



**Columbia World Projects**  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

# Summary Project Report: Measuring the Impact of an Innovative Youth Justice Initiative

November 2023

CENTER FOR  
**JUSTICE**  
AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

## **Project Period**

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Columbia World Projects (CWP) is a university-wide initiative established in 2017 to bridge scholarly knowledge and real-world action. With the goal of achieving the greatest possible impact on pressing challenges of our time, CWP mobilizes Columbia University's scholars, researchers, practitioners, and students to identify and implement interdisciplinary solutions to complex societal challenges in partnership with targeted change agents, such as policymakers, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and corporations.

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# Columbia World Projects

## Measuring the Impact of an Innovative Youth Justice Initiative

### Introduction

The Justice Ambassadors Youth Council (JAYC) offers young New Yorkers, including those who have been negatively impacted by the criminal legal system, an opportunity to engage with government executives to co-create policy proposals that address key community issues experienced by youth in the city. The program, led by Columbia University's Center for Justice, seeks to generate the collaborative thinking needed to transform the criminal legal system and foster paths towards community empowerment, safety, and wellbeing. Since their launch in 2019, JAYC undertook efforts to evaluate the impact of the initiative, but lacked the resources to establish and maintain robust monitoring and evaluation systems that could inform program improvement and improve sustainability. In response to a limited Columbia World Projects (CWP) call for proposals focused on justice initiatives in 2021, the Center for Justice proposed to strengthen JAYC's evaluation capacity and conduct an evaluation of the first five cohorts of the program. In 2022, CWP provided funding for the JAYC program evaluation over a 15-month period. This report summarizes the results of this effort.

### Background

After returning home from a six-year period of incarceration in 2018, 24-year-old Jarrell Daniels founded JAYC at Columbia University's Center for Justice. His desire was for JAYC to empower young people like him who often bear the brunt of community challenges—poverty, lack of access to education and employment opportunities, exposure to violence, and discriminatory legal system practices—while having little to no say in shaping the policies that deeply affect them. Fundamentally, he envisioned JAYC as a platform that centers the voices of young people, at the heart of public crises, and invites them to work in collaboration with government leaders and professionals from a range of state and city agencies to develop actionable policy proposals to directly address these problems.



Jarrell E. Daniels facilitating JAYC program cohort

"Justice Ambassadors is more than a program or youth leadership opportunity, it is a bridge that brings together people on both sides of the law; people from different personal, professional and ideological backgrounds to learn from and alongside each other in an effort to find common ground and to address the most pressing community challenges facing New York residents." – Jarrell Daniels

**Program Overview:** JAYC is a 12- week program that convenes criminal legal-system-impacted youth with government and community representatives, alongside Columbia students and formerly incarcerated mentors. These diverse cohorts come together to discuss a range of topics —childhood trauma, racial injustice, gun violence, and prejudicial policing, among others—during weekly seminars and participate in site visits to community and government agencies. JAYC offers resources, such as case management, educational pathways, post-cohort internships and legal support, to young individuals from vulnerable communities. JAYC members inform the co-development of policy proposals intended to interrupt intergenerational cycles of violence and punishment through community-driven solutions. Ultimately, JAYC aims to create meaningful political engagement across underserved populations in New York City through a collaborative “policy-by-proximity” approach in which youth and government representatives are supported to create policy solutions together.

The model of Justice Ambassadors is centered around the concept of **Policy-by-Proximity**, meaning that in order to have good government, average citizens – particularly the people closest to public crises – must be the ones to help inform local, state and federal policies.

## Objectives

To capture the outcomes of JAYC and better understand and document its implementation process, the objectives of the CWP-supported project were to:

- Strengthen JAYC's existing monitoring and evaluation plan and processes, including establishing a data collection, management, and storage system for historic and future program data.
- Evaluate the first five JAYC program cohorts.
- Use evaluation findings to make recommendations for program improvements and long-term monitoring and evaluation systems.

## Methods

The evaluation was led by a Columbia University Research Associate and the JAYC Leadership Team, with support from CWP. The evaluation considered the broader impact of JAYC within New York City, as well as outcomes unique to government representative and youth participants.

**Employing multiple methods, the evaluation sought to answer three main questions:**

**1. Is JAYC successful in meeting its primary impact goal (e.g., creating meaningful political engagement across underserved populations in New York City)?**

**Methods:** Systematic compilation and analysis of descriptive data sourced from previous JAYC documentation and in-depth knowledge of the program from core JAYC staff.

**2. Is JAYC successful in providing its intended outcomes for government and youth participants?**

**Methods:** 58 Columbia IRB-approved, semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed (31 interviews with government representatives and 27 with youth participants from the first five JAYC cohorts) with quantitative data coding based on selected indicators from the JAYC theory of change.



### 3. How can JAYC be improved, considering both the practical implementation of future cohorts as well as potential strategies for sustainable programmatic growth?

**Methods:** Informal interviews with JAYC stakeholders were conducted, in-person sessions were observed, and transcripts from the semi-structured interviews with government and youth participants (see above) were coded based on questions related to program strengths and weaknesses.

## Findings

The project evaluation was carried out over the span of 15-months and in close alignment with the proposed project objectives and evaluation design. The results demonstrate that, across the four years of its programming and five cohorts of participants, JAYC has been a catalyst for robust and powerful change—not only for its individual participants, but also for the communities that it prioritizes, and the broader systems and institutions of New York City and State. Though small in size, the program has successfully held numerous community events, established new collaborative organizational partnerships, and developed actionable policy proposal ideas. It has also demonstrated the power of preventive and holistic support for reducing youth involvement with the criminal legal system.

#### JAYC Program Achievements 2019 - 2023

- Five JAYC cohorts totaling 107 participants (51 youth and 56 government representatives)
- Over 15 city and state agencies represented in the JAYC program (NY State Department of Probation, NYPD, Brooklyn's District Attorney's (DA's) Office, Manhattan DA's Office, NYC Council, NY State Department of Education, NYC Administration of Child Services, Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, among others)
- 25+ separate community events, attended by over 700 individuals
- A book chapter [1] and academic article [2] published about JAYC
- Development of 21 policy proposals, of which six have seen concrete steps towards implementation. This includes a \$2.5 million pilot restorative justice project, Project Restore, conducted in partnership with the Brooklyn DA's Office and the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, to address gun and gang violence in the Bedford-Stuyvesant community.
- Legal support and case management for participants prevented over 40 years of incarceration through sentence reduction and alternative programming (under a conservative estimate, saving the criminal legal system over \$4,000,000).

Both youth and government representatives described the ways in which their participation in JAYC had increased their perspective-taking and recognition of system challenges while simultaneously increasing their sense of optimism, agency, and desire to engage in greater positive system change. Government representatives found many career and educational avenues from which to continue leveraging their positions following the program, just as youth participants gained important skills and continued to develop their own personal career and educational journeys. The majority of participants expressed a desire to stay involved in and committed to the JAYC work and were engaging in new ways of supporting community projects and civic engagement more broadly.

"Before taking part in JAYC I had no hope. I had dropped out of high-school at 16, was in an abusive relationship at 17, and had two felonies by 18. The program opened my mind to endless opportunities and helped me to create a path to success. Being surrounded by positive people who could relate to my situation changed my life. I'm now working as a youth mentor for a cure violence organization, and look forward to seeing what the future holds." – youth participant

"It showed me a lot of the things that I don't know still, and that I need to make sure that we have young people's voices in everything we do. You know, after that I had wanted to maybe start a youth council at [the Department of] Probation...Now in every work group that gets formed or any new initiative we want to create whether it's internal or across city agencies, we definitely always raise the issue: "Where's the voice of the young people here?" – Commissioner, government representative

Four key domains of the JAYC program stood out across the evaluation as making the program a uniquely powerful and important endeavor. Recommendations were offered to help maintain and build upon these successful practices.

JAYC Successful Practice	Evaluation Recommendation
Centering the Policy-by-Proximity Approach	Invest in training-of-trainers and core staff.
Providing holistic youth support	Develop a year-round youth fellowship.
Emphasizing social network growth	Continue program data collection, documentation, and promotion as a replicable model. Retain and engage alumni.
Engaging in a University- Government- Community partnership	Offer long-term institutional support for JAYC within Columbia while also seeking out external partners.

## Key Outputs

- [Comprehensive JAYC Evaluation Report](#)
- Online database of monitoring indicators
- Online database of JAYC programmatic information
- Documented institutional memory
- JAYC Implementation Handbook
- Solidified alumni network
- [Working Theory of Change](#)



JAYC participants during program sessions

## Lessons Learned

The very nature of Columbia's Center for Justice encapsulates the University's Fourth Purpose. The Center provides a physical location, funding, and shared mission for diverse staff and collaborators, the majority of whom have been formerly incarcerated or justice-involved themselves. By leveraging the power of Columbia University, and working in both internal and external partnerships, the Center is committed to ending mass incarceration and criminalization and advancing alternative approaches to justice and safety. The history of JAYC illustrates the powerful role of higher education in transforming lives. Jarrell Daniels founded the program after participating in a Columbia course, Inside Criminal Justice, taught by Professor Geraldine Downey and Manhattan ADA Lucy Lang, which was offered at Queensboro Correctional Facility. He then enrolled in Columbia's School of General Studies, graduated in Spring 2022 with a B.A., was awarded a Truman Scholarship, and founded JAYC at the Center for Justice, where he is now a full-time staff member.

The work undertaken to evaluate JAYC and strengthen the program's monitoring and evaluation systems and capacity deepened existing collaborations, such as with the Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Bronx DA offices. It also helped create new collaborations, and strengthened the network of support available to individuals most impacted by the criminal legal system.



2022 JAYC Cohort participants

## Conclusions

The evaluation has provided initial evidence that JAYC is a transformational intervention. Although its curriculum provides a powerful platform for perspective taking and bridging difficult dialogues, its greatest strength lies in the way in which it leverages power. The evaluation demonstrated how JAYC provides holistic support to its youth participants while encouraging its senior ambassadors to invest in the creation of broader social networks, new ways of structuring their work, and the sharing of opportunities and influence. JAYC models a revolutionary way of reframing discourse around public health and safety that is relevant to every community. By centering the idea of "policy by proximity" and building a powerful university-community-government collaboration, JAYC gives voice and resources to New York City's changemakers—both youth and government representatives. The evaluation findings and recommendations, as well as the monitoring and evaluation systems put in place during this process, will be useful in maximizing JAYC's potential and growth, within and beyond New York City.

## Citations

1. Daniels, J., Burrows, B., Starks-Tanksley, U., Downey, G. (in press). Social Rehabilitation through Collaborative Education: Justice Ambassadors as a Transformative Program for Youth Development Policy. In F. Coppola and A. Martufi (Eds.), *Social Rehabilitation and Criminal Justice*. Routledge.
2. Burrows, B., Daniels, J., Starks, U., Amso, D., & Downey, G. (2023). The Ecological Resilience Framework: The Justice Ambassadors Youth Council as a model for community-based resilience. *Development and Psychopathology*, Special Issue: Resilience in Development: Pathways to Multisystem Integration, 1-9. [doi:10.1017/S0954579423001001](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579423001001)



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