

**ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE**

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**COMMENTARY**

# The Youth Challenge Model

## *What Quasi-Military Residential Programs Teach Us About At-Risk Youth Intervention Policy*

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**RESEARCH INDEPENDENCE STATEMENT**

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The Hawaii National Guard Youth Challenge Academy reports a 73 percent completion rate and documented outcomes in GED attainment, employment, and reduced recidivism that compare favorably with national program benchmarks.<sup>1</sup> ISPI's analysis examines what the program's evidence base reveals about effective at-risk youth intervention design for island communities — and why its lessons have not been more broadly applied to the Hawaii juvenile justice intervention landscape.

## What the Evidence Shows

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The Youth Challenge model demonstrates that structure without stigma — residential programs that provide intensive structure, skill development, and community accountability without the punitive framing of detention — produces outcomes superior to both detention and unstructured community supervision for youth whose risk factors indicate they need more than probation oversight but less than criminal system involvement.<sup>2</sup>

**The program's effectiveness in Hawaii specifically reflects its cultural alignment with Pacific Island and Native Hawaiian community values — the emphasis on collective accountability, mentorship, and community service resonates with 'ohana-centered cultural frameworks in ways that continental residential programs, designed for different cultural contexts, typically do not.**

## Why the Lessons Have Not Been Broadly Applied

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The Youth Challenge model serves a specific eligibility population — youth who have not been adjudicated in the formal juvenile justice system. The Hawaii juvenile justice system's primary challenge is the youth who are already in the formal system, for whom the Youth Challenge model is not directly applicable. What the model demonstrates, however, is that structured residential intervention with cultural grounding and community accountability components produces meaningful outcomes in Hawaii's specific population context. That demonstration should inform the design of intervention programs for adjudicated youth — but it has not.

## ISPI Recommendations

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1. Commission a policy analysis examining how the Youth Challenge evidence base can be applied to expand structured residential intervention capacity for adjudicated Hawaii youth.
2. Fund development of culturally grounded residential intervention programs for adjudicated Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth modeled on the

'ohana-centered and community accountability elements that drive Youth Challenge outcomes.

3. Establish the Youth Challenge program outcome data as a benchmark against which proposed juvenile justice interventions in Hawaii are evaluated.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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The Island Security Policy Institute (ISPI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Honolulu, Hawaii. ISPI produces practitioner-led research, policy analysis, training programs, and commissioned research on public safety, emergency preparedness, insider threat, and security policy for island and coastal communities worldwide. ISPI is registered as a federal contractor on SAM.gov under NAICS 541720. Warren Pulley, Founder & Executive Director.

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