The Criminal Justice Conversations Podcast with David Onek

Episode #26: Gena Castro Rodriguez, Executive Director, Youth Justice Institute (November 17, 2011)

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DAVID ONEK: Welcome to the Criminal Justice Conversations Podcast, a coproduction of Berkeley Law School and the Berkeley School of Journalism. I’m your host, David Onek. The podcast, recorded in the Berkeley School of Journalism studios, features in depth interviews with a wide range of criminal justice leaders: law enforcement officials, policymakers, advocates, service providers, academics and others. The program gets behind the sound bites that far too often dominate the public dialog about criminal justice to have detailed, nuanced conversations about criminal justice policy.

Today’s guest is Gena Castro Rodriguez, executive director of the Youth Justice Institute. The Youth Justice Institute provides direct services to system involved youth and works to facilitate positive change within the systems that affect them. Castro Rodriguez co-founded the Youth Justice Institute which was originally called the Girls Justice Initiative in 2002 and previously worked for San Francisco’s Mission
neighborhood centers and other youth serving organizations. She and I have worked together for many years and I served as the first advisory board chair of the Youth Justice Institute. Castro Rodriguez holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Sacramento State University and holds two masters’ degrees in counseling psychology from the University of San Francisco and in clinical psychology from The California Institute for Integral Studies. She is also a licensed marriage and family therapist and she joins us in the studio this afternoon, Gena Castro Rodriguez welcome to the program.

GENA CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: Thank you.

ONEK: Gena you founded the Girls Justice Initiative in 2002 to focus on the needs of girls in the juvenile justice system, how do the needs of girls in the system differ from the needs of boys and why did you decide to start an organization exclusively on girl’s needs?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: So girls come into the system and exit the system for different reasons than boys and so in San Francisco about ten years ago we started to know that girls were representing a bigger percentage of the kids that were
involved in juvenile justice and there was a lot of questions about why they were there and what was going on for them and how could the system respond to their needs but not having a lot of information about who they were or how they got there. We didn’t have a lot of suggestions for treatment and rehabilitation so the organization was originally the Girls Justice Initiative and was supposed to be a short term project in order to learn more about girls in the system and then make recommendations for the community and it grew from there so when we went in originally we started to learn where these girls were coming from, what were the pathways for them to get into delinquency, what happened to them once they got into the system and then ultimately we learned about different services that they needed in order to get out of the system.

ONEK: And what did you learn when you finally started to look at that? How are they different than boys?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: One of the big things about girls is they get involved in the juvenile justice system for, with, or because another person. It’s very different than boys. Boys often go in on a crime, their first crime could be a serious felony and they have no prior contact with the system. For girls they have
multiple contacts with the system, often working their way up to a serious crime and often because, with or for someone else and that someone else is often a romantic partner or it could be their family.

ONEK: What about the needs of girls once they hit the system? How are those different from the needs of boys?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: That’s actually very different, girls come with significant histories of trauma and abuse in their background. Many of them crossover about a third of them crossover from child welfare, many of them were failing in school before they came into the system, they’ve been given a lot of signals for a long time that something was going wrong and they’ve been gradually been getting deeper into the system by the time they get into juvenile justice.

ONEK: So can you give an example of one of the clients, the Youth Justice Institute has worked with and the types of services the organization has been able to provide to that client, of course keeping confidentiality?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: A real typical case would be a young woman
that we work with who comes into the system, maybe had a few contact early on either was in detention or was not in detention and started with some very low level crimes, status offense kind of things and then maybe moves up to maybe a misdemeanor and then finally gets into the system for a felony offense and once we sort of track back and understand how she got into the system, we find out that there’s been this history of abuse, there’s been this history of system failure, there’s been this dysfunction in the family and what we do it we try to take all that information and put together a plan for the young woman, so our advocacy work would be assessing what her needs are, assessing what’s gone on for her, creating a plan, working with probation to implement that plan and that plan might look like the kinds of treatments she would need in the community. Maybe it’s therapy to address a trauma that she has experienced, it’s probably our mentoring program which is going to pair her with a health adult who can help support her while she’s on probation and then moving forward. It might be working with the school district to get her back into school or get her into a school that better meets her needs and then it would be going to court and advocating for those services and then really help her when she leaves custody to implement that plan and that’s really where our staff and the mentor comes in to support that young
woman to get back into the system.

ONEK: So just to be clear, you start working with young women when they are incarcerated and return to work with them as they return to the community?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: Yes, and that works best for girls because girls are very relationship focused so when they bond and connect with someone, that’s where our mentoring program works so well, they connect with that person and if that person can be their support and stay with them, they do very well.

ONEK: And how do you build that initial trust? I imagine most of young women you work with have serious trust issues, have had all kinds of adults in their life let them down or abuse them, how do you all come in as a new adult in their lives and establish rapport and build trust?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: I think we’ve learned a lot over the last ten years and one of the things we’ve learned is we are honest with young people. We work with them where they are, we’re very respectful, we talk about what we can and can’t do. We don’t commit to things that we can’t follow through on, we are very
consistent with them and the people we train to work with them, and those are the principles that we want them to carry. Our plans for young people have to be adopted by the young person. They have to have input into it, they have to agree to it, this has to be what they want to do, so it’s kind of different than the rest of the system. We are really working with and for them not because of them.

ONEK: And you talked about training the folks who are on the front lines working with youth, can you tell me about that because any program you put on paper is only going to be as strong as the person sitting there with the young woman building that trust?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: In our mentoring program, we have a really extensive screening process when we bring people into the organization, then once their brought on as volunteer, we have a pretty extensive training program too. We have three full days of training before they ever get to meet with a young person and we put lots of information into those three days of training. We do work around trauma, we do work around juvenile justice system, and we do training around grief and loss for young people. We are really trying to get them to understand the needs
and the strengths of the young people that they are going to work with and then to really understand what their role is, so the young people can know what to expect and what they can get out of the relationship.

ONEK: So you started out the organization focused exclusively on girls, you later expanded to include boys as well. Can you talk about that decision and why you went in that direction?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: We had a lot of success the first two or three years focusing on young women and really getting to know what was going on for them and what were there best practices in working with young women and then helping organizations that worked with girls to better serve those girls and in that time we really realized that the young men were also not receiving services and treatment that responsive to their gender and that the system although it was originally set up for young men, really wasn’t responding to their need either. And so we decided to start with our mentoring work and later with our therapy work, learning about young men. That’s what I like about YJI is that we spend a lot of time learning about these young people and from them so that we know how to help them. We don’t come in with a model, we come in with ideas and then we get information
from them and then that’s how we build our programs.

ONEK: So how did you get that information from young men and what did you learn from them?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: We started mentoring them, we started pairing them with young people, we started having their mentors and they work together, we started asking them questions. We have an intake, an eleven page intake that asks them a lot of questions about what they think is going on their lives, what they think has happened in their families, why they think they haven’t been going to school. It’s a very different angle that sometimes scares the system because we are asking the kids what they think about how they got here but it’s really important information that if you don’t get that information, how do you know how to help them get out of it so we get a lot of information from them.

ONEK: Can you give an example of type of information you might be able to get from a youth that you don’t think other youth serving organizations can get as easily and then what you would do with that information to try and get a better outcome for that youth?
CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: A lot of information that we get is about the root causes or the pathways of how they got involved in the delinquency or in crime so the system might be asking details about the crime but they are not asking how they got to that point so for girls we might find out that she’s using substances but we need to know why she started using substances and when we start unraveling that story we find out that years of abuse and history, we find out people in her life that have let her down, we find places where she might have told people what was going on and no one took care of that for her and so then she starts medicating in order to respond to that and that’s really important information for us to know because her treatment is different than someone who started using out of a different circumstance so that’s one of the things that we really start to unravel working with the young person, rather, you know going to them for the information rather than looking at just the police report or just the probation report.

ONEK: So one of the unique things about the Youth Justice Institute YJI is that you take what you learn from this extensive direct service work and try to think how you can influence policies with it and many organizations do direct
service work, many other organizations do policy work, it’s fairly rare that organizations attempt to do both and there can be some real advantages to that and some real challenges so I’m wondering if you can talk both about the challenges you faced having both of those roles and the benefits you think it’s had for the organization and for the kids you serve.

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: Well it’s one of the things I really like about us is we do the direct service work and when we are sitting at policy tables, we’re speaking from what’s happening right now with young people, but it is a challenge, we have direct service staff, who spend their time doing direct service so there’s not a lot of people in the organization who are able to do the policy work. In the last few years it’s mostly fallen on me to do that and it sort of takes me out of direct service more. The other challenge is that it’s not very well funded so it’s something we sort of do on the side of our direct services. I think we could do more work if we had funding in this area and the other thing is that I’m often the only service provider at many tables that I sit at, so although I think I bring a unique perspective and I definitely bring a lot of information to the table, I’m usually the only person there that is a direct service provider.
ONEK: And how do you think it benefits back to the direct service work you do to have someone like you at the policy tables as well?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: I think it’s really important, I think those tables being separated is a big problem because there are things that happen, there are decisions that are made, there’s policies that are implemented, there’s funding decisions, it feeds so much of the work that we do and it’s disconnected from what’s actually happening that that causes a lot of problems for us and that’s actually why I started getting into the policy work is that I felt like those two things were disconnected and that we had so much knowledge and experience working with young people, we needed to get that out to the broader community.

ONEK: What types of policy issues have you taken a leadership role in?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: Well we’ve been really fortunate in sort of leading in the gender responsive area, culture competency, mental health for kids in the juvenile justice system and one of the really practical ways that plays out for us is we do a
lot of technical and training throughout the jurisdictions and that’s a real immediate way we are able to affect change in jurisdictions so we recently worked with [UNINTELLIGIBLE] county, we’ve been there for almost a year and a half helping them implement gender responsive strategies in their county so their probation department is very willing and open to changing and doing better for young women, so it’s been really great for us to go and do multiple days of gender responsively training and we recently helped them to develop a mentoring program like we have for other girls that are in the system. It’s a way that we can take what we know and pass it on to another jurisdiction and then let them own it and build something on their own for their kids.

ONEK: So can you walk me through how this training relationship would work? You said it’s a couple days of intensive training that you would go in there and do, so I’m a probation office in [UNINTELLIGIBLE] county, I don’t necessarily have a lot of background when you come into the room, what happens to me that first day, what do I learn, how do you get by in from someone that you are training?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: You would think it’s hard but it’s actually
not that hard because what I want people to understand in the training, I don’t want you to walk away with ten things that you’re going to go do, I want you to start to think about these young people differently so say I’m doing a training on gender responsive, I want to give you a lot of information about how girls work, what’s going on for them and then how to best serve them but I want you to think as the participant about how you think about girls now and how you think that could change and what you could do differently so you really don’t walk out with a form or a curriculum or some very in the box kind of thinking, you really walk out thinking differently about young women. We try to really expand your mind and have you learn from the things we’ve learned from and with young women.

ONEK: So if I go to a two day training and I get this what do you do in terms of follow up to make sure that hey I had training for a couple days, it was really cool, I got all excited but then I went back to my regular job on Wednesday after being training Monday and Tuesday and you know I had this huge stack of case files and it kind of I just got back to my regular job and didn’t really change anything.

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: Well we don’t get a lot of feedback, we’ve
been fortunate to work for a year and a half; we just work with Eureka County also with their probation department. At the end of the trainings we like to spend some time having people break into small groups and think about how they would like to implement change given the information we’ve given over the last two days and thinking about what they would want to change and so we’re fortunate to hear back from some of them. In [UNINTELLIGIBLE] county we talked about how girls needs to be social and they are relationship based and the fact that at dinner time they sit and don’t talk to each other and that’s sort of a way to control them in punishment, that we actually miss an opportunity for the girls to learn how to engage with other girls in appropriate ways and that’s really important for girls because girls often don’t get along with other girls and so after that training the detention facility decided that they were going to have family style dinners and everyone sits down and they talk to each other and the girls are learning how to behave in that situation. They are learning how to be friends with other girls and nothing fell apart, everything still, there’s still safety and there’s still structure but they are taking advantage of the opportunity.

ONEK: Now what you just described is an example you a non-profit
organization work collaboratively with law enforcement agency and that’s one of the main themes of this program is how do we have law enforcement and community work collaboratively to try to improve the system and you as a direct service provider and as a policy advocate at times have positions that may be an opposition to the law enforcement agency that you are trying to partner with in other instances, you may have a young person who you think should be released to the community but the probation department is requesting that they be incarcerated. You may have a policy issue that you are trying to make a change in the way that the probation department does something that they disagree with, so how do you maintain those relationships but then the next day you’re supposed to do training where you’re all working together. It’s all very tricky stuff and I’m wondering if you could just talk about how you maintain those relationships given the challenges there?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: So I think you have to build those relationships, they take a while to builds trust between the two organizations, between ours and say between probation here but one thing that we really do is we try to have really high standard in our organization, we try to be very accountable for what we do, we try to have good communication with our partners,
we try to address things really quickly when there’s a problem and then we try to have formal agreements with them so that we understand what our role is and they understand what their role is and then we have systems in place if things do work out, so we have a memorative understanding with San Francisco probation department and in it we have laid out things we can do and they’ve laid out things that they will do and then we’ve even laid out what happens if we don’t agree so if we don’t agree on a case what do we do and how do we try to work that out before we’re in opposition so in the past we had to learn from mistakes, we had to learn from opposing them in a court case and people being upset and in the end when you do it in that way then we don’t have access to the young people and its’ the young people that lose out so really trying to be good at what we do we’ve gained the respect of partners that we’ve worked with and that they know that we are trying to act in best interest of young people and that when we have a problem we are going to come together and try to resolve it. It’s been really helpful; I think we have a good partnership now.

ONEK: Can you go into a little more detail about your [UNINTELLIGIBLE] at San Francisco and exactly the work that you are doing together there?
CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: What was really nice is that we sat down with two supervising PO’s and worked out, here’s what we want to do and they talked about what their concerns were and things that had happened in the past and things that they were worried about and then we came to an agreement together, so sometimes in jurisdictions partnerships or collaboration is kind of from the top down and the people that actually have to implement the collaboration didn’t get any say in how it works so it was really nice that we got to sit with supervising PO’s and hear what their concerns were and we gave some and we pushed on some and we came to some good agreements and we’re implementing it in phases, not all of it has happened yet but we’re really trying to make it a partnership. The young people are involve in that system so we need to work in that system and we need to make sure that they need, respect and work with us on what we’re doing and so in order to do that, we have to work together.

ONEK: And what are some of the details of that specific partnership at San Francisco, what is it that you are doing with them?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: We now go in and do an assessment with young
people, it’s separate from the assessment that probation does so we’re doing the intake and the assessment and coming up with a treatment plan, a plan recommendation, and a service recommendations for young people. We take those service recommendations to the probation officer and we’re giving them the recommendations, the service recommendations, we’ve talked to this young person, we’ve talked to their family, here are some things that we think would be really helpful for them and then the best case scenario we are with probation, probation will implement that plan in their report and then we go to court and then that young person gets to have those services and then when the young person gets out of custody we would be helping them access those services and some of those services might be ours internally and some of those might be services that exist in the community. Now there are a few cases a year, I think two years ago we did the data and there were five cases that year where we were not in agreement with probation and so we have those discussions ahead of time, our reports go to the court, we might go to the court and advocate for going back home instead of going out of home custody and then at that point it’s really up to the judge do decide what happens and then we follow whatever plan the judge puts into place, so if the young person goes at home custody that’s what we do, we’re not also trying to
undermine anything, we’re trying to work in the best interest of the young person.

ONEK: I know you’re also working with adult probation with transition age youth eighteen to twenty four year olds; can you talk about that a little bit?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: Yes we’re just getting started on that, San Francisco has a new grant for reentry and we’re bringing out expertise with young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty four to this collaboration with Walden House, Goodwill and San Francisco adult probation. We really want to focus on the young women that are either coming back from realignment or are coming out of the San Francisco jails because we think that those young women have these special and unique needs that are not always addressed in general programs and so issues around having children or issues around childcare or issues around custody or issues about their backgrounds of trauma and abuse or domestic violence, those things aren’t often addressed in other services, so we’re going to do some group mentoring with those young women and really try to help be supportive for them in the needs that might not be handled in a traditional employment program or in a traditional substance abuse treatment program
and may not be appropriate in those areas but those needs still exist so we’re going to try to fill that area for them. That’s a nice example of how we can bring our expertise to a larger collaboration and help meet the needs of a small population of people.

ONEK: Now I know that’s just getting off the ground, how did that collaboration form, did someone reach out to you, did you reach out to some of the other partners, how did it come to be?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: We were actually talking with San Francisco adult probation, Wendy Still a while ago about the work that we were doing in girls and she has expertise in working with girls, having been part of the gender responsive strategies, commission for years and so she already knew about our work and then Goodwill actually reached out to us because of our expertise in mentoring when they went for this re-entry grant and wanted us to help with the mentoring part of it so it was really nice for us to be recognized for the work that we’ve done and then now sort of be able to expand it in this adult probation area.

ONEK: Great well I think we’ll all be eager to see how that programs unfolds because it seems like it has a lot of promise.
Let me switch gears a little bit and talk about data, now since its inception YJI has really made it a priority to keep extensive data on the youth you serve, something that many direct service providers with limited resources struggle to do effectively, why did you make this a priority really from day one and how have you managed to create and maintain your data base with limited resources?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: The reason I made it a priority in the beginning was I just couldn’t believe how big the lack of data was that we didn’t keep data on these young people, that we didn’t really understand why they were in the system, that we don’t have clear definition of recidivism and we don’t really understand their pathways into the system, there was just a lot of questions that I had so as someone who is an aspiring researcher I really wanted to understand that, so we built this original data base for the girls that housed our eleven page intake, so we took a lot of information that we gathered from the girls and put it into the data base so that we could run reports and start to learn about where the majority of our girls coming from, what are the common themes for these women, what are the kind of things that seem to help when they get out of the system. One of the challenges with data is when you
do direct service work it’s not something that’s well funded, it’s not something that we can easily get resources for so we have a lot of information but not a lot of ways to analyze that data and a lot of ways to get that data out so we’ve had to improvise. We do internal reports, we do quarterly reports, we do end of year reports where we look at our own data and what it’s most helpful with is to help us shape our program. It’s really helpful for us to understand the young people that we’re working with, what’s working and what’s not working and YJI has been really dynamic. We are really trying to respond to the needs of the kids that we are serving and so we reevaluate what we are doing all the time. We make changes when it’s necessary, we’re just going through a re-organization of our services where we’re going to lead with our mentoring program and we’ve actually collapsed our advocacy work into mentoring because the system is different than it was ten years ago. Ten years ago we were fighting cases now we’re more in partnership with public defender, district attorney, the probation department so we need to respond to that and change what we’re doing in order to better serve the kids. The kids are different than they were ten years ago. We had more girls in custody then we have less girls with more serious crimes now so we have to constantly look at who we’re serving, what we’re doing and what are our outcomes
and then change our programs to respond to that.

ONEK: And speaking of change, what are the changes you see in the next five years? What do you think the biggest challenges facing the young men and women you are working with in the juvenile justice system are going to be in the next five years?

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: There’s a few things, a couple things are related to the realignment and kids being kept locally and not going away which—

ONEK: Again this is the state realignment at the adult side that more prisoners being kept at the county level than at the state level.

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: Yes and I think that there’s some changes that have happened for juveniles too where there really only going to be sent away if they are violent felonies so more of our kids will be staying local, so I think one of the things is that we need to respond to the more long term needs of our young people so we’ve adapted out program so that now we stay with our young people for at least one year out of custody and we try to build longer relationships and really support them for
longer periods of time. The other thing is that a lot of our kids are sort of graduating into the adult system and some of that has to do with different sentencing, different crimes that are happening, changes in offenses that can be tried as adults so we’re really trying to figure out with this partnership with adult probation then how do we get in and still support those young people that are eighteen to twenty four, who are still growing and developing, who’s brains are not fully formed, who still needs support so they can go out and do good things and get out of these systems and not write them and lose them to the criminal justice system, still do rehabilitation with them.

ONEK: Alright. Well let me end on that note, Gena Castro Rodriguez thanks so much for joining us.

CASTRO RODRIGUEZ: Thank you David.

ONEK: Please tune in next week when we’ll be joined by Javier Stauring, Co-Director of the Office of Restorative Justice, Los Angeles Archdiocese. Thank you for listening to the Criminal Justice Conversations Podcast. You can find this episode of the program, and all prior episodes, on our website at www.law.berkeley.edu/cjconversations, on NPR KALW’s website,
and on iTunes. You can also become a fan of Criminal Justice Conversations on Facebook, and you can follow us on Twitter on CJ Conversations. The podcast was engineered and edited today by Kelly Shenefeld, our research interns are Katie Henderson and Kareem Copper. I’m David Onek, thanks for listening.