

David Muhammad Testimony before Congressional Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee

Youth Justice – Investments in Prevention

Good afternoon, to Chairwoman Bonamici, Ranking Member, Representative Fulcher and all of the esteemed members of the Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee, I am honored to testify at this important hearing today.

My name is David Muhammad and I am the Executive Director of The National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR). NICJR works to reduce incarceration and violence, improve the outcomes of system-involved youth and adults, and increase the capacity and expertise of the organizations that serve these individuals. NICJR provides technical assistance, training, consulting, research, organizational development, and advocacy in the fields of juvenile and criminal justice, youth development, and violence prevention. We are based in Oakland, CA but work in cities throughout the country.

I have spent the past 25 years working in and with the juvenile justice system. I have worked as a youth corrections administrator in Washington, DC and Oakland, CA and I have developed numerous re-entry and youth development programs and worked on youth justice policy throughout the country.

Since the onset of the Covid pandemic and due to its related impacts, we have experienced a significant increase in gun violence in America. But despite inaccurate assumptions to the contrary, youth are not responsible for this increase. Nationally, and in nearly every city in the country, juveniles account for less than **7%** of gun violence victims and perpetrators.

My organization has conducted [detailed analysis of gun violence](#) in several cities across the nation, and consistently the average age of shooting victims and suspects are in their mid to late 20s.

In the past 20 years, there has been great progress and success in youth justice reform in America, resulting in a [70% reduction in youth incarceration](#). Studies have shown that this drop in juvenile incarceration has had no negative impacts on public safety and in some jurisdictions, evidence proves there has been a positive impact on public safety. This is due to the fact that youth incarceration is ineffective, harmful, and excessively expensive.

The federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), [released a report](#) last month showing that during the same time as youth incarceration was dropping, youth crime was plummeting. The study found that “the number of arrests involving youth fell 84% between

the 1996 peak and 2020.” The report also found that “the number of youth arrests for violent crime in 2020 was one-third the number in 2006.”

In 2019, NICJR in partnership with the City of Oakland and its police department and local community based organizations, launched an innovative youth development and diversion program. Young people arrested for non-violent felony offenses are diverted at the point of arrest to the [Neighborhood Opportunity and Accountability Board \(NOAB\)](#).

Young people referred to the NOAB are immediately engaged by a community services coordinator, who meets with the youth and family and conducts an assessment. The youth and family are then scheduled to meet with the Board for a NOAB Conference. The Board is made up of community leaders, faith leaders, business owners, system-impacted individuals, and victims of crime.

After meeting with the Board, a Life Plan is developed with the youth and family, and they are connected to an array of community based services from our partner local CBOs. Since its inception in April 2020, OPD has referred nearly 80 youth to the program and less than 10 have been re-arrested.

NICJR is replicating the program in nearby Richmond, CA and we are in discussions with several other jurisdictions about starting NOABs.

A national study conducted by the Justice Policy Institute found that on average, its costs taxpayers \$150,000 per year for every youth detained in the juvenile justice system. In places like California and Washington, DC, those cost are much higher, going above \$300,000 per youth every year. Diverting youth from system involvement is not only better for their development and outcomes, but an extreme saving to taxpayers.

Lastly, NICJR’s National Offices of Violence Prevention Network has launched an exciting new project – YDII – the Youth Data and Intervention Initiative. Starting in Washington, DC but eventually will include up to 10 cities around the country, YDII is a research, data tracking, and intensive intervention initiative that seeks to prevent young teens from becoming involved in gun violence when they are young adults.

Initial research shows that young people who have several risk factors combined, have an increased likelihood to be involved in gun violence as a young adult. Such risk factors include:

- Significant school absenteeism
- Received school discipline
- Experienced trauma
- Child welfare involvement
- Initial juvenile delinquency

- Developmental or mental health challenges
- Lives in a high poverty, high crime rate neighborhood

Young people with all of these risk factors at 11, 12, 13 years old, are much more likely to be involved in gun violence 10 years later.

So the goal of YDII is to help jurisdictions track these risk factors in youth and when any young person reaches the threshold of these multiple risk factors, to provide very intensive community based supports, including:

- Family counseling
- Family support
- Intensive mentoring and life coaching
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Appropriate mental health and trauma healing services
- Tutoring and other educational supports
- And in some cases, therapeutic residential options

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today and I look forward to any questions and discussion.