

Revolutionizing Probation from Punishment to Community-Led Safety, Part I, Tip Sheet

Key Takeaways from the National Webinar

On March 26, 2026, the Gault Center, Youth Empowerment for Advancement Hangout (YEAH Philly), and the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies hosted a webinar introducing a framework to shift narratives and practices around juvenile probation to move from punishment to possibility for all youth.

The webinar was offered as part of the Juvenile Probation Accountability Coalition (JPAC), and featured the following speakers:

- Dr. Denese Shervington, MPH, Founder of the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies and author of Healing Is the Revolution
- Iman Shervington, MFA, Senior Director of Media & Communications at the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies
- Kendra Van de Water, Co-founder and Co-CEO of YEAH Philly
- James Aye, Co-founder and Co-CEO of YEAH Philly
- Hyeji Kim, Senior Youth Defense Counsel at the Gault Center

This tip sheet compiles some of the key takeaways and resources that came out of the webinar. Our hope is to grow and build a community of advocates and activate collective efforts to move away from punishment-based probation and toward community-led care and safety. Ultimately, we are aiming to create a national blueprint to end mass supervision and strengthen pathways for community-based healing, accountability, and safety for all youth.

This tip sheet offers a starting point to build **narrative strategies** toward this future.

JPAC will work nationally to grow awareness, strengthen coordination, and weave advocacy efforts together, with the ultimate goal of catalyzing local initiatives to transform juvenile probation. If you are interested in learning more or joining JPAC, please visit our [JPAC Initiatives page](#).

Why the Need for Change?

“There is an America that is more free—where there’s more equality, where there is more justice, where there is less bigotry—and I think it’s waiting for us. But I don’t think we can...create that America while we remain burdened by the history that too many refuse to talk about, too many refused to acknowledge.”

– Bryan Stevenson

Evaluating the the purpose of juvenile probation.

To find out a system’s true purpose, we need to start by looking at how a system behaves. Scientist and systems thinker, Donella Meadows, instructs, “purposes are deduced from behavior, not from rhetoric or stated goals.” ^[1]

Webinar participants reflected on the stated goals and common rhetoric of juvenile probation, in contrast with the actual behaviors of how juvenile probation treats youth and families—themes that came up during group reflection are listed below:

- ***Stated goals and common rhetoric of probation:***
 - Rehabilitation, treatment, services, community-based supervision, public safety, youth accountability, and to reduce and prevent recidivism while keeping families together
- ***Actual, observed behaviors of probation:***
 - Punishment, surveillance, criminalization of normal teen behavior, abusive, apathetic, patriarchal, unrealistic with its expectations of youth, restrictive, hyper focused on rule violations, strict, ignores trauma, creates a revolving door to incarceration and the adult, criminal legal system, overbearing on youth, setting youth up for failure—all without any system accountability
 - Young people who directly experienced probation also shared the following observations: ^[2]
 - “It put me in a constant state of fear and like I was being watched.”
 - “Everything you do is like you’re getting monitored, like you’re on a leash.”
 - “I was depressed about the fact that I may just end up back in jail and that took its toll on me.”

To unpack what’s underlying this divide between ***stated goals*** and ***actual behaviors*** of juvenile probation, history offers some clues. ^[3]

Examining the history of juvenile probation reveals an unbroken lineage of racialized social control reinforced by probation practices.

- 1825-1865: legal enslavement of Black children and adults
 - 1825: New York opens the first House of Refuge, creating the foundation of the juvenile legal system
 - 1841: Massachusetts orders community supervision, creating the foundation of the probation system
- 1865-1930: Black codes and convict leasing schemes restore forced labor practices through carceral systems
 - 1878: Massachusetts formalizes probation through legislation
 - 1896: Plessy v. Ferguson affirms racial segregation, upholding “separate but equal” under the 14th Amendment
 - 1899: Illinois opens the first juvenile court
- 1930-1950: policing and juvenile court systems administer state-sanctioned racial violence and terror in the name of crime control at the height of the Jim Crow Era
- 1950-1970: suppression of civil rights activities is reinforced through juvenile incarceration and probation under the guise of public safety
- 1970-2000: War on Drugs and Crime become proxies to surveil, control, and criminalize Black and Latine communities, supercharging systems of policing and punishment
- 2000-Present: delinquency cases are declining, yet racial disparities deepen as we persevere a cyclical pattern where inequitable structures breed societal and individual biases that foster racial inequities

Juvenile Probation Accountability Coalition (JPAC) invites us to work toward dismantling systems of punishment while growing community-based models that promote safety, healing, accountability, and the flourishing of all youth—driven by a collective why rooted in history.

To learn more about JPAC and join our listserv, visit:
<https://www.defendyouthrights.org/initiatives/jpac/>.

1 Donella Meadows, Thinking in Systems: A Primer 14 (2008).

2 The youth perspectives outlined here are based on the Gault Center’s interview of twenty-five youth who had previously experienced juvenile probation across the country between 2021 and 2024 (on file with author).

3 Donella Meadows, Thinking in Systems: A Primer 170-71 (2008) (“If it’s a social system, watch it work. Learn its history. . . . Starting with the history of several variables plotted together begins to suggest not only what elements are in the system, but how they might be interconnected. And finally, starting with history discourages the common and distracting tendency we all have to define a problem not by the system’s actual behavior, but by the lack of our favorite solution.”).

What Are The Alternatives?

YEAH Philly as a Model Alternative

Juvenile probation surveils and punishes youth.

Youth reported what they need instead is support, stability, and opportunity.

Currently, probation practices do not offer clarity around rules and expectations of youth, nor do they create incentives for positive behaviors. Instead, the system is quick to punish youth when they make mistakes.

- Youth reported what they need instead are **fierce advocates, consistent relationships, opportunities to mess up and regroup, safe spaces, economic opportunities, and mental health support.**

YEAH Philly was created in 2018 to fill a gap between what the legal system offers and what youth actually need. In recognition of the lack of services for young people caught in cycles of violence, YEAH Philly addresses the root causes of violence by providing direct services for youth charged with violent offenses and pushing for transformational policy change. YEAH Philly's innovative approach focuses on:

- **Support over surveillance**
- **Opportunity over punishment**
- **Relationships over compliance**
- **Progress over recidivism**
- **Harm reduction versus anti-violence**

Specifically, YEAH Philly acknowledges that young people are the experts of their own lives and offers real-time holistic support for youth, economic opportunities, conflict resolution, leadership development, safe community spaces, restorative justice, opportunities for autonomous decision-making, space to make mistakes, and accountability.

- **One third of YEAH Philly's staff are young people who went through YEAH Philly's programming.**

Webinar participants also reflected on what they've seen works to improve youth outcomes and the following themes emerged:

- **Youth involved in decision making, strengths-based approach, economic opportunities, investment, mentoring and support, caring relationships, autonomy and choice, incremental progress, listening to youth so they feel heard, authenticity, space to grow and make mistakes, positive relationships centered around love and support**

Accountability without carceral punishment is possible and more effective.

YEAH Philly works because accountability is housed within a relational structure, rooted in trust, where young people's immediate and real needs are heard and met, young people are offered real pathways forward, young people have access to fierce advocacy, and together, racism and harmful systems are challenged—reducing youth isolation and stress.

- **Importantly, YEAH Philly does not feed information to police and instead operates as a true alternative to legal system involvement.**

Under YEAH Philly's model, caring adults invest in youth in real time and show up for community.

- **Harm is repaired through restorative processes, focusing on growth, accountability, and healing.**
- **Youth learn self-sufficiency and leadership skills, with space to make mistakes and strengthen problem-solving abilities.**
- **Youth are given an opportunity to make real choices about their life and face consequences for their choices.**

Moving from probation to community solutions is possible.

We can begin to think about juvenile probation as a public health issue—by highlighting the impact of surveillance and punishment on young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Based on this lens, we can reframe the narrative to shift from:

- Compliance to support
- Surveillance to relationships
- Punishment to opportunity

Everyone has a role to play:

- **Judges** can reduce their reliance on surveillance via probation
- **Probation** can shift internal policies toward a support-based model with community partners
- **Defenders** can find and advocate for community-based alternatives
- **Funders** can invest in community-based solutions
- **Families and communities** can reduce their reliance on carceral systems and instead rely on communities

It is time to invest in what works.

YEAH Philly is one example of what this future can look like—a community-based solution that addresses the root causes of violence through holistic support for youth.

How to Achieve Narrative Change to Revolutionize Probation

“The narratives that build the public imagination of a country are in the hands of people who already have a lot of power. They are the ones who dominate in the production and distribution of narratives. They play a role in keeping things as they are.”

– Elena Mejia Juica

Narrative change is a mentality that can be integrated across all areas of work.

- Narratives are key to who we are and how we see ourselves—they shape how we identify what’s moral vs. immoral and who’s deserving vs. undeserving.
- “Narrative change is about **shifting** definitional **power** to **advance** broader **social change**. It is the effort to challenge, modify, or replace existing narratives that perpetuate inequity and uphold an unjust status quo, through the creation and deployment of new or different narratives.” ([ORS Impact](#))

We have an opportunity to change narratives through story and authenticity to challenge the status quo, advocate for equity, and revolutionize probation.

First, consider the following **three narrative levels**:

- Story - Individual stories
- Narrative - The broader narrative of all of the stories
- Meta-narrative - The broader belief/metaphor/existential question

Then, consider how your narrative will **function**:

- **Creating** - Create a brand new narrative around an issue where no prior narrative exists
- **Countering** - Undermine an unfavorable narrative by disseminating an alternative narrative that decreases its impact
- **Amplifying** - Expand the reach and increase the audience (and thus impact) of a narrative with new messengers and channels
- **Reframing** - Reimagine a more favorable way of viewing the same issue, undermining the logic of the current frame
- **Attaching** - Connect the issue you are working on to a broader narrative, or expand the narrative to include your issue

Coordinate a **narrative strategy** by pushing out a shared message, using the **elements of narrative**:

- **Language** - The words we use to describe or talk about something
 - E.g., use humanizing and strengths-based terms; avoid terms like “juvenile” to describe young people

- **Stories** - The unique stories we tell about an issue
 - E.g., share stories that highlight young people's humanity, struggles, and value to our society
- **Voice** - The lens through which we understand a story
 - E.g., hear from impacted youth directly
- **Frames** - How we set up the way to look at an issue
 - E.g., frame juvenile probation as a public health issue
- **Messages** - Core takeaways from the language, stories, and frames
 - E.g., Juvenile probation harms young people's mental health and wellbeing. Community programs, like YEAH Philly, are better investments for the future of youth and community safety.

When developing narratives, consider your audience and the psychology of public persuasion.

- We can persuade people by understanding their inner mind.
- Most people's opinions and behaviors are driven by *unconscious desires* and *irrational impulses*, combined with *sociocultural identity beliefs and norms*.
- People are usually motivated by a desire to repeat previous experiences of pleasure and avoid past experiences of frustration.
- Archetypes help us understand inner motives—the emotional blueprint for us as a human family that connects us to the human condition that is deep within us, the goodness of humanity.
 - Most of us are born to be *curious, courageous, connected, and compassionate*.
- When shaping narratives intended to positively change behaviors, to access this inner mind we can:
 - Highlight our responsibility as a society to care for all children
 - Tap into the archetype of the “divine child”
 - E.g., “kids are not bad, they are sad”
 - Create stories that tap into humans' innate ability to be curious, courageous, and connected with each other as well as our capacity to love and be compassionate.
 - Tap into the archetype of the “hero” - the community of people who are tapping into the goodness of humanity

Measure narrative change by tracking various outputs.

- Are you seeing changes in attitudes and behaviors around this issue (including within ourselves)?
- Are institutions adopting new practices?
- Is media changing the way they are talking about and framing this issue?
- Are organizations shifting their capacities around this issue?
- Are you seeing policy changes (big p and little p) around this issue?
- Are social norms changing?

Resources

Resources Shared During the Webinar

Webinar Recording & Slides:

- [Recording](#)
- [PowerPoint Slides](#)

Revolutionizing Probation Report, Part I

- [Revolutionizing Probation from Punishment to Community-Led Safety, Part I](#)
- [Executive Summary, Revolutionizing Probation from Punishment to Community-Led Safety, Part I](#)

Narrative Change

- [Narrative Change Self-Assessment Form](#)
- [Measuring Narrative Change: Understanding Progress and Navigating Complexity](#)

YEAH Philly's Violent Crime Initiative

- [Violent Crime Initiative Evaluation](#)

Juvenile Probation Accountability Coalition (JPAC)

- [To learn more about JPAC and join our listserv, visit our webpage.](#)

About the Gault Center

The Gault Center is a national organization dedicated to upholding the constitutional right to counsel for all youth facing arrest. The Gault Center supports a national community of youth defenders and advocates and has worked intensively in several jurisdictions to lead probation order reform efforts to align probation practices with the tenets of racial justice, adolescent development, and due process.

About Youth Empowerment for Advancement Hangout (YEAH Philly)

YEAH Philly is a community-based organization that addresses the root causes of violence by directly serving young people in Philadelphia through evidence-based programming, promoting policy change to reduce mass incarceration in juvenile and criminal legal systems, and challenging racism, racial disparities, and injustice through court advocacy and case management.

About the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies

The Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies is a community-based public health non-profit organization headquartered in New Orleans, LA that works to ignite community healing and sustainable health through comprehensive programming, community-engaged research, and innovative media strategies.