

CHAPTER 1

Enact the YRA Strategic Plan to Support Public Safety





INTRODUCTION

In 1985, the District of Columbia passed the **Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA)** to institute sentencing alternatives for youth convicted as adults. The law applied to youth up to age 22 and encompassed most crimes. More recently, District leadership passed the updated **Youth Rehabilitation Act of 2018**, which extended the age to 24 and modified sentencing provisions to enable more young people to become eligible under this law. However, it was noted at the time that the updated legislation was largely missing the “R,” meaning it failed to prioritize rehabilitative practices in support of young people.

THE YRA STRATEGIC PLAN

In May 2019, the Council of the District of Columbia requested that a strategic plan be developed to prioritize rehabilitative components for the YRA. The Justice Policy Institute (JPI) was selected to lead the development of the strategic plan. This plan was created through the convening of the DC Emerging Adult Justice Action Collaborative.

JPI launched the Collaborative, with funding from the Public Welfare Foundation, to bring together key stakeholders and develop a comprehensive strategic plan for the YRA. The Collaborative consisted of 20 District government, policy and advocacy organizations, community providers, and individuals with lived experience in this field (listed below).

District Agencies and Government

Council Member Charles Allen’s Office
Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA)
DC Department of Corrections (DC DOC)
DC Office of the Attorney General (OAG)
DC Office for Students in Care of DC (SCDC)
DC Superior Court
DC Young Men Emerging Unit (YME)
Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services
Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice
Public Defender Service of DC (PDS)

Advocacy, Policy, and Community

Alliance of Concerned Men
Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth
Corrections Information Council (CIC)
DC Justice Lab
Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop
Impacted Community Members
JP Morgan Chase
Justice Policy Institute
National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens
Public Welfare Foundation
School Justice Project
Voices for a Second Chance

JPI and partners conducted interviews, focus groups, and convenings with more than 75 people over one year to inform the development of the YRA strategic plan.

The **DC Youth Rehabilitation Act Strategic Plan (2020-2025)** was formally submitted to the District government in November 2021. Recommendations from this plan were evidence-based and drawn from national and local models. The YRA strategic plan offered a roadmap for District leaders to implement comprehensive initiatives to support system-involved emerging adults.

The plan was spread across three goals:

- **Goal #1:** Increase trauma-informed, healing-centered restorative services.
- **Goal #2:** Build a community-based continuum of care.
- **Goal #3:** Build a criminal legal system-based continuum of care.

A timeline called for:

Years 1-2: Research, convening, and adopting the strategic plan elements across District agencies (2020-2021).

Year 3: Hiring a coordinator to operationalize the plan (2022).

Year 4: Implementation of pilots targeting these goals (2023).

However, since the submission of the strategic plan in 2021, the Mayor's Office has not implemented it (as of the date of this publication in 2024), with the exception of an amendment to the March 2024 Secure DC Amendment Act authorizing the creation of an Office of Emerging Adults.



DISTRICT LEADERSHIP SQUANDERS EXTENSIVE STRATEGIC PLANNING, MISSING OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE COMMUNITIES SAFER



IT IS PAST TIME TO ENACT THE YRA STRATEGIC PLAN

At the time of YRA's passage, the Council of the District of Columbia had advanced several data-driven, groundbreaking reforms coupled with forward-looking investments to keep communities safe, support young people and returning citizens, and continue the more than decade-long decline in crime from 2003 to 2018. Such investments included:

- The **Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act of 2016 (IRAA)** allowed some individuals who were incarcerated before age 18 to go before a judge for a sentencing review.
- The **Omnibus Public Safety and Justice Amendment Act of 2018** amended the 2016 act to specify that individuals who were convicted of a DC code violation, charged as an adult, convicted before age 18, and had served at least 15 years, could go before a judge for a sentencing review.
- The **Second Look Amendment Act of 2019** went into effect in 2021 to expand IRAA eligibility to individuals who had been incarcerated before the age of 25 and had served at least 15 years of their sentence.



Much has changed since the District mandated the development of a strategic plan for the Youth Rehabilitation Act in 2018: the global pandemic closed in-person schools, businesses, and community support systems, creating hardships for many families. Even before the pandemic, DC Public Schools historically struggled with **worsening disparities in achievement outcomes in Wards 7 and 8**. With only **one grocery store for the two wards**, with limited selection and shopping options, everyday tasks of survival have become increasingly difficult. At the same time, the District holds the record for the **biggest gap in unemployment among African Americans** in the country and the worst health disparities from **infant mortality to life expectancy**. The impacts of these hardships and lack of services may have, in the pandemic's aftermath, contributed to an increase in crimes committed by youth and emerging adults. Concentrated in Wards 7 and 8, **many violent crimes are perpetrated by people who have themselves been victimized within the last twelve months**.

In spite of these destabilizing conditions for residents of the District, the previously successful reform efforts have met backlash. Legislation has been passed to roll back proposed reforms while enacting tougher punishments and harsher sentences. In particular, initiatives and investments to support emerging adults that have shown some success have been called into question or are facing major transitions due to changes in vision, leadership, or funding.

What is missing is a recognition that youth and emerging adults are an asset to the community and that they can be supported to achieve their fullest potential. This view is based on a philosophy known as **Positive Youth Development**, which the **District has formerly embraced**. Additionally, multiple scientific studies support the view that emerging adults, while no longer youths, are **not yet full adults with fully developed decision-making capacities**. Emerging adults are a distinct group and require unique services as they grow into community members who can make positive contributions.

On its own, punishment after a crime is an insufficient strategy for public safety. Incarceration and other methods that rely on control or confinement **lack what emerging adults need most to function as healthy community members**: engaged adults, peer groups who model prosocial behavior, realistic chances for academic achievement, and opportunities to develop their decision-making and critical thinking skills. Investment in violence and crime prevention must constitute the District's highest priorities in establishing community safety. Emerging adults who have become system-impacted also need support and investment during and after their involvement with the criminal legal system.

Implementing the 2020-2025 YRA strategic plan can provide essential investment and support for system-impacted emerging adults. The tenets of the YRA strategic plan remain unchanged, and the need for rehabilitative services among the District's emerging adult population has not declined. In fact, with incidents of certain crimes rising and individual and community instability increasing, this need is now even more urgent.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE YRA STRATEGIC PLAN

Implementation of the YRA strategic plan must be intentional, comprehensive, coordinated, and fully funded to support the District's system-impacted emerging adults. This action plan calls for a focus on goals #1 and #2 of the YRA strategic plan: Increase trauma-informed, healing-centered restorative services and build a community-based continuum of care. Each of the following chapters highlights a specific priority and first step to achieve the objectives of the YRA strategic plan and respond to the current context within the District.

Each long-term priority and first step will require financial commitment. However, inaction on the strategic plan has its own attendant costs. Punishing emerging adults through incarceration is expensive; it is a policy choice that fails to acknowledge the broader individual and community contexts that contribute to crime and therefore addresses no long-term solutions. In contrast, investment in rehabilitative services directly supports community safety and can pay dividends for generations.



This is a single chapter from the full report, **Building a Brighter Future: A Plan to Invest in DC's Emerging Adults**. Please visit the [report's landing page](#) to access other chapters and the appendices for each chapter.