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Evaluating a Young Adult Court (YAC) to Address Inequalities for Transitional Age Youth in Orange County

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Summary of the Project

Major Goals and Objectives

With support from NIJ and others, the University of California (UC), Irvine and the Superior Court of California, Orange County engaged in a collaborative effort to evaluate a Young Adult Court (YAC) that specifically handles justice-system-involved 18- to 25-year-old young men in Orange County, California. The study is a randomized controlled trial that follows young men in the YAC treatment group as well as similar young men who are processed in traditional court (“control”) for 30 months after their enrollment into the court (YAC treatment) or study (control). For this project, the research study team has interviewed the young men every 3 to 6 months for 30 months (baseline; 3-month follow-up, 6-month follow-up, 12-month follow-up, 18-month follow-up, 24-month follow-up, and 30-month follow-up).

Questions in the research interviews cover various domains, including criminal and antisocial behavior, perceptions of the legal system, psychological development, psychosocial maturity, social context (e.g., peer groups, family support), and environmental factors (e.g., neighborhood disorder). We also collect data from two additional sources for YAC treatment participants actively engaged in the court (i.e., pre-graduation). First, we conduct 10-minute interviews with YAC participants before or after their court hearings to assess their perceptions and experiences of the court as it unfolds. Second, case managers and the YAC probation officer submit reviews of each participant’s progress in the program.

The primary goal of the study is to understand whether the YAC improves life outcomes for the young men by reducing recidivism, reducing antisocial behavior,

improving health, improving developmental and psychological outcomes, and/or promoting positive socio-economic and educational outcomes. When data collection is complete, another goal is to examine whether the YAC reduces racial, ethnic, and socio-economic disparities across the life-course— particularly after YAC graduation.

In addition to designing and launching the brand new Orange County YAC, this NIJ-sponsored project also aimed to describe the perceived successes and challenges associated with involvement in another, pre-existing YAC: The San Francisco Young Adult Court (which was established in 2015; <https://sf.courts.ca.gov/divisions/collaborative-courts/young-adult-court>). For this component of the project, our goal was to use data from the San Francisco YAC to inform and improve the Orange County YAC.

Research Questions

This NIJ project was designed to observe an existing YAC in San Francisco and to design and conduct a randomized controlled trial evaluating a new YAC in Orange County. To execute these goals, we partnered with the San Francisco YAC team and the Superior Court of California in Orange County (along with other community partners in Orange County). Collectively, this project sought to understand the overall impact of involvement in a YAC on subsequent criminal, developmental, and social outcomes. The project had the following research aims:

1. Describe the perceived successes and challenges associated with involvement in San Francisco's YAC among graduates of the program.

2. Determine whether Orange County YAC participants differ from a randomized control group in their trajectories of subsequent criminal and antisocial behavior, as well other developmental and contextual outcomes (e.g., behavioral, psychological, educational, social, economic) over the course of two years after enrollment into the YAC.
3. Examine whether the Orange County YAC intervention differentially impacts young minority adults across these outcomes and reduces the iatrogenic effects of justice system involvement that disproportionately affect young adults of color.

Research Design and Methods

San Francisco YAC

When this project started, the San Francisco YAC represented one of the strongest models of this type of criminal justice policy and had been operating for over 5 years. The San Francisco YAC provided us with an opportunity to include two unique sources of data. First, the court provided us with administrative records. Second, we were able to interview graduates of the San Francisco YAC to better understand the young adults' experiences in the YAC.

Specifically, qualitative interviews with graduates of the San Francisco YAC were conducted to ascertain both how and why YACs may be a successful young adult criminal justice intervention. The research team interviewed graduates of the YAC in San Francisco, which included a variety of questions about their time in the YAC and the factors that motivated them to do well. Although many of the questions were quantitative, the interviews also included qualitative, open-ended questions to get a

better understanding of the young men's unique experiences. For example, we asked them, "What are some of the reasons you agreed to participate in the Young Adult Court?" and "What kinds of things helped you feel motivated while in the YAC (if any)?" By allowing the graduates of the YAC to explain what was meaningful or challenging in his own words without restricting responses to a set of predetermined answers, we were able to best utilize this participant driven feedback to modify the Orange County YAC model. Participants were identified based on data provided by the San Francisco YAC and were compensated for their time and effort.

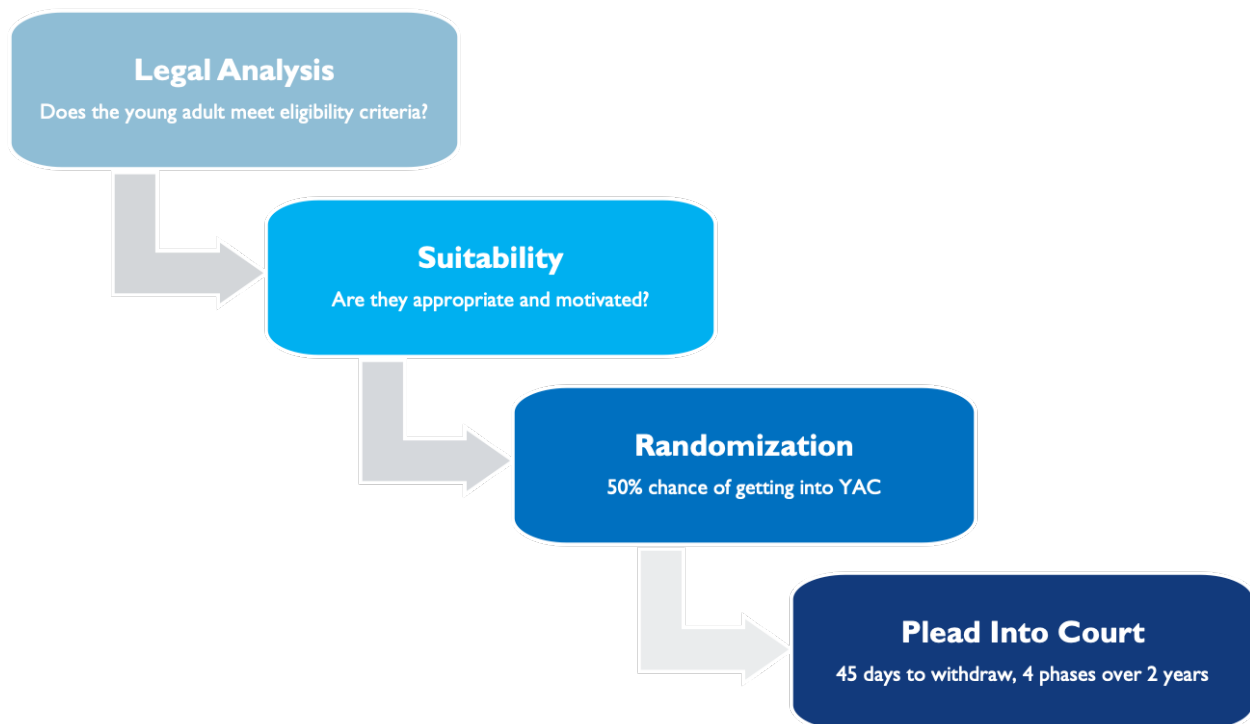
Orange County YAC

With funding from NIJ and others, the research team at UC Irvine and the Superior Court of California in Orange County, along with community partners, designed and launched a randomized controlled trial of the Young Adult Court (YAC) in Orange County. The YAC study in Orange County is a multidisciplinary, collaborative project between the court, the university, the district attorney's office, the public defender's office, the probation department, community service providers, and community stakeholders. The Orange County YAC is designed for young men who live and are charged in Orange County, are between 18 and 25 years old, and are charged with an eligible felony for the first time.

The goals of the YAC are to hold young adults accountable in a developmentally appropriate way, reduce recidivism, and promote positive long-term outcomes. The YAC provides developmentally appropriate supervision, programming, individualized mental health services and community referrals, and resources for eligible young adults. Upon successful completion of the YAC programming, the court dismisses (or reduces

to misdemeanor when unable to dismiss) prior felony charges. The dismissal of the prior felony charges is one of the most critical and unique components of the YAC, as it is well known that a prior felony conviction can significantly impede an individual's ability to reintegrate into society after involvement with the justice system. See Figure 1 for an illustration of referral and case flow information in the Orange County YAC.

Figure 1. Referral and Case Flow in the Orange County Young Adult Court



Notes. Attorneys refer justice-involved young men who meet basic screening criteria to the Young Adult Court (YAC). The YAC team then determines whether the referred individual is eligible and suitable using criteria established by the District Attorney's office. After an individual and his case are determined to be eligible and suitable for the YAC, they are randomly selected and assigned into one of the YAC Study conditions: YAC Treatment or Traditional Court. Young adults in the YAC then have 45 days to withdraw from the court. After entering the court, young men in the YAC treatment group progress through 4 phases of advancement: engagement, accountability, stability/sustainability, and attainment. A program checklist is provided to each participant and used by case managers to coordinate their action plan and ensure participants have met the requirements for phase advancement. Although the exact requirements are individualized to the participant, each phase incrementally moves

towards addressing criminogenic, educational, employment, and housing needs. Young adults in the YAC also receive developmentally appropriate supervision, programming, individualized mental health services, community referrals, and other resources that support domains such as employment, education, basic needs and hygiene, housing, childcare, and personal enrichment. After all of the terms of the YAC program have been met, and the young adults have successfully progressed through all 4 phases, the young men graduate from the program and their prior felonies are removed (or reduced to misdemeanors in some cases).

Given that young adults of color are more likely to be arrested and charged with felonies (in addition to facing other types of discrimination), a prior felony conviction may contribute to substantial racial and ethnic disparities across the life-course (Pager, 2003; Pager et al., 2009) that can have profound impacts on their overall life trajectories and health and well-being. For these reasons, a secondary aim in the present study is to examine whether participation in the YAC reduces racial disparities.

The NIJ funding allowed the research team to design and launch the YAC research study. The research study is following the young men who are randomized into the YAC as well as the young men who are randomly selected to receive treatment-as-usual. As participants are all adults, consent is obtained using a study information sheet at the time of interviews. Each participant is informed of the nature of the study, told that participation is entirely voluntary, that they will not be penalized for declining to participate, that their participation will not impact their legal status, and that data collected will only be used or revealed for research or statistical purposes. Participation in the research study has no impact on participants' ability to enroll in the YAC.

The research interviews include questions about all aspects of the young men's life, including questions about their offending and substance use, mental and physical health, attitudes, psychological development, living conditions, peer groups, and

education/employment readiness and achievement. For this NIJ-sponsored project, interviews were conducted after group randomization (baseline), and at regular intervals at 3 months, 6 months, 1 year, 1.5 years, 2 years, and 2.5 years following the baseline interview. In addition, YAC participants complete brief (10-minute) in-court interviews after appearing in front of the YAC judge. Interviews are collected via Qualtrics, a well established survey provider.

The research team utilizes many strategies to encourage study retention. For example, the participants are financially compensated for their interviews according to an escalating payment plan. In addition, contact information is updated at the end of each interview to maintain valid physical addresses, mailing addresses, e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and contact information for friends/family who may know how to reach participants in the future. Moreover, in all interactions with the participants, the UC Irvine research team strives to maintain a level of professional rapport that allows the participants to feel heard and respected. Finally, interviews are conducted at safe locations preferred by the participants to limit their burden.

Expected Applicability of the Research

Given that the present study includes a randomized controlled trial, the effect sizes generated from analyses are likely to represent realistic effect sizes. Indeed randomized controlled trials are the gold standard in assessing treatment effects. A randomized controlled trial affords the rare and unique opportunity to rigorously evaluate whether the YAC is related to better outcomes than traditional court processing. Upon evidence that the YAC's is effective, the long-term goal is to eventually open the YAC to all eligible and suitable young men.

Activities and Accomplishments

Impact of COVID-19

First, it is important to mention that we experienced many disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic during the life of this grant (i.e., fewer referrals; court and jail visitation closures; restrictions on research procedures; migration between virtual and in-person meetings; extra stressors in the lives of students on the research team).

Although conditions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have improved, the residual impact of the pandemic may continue to affect referrals, enrollment, court functioning, rapport with participants, and interview retention.

San Francisco YAC

During the project, the UC Irvine research team was able to obtain, organize, code, and analyze administrative data received from the San Francisco YAC. In addition, the UC Irvine research team conducted Exit Surveys with graduates of the YAC.

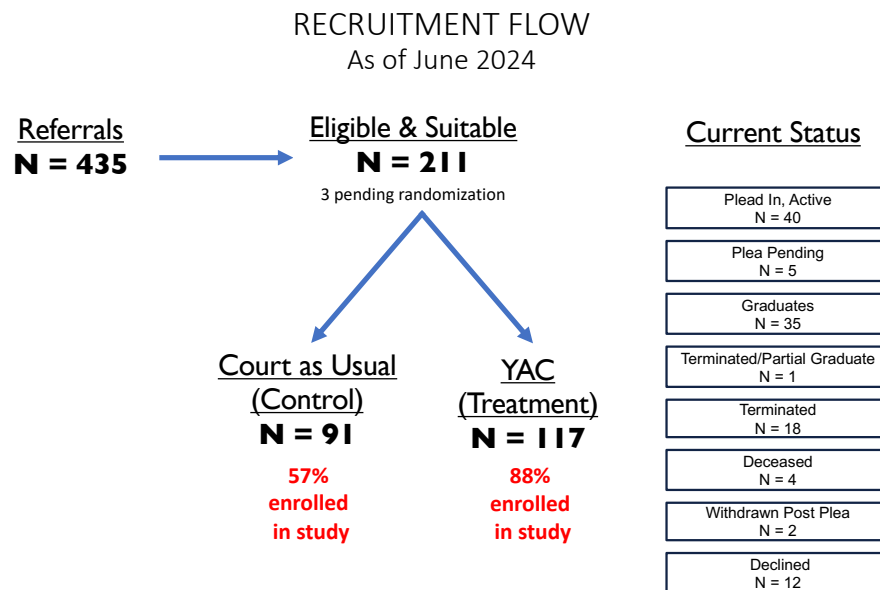
Orange County YAC

The NIJ funds allowed the UC Irvine team to design, launch, and pilot the Orange County YAC research study. During the project, approximately 435 referrals were made to the court. Of the referrals, approximately 49% (N = 211) have been found by the YAC team to be eligible and suitable. Of the 211 young men who were eligible and suitable for the program, 117 have been randomized into the YAC treatment group, 91 have been randomized into the control group, and 3 are pending randomization.

Of the 117 young men randomized into the YAC, 35 have fully graduated from the program, 1 partially graduated (partially terminated) from the program, 40 are

currently active in the program, 5 have pleas pending, 18 have been terminated from the program, 14 withdrew from or declined to enroll in the court, and 4 participants are deceased. Research interviews are continued with everyone except young adults who withdraw from or decline to enroll in the YAC. See Figure 2 for an illustration of the recruitment and case flow.

Figure 2. Recruitment and Case Flow



With regard to study enrollment and research interviews for the Orange County YAC, a total of 155 young men participated in a baseline interview and 616 total interviews have been completed to date. Thus far, approximately 57% of young adults randomized into the control group have participated in a baseline interview and approximately 88% of young adults in the YAC treatment group have participated in a baseline interview.

The breakdown of the interviews by wave is listed in Table 1. In addition to the regular interviews, over 90 participants of the YAC program have completed hundreds of 10-minute interviews before and after their YAC in-court appearance.

Table 1: Completed Interviews by Interview Wave

| Interview Wave | Total |
|--------------------|-------|
| Baseline | 155 |
| 3-Month Follow-Up | 110 |
| 6-Month Follow-Up | 104 |
| 12-Month Follow-Up | 83 |
| 18-Month Follow-Up | 64 |
| 24-Month Follow-Up | 52 |
| 30-Month Follow-Up | 48 |
| Total | 616 |

Moreover, probation officers and case managers have also completed over one thousand progress summaries regarding the young men in the YAC. Information in these summaries includes items such as: whether the participant has made progress toward his goal, whether he demonstrates effort, specific areas of need, perceived barriers to success, and perceived likelihood of recidivism.

In addition to interviews with study participants, this project has yielded several opportunities for training and professional development. Most prominently, this project fostered the professional development of a variety of research assistants. To date, the YAC project has given 72 undergraduate students, 15 post-baccalaureate students, 21

graduate students, and 5 postdoctoral fellows an opportunity to participate in applied research and data collection. Researchers on the project are trained extensively in all research procedures, including how to safely and validly conduct community-, court-, and jail-based interviews, administer interview questions in the field (including how to administer the WASI—an abbreviated, standardized assessment of intelligence), the importance of confidentiality, and the protocol for cleaning, backing up, and transmitting data. Team members are also trained in data coding, data management, and data analysis. As all our data are extremely sensitive, research staff are also trained on how to appropriately and responsibly handle all identifiable materials (e.g., court records, identifiers, etc.). Similarly, all research staff who interact with participants in custody receive training specific to maintaining confidentiality and privacy within a jail setting. Many of the student researchers plan to use the data from this project for independent research projects, papers, theses, and conference presentations.

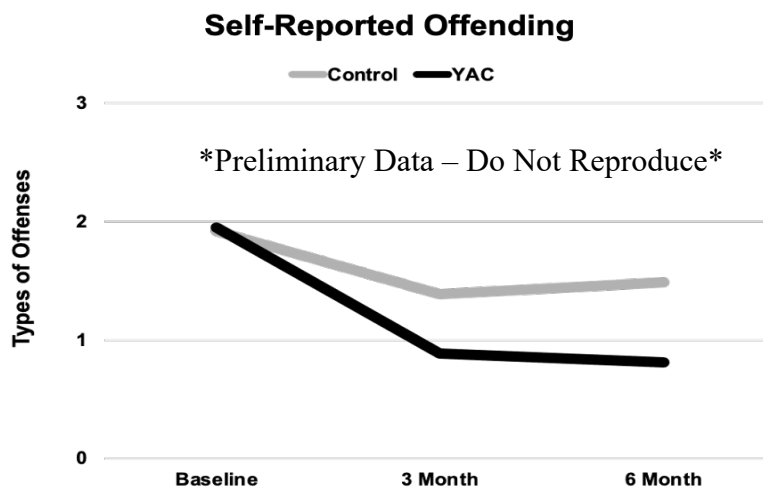
Results and Findings

We are still recruiting participants and conducting follow-up interviews. As such, all results described in this report are considered tentative and are not to be reproduced or cited broadly. However, initial analyses conducted with the existing data show that most of the young adults in our study identify as Hispanic or Latino (67%) at an overrepresented rate compared to Orange County census data (34%; <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/orangecountycalifornia/RHI725222#RHI725222>). Many participants (24%) had not graduated high school or received a GED before entering the court. Many also had high mental health needs and prior exposure to trauma. For example, 24% of participants met criteria for moderate to severe anxiety

at enrollment in the study. Additionally, before enrolling in the study, 60% reported that they had been a direct victim of serious violence, 64% were witnesses to serious violence, and 26% have seen someone get killed as a result of violence. Participants also reported high rates of substance use. In the six months before their first interview, 75% reported using marijuana, 51% reported binge drinking, and 34% reported using other drugs (cocaine; heroin; methamphetamine).

A preliminary descriptive look at available data comparing the young men randomized into the YAC treatment group and the young men in the control group suggest that the YAC treatment group may report less offending (see Figure 3), less non-marijuana drug use (see Figure 4), and may be more likely to be employed six months after enrollment (see Figure 5) than the young men in the control condition.

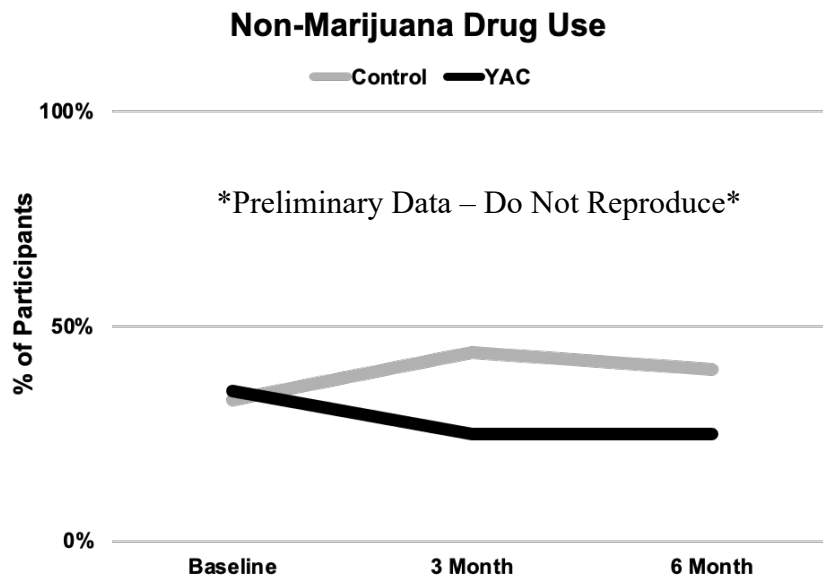
Figure 3: Self-Reported Offending by Treatment Status



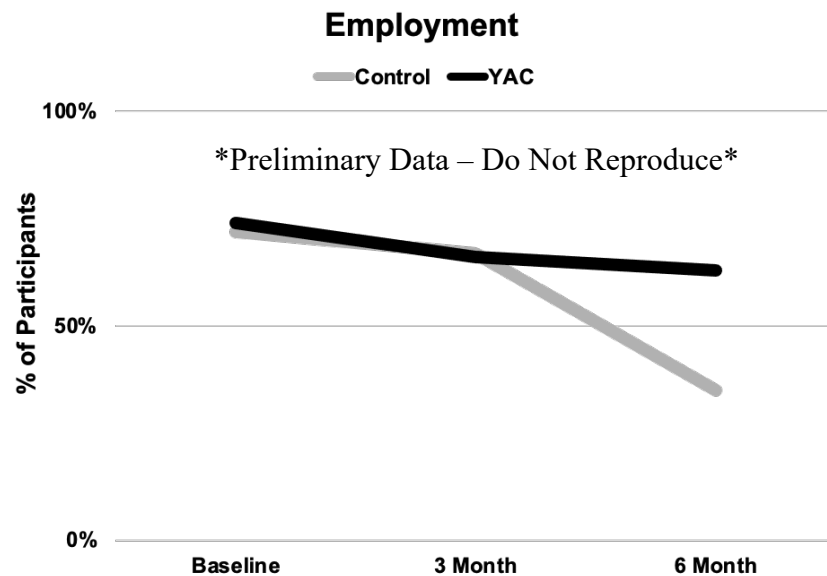
Notes. Self-reported offending for YAC and control participants in the six months after study enrollment. Scores represent the total number of unique types of offenses reported (i.e., offending variety). Baseline represents the total number of offenses

reported in the six months before study enrollment, 3 months represents offenses between baseline and 3 months, and 6 months represents offenses between 3 months and 6 months.

Figure 4: Non-Marijuana Drug Use by Treatment Status



Notes. Self-reported non-marijuana drug use during the first six months of the study. Baseline represents drug use six months before study enrollment, 3 months represents drug use in the months between baseline and 3 months, and 6 months represents drug use in the months between 3 months and 6 months.

Figure 5: Employment by Treatment Status

Notes. Self-reported employment status during the first six months of the study. Values in Figure 5 represent current employment status at baseline, current employment status at the 3-month follow-up, and current employment status at the 6-month follow-up.

San Francisco YAC

As described previously, another goal of this project was to examine the San Francisco YAC. For this aim, we were able to examine some of the administrative data received from San Francisco YAC. We found that the San Francisco YAC has had 279 young adults accepted into the program at the time of data collection, with 92 “success” cases (33%) and 95 court-terminated “failure” cases (34%). The remaining cases were active in the court at the time we received the data. Similar to the YAC of Orange County, the San Francisco YAC participants were about 21 years old. We explored differences between the San Francisco YAC graduates and terminations that may be able to inform how the YAC of Orange County operates. In general, we found that the

two groups were similar in terms racial and ethnic composition as well as referral charges (~27-28% had drug charges; ~30-33% had property charges; ~35-36% had violent person offenses; ~4-7% had another type of charge). In addition, although we were not able to conduct a statistical test comparing the graduates and terminations because of selective missing data, it appears that graduates were less likely to have a history of homelessness, more likely to be employed, and more likely to have a high school degree at the time of data collection.

We also developed a San Francisco YAC Exit Survey that was intended to be administered to graduates and non-graduates. The goal of this survey was to understand the factors that might explain why some men are successful in the YAC and others are not. Unfortunately, disruptions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak precluded us from traveling to San Francisco to conduct in-person interviews with San Francisco YAC graduates. However, we are pleased to report that we were able to conduct research procedures remotely, including identifying, contacting, and interviewing San Francisco YAC clients via Zoom. Unfortunately, contact information was severely limited or incomplete, especially for the young adults who were terminated from the court. This made it difficult to obtain large enough samples of graduates and terminations to conduct true statistical analyses. In total, we interviewed 23 former San Francisco YAC clients (both graduates and terminations).

Through these interviews we learned that the San Francisco program was perceived by the young men as “intensive” and at times difficult to comply with the demands of the court. For example, when asked whether and why the young men had missed any YAC appointments, they stated that they had work, school/classes, family

obligations, or transportation conflicts. Nonetheless, the graduates of the YAC in San Francisco were generally satisfied with their experiences in the court and said the following (quotes edited slightly only to improve clarity and readability):

“One of the greatest things that stuck with me after my time in the YAC was to analyze a situation before doing something and to not act out on impulse”

“The YAC team helped with clothing and the essentials. They break their back to find help for you. If they know you need help with transportation, then they get you a bus pass. For school, they get you supplies and even a laptop. They helped with housing.”

Limitations and Next Steps

One limitation in the YAC study is that the number of potential research participants is dependent on the number of attorneys who refer youth to the court as well as the number who are determined to be eligible and suitable (both of which the UC Irvine research team is not involved with). The number of young adults in the YAC is also ultimately dependent on the number of cases that the court (and service providers) can handle at one time. These two reasons, along with the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, contributed to slower recruitment than anticipated.

Another limitation has been the challenges associated with the recruitment of the control sample. This sample is harder to recruit for a variety of reasons. For example, this group generally has less available contact information, which makes it harder for the research team to locate them. In addition, some control young men may be

disappointed that they were not randomized into the treatment group. Moreover, some control young men may be incarcerated and advised by legal teams to not talk to researchers while their case is open and they are waiting for their trial. We do not know the precise reasons that control young men are less likely to participate than treatment young men, but we are working on reducing the response rate gap.

In the future, we plan to continue enrolling new participants in the Orange County YAC and continue conducting follow-up interviews with enrolled participants. Because we want to determine whether participation in the YAC has long-lasting positive effects after completion of the court, we obtained additional funding to conduct more follow-up interviews at 36 months (3 years), 48 months (4 years), 60 months (5 years), 72 months (6 years), and 84 months (7 years) after study enrollment. This will allow us to follow the young men up to 5 years **after** they graduate from the YAC. In addition to these extended follow-up interviews, the new funding also allows us to continue recruiting new participants to enroll in the study. With a larger sample, we will have more statistical power to conduct nuanced analyses. We are very grateful that NIJ gave us the initial funding to design, launch, pilot, and refine the YAC study. We could never have expected that the COVID-19 would slow recruitment as much as it did, but we are glad to have additional funds to continue the wonderful court and study that NIJ allowed us to launch.

List of Products

We have not yet published complete results from the YAC because we are still recruiting participants and collecting data. However, we published a chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Developmental Psychology and the Law* that provided an overview

of the YAC and some lessons learned from implementing it to guide future research and policy related to young adults in the legal system (Gillespie, Riano, & Cauffman, 2023). We also discuss the YAC in a paper that was recently published in the journal *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* (Cauffman, Gillespie, Beardslee, Davis, Hernandez, & Williams, 2024). Furthermore, we have created other products related to the court, including a YAC pamphlet, a handbook that provides an overview of the court (given to participants in the YAC; <https://www.occourts.org/directory/collaborative-courts/>), and an informational video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLTNwBSRNqg>).

Datasets Generated

De-identified data from the NIJ-funded YAC study will be archived with the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data or NIJ's designated repository.

Dissemination Activities

Information about the Orange County Young Adult Court and study has been presented at multiple local and national conferences, including the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology; the Annual Conference for the American Psychology-Law Society; the Annual Conference of the Society for Research on Adolescence; the UC School of Social Ecology “Reimagining the Justice System” panel; the Orange County Public Safety and Reentry Conference; and the Orange Systems of Care monthly meeting.

In addition to these conference presentations, YAC has also been featured in various news segments and media articles, including:

1. Simon Fraser University- 26 February 2019

Criminal justice system impact on adolescents and young adults

<https://www.sfu.ca/criminology/community/news/2019/criminal-justice-system-impact-on-adolescents-and-young-adults.html>

2. *The Orange County Register*- June 27, 2020

Orange County's 'Young Adult Court' celebrates its first graduate

<https://www.ocregister.com/2020/06/27/orange-countys-young-adult-court-celebrates-its-first-graduate/>

3. *Los Angeles Times*- January 25, 2021

In Orange County, Young Adult Court offers a path to clear felony convictions

<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-01-25/graduates-emerge-felony-free-from-orange-county-young-adult-court>

4. *ACLU SoCal News*- February 28, 2022

Keeping us safe means keeping us whole

<https://www.aclusocal.org/en/news/keeping-us-safe-means-keeping-us-whole>

5. *UCI News*- July 12, 2022

Ready to reenter society

<https://socialecology.uci.edu/news/ready-reenter-society>

6. *UCI News*- July 26, 2022

UCI awarded \$10.1 million grant to expand O.C. Young Adult Court study

<https://news.uci.edu/2022/07/26/uci-awarded-10-1-million-grant-to-expand-o-c-young-adult-court-study/>

7. *The Orange County Register*- January 12, 2023

OC Young Adult Court adds new component to prevent recidivism

[https://www.ocregister.com/2023/01/12/oc-young-adult-court-adds-new-component-to-prevent-
recidivism/#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20holding%20a,community%20colleges%20and%20assistance%20in](https://www.ocregister.com/2023/01/12/oc-young-adult-court-adds-new-component-to-prevent-
recidivism/#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20holding%20a,community%20colleges%20and%20assistance%20in)

8. *UCI News*-Mar 31, 2023

Young Adult Court graduates 4 more

<https://socialecology.uci.edu/news/young-adult-court-graduates-4-more>

9. *NPR*-September 20, 2023

At new mental health courts in California, judges will be able to mandate treatment

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/09/20/1200479082/mental-health-courts-california-care-debate>

10. *ABC News*- September 29, 2023

SoCal legal program gives young offenders 2nd chance, removes stigma

<https://autos.yahoo.com/video/socal-legal-program-gives-young-001721649.html>

11. *UCI School of Social Ecology Director of Communications*- December 15, 2023

Tweet: "Thank you all for all the help I received from everyone in this Young Adult Court program. You really changed my life."

<https://x.com/mimikocruz/status/1735811498344390966>

12. *Association for Psychological Science*- January 23, 2024

Detention Fails to Help Young Lawbreakers Avoid Further Offenses, Report Shows

<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/2024-january-pspi-juvenile->

[justice.html](#)