



“If it wasn’t for this program, I would probably be dead”

The Comprehensive Evaluation of the Transformative Justice Program

Report for Transformative Justice Program in Williamson County

Public Policy Research Institute – Texas A&M University
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Table of Contents

Authors and Acknowledgements.....	1
Executive Summary.....	4
Background & Rationale.....	4
Program Overview	4
Evaluation Design	4
Key Findings	4
Does the Program Work?	4
What Drives Program Outcomes?.....	5
Is the Program Cost Effective?.....	5
Conclusions.....	5
Background	6
Diversion Programs	9
Brief History and Background	9
The TJ Program	11
Evaluation	13
Study Process	13
Random Assignment.....	14
Data Collection	14
Randomized Control Trial	15
Interviews and Observations.....	16
Surveys	17
Research Questions	19
Does the Program Work?	20
RCT Findings	20
Participants at Baseline	20
Arrests During and After the Program.....	22
Program Effect on Recidivism.....	23
Additional Impacts	27

Changing Individuals	27
Changing Community.....	27
Shifting Perspectives	28
What Features of the Program are Driving Outcomes?	30
Foundational Pieces	30
The “Right” Team.....	30
A Committed Community	31
Connection to Juvenile Systems.....	31
Implementation.....	32
Case Management That is Supportive Yet Accountable	32
Overcoming Pre-program Barriers	32
Matching Services to the Participant.....	33
Importance of Building Relationships	34
Services and Relationships Work Together	35
Be Flexible	36
Is the Program Cost Effective?.....	37
Conclusions	39
Appendix.....	40
SF-12 Questionnaire	40
Program Stakeholder Interview Questions	43
TJ Program Participant Focus Group Questions	44

Executive Summary

Background & Rationale

- Emerging adults (ages 17–24) are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system and face high recidivism rates (over 75% within three years).
- Underlying drivers include mental health issues, substance use, trauma, unstable housing, unemployment, and limited education.
- Traditional incarceration often worsens these problems, while community-based interventions are cheaper and more effective.

Program Overview

- Launched in Williamson County, Texas (2020) for felony defendants ages 17–24.
- Offers intensive case management and individualized support plans in lieu of incarceration.
- Program completion leads to felony expungement, reducing barriers to jobs and housing.
- Distinctive features:
 - Focuses on felony charges (rare among diversion programs).
 - Eligibility determined by DA intake (not self-application, ensuring broader access).
 - Strong collaboration between justice system actors and community service providers.
 - Multidisciplinary team makes decisions, balancing rehabilitation and public safety.

Evaluation Design

- Mixed methods: qualitative interviews, randomized control trial (RCT), and cost-benefit analysis.
- 146 participants randomized (2020-2023): 73 in TJ Program, 73 in control group.
- Data sources included surveys, court/jail records, interviews, focus groups, and cost information.

Key Findings

Does the Program Work?

- Findings from RCT
 - TJ participants were 35% less likely to be arrested after intake compared to control.
 - Graduates saw even greater improvements:
 - 48% are less likely to be arrested.
 - Spent ~36 fewer jail days.
 - 61% less likely to receive a felony charge.
 - Nearly 80% have fewer misdemeanors and felonies compared to non-graduates.

- Early months (first 200 days) were critical for participant success.
- Findings from qualitative research
 - Individual Impact
 - Increased sobriety, GED completion, stable jobs, family reconnection, and higher self-esteem.
 - As one participant stated: *"If it wasn't for this program, I would probably be dead."*
 - Community Impact
 - Strengthened credibility of the justice system as compassionate and effective.
 - Inspired interest in replication by other counties.
 - Helped shift public perception toward rehabilitation rather than punishment.

What Drives Program Outcomes?

- Participants valued supportive case management, relationships, and life-skills training.
- Program emphasized both support and accountability, fostering trust and personal growth.
- Strong team cohesion and community commitment identified as critical success factors.
- Barriers remain in housing, transportation, and counseling availability.

Is the Program Cost Effective?

- Program cost: ~\$10,000 per participant.
- Savings from fewer jail days, reduced arrests, lower supervision costs, and reduced TDCJ placements.
- Cost projections suggest positive net savings in most scenarios (between \$1,000–\$2,200 per participant annually).
- Broader societal benefits (e.g., saved lives, reduced trauma, intergenerational effects) not fully captured in fiscal calculations, but likely substantial.

Conclusions

- The TJ Program offers a transformative model for addressing recidivism among emerging adults.
- Success hinges on community commitment, team cohesion, sufficient case managers, and service availability.
- While challenges remain, evidence shows the program improves outcomes for individuals, strengthens communities, and can be cost-effective for the county.
- Williamson County serves as a pioneer and potential model for other jurisdictions considering similar programs.

Background

Emerging adults (ages 17-24 years old) are over-represented in the criminal justice system which is ill-equipped to handle the underlying factors that drive this age group's involvement in the criminal justice system. These factors include unaddressed mental health issues, substance use or co-occurring disorders;¹ chronic unemployment and limited work readiness skills;² housing instability or homelessness;³ a history of emotional and physical trauma;⁴ a history of involvement in the child protection or foster care systems;⁵ and limited basic academic skills.⁶

Jails and prisons lack the supports and services emerging adults need to achieve positive health and safety outcomes and reduce their risk of future system involvement. Moreover, the harsh environment of institutional confinement may exacerbate these needs, further increasing the likelihood of recidivism among emerging adults.⁷ Consequently, over 75% of justice-involved

¹ National Research Council, *Reforming Juvenile Justice*, Committee on Assessing Juvenile Justice Reform, Richard J. Bonnie, Robert L. Johnson, Betty M. Chemers, and Julie A. Schuck, Eds. Committee on Law and Justice, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press (2013): 101, http://www.njjn.org/uploads/digital-library/Reforming_JuvJustice_NationalAcademySciences.pdf

² U.S. Department of Labor, *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey* (accessed April 24, 2018), <http://www.bls.gov/web/empstat/cpssee10.htm> (showing unemployment rates for emerging adults far exceeding those of older age groups); Council for State Governments, "Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Young Adults in the Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice Systems." (Nov. 2015): 4, <https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Transitional-Age-Brief.pdf>; for more information on the impact of labor market outcomes on the transition to adulthood, see also: Danzinger, S. and Ratner, D (2010). "Labor Market Outcomes and the Transition to Adulthood," *The Future of Children* 20(1), https://futureofchildren.princeton.edu/sites/futureofchildren/files/media/transition_to_adulthood_20_01_fulljournal.pdf.

³ Council for State Governments, "Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Young Adults in the Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice Systems." (Nov. 2015): 5, <https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Transitional-Age-Brief.pdf>; see also: Vincent Schiraldi, Bruce Western, Kendra Bradner, "Community-Based Responses to Justice-Involved Young Adults," National Institute of Justice, Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, NCJ No. 248900 (September 2015): 7-8.

⁴ Emerging adults aged 18-20 experience violent victimization at more than twice the rate of the general population, and those with a history of foster care are 10 times more likely to report being arrested when they were 18 or 19. See, Velazquez, T. "Young Adult Justice: A New Frontier Worth Exploring." *The Chronicle of Social Change* (2013): 1, available at <http://chronicleofsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Young-Adult-Justice-FINAL-revised.pdf>.

⁵ Council for State Governments, "Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Young Adults in the Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice Systems." *Supra* note 3

⁶ Council for State Governments, "Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Young Adults in the Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice Systems." *Supra* note 3

⁷ NJJN Commission on Youth and Public Safety p.19, Mark W. Lipsey, "The Primary Factors that Characterize Effective Interventions with Juvenile Offenders: A Meta-Analytic Overview," *Victims & Offenders* 4, no. 2 (April 2009): 124-47; Jeffrey A. Butts, Gordon Bazemore, and Aundra Saa Meroe, *Positive Youth Justice: Framing Justice Interventions Using the Concepts of Positive Youth Development* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2010); Brent B. Benda and Connie L. Tollett, "A Study of Recidivism of Serious and Persistent Offenders Among Adolescents," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 27, no. 2 (March-April 1999): 111-26; and Mark W. Lipsey and Francis T. Cullen, "The Effectiveness of Correctional Rehabilitation: A Review of Systematic Reviews," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 3 (December 2007): 297-320; See also Huizinga, David and Kimberly L. Henry, "The Effect of Arrest and Justice System Sanctions on Subsequent

emerging adults recidivate within three years, the highest short-term recidivism rate of any age group.⁸

Experts in the developmental sciences believe that most emerging adults who make contact with the criminal justice system can be better served in their communities, where services are cheaper and are more likely to result in positive health and safety outcomes.⁹ Yet, most Texas communities lack appropriately coordinated support and services structured to provide holistic, comprehensive care to justice-involved emerging adults.

Williamson County, Texas is one community that decided to test this model, in hopes of improving the lives of the emerging adults and their community overall, and lower recidivism rates. In 2020, the 277th District Court partnered with case managers, defense attorneys, and community services to launch the TJ Program. In this program, an emerging adult who was recently arrested for a felony charge is released into the community where they are provided with intensive case management and additional support to address their identified needs instead of the typical criminal justice system. The participant progresses through a phased and individualized care plan aimed at addressing their health needs, educational, vocational and housing needs, and rectify the reason they were involved in the criminal justice system to begin with. If the participant successfully completes the program, they graduate and have the original felony charge expunged.

The TJ Program is built on a foundation of promising strategies in criminal justice and community-based systems. Multiple jurisdictions have developed diversion programs¹⁰ and specialty courts¹¹ for young adults. Programs can vary in length of time, level of support, level of supervision, and requirements. Typically, these programs are aimed at first time misdemeanor

Behavior: Findings from Longitudinal and Other Studies," *The Long View of Crime: A Synthesis of Longitudinal Research* (2008): 220, 250, noting that in a meta- study of longitudinal deterrence research, "the observation that increased sanctions also have little effect or result in increased subsequent delinquency," see: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-0-387-71165-2_7

⁸ Carson, E.A., and Golinelli, D. (2014)." Prisoners in 2012: Trends in Admissions and Releases, 1991-2012." U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs Bureau of Justice Statistics. The Bureau of Justice Statistics stopped publishing "admission" statistics by age in 2013 and now publishes only yearend (December 31) population of correctional facilities by age. 2012 is, thus, the most recent year data is available for comparison of admission rates by age.

⁹ National Research Council. *Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach*. Committee on Assessing Juvenile Justice Reform, Richard J. Bonnie, Robert L. Johnson, Betty M. Chemers, and Julie A. Schuck, Eds. Committee on Law and Justice, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press (2013): 101, http://www.njjn.org/uploads/digital-library/Reforming_JuvJustice_NationalAcademySciences.pdf; see also: Kelly, W.R., Pitman, Robert, and Streusand, William. *From Retribution to Public Safety: Disruptive Innovation of American Criminal Justice*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield (2017): 138, citing Andrews, D.A. and Bonta, J. *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*. 5 Routledge: New York, NY (2015).

¹⁰ Kimmitt, A. (2021). *Emerging adults in the justice system: Brief literature review and environmental scan*. Department of Justice Canada. <https://canada.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/yj-jj/eajs-jasj/docs/kimmit-2021-eng.pdf>

¹¹ Emerging Adult Justice Learning Community. (2021). A roadmap to reform: Key elements of specialized courts for emerging adults. Justice Lab at Columbia University. <https://justicelab.columbia.edu/sites/justicelab.columbia.edu/files/content/Key%20Elements%20of%20Specialized%20Courts%20for%20Emerging%20Adults.pdf>

offenders. Other programs are led by community organizations, with less direct involvement in the criminal justice system.¹²

The TJ Program sets itself apart in a few ways. It is one of the few programs to focus on felony charges. A felony on an individual's record can prevent them from obtaining employment and housing. With little opportunity, individuals with a felony often find themselves stuck in a cycle of criminal justice involvement to address their basic needs. Eligibility for the program is also left to the District Attorney's typical intake process. Unlike application-based programs who are usually limited to individuals who have means and awareness of the program's existence, all are potentially eligible. Second, the program is situated in the criminal justice system but relies on strong collaboration with community provided services and intensive case management. It considers the holistic wellbeing of the participants, not just their criminal justice behavior. It aligns the criminal justice system with the healthcare, mental health, substance use treatment and community services system. Third, decisions for the emerging adults are made by a team of trained case managers, attorneys, and representatives from the court system and community services systems to identify the best match of services to address need while also considering community safety.

This report presents the findings from a comprehensive evaluation of the TJ Program through both a health and criminal justice outcome- and systems-level lens using a mixed methods approach (randomized control trial (RCT), cost analysis, and process evaluation). All data collection protocols for this evaluation were approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Funding for this project was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Texas Indigent Defense Commission, and the Department of Justice.

¹² Roca Inc. (n.d.). Our intervention model. <https://rocainc.org/how-we-do-it/our-intervention-model/>; UTEC Inc. (2023). 2023 UTEC annual report. <https://utecinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023-UTEC-Annual-Report.pdf>

Diversion Programs

Brief History and Background

The purpose of diversion programs is to redirect offenders from the traditional criminal justice system (typically involving incarceration, either pre- or post-disposition, or both) through programming, supervision, and support structures.¹³ The theory of this redirection is it will result in the avoidance of the negative consequences of envelopment within the criminal justice system, such as incarceration or confinement; of exposure to other criminal justice involved individuals; and of the stigma of criminal justice involvement.¹⁴ The first diversion programs in the United States began in the 1940s as an alternative to prosecution for juvenile offenders.¹⁵ The theory was that criminal sanctions were not effective at rehabilitating offenders, particularly children.¹⁶ A couple of decades later, the first adult diversion program began operating in the mid-1960s in Flint, Michigan.¹⁷ In 1967, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice recommended expanding pretrial diversion nationwide,¹⁸ and in 1973 the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals recommended that all jurisdictions throughout the United States establish pretrial diversion programs.¹⁹ Today, the United States operates the U.S. Pretrial Diversion Program for federal offenders,²⁰ and nearly all states have diversion alternatives either for offenders in general or for specific populations, such as those with substance abuse problems, mental health issues, or veteran/active military status.²¹

¹³ See "Diversion Programs," youth.gov (last visited Nov. 19, 2021), <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/juvenile-justice/diversion-programs>.

¹⁴ Melissa R. Nadel, George Pesta, Thomas Blomberg, William D. Bales & Mark Greenwald, *Civil Citation Diversion or Net Widening?* 55 J. Res. CRIME & DELINQUENCY 278, 81 (2018).

¹⁵ See Rodriguez, *supra* note 3.

¹⁶ See *supra* note 11; see also The Center for Prison Reform, *Diversion Programs in America's Criminal Justice System: A Report by the Center for Prison Reform* (Aug. 2015), <https://centerforprisonreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Jail-Diversion-Programs-in-America.pdf> ("Lawbreakers who serve prison time become stigmatized in their social lives, financial history, and career prospects, making it harder for them to reintegrate into society and avoid further lawbreaking.").

¹⁷ The Citizens Probation Authority still operates today in Genesee County, Michigan. See Spurgeon Kennedy, James Brown, Barbara Darbey, Anne Gatti, Tara Klute, Mary Pat Maher & Daniel Peterca, *Promising Practices in Pretrial Diversion*, National Association of Pretrial Services Agencies (2006).

¹⁸ See The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society: A Report by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (Feb. 1967), <https://www.hsl.org/?view&did=709498>.

¹⁹ See Report of the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals (Jan. 23 1973), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/10865NCJRS.pdf>.

²⁰ The U.S. Department of Justice is in charge of federal diversion. U.S. Department of Justice Manual, Title 9, Pretrial Diversion Program (last updated Apr. 2011), <https://www.justice.gov/jm/jm-9-22000-pretrial-diversion-program>. See also Thomas. E Ulrich, *Pretrial Diversion in the Federal System*, Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts (Dec. 2002), https://www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/66_3_5_0.pdf.

²¹ "Pretrial Diversion," National Conference of State Legislatures (Sept. 28, 2017), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/civil-and-criminal-justice/pretrial-diversion.aspx>.

There are three primary points at which diversion can occur: the law enforcement phase, the pretrial/prosecution phase, and the specialty court phase.²² Various programs work to divert individuals from conviction at these different points, and the practices of these programs vary depending on goals. For example, a diversion program that intervenes at the law enforcement stage by identifying the needs that increase risk of crimes may focus on the provision of behavioral health services.²³ In contrast, a diversion program that intervenes at the pretrial stage to reduce docket pressure may provide referrals to community service opportunities in lieu of standard adjudication.²⁴

The TJ Program is part of the pretrial diversion programs, which intervene at the stage between law enforcement (*i.e.*, arrest) and court sentencing (*i.e.*, incarceration). Though variation exists, the following components are hallmarks of pretrial diversion programs:²⁵

1. Deferment of traditional criminal justice processing pending completion of the program;
2. Specific guidelines for eligibility;
3. Managed supervision and reporting; and
4. Articulated criteria for determining success or failure.

These programs in the U.S. typically entail some combination of drug testing, restitution, community service, and counseling.²⁶ These programs share a premise of diverting participants away from a criminal record and incarceration.²⁷ Ordinarily, successful completion of a diversion program results in dismissal of the underlying criminal charge and sometimes expungement of the charges.²⁸

Diversion programs have also faced criticisms on multiple fronts. Initially celebrated, they were later dismissed as a failing strategy in the 1980s, before regaining attention in the 1990s as a legitimate, cost-effective alternative.²⁹ An early review of adult diversion programs in California found that they largely addressed minor offenses and primarily involved young, white participants.³⁰ The review also noted that not all diversion programs arranged for the expungement of criminal records, creating employment and thus financial problems for

²² See Rodriguez, *supra* note 3.

²³ See *id.*

²⁴ See *id.*

²⁵ See *id.*

²⁶ See Kennedy et al., *supra* note 15.

²⁷ See generally Malcolm M. Feeley, *How to Think About Criminal Court Reform*, 98 BOSTON UNIV. L. REV. 673, 686 (2018).

²⁸ Amber Widgery, Pretrial Diversion, NAT'L CONFERENCE OF STATE LEGISLATURES (Sept. 28, 2017), www.ncsl.org/research/civil-and-criminal-justice/pretrial-diversion.aspx.

²⁹ Rodriguez et al., *supra* note 3; see also Michael W. Agopian, *Evaluation of Adult Diversion Programs: The California Experience*, 41 FED. PROBATION 15 (1977) (“During recent years, perhaps the single most popular concept within criminal justice has been the implementation of diversion procedures.”).

³⁰ See Agopian, *supra* note 25.

participants in the future.³¹ Thus, as early as the 1970s, scholars identified many of the critiques of diversion programs that persist today: financial barriers, extending as opposed to reducing the reach of the criminal justice system, strict entry criteria, racial disparities, and guilty plea requirements.

The TJ Program

The TJ Program is considered part of the diversion program family. The TJ Program launched in Williamson County, Texas in November of 2020. Williamson County sits in Central Texas, directly north of the capital Austin. It is part of the Austin–Round Rock–Georgetown metropolitan area and is considered not just one of the fastest-growing suburban counties in the state but also in the country. The estimated current population is slightly less than 750,000, reflecting a nearly 20% growth from 2020 to 2024. The median household income is slightly less than \$110,000.³²

As discussed above, in this program, an emerging adult who has been recently arrested on a felony charge is released into the community rather than processed through the traditional criminal justice system. Instead of facing incarceration, participants receive intensive case management and tailored support to meet their individual needs. Each person follows a phased, individualized care plan that addresses health, education, vocational training, housing, and other core areas that contribute to long-term stability. The ultimate goal is to not only resolve the circumstances that led to justice involvement but also to lay the foundation for a more sustainable future. Successful completion of the program results in graduation and the expungement of the original felony charge.

The TJ Program distinguishes itself in several critical ways from more traditional diversion programs. First, it is one of the few diversion programs that directly addresses felony charges. A felony record creates significant barriers to employment, housing, and long-term opportunity, leaving many individuals trapped in a cycle of reoffending as they struggle to meet basic needs. By targeting this population, the TJ Program tackles one of the most pressing drivers of recidivism. Second, eligibility is determined through the District Attorney's standard intake process rather than a separate application system. This ensures that the program is not limited to individuals with the resources or awareness to apply but instead remains broadly accessible to all who meet the criteria. Third, the program combines the authority of the justice system with the strengths of community-based services. Intensive case management connects participants to healthcare, mental health and substance use treatment, educational opportunities, and housing resources. This holistic approach acknowledges that justice involvement is often a

³¹ See *id.*; see also The Center for Community Alternatives (2010), *Reconsidered: The Use of Criminal History Records in College Admissions*, New York: Center for Community Alternatives (finding that approximately 70% of higher education institutions collect information about applicants' criminal justice history).

³² Williamson County fact sheet <https://www.wilcotx.gov/DocumentCenter/View/10051/Fact-Sheet-2025?bidId=> (September 2025).

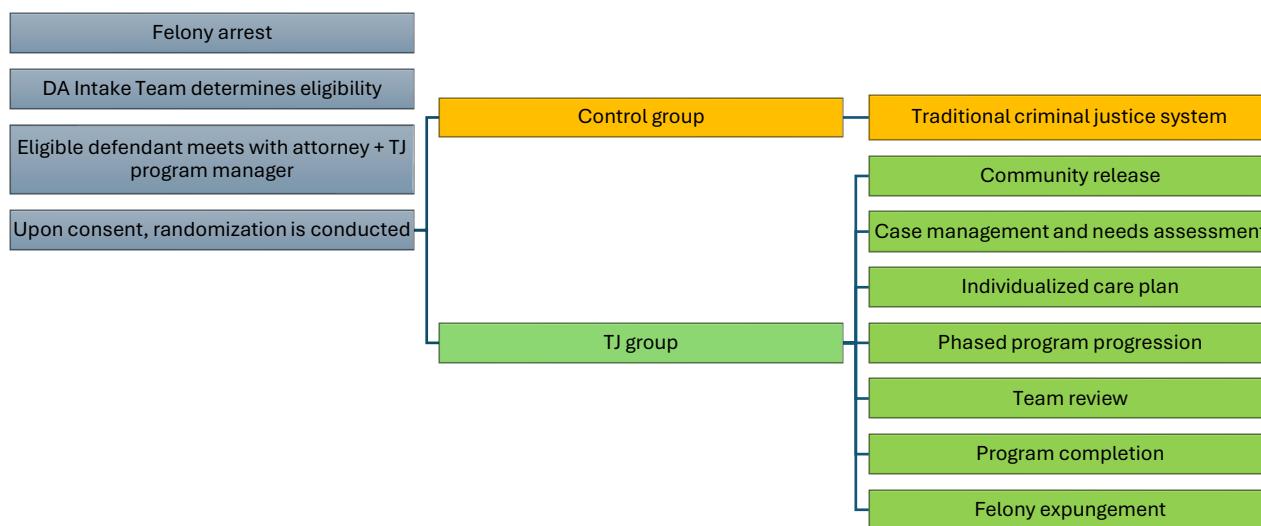
symptom of deeper unmet needs. Finally, program decisions are guided by a multidisciplinary team that includes trained case managers, attorneys, court representatives, and community service providers. Together, they match participants with the most appropriate supports while also safeguarding community safety. This collaborative model ensures that decisions are balanced, participant-centered, and rooted in evidence-based practices. In short, the TJ Program does more than divert young adults from traditional prosecution—it provides a pathway out of the cycle of justice involvement by addressing root causes, reducing barriers, and promoting lasting change.

Evaluation

Study Process

The evaluation design used a mixed-methods approach that included a qualitative component, a RCT, and a cost-benefit analysis. The qualitative component involved interviews with stakeholders, attendance at life-skills events organized by the program, observation of program-related court hearings, review of program documents, and focus groups with participating defendants. The RCT assigned eligible participants to one of two groups: a control group or a treatment group. The control group, also referred to as the comparison group, went through the county's standard criminal justice process following a felony arrest. The treatment group, also known as the TJ group, participated in the program. The cost-benefit analysis assessed program costs against potential savings, including reductions in pretrial jail days and other associated benefits. Figure 1 presents a timeline of the TJ Program starting with arrest all the way to graduation.

Figure 1: TJ Program Timeline



Initial enrollment into the program and associated study was slower than anticipated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To be eligible for the program, an individual must be between the ages of 17 and 24 and arrested for committing a felony in Williamson County, Texas. Upon arrest, the Williamson County District Attorney Intake team reviews the details of the case to determine eligibility. Certain violent felonies such as domestic violence, aggravated assault, manslaughter etc. are excluded, deeming the defendant ineligible for the TJ Program. During the RCT, the program director or case manager would be called to meet with the defendant in the jail, explain the program, gather consent for participating in the study and randomize the participant if they agreed. Those not selected into the program proceed through the typical criminal justice process.

If selected, the participant is assigned to a case manager and a defense attorney and is released into community on a personal recognizance bond. The participant receives a needs assessment that identifies their care needs, and an individualized plan is made. The plan is phased, where phase 1 is meant to address crisis issues. Phase 2 is for stabilization, and phase 3 is setting up the participant for independence. A participant's specific time in the program can vary depending on their progress but they are meant to complete all phases between 12 and 18 months. If the participant successfully graduates, their criminal record is expunged. Typical services assigned include inpatient or outpatient drug and alcohol abuse treatment, counseling, education and career counseling. Additionally, the participant receives intensive case management from a licensed social worker and participates in a life skills group. The participant must also appear in court on a regular basis.

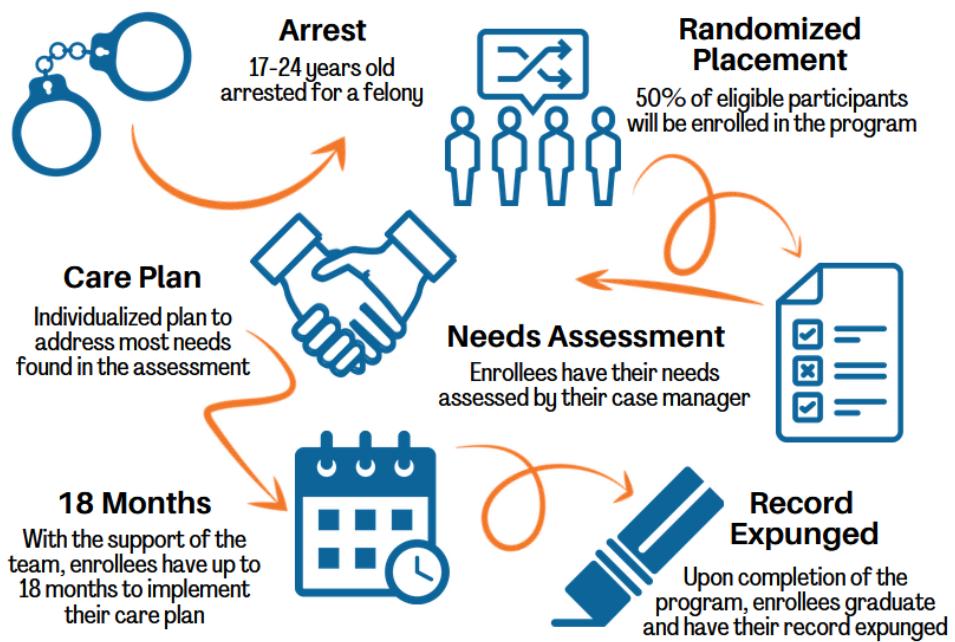
Random Assignment

All in all, from November 2020 to March 2023, 146 defendants were deemed eligible by the District Attorney intake team, of which 73 were randomized in the TJ Program and another 73 were randomized into the control group. The program manager conducted the randomization using a web-based randomization tool that was developed by the research team. The web-based randomization tool shielded front end users from the knowledge of the upcoming random assignment. This prevented compromising of the randomization assignment. The program manager communicated the randomization result to the case management team. For those randomized to participate in the TJ Program, the magistrate judge issued a non-financial personal recognizance (PR) bond releasing the participant without bond but into the custody of the TJ Program case manager. The condition of this PR bond was to attend a first meeting with the TJ Program case manager within 24 hours of release. At that meeting, the TJ Program proceeds as described in the previous section. For those randomized to the comparison group, the magistrate judge adjudicated as normal. This could include issuing a PR bond with or without conditions or a financial amount attached to be surrendered for failure to appear at the next proceeding. This could also have included remaining incarcerated without a bond amount or conditions. It could also have included remaining incarcerated because participant was unable to post the required bond amount or otherwise meet the release conditions. Figure 2 summarizes the TJ Program during the RCT study.

Data Collection

The research team collected data from interviews with program stakeholders, focus groups, court and meeting observations, and program documents as part of the qualitative research section. For the RCT component, the research team worked with the county to receive administrative criminal justice data booking and court data. This data was supplemented by initial survey data. The data also included cost information to guide the cost benefit analysis.

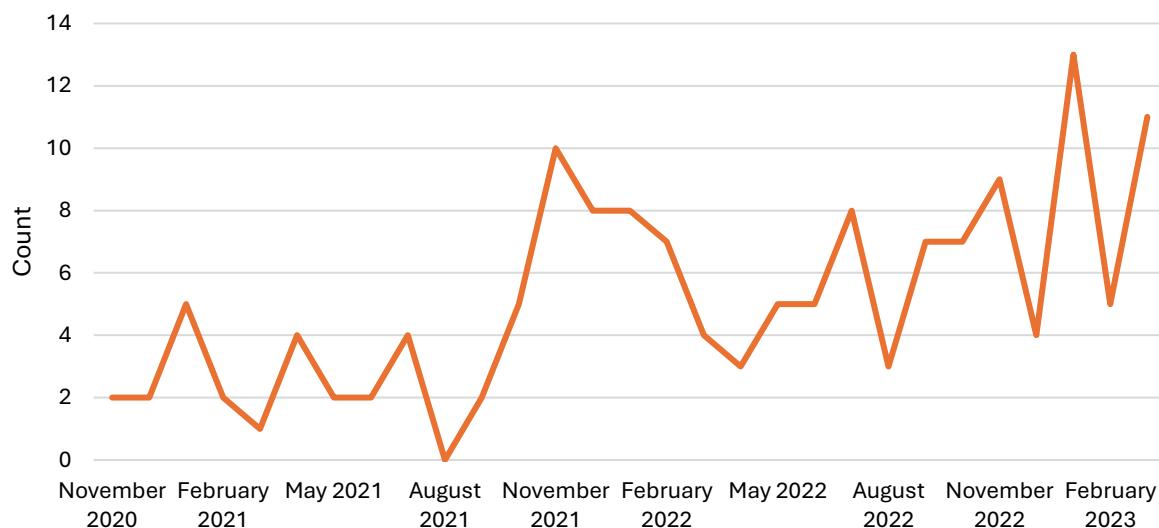
Figure 2: TJ Program during Evaluation



Randomized Control Trial

The RCT study was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic and that affected the expected enrollment in the study. Figure 3 below shows the enrollment in the study between November 2020 (launch month) to March 2023 (end of the enrollment period). The research team followed this sample until June 2025 documenting all new arrests and bookings in Williamson County.

Figure 3: Participant Enrollment



Based on historical data from Williamson County, the expected monthly enrollment was around 14. However, during the first 10 months after the study launched (through August 2021), enrollment hovered between 2 and 4 defendants per month. After August 2021, enrollment increased, ranging from 3 to a high of 13 per month, though it never reached the expected 14. In total, 146 defendants enrolled in the study, with 73 randomized into the TJ Program and 73 into the standard criminal justice process. During that time, the enrollment in the TJ Program and the comparison group mirrored the trend of total enrollment.

Interviews and Observations

The research team led semi-structured interviews with 14 individuals who provide services through the program (case managers, director, community service organization representatives) or are in the court (judges, defense attorneys, prosecutors). All individuals were involved in program design and implementation and as such they are identified as program leaders in this paper. Interviews with six program leaders were repeated approximately a year later to identify any program change and impact.

We also conducted a focus group with TJ participants themselves. Fourteen participants – twelve current participants and two graduates – provided input on what they like about the program, what they dislike, and what impact they believe it is having. Table 1 provides an example of the topics discussed. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

Table 1: Interview and Focus Group Questions

For program leaders	For TJ participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What works? • What are the challenges/gaps? • What is most effective part of program? Least effective? • Is the program being implemented like intended? • What can be improved on? • How has program changed? • Is the program having an impact? On individuals? On the community? On the criminal justice system? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you like about program? • What do you dislike about program? • What would you change? • Is the program having an impact? How?

We attended pre-court planning sessions with program and court staff, court proceedings, and life skills meetings to observe how the participants and program stakeholders engage. During these observations, researchers took detailed notes of activity and interactions between program participants and staff. These notes were analyzed alongside the transcriptions. All

transcriptions and notes were uploaded into Dedoose version 10.0.³³ The documents were reviewed and coded several times before being organized into categories, utilizing a thematic approach. Coded excerpts were re-read to code up and generate overarching categories and a taxonomy.³⁴ Preliminary results were shared with key stakeholders throughout the study period. As such, initial analysis focused on identifying successes and challenges to support the program's implementation. Subsequent analyses considered the evolution of the program.

Our first aim was to identify the key components of the program as a model of emerging adult programs – we broke this theme into “foundational pieces” and “implementation” components. Our second aim was to document the impacts of the program that go beyond traditional criminal justice measures, as an indicator of how individuals, communities, and systems are changing. We elaborate on each of these themes utilizing our findings from the observations and direct quotes from interviews to further illustrate points. Quotes from Program Leaders are designated as “PL” and Program Participants are marked as “PP”. Figure 4 illustrates the themes, categories, and subcategories we identified through this phase of the study.

Surveys

To complement the qualitative and RCT data components, all participants completed a baseline survey on health outcomes at the initial booking and intake. All received an invitation to take subsequent surveys at three-month intervals during the program for the next two years. Participants received \$15 for completing the initial survey and \$15 for each subsequent survey completed. To increase the likelihood of follow-up for surveys, participants had provided a phone number, email address and physical address for themselves and for additional contacts who could reach them. The research team used a survey web-based tool allowing participants to respond via text, email, or touch tone phone. The health survey questions came from the SF-12, which focused on health-related quality of life (“HRQoL”).³⁵ The research team also added additional questions regarding the social determinants of health. (See Appendix: *Survey Questions*, for a copy of the SF-12 questions and the additional questions). The SF-12 used a norm-based scoring system to score responses on a mental and physical component score (0-100). The additional questions elicited impressions of food insecurity, housing, employment, intimate partner violence, stress, and meaningful daily activity. If participants did not complete

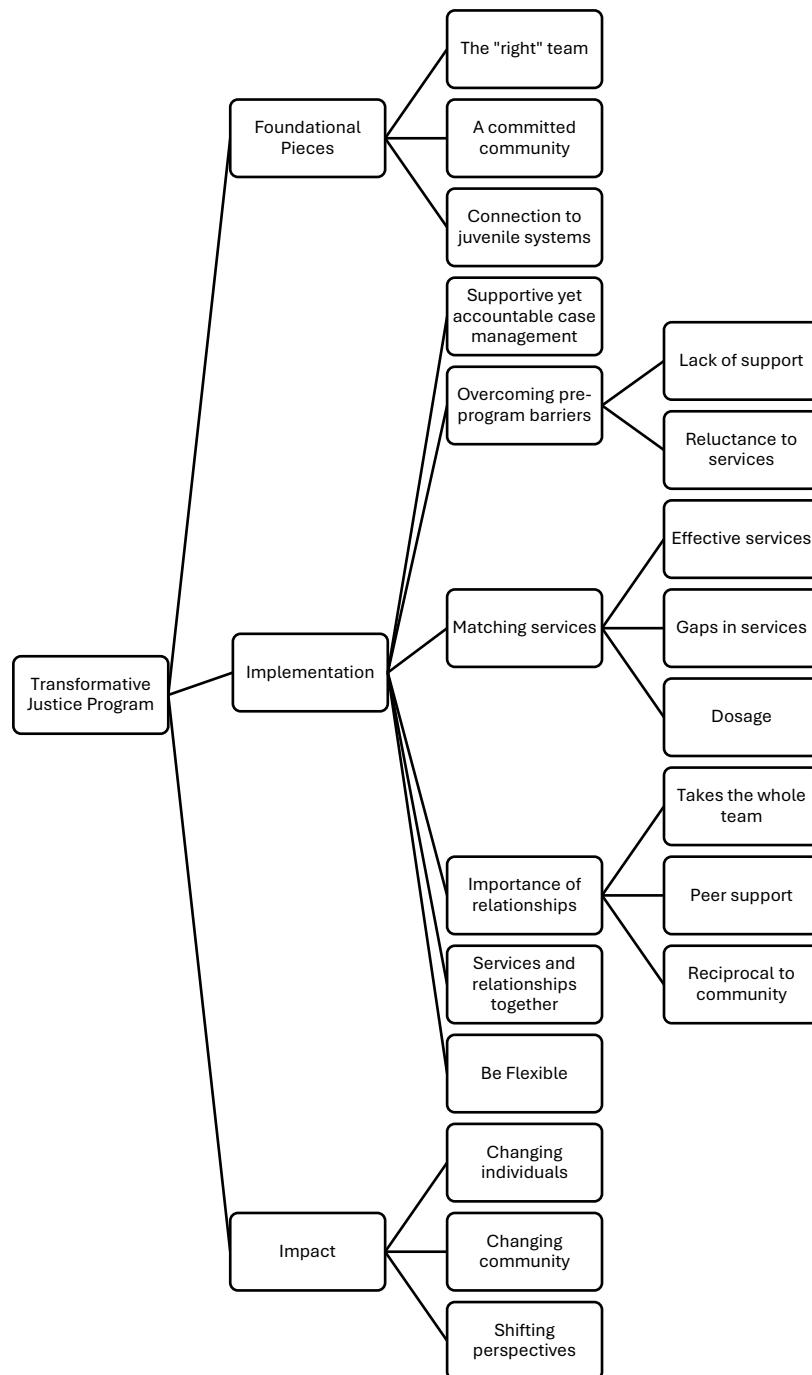
³³ SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC. (n.d.). *Dedoose* (Version 10.0) [Computer software]. <https://www.dedoose.com/>

³⁴ Bradley, E. H., Curry, L. A., & Devers, K. J. (2007). Qualitative data analysis for health services research: Developing taxonomy, themes, and theory. *Health Services Research*, 42(4), 1758–1772. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6773.2006.00684.x>

³⁵ A limitation of the SF-12 in this study design is that it has a one-month lookback whereas it was administered every three months. This means we are missing two months of information each time administered. This cadence was determined by the budget for the evaluation and the idea that frequent administration of surveys becomes prohibitively costly.

a survey quickly, the survey tool sent an electronic reminder up to four times. If a participant still did not complete the survey after receiving this reminder, the research team called participant up to four times to remind them to take the survey. If a participant did not complete the survey after receiving both electronic and phone call reminders, the team called the alternate contacts up to four times to ask them to remind participant to take the survey. Surveys remained active up to one week before the initiation date of the next survey. Participants who failed to take surveys did not receive survey incentives.

Figure 4: Code tree derived from thematic analysis of qualitative data



Research Questions

The following sections present findings from the three components of the TJ Program evaluation: qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis (RCT), and cost-benefit analysis. The evaluation focused on three key questions:

1. Does a community-based services program led by team-based decision-makers improve emerging adults' physical and mental health and reduce recidivism compared to the current criminal justice system? (Does the program work?)
2. Which features of the program are driving these outcomes? what is working or not working?
3. Is the program cost effective?

Does the Program Work?

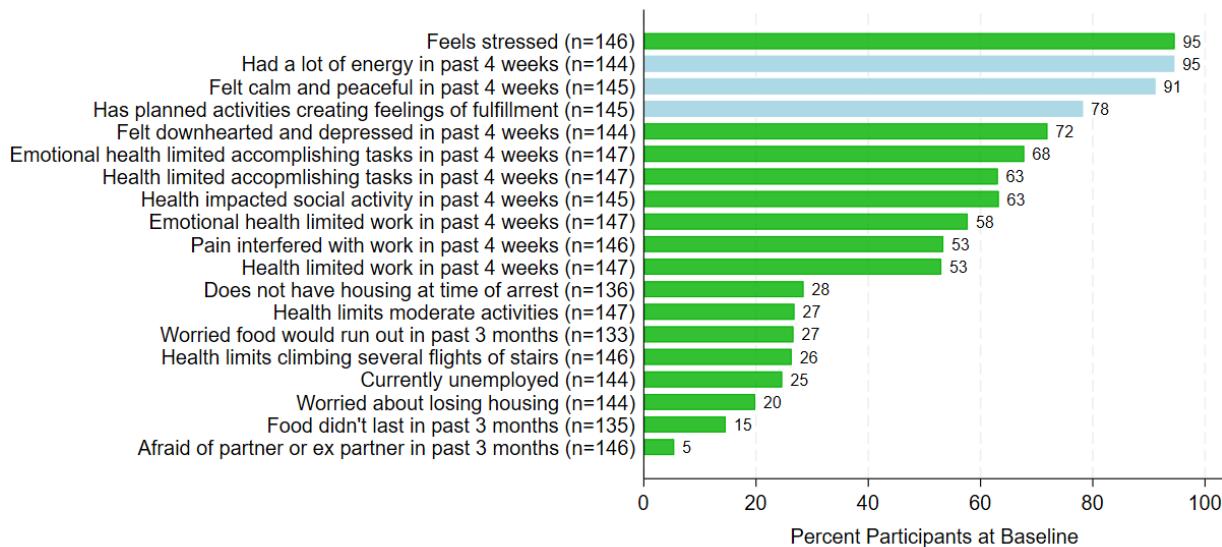
Here we evaluate the key question of the program's outcomes. We start with the RCT findings which give us insight into arrest-related outcomes and supplement this with findings from the qualitative research that provide impact statements from the program participants directly.

RCT Findings

Participants at Baseline

One of the main motivations for a program like TJ is addressing the underlying factors identified in the literature as drivers of repeated interactions with the criminal justice system among emerging adults ages 17 to 24. Figure 5 below documents these factors using our baseline SF-12 survey from all participants in the TJ Program RCT at intake. The blue bars represent positively worded questions—having a lot of energy in the past four weeks, feeling calm and peaceful in the past four weeks, and having planned activities that create a sense of fulfillment. While the other questions, in green, describe negatively worded questions or challenges the participants are facing.

Figure 5: Underlying Factors at Baseline



The figure highlights both protective and risk factors reported by defendants at baseline. On the positive side, a large majority indicated strengths in certain areas: 95% reported having a lot of energy, 91% felt calm and peaceful, and 78% said they had planned activities that gave them a sense of fulfillment. These findings suggest that many participants entered the program with some degree of resilience and positive coping resources. At the same time, the figure shows significant challenges. Nearly all participants (95%) reported feeling stressed, and large proportions indicated that emotional or physical health limited their daily activities—such as accomplishing tasks, social interactions, and work. Housing and food insecurity were also

evident, with roughly a quarter reporting unemployment, no housing at the time of arrest, or concerns about food running out. Taken together, the data suggests that while participants maintain certain protective factors, they also face high levels of stress, health limitations, and basic needs insecurity that may contribute to ongoing justice system involvement. The findings in this figure align with the literature, showing that underlying factors, such as high stress, mental health challenges, and housing or food insecurity, exist in a significant manner and hence must be addressed to reduce criminal justice involvement.

Once the sample was defined, the first thing to check is whether the demographics of the TJ Program group and the normal criminal justice group are statistically identical. This is presented in Table 2 as a balanced sample check.

Table 2: RCT Sample Balance Check

Variable	Control – Mean (n = 73)	TJ Program - Mean (n = 73)	P-value
Age	19.70	19.78	0.83
Male	0.79	0.73	0.33
White	0.78	0.85	0.29
Hispanic	0.49	0.47	0.74
Arrested before intake	0.16	0.26	0.16
# of misdemeanors before intake	0.23	0.53	0.07
# of felonies before intake	1.18	1.06	0.19
# of days in jail before intake	1.99	3.44	0.43
Felony charge before intake	10%	10%	1.00

Table 2 shows that across seven demographic and criminal justice variables, none of the means differ significantly between the TJ Program group and the control/comparison group at the 1% or 5% significance levels. The only exception is the number of misdemeanors before intake, which is significant at the 10% level. Overall, the results suggest that the TJ Program and control groups are comparable across both observable variables (listed in Table 2) and, by extension, unobservable characteristics. Therefore, we are confident attributing any outcome differences to the TJ Program as a causal effect.

In terms of specific charges at intake, the most common offense was possession of a controlled substance, which accounted for about 55% of all charges in the full sample of 146 participants, as well as within both the TJ Program and control groups. The remaining 45% consisted of a mix of charges—including unlawful carrying of a weapon, theft, evading arrest, burglary, delivery of a controlled substance, fraud or forgery, unauthorized use of a vehicle, and driving while intoxicated—none of which exceeded 10% of the total.

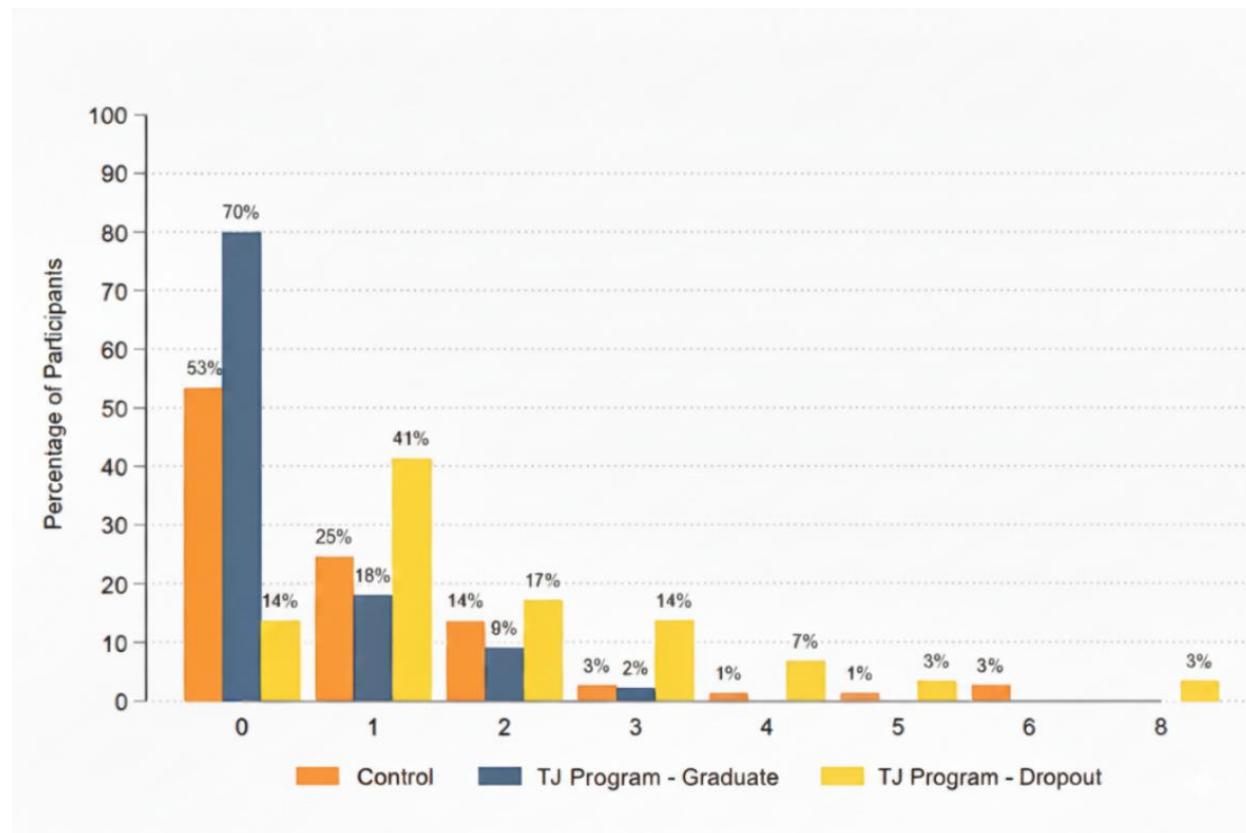
Arrests During and After the Program

Figure 6 summarizes the number of arrests after intake for both the TJ Program and the control group. Within the TJ Program, participants are divided into two groups: graduates (44 out of 73) and dropouts (29 out of 73). Dropouts are defendants who did not complete the TJ Program and were removed from it. Intake is defined as the booking date when a defendant was deemed eligible for the TJ Program and consented to participate in the study.

Among the control group, 53% of defendants were never arrested after intake, compared to 70% of TJ Program graduates. With one arrest, the shares fall to 25% for the control group and 18% for graduates: with two arrests, 14% and 9% respectively. Only 2% of graduates (one individual) were arrested three times after intake, and none were arrested more than three times. Out of 44 TJ Program graduates, 31 never got arrested again after their initial intake. By contrast, 8% of the control group (six defendants) had three or more arrests after intake.

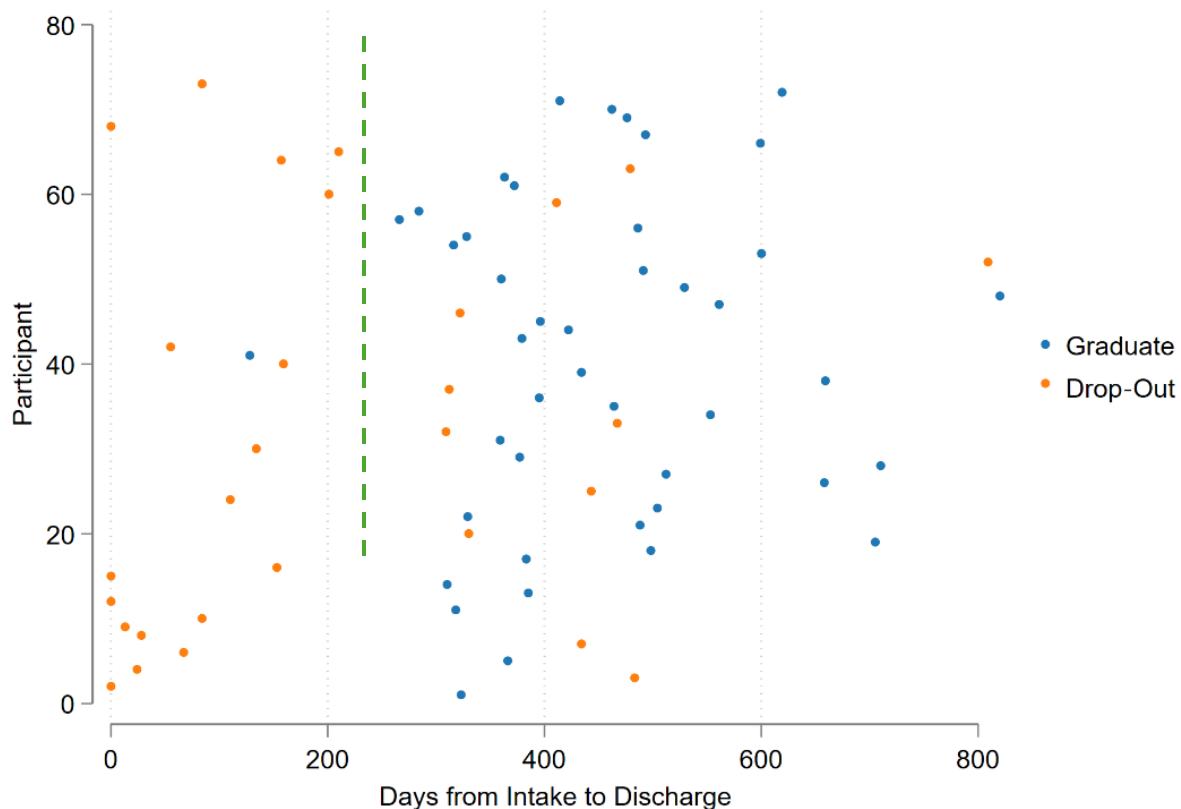
For TJ Program dropouts, 82% were arrested at least once after intake. It is important to note, however, that dropout arrest figures also reflect sanctions imposed by the court for failing to meet program milestones. As a result, these numbers are biased upward for dropouts.

Figure 6: Number of Arrests After Intake



From our conversations with TJ Program stakeholders, we learned that the first few months of enrollment are crucial to determining a defendant's success in the program. Figure 7 focuses on TJ Program enrollees and compares arrest incidents for graduates and dropouts (excluding those in the TJ group who were never arrested). The figure highlights the importance of the first 200 days—roughly the first six months—of enrollment as a critical period for shaping attitudes and securing buy-in from participants. Our qualitative analysis further confirms that this six-month window strongly predicts whether a defendant will ultimately graduate or drop out. During this time, program stakeholders must build strong relationships with participants, earn their trust, and set clear expectations for success.

Figure 7: Days Between Program Discharge and First Re-arrest by Graduation Status



Program Effect on Recidivism

Now we turn our attention to the main results of the study. How does the TJ Program affect recidivism? We define recidivism as “getting arrested/ booked” again within the timeframe the study was following defendants. The timeframe is defined for each defendant from their own intake date until June 2025. Table 4 below presents the main results including whether a defendant was arrested after intake or not (“Arrested after intake”), number of arrests (in total, just felonies, and just misdemeanors), number of jail days, and whether they had a felony charge all after their initial intake date.

Table 3: Outcomes Differences between Control and TJ Program Groups

Outcomes	Control – Mean (n = 73)	TJ Program – Mean (n = 73)	P-value
Arrested after intake	40%	26%	0.08
# of arrests after intake	0.73	0.59	0.52
# of days in jail after intake	22.64	19.11	0.76
# of felonies after intake	0.58	0.53	0.88
# of misdemeanors after intake	0.53	0.48	0.78
Felony charge after intake	27%	18%	0.17

Table 3 reports the mean outcomes listed above along with statistical difference tests. A p-value below 10% indicates a statistically significant difference between the two groups being compared. This is the case for “Arrested after intake,” where 26% of TJ Program participants were arrested after intake compared to 40% in the control group—a 14 percentage point reduction (40% – 26%). This translates to a 35% decrease in arrests ($14 \div 40$). In short, the TJ Program reduces post-intake arrests by 35% compared to the standard criminal justice process, and this reduction is statistically significant at the 10% level. Table 3 shows no other statistically significant differences between the two groups. However, the TJ Program group reports lower averages across all outcomes compared to the control group, which are all favorable findings. For instance, TJ Program participants have 20% less arrests than the normal criminal justice group (albeit not statistically significant).

It is important to note that a key aspect of the TJ Program is balancing support and second chances for participants with accountability and consequences to ensure the program is taken seriously. As part of this approach, short jail stays—such as a weekend in jail—were sometimes used as sanctions for participants who failed to meet program requirements. From a data perspective, however, any jail time—whether stemming from a new arrest or from a program sanction—appears as both a new arrest and additional jail days. The research team attempted to separate these instances as much as possible in order to distinguish jail days and arrests linked to new offenses. The results presented in this report reflect new charges and not existing charges that the program often used as punishment.

An important consideration for the program is whether it should be institutionalized in the county. Williamson County stakeholders were particularly interested in understanding how outcomes might look if the TJ Program served all eligible defendants, rather than only 50% as required for the RCT study. Table 4 replicates Table 3 but restricts the sample to TJ graduates (44 defendants) compared with non-graduates (29) and the control group (73). In the table, TJ Program graduates are labeled as “Graduates,” while the combined group of non-graduates and control defendants is labeled as “All Other”.

Table 4: Outcomes Differences between Non-graduates/Control and TJ Program Graduates

Outcomes	All Other (n = 102)	Graduates (n = 44)	P-value
Arrested after intake	58%	30%	0.002
# of arrests after intake	1.18	0.43	0.003
# of days in jail after intake	38.10	2.36	0.006
# of felonies after intake	1.00	0.23	0.005
# of misdemeanors after intake	0.74	0.18	0.004
Felony charge after intake	46%	18%	0.001

The findings in Table 4 are noteworthy, showing that TJ Program graduates have statistically significantly better outcomes across all six measures (each with a p-value below 10%). Specifically, graduates are 48% less likely to be arrested after intake (a reduction from 58% to 30%), spend an average of 35.7 fewer days in jail, and are 61% less likely to receive a felony charge after intake. However, the findings from Table 4 should be interpreted with caution, as TJ Program graduates likely possess attributes that differentiate them from the “All Other” defendants, and those attributes may have contributed to their success in the program. In fact, Table 5 compares the means (similar to Table 2) of the TJ Program graduates relative to “All Other” as defined in Table 4.

Table 5: Graduates – All Other Sample Balance Check

Variable	All Other (n = 102)	Graduates (n = 44)	P-value
Age	19.78	19.64	0.71
Male	81%	64%	0.02
White	79%	86%	0.32
Hispanic	45%	55%	0.29
Arrested before intake	21%	23%	0.77
# of misdemeanors before intake	0.42	0.30	0.49
# of felonies before intake	0.21	0.07	0.21
# of days in jail before intake	3.63	0.59	0.13
Felony charge before intake	12%	5%	0.17

Across all variables in Table 5, “All Other” are 26% more likely to be male compared to those who graduated from the TJ Program. No other statistically significant differences were detected. The differences are clearer when we compare the demographics within the TJ Program participants splitting the group into graduates versus non-graduates (as seen in Table 6).

Table 6: Graduates vs. Non-Graduates Sample Balance Check

Variable	Non-graduates (n = 29)	Graduates (n = 44)	P-value
Age	20.00	19.65	0.52
Male	86%	64%	0.03
White	83%	86%	0.67
Hispanic	34%	55%	0.09
Arrested before intake	31%	23%	0.43
# of misdemeanors before intake	0.90	0.30	0.03
# of felonies before intake	0.28	0.07	0.09
# of days in jail before intake	7.76	0.59	0.02
Felony charge before intake	17%	5%	0.07

TJ Program participants who graduated are less likely to be male (about 25% less likely), more likely to be Hispanic (62%), have less misdemeanors and felonies before intake, are less likely to have had a felony charge before intake, and have spent almost 7 days less in jail before. For TJ Program stakeholders, it is important to know that past interactions with the criminal justice system (defined as number of charges, whether they have ever had a felony charge, and time spent in jail), is a strong predictor of success in the TJ Program. In short, the TJ Program seems to work best for those defendants who have had minimal experience with the criminal justice system prior to their enrollment in the program. We present in Table 7 the outcomes differences between graduates relative to non-graduates from the TJ Program cohort.

Table 7: Outcomes Differences between Non-graduates and TJ Program Graduates

Outcomes	Non-graduates (n = 29)	Graduates (n = 44)	P-value
Arrested after intake	45%	14%	0.003
# of arrests after intake	1.17	0.20	0.002
# of days in jail after intake	46.24	1.23	0.009
# of felonies after intake	1.21	0.09	0.017
# of misdemeanors after intake	1.03	0.11	0.003
Felony charge after intake	34%	7%	0.003

Table 7 is clear about those who graduate from the TJ Program do a lot better than those who do not graduate. Graduates from the program are (69%) less likely to get arrested, spend 45 less days in jail when they do, and are almost 80% less likely to get a felony charge. These are really encouraging results for the program but one must keep in mind that graduates from the TJ Program are statistically different from those who did not graduate (see Table 6) and hence they could have some predisposition to do well regardless of the program.

Additional Impacts

The research team intended to measure change in physical, mental, and social determinants of health via changes in the SF-12 survey but due to low survey response rate, we were unable to make this comparison. However, the interview process provides additional feedback on the impacts the program is having. Overwhelmingly, program leaders and participants agree the TJ Program works and provided us with details on where they see changes. We have grouped these into changing individuals, changing community, and shifting perspectives. These changes are more difficult to quantify but provide a deeper understanding of the program and its potential impacts.

Changing Individuals

Both leaders and participants inform us of how the program is impacting the participants. According to their stories, participants are not reoffending because of the program. Perhaps more importantly, participants are also getting sober from alcohol and drugs and maintaining that sobriety. As PP1 declared, referring to their previous substance use: *“if it wasn’t for this program, I would probably be dead.”*

We heard about participants completing GEDs and finding more stable jobs. Leaders report that participants are building better relationships with their families and potentially creating generational change as the participants are better equipped to engage with their own children.

The most common changes were more intangible – as both stakeholders and participants noted increasing self-esteem, self-worth and confidence. As one program leader illustrates:

“for the participants, [you] can see radical changes in confidence and self-awareness. They are getting language they can use to describe themselves to future employees, and an ability to envision a future that is exciting to them. They also learn how to ask for help and have a change in willingness to work with others.” -PL10

PP1 exemplified the change:

“I am a totally different person from who I was at the beginning of this program, so I am grateful and have a new perspective towards life. I can now reflect on my past and do not want to go back.”

Changing Community

According to stakeholders, the program is having a notable impact on the community and the criminal justice system. In one sense, participant growth and commitment to the community makes the community itself better. There is also growing attention to offering alternatives to incarceration and the TJ Program. A stakeholder explains this perspective best:

“Even conservative, tough-on-crime Williamson County is receptive to the program and general public is ready for change. [Previously I] tried to do this, but it takes more than a single person or part of the system to make a change. This program is unique in that it is pulling together people from all parts of the system, putting in a lot of resources, time and attention at the most critical time, the beginning of the case. Not only helpful for the participants but also helping the public view the criminal justice system as compassionate and supportive for the good of society, as well as giving the system more credibility when incarceration is needed. –

PL6

Counties are considering their own program, looking to Williamson County as model. As PL11 describes, *“On a national level, being able to show the effectiveness of rehabilitation over incarceration or punitive measures will have long-lasting effects for participants as well as taxpayers (more financially sound than incarceration).”* Other stakeholders agreed that the community perspective on rehabilitation (as opposed to incarceration) is changing, and that programs like TJ are helping change that perception.

Shifting Perspectives

The TJ Program as a mechanism for shifting perspectives seems to be the crux of change - both at the individual level and the systems level. One program stakeholder describes some of the process participants go through as they describe what success looks like in the program.

“[Success is n]ot just not getting arrested again, but what led them to their arrest in the first place, acknowledging they have some part in it. But also [helping them realize] ... ‘I experienced this, and this doesn’t have to be my life, it can go a different way. Even if I have experienced these traumatic events, I have other options.’...And sometimes that doesn’t happen right away. It takes a little encouragement, or sometimes it happens, and it goes back out. But...as long as I’m seeing some type of growth, I consider it successful.” - PL5

Stakeholders and participants also highlight shifts in how the participant thinks about the criminal justice system and other supports. As PP1 describes *“At first, I did not want to do counseling, IOP, and so on because it was inconvenient and I did not see the need, but in the end it is all for the better.”* PP6 agrees *“I was required to go to take tests, get a full-time job, attend life skills and so on. I did not want to do it and I did not realize why they made me do everything until I completed the tasks.”*

One participant (PP1) contrasts TJ Program to the typical criminal justice system:

“I feel like it is different from probation because probation is more about the monitoring and punishment; it feels like it is waiting to catch you when you to make a mistake. But in this program, you can tell that the team sincerely wants us to do well and wishes the best for us. When I get upset talking to [case manager], I can tell they get upset too, and it shows that they care. Very different from probation officers.”

In one example, TJ Program is helping organizations and the public look at defendants differently. As PL9 says, *“sometimes...opportunities require participants to have a clean record, meaning no felony. [One organization] had this rule and we were able to make an exception after describing the program. [We are] decriminalizing participants to the public.”*

And finally, we see a shifting perspective on what it means to be impacting the participants. One stakeholder argues this perspective best:

“The [statistic] is 85% [of this age group is] going to recidivate.... That means automatically, we know, a lot of them are gonna get in trouble. Does that mean we don't care? No, but it means we're fighting against tremendous odds. So, if we can get that number down to 50%, or something different, better, a lot better than [85%], that still means half of the kids that we come in contact with, [5 out of 10], are going to be in trouble again. And that really hurts...But I think we have to focus on the reduction that we are doing instead of worrying about the ones that don't. As hard as that is, it's kind of like, ‘well, we are making an impact’. So do we care about [just] 3.5 of the kids? and I say yes. And so that's what this program is designed to do is focus on the 3.5 and protect the community at the same time.” – PL8

What Features of the Program are Driving Outcomes?

We rely on the stakeholder (program leaders and participants) interviews and observations to help us identify what is working and not working in the program. After analyzing this data, we found common elements that we have grouped into “foundational pieces” and “implementation” components. These findings provide guidance on what components of the TJ Program are most influential in the outcomes seen.

Foundational Pieces

“[It] starts with having someone [like the District Judge] who understands how trauma and mental health issues create boundaries for people to develop naturally and is willing to advocate the importance to the state and community.” – PL1

Foundational pieces represent the supports and philosophies that must be in place from the beginning of the program.

The “Right” Team

One of the most repeated comments throughout the interviews was how great the team is. In this case the team includes the program director, multiple case managers, judges and both defense and prosecuting attorneys. All of these individuals are critical to making the program work best for the participants and the community.

When asked, why does the team function so well, a respondent articulates it best:

“Everyone in the team being so hands-on and close to the participants has enabled [success]. Not luck, but the right people were selected for a reason. A group of people who are known to go the extra mile and are compassionate about helping people - have similar work ethic and personality.” – PL2

Another program leader mentions:

“After finding the right people, working on teamwork and communication is important as well. Not only within the team but also when working with the participants, it is important to find people who value building relationships. Participants will listen and try to do better if there is a connection and trust between them. Since there are confrontational situations when managing their cases, need people with the communication skills, who will to be patient and not give up, and have passion.” – PL3

Still other stakeholders mention the team’s resources and community connections as a key component to bringing needed services to the program. These relationships are particularly important as the whole group is involved with shaping the support the participant receives as part of group decision-making for the care plan. We observed each team member being open to

hearing the others' perspective and, when necessary, making the case for their preferred action. Ultimately, the team weighs the pros and cons and comes to a collaborative decision or a compromise for the participant's care plan.

A Committed Community

Stakeholders suggest that community needs to be as committed to the program as the team leading it. One program leader describes why the level of commitment is important when they responded:

"[The community should realize] it will take time to get satisfactory results and being patient and consistent with the program. Also, making sure to build relationships with critical service partners beforehand (like community mental health authority, substance abuse providers) so you have a place to start." - PL4

We asked our program leaders what advice they would give to another community interested in starting a similar program. Another stakeholder defines the ideal community's values:

"[Communities] should be aware that the program should aim to not only expunge a participant's record but altering their purpose in life. In order to do this, the program needs support and that the process will not look like the traditional criminal justice system. The program needs to be trauma informed and requires a passion to sincerely help people."

-PL5

We heard multiple stories on how members of the community have rallied behind the program to increase awareness of the program or donate money and materials. The community is also the source of services for participants. One of the most intentional points of the program is maximizing local community resources and services that are not at capacity. To do so, the community (and the organizations and individuals that compose it) have to be willing to provide that support to emerging adults.

Connection to Juvenile Systems

When creating programs for emerging adults, it can be beneficial to look at juvenile systems. Even though emerging adults may be too old to be eligible for juvenile services, there are often parallel services for adults available. In the case of the TJ Program, it was a connection to the juvenile justice system in Williamson County. Our participants regularly cite their strong relationship with this system as a key to success. As one program leader (PL6) noted: *"We are taking the best of the Juvenile Probation Department of Williamson County, which does an exceptional job and focus on rehabilitation."* Looking towards juvenile systems (whether they be criminal justice, health, education, and so on) aligns with the philosophy that emerging adults more closely resemble their juvenile counterparts than their older ones. Stakeholders agree that

a strong connection with the juvenile justice system made it easier to take advantage of already established connections with local services and find sources of support that might have otherwise eluded them.

Implementation

With the right foundation in place, programs can look towards implementation. Our program leaders and participants highlighted some of the key implementation components – how they were executed in the TJ Program and what gaps remain.

Case Management That is Supportive Yet Accountable

When asked what the program meant to participants, they immediately honed in on the case managers. Case managers meet with their participants regularly, help them progress through their care plan, and are the main avenue for connecting the participants to services. For most participants though, the role of case manager goes deeper. We heard multiple stories about how the participants value their case managers, and the roles case managers have played in their lives. As one participant describes:

“I called my case manager at 2 in the morning once and he responded, I know I can count on [him] and it helps especially because I don’t have much support outside of the program. When first beginning the program, did not think much of it, but now I am very grateful that I have a support group I can talk to.” – PP1

Another participant added:

“we can talk to our case managers about anything; starting from smallest things like issues with my girlfriend to the bigger issues like housing and family situations that might cause stress and lead to relapse or other bad decisions. They remind us about our plan and goals to keep us on the right track.” – PP2

Program staff highlighted the other side of this – that case management is about support but also about accountability. As one program leader (PL7) discussed: “[case management is] understanding where the participants are coming from and being empathetic, and at the same time holding participants accountable for their choices is important. Making them realize good choices bring good consequences.”

Overcoming Pre-program Barriers

Lack of family/parent support

A common concern from program stakeholders was the lack of support system an emerging adult in the criminal justice system has. This was repeatedly cited as a barrier that needed to be overcome, as it often affects a participant’s housing, ability to get identification, mental health,

or rehabilitation. In some cases, the role of the family was detrimental to their progress in the program as explained in this comment:

“We have one parent who’s an enabler, right? And [they hand-hold the] participant to death...and then there are others that contribute to the cycle...we’ve had some [participants] struggling with alcohol, and then [the parent says] ‘wow, I like you more when you drink’... stupid stuff like that.”- PL8

Reluctance to services

Another common challenge noted by stakeholders was an emerging adult’s reluctance to participate in the program or a specific service. The program leaders reported that some emerging adults felt they did not need help. Participants told us directly that they did not like counseling. Sometimes it was specifically online counseling they did not like, other times it was counseling in general. Stakeholders mentioned the participants reluctance to follow strict rules (like curfew) to receive a spot in transitional housing. It falls to the program team (often the case manager) to convince them of the value of the support or to find an alternative solution.

Matching Services to the Participant

Effective services

Program participants are connected to the services that match their needs; especially if it can reduce their future involvement in the criminal justice system or affect their well-being. For most, these services are related to treating drug and alcohol issues. Helping participants complete their GEDs or find jobs were reported as additional effective services. While the program stakeholders felt counseling was important, participants themselves were a little more reluctant to acknowledge counseling as helpful. Instead, the participants rely on their case managers to support them.

Two services inherent to the program itself (as opposed to the community) were also cited as critical pieces – legal services and life skills. As part of the TJ Program, participants are provided with a defense attorney. While this attorney is intended to offer legal advice for the participant in the case that brought them to the program (and handle their expunction when they graduate), the attorneys often provide additional legal services for the participants in other communities or courts that they have charges in. This has led to multiple participants having other charges dropped or reduced and diminishes participant’s chance of reentering a criminal justice cycle.

One stakeholder explains the life skills group and why it is important for emerging adults:

“The life skills group is helpful because the majority comes in with no skills or they imitate what they have seen growing up which is not helpful. We teach real life skills like credit, how to find an apartment, interviewing, transportation: all the things that we just take for granted but they have not had the opportunity to experience. The team makes our own curriculum and follow a

lesson plan. We also ask for their input - What are you struggling with?- and try to structure sessions around their interests.” – PL5

Additionally, TJ participants are often asked to teach a skill during life skills groups. We observed participants teaching how to make soap (that the participant then sells) and another teaching how to change a flat car tire.

Gaps in services

Housing, transportation, and counseling were repeatedly cited as gaps in services during the first round of interviews with program stakeholders. By the second round of interviews, there were a few updates – the program had found some volunteer counselors, one housing option, and tried to rely on case managers or other participants to provide transportation – but still these issues remain as the most problematic to solve.

Dosage

A noted challenge is getting the right match between participant and the services. An ideal service (like inpatient rehabilitation) may not be available when the participant needs it, so the team relies on an alternative. Additionally, participants also noted a frustration in having to check in too often, especially in the beginning where there are more frequent check-ins with case managers and more frequent drug testing. As one participant illustrates:

“Even though I am sober, I would have to show up to get tested twice a week. There is no point in that because test results are not going to change in a day. It was hard to follow through especially because of my work schedule; the only day I have off is Tuesday so I would have to go after work.”- PP6

Importance of Building Relationships

“The general support is the key contributing factor of success” PL6 tells us, emphasizing the importance of relationships on emerging adults’ lives. The concept of relationships unfolded in multiple ways – the relationship with their case manager, the relationship with the whole team, amongst peers, and with the community – each having an effect on the participant themselves.

Takes the whole team

While case managers are the formal support for participants, the whole team – judges, attorneys, and program staff – build relationships with the participants. In a way, the whole team acts as case managers – offering encouragement, participating in life skills group, showing up to events, rewarding the participants when they do well but also holding them accountable when needed. Even the court setting is different than the usual criminal justice proceedings. Both case managers and lawyers stand up with the participant, and the judge asks participant about new jobs, hobbies, and social relationships in an effort to build connection. This does not go unnoticed by participants. *“The team is like another family, and it is a blessing,”* says PP3.

The effect can be profound as one program stakeholder notes:

“The program is great at supporting and providing comradery, resources and tools to the participants. The difference shows when comparing where the participants start and where they are in the end. For many, this program is the first time they have had a support system or acknowledgement and congratulations in their life.”- PL7

PL12 elaborates: *“If you give up on them, participants do not have other support systems, and a little more could change someone’s life. It is about them and their needs, being patient and understanding, even though it might be tough sometimes.”*

Peer support

Relationships among TJ participants develop organically, usually starting through the life skills group. Through this group, the participants have made friends, offered each other rides, acted as mentors, and so on. One stakeholder pointed out the distinction from this component compared to the typical criminal justice probation model.

“The entire group is accountable for each other, knows each other’s stories, successes and failures, sees the consequences of each of them, and so on. The constant communication, support and accountability. Sometimes participants would tell other participants to stop whining and follow through, which is something you do not see in probation and is very motivating. A probation officer only informs people and reports them if they fail, but in this program there are so many people the participants are accountable to. Being able to see other participants helps a lot as well; they feel less sorry for themselves because someone will have a worse story but turned out better.”- PL2

Reciprocal relationship with the community.

“Once we get participants engaged in the community, they usually want to continue contributing,” a program leader (PL2) notes. PL7 agrees, *“participants are learning how to be successful and give back, contribute to the community.”* As much as the community influences program implementation and the participants’ lives, the participants reciprocate. Typically, through their volunteer and work opportunities, participants see the value of contributing to the community.

Services and Relationships Work Together

After multiple interviews, we started to wonder: what is having a greater impact on participants – is it the services provided through the program or is it the relationships built in the program? One interviewee summarized it best when they said:

“The program cannot go without either one, and the relationship or services alone is not enough. Building relationships with participants is important because many participants are resistant or reluctant to receive services (like counseling). Many do not trust the program and

think they do not need services, and it is only after they have the relationship that they trust and accept help. Although the relationship is what makes participants buy into the program, none of the TJ team are licensed counselors or experts in mental health, trauma, and substance abuse. The program and participants need professional services” -PL3

Be Flexible

The final component highlighted during our interviews that is necessary for program implementation is to be flexible. The TJ Program was envisioned and planned before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Because of this, the county and program leaders expected a higher number of eligible participants and different services available. When the program officially launched towards the end of 2020, there were fewer participants and court proceedings, counseling, and case management were done either virtually or through social distancing. As restrictions lifted, the program returned closer to its original vision. As more time progressed, other shifts occurred, including increasing number of participants who were often younger or have more severe drug use challenges. The increasing number means an increased caseload for case managers and shifting the requirements for court and life group attendance. The team credits being flexible as a way to address these unpredictable challenges and keep the TJ Program devoted to its core mission. As PL9 notes, implementation requires “*a lot of flexibility and opportunities to be creative...it’s different from former work experiences.*”

Is the Program Cost Effective?

In this final section, we examine the cost aspect of the TJ Program. Ultimately, jurisdictions that are interested in setting up programs similar to the TJ Program need to account for the costs and potential benefits or savings from the program. Counties manage budgets that have to be allocated to a variety of programs and expenses and being able to fund and support a program similar to the TJ Program needs to make financial sense. In this section, we look at the cost of the program from the county's perspective rather than from the defendant or the community/society's perspective.

Using data provided by the county and program stakeholders, the TJ Program costs on average \$10,000 per participant. For the program to be cost effective, it should account for at least \$10,000 in potential savings which mainly come from less jail days, less future arrests (booking costs, prosecution costs, and court costs), less low-level felony supervision, and less cost to house felony defendants at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). According to cost data provided by the county, the cost to house a defendant in Williamson County is \$177.62; the low-level supervision costs per defendant per day varies but is estimated to be around \$3.2; and the cost to house a felony defendant in TDCJ is 77.49. The average TJ Program stay (number of days from intake to graduation/discharge) is 358 days.

Table 8: Cost Projections (per participant per year) for the TJ Program

Category	TJ Program cost	Jail day cost	Low-level felony supervision	TDCJ
Baseline values	\$10,000	\$177.62	\$3.2	\$77.49
Projection 1		$-10,000 + 177.62*36+3.2*358+77.49*90*0.5 = \$1,026.9$		
Assumptions: 1. From Table 5, TJ Program graduates spend 36 less days in jail. 2. 50% of eligible felony defendants spend 3 months in TDCJ. 3. Based on TJ Program data, the average time between intake to graduation/discharge is 358 days. 4. Low level felony supervision is \$3.2 per defendant per day.				
Category	TJ Program cost	Jail day cost	Low-level felony supervision	TDCJ
Updated Values	\$10,000	\$177.62	\$6.4	\$77.49
Projection 2		$-10,000 + 177.62*36+6.4*358+77.49*90*0.5 = \$2,172.57$		
Assumptions: 1. From Table 5, TJ Program graduates spend 36 less days in jail. 2. 50% of eligible felony defendants spend 3 months in TDCJ. 3. Based on TJ Program data, the average time between intake to graduation/discharge is 358 days. 4. Low level felony supervision is \$6.4 per defendant per day.				
Category	TJ Program cost	Jail day cost	Low-level felony supervision	TDCJ
Updated Values	\$10,000	\$177.62	\$3.2	\$77.49
Projection 3		$-10,000 + 177.62*36+3.2*358+77.49*90*0.25 = \-716.55		
Assumptions: 1. From Table 5, TJ Program graduates spend 36 less days in jail. 2. 25% of eligible felony defendants spend 3 months in TDCJ. 3. Based on TJ Program data, the average time between intake to graduation/discharge is 358 days. 4. Low level felony supervision is \$3.2 per defendant per day.				

Table 8 above provides three potential projections for the TJ Program, two of which are cost effective, and one is not. Table 8 summarizes these projections using specific assumptions on the cost of the program, number of jail days difference between the TJ Program graduates and all others (non-graduates and the control group), low level felony supervision, and the cost to host defendants in a TDCJ facility. For projection 1 in Table 9, the estimate uses the TJ Program cost per participant, the jail day cost per participant times the saved number of jail days due to

graduating from the TJ Program and add the savings from not having to provide low level felony supervision and house the defendant at a TDCJ facility (with the assumption that 50% of felony defendants end up at a TDCJ facility). This projection suggests that the TJ Program is cost effective and saves the county \$1,026.9 per defendant if the TJ Program is institutionalized. Projections 2 and 3 follow the same approach but alter the cost of low-level felony supervision to \$6.4 (projection 2), and the probability of a defendant ending up at a TDCJ facility from 50% to 25% (projection 3).

As a reminder, these estimates are from the county's perspective and do not incorporate societal and community cost and potential savings and hence are potentially grossly underestimated. For example, as discussed in the qualitative section, one participant in the TJ Program stated to the research team "*If it wasn't for this program, I would probably be dead*". Based on the statistical value of life, saving someone's life is estimated at a range between \$6 million to almost \$20 million, suggesting that the TJ Program has a substantial impact on the society.³⁶ Another component that is very difficult to measure is the multiplier effect that the TJ Program potentially has. As reported in earlier sections, a TJ Program graduate who has turned their life around can effectively be a mentor for other members of their family, friends, and the community and hence potentially lower the number of future potential arrests from other emerging adult populations.

³⁶ Kearsley, A. (2024) "HHS Standard Values for Regulatory Analysis". Office of Science and Data Policy <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cd2a1348ea0777b1aa918089e4965b8c/standard-ria-values.pdf> (accessed September 30, 2025)

Conclusions

The TJ Program is a pioneer program that offers a new way to think about addressing recidivism among emerging adult populations (17 to 24 years of age). The program requires intensive support not just from all stakeholders in the county (commissioner, judges, district attorneys, juvenile department, attorneys, and the sheriff) but also needs the community's support as it relies on their help in providing a new way for those involved in the criminal justice system to change the trajectory of their lives.

The TJ Program has set up costs that are fixed and apply to all defendants and some variable costs that vary with the size of the cohorts in the program. We did not have access to data that reflects the differences between these, but it is expected that the fixed initial costs are high and as the cohort size increases the overall cost is expected to decline because of economies of scale. Williamson County has been a champion in pursuing the TJ Program and supporting an independent evaluation.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the TJ Program provides measurable benefits—reducing arrests, jail days, and felony charges for graduates—while also delivering intangible but transformative impacts on participants' confidence, sobriety, and long-term stability. It shifts community perceptions of justice from being solely punitive to being rehabilitative and supportive. While gaps remain in housing, transportation, and mental health services, the program demonstrates that with the right team, community partnerships, and sustained commitment, diversion efforts can be both cost-effective and life changing.

The TJ Program should therefore be viewed not only as a local innovation but as a potential model for jurisdictions nationwide. By investing in the lives of emerging adults at a pivotal stage, counties can reduce recidivism, save taxpayer dollars, and most importantly, give young people a genuine second chance at building healthy, productive lives.

Appendix

SF-12 Questionnaire

Your Health and Well-Being

This survey asks for your views about your health. This information will help keep track of how you feel and how well you are able to do your usual activities. Thank you for completing this survey!

For each of the following questions, please mark an in the one box that best describes your answer.

1. In general, would you say your health is:

Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor
<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
				

2. The following questions are about activities you might do during a typical day. Does your health now limit you in these activities? If so, how much?

Yes, limited a lot	Yes, limited a little	No, not limited at all
		

a Moderate activities, such as moving a table, pushing a vacuum cleaner, bowling, or playing golf 1 2 3

b Climbing several flights of stairs 1 2 3

3. During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time have you had any of the following problems with your work or other regular daily activities as a result of your physical health?

	All of the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	A little of the time	None of the time
a <u>Accomplished less than you would like</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
b <u>Were limited in the kind of work or other activities</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5

4. During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time have you had any of the following problems with your work or other regular daily activities as a result of any emotional problems (such as feeling depressed or anxious)?

	All of the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	A little of the time	None of the time
a <u>Accomplished less than you would like</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
b <u>Did work or other activities less carefully than usual</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5

5. During the past 4 weeks, how much did pain interfere with your normal work (including both work outside the home and housework)?

	Not at all	A little bit	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely
	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5

6. These questions are about how you feel and how things have been with you during the past 4 weeks. For each question, please give the one answer that comes closest to the way you have been feeling. How much of the time during the past 4 weeks...

	All of the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	A little of the time	None of the time
a Have you felt calm and peaceful?.....	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
b Did you have a lot of energy?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
c Have you felt downhearted and depressed?.....	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5

7. During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time has your physical health or emotional problems interfered with your social activities (like visiting

	All of the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	A little of the time	None of the time
	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5

with friends, relatives, etc.)?

Thank you for completing these questions!

Program Stakeholder Interview Questions

Welcome. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this study. My name is [Name] and I will be leading this interview. This is [Name] who will be taking notes.

Today I will be asking about your experiences and opinions on the Transformative Justice Program. This will be similar to the questions we asked last year. We are trying to understand how the program has changed and evolved over time.

I will be recording this interview solely for note-taking purposes. Nothing you say will be linked to you. Any analysis or reporting of your responses will be anonymous.

Before we begin, do you have any questions?

What is working and what is not working

- What is this program doing well? What is working well for case management? What services and supports are most helpful?
- How difficult is to link a participant to appropriate, personalized services and supports? Why is that?
- In the past we have heard about issues obtaining housing, transportation, and mental health services. Are these services still difficult to obtain?
- What are the current challenges facing the program?

Program Change

- How has the program evolved over time?
- Compared to when the program first started, has coordination and provision of services changed? Has decision-making process changed?
- Have there been any changes in the participant population in the past year?
- How has the program handled a larger number of participants?

Communities and System Change

- Do you think the program is having an impact on participants? On the criminal justice system? On the community? How so?
- Has the local community changed because of the program? If so, how?
- Has the local criminal justice system changed because of the program? If so, how?

[SCRIPT] Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the Transformative Justice Program that we have not already discussed?

That is all we have for today. Thank you so much for your time and your input. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to reach out to us.

TJ Program Participant Focus Group Questions

1. What is the program to you? What does the program involve?
2. Are you required to call/contact your case manager?
3. What do you dislike about the program?
4. What happens when you are not able to show up for the program meetings?
5. What do you dislike about some of the services provided?
6. How often did you used to go to counseling?
7. Does the program require participants to talk to IOP (Intensive Outpatient Program)?
8. Other people declined the offer for this program. What made you accept the offer to participate in the program?
9. What are some of the positive aspects of the program? What do you like?
10. After graduation, do you think you will stay in touch with each other? Would you come back to participate/help the program?
11. Could you explain more about the online and in-person counseling?
12. Anything else that you like about the program?
13. What do you think of court?
14. What do you think the program could improve on?
15. If you were a judge or someone who could make a decision for young adults who are in the same situation as you, what would you recommend? Would you recommend the normal criminal justice system (e.g., bond, jail) or this program/a version of this program? Why?
16. How long does it take to expunge your records? (Focus Group 2: 30 mins)
17. What are you looking forward to?
18. Is there anything else you want to talk about?
19. Do you trust the program?
20. Some of you have experience with the criminal justice system; does this program change your view of the criminal justice system?