

Improving Behavior in Secure Juvenile Detention Facilities



Reframing incentives to foster safer behavior and reduce recidivism

The experiences youth have in secure juvenile detention facilities can have lasting effects on their social-emotional health and their likelihood of recidivism. To improve experiences in these facilities, ideas42's New York City Behavioral Design Team (NYC BDT) worked with the Administration of Children's Services (ACS) to provide recommendations to optimize the behavioral management system used in secure facilities in the Bronx and Brooklyn. The recommendations, which ACS has since implemented, sought to create a safer environment for youth and staff in the facilities. Broadly, the recommendations also sought to help youth develop positive behaviors that would prepare them to better navigate life outside the secure facilities—ultimately reducing their risk of recidivism as a juvenile or adult.

Summary

Juvenile incarceration¹ is a strong predictor of adult incarceration and criminality in the United States.² Of people under 25 years of age released from incarceration, 76% are arrested again within three years, and over 80% are arrested again within five years.³ In New York City, many youths enter the criminal justice system and are at risk for recidivism. In 2017 alone, more than 1,700 children and adolescents were admitted to the New York City Administration of Children's Services' (ACS) secure juvenile detention facilities.⁴ Youth typically enter these facilities if they have been accused of committing serious offenses or they pose the highest risk to the safety of themselves or others.⁵ While the length of stay can vary greatly, with many staying less than five days and others staying for months, the experiences youth have in these facilities can have lasting effects on their social-emotional health.

Highlights

- ▶ NYC created an incentive system to support a safer environment in juvenile detention facilities, but the incentives alone didn't change behavior.
- ▶ We spoke with youth and staff and applied a behavioral lens to improve the program.
- ▶ Ways to encourage healthier behaviors include incorporating youth's voices in rule-setting, simplifying the rules, and aligning incentives with youth's aspirations.

During their stay at the secure facilities, residents participate in ACS's behavioral management system STRIVE+ (Safety, Teamwork, Respect, Initiative, Values, Engagement, and Exceptional Behavior), formerly known as ASPIRE (Actions, Safety, Participation, Inner development, Respect, Education). Under ASPIRE,

¹ "Juvenile incarceration" generally refers to individuals under the age of 18 who are tried in juvenile courts, though some may go through adult criminal systems (this varies by state: in New York, this age is 16).

² Gottesman, David and Susan Wile Schwarz. 2011. *Juvenile Justice in the U.S.: Facts for Policymakers*. National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health.

³ The Council of State Governments Justice Center. 2015. "Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Young Adults in the Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice Systems." <https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Transitional-Age-Brief.pdf>

⁴ New York City Administration for Children's Services. "Annual Demographic Data for Detention (FY 2017)." Retrieved from <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/data-analysis/2017/AnnualDemographicDataReportForDetentionFY2017.pdf>

⁵ New York City Administration of Children's Services. (N.D.) "Secure Detention." Retrieved January 27, 2020, from <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/acs/justice/secure-detention.page>

an incentive-based system, residents gained points for following rules. These points corresponded to specific levels, which afforded youth perks ranging from more time on the phone to more commissary items like snacks. Despite this incentive system, youth still engaged in discouraged behaviors—from minor misbehaviors, like not following the dress code or disrupting class during their required in-detention schooling, to more serious infractions, like physical aggression toward peers or staff, sometimes resulting in injury.

ACS approached the NYC Behavioral Design Team (NYC BDT), a partnership between ideas42 and the NYC Mayor’s Office of Operations, to improve the ASPIRE system. The goal of the collaboration was not only to reduce misbehavior, but also to promote good behavior, including respectful participation in class and group activities. Taken together, our recommendations were designed to increase youth adherence to rules to create a safer environment at the secure facilities themselves, as well as foster healthier behaviors that would keep youth out of the criminal justice system after their release.

Listening to residents and staff

While incentive-based systems can motivate behavior in targeted ways, their effectiveness is contingent on how well the system is adapted to the context in which it is applied. To gain a deeper understanding of the unique context of life in secure juvenile detention facilities, and youths’ perceptions of that context, the NYC BDT spoke with both resident youth and staff.

In April of 2018, the NYC BDT interviewed 11 youth residents and 16 detention center staff members at Horizon Juvenile Center in the Bronx and Crossroads in Brooklyn. From these conversations, we uncovered three key behavioral phenomena that cause young people not to adhere to ASPIRE.

Residents break rules as a way to exert control in an otherwise powerless state: During adolescence, all young people are constantly re-negotiating their relationships with adults and learning to assert their autonomy in the world. In detention centers, youth are in an extremely choice-constrained environment, in which they are constantly observed and are expected to adhere to rules at all times. In this context, ASPIRE may have signaled to residents that they ultimately had only two choices: follow the rules or break them.

Our conversations suggested that youth perceived following the rules as acting passively and breaking the rules as making an active choice. In this context, youth broke rules they did not agree with as a way to exert control over their environment and assert their own autonomy.^{6, 7}

Rules and incentives are numerous and complex, making them difficult to remember and track: ASPIRE included 67 rules—some of which were redundant. Because staff and youth (like all humans) have

⁶ Nagoka, Jenny, Camille A. Farrington, Stacy B. Erlich, and Ryan D. Heath. 2015. *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2019-01/Exec_Summary_YAS_Framework.pdf.

⁷ Silver, Debbie and Dedra Stafford. 2017. “Creating Student Agency Through Self-Efficacy and Growth Mindset.” In *Teaching Kids to Thrive: Essential Skills for Success*, 67-91. Corwin. https://us.corwin.com/sites/default/files/silver_stafford_chapter_3.pdf

limited attention and a limited ability to remember rules, they often did not know what was required to reach each level and its corresponding incentives. Instead of remembering all the rules, youth and staff adopted mental shortcuts, or **heuristics**, to approximate what good behavior looks like. For example, during interviews, residents used vague and hard-to-act-on shortcuts like “chill” or “be good” to explain what good behavior is, and shortcuts like “disrespect” to explain what bad behavior is.

Incentives fail when rewards are not motivating: ASPIRE relied on external incentives, such as commissary and programming privileges, to motivate behavior change. Youth earned or lost points based on their behavior, which translated to levels with corresponding incentives. While incentives can be effective at creating short-term behavior change, they only work if youth actually want the incentives and feel they are attainable. We found that youth did not view all incentives as equally motivating and many of the most desirable incentives did not feel attainable in the short time, often a few weeks, they may stay in the secure facility.

Further, a practice known as the “seven day zeroing out period” made incentives unattainable and therefore unmotivating. Under this practice, youth who committed more serious violations of the rules, like bullying or possession of contraband, lost all their points and were unable to accrue points for seven days. Since residents who have “zeroed out” cannot accrue points, they felt they “had no reason to behave.” With nothing to lose, there is no opportunity to deploy the powerful motivation lever of **loss aversion**—the tendency to be more motivated by potential losses than by potential gains.

Refining ASPIRE program design with resident input

Following our conversations with youth and staff, we recommended three key principles to redesign ASPIRE.

Incorporate youth voice within ASPIRE: Since young people the world over are likely to break rules they do not agree with, the BDT sought to integrate residents’ feedback to create rules that sounded fairer and more relevant to them to gain their buy-in. Integrating youth feedback also provided an opportunity for them to exhibit their own agency within the system, rather than having to resort to breaking rules to assert themselves. In September of 2018, the BDT spoke with six resident youths in order to incorporate their feedback and rewrite rules.⁸ The residents were given the opportunity to review all of the rules, highlight when a direction wasn’t clear, and offer ways to make language more relatable. Using this feedback, we rewrote rules in language and terminology that the youths commonly used to make it better resonate. For example, residents we spoke with suggested changing a rule written as “display leadership skills” to “model positive behavior.”

Simplify ASPIRE to increase compliance: Because the complexity of the behavioral management system was one factor that lowered resident compliance, the BDT suggested simplifying the rules and incentives system to make it easier for staff and youth to remember.

⁸ Six residents and six staff in first user testing session in September 2019.

As a first step, we suggested reducing the total number of rules to fewer than 16. To narrow down the rules, we identified duplicative rules that could be removed. For example, residents earn points for “participating in class, activities and/or groups” and they lose points for “not participating in class, activities, and/or groups.” Rather than including a rule twice, we recommended keeping the positively framed rule—“participating in class, activities and/or groups”—and eliminating the loss of points for not doing so. We also suggested cutting subjective rules like “displaying respectful manners” because they are difficult for youth to comply with and for staff to track.

Working with ACS and behavior management specialist Dr. Brenda Scheuermann, we developed a “rules matrix” to make the rules easier to recall. To organize rules under easy-to-remember categories, we suggested renaming the ASPIRE system STRIVE+ (Safety, Teamwork, Respect, Initiative, Values, Engagement, and Exceptional Behavior), which resonated well with youth in our interviews. We also suggested grouping rules in ways that were meaningful and directly applicable across specific situations. For example, we suggested a specific set of rules for each area in the center frequented daily by residents, such as the cafeteria, bedrooms, and classrooms, as well as for common daily activities or procedures, such as the morning and bedtime routines.

Our final recommendation for simplifying the behavioral management system focused on making the incentives easier to understand. Incentive-based systems are only effective when participants understand how their actions translate to specific rewards. To make this translation clearer, we created a visual menu of incentives, which would allow residents to quickly grasp how the points they earned from following the rules translated into specific privileges (see appendix). The menu of incentives included icons to represent the privileges associated with different point ranges or “levels.” To make these levels easy to remember, the BDT rounded the number of points residents needed to attain them to the nearest 100s and color-coded the levels on the menu.

Align incentives with extrinsic and intrinsic motivation: Rewards are ineffective if people do not value them. To ensure that ACS offered rewards (*extrinsic motivators*) that are desirable to residents, we asked them which incentives mattered most to them. In conversations, young people shared that three types of incentives are most motivating: 1) brand name commissary incentives, like Dove soap and Old Spice deodorant, 2) phone time to call friends and family, and 3) special programming, like speakers and social events. We suggested featuring more of these privileges at the highest point levels to motivate youth to continue to follow safety and social rules throughout their stay.

In addition, more systemic changes to the incentive system could help residents feel motivated to comply during their stay. Since some youths were maxing out at the top level and others felt it was too difficult to move between levels, they felt stuck and unmotivated. To boost *intrinsic motivation*, we recommended increasing the number of levels youth could attain, so that they could perceive themselves making more progress through their stay. We also recommended starting residents on a middle incentive level when they first enter the facility, making higher levels feel more attainable in the short time they may be at the detention center, and leveraging the power of loss aversion by giving them privileges that could be lost through misbehavior.




















































Finally, we recommended eliminating the “seven day zeroing out period,” under which youth lost all of their points and could not accrue additional points for seven days. Instead of “zeroing out,” the BDT recommended a change in practice, allowing residents who committed bad behavior to earn points at a reduced rate or earn full points but not enjoy associated privileges during this time. Such adjustments would help keep incentives effective and maintain motivation even after incidents of non-compliance.

Takeaway

Behavioral science tells us that positive behavior change starts when rules and procedures are well-tailored to individuals’ unique contexts. In order to create a behavior management system aligned with the realities of secure juvenile detention centers, the NYC BDT spoke with experts—resident youth and staff at those centers. In line with their recommendations, the NYC BDT suggested simple changes—incorporating youths’ voices into the system, clarifying rules and incentives, and aligning these rules and incentives with youths’ motivations. ACS has implemented all suggested changes in secure juvenile detention facilities in NYC. These broad principles are applicable across similar environments and could be adapted to the specific contexts of similar facilities in other cities or states.

Implementing these simple changes has the potential to reduce unsafe behavior, including, in the most extreme situations, altercations that can lead to injury. But the impact of these changes goes beyond reducing misbehavior at facilities. Indeed, fostering better behavior—like healthier interactions between youth and their peers—can translate into more supportive experiences within the facility and prevent youth’s future involvement in the juvenile or criminal justice system after they return to their homes.

Appendix: ASPIRE Visual Menu of Incentives

Level	Phone Calls	Commissary	Other Privileges
Copper (0-299 points)	1 phone call 		Basic activities 
Bronze (300-599 points)	2 phone calls  	2 food or hygiene items (Bronze list)  	Basic activities  Nice Paper 
Silver (600-1099 points)	3 phone calls   	3 food or hygiene items (Silver List)   	Basic activities  Nice Paper  Playing Cards  MP3/Batteries 
Gold (1100-1799 points)	4 phone calls    	4 food or hygiene items (Gold List)    	Basic activities  Nice Paper  Playing Cards  MP3/Batteries  1 McDonald's Item 
Platinum 1800+ points	5 phone calls     	5 food or hygiene items (Platinum List)     	Basic activities  Nice Paper  Playing Cards  MP3/Batteries  3 McDonald's Items  Eat a meal with favorite staff  Special Events (Gold)  Special Events (Platinum)  Headphones  Bake Cookies  Make your meal 