

ANNUAL REPORT

2024



JUVENILE JUSTICE INSTITUTE STAFF



Dr. Anne Hobbs
Director



Monica Miles-Steffens
Assistant Director



Kim Trost
Project Coordinator



Michele Lueders
*Program Specialist,
Evidence-based Nebraska Project*



Michaela Benson-Goldsmith
*Research Specialist,
Evidence-based Nebraska Project*

Layout by Tara Grell, public communications and creative coordinator, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

In past decades, policymakers have responded to concerns about juvenile crime by adopting “tough on crime” strategies, believing that harsh punishments such as detention, stricter sentencing, and zero-tolerance policies will deter young people from engaging in delinquency. However, extensive research has shown that these punitive approaches do not work as intended. Instead of rehabilitating youth or preventing future crime, they often lead to worse outcomes by exposing young people to additional trauma, disrupting their development, and increasing their likelihood of reoffending. We are now at a similar crossroads in Nebraska.

As much as we may want tough programming and places like detention to “set a kid straight” — it doesn’t. Rather, it places the youth in an environment where they are more likely to associate with other delinquent peers, reinforcing criminal behavior rather than deterring it. Studies have consistently shown that youth who are detained are more likely to continue engaging in criminal behavior compared to those who are diverted into community-based interventions (Mulvey, 2011).

As the mom of three teenagers, two pre-teens (who think they are 18), and four grown children, I wish our systems were more collaborative in helping kids learn responsibility! I would enroll my kids (some of the grown ones as well) immediately in a program that could really instill a deep understanding of civic engagement and authentic responsibility. Unfortunately, youth need to grow into this and need to see it modeled in the people around them.

Research shows us that having at least one responsible adult by their side as they walk through life’s challenges is what makes the difference. For some youth this may mean demonstrating the skills they need to make amends for the harm they have caused. For others, it may mean walking with them as they address the shame and self-sabotage that arise from harm done to them. It is imperative, now more than ever, that each of us step up and be that one adult.

I am so proud of the staff and faculty at the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s Juvenile Justice Institute (JJI), who have devoted decades to helping support Nebraska’s youth. Through their hard work, passion, and persistence, the JJi has supported Nebraska’s communities, non-profit staff and the youth they serve. This annual report highlights only a brief snapshot of JJi’s recent work.

In deep gratitude,

THE JUVENILE JUSTICE INSTITUTE

The Juvenile Justice Institute (JJI) was established in 2002 by the Nebraska Legislature with the goal of improving the state’s juvenile justice system through research, evaluation, and evidence-based practices. As part of the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, the JJI serves as a bridge between academic research and real-world application, ensuring that policies and programs are informed by the latest findings in implementation science.

From its inception, the JJI has focused on bringing practical solutions to the field of juvenile justice. Rather than producing research for research’s sake, the Institute prioritizes evidence-based interventions that can be implemented by policymakers, county officials, and community service providers.

Our mission is to lead innovative research, evaluation, and training efforts. These efforts are designed to guide meaningful youth justice policy, practice, and professional development that will equip practitioners to serve youth and lead systems in practical evidence informed ways.

Values

These value statements reflect what to expect when partnering with JJI. We believe that:

- Communities are the experts in their strengths and challenges. Research and evaluation should guide communities in their efforts to do their best work.
- Everyone has a voice at the table. It is only through intentional, collaborative, and restorative dialogue that complex system issues will be solved.
- Youth are the future of systems change. We strive to create innovative opportunities to elevate the voices of system impacted youth and families.
- A skilled workforce improves outcomes for youth and families. We are committed to developing current and future youth justice professionals with the skills necessary to build relationships and meet the complex needs of system impacted individuals and youth justice stakeholders.
- Restorative practices must be embedded across the juvenile justice system continuum. We believe this is done through restorative language, questions, and dialogue, reserving formal restorative interventions for resolving conflict.

The Juvenile Justice Institute is uniquely situated to implement these values because we actively seek opportunities to connect academia to the “real world.” The research that we engage in is a testimony to this philosophy.

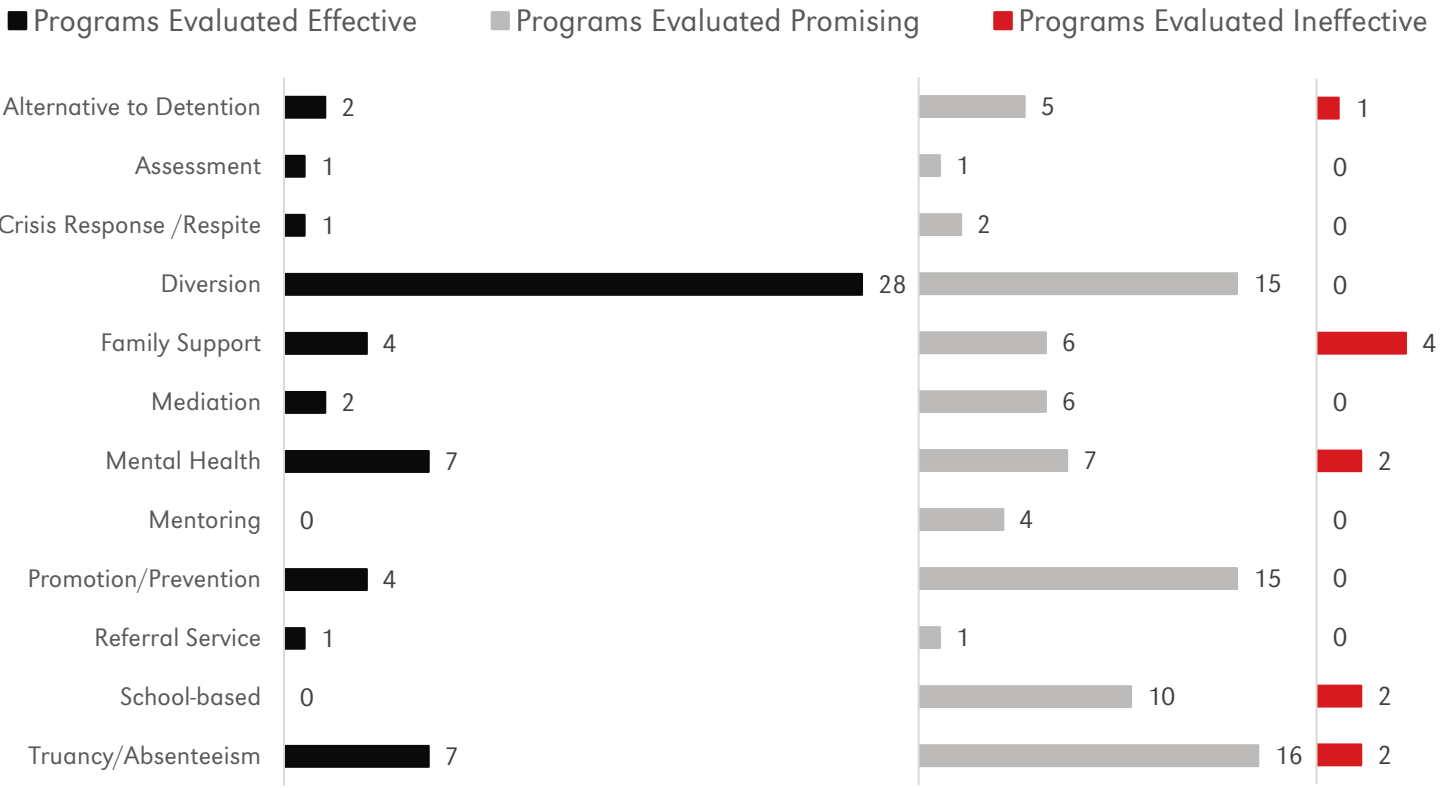
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Evidence-based Nebraska

In 2013, the state of Nebraska began to invest in determining whether juvenile justice programs were effective. The state partnered with the JJI to develop Evidence-based Nebraska, a model of evaluating programs, using a uniform metric across program type and across the entire state (Hobbs, 2025).

In fiscal year 2024, the JJI examined outcomes for 293 programs, across 15 different program types. Almost 50% of programs funded showed outcomes qualifying them for a promising to effective rating (Benson Goldsmith, Hobbs & Hall 2024). For additional information visit jjinebraska.org.

Nebraska’s Programs Evaluated as Effective or Promising



Building Continuums of Care

In 2024, the JJI began working with JBS International to provide training and technical assistance to jurisdictions receiving 2023 Building Local Continuums of Care to Support Youth Success administered by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). The technical training and technical assistance have helped dozens of local jurisdictions as they develop comprehensive plans to implement continuums of care.

Nebraska Office of Dispute Resolution

Throughout 2024, the JJI partnered with the Nebraska Office of Dispute Resolution to evaluate whether youth placed on a diversion or truancy program with restorative aspects, are more likely to complete the program, and less likely to recidivate. The evaluation will compare outcomes for youth who complete standard diversion or absenteeism interventions.

Nebraska Administrative Office of Courts and Probation

In 2024, the JJI worked closely with the Nebraska Administrative Office of Courts and Probation to validate the Nebraska Risk Assessment (RAI) Instrument. The JJI faculty and staff partnered with the Nebraska Center for Justice Research to attempt to validate the RAI, employing both qualitative and quantitative methodology.

BUILDING THE WORKFORCE

Part of the JJI’s mission is to equip professionals with the skills and knowledge to effectively work with youth, families, and lead at different levels of the juvenile justice system. In 2024, the JJI collaborated with our numerous partners to offer a variety of professional growth experiences.

Juvenile Justice Certificate Program

In 2024, the JJI welcomed the second cohort of the Juvenile Justice Certificate Program. This program is offered through UNO as a micro-credential professional development course. Participants completing the eight-month program receive a certificate and digital badge highlighting the skills they learned through the program. The cohort style program meets each month from September through April diving into specialized youth justice topics, as well as learning motivational interviewing skills. Participants utilize skills learned in implementation science to complete an applied capstone project which is presented at the annual Nebraska Juvenile Justice Association conference in May. For additional information visit juvenilejustice.unomaha.edu/certificate.



One of the core values of the JJI is elevating youth voices in everything we do. We are grateful to our team of youth consultants who work with us on curriculum and teaching the participants about authentic youth engagement throughout the course. Our team of youth consultants utilize their lived experiences as strengths in helping professionals learn how to build meaningful connections with the youth they serve. Our consultants come to us as current students on UNO campus and through a partnership with the Nebraska Correctional Youth Facility. We facilitate a monthly group with young men and the Intentional Peer Support mentors where we dialogue about the certificate and other timely juvenile justice topics and bring their insight and wisdom back to the certificate participants and other stakeholders.



Restorative Practices

In 2024, the JJI embarked on a journey to expand the field of restorative practices in Nebraska. Starting in 2023 and throughout 2024, the JJI partnered with RADIUS in Omaha to help train their staff in restorative practices. Together we brought the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP) to Omaha to train the first group of RADIUS staff, administrators, and JJI in Restorative Practices for Justice Workers. This was followed by training for trainers, community stakeholder training, and now ongoing new employee training.

The IIRP training has been a springboard for the JJI to develop as practitioners and share our knowledge. During the past year, the JJI received a seed grant to develop a Restorative Justice Practices Micro-Credential Certificate Program. That program launched in February 2025.

The JJI facilitates a free monthly restorative practices community of practice that is open to anyone interested in discussing and learning about this topic. The group meets by Zoom on the third Monday of the month. To join, send an email to: mmiles-steffens@unomaha.edu.

Other Training Highlights

During the past year, the JJI has engaged in some exciting training and technical assistance opportunities. The JJI was invited by JBS International to join their proposal to provide national training and technical assistance for the new OJJDP Building Local Continuums of Care to Support Youth Success initiative. Our team was one of three providers selected and we have been busy providing one-on-one support to local sites nationwide, creating and researching resources to share with sites, and presenting on webinars and at the National OJJDP conference in November.

The JJI also helped one of our certificate participants see their Capstone project finally come to fruition by hosting a film screening event of the documentary — “The Prison Within.” Over 100 community members came to view the film and engage with the post screening panel which included Katherin Hervey (filmmaker), Michael Hendrickson and Troy Williams (featured in the film), and Shakur Abdullah (emcee from the Community Justice Center in Nebraska).

WORKING WITH STUDENTS

The Juvenile Reentry Mentoring Program

Since 2011, the JJI has partnered with university students to mentor youth transitioning out of detention settings. To date, over 300 undergraduate mentors, with their adaptability and relatability, have formed strong, meaningful relationships with high-risk youth across Nebraska. Participating students take a two-semester course covering juvenile justice, mentoring strategies, and legislative issues before meeting with youth in detention centers and group homes. Through structured guidance and real-world engagement, student mentors gain valuable experience that often reshapes their career aspirations, inspiring many to pursue careers in juvenile justice.



THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships and restorative practice are at the core of the JJI’s work. By prioritizing human dignity, restorative practices allow for growth and change in young people, rather than defining them by their mistakes. When people are treated with respect and provided with the necessary resources to succeed, they are more likely to develop positive behaviors and avoid future contact with the justice system.

To this end, the JJI is proud to partner with hundreds of agencies statewide. We appreciate the time you have spent building a relationship with our faculty and staff. We know that together we can create a more effective, equitable, and humane juvenile justice system that will grow the kind of state we want for tomorrow.

MEET OUR STUDENTS

Each year, the JJI is privileged to work with numerous students. Often this is through research and practicum internships. Below we highlight students that worked with us in 2024 and some of their major accomplishments.



Riah Engel — Research Intern

I worked on comparing reentry processes between Singapore and the U.S. and based on that research, just submitted my first academic paper to a peer-reviewed journal. I hope to continue co-authoring papers with the JJI faculty and staff.



Ainsley Grube — Student Worker

One of the most valuable insights I gained at JJI was understanding how diversion programs are evaluated for effectiveness through the analysis of structured datasets with multiple factors and characteristics. Actively synthesizing this data gave me a deeper appreciation for the many variables that impact program efficacy, and the complexities involved in improving outcomes.



Tommie De Leon — Student Worker

I’m passionate about using my personal experience in the juvenile justice and foster care systems to educate others and advocate for meaningful change. Through my work with the JJI, I have been able to highlight lessons that can be learned from these experiences to create better outcomes for youth.



Bennet Sievers — Research Intern

I gather resources and compile data for future research and analyses, driven by the belief that our youth are the key to our future. This information is crucial in creating meaningful opportunities and change for them.



Maeve Hemmer — Research Intern

I have had the opportunity to take both of JJI’s certificate programs (Juvenile Justice and Restorative Practices) which have both been invaluable to my professional development & work in the field but more importantly, have helped me to be a better human altogether. I also got to go on the trip to Singapore which has completely reoriented the way I approach life; it put a fire in my belly to learn all I can about restorative approaches and be part of the solution in finding more humane ways to support humans.



Nikemious “Nike” Green — Youth Consultant

I am a part of the youth consultant team for the Juvenile Justice Certificate Program. I help provide professionals a different perspective from my lived experience and hope that it helps them as they work with youth in the system.



Addison Kobie — Nebraska Center for Justice Research Staff

I work on the Risk Assessment Instrument validation project with the JJI, and I find the process of working with so many constituents’ groups very rewarding. It is nice to see all of Nebraska wanting the best for the youths.



Sadie Brewer — Doctoral Student/Graduate Assistant

I am currently working with the JJI on the Juvenile Reentry Mentoring Program, Refugee Reentry Research, and Evidence-based Nebraska project. Through these programs, I have learned the importance of bridging the gap between research and implementation and the best ways to collaborate with outside organizations.



Maddie Hagan — Student Worker

Helping professionals authentically connect with system-involved youth is an incredible opportunity. One of the most impactful experiences I’ve had with the JJI was facilitating conversations where both professionals and incarcerated youth could share their perspectives, creating space for open dialogue and deeper understanding.



Faith Hall, M.A. — Graduate Assistant

I have had the privilege of working on the Evidence-based Nebraska project for the past two years. Being able to work with the team developing reports and connecting with programs has helped me to grow professionally and personally. I have learned many valuable skills and have increased my passion for working with juveniles in the criminal justice system.



Sara Kabir — Student Worker

At the JJI, I create digital content to promote the organization’s work and raise awareness about issues affecting justice-involved youth. From designing engaging social media graphics and infographics to crafting impactful campaign materials, I love using visuals to tell compelling stories. I enjoy the creative freedom of experimenting with colors, layouts, and interactive media to make complex information more accessible and engaging. It’s exciting to see how a well-designed post or infographic can spark conversations and drive real engagement!

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN SINGAPORE

Students from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and a retired judge participated in this travel abroad program to Singapore. For two weeks, we explored how restorative practices have shaped Singapore’s justice and social welfare systems. Our students were able to connect with student ambassadors from the Singapore University of Social Sciences and the National University of Singapore and received a certificate in restorative practices from Singapore’s Lutheran Community Care Services. The groups also witnessed restorative justice implemented through various justice and social welfare agencies by going onsite to learn from their staff and individuals in the programs. These experiences provided insight into how restorative approaches balance accountability with healing, emphasizing reconciliation and community support. This immersive experience broadened their understanding of justice reform and the role of restorative practices in building stronger, more resilient communities.



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Juvenile Justice Institute
Email: unojji@unomaha.edu
juvenilejustice.unomaha.edu
jjinebraska.org

 SCHOOL OF CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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