



tyji Tow Youth
Justice
Institute

Making connections. Informing solutions.

University of New Haven

2024 Annual Report

Making Connections for Ten Years



“To achieve the best outcomes for youth, we must first see them as **children and adolescents** who make mistakes, not as criminals committing crimes.”

WILLIAM CARBONE



ABOVE: Erika Nowakowski, Executive Director and William H. Carbone, Senior Executive Director at Pathways to Success: Trailblazers and Innovators in Youth Justice Conference

From Our Directors

Dear Friends,

We are changing the face of youth justice.

Ten years ago, we set out to reimagine a more humane and efficient juvenile justice system anchored to the idea that all kids deserve the opportunity to be kids.

The timing was right. Connecticut had passed legislation to incrementally raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction while making significant investments in youth-oriented resources, setting the stage for major reforms. Together with the University of New Haven, The Tow Foundation, and the State of Connecticut, the Tow Youth Justice Institute was founded as the collaborative engine driving work being done by the newly formed Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee to connect evidence-based research to legislative action and community partners to decision-makers.

We have since earned a reputation for transforming our partners' ideas into reality.

Through our collaborative work, we helped move legislative reforms that dramatically reduced the number of youth entering Connecticut's juvenile justice system by raising the minimum age of juvenile arrest; rolling out community and school-based diversion strategies, alternatives to arrest that dramatically reduced the number of youth in the system; and changing the criteria for arrests to remove status offenses.

During our first ten years, we understood that our young people are multi-system involved and that our work must extend beyond youth justice to all

systems that impact youth and their families. After years of legislative successes, the time is right to expand as we move into our next ten years. We have taken on the new role as the collaborative engine of the Transforming Children's Behavioral Health Policy and Planning Committee, formed in 2022 to assess, advise on, and develop reforms to transform children's behavioral health across the state. In addition, we are working on performance-based accountability to provide comprehensive training and technical assistance to community-based organizations to build capacity for lasting impact, and safer and healthier communities.

This inaugural annual report shares and celebrates our journey of leading a movement in youth justice reform, engaging youth, families, and community members with lived experience, and strengthening partnerships across multiple systems to imagine a brighter, healthier future for all children and their families. We hope our successes inspire you. Without you, none of it would have been possible.

Sincerely,



William H. Carbone, M.P.A.
Senior Executive Director



Erika Nowakowski, M.S.W.
Executive Director

Envisioning a System Where All Youth Can Grow



We believe in a juvenile system where youth-serving agencies consistently work together, use best practices, and make the most of available data and resources to create healthy, safe, supportive, and equitable environments where all children and families can achieve **the most positive outcomes.**

Our World in 2014

Important legislative steps had been taken to update Connecticut's punitive juvenile justice system to raise the age of youth under adult court jurisdiction in phases over several years. However, hundreds of kids were still being arrested and introduced to the criminal justice system for minor status offenses, such as skipping school or running away from home. Recent research demonstrated that low-risk youth typically outgrew negative adolescent behavior with minimal oversight and services, while youth who are arrested and enter the justice system often face reduced educational and vocational opportunities and in turn, are at a greater risk of reoffending.

The juvenile justice system wasn't just negatively affecting youth outcomes, it was dated, inefficient, and wasting scarce state and local resources.

Fact:

When alternatives to arrest are introduced for minor offenses, youth are **2.5 times** less likely to reoffend. The best way to prevent future arrests is to stop the initial arrest from occurring in the first place.

We Set Out to Reimagine Juvenile Justice

In 2014, the Tow Youth Justice Institute was founded in partnership with the University of New Haven, The Tow Foundation, and the State of Connecticut to reimagine a juvenile justice system that **prioritizes the needs and well-being of youth.**

Together, we understood that long-term commitments from key stakeholders were necessary to achieve meaningful and lasting change, and that only through cross-system collaboration, transparency, and authentic engagement with youth, their families, and the community could we make new ideas of justice a reality.

In a short time, TYJI established a unique reputation and talent for **connecting research to legislative actions and youth, family, and community voices to decision-makers.**



ABOVE: Representative Toni Walker and Senator Gary Winfield at a Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee meeting

“Raising the age that youth are considered adults in the justice system does more than just lower recidivism rates, it increases opportunities for troubled youth to become active and upstanding citizens.”

REPRESENTATIVE TONI WALKER

Success Is Our **Focus**



We Inspire Policy:

We develop and facilitate the implementation of effective, impactful youth justice policies to reform the juvenile justice system. This is no small feat, requiring thousands of hours of patient collaboration and stewardship with hundreds of key stakeholders, demonstrating our capacity to build true systems of change.



We Train for the Future:

We utilize our vast network of experts and partners to help train youth-oriented working professionals in best practices, offer technical assistance, and educate Connecticut's youth about social justice issues that impact them and their families.



We Engage, Inform, and Build Community:

We create space where the youth justice community, youth, and their families can be informed, remain engaged and connected, and work together toward the best possible outcomes for youth.



Affecting Positive Change Through Legislation: Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee

Established by the State of Connecticut in 2014, the Juvenile Justice Planning and Oversight Committee brings together **more than 40 youth-oriented representatives** from state agencies, the legislature, law enforcement, critical nonprofits, advocates, and youth and community members who have lived experience to outline priorities, establish goals, and develop evidence-based policy objectives.

Legislative Success

JJPOC initiatives enacted as legislation:

- Decriminalized Status Offenses
- Raised the Minimum Age
- Created the Juvenile Justice Education Unit

How Do We Move the Bar?

We Acknowledge

that inequities and disparities exist across all systems that impact our youth, and understand that reforming those systems demands a broad coalition of partners, a deeply collaborative process, and input from those most affected—youth with lived experience.

We Commit

to reducing racial and ethnic disparities that negatively impact youth outcomes across systems and services, from missed educational opportunities to living with undiagnosed developmental needs and challenges.

We Embrace

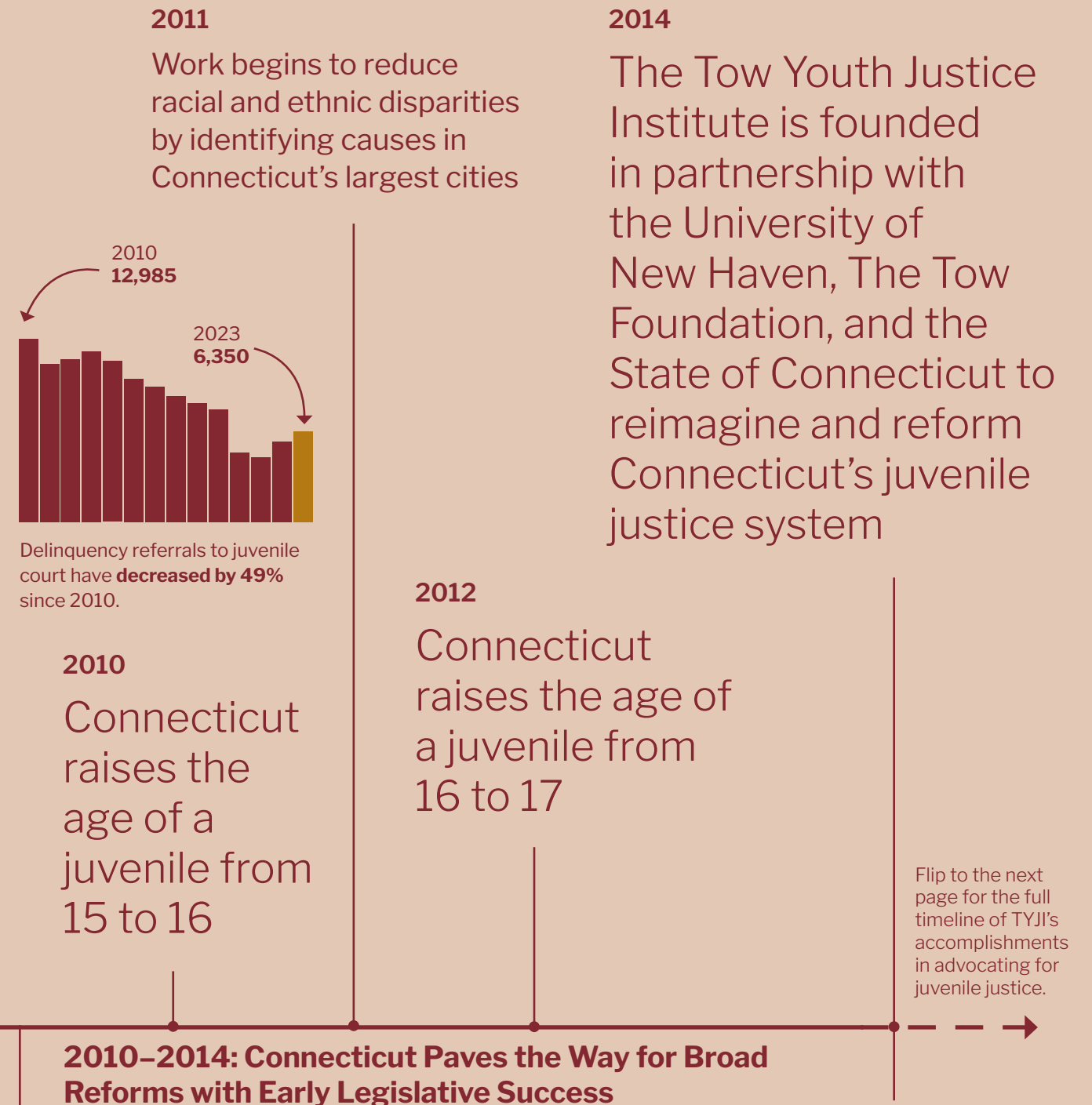
restorative justice practices as an essential approach to divert youth from the juvenile justice system, repair harm caused by inequities, and build mutual respect and trust between youth and youth-oriented systems.

We Believe

that all adolescents, regardless of race, ethnicity, or background, deserve the same opportunities to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Juvenile Justice Reform Timeline of Success

From policy, to training, to engagement



2014
POLICY

Connecticut creates JJPOC

Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee establishes goals to reduce reliance on juvenile justice system and to reform policies that hinder youths' opportunities to success

2015
POLICY

Connecticut aligns JJ laws with US Supreme Court ruling in *Miller v. Alabama* to:

- Retroactively eliminate life without parole
- Shorten time to parole

Passes legislation that prohibits out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of children in pre-K through 2nd grade and includes behavioral health and disciplinary issues in school health screenings

2016
POLICY

Connecticut reforms JJ by:

- Extending restrictions on use of restraint and seclusion to all public school students
- Passing legislation to decriminalize status offenses such as truancy, defiance of school rules, running away from home
- Consolidating all oversight and juvenile justice functions within the Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division

2017

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

TYJI develops new approaches to youth justice and best practices training for youth-oriented professionals

- Launches Transforming Youth Justice Program
- TYJI collaborates with the Child Health and Development Institute to begin training school faculty and administrators in restorative justice practices

2017

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

TYJI creates advisory council of experts and advisors

First TYJI Issue Brief released

2018

POLICY

JJPOC sets policy goals to address conditions that cause youth to enter the system:

- Develop community-based diversion plan
- Create school-based diversion framework
- Focus on trauma approach to suspensions and expulsions
- Develop prearrest diversion plans

JJPOC monitors the closing of Connecticut Juvenile Training School

2019

POLICY

JJPOC establishes education unit to oversee transition of educational credits for youth in confinement

JJPOC launches Improving Outcomes for Youth (IOYouth) Task Force to assess juvenile justice reform implementation and impact

2019

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

TYJI receives OJJDP Cooperative Agreements and works with partners to:

- Reduce racial and ethnic disparities
- Increase community-based diversion

2021

POLICY

Connecticut raises the minimum age of juvenile arrest from seven to ten years old

2021

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

TYJI creates *Fact vs. Fiction* series:

- Shaping a Service Approach in JJ Facilities
- Raising Up Our Youth
- Hearing the Truth About Car Theft in Connecticut

2020

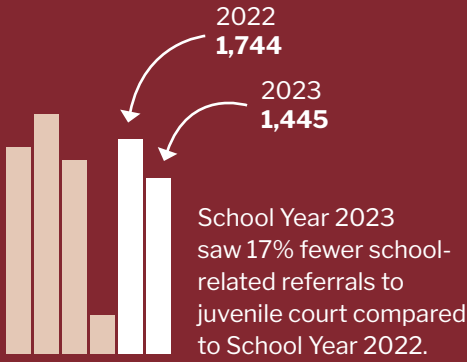
EDUCATION AND TRAINING

TYJI begins restorative practices training for Youth Service Bureaus, Manson Youth Institute, Bridgeport Public Schools, and other organizations through OJJDP funding award

TYJI launches Social Justice Program in New Haven high schools

2014–2017: Sets the Stage with Policy Successes and Training

2018–2021: Expands Juvenile Justice System Reform and Training



2022
POLICY

Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee continues to deepen its work in the community

- Implements oversight of educational services for children in juvenile justice facilities
- Implements oversight of a close-to-home model of residential facilities
- Develops comprehensive reentry model for children returning from juvenile justice facilities
- Evaluates gender-responsive services
- Focuses on reentry

Transforming Children’s Behavioral Health Policy and Planning Committee Created

2024
EDUCATION AND TRAINING

TYJI holds second-annual Pathways to Success conference

TYJI develops and launches restorative justice resource hub

2023
EDUCATION AND TRAINING

TYJI expands Social Justice School statewide

TYJI launches Pathways to Success conference

2022–2024: Deepens Commitment to Juvenile Justice and Multi-System Reform

Forging Leaders and Changemakers; Engaging Youth

Enacting successful juvenile justice reforms requires more than passing legislation; it requires **engaging, educating, and training** youth-servicing stakeholders, youth and their families, and the community by breaking down complicated issues, processes, and best practices of restorative justice in an accessible and accurate way.



“Working with the Community Expertise Workgroup has been a fantastic experience for the teens in *Speak Up*. They view themselves differently than before; they feel empowered and realize they are advocate ambassadors for their peers and community.”

STELLA ROSE, CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY



Transforming Youth Justice Program

Since 2015, our Transforming Youth Justice Program has brought new and innovative approaches to reducing racial and ethnic disparity, school-based diversion initiatives, and restorative practices in juvenile justice to youth-serving professionals across Connecticut, including law enforcement, state agencies, school districts, youth service bureaus, community organizations, and many more.

Over nine months, TYJP fellows participate in monthly, one-day sessions focused on youth justice reforms and best practices in core competencies, such as research, data utilization, and cross-system collaboration. The program culminates with fellows researching and developing individualized Capstone proposals, real projects that combine their professional work experience and new skills to introduce critical youth justice reforms relevant to their work or community.

Projects are released on Capstone Day in a series of professional presentations attended by supervisors, community members, and former fellows that often lead to projects being implemented.

8

COHORTS

115+

PARTICIPANTS

“Their ongoing guidance and support have continued to make me a better professional, even a year after my participation.”

JESSICA BLAKE



ABOVE: Members of Cohort 5

Social Justice School Program

TYJI's Social Justice School Program, initially developed for the New Haven Public Schools, has had over 1,000 students participate.

In this safe, restorative setting, they explore complicated social justice issues and how they relate to their own experiences and communities. Engagement is key, so we tap community leaders, social justice experts, media professionals, and other dynamic figures to help students explore difficult subjects using creative media such as zines and poetry. For our students, the experience doesn't end with the school day or summer session; it continues with them as they take their new understanding of social justice to engage with and inspire friends, families, and community members.

5

SESSIONS

1,000+

STUDENTS

ISSUES

LGBTQ⁺

School Safety

Crown Act

Suicide Prevention

Youth Voice

Restorative Justice

Gang Violence

Youth Supporting Services

Homelessness

Raise Minimum Age

Student Rights

Racial and Ethnic Disparities

Mental Health





Engaging and Informing the Public

Everything we do is about engagement,
building community, and making connections.

Pathways to Success: Trailblazers and Innovators in Youth Justice

The annual Pathways to Success conference is rooted in webinars, virtual programming, and TYJI's *Fact vs. Fiction* series that continued important reform work during COVID-19.

The conference is a full day of live public programming that brings together a wide array of youth-oriented professionals to address key issues facing today's youth. Our aim was always clear: use our expertise and access to experts across the youth justice field to engage with and inform our community in a dynamic and inspiring environment, **where ideas and dialogue are turned into action.**

The 2024 conference was held at the Hartford Convention Center in Connecticut and featured renowned psychologist, author, and advocate **Dr. Maysa Akbar** as the keynote speaker.



ABOVE: Dr. Maysa Akbar



TOP: "Supporting Disconnected Youth in Connecticut: Current Status and Future Directions" panelists

BOTTOM: "Rethinking JJ Housing: Community-Centered Solutions" youth panelists from Our Piece of the Pie

We've expanded the conversation beyond juvenile justice to include **children's behavioral health** and other issues that affect youth outcomes.

Attendees could participate in one of three breakout sessions: Navigating Inclusivity: Advancing Gender-Responsive Approaches for Diverse Youth; Building System Collaborations for Youth with Disabilities; and Rethinking Youth Housing: Community-Centered Solutions.

Fact vs. Fiction

Pathways to Success evolved out of a webinar series that addressed misinformation about juvenile justice reforms in Connecticut during COVID-19.



Issue Briefs

Since 2017, we have collaborated with some of our most valued partners and experts to prepare dozens of briefs, in order to become a trusted and valued source of information and expertise in our community. From child trauma to status offenses, our Issue Briefs synthesize important background information, research, and best practices in a relatable and easy-to-digest format so that JJPOC members, legislators, media outlets, and the broader public understand the most pressing issues affecting our youth today.

Our goal is simple: educate, inform, engage, and empower.



Topics Include:

- Restorative Justice
- Status Offenses
- Opioid Crisis
- Raise the Age
- Homelessness

“TYJI’s team gathers the most important information and research so that we can make the most informed decisions and investments in the children’s behavioral health and juvenile justice systems.”

SARAH EAGAN, STATE OF CT CHILD ADVOCATE

Educating Future Leaders: University of New Haven Juvenile Justice Intern Program

From the beginning, we strived to engage University of New Haven students in ways that provide personal and professional development opportunities for future juvenile justice workers through strong, innovative youth justice programs. Students have the opportunity to intern in areas of restorative practices, Transforming Youth Justice programs, research, the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee, and communications.



90+

STUDENTS IN
INTERNSHIP PROGRAM



“Understanding the importance, intricacies, and process of collaboration that then lead to meaningful change to the state’s juvenile justice system, was eye-opening. I am so grateful to TYJI for my experience as an intern.”

KELLY ORTS, FORMER INTERN

Transforming Children’s Behavioral Health Policy and Planning Committee (TCB)

Mental health is the foundation of positive outcomes for youth. Established by the State of Connecticut in 2022, the committee brings together professionals across a complex array of systems and agencies to evaluate prevention, early intervention, and other youth-related behavioral health treatment services and options, establish goals, and develop legislative objectives to improve developmental and behavioral health outcomes for all children. As with the JJPOC, we serve as the collaborative and administrative engine behind the committee, subcommittees, and workgroups.



Imagining a Brighter Future



Expanding Social Justice School Programs Beyond New Haven



Building on our New Haven school system success, we expanded the Social Justice Program to Hartford in 2024 and are exploring additional school systems and organizations across the state.

Children's Behavioral Health Academy

Modeled on the successes of the Transforming Youth Justice Program, we envision the Children's Behavioral Health Academy as an invaluable space where professionals working across the multiple systems and agencies of behavioral health can get training in best practices, exchange new ideas, and learn valuable skills that meet the complexity of child protective, behavioral, and mental health services. We believe fellows will combine what they learn at the academy with their own experiences to be more effective in their work and community and continue to work toward our shared goal of improving outcomes for all youth and their families.



Reimagining TYJI for Future Success

We have learned the importance of always having our ears to the ground to respond effectively to issues affecting youth and their families.

We've never been afraid to rethink traditional notions of justice and equity or our capacity to facilitate reforms. As the scale and scope of our work move beyond juvenile justice, we have grown (and will continue to grow) our staff, funding, and capacity to meet the needs of our new roles. With the help of Flyleaf Creative, we created a new look for TYJI and re-envisioned how we communicate our mission, values, and goals, and how we celebrate our partners and the important work we do in Connecticut and beyond.



Dear Friends and Supporters,

After ten eventful years of successful youth justice reform, our eyes are firmly set on the future. We know that creating healthy, supportive, and safe environments is crucial in order for today's youth to thrive and become the prosperous, contributing adults of tomorrow. Our aim is to make this a reality for all youth in Connecticut.

To achieve this, we will continue cultivating and expanding our collaborative network and strengthening our role as facilitators and bridge builders at the intersection of cross-system work. But we alone can't make this happen. We all must act and strive to create the kind of healthy, safe, and fulfilling communities our youth and families deserve.

So, join us today as a collaborator, a partner, a contributor, or a supporter. Talk to us; partner with us; support our work financially.

We are grateful to you and to all our partners and supporters for your commitment to our vision of a brighter future for all youth. We look forward to the inspiring work ahead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Erika Nowakowski". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "E" and "N".

Erika Nowakowski, M.S.W.
Executive Director



Thank You to Our Funders



University of New Haven

The Tow Foundation

State of Connecticut Judicial Branch

State of Connecticut Office of Legislative Management

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Hartford Foundation for Public Giving

Travelers Championship

Child Health and Development Institute

Fairfield County's Community Foundation

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