justice facilities) while being focused on the youth population per their missions. The partnerships highlighted offered a rare means to bring dozens of disparate learning plans together into shared experiences for the JFF, their youth, and their staff, significantly improving learning opportunities and outcomes for the youth and the facility while benefitting the community partners.

Feedback from some of the podcast-style conversations from the community partners showed that the conversations promoted engagement beyond just the partnership but to the community at large. For example, some shared that this helped them to consider a wider range of community partners as they continue to habilitate and rehabilitate these youth in safe, secure, and supportive learning



spaces, while also helping to generate new learning opportunities and possibilities for the youth. Some shared that these changes in conceptualizing partnerships with JJFs were transformative in that they view such partnerships as a means of re-imagining these youths' current circumstances and futures in new positive and empowering ways.

### **Future Use of Podcast-Style Conversations in Supporting Partnerships and Research**

In this manuscript, we highlighted a novel approach of using a podcast-style conversation format to cultivate a sense of possibility for those involved in delivering community-based programs and programming to school-age populations and future partnerships in collaboration with JJFs. This approach could be a new direction and/or an additional approach to research in the field. This approach led to the learning of new information—strategies, approaches, solutions, partnerships—related to how the JJFs were strengthening their learning spaces, youth engagement, and skill-building not previously known through our original format. Learning about these other approaches allowed us to reinforce the efforts, spotlight the efforts in our interactions with our JJFs, and highlight the approaches within training scenarios that strengthened our efforts. With JJF and community partner feedback on the ease with which they could share ideas, promote effective supports, and describe the partnership journey using this format, we are hopeful that others may consider its use in their research efforts as well. As the literature focused on JJF community-based programs and partnerships continues to grow, we call on scholars to consider moments when such an approach may contribute to and inform iterative research processes, no matter the research focus.

The ultimate effect of this work was that JJFs and their community partners shared effective, feasible, and replicable examples of how they worked together to foster a safe and effective learning space for youth and for each other—within and beyond the facility. The podcast-style conversations focused on how partnerships demand hard work and deep commitment to outcomes to help build life skills.

Throughout so many conversations, adaptability and flexibility were key. Youth served in JJFs have so many restrictions that their peers do not, and these partnerships disrupted conventional approaches and ways of thinking to provide JJF youth with opportunities to get excited about, be fully engaged in, and have educational experiences

they would otherwise have not had during their middle and high school educational careers. The true sparkle of the conversations was the unique circumstances within each individual partnership that accentuated the ranges of resources, support systems, and innovative thinking that these collaborations demanded, while they collectively asserted the importance of such efforts to transform youth outcomes, the safety of facility learning spaces, and future possibilities.

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