Fewer Chutes, More Ladders:

Preventing Juvenile Legal Involvement and Ensuring Successful School Reentry for California's Youth

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ForwardChange
www.fwdchange.org

January 2026

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Acknowledgments

This research was made possible through the generous support of the Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR). We are deeply grateful for their commitment to advancing knowledge that serves the wellbeing of young people across California.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the many individuals who participated in interviews for this study. Their willingness to share their time, experiences, and insights was essential to the development of this report.

We owe a special debt of gratitude to young people with lived experience in the juvenile justice system, including members of the OYCR Youth Advisory Board (YAB), who contributed to this work. Their perspectives were invaluable.

DISCLAIMER: The Office of Youth and Community Restoration served as a facilitator of the Youth Justice Committee (YJC) of the Child Welfare Council for this YJC education report deliverable. The recommendations in this report do not necessarily reflect the opinions of OYCR, CHHS or the Administration.

Suggested Citation: Chandler, A. (2026). *Fewer Chutes, More Ladders: Preventing Juvenile Legal Involvement and Ensuring Successful School Reentry for California's Youth.* Forward Change.

Executive Summary

This report, "Fewer Chutes, More Ladders," frames a set of persistent problems facing youth in our state through a simple metaphor: "chutes" are the sudden setbacks associated with the "school-to-prison pipeline"—arrests, suspensions, expulsions, incarcerations—that push young people away from opportunity, while "ladders" are the supports, programs, and relationships that help them climb toward a hopeful future in terms of education, employment, and economic security. With this perspective, we examine the interconnected challenges of trying to prevent juvenile legal involvement in California while ensuring that youth who have experienced arrest or confinement can successfully return to school and move back onto a path toward long-term success. It is important to note that Black, Latino, and American Indian youth disproportionately travel the path to poor outcomes and punishment rather than the ladder to opportunity.

Drawing on an extensive literature review and many in-depth interviews, this report details not only the issues facing our youth but also many programs that have shown success in helping young people avoid falling down the chutes that have ensnared so many others. Central among those pitfalls are juvenile arrest and incarceration, which can reshape the trajectory of a young person's life. Arrest during adolescence has been shown to lower high school graduation rates, reduce the likelihood of college attendance, and sharply diminish employment prospects in adulthood. Incarceration compounds these harms, deepening disengagement from education, damaging mental health, and limiting future income and asset-building.

Research cited in this report shows that school suspension doubles the odds of arrest. Academic struggles such as low reading and verbal skills and chronic absenteeism heighten risk, while suspended or expelled youth dealing with unstable or unsafe family environments and neighborhood disadvantage further contribute to that risk. The metaphor of the ladder may seem simple, but so is the solution: the ladder starts with keeping youth in school.

Meanwhile, developmental factors such as mental health conditions, low self-control, and learning disabilities can further compound vulnerability. It's easy to see the feedback loop: poor mental health can lead to school disengagement, which can lead to association with delinquent peers, which can lead to an arrest, which in turn increases the likelihood of further arrests, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that is difficult to break.

Yet the message of this report lies in the success of programs and initiatives that provide evidence-fueled hope that this cycle can be disrupted. Some of these programs operate through schools, while others are community-based. What unites these approaches is common grounding in certain strategies that keep kids climbing ladders.

System-level reforms are also important. Problem-solving approaches have been shown to have far more positive effects in keeping students engaged in learning rather than punitive measures that push them out. As is noted in this report, a single arrest lowers the chance of college enrollment for a youth by 42%. Diversion programs that can redirect youth from formal court processing toward supportive services can restore their path to advanced education and disrupt destructive pathways.

Disrupting the School-to-Incarceration Pathway: Programs and Policies

There are a range of promising intervention strategies for interrupting the pathway that leads students from school struggles to justice system involvement. In total, 22 programs and practices were identified through a systematic scan of the research literature. Most interventions target school-related risks and are delivered in schools, some are delivered in community settings and target community-level risks, and one targets family risks and is delivered in a community context. These interventions, outlined in this section of the report, include:

Improving Reading and Literacy Aptitude

Reducing School Absences

Reducing Behavior Problems

Reducing Disciplinary Referrals

Reducing School Suspensions

Reducing Delinquency and Arrests

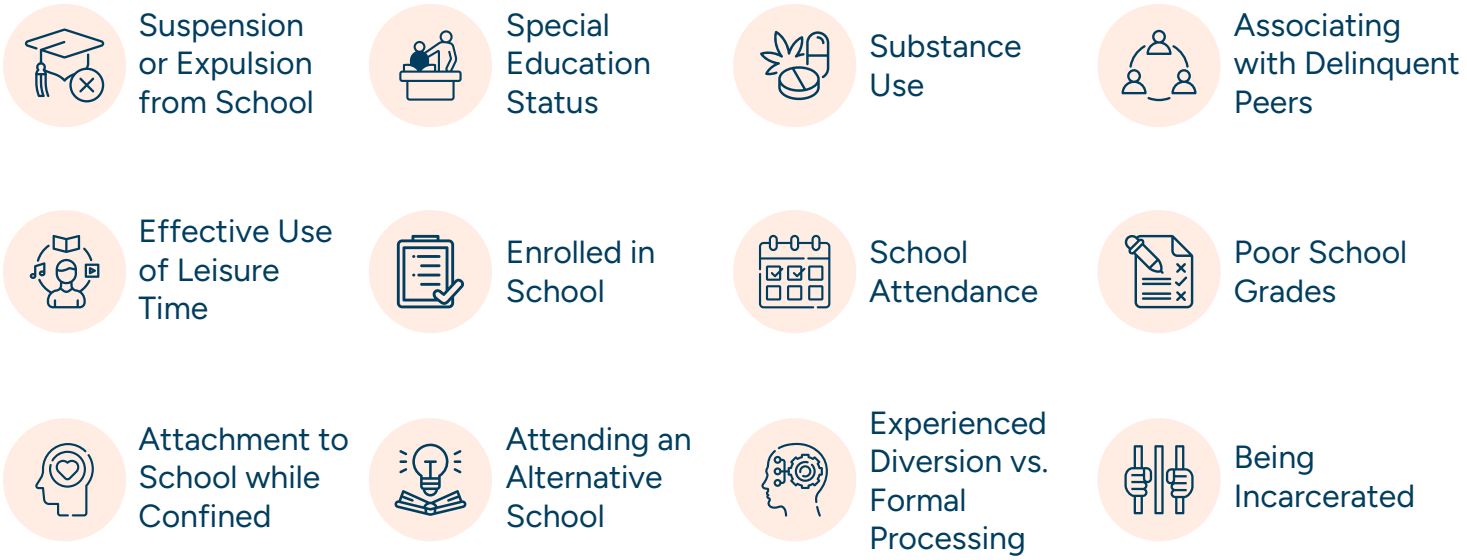
Improving High School Grades and Test Scores

Reducing Substance Abuse

The importance of intervening early to prevent students from being caught up in the juvenile legal system cannot be overstated. Efforts should focus on strengthening academic achievement, improving school attendance, addressing behavioral issues, and reducing disciplinary referrals. Systems and policy reforms pair with these efforts. Schools can shift away from exclusionary discipline and toward restorative and empathic approaches. Districts can reduce racial disparities in discipline. Agencies can foster better coordination between education, justice, and community systems. Together, these approaches are meant to create conditions where students can be engaged and thrive.

Building Ladders:
Ensuring Reentry Success after Juvenile Legal Involvement

For youth returning from detention or incarceration, meanwhile, reentry success hinges on coordinated, comprehensive support that begins before release. Once entangled in the juvenile legal system, it can be difficult for youth to return to an education-centered pathway to opportunity. The report that follows outlines the predictors of reentry success (i.e. no new arrest or adjudication, consistent connection to school and completion, and improved mental and behavioral health) after juvenile legal involvement that might be the targets of evidence-based intervention, including these life course outcomes:



This section of the report explores the social environmental and developmental predictors of recidivism. It also articulates a broader definition of "reentry success" beyond recidivism alone and looks at programs and policies that facilitate that success.

The period following release is a critical window during which effective intervention can dramatically reduce the likelihood of recidivism and promote positive long-term outcomes. In order to provide youth leaving detention or incarceration with a path to successfully transition back, we need coordinated, cross-sector efforts that address the educational, behavioral, social-emotional, physical, and mental health needs of youth reentering school. Where possible, workforce development and career pathways are also emphasized as critical for long-term stability. Socially, young people may need help building stable connections to positive social networks and many can benefit from having their behavioral health needs addressed. Of course, system-level coordination is essential, with plan development during incarceration, family involvement, and inter-agency collaboration. These efforts recognize that reentry is not a single event but a process, meant to reduce recidivism and improve life outcomes.

Building Ladders

These initiatives and approaches move us toward the vision of "Fewer Chutes, More Ladders," a future of possibility and hope. To realize that vision, we must discover the commonalities within the strategies and programs that have proven successful and find ways to create collaboration toward common goals that benefit our youth. Keeping youth on pathways to education, employment, and success requires a commitment to both eliminating the chutes that derail them and building the ladders that enable their climb.

Introduction

The intersection of school failure, disciplinary exclusion, and juvenile legal involvement forms the 'school-to-prison pipeline,' a pathway disproportionately traveled by Black, Latino, and American Indian youth in California and across the nation.[1] Once youth become entangled in the juvenile legal system, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that they are diverted from trajectories of opportunity toward those defined by punishment and diminished life prospects as arrest and incarceration undermine long-term outcomes in education, employment, earnings, and asset accumulation.

Harms Associated with Juvenile Arrest

Juvenile arrest has been found in multiple longitudinal studies to reduce educational attainment, and in turn, worsen economic outcomes and the odds of future system involvement. A quasi-experimental analysis using nationally representative longitudinal data found that youth who were arrested saw a significant drop in college enrollment (-42%), which was attributable to the arrest's negative impact on high school grade point average and enrollment in advanced courses.[2] In a separate quasi-experimental study using longitudinal data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN), Baker et al. (2025) found that juvenile arrest reduced the likelihood of college graduation by 20 to 30 percentage points.[3]

The long-term consequences of juvenile arrest extend into the adult criminal justice system. In a large-scale study of nearly 800 adolescents, those arrested between the ages of 10 and 17 were nearly seven times more likely to have an official adult criminal record by age 25 compared to their non-arrested peers. This association held even after adjusting for a range of confounding variables, including family background, parental supervision, peer delinquency, and self-reported delinquent behavior.[4]

The economic consequences are similarly stark, particularly for Black youth. Kopf and Rydarowicz (2025) analyzed national data and found that juvenile arrests significantly reduced employment for Black individuals. The same effect was not observed among Latino or White individuals unless they had multiple arrests. Repeated arrests reduced employment and weeks worked across all racial groups, with the most pronounced effects for Black youth. Educational attainment helped mitigate some of these negative effects.[5]

Finally, research points to reduced adult income and assets as long-term consequences of juvenile arrest. McCannon and Kanengiser (2024), using a quasi-experimental approach with national data, found that arrest during adolescence reduced both adult income and employment, primarily due to lower high school graduation rates and reduced total years of education.[6] A related quasi-experimental study using the same dataset by Siennick and Widdowson (2020) found that youth arrested as juveniles accumulated fewer assets in adulthood by age 30. These disparities in asset accumulation were largely explained by differences in education, weeks worked, and earnings.[7]

Harms Associated with Juvenile Incarceration

Juvenile incarceration is associated with even more severe and lasting harms than arrest alone, including increased recidivism, diminished educational

1 Barnes, J. C., & Motz, R. T. (2018). Reducing racial inequalities in adulthood arrest by reducing inequalities in school discipline: Evidence from the school-to-prison pipeline. *Developmental Psychology*, 54(12), 2328.
2 Widdowson, A. O., Siennick, S. E., & Hay, C. (2016). The implications of arrest for college enrollment: An analysis of long-term effects and mediating mechanisms. *Criminology*, 54(4), 621-652.
3 Baker, G., Kirk, D. S., & Sampson, R. J. (2025). The Great Leveler? Juvenile Arrest, College Attainment, and the Future of American Inequality. *Sociology of Education*, 00380407251338844.
4 Gatti, U., Tremblay, R. E., & Vitaro, F. (2009). Iatrogenic effect of juvenile justice. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 50(8), 991-998.
5 Kopf, S., & Rydarowicz, A. (2025). Criminal Labels, Racial Inequities, and the Lifelong Impact of Early Arrests on Employment. *Race and Justice.*
6 McCannon, B. C., & Kanengiser, J. (2024). Long-Term Effects of Criminal Justice System Interactions When Young. *Social Science Research Network.*
7 Siennick, S. E., & Widdowson, A. O. (2020). Juvenile arrest and later economic attainment: Strength and mechanisms of the relationship. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 1-28.

attainment, worsened mental health, and long-term economic disadvantage.[8] A series of studies illustrate that incarceration is not only ineffective at preventing future offending but may in fact contribute to it. For example, a quasi-experimental study using overlapping residence assignments in Florida's 160 juvenile facilities found that exposure to aggressive and unstable peers during incarceration increased the likelihood of recidivism.[9] Similarly, Walker and Herting (2020) applied a quasi-experimental analysis to data from 46,000 juvenile cases across 32 jurisdictions and found that pretrial detention (roughly 75% of juvenile incarceration cases) was associated with a 33% increase in felony recidivism and an 11% increase in misdemeanor recidivism within one year. These effects were particularly pronounced for first-time offenders.[10]

The educational impacts of incarceration are profound. National data indicate that 40% of incarcerated youth between ages 16 and 24 are high school dropouts, compared to only 8.1% in the general population.[11] Research, moreover, has shown that incarceration itself can drive these outcomes. Hjalmarsson (2008), using nationally representative longitudinal data, estimated that incarceration reduces the probability of high school graduation by 25 percentage points, with the stigma of incarceration likely playing a central role.[12] Aizer and Doyle (2015), studying over 35,000 youth in Illinois, found a 13-point reduction in graduation rates (from 43% to 30%) attributable to incarceration, based on comparisons between similarly situated youth assigned to more or less punitive judges.[13] Baron et al. (2023), using linked school and justice system data from Michigan, found that pretrial juvenile detention led to a 38% decline in graduation and a 27% increase in adult arrest by age 19.[14]

Mental health outcomes are also adversely affected by incarceration. Powell (2022), applying a quasi-experimental analysis to national data, found that incarceration during late adolescence (ages 16–17) and early adulthood (ages 18–24) was associated with long-term declines in mental health. These effects were not observed for incarcerations that began after age 25, suggesting that early exposure to confinement may be particularly damaging during critical periods of development.[15]

Incarceration during adolescence also increases the risk of adult criminal justice involvement. In their quasi-experimental analysis, Aizer and Doyle (2015) demonstrated that youth incarcerated in Illinois were 22 percentage points more likely to be incarcerated as adults (from 6.7% to 28.7%).[16] Similarly, Eren and Mocan (2021), studying 7,396 youth incarcerated in Louisiana, found that juvenile incarceration significantly increased the probability of adult criminal conviction.[17]

Finally, employment outcomes in adulthood are also severely impacted by juvenile incarceration. One longitudinal study found that by age 30, only 20% of formerly detained males and 33% of formerly detained females were employed full-time or enrolled in school, compared to 77% of their peers in the general population.[18] Apel and Sweeten (2010), using nationally representative data, found that incarceration in adolescence was associated with an 11 percentage-point decline in formal employment in adulthood, even when comparing youth with similar background characteristics.[19]

8 Ackerman, E., Magram, J., & Kennedy, T. D. (2024). Systematic Review: Impact of Juvenile Incarceration. Child Protection and Practice, 100083.
9 Stevenson, M. (2017). Breaking bad: Mechanisms of social influence and the path to criminality in juvenile jails. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 99(5), 824-838.
10 Walker, S. C., & Herting, J. R. (2020). The impact of pretrial juvenile detention on 12-month recidivism: A matched comparison study. *Crime & Delinquency*, 66(13-14), 1865-1887.
11 Burrus, J., & Roberts, R. D. (2012). Dropping out of high school: Prevalence, risk factors, and remediation strategies. *R & D Connections*, 18(2), 1-9.
12 Hjalmarsson, R. (2008). Criminal justice involvement and high school completion. *Journal of Urban Economics,* 63(2), 613-630
13 Aizer, A., & Doyle Jr, J. J. (2015). Juvenile incarceration, human capital, and future crime: Evidence from randomly assigned judges. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 130(2), 759-803.
14 Baron, E. J., Jacob, B., & Ryan, J. (2023). Pretrial juvenile detention. *Journal of Public Economics*, 217, 104798.
15 Powell, K. (2022). The age-graded consequences of justice system involvement for mental health. *Journal of research in crime and delinquency,* 59(2), 167-202.
16 Aizer, A., & Doyle Jr, J. J. (2015). Juvenile incarceration, human capital, and future crime: Evidence from randomly assigned judges. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 130(2), 759-803.
17 Eren, O., & Mocan, N. (2021). Juvenile punishment, high school graduation, and adult crime: Evidence from idiosyncratic judge harshness. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 103(1), 34-47.
18 Abram, K. M., Azores-Gococo, N. M., Emanuel, K. M., Aaby, D. A., Welty, L. J., Hershfield, J. A., ... & Teplin, L. A. (2017). Sex and racial/ethnic differences in positive outcomes in delinquent youth after detention: A 12-year longitudinal study. *JAMA pediatrics*, 171(2), 123-132
19 Apel, R., & Sweeten, G. (2010). The impact of incarceration on employment during the transition to adulthood. *Social problems*, 57(3), 448-479.

Taken together, this body of evidence demonstrates that involvement in the juvenile legal system, whether through arrest or incarceration, produces lasting harm that extends well into adulthood. These harms span educational, economic, developmental, and legal domains, and disproportionately affect youth of color. The findings underscore the urgent need to emphasize approaches to youth justice that prioritize support and opportunity over punishment and exclusion.

Changing Life Trajectories: Fewer Chutes, More Ladders

Keeping young people on a pathway to opportunity requires two complementary efforts: preventing juvenile legal involvement among youth and supporting those already involved in the system to re-engage with education and future success. This process can be likened to the classic preschool game *Chutes and Ladders*, where "chutes" represent sudden setbacks that knock youth off track, while "ladders" provide pathways back to progress. In the real world, eliminating chutes and building ladders demands coordinated action from multiple stakeholders, especially across systems that have historically failed to collaborate effectively for the benefit of justice-involved youth.

Youth in the juvenile legal system possess enormous potential for positive change. That potential can be harnessed to shift their trajectories away from punitive outcomes and toward greater opportunity. A large and growing body of research confirms that adolescence is a highly sensitive developmental period marked by tremendous neural plasticity. With the right supports and opportunities, young people can alter the course of their lives in meaningful and lasting ways.[20]

This report identifies critical intervention points that can be targeted to redirect life trajectories away from justice system entrenchment and toward opportunity. It also reviews policy and programmatic strategies that hold promise for making those interventions effective. Ultimately, the goal is to create a system where ladders to opportunity outnumber the chutes to incarceration, and where collaboration across agencies and disciplines enables that vision to become reality.

20 Chaplo, S., & Fishbein, D. (2021). Capitalizing on Neuroplasticity Across Development to Redirect Pathways from Juvenile Justice Involvement. *Sensitive Periods of Brain Development and Preventive Interventions*, 235-254.

Methodology: Literature Review and Interview Methods

The insights for the findings summarized in this report were drawn from two primary sources:

Literature Scan and Synthesis:

An extensive scan of peer-reviewed and grey literature (information produced outside of traditional publishing channels) was used to construct a narrative review for this report. Terms related to the topic, such as “juvenile,” “delinquency,” “juvenile justice involvement,” “detention,” “incarceration,” “school reentry,” “school discipline,” “suspensions,” or “expulsions,” were used to identify more than 426 articles that were coded and synthesized to produce a narrative framework that encompassed an array of issues facing youth at risk of involvement in the juvenile legal system or those who are presently involved. Included studies identifying predictors of delinquency, arrest, incarceration or recidivism were restricted to those that used both longitudinal data and multivariate, preferably quasi-experimental, research designs. Additional scans were conducted to identify delinquency or recidivism reducing interventions that were considered “proven or promising.” That is, they were rigorously evaluated using randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs. Additional “best practice” recommendations and system innovations were identified through research scans or field interviews.

Field Interviews:

A total of 70 semi-structured interviews were conducted with an array of field stakeholders connected to education or juvenile legal systems. Field interviews were designed to address key issues raised in the research literature as well as how those issues might be relevant to stakeholders in a California context. The range of stakeholders included youth who have experienced involvement with the juvenile legal system, members of the Youth Advisory Board of the Office of Youth and Community Restoration, staff and administrators at County Offices of Education, staff at county probation departments, school principals, school district administrators, youth justice advocates, judges, staff at public defenders’ offices, and researchers.

A Life Course Framework for Organizing Research Evidence

To organize the vast literature that relates to pathways to and successful recovery from juvenile legal involvement, this report leverages the ***life course systems framework***, a conceptual framework for understanding the long-term drivers of life outcomes.[21] Three core concepts form the foundation of the framework: social-ecological environments, developmental factors, and life course outcomes. Together they provide a cohesive framework for synthesizing a broad body of research on the drivers of juvenile delinquency and offer a structured lens through which to map and categorize the range of interventions aimed at preventing or mitigating delinquent behavior.

Social-Ecological Environments

Social-ecological environments encompass the broader social, cultural, and institutional settings in which individuals grow and live their lives. These environments shape the direction of a person's development through three interrelated dimensions. First, ***institutionalized pathways*** refer to the structured routes individuals are expected to follow across systems like education, employment, and the legal system, should they become entangled in it.[22] These paths are made up of a sequence of socially recognized milestones, such as progressing through grade levels, entering the workforce, or completing a term of probation. Transitions across these milestones often determine access to critical resources and social roles, with institutional actors like educators, employers, and legal authorities serving as gatekeepers. Whether a person advances along these pathways often depends on their ability to navigate opportunities and constraints shaped by broader historical and structural forces. Second, the concept of ***"linked lives"*** highlights the significance of social relationships that extend across time and context.[23] From early childhood through adulthood, family members, peers, teachers, mentors, and professional contacts all play crucial roles in shaping behavior and life chances. These relationships provide informal social regulation by setting expectations and guiding behavior. They also serve as channels to resources like jobs or educational opportunities. Evidence shows that such networks are vital in influencing long-term outcomes such as educational attainment, income mobility, and health. Third, ***overlapping social-ecological settings*** refers to the layered environments in which these pathways and relationships are embedded. These include micro-level settings (e.g., families, peer groups), meso-level institutions (e.g., schools, neighborhoods), and macro-level structures (e.g., economic systems, policy regimes, cultural norms). Together, these layers interact to influence the opportunities and constraints individuals face over time.[24]

Developmental Factors

Developmental factors refer to the dynamic, lifelong processes through which individuals grow and adapt. These processes begin early in life and

21 Chander, Arnold L. (2025) *Mobility Milestones: Key Life Course Milestones Shaping Racial Mobility Gaps*. Forward Change. Available at www.forwardchange.org/strivingandthriving

22 Bernardi, L., Huinink, J., & Settersten Jr, R. A. (2019). The life course cube: A tool for studying lives. *Advances in life course research,* 41, 100258; Heckhausen, J., & Buchmann, M. (2019). A multi-disciplinary model of life-course canalization and agency. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 41, 100246.

23 Elder, G. H., Shanahan, M. J., & Jennings, J. A. (2015). Human development in time and place. *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science,* 4, 6-54; Settersten, R. A. (2018). Nine ways that social relationships matter for the life course. *Social networks and the life course: Integrating the development of human lives and social relational networks*, 27-40; Fletcher, J., & Han, J. K. (2021). High schools and intergenerational mobility. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 76, 100621; Chetty, R., Jackson, M. O., Kuchler, T., Stroebel, J., Hendren, N., Fluegge, R. B., ... & Wernerfelt, N. (2022). Social capital I: measurement and associations with economic mobility. *Nature*, 608(7921), 108-121.

24 Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

are shaped by the interaction between internal characteristics, such as genes, biology, and mental health, and external influences in social-ecological environments. Among these factors are cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, personality traits, belief systems, and physiological responses to stress. Each of these factors plays a role in shaping an individual's future in areas like education, employment, and health.[25] ***Development occurs through a reciprocal relationship between individuals and their environments:*** the brain is shaped by early experiences, and those changes in turn influence how individuals interact with the world.[26] Early childhood is especially critical, as experiences during this period, positive or negative, can have lasting consequences. For instance, childhood poverty, exposure to neglect or abuse, or contact with harmful environmental toxins can derail healthy development and lead to poorer outcomes later in life.[27] On the other hand, early interventions like the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian Projects have been shown to improve educational achievement and income well into adulthood.[28] These findings underscore the importance of early developmental supports in setting the stage for long-term success. Adolescence, moreover, represents a sensitive developmental window marked by profound neurological changes, particularly within the prefrontal cortex, an area essential for executive functioning, decision-making, and impulse control. During this stage, the brain experiences substantial maturation, including increased connectivity both within cortical regions and between cortical and subcortical structures. Given the heightened

neuroplasticity of this period, interventions introduced during adolescence hold considerable potential to significantly influence long-term developmental trajectories.[29]

Life Course Outcomes

Life course outcomes refer to the measurable achievements and setbacks individuals experience over time within institutionalized systems, such as schools, workplaces, and the legal system. These outcomes, shaped by both social environments and developmental factors, reflect what researchers call ***"socio-structural achievements."***[30] They include ***"positive credentials"***, such as educational diplomas or stable employment, and ***"negative credentials"***, such as school suspensions, juvenile offenses, or criminal records. These markers help define whether a person continues along normative pathways or diverges into cycles of disadvantage. Positive credentials, like graduating from high school or completing college, function as gateways to further opportunities and greater economic stability. In contrast, negative credentials, such as incarceration or chronic unemployment, can close off these avenues and contribute to long-term exclusion. Over time, these outcomes accumulate and reinforce earlier advantages or disadvantages, shaping individual trajectories and contributing to broader patterns of inequality. Understanding these patterns is essential to identifying points of intervention that can alter developmental and institutional pathways toward more equitable outcomes.

25 Black, S. E., & Devereux, P. J. (2011). Recent developments in intergenerational mobility. *Handbook of labor economics*, 4, 1487-1541; Kröger, L. K., Palacios-Abad, A., & Radl, J. (2024). Non-cognitive skills and intergenerational inequality: Reviewing the power of personality. In *Research Handbook on Intergenerational Inequality* (pp. 400-414). Edward Elgar Publishing; Schneiderman, N., Ironson, G., & Siegel, S. D. (2005). Stress and health: psychological, behavioral, and biological determinants. *Annu. Rev. Clin. Psychol.*, 1(1), 607-628.

26 Sameroff, A. (2009). *The transactional model*. American Psychological Association.

27 Tooley, U. A., Bassett, D. S., & Mackey, A. P. (2021). Environmental influences on the pace of brain development. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 22(6), 372-384; Knudsen, E., Heckman, J., Cameron, J., & Shonkoff, J. (2006). Economic, neurobiological, and behavioral perspectives on building America's future workforce. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 103, 10155–10162. Duncan, G. J., Ziol-Guest, K. M., & Kalil, A. (2010). Early-childhood poverty and adult attainment, behavior, and health. *Child development*, 81(1), 306–325; Ziol-Guest, K. M., Duncan, G. J., Kalil, A., & Boyce, W. T. (2012). Early childhood poverty, immune-mediated disease processes, and adult productivity. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 109(Supplement_2), 17289–17293.

28 Cascio, E. (2021) *Early Childhood Education in the United States: What, When, Where, Who, How, and Why.* (NBER Working Paper 28722), doi: 0.3386/w28722

29 Backes, E. P., & Bonnie, R. J. (Eds.). (2019). *The promise of adolescence: Realizing opportunity for all youth.*

30 Bernardi, L., Huinink, J., & Settersten Jr, R. A. (2019). The life course cube: A tool for studying lives. *Advances in life course research*, 41, 100258.

ELIMINATING CHUTES:

Preventing Juvenile Legal Involvement for California's Youth

As noted above, involvement in the juvenile legal system negatively impacts a wide range of long-term life outcomes. While the causes of such involvement are complex, there are identifiable life course risk pathways that should be the focus of targeted intervention. A substantial body of evidence indicates that these pathways are shaped by powerful feedback loops that divert youth from opportunity and reinforce trajectories toward punishment.

This section reviews research demonstrating that many of the key life course predictors of delinquency, such as poor school performance, disengagement, and behavioral challenges, are often exacerbated by both arrest and school suspension. These events can initiate or intensify a downward feedback spiral, compounding existing vulnerabilities and increasing the likelihood of future system involvement.

The section also highlights effective and promising practices, programs, and system-level reforms that have shown potential to interrupt this cycle. Together, these strategies offer a roadmap for disrupting the school-to-incarceration pipeline and redirecting youth toward more positive developmental pathways.

Predictors of Juvenile Legal Involvement: The School-to-Incarceration Pathway

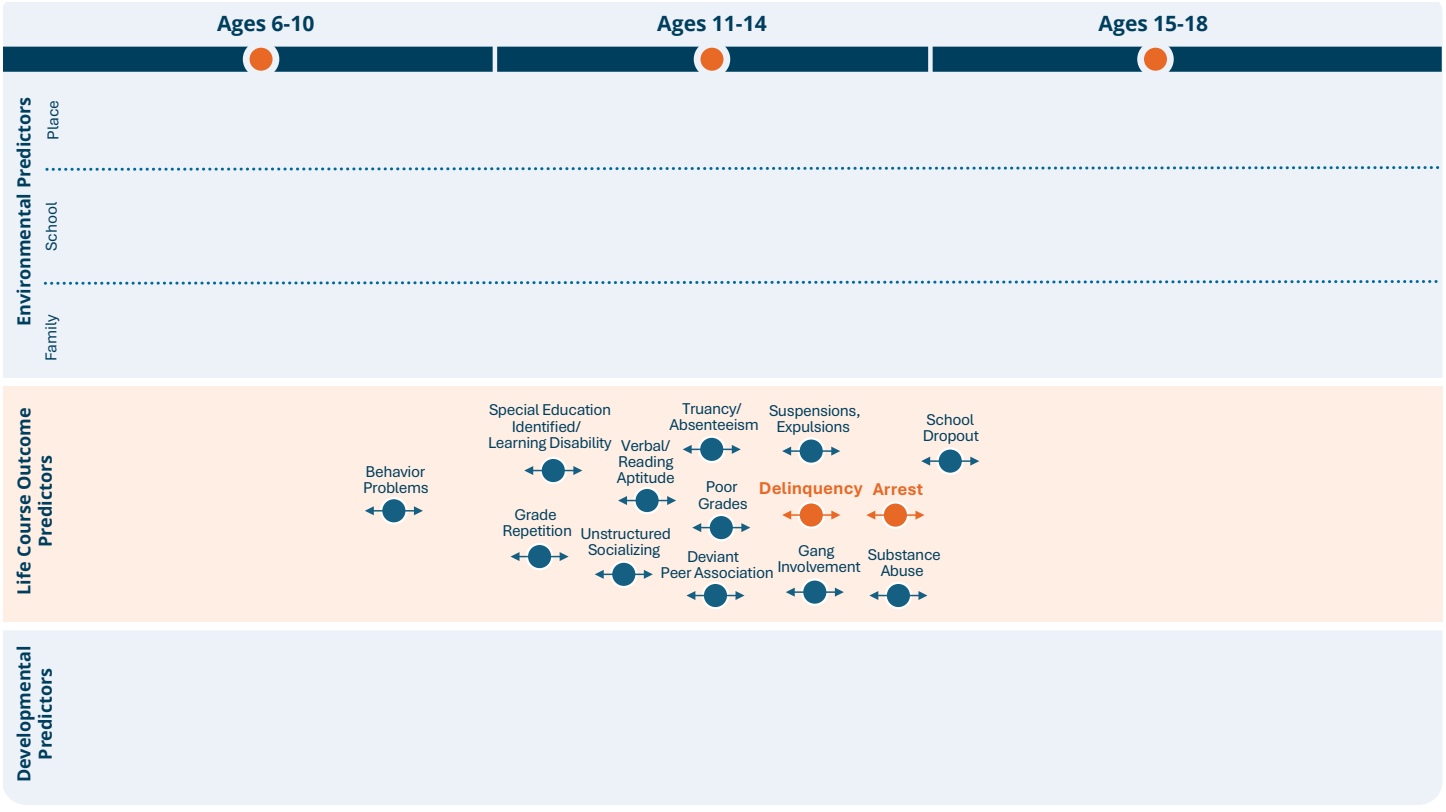
Below we summarize the predictors of delinquency, arrest and incarceration drawing on a large body of empirical research. Predictors are organized into three groups: life course outcomes, social environments, and developmental factors.

Life Course Outcomes

A total of 11 life course outcomes were identified in the research literature as predictors of delinquency, arrest, or both. The seven most consistently predictive factors across numerous studies include **school truancy, low verbal or reading aptitude, poor academic grades, suspensions or expulsions, association with deviant peers, gang involvement, substance use, and dropping out of school.** Each of these outcomes has been linked to delinquency or arrest in dozens of studies, including several conducted in countries outside the United States.[31]

In addition to these high-consistency predictors, the literature also highlights several less consistent, but still commonly observed factors. These include **persistent behavior problems, repeating a grade after elementary school, and being identified for special education or diagnosed with a learning disability.** While these outcomes do not appear as uniformly across studies as the top seven, they remain important considerations when assessing risk for juvenile legal involvement. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of key life course outcomes, displayed on a canvas that will be referenced throughout this report. The age position for each outcome icon is approximate based on existing study samples. However, bidirectional arrows to the left and right of each outcome icon indicate the flexible timing of their occurrence across middle childhood (ages 6-10) and adolescence (11-18).

Figure 1. Life Course Outcome Predictors in the School-to-Incarceration Pathway



31 See Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press

Summary details for each life course outcome are presented below. Where possible, prevalence rates and racial disparities for the outcome are summarized.

Behavior problems

Behaviors in middle childhood and early adolescence such as aggression, classroom disruption, disrespecting teachers, bullying of peers, and bringing weapons to school have been shown to predict subsequent involvement in delinquency and incarceration during later adolescence and early adulthood.[32]

Grade repetition

Multiple studies have found that repeating a grade—particularly after elementary school—is generally linked to an increased risk of juvenile delinquency, criminal conviction, and incarceration.[33] National survey data show that grade repetition is about 2.5 times more common among youth in confinement (26%) than among those in the general population (11%).[34] Recent research from Louisiana provides stronger evidence that grade repetition may not merely correlate with delinquency but may in fact cause it. Eren et al. (2017), using a quasi-experimental approach with administrative data, found that repeating a grade in middle school increased the likelihood of a juvenile crime conviction by 0.3 percentage points.[35] Another study by Eren et al (2022) using a similar method showed that retention in the eighth grade raised the probability of a violent crime conviction by 1.05 percentage points. A relative increase of 58.44%.[36] Together, these findings suggest that grade repetition is not only a marker of academic struggle but also a potential driver of future involvement in the juvenile and criminal legal systems. **Prevalence and Disparities:** Currently, there is no comprehensive data on the prevalence and patterns of grade repetition in California. However, nationally representative data analyzed by Giano et al. (2022) offer insight into racial disparities in grade retention among students from kindergarten through eighth grade. Their findings indicate that more than one-quarter of American Indian, Black, and Latino students had been retained in a grade before reaching the eighth grade, compared to 18% of White students and just 7.2% of Asian students.[37]

Special education identification or disability

Students who are identified for special education services or who have emotional or learning disabilities face a heightened risk for involvement in the juvenile legal system.[38] Unfortunately, the existing research literature does not clearly distinguish between the effects of being classified for special education and the effects of the underlying disability itself on the likelihood of delinquency and arrest.

Truancy or Absenteeism

Missing school, especially in the form of unexcused absences or truancy, is one of the most consistent predictors of juvenile delinquency and later criminal behavior in adulthood.[39] In a nationally representative study of school districts, McNeely et al. (2021) found that disparities in unexcused absences fully accounted for the gap in juvenile court petition rates between Latino and White students. These disparities also partially explained the differences in petition rates between Black and White students and between American Indian and White students.[40] **Prevalence and Patterns:** Since the COVID-19 pandemic, school absenteeism has risen sharply across the United States. Between the 2018–2019 and 2021–2022 school years, rates of chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% ore more of school days, nearly doubled, increasing by

32 See Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press, Loeber, R., & Dishion, T. (1983). Early predictors of male delinquency: a review. *Psychological bulletin*, 94(1), 68; Barnert, E. S., Perry, R., Shetgiri, R., Steers, N., Dudovitz, R., Heard-Garris, N. J., ... & Chung, P. J. (2021). Adolescent protective and risk factors for incarceration through early adulthood. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 30(6), 1428-1440

33 See See Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press.

34 See Sedlak, A. J., & Bruce, C. (2010). Youth's Characteristics and Backgrounds: Findings from the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

35 Eren, O., Depew, B., & Barnes, S. (2017). Test-based promotion policies, dropping out, and juvenile crime. *Journal of Public Economics*, 153, 9-31.

36 Eren, O., Lovenheim, M. F., & Mocan, H. N. (2022). The effect of grade retention on adult crime: Evidence from a test-based promotion policy. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 40(2), 361-395

37 See Giano, Z., Williams, A. L., & Becnel, J. N. (2022). Grade retention and school dropout: comparing specific grade levels across childhood and early adolescence. *The Journal of Early Adolescence,* 42(1), 33-57

38 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press

39 Ellis, Lee; Farrington, David P.; Hoskin, Anthony W. *Handbook of Crime Correlates.* Academic Press

40 McNeely, C. A., Alemu, B., Lee, W. F., & West, I. (2021). Exploring an unexamined source of racial disparities in juvenile court involvement: Unexcused absenteeism policies in US schools. *AERA* Open, 7

91%.[41] In California, chronic absenteeism peaked in 2021–2022, with 30% of TK–12 students classified as chronically absent. Although the rate has since declined to 20%, it remains significantly higher than the pre-pandemic level of 12% recorded in 2018–2019. The rise in absenteeism has been most pronounced among kindergarten and transitional kindergarten students, who in 2023–2024 had the highest chronic absenteeism rate of any grade level at 26%. Students in grades 9–12 had the second-highest rate at 24% but missed more days on average: about 16 days per student. Racial disparities in absenteeism also remain stark: nearly one-third of Native American, Black, and Pacific Islander students were chronically absent in 2023–2024, each missing an average of 17 to 19 days. In contrast, Asian and Filipino students had chronic absenteeism rates less than half the statewide average. Foster youth and students experiencing homelessness reported the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, at 36–37%, missing 19 to 20 days on average. Students with disabilities and those from low-income households also had above-average rates.[42] Examining attendance patterns in more detail, Liu and Lee (2022) analyzed data from a large urban school district in California. They found that unexcused absences among secondary school students increase steadily over the course of the school year and across grade levels, while excused absences remain relatively stable. Their study also revealed that students who begin the school year with a high number of unexcused absences tend to accumulate additional unexcused absences at a significantly faster rate than their peers.[43] Finally, the study found a clear link between unexcused absenteeism and students' perceptions of school climate. Students with higher growth rates in unexcused absences consistently reported lower ratings across all dimensions of school culture, suggesting that attendance issues may reflect broader problems of engagement and belonging within the school environment.

41 Dee, T. S. (2024). Higher chronic absenteeism threatens academic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121(3), e2312249121
42 Guinan, Brett and Hill, Laura (2025). *Chronic Absenteeism in California*. Public Policy Institute of California
43 Liu, J., & Lee, M. G. (2022). Beyond Chronic Absenteeism: The Dynamics and Disparities of Class Absences in Secondary School. EdWorkingPaper No. 22-562. *Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University*

Verbal/Reading Aptitude

Deficits in verbal and reading aptitude are among the most consistent predictors of delinquency identified in the research literature.[44] A recent systematic review of studies examining the language skills of youth offenders in confinement settings found that they exhibit a standardized mean difference of 1.26 (g = 1.26) in language skills, compared to non-confined youth. An effect size equivalent to a 19-point deficit on a standardized language assessment.[45] National survey data reinforce these findings, showing that nearly half (48%) of youth in custody reported performing below their expected grade level, nearly twice the rate observed in the general youth population (28%).[46] Additional research on detained and committed youth has shown that their academic performance, particularly in math and reading, often lags significantly behind. On average, these youth perform at levels that are three to six grades below their nominal grade level.[47]

Poor Grades

Poor school grades in middle and high school are among the most highly consistent predictors of juvenile delinquency, arrest and incarceration.[48] For instance, a study using nationally representative longitudinal data found that secondary school grades predicted delinquency even after controlling for several factors, including prior delinquent behavior, school attachment, attention skills, family and peer influences, and self-control.[49] As a consequence of failing grades, many of these youth find themselves severely credit deficient for their age.[50]

44 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press.
45 Chow, J. C., Wallace, E. S., Senter, R., Kumm, S., & Mason, C. Q. (2022). A systematic review and meta-analysis of the language skills of youth offenders. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 65(3), 1166-1182.
46 Sedlak A. J., Bruce C. (2010). *Youth's characteristics and backgrounds: Findings from the Survey of youth in residential placement.* Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
47 Grigorenko, E. L., Macomber, D., Hart, L., Naples, A., Chapman, J., Geib, C. F., ... & Wagner, R. (2015). Academic achievement among juvenile detainees. *Journal of learning disabilities*, 48(4), 359-368; Krezmien M., Mulcahy C., Leone P. (2008). Detained and committed youth: Examining differences in achievement, mental health needs, and special education status. *Education & Treatment of Children*, 31, 445–464.
48 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press
49 Hoffmann, J. P., Erickson, L. D., & Spence, K. R. (2013). Modeling the association between academic achievement and delinquency: An application of interactional theory. *Criminology,* 51(3), 629-660.
50 Cavendish, W. (2014). Academic attainment during commitment and postrelease education–related outcomes of juvenile justice-involved youth with and without disabilities. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 22(1), 41-52

Suspensions or Expulsions

School suspensions and expulsions are among the most consistent predictors of juvenile delinquency, arrest, and incarceration, often marking a critical turning point in a young person's risk of becoming involved in the juvenile legal system.[51] A recent meta-analysis found that being suspended or expelled roughly doubled the odds of engaging in delinquent behavior.[52] Similarly, a systematic review reported that such disciplinary outcomes can increase the likelihood of contact with the juvenile justice system by as much as five times compared to youth who are not suspended or expelled.[53] These findings are reinforced by large longitudinal studies, which demonstrate the strong and lasting impact of school exclusion on youth outcomes. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), Mittleman (2018) found that suspensions significantly alter children's life trajectories by more than doubling their risk of arrest.[54] Applying a quasi-experimental analysis to national longitudinal data, Mowen et al. (2020) found that suspensions lead to within-individual increases in self-reported offending. This effect persists even after accounting for initial levels of delinquency. Additionally, repeated suspensions were found to further ratchet up offending behavior.[55] Another quasi-experimental study using the same national longitudinal dataset showed that suspensions increased the risk of arrest significantly more for Black and Latino youth compared to their White peers.[56] Cuellar & Markowitz (2015) used a quasi-experimental design to isolate the causal impact of suspensions on delinquency, matching school data with juvenile crime records for an urban county. The core challenge is that suspended students are already more likely to engage in problematic behavior, making it difficult to attribute subsequent offenses to the suspension itself.

51 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates.* Academic Press.
52 Gerlinger, J., Viano, S., Gardella, J. H., Fisher, B. W., Chris Curran, F., & Higgins, E. M. (2021). Exclusionary school discipline and delinquent outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of youth and adolescence,* 50(8), 1493-1509
53 Novak, A. (2018). The association between experiences of exclusionary discipline and justice system contact: A systematic review. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 40, 73-82
54 Mittleman, J. (2018). A downward spiral? Childhood suspension and the path to juvenile arrest. *Sociology of education*, 91(3), 183-204
55 Mowen, T. J., Brent, J. J., & Boman IV, J. H. (2020). The effect of school discipline on offending across time. *Justice Quarterly*, 37(4), 739-760
56 Fisher, B. W., & Widdowson, A. O. (2023). Racial and ethnic differences in the consequences of school suspension for arrest. *Criminology*, 61(3), 622-653

The researchers addressed this through an innovative comparison: on school days, suspended students have more opportunity to offend than peers in class, but on weekends and holidays, all youth have similar opportunities regardless of suspension status. By comparing offense rates across these contexts, the study estimated the direct impact of out-of-school suspension on the likelihood of committing a crime that same day.
Using difference-in-differences analysis, they found that being suspended on a school day more than doubled a student's likelihood of offending. This effect was especially pronounced among Black students, suggesting that increased arrest rates may reflect heightened surveillance of suspended youth rather than behavioral differences alone.[57] Further underscoring the link between school exclusion and system contact, a nationally representative survey of incarcerated youth found that nearly 60 percent had been suspended from school during the year prior to entering custody.[58] **Prevalence and Patterns:** Suspension rates in California are both substantial and disparate. In middle school, when suspension rates usually peak, annual suspension rates in 2023-24 were 16% for Blacks, 14% for American Indians,

57 Cuellar, A. E., & Markowitz, S. (2015). School suspension and the school-to-prison pipeline. *International Review of Law and Economics*, 43, 98-106.
58 Sedlak A. J., Bruce C. (2010). *Youth's characteristics and backgrounds: Findings from the Survey of youth in residential placement.* Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

9% for Pacific Islanders, 7% for Latinos, 5% for Whites and 2% for Asians.[59] While annual suspension rates provide a snapshot of disciplinary disparities within a given year, they do not capture the full extent of how many students experience suspension at any point during their K–12 education. Research examining the cumulative risk of ever being suspended reveals a more sobering reality. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, which tracked 9,000 adolescents from the mid-1980s through the early 2000s, Shollenberger (2015) found that suspension was both widespread and deeply racially disparate. Two-thirds of Black boys (67%) and nearly half of Latino boys (49%) had been suspended at least once, compared to 39% of White boys. The pattern was similar among girls: 45% of Black girls and 29% of Latinas had experienced suspension, compared to just 20% of White girls.[60]

Associating with Deviant Peers

Associating with deviant peers is one of the most consistent predictors of juvenile delinquency.[61] A substantial body of research indicates that youth are not only influenced by the delinquent behavior of their peers but also tend to form friendships with others who engage in similar levels of offending. This reciprocal dynamic increases the likelihood of further involvement in delinquent activities.[62] Research shows that violent delinquency spreads through peer networks. In a nationally representative study of over 90,000 students, Bond and Bushman (2017) found that youth were 48% more likely to engage in a serious fight, 183% more likely to injure someone, and 140% more likely to pull a weapon if a friend had engaged in the same behavior. The authors concluded that violence propagates through peer networks like a contagion, amplifying risk across groups.[63] Other research suggests that adolescent boys may seek out delinquent or violent peers for self-protection. Yet these alliances often heighten the risk of involvement in violence and other delinquency.[64] Some of the most compelling evidence for the causal influence of peer associations comes from studies examining students' changing risk for delinquency during school transitions. In a quasi-experimental study, Freelin et al. (2023) analyzed data from a longitudinal sample of 14,000 students across 26 public high school districts, focusing on the transition from 8th to 9th grade. They found that students who moved to a different school after 8th grade reported significantly lower levels of delinquency compared to peers who remained at the same school. This effect persisted through the end of 10th grade and was most pronounced in settings where multiple middle schools fed into a single high school. The study also revealed that students who changed schools had fewer delinquent peers and engaged in less unstructured socializing after the transition—two factors strongly associated with delinquent behavior.[65]

Unstructured Socializing

Unstructured socializing refers to time spent with peers in settings that are unsupervised by adults and that lack structured, goal-oriented activities. A wide range of studies has consistently identified this type of socializing as a predictor of delinquent behavior, including both violent and property offenses.[66]

Gang involvement

Gang involvement is one of the most well-established and consistently documented predictors of delinquency in the empirical literature.[67] A meta-analysis of 179 studies found a strong and robust association between gang membership and juvenile offending.[68]

59 California Department of Education, "2023-24 Suspension Rate", Dataquest.
60 Shollenberger, T. L. (2015). "Racial disparities in school suspension and subsequent outcomes" in Losen, D. J. (Ed.). (2014). *Closing the school discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion.* Teachers College Press
61 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press. Also see Hoeben, E. M., Meldrum, R. C., Walker, D. A., & Young, J. T. (2016). The role of peer delinquency and unstructured socializing in explaining delinquency and substance use: A state-of-the-art review. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47, 108-122
62 Gallupe, O., McLevey, J., & Brown, S. (2019). Selection and influence: A meta-analysis of the association between peer and personal offending. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 35(2), 313-335
63 Bond, R. M., & Bushman, B. J. (2017). The contagious spread of violence among US adolescents through social networks. *American journal of public health*, 107(2), 288-294
64 See Harding, D. J. (2008). Neighborhood violence and adolescent friendships. *International journal of conflict and violence,* 2(1), 28 and Harding, D. J. (2009). Violence, older peers, and the socialization of adolescent boys in disadvantaged neighborhoods. *American sociological review,* 74(3), 445-464
65 Freelin, B. N., McMillan, C., Felmlee, D., & Osgood, D. W. (2023). Changing contexts: A quasi-experiment examining adolescent delinquency and the transition to high school. *Criminology*, 61(1), 40-73
66 Hoeben, E. M., Meldrum, R. C., Walker, D. A., & Young, J. T. (2016). The role of peer delinquency and unstructured socializing in explaining delinquency and substance use: A state-of-the-art review. *Journal of Criminal Justice,* 47, 108-122
67 EEllis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press.
68 Pyrooz, D. C., Turanovic, J. J., Decker, S. H., & Wu, J. (2016). Taking stock of the relationship between gang membership and offending: A meta-analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior,* 43(3), 365-397

Substance Use

Substance use, specifically the use of drugs and alcohol, is a consistently strong predictor of delinquency.[69] In a comprehensive umbrella review that examined 29 systematic reviews and 24 meta-analyses, Ayana et al. (2024) identified substance use as the third most powerful predictor of delinquent behavior among youth, following only moral development and mental health problems. One of the included meta-analyses found that substance use more than doubled the odds of delinquency for adolescents.[70]

Dropping out of School

Dropping out of school is a highly consistent predictor of delinquency and arrest.[71] A study using national data from 2009 found that 40% of incarcerated youth aged 16 to 24 had dropped out of high school, compared to only 8.2% of their non-incarcerated peers.[72] National longitudinal studies further indicate that high school dropout is a key pathway to adult incarceration, particularly for Black males. In California, for example, an estimated 90% of Black male high school dropouts have been incarcerated at some point in their lives.[73] **Prevalence and Patterns:** In California's 2023–24 school year, high school dropout rates were significantly higher among students of color: 22% for Black students, 21% for American Indian students, 17% for Pacific Islanders, and 15% for Latinos, compared to 11% for White students and 8% for Asian students. Rates were markedly higher for males than females across groups.[74]

69 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press
70 Ayano, G., Rooney, R., Pollard, C. M., Dantas, J. A., Lobo, R., Jeemi, Z., ... & Alati, R. (2024). Risk and protective factors of youth crime: An umbrella review of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 113, 102479
71 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press
72 Burrus, J., & Roberts, R. D. (2012). Dropping out of high school: Prevalence, risk factors, and remediation strategies. R & D *Connections,* 18(2), 1-9
73 Raphael, S. (2007). Early incarceration spells and the transition to adulthood. *The price of independence: The economics of early adulthood*, 278-305
74 California Department of Education, "2023-24 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate", Dataquest.

The Arrest-Delinquency Feedback Spiral: When Predictors of Juvenile Legal Involvement Compound Each Other

A growing body of research indicates that arrest can contribute to increased delinquency and a higher likelihood of future arrest. This effect is partly mediated by a decline in school attachment and increased association with delinquent peers, including gang involvement. Eleven predictors of delinquency and arrest were identified in this study and are depicted in Figure 2. Once arrest occurs, a feedback spiral depicted in Figure 3 can occur as school attendance, gang involvement, and the risk of school dropout are made worse.

Figure 2. Predictors of Delinquency and Arrest

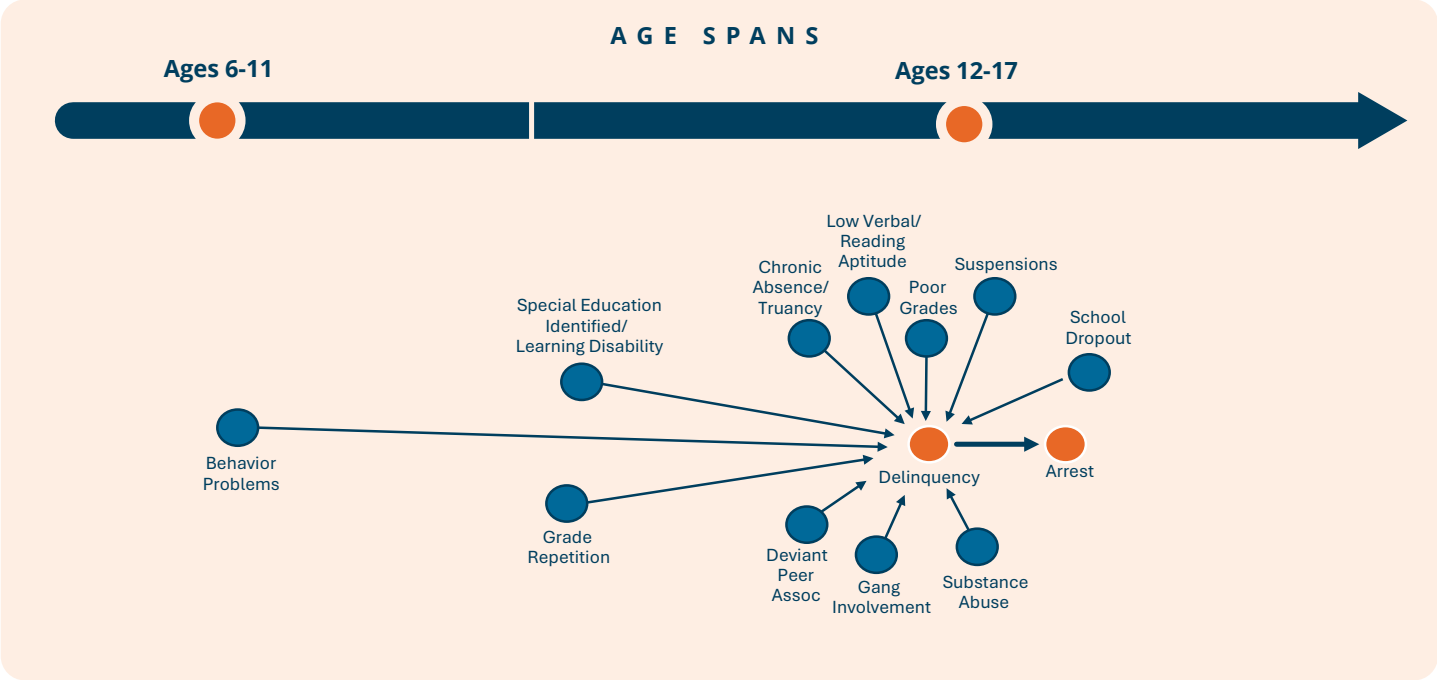
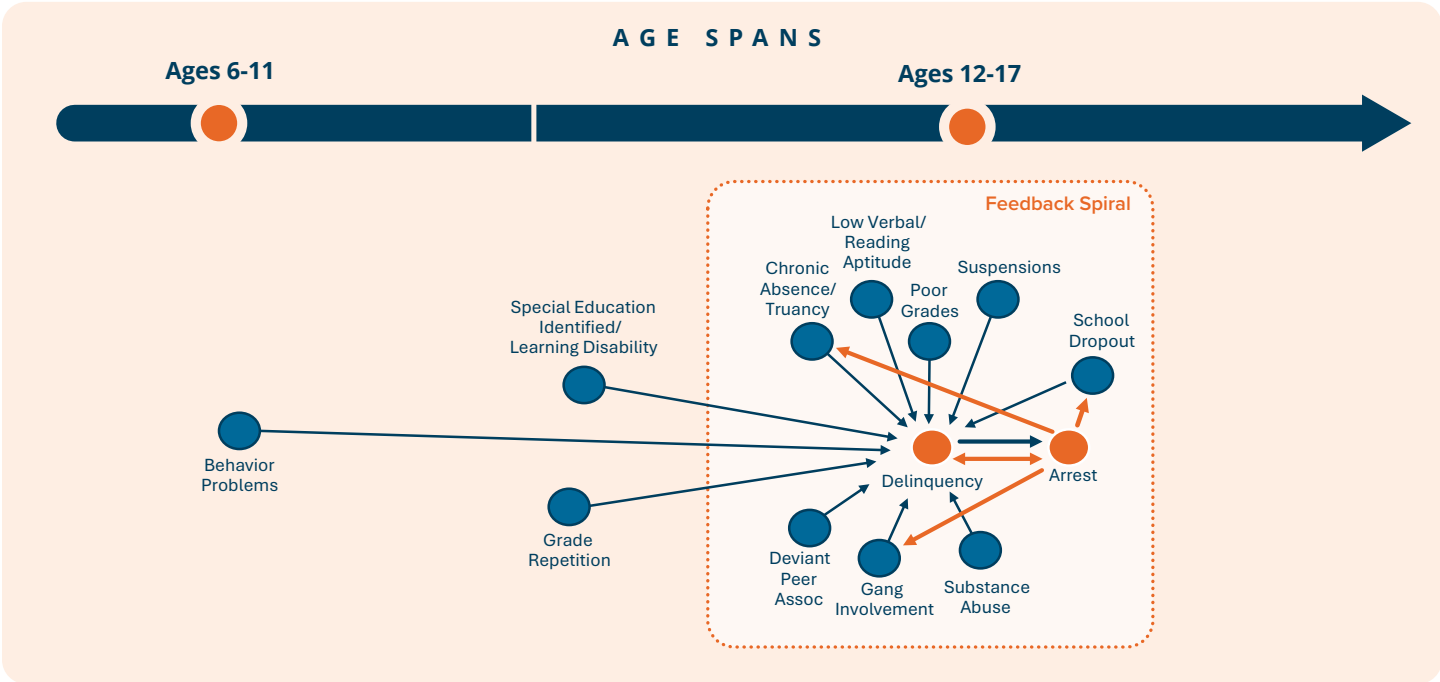


Figure 3. A Feedback Spiral: The Effect of Arrest on Predictors of Delinquency



Below is a summary of evidence documenting this feedback spiral following juvenile arrest:

Delinquency

Two studies using nationally representative data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) found that juvenile arrest increases rather than decreases subsequent delinquency. Mowen et al. (2018) reported that arrest leads to within-individual increases in delinquent behavior over time, even after accounting for baseline delinquency.[75] Bersani et al. (2022) reinforced these findings through a quasi-experimental analysis of the same dataset. They found that early arrest disrupts typical developmental trajectories, increasing the likelihood, frequency, and severity of offending throughout adolescence and into early adulthood. Notably, these effects persisted even after controlling for subsequent arrests, suggesting that the initial arrest itself plays a critical role in shaping future behavior.[76]

Arrest

Multiple studies involving youth in the juvenile legal system have found that juvenile arrest increases the likelihood of subsequent arrests, even when arrested youth report similar levels of offending as their non-arrested peers. Beardslee et al. (2019) conducted a quasi-experimental study using longitudinal data from a sample of male youth, ages 13 to 17, who were arrested primarily for low-level offenses and followed for nine years. Compared to a matched group of boys with no justice system contact, the arrested youth were significantly more likely to be arrested again during each six-month period of the study, even after controlling for self-reported delinquent behavior.[77] Similarly, Wiley (2015) analyzed longitudinal data from a school-based survey of approximately 3,800 students in seventh, eighth, and ninth grades across seven U.S. cities. Her findings revealed that arrest was consistently associated with an increase in delinquency across all grade cohorts. However, the effect was particularly pronounced for seventh graders, who experienced a 132% increase in delinquent behavior following arrest, compared to a 55% increase among ninth graders. The spike in delinquency among seventh graders was largely attributed to weakened school attachment and increased association with delinquent peers following arrest.[78]

School Attendance

In a quasi-experimental study conducted within a midsized urban school district, Geller and Engberg (2022) found that being arrested led to a significant decline in school attendance. This drop was primarily driven by increased suspensions and time spent attending court hearings.[79]

School Dropout

Two studies using nationally representative data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) have found that juvenile arrest significantly increases the risk of dropping out of high school. Sweeten (2006) showed that first-time arrest and subsequent court involvement were strongly associated with a higher likelihood of school dropout.[80] Building on this work, Ward et al. (2015) applied a quasi-experimental analysis to the same dataset and confirmed that juvenile arrest directly contributes to increased dropout rates.[81] Supporting these findings, Kirk and Sampson (2013) conducted a quasi-experimental study using longitudinal data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN). Their analysis found that being arrested raised the probability of dropping out of high school by 22 percentage points.[82]

75 Mowen, T. J., Brent, J. J., & Bares, K. J. (2018). How arrest impacts delinquency over time between and within individuals. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice,* 16(4), 358-377.
76 Bersani, B. E., Jacobsen, W. C., & Doherty, E. E. (2022). Does early adolescent arrest alter the developmental course of offending into young adulthood?. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 51(4), 724-745.
77 Beardslee, J., Miltimore, S., Fine, A., Frick, P. J., Steinberg, L., & Cauffman, E. (2019). Under the radar or under arrest: How is adolescent boys' first contact with the juvenile justice system related to future offending and arrests?. *Law and Human Behavior*, 43(4), 342.
78 Wiley, S. A. (2015). Arrested development: Does the grade level at which juveniles experience arrest matter?. *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology*, 1(4), 411-433.
79 Mark, N. D., Geller, A., & Engberg, J. (2022). Adding insult to injury: Arrests reduce attendance through institutional mechanisms. *Sociology of education*, 95(3), 189-215.
80 Sweeten, G. (2006). Who will graduate? Disruption of high school education by arrest and court involvement. *Justice Quarterly,* 23(4), 462-480.
81 Ward, S., Williams, J., & van Ours, J. C. (2021). Delinquency, arrest and early school leaving. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 83(2), 411-436.
82 Kirk, D. S., & Sampson, R. J. (2013). Juvenile arrest and collateral educational damage in the transition to adulthood. *Sociology of education*, 86(1), 36-62.

Gang Membership

Juvenile arrest has been shown to increase the likelihood of gang involvement. Wiley et al. (2017) conducted a quasi-experimental analysis using longitudinal data from a school-based survey of approximately 3,800 seventh, eighth, and ninth graders across seven cities. Their findings revealed that youth who were arrested had 3.4 times the odds of joining a gang compared to their non-arrested peers.[83]

Social Environmental Factors

A total of 15 social environmental factors have been found in the literature to predict delinquency, arrest, or both (see Table 1). These factors are organized into three domains: family, school, and neighborhood. Among them, the five most consistently predictive factors, across a wide range of studies, are all related to the family environment: **large family size, experiences of child maltreatment, parent criminality, low levels of parental supervision, and having a sibling involved in delinquent behavior.**[84]

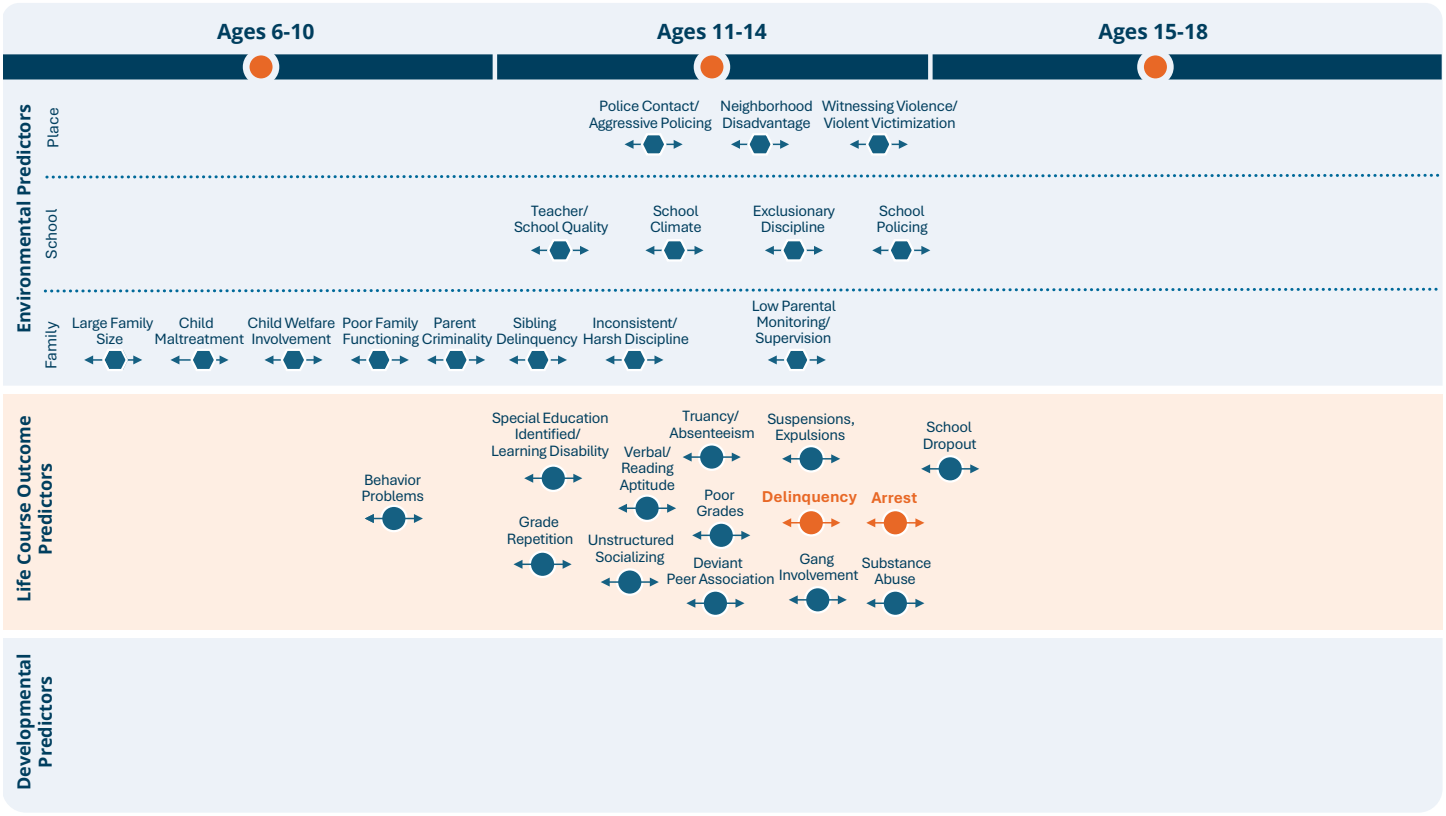
Table 1. Social Environmental Factors Predicting Delinquency or Arrest

Family	School	Place
Family size	School climate	Neighborhood disadvantage
Child maltreatment	Exclusionary discipline practices	Police contact/aggressive policing
Child welfare involvement	School policing	Exposure to violence
Parent criminality	Teacher and school quality	
Sibling delinquency		
Low parental monitoring and supervision		
Inconsistent or harsh discipline		
Family functioning		

Figure 4 visually depicts environmental predictors of delinquency and arrest alongside life course outcome predictors. Again the age placement of the icon for each social environmental predictor is approximate and the bi-directional arrows indicate that the timing of the predictor can vary widely across middle childhood (ages 6-10) and adolescence (11-18).

83 Wiley, S. A., Carson, D. C., & Esbensen, F. A. (2017). Arrest and the amplification of deviance: Does gang membership moderate the relationship?. *Justice Quarterly*, 34(5), 788-817.
84 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press

Figure 4. Life Course Outcome and Environmental Predictors in the School-to-Incarceration Pathway



Summary details for each social-ecological predictor are presented below.

Family Factors

Large family size: Family size is one of the most consistent predictors of juvenile delinquency and arrest. Research shows that individuals born into large families tend to have higher average levels of involvement in delinquency and crime compared to those from smaller families.[85]

Child maltreatment: Child maltreatment, including physical abuse and neglect, is consistently linked to juvenile delinquency and arrest. A substantial and almost unanimous body of research shows that both abuse and neglect are positively associated with a wide range of offending behaviors.[86] In one longitudinal study, youth with at least one documented report of maltreatment before the age of 18 had nearly three times the odds of receiving an arrest petition for a violent offense (OR = 2.89), as well as three times the odds of receiving an arrest petition for a drug-related offense.[87]

Child welfare involvement: Youth placed in out-of-home care have heightened risks for delinquency, especially those with greater instability in home placements or placement in group homes.[88] In a cohort of nearly 27,000 youth from three large urban counties with a first petition to delinquency court between 2010 and 2014, around 45% to 70%, depending on the jurisdiction, had prior contact with the child welfare system. Moreover, 95% of young people with involvement in both the juvenile legal and child welfare systems have contact with the child welfare system before the juvenile legal system.[89] A study looking at Los Angeles County found that for almost

85 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press.
86 Ibid.
87 Mersky, J. P., Topitzes, J., & Reynolds, A. J. (2012). Unsafe at any age: Linking childhood and adolescent maltreatment to delinquency and crime. *Journal of research in crime and delinquency*, 49(2), 295-318.
88 Care, T. L. O. O. H. (2011). Crime during the Transition to Adulthood: How Youth Fare as They Leave Out-of-Home Care; Herz, D. C., Eastman, A. L., & Suthar, H. (2023). An empirical test of dual system pathways. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 21(3), 195-221.
89 Herz, D. C., Dierkhising, C. B., Raithel, J., Schretzman, M., Guiltinan, S., Goerge, R. M., ... & Abbott, S. (2019). Dual system youth and their pathways: A comparison of incidence, characteristics and system experiences using linked administrative data. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 48, 2432-2450; Herz, D. C., Eastman, A. L., & Suthar, H. (2023). An empirical test of dual system pathways. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 21(3), 195-221.

7,000 youth with a first juvenile petition between 2004 and 2016, nearly two-thirds (64%) had at least one prior child welfare investigation, typically when they were 5 to 8 years old. Half (48%) interacted with both systems concurrently. Rates of this "dual-involvement" were elevated for Black youth and females overall.[90] Studies that have examined data exclusively on youth with a history of child welfare involvement have found that certain types of involvement increase the risk of arrest. Multiple studies conducted in Los Angeles County have found that having a history of group home placement or experiencing three or more placements in a year significantly increased the risk of receiving a juvenile delinquency court petition prior to turning 18.[91] Similarly, a statewide study of child protection system records in California found that adolescents who experienced placement in a group home setting were at elevated risk of arrest compared to child welfare involved children not placed in such settings.[92]

Parent criminality: Parent criminality is one of the most consistent and well-documented predictors of juvenile delinquency and arrest.[93] A meta-analysis found that children with criminally involved parents are approximately 2.4 times more likely to engage in criminal behavior themselves.[94] In one large study of boys, 64% of all serious delinquent acts were committed by youth from the 10% of families with prior arrest histories. Notably, the father's history of arrest emerged as the strongest predictor of boys' delinquency.[95] Nationally representative data further underline this association. Heard-Garris et al. (2019) found that 22% of adjudicated youth had a parent who had been incarcerated during their childhood—double the rate observed in the general adolescent population (11%).[96] Another nationally representative study similarly found that having an incarcerated parent roughly doubled a young person's likelihood of being incarcerated themselves.[97]

Poor Family Functioning: Across 14 meta-analyses examining longitudinal predictors, family problems rank among the strongest of 59 identified factors associated with persistent criminal behavior in youth.[98] In fact, overall family functioning has been found to be one of the earliest and most reliable predictors of juvenile delinquency.[99]

Sibling delinquency: Sibling delinquency is a highly consistent predictor of juvenile offending: youth whose siblings engage in delinquent behavior or who have been arrested are significantly more likely to offend or face arrest themselves.[100] A recent

90 Herz, D. C., Eastman, A. L., Putnam-Hornstein, E., & McCroskey, J. (2021). Dual system youth and their pathways in Los Angeles County: a replication of the OJJDP Dual System Youth Study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 118, 105160.
91 Eastman, A. L., Park, K., Herz, D., Dierkhising, C. B., McCroskey, J., & Guo, L. (2024). Contact with foster care and the Juvenile Delinquency Court: A prospective examination from birth through age 18. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 1-14.
92 Prindle, J., Eastman, A. L., Chen, W. T., McCroskey, J., & Putnam-Hornstein, E. (2025). Arrests among adolescents with a history of foster care placements in group home settings. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 161, 107245.
93 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press.
94 Besemer, S., Ahmad, S. I., Hinshaw, S. P., & Farrington, D. P. (2017). A systematic review and meta-analysis of the intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 37, 161-178.
95 Farrington, D. P., Jolliffe, D., Loeber, R., Stouthamer-Loeber, M., & Kalb, L. M. (2001). The concentration of offenders in families, and family criminality in the prediction of boys' delinquency. *Journal of adolescence*, 24(5), 579-596.
96 Heard-Garris, N., Sacotte, K. A., Winkelman, T. N., Cohen, A., Ekwueme, P. O., Barnert, E., ... & Davis, M. M. (2019). Association of childhood history of parental incarceration and juvenile justice involvement with mental health in early adulthood. *JAMA network open*, 2(9), e1910465-e1910465. These figures are derived from calculations of data included in Table 1, pg. 4/11
97 Barnert, E. S., Perry, R., Shetgiri, R., Steers, N., Dudovitz, R., Heard-Garris, N. J., ... & Chung, P. J. (2021). Adolescent protective and risk factors for incarceration through early adulthood. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 30, 1428-1440
98 Basto-Pereira, M., & Farrington, D. P. (2022). Developmental predictors of offending and persistence in crime: A systematic review of meta-analyses. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 101761. (2022)
99 Early intervention and juvenile delinquency prevention: Evidence from the Chicago longitudinal study. *Social Work Research*, 30(3), 153-167.
100 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press.

meta-analysis found this risk particularly elevated for same-sex or younger siblings.[101] Using nationally representative longitudinal data, another study found that having a gang-involved sibling increases both the likelihood of joining a gang and the risk of rejoining after leaving.[102]

Inconsistent or harsh parental discipline: Inconsistent or erratic discipline, as well as harsh or physically punitive disciplinary practices, have been found to be significant predictors of juvenile delinquency.[103]

Low parental monitoring and supervision: Low parental supervision is one of the most consistently identified predictors of juvenile delinquency and arrest.[104] A recent meta-analysis of 19 prospective longitudinal studies confirmed that low parental supervision is a strong and reliable predictor of both delinquent behavior and juvenile arrest.[105]

School Factors

School climate: A meta-analysis of 13 longitudinal studies found that school climate was a significant predictor of delinquent behavior. School climate refers to the overall pattern of experiences within the school environment, including culture, values, and norms.[106]

Teacher and school quality: The quality of school teachers has been shown to significantly influence students' risk for juvenile delinquency and arrest. Rose et al. (2022) analyzed a large dataset linking school and criminal justice records from North Carolina, covering approximately 2 million students and 40,000 teachers. Using a quasi-experimental approach, they found that teachers have a significant causal impact on reducing the likelihood of arrest and incarceration between the ages of 16 and 21. Notably, teachers who were effective at improving students' academic test scores were not necessarily effective at reducing the risk of juvenile legal system involvement.[107] Jordan et al. (2024) further affirms the importance of school quality in shaping long-term legal outcomes. Their study followed ten cohorts of ninth-grade students in Chicago public schools and found that schools effective at improving eighth-grade reading scores significantly reduced students' risk of future felony arraignment and incarceration. Importantly, schools that successfully promoted on-time transition from eighth grade to high school had a particularly strong effect on lowering criminal justice involvement among Black male students.

101 Walters, G. D. (2022). Delinquency between siblings: a meta-analysis. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 67, 101792.
102 Hashimi, S., Wakefield, S., & Apel, R. (2021). Sibling transmission of gang involvement. *Journal of research in crime and delinquency*, 58(5), 507-544.
103 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press.
104 Ibid.
105 Flanagan, I. M., Auty, K. M., & Farrington, D. P. (2019). Parental supervision and later offending: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 47, 215-229.

106 Reaves, S., McMahon, S. D., Duffy, S. N., & Ruiz, L. (2018). The test of time: A meta-analytic review of the relation between school climate and problem behavior. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 39, 100-108.
107 Rose, E. K., Schellenberg, J. T., & Shem-Tov, Y. (2022). *The effects of teacher quality on adult criminal justice contact* (No. w30274). National Bureau of Economic Research.

In contrast, schools that were more effective at improving math scores showed little to no impact on future involvement with the justice system.[108] Both studies suggest that schools and teachers reduce juvenile delinquency through potentially different mechanisms than those that improve test scores.

Exclusionary discipline: Exclusionary discipline, including suspensions and expulsions, has been strongly linked to delinquent behavior. A large meta-analysis of 40 studies found that experiencing suspension or expulsion roughly doubles the risk of engaging in delinquency.[109] While this relationship is well established at the individual level, an important question remains: does a school's overall reliance on exclusionary discipline contribute to higher rates of delinquency among its student population? Gerlinger (2020) tackled this question in her exploration of the relationship between exclusionary discipline and neighborhood adolescent crime using school and crime data for six Southern California counties including Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, San Diego and Ventura. Her findings revealed that higher suspension rates were associated with increases in local crime, particularly aggravated assaults occurring within a two-mile radius of schools. This relationship was especially pronounced in communities with higher levels of neighborhood disadvantage.[110]

School policing: Studies using national data show that police in schools increase student arrest rates, often for behavior that would not be criminalized otherwise. A quasi-experimental analysis of national data by Homer & Fisher (2020) found that the presence of police in schools, increased arrest rates for students, especially Black students and boys.[111] In a separate quasi-experimental study using the same dataset, Sorensen et al (2023) found that placing school resource officers (SRO) in schools reduced some forms of violence, but did not prevent gun-related incidents. Moreover, the presence of an SRO is associated with increased use of exclusionary and punitive disciplinary measures—including suspension, expulsion, police referral, and arrest. These effects are consistently greatest for Black students, boys, and students with disabilities.[112]

Place Factors

Police contact or aggressive policing: Black, American Indian, and Latino youth have historically faced disproportionate contact with law enforcement, and growing evidence indicates that racial disparities in arrest, adjudication, and confinement are not solely explained by the legal characteristics of juvenile cases.[113] In fact, several local studies suggest that police contact may contribute to, rather than reduce youth delinquency. In a quasi-experimental study using longitudinal data for 2,127 middle school students across seven cities, Wiley et al. (2013) found that youth who were stopped by police reported higher levels of subsequent delinquency. Specifically, a single police stop was associated with a 19% increase in reported delinquent behavior. When the researchers accounted for the indirect effects of police contact, such as weakened social bonds, the development of a deviant self-identity, and increased association with delinquent peers, the estimated increase in delinquency rose to 60% over time.[114] Supporting these findings, Ward et al. (2014) conducted a quasi-experimental analysis of longitudinal data from the city of Rochester and found that police contact significantly increased the likelihood of future violent offending among juveniles.[115] Similarly, a study by Chenane et al. (2021), using longitudinal data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN), showed that adolescents with prior police contact had substantially higher odds of engaging

108 Jordan, A., Karger, E., & Neal, D. (2024). *Early Predictors of Racial Disparities in Criminal Justice Involvement* (No. w32428). National Bureau of Economic Research.
109 Gerlinger, J., Viano, S., Gardella, J. H., Fisher, B. W., Chris Curran, F., & Higgins, E. M. (2021). Exclusionary school discipline and delinquent outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 50(8), 1493-1509.
110 Gerlinger, J. (2020). Exclusionary school discipline and neighborhood crime. *Socius*, 6, 2378023120925404.
111 Homer, E. M., & Fisher, B. W. (2020). Police in schools and student arrest rates across the United States: Examining differences by race, ethnicity, and gender. *Journal of school violence*, 19(2), 192-204.
112 Sorensen, L. C., Avila-Acosta, M., Engberg, J. B., & Bushway, S. D. (2023). The thin blue line in schools: New evidence on school-based policing across the US. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 42(4), 941-970.
113 Leiber, M. J., & Fix, R. (2019). Reflections on the impact of race and ethnicity on juvenile court outcomes and efforts to enact change. *American journal of criminal justice*, 44, 581-608. For confinement, also see Peck, J. H., & Jennings, W. G. (2016). A critical examination of "being Black" in the juvenile justice system. *Law and Human Behavior*, 40(3), 219. For arrests, see Claus, R. E., Vidal, S., & Harmon, M. (2018). Racial and ethnic disparities in the police handling of juvenile arrests. *Crime & Delinquency*, 64(11), 1375- 1393. Zane, S. N., Mears, D. P., & Welsh, B. C. (2020). How universal is disproportionate minority contact? An examination of racial and ethnic disparities in juvenile justice processing across four states. *Justice Quarterly*, 37(5), 817-841.
114 Wiley, S. A., Slocum, L. A., & Esbensen, F. A. (2013). The unintended consequences of being stopped or arrested: An exploration of the labeling mechanisms through which police contact leads to subsequent delinquency. *Criminology*, 51(4), 927-966.
115 Ward, J. T., Krohn, M. D., & Gibson, C. L. (2014). The effects of police contact on trajectories of violence: A group-based, propensity score matching analysis. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 29(3), 440-475.

in later delinquency and violence. Specifically, the odds of committing any delinquent or violent act increased by 44% to 81% for youth who had previous interactions with the police, compared to those with no police contact.[116] Together, these studies challenge the assumption that police contact serves a deterrent function for youth. Instead, they suggest that such interactions, particularly when experienced at a young age, may exacerbate rather than reduce the likelihood of future offending, with significant implications for racial disparities in juvenile legal outcomes.

Neighborhood disadvantage: The neighborhoods in which young people live play a significant role in shaping their likelihood of engaging in delinquent behavior, particularly violent offenses. A meta-analysis of 43 studies found a positive and statistically significant relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and physical aggression.[117] Using nationally representative longitudinal data from the Add Health study, Haynie et al. (2006) also found that neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage was consistently associated with higher levels of adolescent violence, even after controlling for a range of individual and contextual variables.[118] Further evidence of neighborhood effects comes from a quasi-experimental study by Billings et al. (2016), which used administrative data from schools and law enforcement in Charlotte, North Carolina. The researchers examined how changes to school attendance boundaries influenced juvenile delinquency among 14-year-old students. Their findings showed that neighborhood context significantly affected criminal behavior, particularly when students attend school with peers who live within one kilometer of their residence. The effect was even stronger when those neighbors were also enrolled in the same grade, highlighting the importance of both physical proximity and peer group structure in shaping delinquency risk.[119]

Exposure to violence: Exposure to violence, whether direct victimization or witnessing violent acts, heightens the risk of engaging in delinquency. In one national study of more than 4,000 juveniles residing in U.S. central cities, Lin and colleagues (2011) found that both direct victimization and indirect (witnessing) victimization were positively associated with violent and property delinquency.[120] In a subsequent national study of adolescents, Jackson et al (2013) found that after controlling for exposure to other forms of interpersonal violence and prior delinquency, being exposed to peer violence roughly doubled the odds of future delinquency for affected youth compared to youth with no exposure to peer violence. Larger effects were observed for adolescents from low-income households.[121]

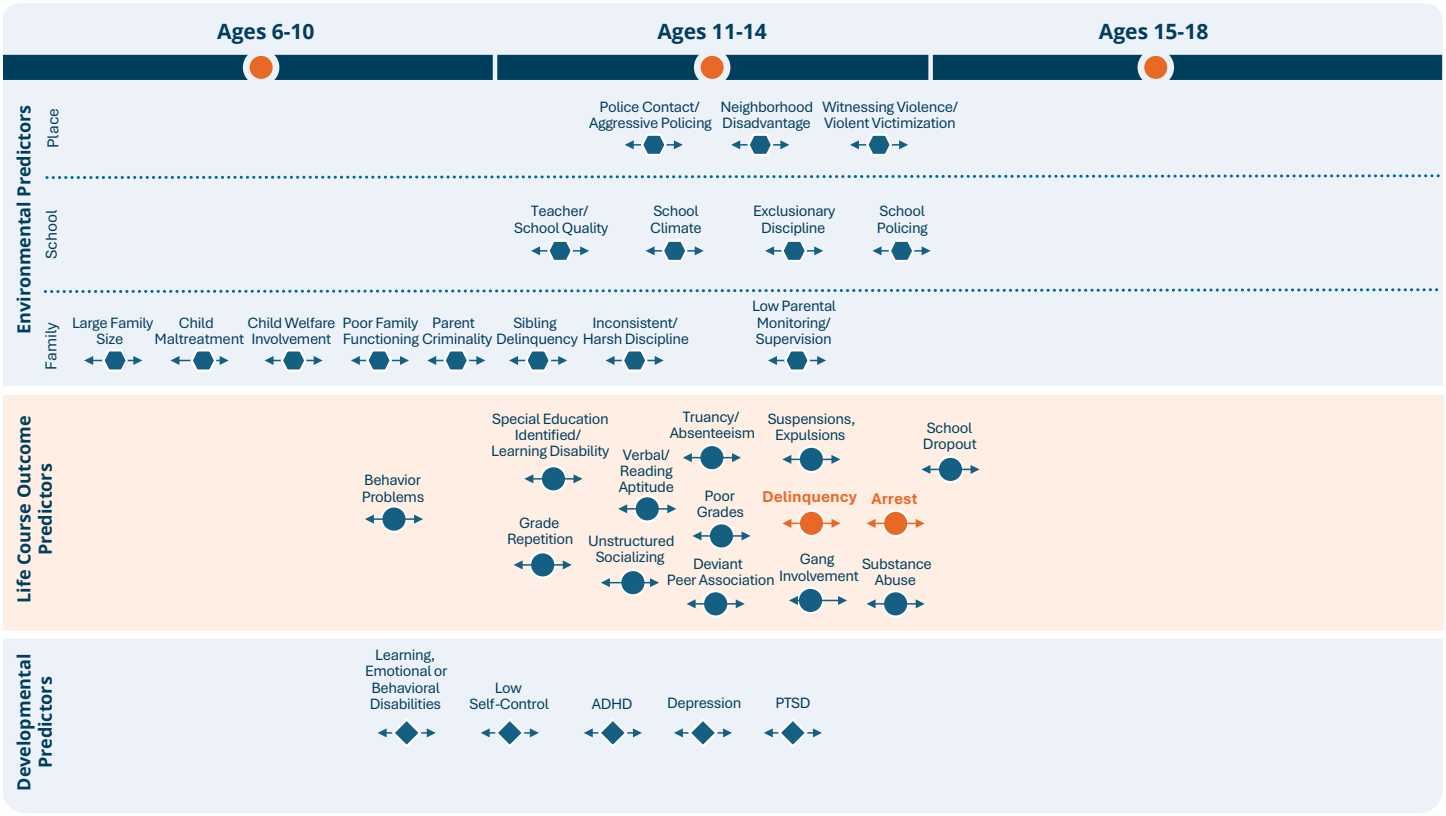
Developmental Factors

Research has identified five developmental factors that predict delinquency and arrest: learning disabilities, verbal/reading aptitude, self-control, depression, and mental health disorders such as ADHD and PTSD (see Figure 5). Of these, verbal/reading aptitude, self-control, depression, and mental disorders are consistently strong predictors across many studies.

116 Chenane, J. L., Wright, E. M., & Wang, Y. (2021). The effects of police contact and neighborhood context on delinquency and violence. *Victims & Offenders*, 16(4), 495-518.
117 Chang, L. Y., Wang, M. Y., & Tsai, P. S. (2016). Neighborhood disadvantage and physical aggression in children and adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis of multilevel studies. *Aggressive behavior*, 42(5), 441-454.
118 Haynie, D. L., Silver, E., & Teasdale, B. (2006). Neighborhood characteristics, peer networks, and adolescent violence. *Journal of quantitative criminology*, 22(2), 147-169.
119 Billings, S. B., Deming, D. J., & Ross, S. L. (2016). *Partners in crime: Schools, neighborhoods and the formation of criminal networks* (No. w21962). National Bureau of Economic Research.

120 Lin, W. H., Cochran, J. K., & Mieczkowski, T. (2011). Direct and vicarious violent victimization and juvenile delinquency: An application of general strain theory. *Sociological inquiry*, 81(2), 195-222.
121 Jackson, C. L., Hanson, R. F., Amstadter, A. B., Saunders, B. E., & Kilpatrick, D. G. (2013). The longitudinal relation between peer violent victimization and delinquency: Results from a national representative sample of US adolescents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 28(8), 1596-1616.

Figure 5. Life Course Outcome, Environmental, and Developmental Predictors in the School-to-Incarceration Pathway



Summary details for each developmental predictor are presented below.

Learning, emotional or behavioral disabilities: Youth involved in delinquency, or who are incarcerated, have disproportionately high rates of disabilities.[122] A national survey found that approximately one-third of adolescents in secure juvenile confinement received educational support under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), though this metric is a likely undercount of actual disability prevalence in this population. Among these youth, nearly 50% were receiving services for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), while 39% received support for learning disabilities. The prevalence of disabilities varied widely across juvenile residential facilities, ranging from 9% to 77%.[123] Additional national data from the 2004–05 school year revealed that nearly 40% of youth in juvenile correctional facilities were identified as having a disability—a figure substantially higher than the national disability prevalence of 9–12% among all school-age youth.[124]

Low self-control: Deficits in self-control, including characteristics like risk-taking behavior, lack of obedience to authority, and impulsiveness, have been long-standing and highly consistent predictors of delinquency.[125] However, Neil and Sampson (2021) have noted that levels of self-control interact with sociohistorical conditions to influence risks for outcomes like juvenile arrest. In their study of longitudinal data for three cohorts of over 1,000 children originally from Chicago born up to 17 years apart, they found large differences across the three cohorts in the risk that children with low self-control would be arrested. The differences depended largely on the historical timing of when children reached late adolescence and early adulthood and contemporaneous crime

122 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press; Pyle, N., Flower, A., Fall, A. M., & Williams, J. (2016). Individual-level risk factors of incarcerated youth. *Remedial and Special Education*, 37(3), 172-186; Mann, E. A., & Reynolds, A. J. (2006). Early intervention and juvenile delinquency prevention: Evidence from the Chicago longitudinal study. Social Work Research, 30(3), 153-167

123 Quinn M. M., Rutherford R. B., Leone P. E., Osher D. M., Poirier J. M. (2005). Youth with disabilities in juvenile corrections: A national survey. *Exceptional Children*, 71, 339–345

124 Gagnon, J. C., Barber, B. R., Van Loan, C., & Leone, P. E. (2009). Juvenile correctional schools: Characteristics and approaches to curriculum. *Education and treatment of children*, 673-696; Stizek G. A., Pittsonberger J. L., Riordan K. E., Lyter D. M., & Orlofsky G. F. (2007). *Characteristics of schools, districts, teachers, principals, and school libraries in the United States 2003–2004:* School and staffing survey (NCES 2006-313 Revised). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office

125 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press.

rates and police enforcement, especially for drug offenses. Individuals with low self-control who were born in the early to mid-1980s faced nearly double the likelihood of arrest during their peak adolescent years of delinquency compared to those born in the mid-1990s.[126]

Mental Disorders (ADHD, PTSD, Conduct Disorder): Mental disorders, particularly Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), are highly consistent predictors of delinquency, arrest, and incarceration.[127] A systematic review of studies of incarcerated youth found that, since 2006, the average prevalence of ADHD among youth in custody is 20.4%. Furthermore, 62% of incarcerated youth studied were diagnosed with conduct disorder at some point in their lives. Rates of major depression were also notably elevated, 10% among males and 26% among females, as were rates of PTSD, affecting 9% of males and 18% of females. Co-occurring mental health conditions are also common among confined youth.[128] A multi-state study involving more than 1,400 justice-involved adolescents found that 60% met diagnostic criteria for three or more psychiatric disorders.[129]

Depression: Both clinical and subclinical depression are highly consistent predictors of juvenile delinquency, with clinical depression more consistently predicting arrest and incarceration.[130]

126 Neil, R., & Sampson, R. J. (2021). The birth lottery of history: Arrest over the life course of multiple cohorts coming of age, 1995–2018. *American Journal of Sociology*, 126(5), 1127-1178.
127 Ibid.
128 Beaudry, G., Yu, R., Långström, N., & Fazel, S. (2021). An updated systematic review and meta-regression analysis: Mental disorders among adolescents in juvenile detention and correctional facilities. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 60(1), 46-60
129 Shufelt, J. L., & Cocozza, J. J. (2006). *Youth with mental health disorders in the juvenile justice system: Results from a multi-state prevalence study* (pp. 1-6). Delmar, NY: National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice.
130 Ellis, L., Farrington, D. P., & Hoskin, A. W. (2019). *Handbook of crime correlates*. Academic Press.

Disrupting the School-to-Incarceration Pathway: Programs and Policies

The life course, environmental, and developmental factors identified above suggest points of intervention for disrupting the school-to-incarceration pathway. This section presents programs, practices, and policy reforms with the credible potential to do so.

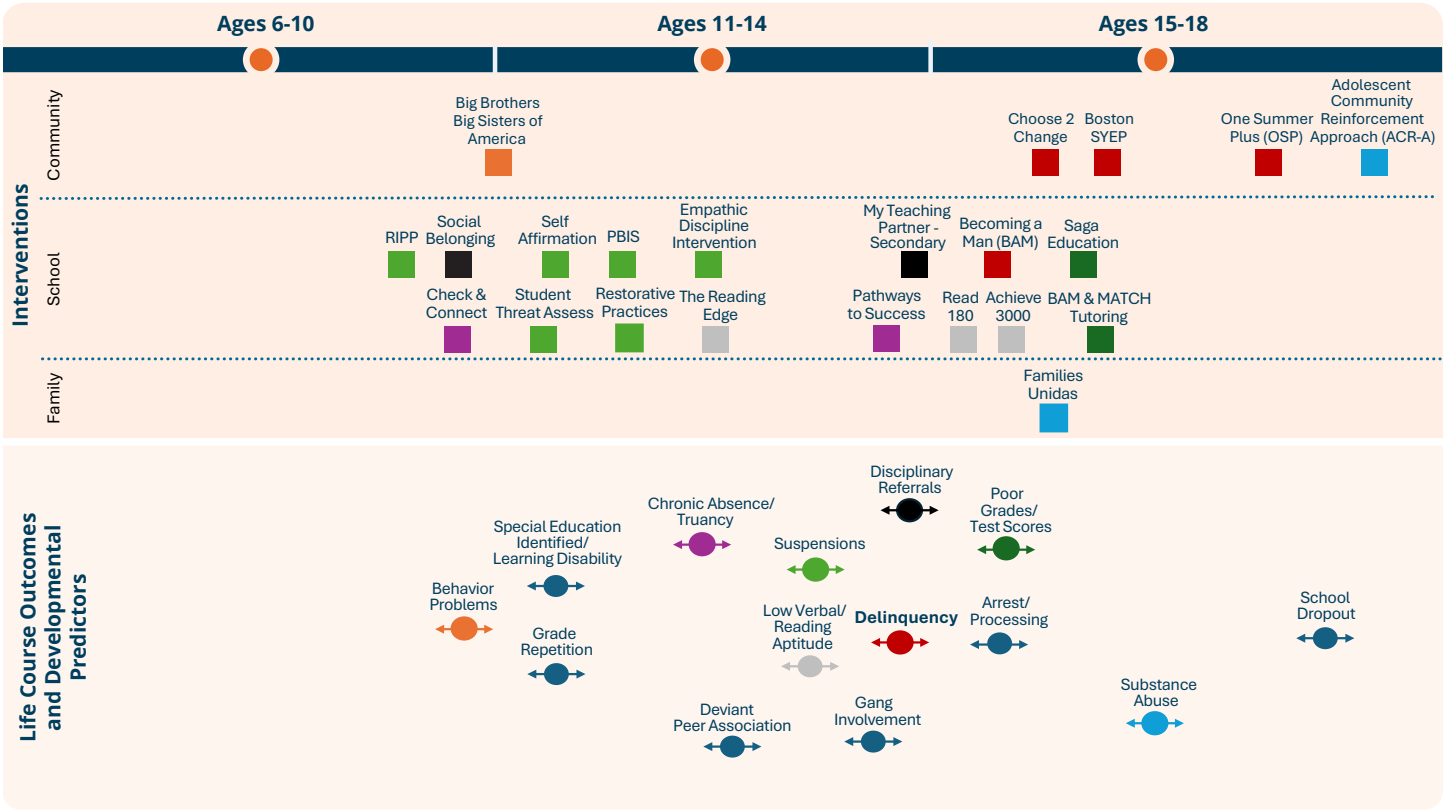
Evidence-Based Programs and Practices

Research offers promising programs and practices that can redirect youth away from juvenile legal involvement during middle and high school, when the risk is greatest. Through a systematic literature scan, we identified 22 rigorously evaluated programs and practices that improve outcomes for middle and high school students. All programs were evaluated with randomized controlled trials, or quasi-experimental designs.

Figure 6 provides a color-coded visualization of these interventions and the outcomes that they target. For example, Check & Connect and Pathways to Success (shown in the top panel) are effective interventions for reducing chronic absence or truancy (depicted in purple in the bottom panel). The icon for each intervention is positioned at the approximate mean age of the study sample used to evaluate it.

Interventions are also distinguished by the context or type of social-ecological risk that they address. Most target school-related risks and are delivered in schools (n=16). Five are delivered in community settings and target community-level risks. One, Familias Unidas, targets family risks but is delivered in a community context.

Figure 6. Evidence-Based Programs and Practices



Reading and Literacy Aptitude

A handful of interventions have proven effective at improving reading skills for adolescents in middle and high school.[131] They include The Reading Edge, Achieve3000 and Read 180. These interventions produced modest but meaningful gains in literacy outcomes, with effect sizes ranging from 0.15 to 0.30 standard deviations. See Table 2. The Reading Edge yielded the smallest effect (0.15 SD) with middle school students, Achieve3000 produced gains of 0.20 SD for 6th and 9th graders, and Read 180 demonstrated the largest effect (0.30 SD) for moderate-risk ninth-grade readers. The study populations varied considerably in demographic composition: The Reading Edge sample was predominantly White (75-95% across 2 sites) and rural with moderate poverty rates, while Achieve3000 and Read 180 samples were more racially diverse and included higher proportions of English Language Learners and students receiving special education services.

Table 2. Reading Improvement Interventions

Reading Intervention	Study Population	Outcome
The Reading Edge	Mostly white and rural middle school students in West Virginia and Florida.	Improved reading scores by .15 standard deviations, which was equivalent to increasing a standardized test score from the 50th to the 56th percentile.
Achieve3000	3rd, 6th and 9th grade students at 16 schools in 4 districts located in different regions of the U.S. Students were 60% White, 37% Latino, 21% Black.	Improved total reading scores across grades 6 and 9 by .20 standard deviations.
Read 180	9th grade students in Florida who were 51% White, 20% Latino, and 20% Black	Improved reading scores by .30 standard deviations for moderate risk readers. The effect on reading scores was smaller for high-risk students.

The Reading Edge

Summary

The Reading Edge is a one-semester cooperative learning intervention for middle school students. The program enhances reading skills through structured peer collaboration and metacognitive strategy instruction. Team accountability reinforces engagement, with individual assessments determining each team's progress.

The Reading Edge, adapted from the Student Team Reading model, is a cooperative learning program designed to improve reading skills among middle school students through structured peer collaboration. In an evaluation study, the program lasted for one academic semester and was grounded in the principles of cooperative

131 Baye, A., Inns, A., Lake, C., & Slavin, R. E. (2019). A synthesis of quantitative research on reading programs for secondary students. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 54(2), 133-166.

learning, a model that leverages adolescents' social motivation by emphasizing team-based goals.[132] Students worked in teams of four to five and engaged in activities such as partner reading, story retelling, writing related to reading selections, vocabulary mastery, and story-structure analysis. Instruction also included explicit teaching of metacognitive strategies to foster deeper reading comprehension. A central feature of the program was the use of individual assessments to generate team scores, encouraging students to support one another's learning through peer explanation, encouragement, and collaboration.

The program was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial (RCT) involving 788 study participants from rural middle schools in West Virginia and Florida.[133] In West Virginia, 50% of students qualified for free lunch, and the racial composition was 95% White, 4% Black, and 1% American Indian. At the Florida site, 69% of students were eligible for free lunch, with a study sample that was 75% White, 8% Black, 13% Latino, and 1% Asian or Native. Results from the evaluation indicated that participation in The Reading Edge led to a statistically significant improvement in reading achievement. The program produced an effect size of 0.15 standard deviations, equivalent to raising a student's score from the 50th to the 56th percentile on a standardized reading test.

Achieve3000

Summary

Achieve3000 is a differentiated online literacy program designed to build reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. The program delivers standards-based content through a five-step routine that blends whole-class and individualized instruction. Adaptive assessments tailor content to each student's level, and integrated reporting helps teachers track progress.

Adaptable for both whole-class instruction and individualized learning, the program uses a five-step literacy routine focused on supporting students in reading informational text, building content knowledge, applying higher-order thinking skills, routinely using reading strategies, and developing evidence-based opinions. It includes ongoing assessments that inform teacher-led instruction and adaptive pathways that respond to students' individual literacy levels. The platform also offers integrated reporting tools to support instructional decision-making by educators and administrators.

A randomized controlled trial was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of Achieve3000 for improving literacy outcomes.[134] The study included a sample of 1,012 students and 46 teachers across 16 schools in four school districts. Nearly half of the students were in sixth grade (49%), with the remainder split between third grade (27%) and ninth grade (25%). The sample was 37% Latino, 67% White (including White Hispanics), 21% Black, 4.5% Asian, and 8% multiracial or other. In addition, 13% of students were English Language Learners, 12% were classified as special education (SPED), 2.3% were identified as Section 504 students, and 62% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

132 Slavin, R., Chamberlain, A., Daniels, C., & Madden, N. A. (2009). The Reading Edge: a randomized evaluation of a middle school cooperative reading program. *Effective Education*, 1(1), 13-26.
133 Slavin, R., Chamberlain, A., Daniels, C., & Madden, N. A. (2009). The Reading Edge: a randomized evaluation of a middle school cooperative reading program. *Effective Education*, 1(1), 13-26.
134 Shannon, L., & Grant, B-J. (2015). *A Final Report for the Evaluation of the Achieve3000 Programs.*

The intervention was implemented over the course of one academic year. Results showed that Achieve3000 produced a statistically significant improvement in total reading scores by .20 standard deviations for students in grades 6 and 9.

Read 180

Summary

READ 180 is a daily reading intervention for struggling readers that supplements the standard English Language Arts curriculum. The program blends whole-group instruction, small-group tutoring, independent reading, and adaptive learning software.

READ 180 is delivered in 90-minute daily instructional blocks consisting of 30 minutes of whole-group instruction followed by three 20-minute rotating stations: independent reading, small-group instruction with the teacher, and use of READ 180's adaptive learning software. It is implemented in addition to the standard English Language Arts curriculum. In this evaluation, both treatment and control groups received supplemental instruction, ensuring parity in instructional time across conditions.

A randomized controlled trial was conducted in seven comprehensive high schools within a large Florida school district to assess the effectiveness of READ 180.[135] The study sample included 1,197 ninth-grade students who were identified as struggling readers based on their performance on the prior year's Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). The sample was 51% White, 20% Latino, 20% Black, and 8.6% other. Additionally, 43% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and 12% were classified as English Language Learners.

The intervention was implemented over the course of one academic year. Results showed that READ 180 significantly improved reading outcomes for students classified as moderate-risk readers, yielding an effect size of 0.30 standard deviations for reading test scores. However, the intervention impact was smaller for students categorized as high-risk, indicating that while the program is effective for some struggling readers, its benefits may be more limited among students with more intensive reading needs.

School Absences

Two interventions were found to reduce school absences: Check & Connect and Pathways to Success. See Table 3. Both demonstrated effectiveness in reducing school absences among predominantly Black and Latino students in high-poverty urban settings, though they employed markedly different intervention models. Check & Connect paired students in grades 5-7 with paid adult mentors who monitored attendance and academic performance, delivered personalized interventions, and engaged families through regular contact. It was evaluated in a large field trial of nearly 5,000 students. Pathways to Success took a lighter-touch approach, delivering 12 brief classroom sessions over six weeks at the start of eighth grade to help students connect current schoolwork to future career aspirations. It was evaluated in a much smaller study of 264 eighth graders.

135 Lang, L., Torgesen, J., Vogel, W., Chanter, C., Lefsky, E., & Petscher, Y. (2009). Exploring the relative effectiveness of reading interventions for high school students. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 2(2), 149–175. doi:10.1080/19345740802641535

Table 3. School Absence Interventions

Intervention	Study Population	Outcome
Check & Connect	Students in grades 5-7. Mostly Black (49%) and Latino (47%) living in Chicago.	Reduced chronic school absence (missing 10 or more school days) by 17%.
Pathways to Success	8th grade students. Mostly Black (72%) and Latino (17%) living in Detroit.	Reduced school absences by 0.21 standard deviations at nearly 2 years post-intervention.

Check & Connect

Summary

Check & Connect is a two-year mentoring program that pairs at-risk students with trained mentors. Mentors monitor academic and attendance data, provide individualized interventions, and engage families. The program aims to improve student engagement and reduce chronic absenteeism.

Check & Connect has demonstrated efficacy in enhancing school attendance among students in grades 5 through 7. In the program, students exhibiting high levels of absenteeism or poor academic performance are paired with trained adult mentors who are paid staff. These mentors are tasked with monitoring the students' attendance and academic achievements, acting as case managers to facilitate access to both social services and school-based resources, and fostering meaningful relationships with the students. Mentors facilitate student engagement through two principal mechanisms, Check and Connect. The "Check" aspect involves close monitoring of students' behavior and academic performance, including attendance, grades, and behavior referrals, to identify early signs of disengagement. Following this, mentors implement personalized interventions under the "Connect" component, aimed at enhancing student engagement. These interventions are tailored based on a detailed understanding of the student's level of school engagement and family context, designed to leverage the resources available within the school and the wider community. Furthermore, mentors are encouraged to engage with the students' families, collaborating with parents to augment student engagement and serving as intermediaries between the family and the school. Formal interactions between mentors and students occur, on average, five times a month, either individually or in small groups. Additionally, mentors engage in informal interactions with students during school activities such as recess, lunchtime, and in hallways, among other school settings. Communication with parents or guardians, which includes home visits and phone calls, occurs twice a month on average. However, the extent of family involvement varies significantly across mentors.

This program was evaluated in a randomized controlled trial with a substantial cohort of 4,929 students, predominantly Black (49%) and Latino (47%), located in the south and west sides of Chicago. These students were enrolled in schools where the rate of eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch ranged from 71 to 100 percent. The gender composition of the study sample was 53% male. At the conclusion of the intervention period, Check & Connect achieved a significant reduction in chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10 or more days of school per year, by 16.8 percent. On average, the program decreased total absences by 23%.[136]

136 Guryan, J., Christenson, S., Cureton, A., Lai, I., Ludwig, J., Schwarz, C., ... & Turner, M. C. (2021). The effect of mentoring on school attendance and academic outcomes: A randomized evaluation of the Check & Connect Program. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 40(3), 841-882.

Pathways to Success

Summary

Pathways to Success is a six-week, school-based intervention for 8th grade students that helps them envision and plan toward future career-oriented identities by linking current academic efforts to long-term goals. The curriculum is delivered by classroom teachers over 12 sessions.

Pathways to Success is a program for 8th grade students focused on helping them identify pathways and implement strategies to achieve future selves, particularly those related to careers. The program's approach is designed to resonate with students on a level that aligns with their current developmental stage, with content and delivery both tailored to be developmentally fitting and easily grasped by students. Overall, the program aims to bridge students' current school endeavors with future aspirations by helping them to envision adult identities and outline strategies to achieve them. It consists of 12 brief sessions each completed during a single class period and conducted twice a week over the first six weeks of the school year. Every session was designed with a distinct objective, drawing from the content of prior sessions, while consistently emphasizing the main goals throughout a span of 6 weeks. During program sessions, students learn that that their schooling is a pathway to their future selves and that facing challenges is a natural part of the process. All 8th-grade teachers facilitate the Pathways program, incorporating it into homeroom, advisory, or any other suitable period. Sessions 1 & 2 involve engaging activities that prompt students to visualize their potential adult selves, aligning these visions with their current social identities. Session 3 helps students discern between positive role models and potentially detrimental influences in their lives. Session 4 guides students in crafting timelines linking their present to their envisioned future, acknowledging potential hurdles and emerging opportunities. Sessions 5-7 emphasize skill development, where students devise strategies to achieve their aspirations and sidestep potential pitfalls. Activities reinforce the notion that facing difficulties is a standard aspect of growth, and remaining sessions involve reflection and application. Students collaborate in small groups, deliberating on each session to strengthen their grasp of core concepts. Central themes include the universality of valuing education, the collective aspiration for a brighter future, the inevitability of challenges, and the normality of occasional setbacks. Throughout the program, facilitators maintain a structured environment that continuously emphasizes overarching themes and meta-messages embedded within each activity.

The program was evaluated in a randomized controlled trial with a sample of 264 Black (72%) and Latino (17%) 8th graders in a Detroit middle school in the early 2000s. Two-thirds received (66%) free or reduced-price lunch and 54.1% of households in the student's neighborhoods were poor. The program reduced school absences by -0.21 standard deviations at 24 months follow-up (approximately 22 months post-intervention).[137]

Behavior Problems

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America was the only rigorously-evaluated intervention that was identified to reduce behavior problems.

137 Oyserman, D., Bybee, D., & Terry, K. (2006). Possible selves and academic outcomes: How and when possible selves impel action. Journal of personality and social psychology, 91(1), 188.

Table 4. Behavior Problem Interventions

Intervention	Study Population	Outcome
Big Brothers Big Sisters of America	Children were ages 9 to 14 and lived on the West Coast. 40% were White, 28% Black, 21% Latino, and 11% Other.	Reduced parent-reported measures of conduct problems by .14 standard deviations.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America

Summary

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) is a national mentoring program that pairs youth with trained volunteer mentors. Mentors and mentees meet weekly in school or community settings, building relationships through ongoing support. The organization also offers specialized programs for targeted populations.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) fosters mentoring relationships that are designed to promote positive youth development through consistent, supportive interactions. Matches typically meet once a week either in site-based settings, such as schools, or in community-based environments. Activities range from casual conversations and academic support to recreational outings and cultural events. BBBSA agencies provide ongoing training and support to both mentors ("Bigs") and mentees ("Littles") to foster the development of a trusting and growth-oriented relationship. In addition to its core mentoring model, BBBSA offers specialized programs for specific populations, including Latino and Native American youth, children of incarcerated parents, and military families, as well as activity-based mentoring programs such as Sports Buddies and workplace mentoring. Each local agency operates independently but adheres to BBBSA's national standards for service delivery.

The program was evaluated through a randomized controlled trial conducted at two BBBSA agencies located on the West Coast.[138] The study enrolled 764 youth between the ages of 9 and 14, of whom 42% were female. The sample was 40% White, 28% Black, 21% Latino, and 11% other. Participants were randomly assigned either to the treatment group (n = 379), which made them immediately eligible to be matched with a mentor, or to the control group (n = 385), which placed them on a 13-month waitlist. Follow-up data were obtained from 654 youth, representing 87% of the treatment group and 84% of the control group.

The evaluation study measured a range of youth-reported outcomes, including depressive symptoms, prosocial behavior, social acceptance, parent–child relationship quality, misconduct, academic self-perception, school attendance, and academic performance. Caregivers completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) at baseline and follow-up. The intervention lasted for one year. In an intent-to-treat analysis, the program led to a statistically significant reduction in parent-reported conduct problems, with an effect size of .14 standard deviations. These findings suggest that structured mentoring through BBBSA can modestly but meaningfully reduce behavioral issues in youth, particularly in terms of caregiver-observed misconduct.

138 Herrera, C., DuBois, D. L., Heubach, J., & Grossman, J. B. (2023). Effects of the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America Community-Based Mentoring Program on social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes of participating youth: A randomized controlled trial. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 144, Article 106742

Disciplinary Referrals

Two interventions reduced school disciplinary referrals among middle school students: My Teaching Partner Secondary and the Social Belonging Intervention. Both drew on large samples but operated through different mechanisms at different intensities. MTP-S worked indirectly through teachers, providing year-long coaching cycles to improve classroom interactions; the study sample was 59% Black and 9% Latino. The Social Belonging Intervention delivered just two hours of content across two sessions to help sixth graders normalize feelings of not fitting in during the transition to middle school. The study tested this approach with students in a midwestern school district, 44% of whom were Black, Latino, or Native American.

Table 5. Disciplinary Referral Reduction Interventions

Intervention	Study Population	Outcome
My Teaching Partner Secondary	Middle and high school teachers. Students affected were Black (59%), Latino (9%) and White.	At one-year post-intervention (2 years after the start of the intervention), disciplinary referrals for black students fell by 67% (.21 standard deviations).
The Social Belonging Intervention	6th graders in a Midwestern public school district. 44% of students were Black, Latino or Native American.	At approximately 8 months post-intervention, the district saw a 34% reduction in disciplinary referrals.

My Teaching Partner Secondary

Summary

My Teaching Partner Secondary (MTP-S) is a professional development program for middle and high school teachers that focuses on improving classroom interaction skills to improve student learning and development.

The primary aim of MTP-S is to refine classroom interaction skills, ultimately boosting student learning and growth. At the heart of the MTP-S approach is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System-Secondary (CLASS-S), a tool that provides a structured assessment of the quality of teacher-student interactions. CLASS-S categorizes classroom behaviors into three primary domains: Emotional, Organizational, and Instructional Support. Each domain is further subdivided into specific dimensions. MTP-S coaches utilize CLASS-S as a guiding framework to help teachers cultivate classrooms that are emotionally positive, motivating, and sensitive to the socioemotional and academic needs of students. Over the course of the academic year, the coaches steer teachers' focus towards each dimension of CLASS-S via structured "coaching cycles." The essence of these cycles remains rooted in the CLASS-S dimensions, with each cycle culminating in a coach's written reflection that pinpoints specific teacher behaviors within the CLASS-S framework.

The coaching cycle involves a five-step process: 1) Recording: Teachers capture classroom instruction on video. From this footage, coaches isolate segments that represent both the strengths and areas of growth according to CLASS-S dimensions. 2) Feedback: Coaches send back the selected video clips to the teachers, accompanied by written observations. These observations, grounded in the CLASS-S criteria, highlight the effect of teacher-

student interactions on students. Furthermore, they are crafted to bolster teachers' ability to self-assess. 3) Reflection: After viewing the clips, teachers write their own responses to the prompts provided. 4) Discussion: Through a phone call or online conversation, the teacher and coach jointly review the video segments, feedback, and the teacher's reflections. 5) Planning for Improvement: The cycle concludes with the coach drafting a summary of the discussions, including a strategic action plan for improvement, always tied back to the CLASS-S dimensions. To supplement the coaching process, coaches can also direct teachers to a video library available on the MTP-S website. This resource offers a deeper dive into the CLASS-S dimensions. The video content, sourced from real classrooms, comes with written explanations that shed light on teacher practices corresponding to specific CLASS-S dimensions.

In 2010, MTP-S was evaluated in a randomized controlled trial with a sample of 86 teachers from 5 middle and high schools who provided instruction to 1,163 students. The student sample was 52% male and primarily Black (59%) with a smaller portion that was Latino (9%). About 2 out 5 students (41%) qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), with the median household income of the district's catchment area ranging from $35,000 to $50,000 annually. Teachers were predominantly White (56%) and Black (33%) with a small Latino contingent (1%). At one-year post-intervention (2 years after the start of the intervention), disciplinary referrals for black students fell by 67% (.21 standard deviations). The Black-White gap in disciplinary referrals was eliminated in classrooms where teachers received the intervention compared to control classrooms. Reductions among non-Black students were not significant.[139]

The Social Belonging Intervention

Summary

The Social Belonging Intervention is a single or multi-session, classroom-based program designed to safeguard students' sense of belonging by conveying the general principle that worries about belonging during academic transitions are common and will typically diminish over time.

The Social Belonging intervention is a brief intervention focused on helping boost the sense of belonging for students transitioning into middle school.[140] It was delivered over two 30-60 minute class sessions. The intervention is portrayed to students as a collaborative endeavor to gather insights regarding their transition to middle school, which will aid future students. Students are informed that they will analyze insights and narratives from past students and contribute their own experiences and knowledge to provide upcoming students with clearer expectations of the transition. In this light, participants are viewed as contributors and partners in an initiative meant to assist others, rather than being the recipients of an intervention or a targeted message. The intervention includes:

(1) Information describing the experience of students in the transition to middle school, which directly conveys the intervention message that it's normal for students to initially feel out of place in a new school. Such feelings don't signify that they don't belong. In fact, over time, most students typically feel integrated and comfortable in the new environment.

(2) Diverse stories from older students are provided that showcase the main intervention message.

(3) Interactive segments that allow current students to link the message to their own experiences and express it in their own words.

139 Gregory, A., Hafen, C. A., Ruzek, E., Mikami, A. Y., Allen, J. P., & Pianta, R. C. (2016). Closing the racial discipline gap in classrooms by changing teacher practice. *School psychology review*, 45(2), 171-191.
140 Borman, G. D., Rozek, C. S., Pyne, J., & Hanselman, P. (2019). Reappraising academic and social adversity improves middle school students' academic achievement, behavior, and well-being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,* 116(33), 16286-16291

After engaging with the content, students reflect on their own transition experiences, comparing them with those of previous students. They're informed that their insights might be shared with upcoming students to set realistic expectations about school transitions.[141]

The intervention was evaluated using a double-blind randomized controlled trial with a sample of 1,304 sixth graders in a midwestern public school district. Forty-four percent (44%) of students were Black, Latino or Native American and 50% were female. The intervention was administered twice for two hours in total: 1 hour in September of the school year and 1 hour in October-November. The intervention was administered by regular teachers in home room and English Language Arts classes. At approximately 8 months post-intervention, treated students saw a 34% reduction in disciplinary referrals compared to non-treated students.[142]

School Suspensions

Six interventions reduced school suspensions through approaches that varied widely in intensity, target population, and approach. They included: the Self-Affirmation intervention, Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Practices, Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP), the Empathic Discipline intervention, and the Student Threat Assessment. Self-Affirmation and the Empathic Discipline Intervention represent minimal-intensity approaches: the former engages students in brief classroom writing exercises reflecting on personal values, while the latter shifts teacher mindsets through a single 45-70 minute online module. Both produced substantial reductions in racial discipline gaps. At higher intensity, Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways delivered 25 weekly sessions teaching conflict resolution to middle schoolers. It was tested with a nearly all-Black sample of sixth graders and was found to reduce in-school suspensions for boys, but not for girls. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports operates as a school-wide multi-tiered framework emphasizing consistent behavioral expectations and data-driven responses. Quasi-experimental studies in California found PBIS reduced out-of-school suspensions across diverse student populations, with particularly strong effects for students with disabilities, though no significant reductions in expulsions. Restorative Practices shift discipline away from punishment toward reconciliation and relationship-building.

Implementation in a district serving predominantly Black and Latino students reduced disciplinary incidents though effects on racial disparities proved inconsistent across studies. Student Threat Assessment provides structured decision-making protocols for responding to threats of violence. Evaluated with a mostly Black and male K-12 sample, it reduced a narrow subset of suspensions that are 10 days or longer as well as alternative school placements. Notable limitations cut across this evidence base. The most rigorous PBIS evaluations were conducted in elementary schools, where suspension rates are lower, leaving questions about effectiveness in middle and high schools where exclusionary discipline peaks. Student Threat Assessment was found to reduce long suspensions (10 days or greater), but not suspensions overall. RIPP reduced suspensions for boys, but not girls and both RIPP and Empathic Discipline intervention reduced in-school suspensions, but not out-of-school suspensions.

141 Walton, Gregory M.; Crum, Alia J.. *Handbook of Wise Interventions: How Social Psychology Can Help People Change*. Guilford Publications.
142 Borman, G. D., Rozek, C. S., Pyne, J., & Hanselman, P. (2019). Reappraising academic and social adversity improves middle school students' academic achievement, behavior, and well-being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 116*(33), 16286-16291

Table 6. Suspension Reduction Interventions

Intervention	Study Population	Outcome
Self-Affirmation	7th graders who were 19% Black, 17% Latino, and 53% White.	At around a year post-intervention, there was a 67% reduction in the disciplinary gap between Black and White students. The intervention did not significantly affect White, Latino, or Asian students.
Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS)	K-12 students in California.	Two quasi-experimental studies in California reported an overall reduction in out-of-school suspensions of 0.25 standard deviations and a larger reduction of 0.41 standard deviations in schools with high-fidelity implementation. Reduced referrals to alternative disciplinary settings for students with disabilities by .65 standard deviations.
Restorative Practices	Elementary, middle, and high school students who were mostly black (54%) and Latino (38%).	After one year of implementation, disciplinary incidents were reduced by 40% (from 18.2% to 11.1%).
Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP)	6th grade students in Richmond, Virginia that were almost entirely Black (96%).	Reduced in-school suspensions by 28% for boys. There was no such reduction for girls.
Empathic Discipline Intervention	Teachers of middle school students that were 17% Black, 15% Latino, 0.3% Native American, and 58% White.	Black and Latino students saw a 45% narrowing in in-school suspension disparities relative to their White peers, decreasing the gap from 10.6 to 5.9 percentage points.
Student Threat Assessment	Student grade levels ranged from kindergarten to 12th grade, with 44.3% in elementary school, 29.4% in middle school, 26.4% in high school. Most participants (73%) were boys. 24% were White, 73% Black and 3% Latino.	Reduced suspensions longer than 10 days by 49% (25% treatment vs. 49% control) and alternative school placement by 80% (4% treatment vs. 20% control).

Self-Affirmation

Summary

The Self-Affirmation intervention is a brief classroom writing exercise in which middle or high school students reflect on personally meaningful values. By reinforcing students' sense of self-worth, the intervention buffers against stereotype threat and improves their ability to cope with academic challenges.

The Self-Affirmation intervention is conducted during single or multiple classroom sessions with middle school or older students. The values writing task is the predominant technique for self-affirmation.[143] Designed to address and mitigate threats stemming from negative stereotypes, values-affirmation interventions employ exercises that encourage students to contemplate and articulate values that are important to them. During this exercise, participants read over a list of values and choose one or more that resonate with them personally (e.g. Athletic Ability, Being Good at Art, Creativity, Independence, Living in the Moment, Membership in a Social Group, Music, Politics, Relationships with Friends and Family, Religious Values, Sense of Humor). To maintain engagement throughout the academic year, the content of the exercise is diversified. However, each session consistently probes into self-defining values. Typically, these writing exercises require about 10 minutes of the students' time. By reflecting on their fundamental values, students reconnect with innate sources of self-worth. This restored sense of self-integrity equips them to tackle challenges more effectively.[144]

Two studies assessed the impact of the Self-Affirmation intervention on middle school students. The first included the administration of the self-affirmation exercise over 9 sessions between the 6th and 8th grades. The study took place in a medium-sized suburb on the eastern seaboard, targeting 163 sixth graders. The student body consisted of 50% male, 48% White, 39% Black, and 7% Latino students, with roughly a third participating in the free or reduced-price lunch program. At three years follow-up, there was a 69% decline in disciplinary incidents, encompassing both suspensions and office referrals.[145]

The second study included 2,149 seventh graders across 11 middle schools in Madison, Wisconsin and involved the administration of the self-affirmation exercise multiple times over a single school year. The participating students were 50% male, 19% Black, 17% Latino, and 53% White. At around a year post-intervention, there was a 67% reduction in the disciplinary gap between Black and White students. This effect was concentrated among previously suspended Black students. However, the intervention did not significantly affect White, Latino, or Asian students.[146]

143 Sherman, D. K., Lokhande, M., Müller, T., & Cohen, G. L. (2020). Self-affirmation interventions. *Handbook of wise interventions: How social-psychological insights can help solve problems*, 63-99.
144 Goyer, J. P., Cohen, G. L., Cook, J. E., Master, A., Apfel, N., Lee, W., ... & Walton, G. M. (2019). Targeted identity-safety interventions cause lasting reductions in discipline citations among negatively stereotyped boys. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 117(2), 229; Also see Walton, Gregory M.; Crum, Alia J.. *Handbook of Wise Interventions: How Social Psychology Can Help People Change* (p. 77). Guilford Publications
145 Binning, K. R., Cook, J. E., Purdie-Greenaway, V., Garcia, J., Chen, S., Apfel, N., ... & Cohen, G. L. (2019). Bolstering trust and reducing discipline incidents at a diverse middle school: How self-affirmation affects behavioral conduct during the transition to adolescence. *Journal of school psychology*, 75, 74-88.
146 Borman, G. D., Pyne, J., Rozek, C. S., & Schmidt, A. (2022). A replicable identity-based intervention reduces the black-white suspension gap at scale. *American Educational Research Journal*, 59(2), 284-314.

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS)

Summary

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a multi-tiered framework that promotes positive student outcomes and reduces exclusionary discipline by implementing consistent behavioral expectations, data-driven decision-making, and proactive instruction through increasingly intensive supports across Tiers 1, 2, and 3.

At its foundation, Tier 1 of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) emphasizes schoolwide teaching of behavioral expectations, monitored by dedicated teams that review discipline data such as office referrals. Students who do not respond to Tier 1 supports receive more targeted interventions through Tier 2 (e.g., Check-In/Check-Out, group-based social skills training). Those requiring even more intensive support receive individualized interventions at Tier 3, including functional behavior assessments that systematically identify environmental variables contributing to behavioral challenges.[147]

Recent reviews of multiple studies have found that implementation of PBIS is associated with reductions in school suspensions.[148] However, a key limitation of the existing research is that the most rigorous evaluations, specifically randomized controlled trials, have been conducted exclusively in elementary schools where suspension rates are generally lower.[149] As a result, less is known about the effectiveness of PBIS in middle and high schools, where suspension rates tend to be highest. Despite this gap, a series of quasi-experimental studies by Gage and colleagues, using statewide data from Georgia and Florida that included both middle and high schools, found that PBIS implementation led to significant reductions in suspensions.[150] These findings have been further supported by two additional studies that replicated the quasi-experimental approach in California, also demonstrating positive effects from PBIS on reducing school suspensions.

Both California studies used propensity score matching to ensure equivalence between treatment and comparison groups. In the first study, researchers used 2015–2016 data to compare 544 schools implementing Tier 1 PBIS with fidelity to 544 matched schools with no PBIS training.[151] The matched sample of 1,088 schools was drawn from an initial pool of 9,755 schools after excluding nontraditional schools (e.g. alternative schools) and those lacking valid outcome data. The student population was diverse and representative of the broader California public school system, including a high proportion of historically marginalized students and schools with elevated rates of disciplinary action. The analysis found statistically significant reductions in out-of-school suspensions (OSS) and missed school days for all students, with particularly large effects among students with disabilities (SWD), who were 0.65 standard deviations less likely to be referred to alternative disciplinary settings. Latino and Black students also benefited from reductions in one-time and repeated suspensions, respectively.

147 Lee, A., & Gage, N. A. (2020). Updating and expanding systematic reviews and meta-analyses on the effects of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports. *Psychology in the Schools*, 57(5), 783-804.
148 Welsh, R. O. (2023). Up the down escalator? Examining a decade of school discipline reforms. Children and Youth Services Review, 150, 106962; Lee, A., & Gage, N. A. (2020). Updating and expanding systematic reviews and meta-analyses on the effects of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports. *Psychology in the Schools*, 57(5), 783-804.
149 See Bradshaw, C. P., Mitchell, M. M., & Leaf, P. J. (2010). Examining the effects of schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports on student outcomes: Results from a randomized controlled effectiveness trial in elementary schools. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 12(3), 133-148 and Weist, M. D., Splett, J. W., Halliday, C. A., Gage, N. A., Seaman, M. A., Perkins, K. A., ... & DiStefano, C. (2022). A randomized controlled trial on the interconnected systems framework for school mental health and PBIS: Focus on proximal variables and school discipline. *Journal of school psychology*, 94, 49-65.
150 See Gage, N. A., Lee, A., Grasley-Boy, N., & Peshak George, H. (2018). The impact of school- wide positive behavior interventions and supports on school suspensions: A statewide quasi- experimental analysis. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 20, 217–226; Gage, N. A., Grasley-Boy, N., Peshak George, H., Childs, K., & Kincaid, D. (2019). A quasi-experimental design analysis of the effects of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports on discipline in Florida. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 21, 50–61; Lee, A., Gage, N. A., McLeskey, J., & Huggins-Manley, A. C. (2021). The impacts of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports on school discipline outcomes for diverse students. *The Elementary School Journal,* 121(3), 410-429
151 Grasley-Boy, N. M., Gage, N. A., & Lombardo, M. (2019). Effect of SWPBIS on disciplinary exclusions for students with and without disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 86(1), 25-39.

In the second study, researchers used 2016–2017 data to evaluate the impact of PBIS at schools recognized for a high degree of implementation fidelity.[152] This study compared 98 implementing schools to 98 matched non-implementing schools drawn from a pool of 10,473 public schools across California. The matched schools had an average enrollment of 623 students, and the sample demographics included 53% Latino, 26% White, 6% Black, 23% English learners, 12% of students receiving special education, and 63% economically disadvantaged. Results showed that PBIS implementation significantly reduced out of school suspensions, with an overall effect size of 0.25 standard deviations. Among schools with the highest fidelity of implementation, the effect size increased to 0.41 standard deviations.

No statistically significant effects were found for expulsions in either study, likely due to the infrequency of expulsions and the possibility that they reflect behavioral incidents not directly addressed by Tier 1 supports.

Restorative Practices

Summary

Restorative Practices (RP) are proactive and responsive strategies used in schools to build relationships, foster accountability, and reduce exclusionary discipline. These strategies include restorative circles, conferencing, and re-entry processes. Whole-school approaches often incorporate staff training, student leadership, and dedicated coordinators to address both overall suspension rates and disparities by race and disability.

Restorative Practices (RP), often used interchangeably with the term restorative justice in education, does not focus on punishment, it emphasizes reconciliation, respect, and relationship-building to address student misconduct and prevent exclusionary discipline such as suspensions and expulsions. Core practices include restorative circles (e.g., community-building and peace circles), restorative conferencing that involves a mediated dialogue between those experiencing harm and those responsible for causing harm, re-entry processes following disciplinary events, and restorative conversations that help students better understand conflict situations, the impacts of their actions and how to repair harm. Whole-school approaches also often involve professional development for staff, leadership opportunities for students, and the appointment of RP coordinators to ensure high-fidelity implementation. The goal of RP is not only to reduce overall rates of suspension but also to address longstanding racial and special education disproportionality in disciplinary outcomes.

Randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental designs, and correlational research all suggest that restorative practices can reduce exclusionary discipline. However, the distribution of these benefits varies across student subgroups and contexts. An integrative review by Samimi et al. (2023) synthesized findings from 11 studies conducted in K–12 schools across the U.S. between 2002 and 2018.[153] These studies, mostly based in middle schools and relying on administrative data, found consistent reductions in suspension rates following RP implementation. Common strategies included peace circles, restorative conferences, and schoolwide community-building activities. In several cases, multi-year implementation yielded steep declines in suspensions. For instance, Armour (2013, 2014) reported year-over-year reductions in out-of-school suspensions of more than 70% for middle school students.[154]

152 Gage, N. A., Grasley-Boy, N., Lombardo, M., & Anderson, L. (2020). The effect of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports on disciplinary exclusions: A conceptual replication. *Behavioral Disorders,* 46(1), 42-53; Fidelity of implementation is measured using the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI), with a threshold of 70% indicating fidelity. Schools may receive recognition at the Gold level (fidelity at Tier 1 and either Tier 2 or 3) or the Platinum level (fidelity across all three tiers). The framework is supported statewide by the California PBIS Coalition, which as of 2017, had expanded its support to more than 2,500 schools.

153 Samimi, C., Han, T. M., Navvab, A., Sedivy, J. A., & Anyon, Y. (2023). Restorative practices and exclusionary school discipline: an integrative review. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 26(1), 28-47.

154 Armour, M. (2013). *Ed White Middle School restorative discipline evaluation: Implementation and impact, 2012/2013, Sixth Grade*. Retrieved from North East Independent School District website: https://irjrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Ed-White-Evaluation-2012-2013.pdf; Armour, M. (2014). *Ed White Middle School restorative discipline evaluation: Implementation and impact, 2013/2014, sixth & seventh grade*. Retrieved from North East Independent School District website: https://irjrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Year-2-Final-EW-Report.pdf

Four separate individual studies employed more rigorous causal research designs. Gregory et al. (2022) conducted a cluster randomized controlled trial of a Whole School Restorative Practices Project across 18 elementary, middle, and high schools in a large Northeastern city, involving 5,878 students.[155] The student sample was mostly Black (54%) and Latino (38%). After one year of implementation, the proportion of students with a discipline incident record was significantly lower in RP schools (11.1%) compared to control schools (18.2%). This effect remained after adjusting for student and school-level characteristics. Although discipline incidents decreased across all sociodemographic groups, the study found no evidence that RP narrowed gaps based on race, gender, or disability status, indicating that disparities persisted even as overall incidents declined.

A second randomized controlled trial, conducted by Augustine et al. (2018), evaluated the SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change Program in the Pittsburgh Public Schools district, encompassing 44 schools across elementary, middle, and high levels.[156] In the second year of implementation, the study found that the program reduced the number of days lost to suspension by 36%, double the rate for non-treatment schools (18%). Notably, the program was effective for Black students, but not White ones. Reduction in overall suspension rates was driven by declines in elementary school rates, not rates for middle and high schools. Moreover, despite reductions in suspensions, academic outcomes overall did not improve and appeared to have worsened in treatment schools compared to nontreatment schools.

In a quasi-experimental study using a difference-in-differences approach, Davison, Penner, and Penner (2022) examined RP implementation over a nine-year period in Meadowview Public Schools, a district that was 63% White, 16% Latino, and 13% Black.[157] Their analysis showed substantial reductions in overall suspension during the first five years of implementation with rates falling from 5.1% in the first year of implementation to 0.4% by year 5. Again, however, these gains were not equitably distributed. While White students saw meaningful improvements, Black students' suspension rates remained largely unchanged, resulting in a widening of racial disparities.

Finally, a longitudinal study in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) evaluated the combined impact of a districtwide suspension ban and the rollout of restorative practices.[158] Drawing on 12 years of student-level administrative data (2003-2015) and an interrupted time series design, the study found steep declines in suspension rates following the suspension ban in 2011–2012. LAUSD's suspension rate was 7.1% in 2004-2005 and decreased at a rate of .60 percentage points a year until 2011. After the adoption of the willful defiance ban, the annual drop in suspension rates accelerated to 1.1 percentage points in 2011-12 and 1.6 percentage points in 2012-13. In 2013-14, the annual drop in the suspension rate slowed to just 0.7 percentage points. However, the rollout of restorative practices in 2014-15 corresponded to a resumption in the steep rate of decline in suspensions, yielding a 1.0 percentage-point decline. The largest suspension declines occurred among students from groups that had historically experienced higher discipline rates, including Latino and low-income students. While the suspension gap between Latino and White/Asian students was effectively eliminated, disparities for Black and special education (SPED) students persisted, though they were significantly reduced.

In summary, restorative practices have demonstrated promise as an alternative to exclusionary discipline, with multiple studies reporting reductions in suspension rates following implementation. However, the extent to which RP reduces disparities by race and disability status is mixed. While some studies observed narrowing gaps for specific student groups, others found that disproportionalities remained or widened. These findings suggest that while RP can be an effective component of broader school discipline reform, its equity goals may require sustained, multiyear implementation and complementary strategies targeted to specifically address racial disparities.

155 Gregory, A., Huang, F., & Ward-Seidel, A. R. (2022). Evaluation of the whole school restorative practices project: One-year impact on discipline incidents. *Journal of school psychology*, 95, 58-71.
156 Augustine, C. H., Engberg, J., Grimm, G. E., Lee, E., Wang, E. L., Christianson, K., & Joseph, A. A. (2018). *Can restorative practices improve school climate and curb suspensions. An evaluation of the impact of restorative practices in a mid-sized urban school district,* 1-112.
157 Davison, M., Penner, A. M., & Penner, E. K. (2022). Restorative for all? Racial disproportionality and school discipline under restorative justice. *American educational research journal*, 59(4), 687-718.
158 Hashim, A. K., Strunk, K. O., & Dhaliwal, T. K. (2018). Justice for all? Suspension bans and restorative justice programs in the Los Angeles Unified School District. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 93(2), 174-189.

Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP)

Summary

Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP) is a school-based violence prevention program for middle school students aged 10–14 that teaches conflict resolution and nonviolence through a structured, manual-guided curriculum of twenty-five weekly sessions focused on social-cognitive problem-solving, hands-on learning, and skill development.

Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP) is a school-based program aimed at preventing violence and aggression among mostly middle school students. The program is designed to teach conflict resolution strategies and skills to students ages 10–14. It uses prevention specialists to deliver a curriculum fostering nonviolence, constructive communication, and achievement. The curriculum involves 25 sessions lasting fifty minutes, typically during social studies or health classes. The program equips students with a social-cognitive problem-solving model and skills to deter violence. With consistent application and reflection on this model, students discern which strategies work best for various scenarios. The teaching approach hinges on three core techniques: practicing the problem-solving model, hands-on learning, and instructional methods. Each session is structured sequentially, with initial ones concentrating on team cohesion and knowledge sharing, while subsequent sessions emphasize skill enhancement and critical thinking.

The program was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial in the 1995-96 school year with 626 sixth grade students in Richmond, Virginia. Students were almost entirely Black (96%) and not enrolled in special education classes. Sessions occurred weekly with a three-week pause in February for achievement tests. To ensure uniformity across schools, a manual guided the implementation process. At the end of the school year, in-school suspensions were reduced by 28% for boys receiving the program. There was no such reduction for girls.[159]

Empathic Discipline Intervention

Summary

The Empathic Discipline Intervention is a brief, online program for teachers that promotes empathy in responding to student misbehavior by encouraging reflection, perspective-taking, and relationship-building through interactive modules, narratives, and guided activities designed to shift disciplinary approaches toward greater understanding and support.

The Empathic Discipline Intervention is a brief online intervention designed to shift teachers' mindsets about misbehavior, yielding greater empathy that entails valuing student's perspectives and maintaining positive relationships to help improve student behavior. The intervention lasts 45 to 70 minutes. It engages middle school teachers, prompting them to reflect on ideal strategies for interacting with students during instances of misbehavior. Using a blend of teacher and student stories, it showcases the importance of understanding students' viewpoints and fostering positive connections even in challenging moments.[160] The intervention material comprises articles, narratives, and reflection exercises. These resources emphasize a holistic approach to misbehavior that is backed by research. The approach addresses students' emotional development, teachers' roles in nurturing prosocial skills, and the significance of valuing students' perspectives, especially during conflicts. The primary goal is to promote empathy in understanding and addressing student misbehavior.

159 Farrell, A. D., Meyer, A. L., Sullivan, T. N., & Kung, E. M. (2003). Evaluation of the Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP) seventh grade violence prevention curriculum. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 12(1), 101-120; Farrell, A. D., Meyer, A. L., & White, K. S. (2001). Evaluation of Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP): A school-based prevention program for reducing violence among urban adolescents. *Journal of clinical child psychology*, 30(4), 451-463.

160 Ibid; Okonofua, J. A., & Ruiz, M. (2020). "Chapter 14: The empathic-discipline intervention" in Walton, Gregory M.; Crum, Alia J.. *Handbook of Wise Interventions: How Social Psychology Can Help People Change*. Guilford Publications.

Instead of merely being recipients, the participating teachers are recognized as seasoned experts in managing student misbehavior. They are encouraged to share their wisdom to mentor and guide newer educators. The intervention further bolsters this by highlighting anecdotes of impactful teachers who have positively influenced students by showing genuine care and understanding. It underscores the potential of such empathetic interactions in molding students into responsible and motivated young adults. One of the key activities involves teachers reflecting on their experiences and their feelings about the intervention materials to pen a letter to a novice teacher, offering insights on building and navigating student relationships. Such reflective exercises enable teachers to internalize and further apply these empathetic strategies.

This intervention underscores the importance of understanding the underlying negative emotions leading to misbehavior while maintaining trust and positivity in teacher-student relationships. An added advantage is its cost-effectiveness; it can be rolled out to a vast number of teachers and students with minimal additional expense. The program is divided into modules. The initial module, offered midway through the Fall semester, presents an article detailing the non-judgmental reasons behind student misbehavior and the transformative power of positive teacher-student relationships. It actively dissuades teachers from labeling misbehaving students as "troublemakers." Instead, it advocates for a more compassionate approach, urging teachers to probe more deeply into the experiences and emotions that might trigger misbehavior, all while preserving a positive rapport.

A follow-up session two months later reinforces these principles. Teachers are reminded of the pivotal role they play, with a particular emphasis on how their genuine care and respect can drastically improve students' attitudes and behaviors. It's worth noting that the quality of relationships between students and teachers is a significant determinant of classroom behavior. Resorting to strict disciplinary actions can jeopardize these bonds. If students perceive a lack of respect and act out, it risks labeling them as "troublemakers" in the teachers' eyes, potentially leading to stricter reactions in the future. This could set off a detrimental cycle of punitive actions and increased misbehavior.

Two studies evaluated the effects of the intervention on school suspensions. The first study involved 31 mostly female (77%) math teachers at five middle schools spread across three California school districts. These teachers instructed a predominantly Latino (54%) group of middle school students (n=1,682), with a smaller Black share (2%). Over the course of a semester, the intervention cut in-school suspensions by half (50%), from 9.6% to 4.8%, for students whose teachers received the intervention. There was no evidence of differences based on race or gender.[161] The second study, conducted in 2017, introduced the intervention to 66 teachers of a diverse sample (n=5,822) of middle school students that was 17% Black, 15% Latino, 0.3% Native American, and 58% White. At the end of the school year, Black and Latino students of treated teachers saw a 45% narrowing in in-school suspension disparities relative to their White peers, decreasing the gap from 10.6 to 5.9 percentage points.[162]

Student Threat Assessment

Summary

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (V-STAG) is a multidisciplinary, school-based intervention in which teams—trained via a one-day workshop and guided by a manual—use a structured decision-making process to classify student threats and respond with an array of appropriate and less exclusionary strategies.

161 Okonofua, J. A., Paunesku, D., & Walton, G. M. (2016). Brief intervention to encourage empathic discipline cuts suspension rates in half among adolescents. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,* 113(19), 5221-5226.
162 Okonofua, J. A., Goyer, J. P., Lindsay, C. A., Haugabrook, J., & Walton, G. M. (2022). A scalable empathic-mindset intervention reduces group disparities in school suspensions. *Science advances*, 8(12), eabj0691.

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (V-STAG) provide a multidisciplinary, school-based process for responding to threats of violence using a structured decision tree rather than zero-tolerance exclusions.[163] A school leader designates a threat assessment team (e.g., principal/assistant principal, school psychologist, counselor, social worker, school resource officer). Teams receive a standard one-day workshop delivered by model developers and a manual outlining roles, legal/ethical considerations, and case exercises. The decision process begins with a structured interview of the student and corroborating witnesses focused on intent and context (Step 1). Teams classify threats as "transient" (no sustained intent; often resolvable with clarification, apology, brief counseling/mediation, and proportionate discipline) or "substantive" when sustained intent or concerning indicators are present (Step 2–3). Substantive threats are further classified as serious (e.g., threaten to assault) or very serious (e.g., threaten to kill/sexually assault or severely injure; weapon involvement typically elevates severity) (Step 4). Responses are scaled to severity: for serious threats, immediate protective actions (parent contact, supervision, warning intended victim, problem-solving) are taken (Step 5). For very serious threats, teams add a mental-health evaluation, consider short-term suspension pending a safety evaluation (long-term exclusion is discouraged), determine law-enforcement involvement as needed, and produce a written safety plan integrating educational, counseling, and security measures (Steps 6–7). The model's overarching aim is to resolve most cases without long-term exclusion, while addressing underlying problems and protecting potential victims.

Student Threat Assessment Guidelines were evaluated in a randomized controlled trial involving 40 schools in a southeastern Virginia urban/suburban district.[164] Schools were randomized to implement V-STAG or continue business-as-usual discipline. The student sample consisted of 201 students who made a threat during the school year (intervention: n = 100; control: n = 101), spanning K–12 (44.3% elementary, 29.4% middle, 26.4% high). Most (73%) were boys, 24% White, 73% were Black and 3% were Latino. Outcomes were observed over the school year in which threats occurred. Controlling for gender, race, school level, and threat severity, students in V-STAG schools were more likely to receive supportive responses such as counseling (OR = 3.98) and parent conferences (OR = 2.57), and less likely to receive long-term suspension of 10 or more days (OR = 0.35) or alternative school placement (OR = 0.13). Raw percentages illustrate these shifts: long-term suspension 25% vs. 49% (intervention vs. control), counseling 56% vs. 25%, parent conference 75% vs. 55%, and alternative placement 4% vs. 20%; victim's-parent notification was similar (79% vs. 81%). Higher implementation fidelity was associated with lower odds of long-term suspension (OR = 0.73).

Delinquency and Arrests

Four interventions, all evaluated in large field trials, reduced arrests among adolescents in high-violence urban neighborhoods, though they varied in setting, duration, and approach: Choose to Change, Boston Youth Summer Employment (SYEP), One Summer Plus, and Becoming a Man (BAM). Choose to Change, Boston Summer Youth Employment, and One Summer Plus operated in community settings, while Becoming a Man was delivered in schools. All four served predominantly Black and Latino youth from low-income families and schools. Despite differing in intensity and duration, the programs share a common theoretical foundation in cognitive behavioral approaches that help youth regulate emotions and reframe responses to conflict. Choose to Change combined intensive mentoring with trauma-informed group therapy over six months; the summer employment programs (Boston SYEP and One Summer Plus) paired subsidized jobs with job-readiness training or social-emotional learning; and Becoming a Man provided yearlong weekly group sessions with trained counselors who maintained ongoing relationships with participants. Importantly, One Summer Plus and Becoming a Man enrolled only males, leaving uncertain whether these approaches work for young women at risk of justice involvement.

163 Cornell, D. G., Allen, K., & Fan, X. (2012). A randomized controlled study of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in kindergarten through grade 12. *School Psychology Review,* 41(1), 100-115.
164 Ibid.

Table 7. Arrest Reducing Interventions

Intervention	Study Population	Outcome
Choose to Change	Youth were ages 13-18 from Chicago and were nearly all Black (95%). More than half were male (57%), almost all were low-income (95% FRPL), 35% previously arrested, and 20% had a gap in enrollment during prior year.	At 36 months post-randomization, decreased violent crime arrests by 16% (3.1 percentage points).
Boston Youth Summer Employment (SYEP)	Youth had a mean age of 16 and were 53% female, 51% Black, and 9% White. 18% of youth's families were on public assistance.	At 17 months post-intervention, violent-crime arraignments among the treatment group decreased 35% relative to the control group, with roughly 2.5 fewer arraignments per 100 youth. The percentage decline for property crime arraignments was 57% during this same time period.
One Summer Plus	Black (95%) and low-income youth (92% FRPL) living in Chicago. Mean age was 16.7.	At 14 months post-intervention, violent crime arrests decreased for participants by 43%.
Becoming a Man	Largely Black (69%) and Latino (29%) 9th and 10th graders from Chicago living in low-income, racially segregated and high violence neighborhoods. Students in the study sample were 100% male with an average age of 15.6 years.	At 24 months follow-up (0 months post-intervention), participation in BAM reduced total arrests by 35%, violent-crime arrests by 50%, and other arrests by 43%.

Choose to Change

Summary

Choose to Change (C2C) is a six-month intervention for high-risk youth that combines intensive, advocate-led mentoring with trauma-informed group therapy using a curriculum that helps address the social and psychological roots of violence.

Choose to Change (C2C) combines individualized, advocate-led wraparound services with group-based, trauma-informed therapy for high-risk youth.[165] The program is designed to address both the social and psychological drivers of youth violence and justice system involvement. C2C pairs youth with trained advocates from Youth

165 Abdul-Razzak, N., & Hallberg, K. (2024). *Unpacking the Impacts of a Youth Behavioral Health Intervention: Experimental Evidence from Chicago. EdWorkingPaper No. 24-1053*. Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Advocate Programs (YAP) who provide intensive mentoring, support, and advocacy, meeting with youth individually for at least eight hours per week. These relationships are built through persistent, strength-based engagement and include one-on-one sessions, family meetings, and group recreational activities such as sports, outings, and community events. Advocates offer 24/7 support and maintain frequent communication with participants between formal sessions. Notably, C2C adheres to a "No Reject, No Eject" policy, ensuring that youth remain in the program regardless of their personal circumstances, emerging challenges, or non-compliance with program rules.

In addition to mentoring, youth participate in trauma-informed group therapy sessions using the Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress (SPARCS) curriculum. Led by Master's-level clinicians (referred to as "coaches" to reduce stigma), SPARCS focuses on six domains: emotional and behavioral regulation, attention and awareness, self-concept, relationships, physical health, and hope. The curriculum draws from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), using interactive exercises to help youth develop coping skills, resolve conflicts, and identify the impact of trauma on their behavior. Advocates attend SPARCS sessions with youth and reinforce therapeutic strategies during their mentoring sessions, creating opportunities for applied learning and behavior change across multiple contexts.

Youth are referred to Choose to Change (C2C) by community-based organizations, public agencies, or their middle or high schools based on assessments indicating a heightened risk of involvement in violence or the legal system. Once a referral is made, C2C advocates reach out to the youth and their families to introduce the program and obtain consent for participation. Advocates employ a persistent, community-driven approach to engagement, often relying on local connections and multiple outreach strategies to locate and recruit participants. This intensive effort results in a 62% participation rate.

Throughout the six-month program, advocates maintain close relationships with the youth through regular one-on-one meetings, family sessions, and weekly group-based recreational activities. These group outings, which may include basketball games, movie nights, or shared meals, are designed to be enjoyable while also serving as opportunities for trust-building and connection. Advocates also provide 24/7 support, staying in close contact with participants via phone calls and text messages between scheduled sessions.

The C2C intervention was evaluated starting in 2015 as part of a randomized controlled trial conducted in Chicago. The study sample consisted of 2,074 youth, aged 13 to 18, predominantly Black (95%), 57% male, and nearly all qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (95%). About 35% had a prior arrest, and 20% had a recent gap in school enrollment. The evaluation tracked outcomes for up to 36 months after randomization. In the intent-to-treat (ITT) analysis, the program reduced the likelihood of violent crime arrest by 16% (3.1 percentage points) with statistically significant effects emerging as early as 12 months.

Boston Youth Summer Employment (SYEP)

Summary

The Boston Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) is a six-week program for Boston residents aged 14 to 24. Participants receive subsidized summer jobs at minimum wage along with 20 hours of job-readiness training. The program connects approximately 10,000 youth annually to roles in community organizations, city agencies, nonprofits, and private businesses.

The Boston Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) offers subsidized minimum-wage employment to adolescents ages 14 to 24 during the summer. The program operates on an annual budget of around $10 million, sourced from city, state, and private sectors. It connects approximately 10,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 24 with 900 local employers each summer. Throughout a span of 6 weeks, from early July to mid-August, participants work up to 25 hours weekly and earn the Massachusetts minimum wage. The youth may find

themselves working in subsidized roles, such as those in community organizations, nonprofits, or city agencies, or they might secure positions in the private sector where their wages are paid directly by the employer. The program also incorporates a comprehensive 20-hour job-readiness training. The hands-on curriculum includes modules focused on recognizing personal strengths and skills, developing essential soft skills like communication and teamwork, and practical job search techniques that range from crafting resumes and cover letters to navigating interviews.[166]

The program was evaluated in 2015 using a randomized controlled trial with a sample of 4,235 adolescents (average age of 16) that were 53% female, 51% Black, and 10% White. About 20% of these youths' families were on public assistance. At 17 months post-intervention, violent-crime arraignments among the treatment group decreased by 35% relative to the control group, with roughly 2.5 fewer arraignments per 100 youth. The percentage decline for property crimes was 57% during this same time. The program had a greater impact on reducing the number of arraignments for violent crimes among males (−0.071 arraignments per youth).[167]

One Summer Plus

Summary

One Summer Plus (OSP) is a Chicago-based summer employment program for male youth ages 16–22 living in high-violence neighborhoods. The program combines minimum-wage jobs, mentorship, and a socio-emotional learning (SEL) component rooted in cognitive behavioral therapy to help youth build work skills, regulate emotions, and stay engaged through post-summer, community-based activities.

One Summer Plus (OSP) is a summer jobs program that links Chicago students (8th grade to 12th grade) who attend high schools in some of the most violent neighborhoods in the city with minimum wage summer jobs ($8.25 an hour in 2012).[168] In addition to offering summer employment, One Summer Plus (OSP) offered a socio-emotional learning (SEL) module for some students. This component encompasses group sessions rooted in cognitive behavioral therapy, enabling students to grasp and regulate their feelings, thoughts, and actions. While students in the exclusive job program commit 25 hours weekly, those in the combined jobs+SEL initiative split their 25 hours between work (15 hours) and SEL sessions (10 hours). Youth participants were given summer jobs spanning five hours daily, five days a week, at the then minimum wage. Every participant was paired with a job mentor who is an adult committed to guiding them in cultivating employment skills and addressing potential employment obstacles. The mentor-student ratio stood at approximately 10:1. Mentor profiles varied: some were part of the program staff, some were college students on summer break, and others were temporary community workers. All mentors underwent an initial day-long training, which was further refined and expanded in subsequent program iterations. They also received a salary.

The Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) managed the program in collaboration with local non-profit organizations who oversaw applicant recruitment, brief training for the youths, mentor hiring, employer recruitment, student-job matching, daily meal and transportation support, ongoing progress monitoring, and securing alternative placements if needed. Program eligibility was confined to individuals aged 16-22, a move designed to circumvent the complexities associated with procuring work permits for those aged 14 and 15. Post-summer, DFSS motivated participants to stay engaged with activities presented by community service agencies, encompassing a blend of further SEL sessions, job mentorship, and community engagements like sports events and DJ workshops. These post-summer activities were less rigorous, and instead of an hourly wage, students earned a nominal stipend of around $200. Given the city's emphasis on curtailing violence, the DFSS program participation was limited to male youth.

166 Ibid.
167 Modestino, A. S. (2019). How do summer youth employment programs improve criminal justice outcomes, and for whom? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 38(3), 600-628.
168 Heller, S. B. (2014). Summer jobs reduce violence among disadvantaged youth. *Science,* 346(6214), 1219-1223.

OSP was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial starting in 2012 with a sample of 1,634 males who were mostly Black (95%) and low-income (92% FRPL). Youth were an average age of 16.7 years old and resided in neighborhoods where 33% of the residents lived below the poverty line. About 20% had baseline arrests. At 14 months post-intervention, violent crime arrests decreased for participants by 43 percent.[169]

Becoming a Man

Summary

Becoming a Man (BAM) is a yearlong school-based program for high school boys, particularly young males of color from disadvantaged backgrounds. Participants attend weekly group sessions and receive individual support from trained counselor-mentors. Grounded in cognitive behavioral therapy, the curriculum builds social-emotional skills and core values through supportive relationships and consistent engagement.

Becoming a Man's (BAM) core objective is to aid young men in their transition to adulthood. It achieves this by offering a light-touch form of group-based cognitive behavioral therapy led by relatable mentor facilitators and fostering the development of social-emotional skills and core values. Participants engage in weekly group sessions, typically consisting of 8 to 15 students, for a minimum of a year. They also receive individual counseling and participate in a 30-lesson "rites-of-passage" curriculum. This curriculum encompasses a range of activities, from hands-on exercises to role-playing. A unique feature of the program is that students forgo one of their regular classes to attend these sessions, which provides an incentive to participate.[170]

BAM is built around five foundational pillars:[171]

1. **Safe Space:** The BAM meeting room is perceived by the youth as a sort of sanctuary within the school. It's a space that is made by counselors to feel both welcoming and respectful.

2. **Core Values:** These form the backbone of the curriculum and provide a consistent language for participants. They are experienced and internalized through various activities. Interestingly, the interpretation and definition of these core values varied among participants and counselors.

3. **Activities and Missions:** Beyond aligning with the core values, these activities foster camaraderie, responsibility, and ownership among the youth. Counselors design these missions to help participants perceive challenges differently, enhance communication skills, and build group unity.

4. **Check-Ins:** These group sessions, centered on personal sharing and discussion, are a central feature of BAM. It offers participants rare opportunities to express their life challenges candidly and find solace and support among their peers.

5. **Relationships:** Through BAM, participants experienced a unique sense of belonging and participation. As one participant shared, the program feels like a collective journey rather than an individual one. Respect and admiration for their counselors were a commonly expressed sentiment among participants.

The role of the counselors in BAM is multifaceted. Counselors, who are male and college-educated or higher, receive training throughout the academic year in the BAM model. BAM strives to recruit counselors from neighborhoods similar to those in which they'll be working. Counselors actively introduce themselves to various school stakeholders, ensuring a smooth integration for the program. Beyond facilitating group

169 Heller, S. B. (2014). Summer jobs reduce violence among disadvantaged youth. *Science*, 346(6214), 1219-1223.
170 Ibid.
171 Lansing, J., & Rapoport, E. (2016). *Bolstering belonging in BAM and beyond: Youth Guidance's Becoming a Man (BAM) Program components, experiential processes, and mechanisms. A report to Youth Guidance*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

sessions, counselors frequently engage with participants individually, helping to address academic, familial, or peer-related challenges. These interactions range from hallway chats and lunchtime discussions to after-school activities. In some cases, counselors even liaise with students' families or maintain touchpoints over weekends through calls or texts. Counselors are also available to students outside regular hours, which many students considered pivotal. This amplified the genuine care and concern they felt from their counselors. However, this extended engagement also posed challenges for counselors in maintaining a work-life balance.

Starting in 2013, the Becoming a Man (BAM) program was evaluated as part of a randomized controlled trial with a sample of 2,740 largely Black (69%) and Latino (29%) 9th and 10th graders living on the south and west sides of Chicago in low-income, racially segregated, and high violence neighborhoods. Students in the study sample were 100% male with an average age of 15.6 years. At program conclusion, participation in BAM reduced total arrests by 35%, violent-crime arrests by 50%, and other arrests by 43%. At 5 years post-intervention, BAM participation increased high school graduation rates by 19%.[172]

High School Grades and Test Scores

High dosage tutoring has been touted as an effective strategy for improving high school grades and test scores for low-performing students. A study by Nickow et al (2024) meta-analyzed 89 high dosage tutoring field experiments to yield an estimated pooled effect on learning outcomes of .29 standard deviations.[173] This is substantively large in comparison to most existing educational interventions.[174] However, a significant limitation of the existing body of evidence is its disproportionate focus on elementary schools. In fact, only 5 of the 89 studies identified in Nickow et al (2024) include middle and high school students, and only 3 of those studies were conducted in the United States.[175] A second limitation is that the strongest evidence for high dosage tutoring with adolescents is for math outcomes, not reading ones.[176] For improving math test scores and grades, however, one program called Saga Education stands out.

172 Heller, S. B., Shah, A. K., Guryan, J., Ludwig, J., Mullainathan, S., & Pollack, H. A. (2017). Thinking, fast and slow? Some field experiments to reduce crime and dropout in Chicago. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 132(1), 1-54.
173 Nickow, A., Oreopoulos, P., & Quan, V. (2024). The Promise of Tutoring for PreK–12 Learning: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence. *American Educational Research Journal*, 61(1), 74-107.
174 Kraft, M. A. (2020). Interpreting effect sizes of education interventions. *Educational researcher*, 49(4), 241-253
175 See Guryan, J., Ludwig, J., Bhatt, M. P., Cook, P. J., Davis, J. M., Dodge, K., Farkas, G., Fryer, R. G., Jr., Mayer, S., Pollack, H., Steinberg, L., & Stoddard, G. (2023). Not too late: Improving academic outcomes among adolescents. *American Economic Review*, 113(3), 738–765; Parker, D. C., Nelson, P. M., Zaslofsky, A. F., Kanive, R., Foegen, A., Kaiser, P., & Heisted, D. (2019). Evaluation of a math intervention program implemented with community support. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 12(3), 391–412; Harper, J., & Schmidt, F. (2016). Effectiveness of a group-based academic tutoring program for children in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 67, 238–246; Hickey, A. J., & Flynn, R. J. (2019). Effects of the TutorBright tutoring programme on the reading and mathematics skills of children in foster care. *Oxford Review of Education*, 45(4), 519–537; Marquis, R. (2013). *Gender effects of a foster parent-delivered tutoring program on foster children's academic skills and mental health* [Unpublished graduate thesis]. University of Ottawa.
176 Two of the three high dosage tutoring programs in Nickow et al (2024) that include U.S. middle and high school students, also the largest RCTs, focus on math outcomes only.

High Dosage Tutoring: Saga Education

Summary

Saga Education is a daily, school-based math tutoring program that pairs ninth and tenth grade students with trained tutors, primarily recent college graduates, for personalized instruction aligned with both foundational skills and current math coursework. In the 2018–19 academic year, the program introduced a cost-effective modification that combined in-person tutoring with computer-assisted learning, allowing students to alternate between small-group instruction and adaptive online math practice.

Three separate U.S. based randomized controlled trials conducted in Chicago, Illinois have demonstrated the effectiveness of Saga Education for improving math test scores and grades for disadvantaged high school students, particularly males. The first study involved a combination of Saga Education (then called MATCH tutoring) with the Becoming a Man program and was evaluated during the 2012-13 academic year. The second evaluation focused on Saga Education and was evaluated in the 2012-13 and 2013-14 academic years. The last study was conducted in the 2018-19 academic year and focused on a modified version of Saga Education that included an online tutoring platform.

Table 8. Grade and Test Score Interventions

Intervention	Study Population	Outcome
Becoming a Man and MATCH Tutoring (renamed Saga Education)	Mostly Black (95%) males in the 9th and 10th grades living on the south side of Chicago. Nearly all (99%) of the students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL).	Increased math test scores by .51 standard deviations and math grades by .49 standard deviations.
Saga Education (Chicago Studies 1 and 2)	9th and 10th graders living on the south and west sides of Chicago. Participants were 55% Black, 41% Latino, 4% other and 85% male. The vast majority (89%) were also eligible for FRPL. The mean baseline G.P.A. was 2.2	At 1-year post-randomization, Saga Education increased math test scores by .12 standard deviations and math grades by .22 standard deviations.
Saga Education (Study 1: Chicago)	9th and 10th graders in south and west sides of Chicago. Participants were 24% Black, and 57% Latino. 91% were eligible for FRPL.	Increased math test scores .23 standard deviations (pooled) and improved math grades by .24 GPA points.
Saga Education (Study 2: New York City)	9th and 10th graders in New York City. Participants were 33% Black and 50% Latino. 88% were eligible for FRPL.	

Becoming a Man (BAM) and MATCH Tutoring

BAM, described above, was combined with the high dosage tutoring program formerly called MATCH tutoring. MATCH tutoring (renamed Saga Education) provides personalized tutoring that adapts to the students' changing needs, letting them advance at their own learning pace. The high dosage math tutoring program offers a specialized curriculum that is tied to what students are learning in their regular math classrooms.

BAM combined with MATCH tutoring was evaluated in the 2012-13 school year with a sample of 106 mostly Black (95%) males in the 9th and 10th grades living on the south side of Chicago.[177] Nearly all (99%) of the students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. The evaluation study excluded youth who missed more than 60% of school days in the prior academic year or failed more than 75% of their classes. At baseline, participants had reading and math scores placing them at the 26th and 22nd percentiles of the national test score distribution. Over the course of a school year, participation in the combined intervention increased math test scores by .51 standard deviations compared to the control group. This effect size translates to .48 standard deviations compared to the national distribution. Participation in the combined intervention also increased math grades by .49 standard deviations.

Saga Education

Saga Education offers intensive math tutoring, integrating a specialized curriculum that aligns with students' standard math lessons. The tutors, primarily recent college graduates, are selected for their proficiency in math and their interpersonal aptitude. Before the academic year starts, each tutor undergoes around 100 hours of training. Students participate in tutoring sessions daily, supplementing their regular math classes. For some, this means forgoing an elective course, such as art or physical education. Each session is bifurcated: one half concentrates on addressing skill gaps using Saga's own curriculum, while the other aligns with the students' ongoing math curriculum. In total, a student might engage with Saga for up to 140 hours annually. The demographic makeup of tutors is diverse, with roughly half identifying as Black or Latinx and about 50% female.

A typical Saga session involves a tutor working simultaneously with two students, primarily on the Algebra curriculum. However, foundational math skills are also taught as prerequisites to grasp more complex Algebraic concepts. Each session follows a structured pattern: students start with a short 4- to 5-minute warm-up, followed by 40 minutes of tailored tutoring. The session concludes with students tackling one to three problems that assess their grasp of the day's material. On a typical day, a tutor handles six periods, and to further individualize instruction, Saga implements regular internal assessments. Moreover, to ensure a seamless integration with classroom teaching, Saga site directors liaise weekly with math teachers, ensuring the tutorial covers complementary topics. Beyond just math, tutors also introduce students to general study skills. This includes formal programmatic guidance, like structured problem-solving techniques, and casual advice-driven discussions. Each school's Saga program is supervised by a site director who manages behavioral aspects, coordinates with school staff, and provides tutors with daily feedback and professional development opportunities.

Saga Education was evaluated with a randomized controlled trial for two cohorts of students (2012-13, n=2,633 and 2013-14, n=2,710) in two separate RCTs with samples of 9th and 10th grade students living on the south and west sides of Chicago. In total, 5,343 students were included in both studies combined. The student sample was 55% Black, 41% Latino, 4% other, and 85% male. The vast majority (89%) of students were also eligible for FRPL and had a 2.2 baseline G.P.A. At the conclusion of the program, Saga Education increased math test scores by .12 standard deviations and math grades by .22 standard deviations.[178]

177 Cook, P. J., Dodge, K., Farkas, G., Fryer, R. G., Guryan, J., Ludwig, J., ... & Steinberg, L. (2014). The (surprising) efficacy of academic and behavioral intervention with disadvantaged youth: Results from a randomized experiment in Chicago (No. w19862). National Bureau of Economic Research.
178 Guryan, J., Ludwig, J., Bhatt, M. P., Cook, P. J., Davis, J. M., Dodge, K., ... & Stoddard, G. (2023). Not too late: Improving academic outcomes among adolescents. *American Economic Review*, 113(3), 738-765.

Saga Education (modified with online component)

During the 2018–19 academic year, Saga Education introduced a modified version of its traditional tutoring model to evaluate a more cost-efficient approach that incorporated computer-assisted learning (CAL).[179] This new format involved students working in groups of four, alternating between in-person sessions involving two students and a tutor and independent work by each student on the ALEKS platform every other day. ALEKS (Assessment and Learning in Knowledge Spaces), is a web-based intelligent math platform that customizes instruction based on each student's demonstrated knowledge. Ninth and tenth grade students participated in a daily "Math Lab" course as part of their regular class schedule, which supplemented their standard math instruction. Each tutor worked with a pair of students in a classroom containing around 10 tutors and 20 students. Students typically remained with the same tutor throughout the school year, and sessions were conducted every school day.

The tutoring sessions focused on a combination of math review for prior grade levels and grade-level content, beginning with a short warm-up activity, followed by 40 minutes of personalized instruction, and ending with a brief wrap-up to reinforce the day's lesson. The content was tailored to individual student needs based on frequent formative assessments, and tutors followed a structured curriculum developed by Saga. As part of the revised four-student model, two students worked with the tutor while the other two engaged with ALEKS. ALEKS uses AI-driven diagnostics and provides targeted problem sets, hints, and feedback.

In its evaluation of the modified model, Saga Education hired and trained 72 tutors across two academic years to implement the program in seven high schools in Chicago and New York City. Tutors were primarily recent college graduates selected for their math proficiency and interpersonal skills, and each received approximately 100 hours of training before the school year began. Tutors taught for six class periods each day and worked with about 24 students in total. They received ongoing feedback and professional development from on-site directors, who also handled school coordination and student behavior management. To support the CAL component, Saga employed two specialized program directors to oversee the integration of the ALEKS platform. This blended model maintained the core elements of Saga's personalized tutoring while reducing instructional costs by combining in-person support with adaptive technology.

The modified version of Saga Education was evaluated through two large-scale randomized controlled trials conducted across high schools in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) systems.[180] The combined study sample included 3,906 ninth- and tenth-grade students. In the first cohort (academic year 2018–19), 2,005 students from six schools were randomly assigned to either a treatment group receiving Saga's blended in-person and computer-assisted tutoring model or to a control group that continued with standard school classes. A second cohort of 9th and 10th graders, randomized in the 2019–20 academic year, included an additional 1,841 students from seven schools. Students were excluded from the study if they had failed more than 75% of their classes the previous year, missed over 60% of enrolled school days, or had disabilities that the tutoring program was not designed to accommodate.

The participant population was predominantly low-income, with 91% of cohort 1 and 88% of cohort 2 qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. In cohort 1, 24% of students identified as Black and 57% as Latinx; in cohort 2, the racial composition was 33% Black and 50% Latinx. On average, students in both cohorts were chronically absent missing around 15 school days in the year prior to the study. Baseline academic performance was modest, with cohort 1 students earning roughly C+ grades in both math and non-math subjects, while cohort 2 students had slightly lower math grades, averaging around a C.

The intervention lasted for one full academic year and included daily, scheduled tutoring sessions in addition to students' regular math classes. The primary outcome measure was performance on standardized math assessments administered at the end of the school year. The intent-to-treat (ITT) analysis found an improvement

179 Bhatt, M. P., Guryan, J., Khan, S. A., LaForest-Tucker, M., & Mishra, B. (2024). *Can technology facilitate scale? Evidence from a randomized evaluation of high dosage tutoring* (No. w32510). National Bureau of Economic Research
180 Ibid.

of 0.19 standard deviations in math scores, while the treatment-on-the-treated (TOT) effect was 0.23 standard deviations. These gains are equivalent to approximately one to one-and-a-half years of additional math learning. Additionally, the program produced a 0.24-point increase in math GPA (TOT)—equivalent to roughly a quarter of a letter grade—and reduced the math course failure rate (TOT) by 22% (from 21.2% to 16.6%).

Longitudinal data from the first cohort revealed that these gains were largely sustained beyond the intervention year. Six months after program completion, students in the treatment group still exhibited a statistically significant TOT effect of 0.145 GPA points, retaining about 61% of the gains observed at the end of the tutoring year. The reduction in course failure rates also remained substantial at one year post-intervention, with a 20% decrease relative to the control group. Overall, the findings suggest that Saga Education's tutoring model not only improves immediate academic outcomes but also has durable effects on students' math achievement and course performance.

Behavioral health/Substance Use

Two interventions were identified that reduced substance use for adolescents: Familias Unidas and the Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach (A-CRA). Both programs target adolescent substance use through family engagement, but they differ in cultural specificity and setting. Familias Unidas is a culturally tailored intervention for Latino families, delivered in school and community settings. It was evaluated with Latino families of delinquent adolescents in Miami-Dade County, Florida. A-CRA takes a broader, non-culturally specific approach, delivering sessions to adolescents and their caregivers in outpatient treatment settings. Both programs share a theoretical commitment to family involvement as central to reducing substance use.

Table 9. Behavioral Health Interventions

Intervention	Population Treated	Outcome
Families Unidas	Latino adolescents ages 12-17 with histories of delinquency.	Decreased overall substance use by 25% (44.4% to 33.3%) over 12 months. Decreased illicit drug use by 23% (from 29.1% to 22.5%) over 12 months.
Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach (A-CRA)	Youth ages 12-25 that were 61% White, 30% Black, 6% multiracial or other, and 4% Latino.	A-CRA participants had a recovery rate of 34%, compared to 23% for MET/CBT5 and 19% for MDFT (differences were not statistically significant).

Families Unidas

Summary

Familias Unidas is a 12-week family intervention culturally tailored for Latino adolescents. The program combines group and family sessions to strengthen parenting skills and enhance parent-child communication. By increasing active parental involvement, it aims to prevent substance use and sexual risk behaviors.

Familias Unidas is a culturally tailored, family-based intervention designed to prevent substance use and sexual risk behaviors among Latino adolescents by strengthening parenting skills and promoting family involvement.[181] The 12-week program consists of eight multi-parent group sessions and four family sessions that focus on improving communication, enhancing parental investment in adolescents' lives, and fostering skills to help parents guide their children away from risky behaviors. Sessions are held in school and community settings and are facilitated by trained staff using a participatory approach, with content emphasizing parental responsibility, peer and school influences, and culturally relevant stressors.

The effectiveness of Familias Unidas was evaluated through a randomized controlled trial involving 242 Latino families with delinquent youth ages 12 to 17 years (mean age = 14.7) in Miami-Dade County, Florida.[182] The sample included 156 males and 86 females, and participants were randomly assigned to either the Familias Unidas intervention or a Community Practice control group. Data were collected at baseline, and at 3- and 9-months post-intervention. Results showed that Familias Unidas significantly reduced youth substance use and illicit drug use in the previous 90 days, as well as alcohol dependence diagnoses and the likelihood of having sex under the influence of substances. Specifically, illicit drug use decreased in the intervention group from 29.1% to 22.5%, while increasing in the control group from 23.1% to 31.3%, with an effect size of $\delta = 0.79$ ($b = -0.72$, $p = 0.04$). The intervention also reduced overall substance use from 44.4% to 33.3%, compared to an increase from 38.8% to 45.5% in the control group. No statistically significant differences were observed in alcohol use or marijuana dependence. Subgroup analyses indicated that the program was particularly effective for youth whose parents experienced high stress and low social support.

Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach (A-CRA)

Summary

The Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach (A-CRA) is a 12- to 14-week outpatient behavioral intervention for youth ages 12–25. Through individual and family sessions, the program focuses on skill-building, goal-setting, and caregiver involvement. The goal is to reduce substance use by strengthening positive reinforcers across home, school, and social settings.

The Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach (A-CRA) is a structured, outpatient behavioral intervention designed to support adolescents aged 12–25 in overcoming substance use disorders by enhancing positive reinforcers in their family, social, and academic environments.[183] The standard model consists of 10 individual sessions with the adolescent, four sessions with caregivers (including two joint family sessions), and limited case management over 12 to 14 weeks. The program incorporates elements such as functional analyses of behavior, collaborative goal setting, satisfaction assessments across life domains, and training in problem-solving, relapse prevention, and prosocial skill development. Parent sessions focus on effective parenting practices, positive family communication, and supporting adolescent behavior change. A-CRA is grounded in the Adult Community Reinforcement Approach and is adaptable to various treatment settings, including outpatient and residential programs.

The effectiveness of A-CRA was evaluated as part of the Cannabis Youth Treatment (CYT) Study, a multi-site randomized controlled trial involving 600 adolescents aged 13 to 18, most of whom were male (83%). The sample was 61% White, 30% Black, 6% multiracial or other, and 4% Latino. Participants were recruited from four treatment sites located in Connecticut, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Florida. Adolescents were randomly assigned

181 Prado, G., Cordova, D., Huang, S., Estrada, Y., Rosen, A., Bacio, G. A., Jimenez, G. L., Pantin, H., Brown, C. H., Velasquez, M.-R., Villamar, J., Frietas, D., Tapia, M., & McCollister, K. (2012). The efficacy of Familias Unidas on drug and alcohol outcomes for Hispanic delinquent youth: Main effects and interaction effects by parental stress and social support. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence,* 125(1), S18–S25. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2012.06.011

182 Ibid.

183 Dennis, M., Godley, S. H., Diamond, G., Tims, F. M., Babor, T., Donaldson, J., Liddle, H., Titus, J. C., Kaminer, Y., Webb, C., Hamilton, N., & Funk, R. (2004). The Cannabis Youth Treatment (CYT) Study: Main findings from two randomized trials. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 27(3), 197–213. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2003.09.005

to receive one of three interventions: MET/CBT5 (Motivational Enhancement Therapy/Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, five sessions), A-CRA, or Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT). Outcome measures included self-reported days of abstinence and the percentage of participants in recovery (defined as no substance use or clinical problems while living in the community), assessed over a follow-up period of 9.5 to 11.5 months.

Results showed that while all interventions led to significant improvements over time, A-CRA demonstrated promising outcomes in certain settings. In one site (Chestnut Health Systems), A-CRA was associated with the highest recovery rate (40%) compared to MDFT (22%) and MET/CBT5 (18%), with a moderate effect size (Cohen's $f = 0.20$, $p < .05$). Across all sites, A-CRA participants had a recovery rate of 34%, compared to 23% for MET/CBT5 and 19% for MDFT, although these differences were not statistically significant at the study-wide level. Overall, A-CRA showed favorable trends in promoting recovery among adolescents with cannabis use disorders, particularly in settings with strong implementation fidelity. Limitations of the study include the absence of a no-treatment control group and reliance on self-reported outcomes. Nonetheless, the findings support A-CRA as a promising, evidence-informed approach for addressing adolescent substance use.

Systems Reform Spotlight: School Discipline Reform

Disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions push students closer to the juvenile legal system. Black youth and other youth of color face these consequences at far higher rates. This section examines the evidence on school discipline disparities and reforms that could reduce them. It covers how often and how unevenly California schools impose discipline, what rigorous research identifies as the causes, and what the past fifteen years of reform efforts have achieved. It then presents a research-based framework for reducing discipline disparities in California and beyond.

Racial Disparities in School Suspensions

Suspension rates have declined only modestly over the past decade despite policy reforms meant to reduce them, including a statewide ban on suspensions for "willful defiance" in elementary schools enacted in 2013 (see "Effects of Suspension Reforms in California" below). See Table 10.

Table 10. California Annual Suspension Rates by Race, 2014-15 and 2023-24

Race	Suspension Rates	
	2014-15	2023-24
Black	10.1%	8.6%
American Indian or Alaska Native	7.5%	7.1%
Pacific Islander	5%	5%
Latino	4%	4%
White	3%	3%
Filipino	2%	1%
Asian	1%	1%
Total	**3.8%**	**3.3%**

SOURCE: California Department of Education, Dataquest

In addition to lingering high suspension rates, large racial disparities have persisted. See Table 11. Black, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and Latino students were suspended at rates that were multiple times those of White students in 2014-15. Despite a modest decline (13%) in overall suspension rates in the ensuing decade, suspension ratios across racial groups have barely budged.

Table 11. California Annual Suspension Rate Ratios, 2014-15 and 2023-24

Race	Suspension Rate Ratios	
	2014-15	2023-24
Black	3.2	3.2
American Indian or Alaska Native	2.3	2.6
Asian	0.3	0.4
Filipino	0.5	0.4
Latino	1.2	1.3
Pacific Islander	1.5	1.7
White	1.0	1.0

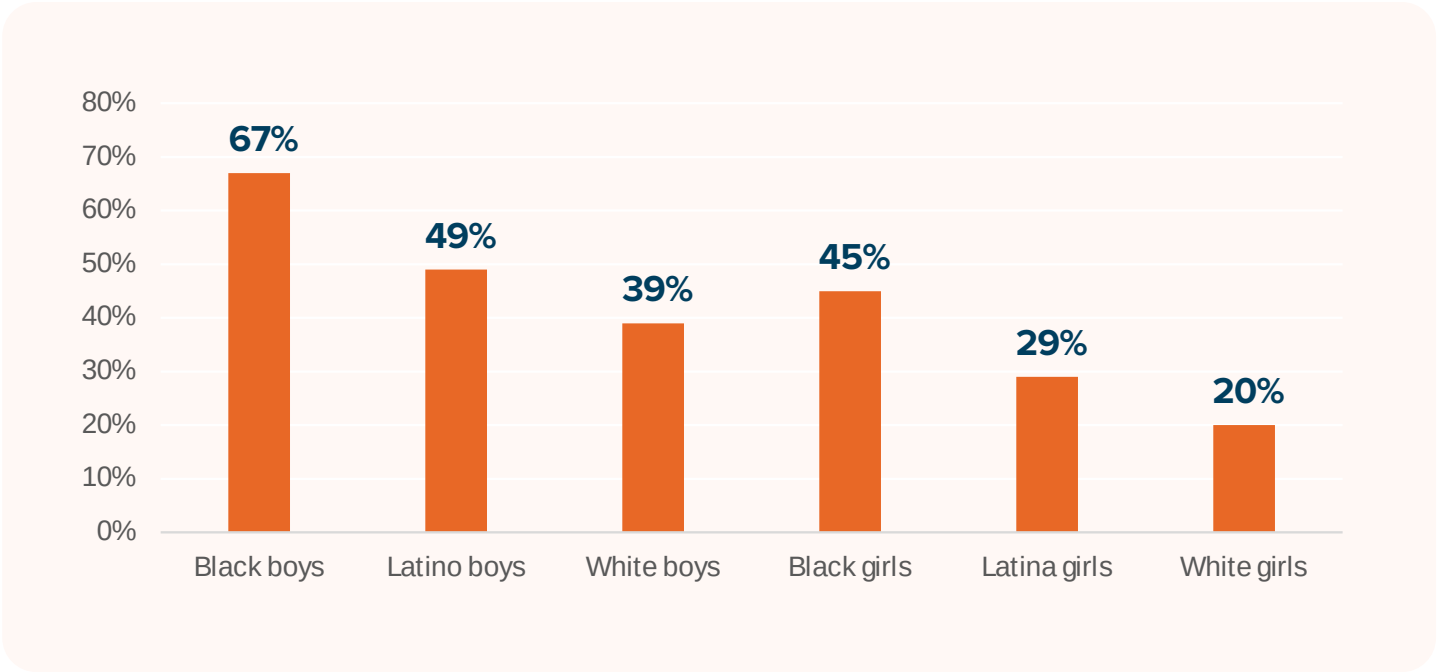
SOURCE: California Department of Education, Dataquest

Lifetime risks of suspension are much higher than annual rates

Annual suspension rates understate the true magnitude of the suspension problem as well as the size of racial disparities. A more revealing measure is the risk of ever having been suspended across K-12 grade levels. While we lack this data for California, we do have national data that paint a sobering and suggestive picture. Nationally representative longitudinal data for adolescents first interviewed in the late 1990s shows not only large lifetime risks of school suspension, but also large disparities.[184] See Figure 7. Approaching 70 percent of Black boys were suspended at some point during their K-12 education compared to half of Latino boys and 39% of White boys. Nearly half of Black girls (45%), 29% of Latina girls, and 20% of White girls were suspended at least once during these grades.[185]

184 Data used was from the National Longitudinal Survey 1997 (NLSY97) which includes a nationally representative sample of youth who were first interviewed in 1997 when they were ages 12 to 17.
185 Shollenberger, T. L. (2014). "Racial disparities in school suspension and subsequent outcomes: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997" in Losen, D. J. (Ed.). *Closing the school discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion*. Teachers College Press.

Figure 7. Lifetime Risk of Suspension by Race across K-12 (NLSY97)



SOURCE: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97). Shollenberger, T. L. (2014). "Racial disparities in school suspension and subsequent outcomes: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997" in Losen, D. J. (Ed.). *Closing the school discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion*. Teachers College Pres.

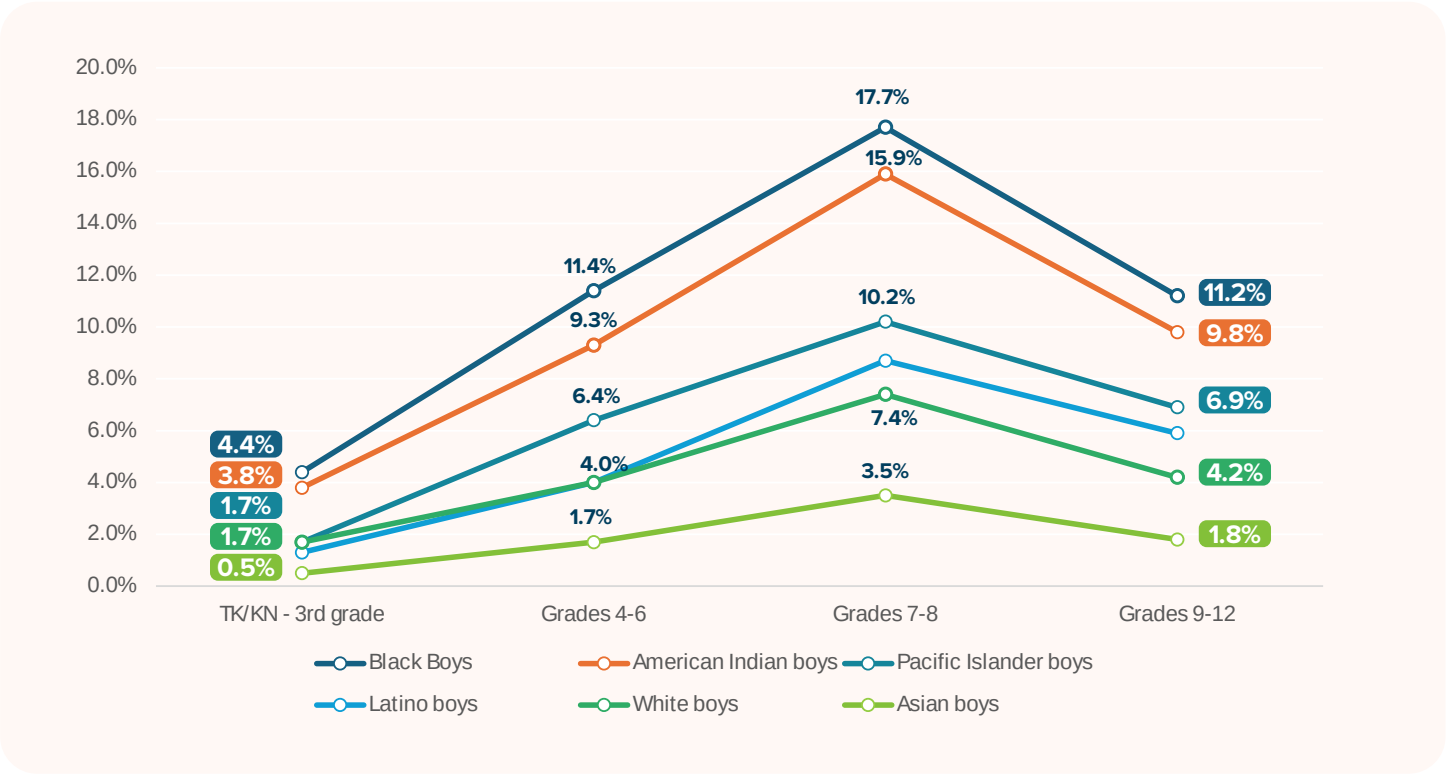
A study using more recent data from the Monitoring the Future survey, a recurring nationally representative survey of 8th and 10th grade students, found that during the period 2012 to 2019, Black youth were more than three times (320%) as likely as White youth to have ever experienced a suspension or expulsion (30.6% vs. 10.5%) and were 77% more likely to receive an office referral (24.1% vs. 15.9%).[186]

Suspensions are Concentrated in Middle School and Early High School

Suspensions in California are highly concentrated in middle school and the transition into high school, making these grades critical targets of intervention. Figures 8 and 9 show annual suspension rates by grade span for boys and girls in 2023-24.

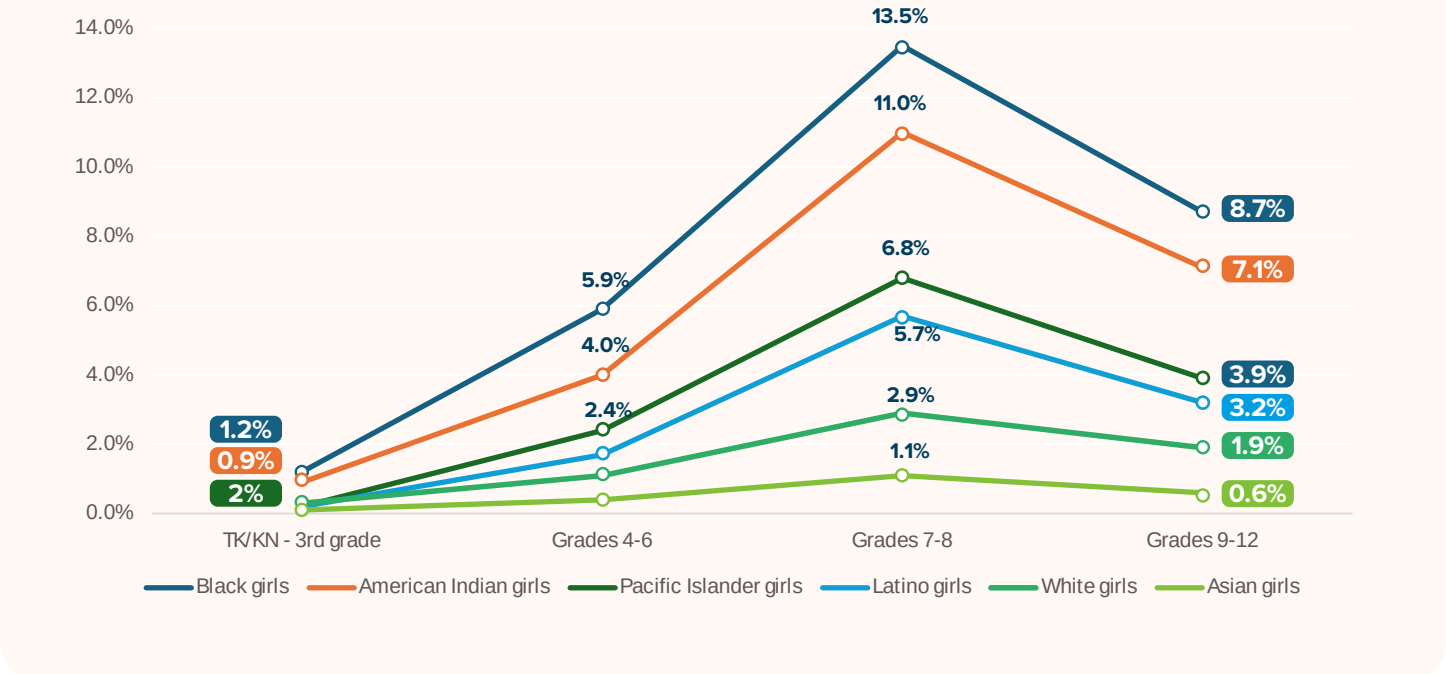
186 Lehmann, P. S. (2023). Race and ethnicity effects in school discipline: A coarsened exact matching analysis. *Crime & Delinquency*, 69(8), 1414-1440.

Figure 8. Annual Suspension Rates for California Boys by Grade Span, 2023-24



SOURCE: California Department of Education, Dataquest

Figure 9. Annual Suspension Rates for California Girls by Grade Span, 2023-24



SOURCE: California Department of Education, Dataquest

Causes of Racial Disparities in School Discipline

A common belief regarding disparate patterns of exclusionary discipline is that differences in student behavior are the primary drivers of racial disparities. A growing body of evidence, however, challenges this notion showing that disparities in school discipline are mostly attributable to differential treatment by adults, teacher characteristics and teacher behavior.

For example, Owens and McLanahan (2020) analyzed data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), covering a large longitudinal cohort of children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large U.S. cities.[187] Using disciplinary and behavioral data collected at age nine, they assessed the drivers of racial disparities in elementary school suspensions. They measured the overall Black-White suspension gap to be 21 percentage points (28% for Black children vs. 7% for White children). Using Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition, the study disaggregated the Black-White suspension gap into three explanatory factors: differences in behavior, the effects of students being sorted into different schools that vary in their suspension rates, and differential treatment of Blacks and Whites within the same schools. They found that differential treatment within schools explained 46% of this gap, while between-school sorting and behavior differences explained 21% and 9%, respectively. Notably, within the same schools, Black children with mid-to-high levels of behavior problems were significantly more likely to be suspended than similarly misbehaving White peers, with a 1.5 percentage-point larger increase in suspension risk per unit increase in behavior problems. The study emphasizes that disparities are shaped less by actual behavioral differences and more by how schools respond to similar behaviors across racial groups.

Liu, Penner, and Gao (2023) investigated the role of individual teacher behavior in driving racial disparities.[188] Using four years of data from a large, diverse California school district (comprising over 79,000 students), the authors identified the top 5% of teachers issuing the most office disciplinary referrals (ODRs). These "top referrers," while only 1.7% of all teachers, accounted for 34.8% of all ODRs. Their referring patterns effectively doubled the Black-White and Latino-White gaps in office referrals. These referrals primarily involved subjective offenses like defiance and interpersonal conflict. Although only a small share (4%) of ODRs led to suspensions, those issued by top referrers disproportionately contributed to suspension disparities as well. Black students, who made up 7% of enrolled students, accounted for 27% of referrals by top referrers. The study also found that top referrers were more likely to be early-career, White, and teaching in middle schools, while teachers of color were significantly less likely to refer students.

In a related study, Hayes, Liu, and Gershenson (2023) analyzed how teacher characteristics influence student discipline outcomes in a California school district.[189] Their findings indicate that Black students are significantly less likely to be referred for discipline when taught by Black teachers. Specifically, having a same-race teacher reduces the likelihood of a referral by 26.6%. These effects were strongest in middle schools and among students attending high-poverty schools. The results suggest that teacher-student racial congruence may play a role in mitigating discipline disparities. Additionally, teachers with more experience and those with credentials in special education or English learner instruction were less likely to issue referrals, highlighting the importance of training and professional background.

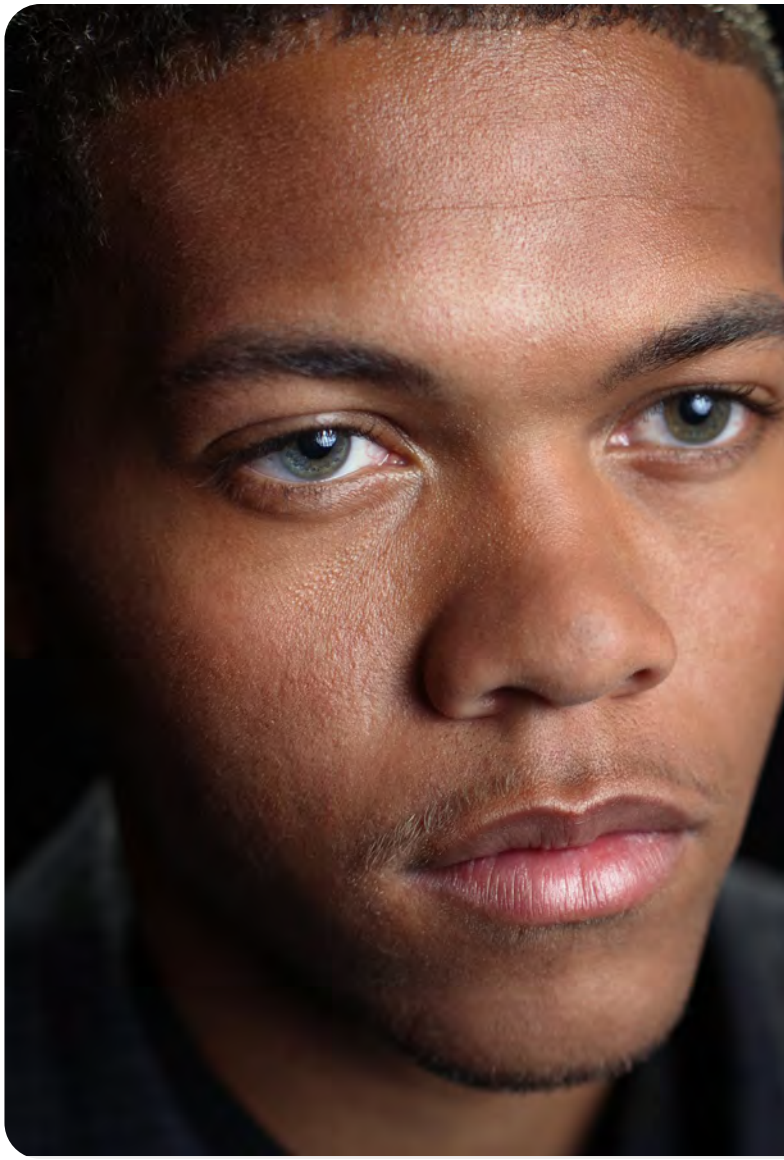
A final study by Liu, Hayes, and Gershenson (2024) used a fixed-effects design to examine racial bias in discipline decisions by analyzing multi-student incidents in which White and non-White students received different disciplinary outcomes.[190] Drawing on data from over 240,000 student-year observations from a California district, the study found that Black and Latino students were significantly more likely than their White peers to receive suspensions for the same infractions, even when controlling for prior disciplinary history. The effect was most pronounced in high school and for serious infractions such as fights or drug-related offenses. Black students were nearly twice

187 Owens, J., & McLanahan, S. S. (2020). Unpacking the drivers of racial disparities in school suspension and expulsion. *Social Forces*, 98(4), 1548-1577.
188 Liu, J., Penner, E. K., & Gao, W. (2023). Troublemakers? The role of frequent teacher referrers in expanding racial disciplinary disproportionalities. *Educational Researcher,* 52(8), 469-481.
189 Hayes, M. S., Liu, J., & Gershenson, S. (2023). Who refers whom? The effects of teacher characteristics on disciplinary office referrals. *Economics of Education Review*, 93, 102376.
190 Liu, J., Hayes, M. S., & Gershenson, S. (2024). JUE insight: From referrals to suspensions: New evidence on racial disparities in exclusionary discipline. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 141, 103453.

as likely as White students to be suspended for the same incident, providing direct evidence of systematic racial bias in the adjudication phase of the disciplinary process.

Taken together, these studies provide robust, multi-method evidence that racial disparities in school discipline are not primarily driven by differences in student behavior. Instead, they arise from discretionary practices in identification, referral, and punishment processes that differentially impact students of color, particularly Black students. Implicit bias, educator discretion, and the structural context of schooling all contribute to these inequities.
In addition to observational studies, a growing body of compelling experimental research points to teacher and administrator biases as being prime contributors to disparities in discipline outcomes, especially for Black boys. In their foundational experimental study, Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) investigated how teachers respond to repeated misbehavior by students with racially stereotypical names.[191] In a randomized, between-subjects design, 191 K–12 teachers from across the United States (87% White, 9% Black, and 3% other race) read descriptions of two identical classroom infractions, insubordination and class disturbance, committed by a student randomly assigned a stereotypically Black name (Darnell or Deshawn) or White name (Greg or Jake). Teachers rated the severity of the misbehavior, their level of irritation, the likelihood that they would suspend the youth, and whether they would label the student a "troublemaker." While no significant difference emerged after the first infraction, stark differences appeared after the second: teachers showed a sharper increase in negative reactions to Black students' behavior compared to White students. Teachers were significantly more likely to view the behavior as part of a pattern, label the Black student a troublemaker, and imagine suspending the student in the future. These results suggest that racial bias not only affects immediate interpretations of behavior but also contributes to cumulative disciplinary decisions as student misbehavior recurs.

Expanding on this work, Owens (2022) employed a large-scale video vignette experiment involving 1,339 middle and high school teachers from 295 U.S. public schools, recruited from a nationally



representative sample.[192] Teachers were randomly assigned to view a video of a Black, Latino, or White boy committing identical, routine misbehavior and were asked to rate the student's blameworthiness and indicate whether they would refer the student to the principal's office. The results revealed that, on average, Black boys were rated as 0.15 to 0.16 standard deviations (SD) more blameworthy than White boys for the same behavior. Latino boys were rated between White and Black boys, but the differences were not statistically significant from White boys. Further, Owens found that being Black increased the likelihood of office referral by 6.6 percentage points overall, with 27% of the effect mediated by higher perceived blameworthiness and 73% driven by direct referral bias. These findings suggest that teacher bias operates through

191 Okonofua, J. A., & Eberhardt, J. L. (2015). Two strikes: Race and the disciplining of young students. *Psychological science*, 26(5), 617-624.

192 Owens, J. (2022). Double jeopardy: Teacher biases, racialized organizations, and the production of racial/ethnic disparities in school discipline. *American Sociological Review*, 87(6), 1007-1048.

both subjective interpretations of behavior and discretionary referral decisions.

In addition to individual bias, Owens (2022) also examined how school-level demographics shape disciplinary responses.[193] The study found that schools with 35% or more Black and Latino students, exhibited more punitive "blaming climates." In these schools, all students, regardless of race, were rated more blameworthy for identical behaviors, and each percentage-point increase in minority enrollment was associated with a 0.004 SD increase in blameworthiness ratings. These effects were linked to structural features such as the presence of zero-tolerance policies and higher concentrations of experienced Latinx teachers. The study concluded that Black students face a "double jeopardy": they are both more likely to be perceived as blameworthy by individual teachers and more likely to attend schools with organizational cultures that interpret behavior more harshly.

In a related follow-up study, Owens (2023) focused on teacher race and its influence on perceptions of student misbehavior.[194] Using the same video vignette experiment described in their prior study above, they found that White teachers rated Black boys as 0.14 to 0.15 standard deviations more blameworthy than White boys, while ratings for Latino boys were not significantly different. Notably, Latinx teachers rated Black boys as 0.98 SD more blameworthy than White boys and 0.63 SD more than Latino boys. This effect translates into an estimated 5-percentage-point increase in referral probability. By contrast, Black teachers did not exhibit significant differences in their ratings of Black, Latino, and White students. These findings suggest that teacher race may shape the extent and direction of disciplinary bias.

Across all studies in this section, the consistent pattern is that Black students are perceived and treated more harshly for identical behavior. While the magnitude of effects varies by context and teacher demographics, the presence of bias is robust. Latino students face similar patterns of biased perception, though often to a lesser degree and with more variation depending on the teacher's racial background. Importantly, these biases not only shape the probability of disciplinary referral but also reinforce disparate responses to student behavior over time. The evidence highlights the role of both interpersonal and structural factors in producing and sustaining racial disparities in school discipline and points to the need for both teacher-level interventions and school-level reforms to mitigate these disparities.

193 Owens, J. (2022). Double jeopardy: Teacher biases, racialized organizations, and the production of racial/ethnic disparities in school discipline. American Sociological Review, 87(6), 1007-1048.
194 Owens, J. (2023). Seeing behavior as Black, brown, or white: Teachers' racial/ethnic bias in perceptions of routine classroom misbehavior. Social Psychology Quarterly, 86(3), 298-311.

The Effects of California Suspension Reforms: 2011-2019

States and school districts across the nation have embarked on various reforms to school discipline policies in order to both reduce the scale of school suspensions and to shrink disparities.[195] While many of these policy reforms have borne fruit in reducing overall suspension rates, they have typically failed to substantially reduce or eliminate racial disparities.[196] As described further below, evidence for reforms in California has broadly yielded the same conclusion. The most important policy reform related to discipline that was enacted in California was a 2013 K-3 ban on the disciplinary category known as "willful defiance" (defined as "disrupting school activities or otherwise willfully defying the valid authority of school staff"). Considered an overly broad disciplinary category subject to significant racial bias, willful defiance was also permanently banned in grades 4 and 5, and temporarily banned (for 5 years) in grades 6 through 7 starting in 2019. More recently in 2023, California extended the ban to all grades in the state with a provision for the law to sunset in 2029.[197] Prior to the statewide bans, five school districts in California enacted their own K-12 bans of willful defiance.

Three recent studies examined the effects of both the statewide and local district bans on school discipline outcomes in California, with a particular focus on whether such policies reduce suspension rates and disciplinary disparities for Black students.

195 Welsh, R. O. (2025). Suspended Futures: Transforming Racial Inequities in School Discipline. Harvard Education Press.
196 Welsh, R. O. (2023). Up the down escalator? Examining a decade of school discipline reforms. Children and Youth Services Review, 150, 106962.
197 'Willful Defiance' Suspensions Persist Despite Years-Old Ban. Retrieved on July 15th, 2025 from https://sacobserver.com/2025/07/suspension-disparities-student-outcomes/; California students can no longer be suspended for 'willful defiance'. Could nationwide change be next?: Governor Gavin Newsom banned the punishments that disproportionately harm Black, Latino, disabled and low-income students. Retrieved on July 15, 2025 from https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/oct/14/california-gavin-newsom-student-suspensions-willful-defiance

While all three studies document reductions in suspensions for willful defiance overall, they yield mixed findings regarding the equity implications for historically over-disciplined student groups.

The first study, Wang (2022), uses a difference-in-differences design to evaluate the effects of willful defiance suspension bans in four California school districts (San Francisco, Pasadena, Oakland, and Azusa) between the 2011–2012 and 2018–2019 school years.[198] Drawing on school-level data from the California Department of Education and comparing these districts to 265 comparison districts, the study finds that willful defiance suspension rates declined by approximately 69%, with subgroup reductions of 78% for White students, 73% for Black students, and 67% for Latino students. However, these declines did not translate into reductions in overall out-of-school suspension (OSS) rates, particularly for Black students. In fact, OSS rates for Black students increased by around 26%, driven largely by the substitution of suspension reasons from "willful defiance" to categories such as "non-willful defiance" or vague categories like "miscellaneous." Notably, this pattern was more pronounced in schools with a lower proportion of Black teachers. Supplementary analysis using Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data from three districts confirmed that student behavior did not significantly change post-reform, suggesting that the increase in suspensions was not due to worsened behavior but rather to changes in how infractions were labeled.

In the second study, Ramey & Freeman (2023) adopt a school district fixed-effects and generalized structural equation model over a similar time frame (2011–2018) to evaluate the impact of both K–3 and K–12 WDBs in several large California districts.[199] The analysis includes all districts with K–12 bans, which collectively enroll more than one in eight students in the state. Results show that willful defiance suspension rates declined by approximately 50% in districts with K–3 bans and by about 90% in districts with K–12 bans, confirming the effectiveness of the bans in reducing that specific suspension category. Additionally, non-defiance suspension rates declined significantly for White, Latinx, and Asian students (by 40–50%) in K–12 ban districts. However, for Black students, non-defiance suspensions declined only modestly (~15%) and then returned to pre-reform levels, indicating a limited and unsustained impact for this group. Importantly, the study found no overall increase in special education enrollment as a result of the bans, though there were modest subgroup differences (e.g., increases in special education identification among Latinx students after K–3 bans). Unlike the first study, this analysis did not find a widespread substitution effect in non-defiance suspensions when examining the full grade range. However, the authors speculate that substitution effects may be more pronounced at the middle and high school levels, which were not disaggregated in their analysis.

In the third study, Hashim et al (2018) adds further nuance by evaluating the impact of a willful defiance ban in LAUSD, the largest school district in California.[200] Using an interrupted time series design and 12 years of student-level administrative data (2003–2015), the study finds that suspension rates declined sharply across all student groups after the implementation of the ban in 2011–2012, with steeper declines among frequently disciplined students. In 2014–2015, LAUSD introduced restorative justice programs alongside the suspension ban, which further reduced suspension rates and contributed to narrowing some discipline gaps. For example, the suspension gap between Latino students and their White/Asian peers was eliminated, and suspension rates declined for special education students, although the gap between SPED and non-SPED students persisted. Notably, while suspension rates for Black students did decline initially, progress stalled in the third year after the ban, and only modest gains were observed after the introduction of restorative justice practices, leaving a persistent suspension gap between Black and non-Black students.

Taken together, these three studies show that willful defiance suspension bans in California led to large reductions in the use of that specific suspension category across student groups. However, they offer divergent findings on overall suspension outcomes and equity impacts. All three studies identify ongoing racial disparities, particularly for Black students, despite overall declines in suspension rates. The first study (Wang, 2022) finds evidence of negative

198 Wang, R. (2022). The impact of suspension reforms on discipline outcomes: Evidence from california high schools. *AERA Open*, 8, 23328584211068067.
199 Ramey, D. M., & Freelin, B. N. (2023). Controlling Defiance: An Examination of School Social Control in California School Districts. *Sociological Perspectives*, 66(2), 276-310.
200 Hashim, A. K., Strunk, K. O., & Dhaliwal, T. K. (2018). Justice for all? Suspension bans and restorative justice programs in the Los Angeles Unified School District. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 93(2), 174-189.

substitution effects, with Black students increasingly suspended for other infractions. Ramey & Freman (2023) find short-lived benefits for Black students and no evidence of widespread substitution, though it acknowledges this may differ by grade level. The third study by Hashim et al (2018) provides evidence that restorative practices can complement willful defiance bans to reduce suspensions further, but it also finds that discipline gaps for Black students remain persistent, even as gaps for other groups narrowed.

In conclusion, these studies suggest that policy-based reforms like willful defiance bans (WDBs) are effective at reducing willful defiance suspensions, but they have limited impact on eliminating racial disparities in school discipline, particularly for Black students. Where WDBs were implemented without robust accompanying supports or efforts to address educator bias, disciplinary disparities persisted or worsened. Interventions that pair policy changes with program-based reforms, such as restorative practices, staff training, and other evidence-based interventions, may be more effective in advancing both equity and reductions in exclusionary discipline.

Toward an Effective Strategy for Reducing Suspensions and School Discipline Disparities

Systematic reviews of the evidence suggest that there are effective strategies to bring down overall suspensions, but there is a need for greater practice and policy innovation to address lingering racial disparities in suspension rates, especially for Black students.[201] Evidence showing that teacher bias plays a central role in the generation of discipline disparities is complemented by additional research that suggests that a relatively small number of teachers, grades, and situations drive a substantial share of school discipline disparities and could therefore be the targets of strategic intervention.

The work of Liu, Penner, and Gao (2023) shows that the top disciplinary referrers in a large school district in California contributed to a substantial share of disparities in referrals.[202] For example, "top referrers," while only 1.7% of teachers, accounted for 34.8% of all disciplinary referrals. Their referring patterns effectively doubled the Black-White and Latino-White referral gaps. This pattern of concentration is likely to be evident within other districts within the state and elsewhere and, if so, should be the subject of strategic intervention.

Disciplinary referrals and suspensions, moreover, are concentrated in a small number of grades, namely, middle school and early high school. In California, for example, suspension rates peak in middle school for all boys, but especially for Blacks (18%), American Indians (16%), Pacific islanders (10%), and Latinos (9%). They also peak for girls at 14% for Blacks, 11% for American Indians, 7% for Pacific Islanders, and 6% for Latinos.

Lastly, research shows that suspension disparities disproportionately involve a small number of situations that could be targeted for intervention.

In their study, Austin, McIntosh, and Girvan (2024) found that specific situations, known as "vulnerable decision points" or VDPs, account for inordinate shares of racial disparities in school discipline. They utilized data from 2,020 schools participating in the School-Wide Information System (SWIS), a database repository utilized by schools that are implementing Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS). VDPs are combinations of situational factors that include behavior type, location, time of day, grade level, and season (e.g. defiance in classrooms in spring afternoons). The most common VDPs were subjective behaviors like defiance or disruption in classroom settings, particularly in the afternoon. On average, the single most significant VDP in a school accounted for 17% of its overall racial disparity in office disciplinary referrals; the top three VDPs explained 37%. The study suggests that subjective infractions during specific times and locations, especially involving Black students, are key contributors to disparities. Although VDPs represent a combination of behavior type, location, time of day, grade level, etc., certain components of VDPs stand out separately for their contribution to disparities:

- **Location:** classrooms were the most disparate setting for 88% of schools
- **Behavioral type:** physical aggression and defiance were the most disparate behavioral categories in 37% and 28% of schools respectively.
- **Time of Day:** midday and afternoon were the most disparate settings in 38% and 34% of schools respectively.
- **Season:** more disparities were present during Spring than other seasons.
- **Motivation for infraction:** attention from peers was the most frequently identified motivation for behavior in schools that accounted for the most disparities.
- **Grade Levels:** grades with the most disparate rates of disciplinary referrals were 5th grade, 7th grade and 9th grade. These grade levels accounted for over 60% of their school's disparities.

201 Welsh, R. O. (2023). Up the down escalator? Examining a decade of school discipline reforms. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 150, 106962; Cruz, R. A., Firestone, A. R., & Rodl, J. E. (2021). Disproportionality reduction in exclusionary school discipline: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of educational research*, 91(3), 397-431; Valdebenito, S., Eisner, M., Farrington, D. P., Ttofi, M. M., & Sutherland, A. (2019). What can we do to reduce disciplinary school exclusion? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of experimental criminology,* 15(3), 253-287; Alamos, P., & Williford, A. P. (2023). A conceptual model to understand and address racial disparities in exclusionary discipline through teacher-child relationships. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 65, 363-373.

202 Liu, J., Penner, E. K., & Gao, W. (2023). Troublemakers? The role of frequent teacher referrers in expanding racial disciplinary disproportionalities. *Educational Researcher,* 52(8), 469-481.

Among a full list of VDPs, the most common were:

1. defiance in classrooms in the afternoon [1pm-3pm] (strongest in 9.9% of schools)

2. defiance in classrooms in the morning [9am-11am] (strongest in 8.5% of schools)

3. physical aggression on the playground at midday [11am-1pm] (strongest in 8.1% of schools)

Leveraging these insights, Richard O. Welsh (2025) in his pathbreaking book, ***Suspended Futures: Transforming Racial Inequities in School Discipline***, offers a strategic framework for reducing school discipline disparities by incorporating evidence-based programs and practices within a multi-tiered system of support that targets both **students** *and* **teachers**. In the book he emphasizes the need to shift the reform focus from students to structures and to provide the sorely needed supports to teachers that are often missing in recent policy efforts. He posits that a combination of policies, programs, and personnel changes is required that can be organized within a coherent approach. To that end, he proposes a **"Transforming School Discipline Strategic Framework"** that combines data-driven decision-making with a multi-tiered framework for intervention.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

A key pillar of the Transforming School Discipline Strategic Framework is data-driven decision-making. Given that discipline disparities are concentrated within certain grades, classrooms, and situations, using data to identify and target those leverage points is a critical first step in effectively tackling discipline disparities. Data can help identify the schools and classrooms in greatest need of support as well the situations, or "vulnerable decision points," most strongly associated with disparate outcomes. The top referrers can be targeted with increasingly intensive levels of support, informed by an understanding of the situations that give rise to the greatest challenge. Additionally, Discipline Data Dashboards can be utilized to track and evaluate progress aligned with collaborative goal setting. Bringing resources to where it matters most is perhaps the next most important frontier in effectively addressing disparities in discipline.[203]

A Multi-Tiered System of Educator and Student Supports

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) is a well established framework and approach for targeting increasingly intensive evidence-based interventions to those in need of the greatest support. MTSS was developed as a framework in education to provide academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support to all students in a school.[204] It involves progressive levels of support tied to the level of student needs and issues. There are typically three tiers in MTSS:

- **Tier 1:** The universal tier involves providing support to all students in the school. It includes high-quality classroom instruction and proactive school-wide behavior expectations.

- **Tier 2:** Entails additional targeted support for students who are not making adequate progress in Tier 1 alone. It may include small group interventions or more targeted instruction in areas where students struggle.

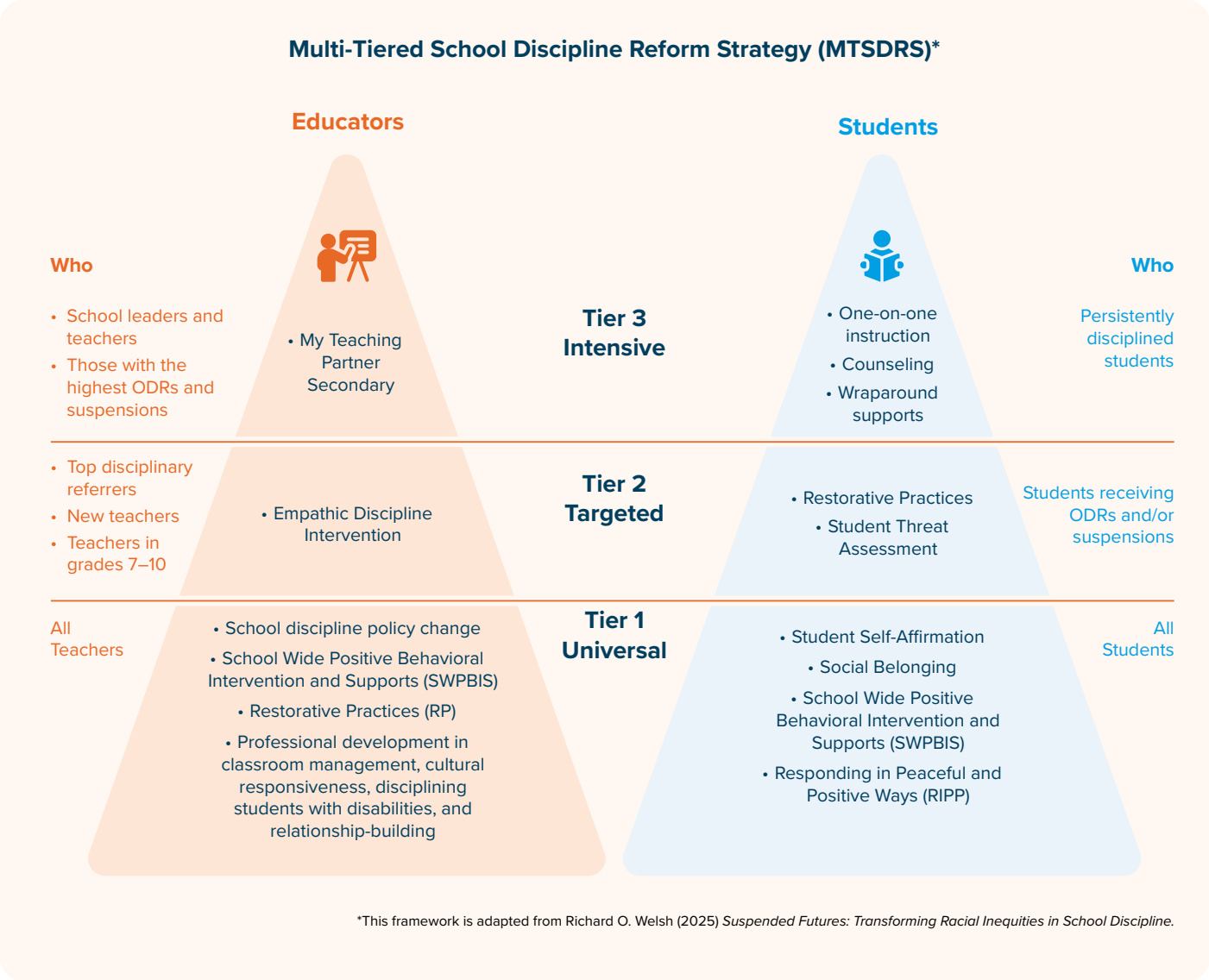
- **Tier 3:** Includes intensive, individualized support for students who continue to show difficulty after Tier 2. This could include individual tutoring or specialized interventions. MTSS emphasizes data-based decision making, meaning student performance data is consistently collected and analyzed to adjust support as necessary. The goal is to proactively identify and address academic and behavioral needs to help all students succeed.

Welsh (2025) proposed the adaptation of the MTSS framework to support both students and educators in reducing disciplinary referrals and suspensions and to reducing racial disparities in these outcomes. Each tier corresponds to a level of need and risk and associated interventions. Figure 10 is an adapted representation of Welsh's framework.

203 Welsh, R. O. (2025). *Suspended Futures: Transforming Racial Inequities in School Discipline.* Harvard Education Press.

204 Bradshaw, C. P., Pas, E. T., Debnam, K. J., & Johnson, S. L. (2021). A randomized controlled trial of MTSS-B in high schools: Improving classroom management to prevent EBDs. *Remedial and Special Education*, 42(1), 44-59.

Figure 10. The Multi-Tiered School Discipline Reform Strategy



*This framework is adapted from Richard O. Welsh (2025) *Suspended Futures: Transforming Racial Inequities in School Discipline.*

Educator Supports

Tier 1 supports for educators represent the universal level of the **Multi-Tiered System of Disciplinary Reform Supports (MTSDRS)** and are provided to all teachers. This tier includes revisions to student codes of conduct aimed at reducing reliance on discretionary disciplinary categories that contribute to racial and other disparities. It also incorporates high-priority professional development topics, including classroom management, culturally responsive teaching, discipline practices for students with disabilities, and relationship-building strategies. In addition, Tier 1 includes training in **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)** and **Restorative Practices (RP)** discussed above.

Tier 2 supports are targeted toward educators who are top disciplinary referrers, new teachers, and teachers working in high-suspension grades—particularly grades seven through ten. This tier focuses on reducing office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) by building educator capacity to respond more effectively to student behavior. The primary evidence-based intervention at this tier is **Empathic Discipline Intervention**, described above.

Tier 3 supports are the most intensive and are directed at school leaders and teachers with the highest rates of both ODRs and suspensions. This tier addresses not only the frequency of disciplinary actions but also

disparities in how they are applied. The central intervention in Tier 3 is **My Teaching Partner–Secondary (MTP-S)**, a coaching-based model also described in more detail above.

Resource-intensive interventions should be directed toward schools, school leaders, and teachers with the greatest demonstrated need. One key distinction between Tier 2 and Tier 3 for educators is the emphasis on individualized coaching. Multiple experimental studies provide empirical support for investing in coaching and professional development, with evidence increasingly identifying one-on-one coaching as a critical component in enhancing the effectiveness of professional development aimed at reducing racial disparities in school discipline.[205]

In addition to implementing established evidence-based strategies, Tier 3 schools may also adopt innovative, yet-to-be-validated approaches to school discipline. While the current evidence base for these strategies is limited, their effectiveness may be clarified with further research. Such approaches include: (a) placing behavioral coaches and specialists at the school level, (b) assigning individual behavioral coaches to the highest-referring educators (e.g., the top 5 percent of referrers within a school), and (c) conducting quarterly discipline-focused school walk-throughs and observations led by district and school leadership.[206]

Student Supports

Tier 1 supports for students represent the universal level of intervention and are available to all students. This tier encompasses several evidence-based strategies designed to promote a positive school climate and student well-being. These include the **Self-Affirmation intervention**, the **Social Belonging intervention**, **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports** (PBIS), and **Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways**, all described in detail above.

Tier 2 supports are targeted toward students who do not respond to Tier 1 interventions and have received office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) or suspensions. At this level, interventions are more focused and intensive. Evidence-based strategies for Tier 2 include **Restorative Practices** and **Student Threat Assessment**.

Tier 3 encompasses a range of intensive, individualized supports designed for students who are frequently disciplined or who engage in the most serious behavioral infractions. These students often require specialized interventions such as individualized instruction or external counseling services. Tier 3 strategies may include (a) identifying persistently disciplined students using current-year disciplinary data and consultation with school leadership; (b) providing one-on-one academic tutoring; (c) offering individualized counseling services; (d) implementing proactive restorative practices, including restorative circles, mediation, and harm-repair circles; (e) piloting a case consultation model by assigning a social worker to support the student's reintegration into in-person learning, including family engagement and parent conferencing; (f) establishing structured feedback mechanisms to hear from students directly, identify the underlying causes of behavioral issues, and respond to their needs; and (g) providing one-on-one mentoring to foster supportive adult-student relationships.[207]

205 Bradshaw, C. P., Pas, E. T., Bottiani, J. H., Debnam, K. J., Reinke, W. M., Herman, K. C., & Rosenberg, M. S. (2018). Promoting cultural responsivity and student engagement through double check coaching of classroom teachers: An efficacy study. *School Psychology Review*, 47(2), 118-134; Gregory, A., Allen, J. P., Mikami, A. Y., Hafen, A., & Pianta, R. C. (2013). The promise of a teacher professional development program in reducing the racial disparity in classroom exclusionary discipline; Gion, C., McIntosh, K., & Falcon, S. (2022). Effects of a multifaceted classroom intervention on racial disproportionality. *School psychology review*, 51(1), 67-83.

206 Welsh, R. O. (2025). *Suspended Futures: Transforming Racial Inequities in School Discipline*. Harvard Education Press.

207 Ibid.

BUILDING LADDERS:

Ensuring Reentry Success after Juvenile Legal Involvement

Once entangled in the juvenile legal system, youth often struggle to return to an educational pathway leading to opportunity. Evidence shows that an array of mechanisms including negative "labelling," low expectations, enhanced surveillance, and institutional roadblocks can make the process of reentry fraught and unsuccessful. Overcoming these barriers requires intentional efforts to build "ladders" to opportunity. This section of the report is focused on the predictors of recidivism and school success after juvenile legal involvement that might be the targets of evidence-based intervention. It reviews how the concept of "recidivism" is defined in the research literature before offering a definition of "reentry success" that goes beyond a focus on recidivism alone. Finally, it summarizes the state of the evidence regarding effective interventions for promoting reentry success among justice-involved youth.

The Meaning of Recidivism and its Prevalence Levels

Recidivism has been measured in various ways in both research and official statistics. Different measures involve important trade-offs. For example, a 2011 study, led by the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA), emphasizes the need for standardized definitions to improve the clarity of juvenile justice outcomes reported to policymakers. CJCA ultimately recommended adjudication, a formal judicial finding of guilt, as the preferred measure of recidivism.[208] Juvenile correctional leaders considered arrest data too discretionary and prone to error, preferring adjudication as a legally valid and consistent benchmark. At the same time, the CJCA advised collecting multiple recidivism measures to allow cross-study comparisons, emphasizing that only delinquent acts committed after release from custody should count as recidivism, excluding acts during confinement or probation violations.

Caudill and Trulson (2023) present a contrasting perspective drawing on empirical data to support their recommendation that re-arrest date (or referral date) be used as the operational measure for recidivism.[209] They conducted an event history analysis of over 10,000 juvenile cases in a large southern state to examine how different operational definitions (offense date, referral date, and adjudication date) affect recidivism estimates. Their findings revealed substantial disparities in the likelihood of recidivism within a particular time frame depending on which measure was used. Recidivism defined by the date of the new offense (arrest) produced the highest recidivism risk, followed closely by referral date, while adjudication date produced significantly lower estimates. This discrepancy was largely attributed to court processing times, which averaged five months and caused adjudication-based measures to lag well behind other indicators.

The study also found that adjudication systematically underrepresented recidivism during the initial months after release, raising concerns about its validity when shorter time-frames are of concern.

Furthermore, Claudill & Trulson (2023) showed that different definitions of recidivism altered the strength and significance of key predictive factors, such as race, mental health, family structure, and detention history. For example, Latino youth were significantly more likely to be identified as recidivists under offense (arrest) or referral-based definitions than under adjudication-based definitions. These shifts have meaningful implications for how recidivism risk is understood and for how programs targeting high-risk youth are evaluated. Based on these findings, the authors concluded that offense (arrest) or referral dates are more appropriate measures of recidivism in juvenile justice research, particularly when the goal is to assess reoffending behavior within a specific timeframe. Referral date, in particular, offers a reasonable proxy when offense date is unavailable, striking a balance between timeliness and data availability.

Taken together, these studies reflect a tension between legal certainty and measurement accuracy. The CJCA's recommendation of adjudication centers on legal legitimacy and standardization, which are important for system-level accountability. However, the Claudill & Trulson (2023) study demonstrates that adjudication may significantly undercount recidivism due to procedural delays, thereby limiting its utility for research and timely evaluation. Ultimately, the findings suggest that researchers and practitioners should consider using multiple measures of recidivism while recognizing the trade-offs inherent in each. They should prioritize measures that most accurately capture youth reoffending behavior, particularly when evaluating intervention effectiveness or identifying risk patterns.

208 Harris, P. W., Lockwood, B., Mengers, L., & Stoodley, B. (2011). Measuring recidivism in juvenile corrections. *Journal of Juvenile Justice*, 1(1).
209 Caudill, J. W., & Trulson, C. R. (2023). Comparing official measures of recidivism in juvenile justice. *American journal of criminal justice*, 48(2), 319-344.

Recidivism Prevalence Levels

The prevalence of recidivism among justice-involved youth depends on the measure of recidivism and the timeframe for analysis. Though we lack national recidivism data, two studies using different datasets and analysis time frames offer suggestive prevalence rates. Robertson et al (2020) draw on data for 6,771 probation youth across 20 sites in five U.S. states (JJ-TRIALS) to estimate rates of juvenile recidivism.[210] They examine two measures of recidivism over a 12-month follow-up period: (1) rearrest or referral to the juvenile justice system, and (2) adjudication. The researchers further defined recidivism as any qualifying event occurring at least 30 days after initial intake to account for jurisdictional variation in recordkeeping and case processing.

Using the rearrest or referral definition, the study found an overall 12-month recidivism rate of 33.1%, though site-specific rates varied widely, from 6.9% to 69.2%. In contrast, adjudication rates were substantially lower. Only 11.6% of youth were adjudicated delinquent for a new offense during the follow-up period, while 15.3% were not adjudicated, and 6.2% had cases still pending. Across the 20 sites, adjudication rates ranged from 1.9% to 27.8%, but the presence of pending cases in some jurisdictions (up to 19.6%) complicates interpretation. ***Due to these uncertainties, the authors emphasize that rearrest-based measures provide more consistent and timely indicators of youth reoffending across diverse jurisdictions.*** Brame et al (2018) used data from the Pathways to Desistance Study, a large-scale longitudinal project that tracked 1,354 youth adjudicated delinquent or convicted of serious offenses in Maricopa County, AZ, and Philadelphia, PA.[211] This study followed youth for seven years post-enrollment and used both juvenile petition records and adult FBI arrest records to assess recidivism. It reported that 75% to 80% of the sample recidivated within seven years. The study emphasized that most recidivism occurred early in the observation period, followed by a sharp decline in offending, suggesting a temporal concentration of risk shortly after initial system involvement.

Together, these studies demonstrate that recidivism prevalence can range widely depending on the definition and the time frame of measurement. The prevalence of re-arrest is both large (33%) and variable (6.9% to 69%) within the first few months of the initial case disposition, while adjudication rates are much lower (11.6%). Over longer time horizons (7 years), risk of re-arrest rises considerably (75-80%).

210 Robertson, A. A., Fang, Z., Weiland, D., Joe, G., Gardner, S., Dembo, R., ... & Elkington, K. (2020). Recidivism among justice-involved youth: Findings from JJ-TRIALS. *Criminal justice and behavior*, 47(9), 1059-1078.
211 Brame, R., Mulvey, E. P., Schubert, C. A., & Piquero, A. R. (2018). Recidivism in a sample of serious adolescent offenders. Journal of *Quantitative Criminology*, 34(1), 167-187.

Defining Reentry Success

Research suggests that recidivism should be defined to account for both new arrests and new adjudications. Yet reducing recidivism alone does not constitute reentry success. Youth who remain caught in cycles of educational disengagement, ongoing punishment, and poverty gain little from avoiding rearrest if other conditions persist. Measures of reentry success should also include school connection, school completion, and improved mental and behavioral health.

1

No new arrest or adjudication

Because arrest and adjudication capture different aspects of recidivism and each are subject to their own biases, both are important dimensions of reentry success.

2

Consistent connection to school and completion

This should include school enrollment, continuous attendance, and persistence to completion. School attachment and success are not only critical levers for preventing recidivism, they are essential bridges to long-term opportunity.

3

Improved mental and behavioral health

Given the prevalence of mental health conditions and substance use disorders among justice-involved youth, as well as their association with recidivism, mental and behavioral health improvement is a critical lever for long-term wellbeing.

Predictors of Reentry Success After Juvenile-Legal Involvement

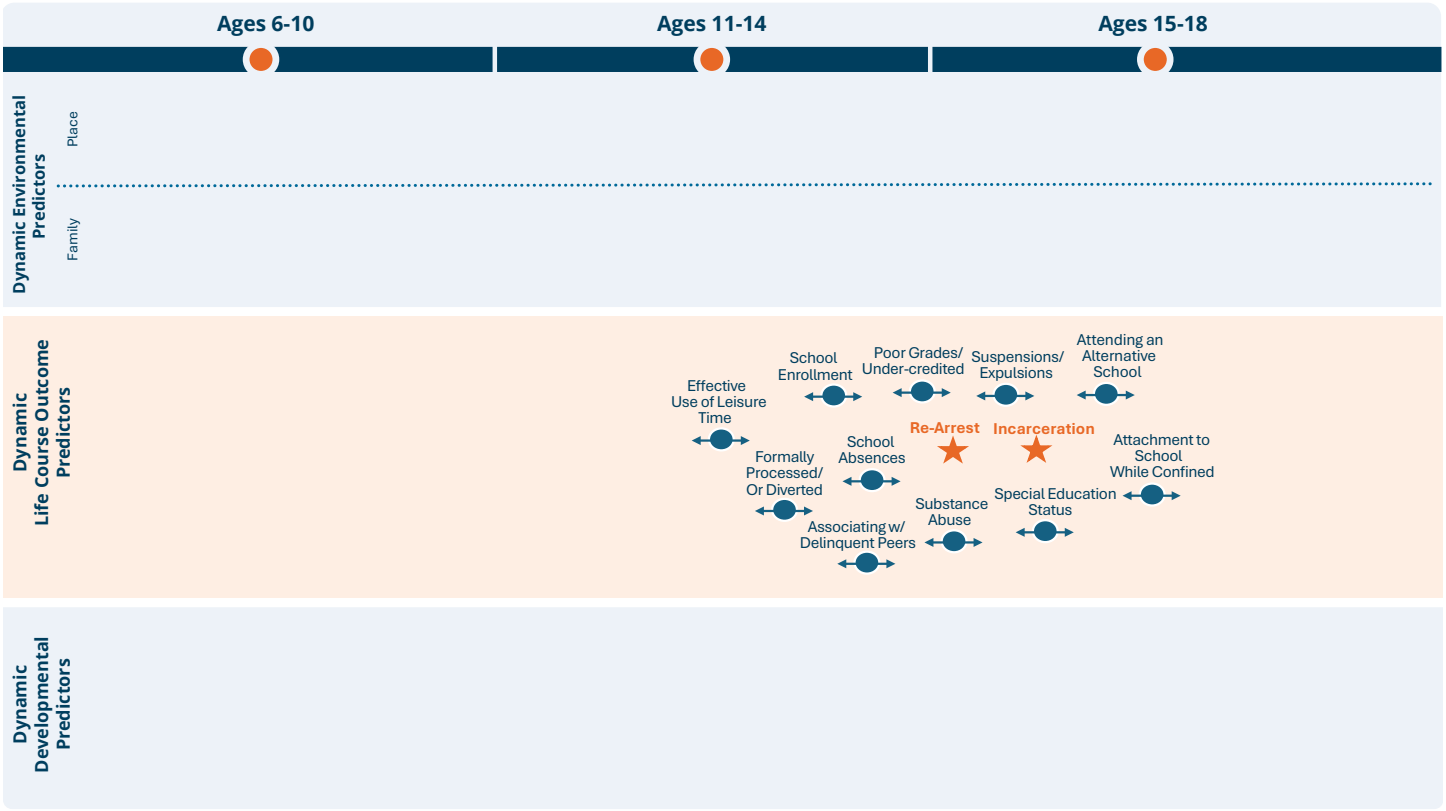
While school connection and completion as well as mental/behavioral health are critical aspects of reentry success for justice-involved youth, the existing research literature is overwhelmingly focused on predictors of recidivism. The section below summarizes predictors for juvenile recidivism grouped as life course outcomes, social-ecological environments, and developmental factors. Emphasis is placed on identifying "dynamic" vs. "static" predictors of recidivism. Static predictors are non-changeable factors that occurred prior to the potential window of intervention. Examples include age at first arrest, type of offense, and prior incarceration history. Dynamic predictors, on the other hand, are changeable factors that occur after involvement with the legal system and can be targeted for intervention. Efforts to prevent recidivism should target dynamic risk factors, not only because they are changeable, but also because they are more accurate predictors of recidivism outcomes for Black youth. For example, Miller and colleagues (2022) assessed how well static factors performed in comparison to dynamic factors in predicting a new juvenile petition over the course of two years.[212] A risk score based on static factors, including criminal history and interactions with the juvenile legal system (e.g. convictions, prior probation, prior detention), overpredicted recidivism (i.e. generated false positives) for Black youth, but not for White youth. In other words, static factors predicted delinquency well for White youth, but predicted recidivism where none actually occurred for Black youth. Dynamic factors, in contrast, were more accurate predictors for both Black and White youth.

Life Course Outcomes

A review of the literature yielded a total of 12 life course outcomes that predict juvenile recidivism, including re-arrest, re-adjudication or incarceration. Predictors include: **being suspended or expelled** from school, **being identified for special education** services, engaging in **substance abuse**, associating with **delinquent peers, effective use of leisure time, school enrollment, school absences, school grades, attachment to school while confined, attending an alternative school, experiencing diversion** vs. formal processing, and **being incarcerated**. See Figure 11 for a visual summary. Like with prior charts, the horizontal placement of the predictor is approximate for age and can vary significantly across early to middle adolescence (12-16). The double-sided arrows for each predictor are meant to communicate this variability.

212 Miller, W. T., Campbell, C. A., Papp, J., & Ruhland, E. (2022). The contribution of static and dynamic factors to recidivism prediction for Black and White youth offenders. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, 66(16), 1779-1795.

Figure 11. Life Course Outcome Predictors of Reentry Success



Suspension or expulsions: Among youth with a history of arrest or adjudication, school exclusion through suspension or expulsion is associated with an elevated risk of subsequent arrest. Utilizing data from a large longitudinal sample of adolescents convicted of serious offenses, Monahan et al. (2014) found that these youth were more than twice as likely to be arrested during months when they experienced a suspension or expulsion compared to months when they did not.[213]

Special education status: Special education needs are associated with increased recidivism among justice-involved youth. Kim et al. (2021) analyzed administrative data for over 4,000 probation-involved youth in Washington State. They found that youth receiving special education services were significantly more likely to reoffend, even after controlling for demographic factors, mental health status, and self-regulation skills. This association was particularly pronounced among those who had experienced suspension or expulsion from school.[214]

Substance abuse: A large longitudinal study of probation-involved youth (n=1,354) found that 43-45% met lifetime diagnostic criteria for alcohol or drug abuse or dependence.[215] In a separate study of 12,649 probation youth, Stanley et al. (2025) found that substance use increased the risk of recidivism by 50% compared to youth without substance use disorders.[216]

213 Monahan, K. C., VanDerhei, S., Bechtold, J., & Cauffman, E. (2014). From the school yard to the squad car: School discipline, truancy, and arrest. *Journal of youth and adolescence,* 43(7), 1110-1122.
214 Kim, B. K. E., Johnson, J., Rhinehart, L., Logan-Greene, P., Lomeli, J., & Nurius, P. S. (2021). The school-to-prison pipeline for probation youth with special education needs. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 91(3), 375.
215 Mulvey, E. P., & Schubert, C. A. (2012). Some initial findings and policy implications of the pathways to desistance study. *Victims & offenders*, 7(4), 407-427.
216 Stanley, J. N., DeLucca, S. C., Belenko, S., & Robertson, A. (2025). The impact of mental health and substance use issues on recidivism among youth on probation. *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, 51(3), 372-382.

Associating with delinquent peers: Associating with delinquent peers has long been identified as a predictor of recidivism among juveniles.[217] It is common for youth who are incarcerated or on probation to associate with other young people involved in delinquency or to join gangs as a way to seek protection from violent victimization.[218] Also, youth who receive low levels of parental supervision or have parents with whom they lack a strong bond may seek connection and validation from peers, including those involved in delinquency.[219]

Effective use of leisure time: Significant leisure time spent outside structured activities or adult supervision is associated with increased risk for delinquency.[220]

School enrollment: Being enrolled in school is an important predictor of recidivism. In an analysis of administrative longitudinal data for a large sample (n=7,117) of youth on community probation in Florida, Helm (2025) found that youth that were currently enrolled in school had 30% lower odds of re-adjudication within a year after release from community placement.[221]

School absences (attendance): Consistent school attendance is negatively associated with re-arrest, while habitual truancy is positively associated. In their quasi-experimental study of a large sample of more than 4,000 Florida youth released

217 Cottle, C. C., Lee, R. J., & Heilbrun, K. (2001). The prediction of criminal recidivism in juveniles: A meta-analysis. *Criminal justice and behavior*, 28(3), 367-394; Basto-Pereira, M., & Farrington, D. P. (2022). Developmental predictors of offending and persistence in crime: A systematic review of meta-analyses. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 101761

218 Pyle, N., Flower, A., Williams, J., & Fall, A. M. (2020). Social risk factors of institutionalized juvenile offenders: A systematic review. *Adolescent Research Review*, 5, 173-186; Harding, D. J. (2010). *Living the drama: Community, conflict, and culture among inner-city boys*. University of Chicago Press.

219 De Boer, S., Testé, B., & Guarnaccia, C. (2023). How Young Offenders' Perceive Their Life Courses and the Juvenile Justice System: A Systematic Review of Recent Qualitative Research. *Adolescent Research Review*, 8(2), 137-158

220 Cottle, C. C., Lee, R. J., & Heilbrun, K. (2001). The prediction of criminal recidivism in juveniles: A meta-analysis. *Criminal justice and behavior*, 28(3), 367-394

221 Helm, C. (2025). *Educational Strain and Juvenile Recidivism: A General Strain Theory Analysis of Probation Youth* (Master's thesis, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte).

The Importance of School to Reentry Success

School-related factors are among the strongest predictors of long-term reentry success. These include suspensions, expulsions, special education status, enrollment, attendance, grades, and alternative school placement. Not only do observational studies show that school factors are deeply implicated in reentry success, evidence drawn from studies of rigorously-evaluated interventions affirms the same conclusion. In their study, Wilson and Lipsey (2024) analyzed how youth delinquency prevention programs impact outcomes beyond delinquency itself. They also examined whether these other outcomes help explain why some programs succeed in reducing delinquent behavior.* The researchers explored which non-delinquency factors, when changed, are most closely associated with reductions in future delinquent behavior. They refer to these influential factors as "change levers." To identify these change levers, the researchers examined 153 intervention studies involving juvenile offenders, 60% of which were randomized controlled trials (RCTs). They looked for correlations between how much a program improved a non-delinquency outcome (e.g., school attendance, family functioning) and how much it reduced delinquency. Among all the non-delinquency outcomes examined, "school-related factors showed the strongest relationships" with delinquency. **Among them, school attendance had the largest association (B_1 = 0.52), followed by a reduction in non-delinquent behavior leading to discipline (B_1 = 0.38), and positive attitudes about school and teachers (B_1 = 0.36) Staying in school** had a moderate association (B_1 = 0.28), though this was not statistically significant. Academic achievement, such as improved grades, was was found to be weakly related to reductions in delinquency (B_1 = 0.13). Other non-school domains strongly correlated with delinquency reductions included family functioning (B_1 = 0.43) and substance use (B_1 = 0.43). Programs that reduced substance use among youth also tended to reduce delinquent behavior. This is consistent with long-standing evidence that substance use and delinquency often reinforce each other. The implication of these study findings is that school-related factors may present the strongest points of leverage for reducing recidivism for delinquent youth.

* Wilson, D. B., & Lipsey, M. W. (2024). Scaling up effective juvenile delinquency programs by focusing on change levers: Evidence from a large meta-analysis. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 23(2), 261-286."

from confinement, Blomberg et al (2012), found that youth with above-average school attendance were significantly less likely to be arrested a year after release than their lower attendance peers.[222]

Poor Grades (undercredited): Good grades in high school are negatively associated with recidivism among delinquent youth. In their study of administrative longitudinal data for a large sample (n=7,117) of justice-involved youth in Florida, Walters (2024) found that better grades were negatively associated with re-arrest for a year after release from community placement.[223]

Attachment to school while confined: A recent longitudinal study followed more than 1,300 adjudicated adolescents for one year after release. Researchers measured attachment to school during confinement through bonds with teachers, attitudes toward school, and time spent on homework. Those with stronger attachment were less likely to engage in delinquency and more likely to re-enroll in school or work after release.[224]

Attending an alternative school: Evidence suggests that attending an alternative school has countervailing effects for delinquent youth. These schools are associated with an improvement in educational outcomes and an *increase* in the likelihood of recidivism. For example, in their study of longitudinal data for a large sample of first-time adolescent offenders, Fine et al (2018) found that even when controlling for baseline variables, alternative school attendance during the year after disposition for first-time juvenile offenders was associated with an improvement in self-reported school outcomes (e.g. school misconduct, truancy and grades) and an increase in self-reported violent re-offending.[225]

Experienced formal processing or diversion: Diversion for first-time juvenile offenders is associated with a reduction in their risk of recidivism. In their quasi-experimental study of longitudinal data for two large samples of justice-involved youth, Cauffman et al (2021) found that youth that experienced diversion without formal system processing were significantly less likely to recidivate in the five years after their first arrest. Of youth who were formally processed, 60% were re-arrested and 28% were incarcerated within 5 years. In contrast, for youth who were informally processed, 43% were re-arrested and 17% were incarcerated within 5 years.[226]

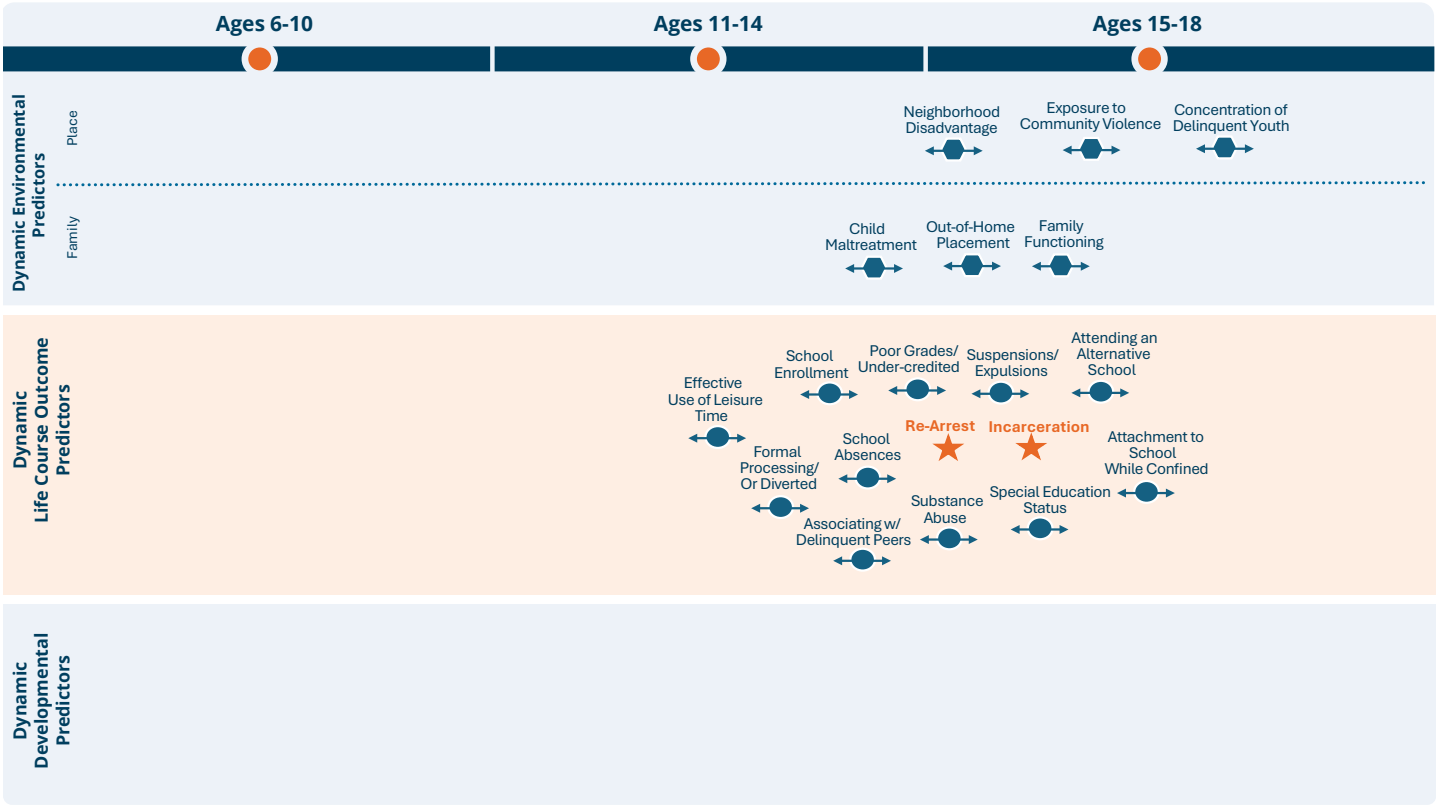
Incarceration: Evidence points to incarceration as a cause of juvenile recidivism rather than a means of prevention.[227] A study of all youth released from the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice between July 2006 and July 2011 found that social interactions with peers from unstable homes and with high levels of aggression while incarcerated caused an increase in the propensity of released youth to recidivate. The study used the quasi-random overlap in shared residence among youth in Florida's 160 correctional facilities as the basis for assigning a causal interpretation to this relationship.[228] Walker and Herting (2020) applied a quasi-experimental analysis to data for 46,000 juvenile cases across 32 jurisdictions and found that pretrial detention was associated with a 33% increase in felony recidivism and an 11% increase in misdemeanor recidivism within one year. The effects of detention on recidivism were most pronounced for first-time offenders.[229]

222 Blomberg, T. G., Bales, W. D., & Piquero, A. R. (2012). Is educational achievement a turning point for incarcerated delinquents across race and sex?. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 41(2), 202-216.
223 Walters, G. D. (2024). Predicting future recidivism from changes in school grades and moral agency. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 51(4), 491-509.
224 Cavendish, W. (2014). Academic attainment during commitment and postrelease education–related outcomes of juvenile justice-involved youth with and without disabilities. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 22(1), 41-52.
225 Fine, A., Simmons, C., Miltimore, S., Steinberg, L., Frick, P. J., & Cauffman, E. (2018). The school experiences of male adolescent offenders: Implications for academic performance and recidivism. *Crime & Delinquency,* 64(10), 1326-1350.
226 Cauffman, E., Beardslee, J., Fine, A., Frick, P. J., & Steinberg, L. (2021). Crossroads in juvenile justice: The impact of initial processing decision on youth 5 years after first arrest. *Development and psychopathology*, 33(2), 700-713.
227 Ackerman, E., Magram, J., & Kennedy, T. D. (2024). Systematic review: Impact of juvenile incarceration. *Child Protection and Practice*, 3, 100083.
228 Stevenson, M. (2017). Breaking bad: Mechanisms of social influence and the path to criminality in juvenile jails. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 99(5), 824-838.
229 Walker, S. C., & Herting, J. R. (2020). The impact of pretrial juvenile detention on 12-month recidivism: A matched comparison study. *Crime & Delinquency*, 66(13-14), 1865-1887.

Social Environmental Factors

A total of nine social-environmental factors were found in the literature to predict recidivism. They can be grouped into two contextual domains: family and place (e.g., neighborhood). Within the family context, predictive factors include **child maltreatment, out-of-home placement**, and overall **family functioning**. Within the place context, predictors include **neighborhood disadvantage, exposure to community violence,** and the **local concentration of delinquent youth**. See Figure 12 for a visual summary.

Figure 12. Life Course Outcomes and Social Environmental Predictors of Reentry Success



Family

Child maltreatment: Child maltreatment has been shown to increase the risk of juvenile recidivism. In their study using statewide administrative data, Cho & Lee (2022) employed a quasi-experimental analysis to assess the relationship child maltreatment and repeat offending.[230] They found that over a 3-year period, 65.2% of maltreated offenders and 61.5% of a matched sample recidivated after their initial offense. Moreover, the expected number of reoffenses were 1.23 times greater for maltreated youth compared to their non-maltreated peers.

Out-of-home placement: The number of times a youth is placed in out-of-home care has been shown in a meta-analysis to predict recidivism among delinquent youth.[231] Moreover, being placed in congregate care rather than a family-like setting increases the risk of recidivism.[232]

230 Cho, M., & Lee, C. H. (2022). Childhood maltreatment and repeat offending in juvenile delinquents: A propensity score matched-control study. *Youth & Society*, 54(7), 1178-1199.
231 Cottle, C. C., Lee, R. J., & Heilbrun, K. (2001). The prediction of criminal recidivism in juveniles: A meta-analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 28(3), 367–394.
232 Huang, H., Ryan, J. P., Sappleton, A., & Chiu, Y. L. (2015). Crossover youth post arrest: Placement status and recidivism. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 57, 193-200.

Family functioning: Across 14 meta-analyses of longitudinal predictors, family problems are one of the strongest predictors of persistent criminality among juvenile youth.[233]

Place

Neighborhood concentrated disadvantage: Neighborhood disadvantage, including high levels of poverty, unemployment, high school dropout, and families on public assistance, is associated with greater juvenile recidivism. In a meta-analysis of 29 studies, Jacobs et al (2022) found that neighborhood concentrated disadvantage was associated with an increase in re-arrests, especially for drug and violent offenses.[234]

Exposure to community violence: Two longitudinal studies of justice-involved adolescents have reported that exposure to community violence increases the risk of reactive aggression for these youth as much as 18 months after exposure.[235]

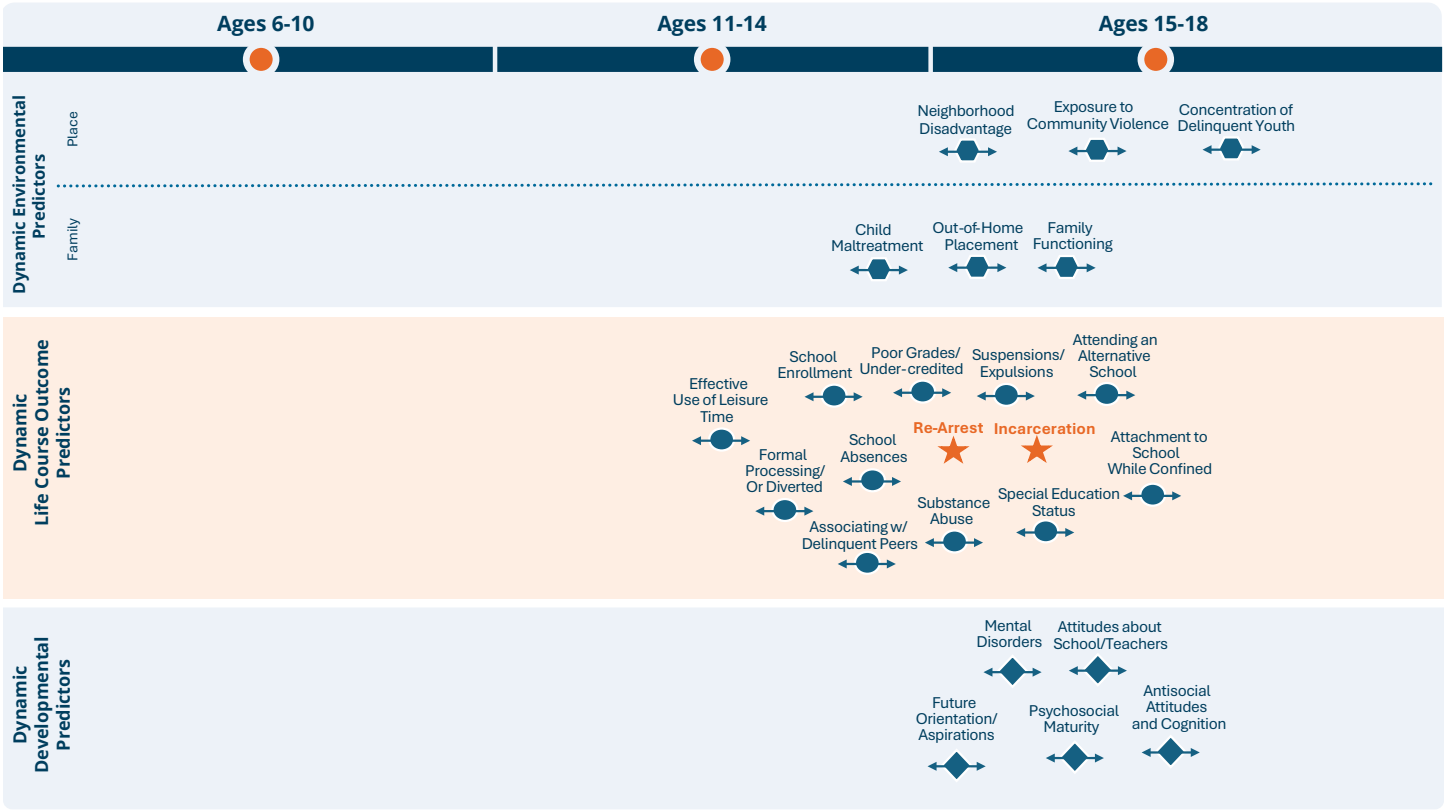
Concentration of delinquent youth: The concentration of delinquent youth in a neighborhood is associated with an increase in delinquency for that population. Studying data for a large sample of adjudicated delinquent youth on community supervision, Powell et al (2021) found that increases in delinquent youth concentration contribute to an increased risk of reoffending for younger, but not older youth.[236]

Developmental Factors

A total of five developmental factors were identified in the literature to be predictors of recidivism. These include: (1) the presence of **mental disorders**, (2) **negative attitudes toward school and teachers**, (3) **antisocial attitudes and cognitions**, (4) **psychosocial immaturity**, and (5) **limited future orientation or aspirations**. See Figure 13.

233 Cottle, C. C., Lee, R. J., & Heilbrun, K. (2001). The prediction of criminal recidivism in juveniles: A meta-analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 28(3), 367–394.
234 Jacobs, L. A., Ashcraft, L. E., Sewall, C. J., Wallace, D., & Folb, B. L. (2022). Recidivism in context: A meta-analysis of neighborhood concentrated disadvantage and repeat offending. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 49(6), 783-806.
235 Myers, T. D. W., Salcedo, A., Frick, P. J., Ray, J. V., Thornton, L. C., Steinberg, L., & Cauffman, E. (2018). Understanding the link between exposure to violence and aggression in justice-involved adolescents. *Development and Psychopathology*, 30(2), 593-603; Myers, T. D. W., Salcedo, A., Frick, P. J., Ray, J. V., Thornton, L. C., Steinberg, L., & Cauffman, E. (2018). Understanding the link between exposure to violence and aggression in justice-involved adolescents. *Development and Psychopathology*, 30(2), 593-603.
236 Powell, Z. A., Craig, J. M., Piquero, A. R., Baglivio, M. T., & Epps, N. (2021). Delinquent youth concentration and juvenile recidivism. *Deviant behavior*, 42(7), 821-836.

Figure 13. Life Course Outcome, Environmental and Developmental Predictors of Reentry Success



Future orientation/aspirations: Beliefs about one's potential for future success are associated with delinquent behavior. Two studies using large longitudinal samples of justice-involved youth found that perceptions of the importance and likelihood of achieving positive future goals influenced the likelihood of engaging in delinquency. Iselin et al. (2012) reported that the goal of "staying out of trouble with the law" was linked to a reduction in self-reported delinquency, though not in official arrests or petitions.[237] Similarly, Mahler et al. (2017) found that both aspirations for future success and expectations of achieving that success independently predicted future delinquency. Notably, in this study the influence of aspirations on delinquent behavior was significant only among youth with high levels of impulse control.[238]

Mental disorders: Having a mental disorder places justice-involved youth at elevated risk for recidivism. A 2017 meta-analysis of 17 independent studies involving 5,737 justice-involved youth examined the relationship between mental disorders and juvenile recidivism.[239] The researchers found that externalizing disorders (e.g., ADHD, conduct disorder) and comorbid disorders (combinations of internalizing and externalizing disorders) were significantly associated with higher rates of recidivism, with small to moderate effect sizes (d = 0.415 and d = 0.366). In contrast, internalizing disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety) showed no significant association with reoffending. The high prevalence of mental disorders among justice-involved youth underscores the importance of targeting mental health as a focus for intervention. Research indicates that between 45% and 73% of adolescents in the juvenile justice system meet the diagnostic criteria for at least one psychiatric disorder, with substance use disorders being the most frequently identified.[240] For instance, the Pathways to Desistance Study followed 1,354 youth adjudicated delinquent or convicted of serious offenses in Maricopa County, Arizona, and

237 Iselin, A. M. R., Mulvey, E. P., Loughran, T. A., Chung, H. L., & Schubert, C. A. (2012). A longitudinal examination of serious adolescent offenders' perceptions of chances for success and engagement in behaviors accomplishing goals. *Journal of abnormal child psychology*, 40(2), 237-249.
238 Mahler, A., Simmons, C., Frick, P. J., Steinberg, L., & Cauffman, E. (2017). Aspirations, expectations and delinquency: The moderating effect of impulse control. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 46(7), 1503-1514.
239 Wibbelink, C. J., Hoeve, M., Stams, G. J. J., & Oort, F. J. (2017). A meta-analysis of the association between mental disorders and juvenile recidivism. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 33, 78-90.
240 Shufelt, J. L., & Cocozza, J. J. (2006). *Youth with mental health disorders in the juvenile justice system: Results from a multi-state prevalence study* (pp. 1-6). Delmar, NY: National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Researchers found that approximately 58% of participants met the criteria for at least one mental health disorder, with substance use disorder emerging as the most prevalent condition.[241]

Attitudes about school/teachers: In their study, Wilson and Lipsey (2024) analyzed how youth delinquency prevention programs impact outcomes beyond delinquency itself. They also examined whether these other outcomes help explain why some programs succeed in reducing delinquent behavior. To identify these related outcomes, the researchers examined 153 intervention studies involving juvenile offenders, 60% of which were randomized controlled trials (RCTs). They looked for correlations between how much a program improved a non-delinquency outcome (e.g., school attendance, family functioning) and how much it reduced delinquency. Among the strongest correlated outcomes with delinquency reduction was positive attitudes about school and teachers (B_1 = 0.36).[242]

Psychosocial immaturity: Psychosocial maturity is a multifaceted construct that includes cognitive, social, and emotional characteristics relevant to decision-making.[243] A study using data from a large longitudinal sample of serious juvenile offenders (n = 1,088) found that higher psychosocial maturity was associated with a reduced risk of reoffending. Researchers measured psychosocial maturity through an index capturing impulse control, suppression of aggression, consideration of others, future orientation, personal responsibility, and resistance to peer influence.[244]

Antisocial attitudes and cognition: Antisocial attitudes and cognitive traits, such as callous-unemotional tendencies and moral disengagement (the disconnection of one's harmful behavior from thoughts of self-condemnation), have been identified as significant predictors of delinquency and recidivism among justice-involved youth.[245] The Crossroads Study followed 1,126 first-time offending youth arrested for various low-level offenses in California, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania. Research using this data has shown that adolescents with elevated levels of callous-unemotional traits are more likely to engage in persistent antisocial and illegal behavior over time.[246] These traits are marked by shallow or inappropriate emotional responses, a lack of empathy, and diminished feelings of guilt. In their study, Ray et al (2016) identified subgroups of youth based on their self-reported offending history prior to their first arrest (typically between ages 13 and 17). They found that youth with elevated callous-unemotional traits were significantly more likely to belong to the group with high patterns of delinquency, even after accounting for other influential factors such as impulsivity and neighborhood environment. In addition to callous-unemotional traits, moral disengagement has emerged as another key cognitive risk factor for delinquent behavior. Drawing on data from the Pathways to Desistance Study, researchers defined moral disengagement as the cognitive process of rationalizing or justifying harmful behavior to make it seem less morally wrong. The study found that adolescents who showed greater reductions in moral disengagement during the transition to adulthood also demonstrated lower rates of self-reported offending and were less likely to be rearrested.[247] These associations held even after controlling for callous-unemotional traits, prior offending history, and time spent incarcerated. Together, these findings highlight the critical role of antisocial attitudes and cognitive processes in shaping both the onset and persistence of delinquent behavior.

241 Schubert, C. A., Mulvey, E. P., & Glasheen, C. (2011). Influence of mental health and substance use problems and criminogenic risk on outcomes in serious juvenile offenders. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 50(9), 925-937.
242 Wilson, D. B., & Lipsey, M. W. (2024). Scaling up effective juvenile delinquency programs by focusing on change levers: Evidence from a large meta-analysis. *Criminology & Public Policy,* 23(2), 261-286.
243 Cauffman, E., & Steinberg, L. (2000). (Im) maturity of judgment in adolescence: Why adolescents may be less culpable than adults. *Behavioral sciences & the law*, 18(6), 741-760.
244 Monahan, K. C., Steinberg, L., Cauffman, E., & Mulvey, E. P. (2013). Psychosocial (im) maturity from adolescence to early adulthood: Distinguishing between adolescence-limited and persisting antisocial behavior. *Development and psychopathology,* 25(4pt1), 1093-1105.
245 Cauffman, E., Gillespie, M. L., Beardslee, J., Davis, F., Hernandez, M., & Williams, T. (2023). Adolescent contact, lasting impact? Lessons learned from two longitudinal studies spanning 20 years of developmental science research with justice-system-involved youths. *Psychological science in the public interest,* 24(3), 133-161.
246 Ray, J. V., Thornton, L. C., Frick, P. J., Steinberg, L., & Cauffman, E. (2016). Impulse control and callous-unemotional traits distinguish patterns of delinquency and substance use in justice involved adolescents: Examining the moderating role of neighborhood context. *Journal of abnormal child psychology*, 44(3), 599-611.
247 Shulman, E. P., Cauffman, E., Piquero, A. R., & Fagan, J. (2011). Moral disengagement among serious juvenile offenders: a longitudinal study of the relations between morally disengaged attitudes and offending. *Developmental psychology,* 47(6), 1619.

Facilitating Reentry Success: Programs and Policies

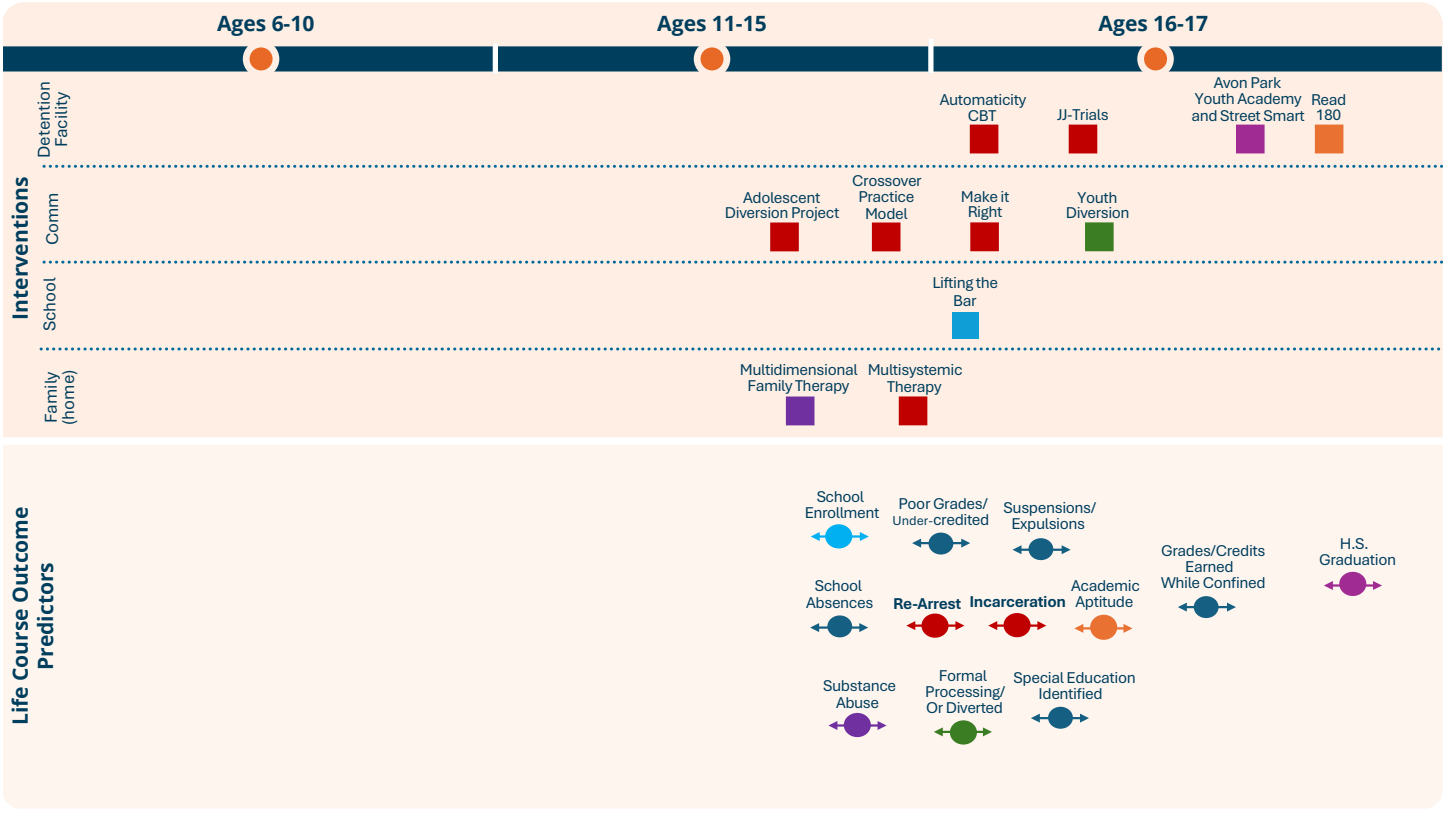
The period following release from incarceration is a critical window during which effective intervention can dramatically reduce the likelihood of recidivism and promote positive long-term outcomes.

The policies and programs outlined in the following section reflect a growing recognition of reentry as not simply a return to prior systems, but a pivotal opportunity to reset trajectories. In contrast to traditional punitive approaches, these strategies emphasize relationship-building, trust, continuity of educational progress, and the alignment of services across school, probation, and mental health systems.

Evidence-Based Programs and Practices

The programs and policies profiled in the pages that follow represent a small but growing body of interventions aimed at preventing recidivism and supporting successful reentry for youth transitioning from detention back into school. In total, 11 successful programs and practices were identified through a systematic scan of the research literature. All interventions described below were rigorously evaluated with randomized controlled trial or quasi-experimental designs and were found to improve outcomes mostly for young people in high school. Four were delivered in detention settings, 4 in community settings, and 1 in schools. Two targeted family systems and were delivered in home and community settings. Figure 14 offers a color-coded visualization of these interventions and the outcomes they target.

Figure 14. Evidence-Based Programs and Practices



Recidivism

Eight interventions proved effective in reducing recidivism among justice-involved youth, though they varied in setting, intensity, target population, and theoretical approach: the Adolescent Diversion Project, Automaticity Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Crossover Practice Model, JJ-Trials, Lifting the Bar, Make it Right, Multidimensional Family Therapy, and Multisystemic Therapy.

The Adolescent Diversion Project and Make it Right were diversion programs that steered youth away from formal prosecution toward community-based alternatives. The Adolescent Diversion Project paired mostly Black male adolescents with student volunteer caseworkers for 18 weeks and reduced recidivism by 30-35% at 8 months post-intervention. Make it Right offered restorative justice conferencing for mostly Black and Latino adolescents arrested for felonies, reducing rearrest by 44% within six months and sustaining effects through four years.

Automaticity CBT and Lifting the Bar targeted youth in detention or reentering schools after confinement. Automaticity CBT delivered twice-daily cognitive behavioral therapy sessions to 2,593 Black and Latino males at Cook County's juvenile detention center, reducing reincarceration by 21% at 18 months post-intervention. Lifting the Bar, a brief pilot intervention focused on building relationships between justice-involved youth and educators in Oakland, reduced reincarceration by 58% and disciplinary citations by 91% during the semester following release.

Two family-centered interventions addressed youth with co-occurring behavioral health needs. Multidimensional Family Therapy engaged mostly Latino and Black Florida adolescents with substance use and psychiatric disorders through 6-9 months of individual, family, and community sessions, reducing self-reported delinquency at around a year post-intervention. Multisystemic Therapy provided intensive home-based services to mostly Black serious offenders in South Carolina, reducing reincarceration by 47% at 15 months post-intervention. However, subsequent research, including a large Los Angeles County study, found the program may produce harmful effects for Black youth.

Two systems-level interventions also proved effective. The Crossover Practice Model addressed the needs of mostly Black youth with special education needs involved in both child welfare and juvenile justice systems. A quasi-experimental study found that its interagency collaboration approach reduced re-adjudication by 34%. JJ-Trials tested organizational interventions across 20 county-level agencies in five states to improve substance use service delivery for 18,698 youth, achieving a 9% reduction in recidivism.

Table 12. Recidivism Prevention Interventions

Program	Study Population	Outcome
Adolescent Diversion Project	Mostly male (84%) and Black (91%) adolescents (avg age was 14).	Reduced recidivism (self-reported delinquency) by 30-35% at around 7.5 post-intervention.
Automaticity Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	Mostly black (84%) and Latino (13%) male adolescents (avg age was 16.1 years) who were admitted to the temporary detention center in Cook County, Illinois.	Reduced reincarceration rates to the juvenile detention center by 21% at approximately 18 months post-intervention.

Crossover Practice Model (CYPM)	Youth aged 10 to 17, who had an open child protection case and were charged with a delinquent offense. The sample was 75% Black, 74% eligible for special education services, and 61% with a history of neglect. The mean age was 14.8 years.	Reduced re-adjudication by 34% (31.6% CYPM vs. 48% comparison group) at 1 year follow-up.
JJ Trials	A total of 18,698 youth at 20 county county-level JJ agency sites across Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and Texas.	Reduced new arrest or referral rates by 9% during the intervention period translating to an estimated 1,627 fewer recidivism events across the full sample.
Lifting the Bar	Adolescents (avg age of 16) who were predominantly male (87%), mostly Black (62%) and multiracial (21%), who were released from a local detention facility and returned to middle or high schools in the Oakland Unified School District.	Reduced youth reincarceration by 58% (29% treatment vs. 69% control) during the semester following release. Also reduced school disciplinary citations by 91%.
Make it Right	Youth (avg age was 15.8 year) who were mostly Black (52%) and Latino (32%), male (90%).	Reduced re-arrest rates by 44% within 6 months of randomization with effects persisting through 4 years.
Multidimensional Family Therapy	Mostly Latino (68%), Black (18%), and male (74%) adolescents from Florida with an average age of 15.4 years.	Reduced self-reported delinquent behavior by .42 standard deviations at around 12 months post-intervention.
Multisystemic Therapy	Mostly Black (81%) and male (82%) adolescents (avg age was 15) from South Carolina who committed a serious criminal offense and had an average of 3 prior arrests. The majority (59%) had been incarcerated at least once prior.	Decreased re-incarceration rates by 47% at 1.5 years post-intervention.

Adolescent Diversion Project

Summary

The Adolescent Diversion Project is an 18-week, strengths-based intervention that diverts arrested youth from formal juvenile justice processing. The program pairs each participant with a trained student caseworker who provides individualized support through weekly community-based sessions. These sessions focus on improving family relationships, academic engagement, employment readiness, and independent access to local resources.

The Adolescent Diversion Project (ADP) offers a strengths-based alternative to traditional juvenile court processing for delinquency. ADP involves diverting arrested youth from formal juvenile justice processing and directing them instead towards community-based services. Over an 18-week span, student volunteer caseworkers dedicate 6-8 hours weekly to these youths, engaging with them in their homes, schools, and communities. These one-on-one sessions are tailored to address the individual needs of each juvenile, aiming to enhance areas like family bonding, academics, employment, and leisure activities. As part of their guidance, caseworkers introduce the youth to community resources, enabling them to independently access these resources post-program. In the program's final month, caseworkers shift to a consultant role, gradually reducing their hours but ensuring that youth are well-prepared to apply the strategies and techniques they've acquired after the program concludes.[248] ADP was evaluated with a randomized controlled trial that included a sample of 395 adolescents who were mostly male (84%) and Black (91%) with an average age of 14. Findings at 7.5 months post-intervention indicated that ADP reduced recidivism by 30-35% for diverted youth compared to non-diverted youth.[249]

Automaticity Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Summary

Automaticity CBT is a cognitive behavioral therapy program delivered to adolescents during their detention at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center. The program combines twice-daily group sessions, self-assessments, and behavior-based exercises to help youth identify and reduce automatic problematic behaviors and biased beliefs, particularly those related to aggression and hostile attribution.

In the Automaticity CBT program, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is used with adolescents in juvenile confinement to teach them how "to recognize and reduce problematic automatic behaviors and biased beliefs". Participants remain involved with the program throughout their detention period at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, which usually spans three to four weeks. During their stay, aside from attending school within the center, the youth participate in group CBT sessions twice daily. The program's manualized curriculum is delivered by trained staff from the detention center. A unique aspect of the program requires adolescent detainees to complete "thinking reports" whenever their actions lead the detention staff to impose a "time out," which entails solitary time in their cell. Besides conventional CBT methods, the program incorporates self-assessment, film-based learning, and "behavior experiments" to help youth address issues like hostile attribution bias. The program was evaluated in 2009 as part of a randomized controlled trial with a sample of 2,593 Black (84%) and Latino (13%) male adolescents (avg age 16.1 years) who were admitted to the detention center. Youth resided in neighborhoods where more than a third of residents (35%) lived below the poverty line. For youth who participated in the programming, CBT reduced readmission rates to the juvenile detention facility by 21% at approximately 18 months post-intervention.[250]

248 Ibid

249 Smith, E. P., Wolf, A. M., Cantillon, D. M., Thomas, O., & Davidson, W. S. (2004). The Adolescent Diversion Project: 25 years of research on an ecological model of intervention. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 27(2), 29-47.

250 Heller, S. B., Shah, A. K., Guryan, J., Ludwig, J., Mullainathan, S., & Pollack, H. A. (2017). Thinking, fast and slow? Some field experiments to reduce crime and dropout in Chicago. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 132(1), 1-54.

Crossover Practice Model

Summary

The Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM) is a research-based, three-phase framework designed to improve outcomes for youth involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The model promotes interagency collaboration, family engagement, strength-based interventions to reduce system involvement and support long-term stability.

The Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM) is a structured, research-based framework developed by the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University to improve outcomes for "crossover youth"—those simultaneously involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Designed to disrupt the progression from maltreatment to delinquency, CYPM emphasizes interagency collaboration, family engagement, strength-based approaches, and equitable treatment of youth and families. Its goals include reducing reliance on out-of-home and congregate care, decreasing disproportionate system involvement among youth of color, and improving permanency and service access. CYPM is implemented across three phases: (1) early identification and diversion, including arrest protocols and information-sharing agreements; (2) joint assessment and case planning, involving multidisciplinary teams, consolidated court processing, and coordinated service referrals; and (3) ongoing management and case closure, with a focus on permanency planning and sustained access to behavioral health, housing, education, and other supports. The model also requires comprehensive staff training and consistent engagement of youth and families throughout the process.

A quasi-experimental evaluation of CYPM conducted in a Midwestern urban county (referred to as Oak County) assessed the model's impact on youth recidivism.[251] The study included a total of 171 youth aged 10 to 17, all of whom had an open child protection case and had been charged with a delinquent offense (excluding status and traffic offenses). The sample was 75% Black, and 74% were eligible for special education services (i.e., had an Individualized Education Plan). The mean age was 14.8 years, and 61% had been neglected. The full study sample was divided into three groups of 57 youth each: CYPM participants from Oak County, a historical comparison group from Oak County, and a contemporaneous comparison group from neighboring counties. Youth outcomes were tracked for 12 months following their offense. Using propensity score matching and logistic regression analyses, the study found that 31.6% of CYPM youth were adjudicated for a new offense within a year, compared to 48% in the comparison groups.

The Juvenile Justice-Translational Research on Interventions for Adolescents in the Legal System (JJ-TRIALS)

Summary

The Juvenile Justice–Translational Research on Interventions for Adolescents in the Legal System (JJ-TRIALS) was a national initiative that tested the effectiveness of organizational interventions to improve substance use service delivery and reduce recidivism among justice-involved youth. These interventions ranged from interagency training and system mapping to intensive external facilitation.

The Juvenile Justice–Translational Research on Interventions for Adolescents in the Legal System (JJ-TRIALS) was an initiative that evaluated the effectiveness of organizational interventions aimed at improving substance use (SU) service delivery and reducing recidivism among justice-involved youth.[252] The study aimed

251 Haight, W., Bidwell, L., Choi, W. S., & Cho, M. (2016). An evaluation of the Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM): Recidivism outcomes for maltreated youth involved in the juvenile justice system. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 65, 78-85.
252 Robertson, A. A., Gardner, S., Dembo, R., Dennis, M., Pankow, J., & Wilson, K. J. (2023). Impact of implementation interventions to improve substance use service delivery on recidivism among justice-involved youth. *Health & justice*, 11(1), 12.

to strengthen practices across juvenile justice and behavioral health agencies to improve identification of substance use treatment needs, increase referrals, and boost youth engagement in treatment. Two types of organizational interventions were tested. All sites received the "Core" intervention, which consisted of interagency workgroups, needs assessments, system mapping, training in evidence-based substance use treatment, family engagement, and capacity-building around data-driven decision-making. "Enhanced" sites also received one year of intensive external facilitation. Trained facilitators guided local workgroups through structured quality improvement cycles using the Plan-Do-Study-Act model. They helped agencies set measurable goals, analyze site-specific data, and implement sustainable changes.

An evaluation of JJ-Trials employed a cluster randomized delayed-start (step-wedge) design involving 20 county-level JJ agency sites across five U.S. states (Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and Texas).[253] The analysis included 18,698 youth and assessed 1-year recidivism, defined as a new arrest or referral, across four time periods between March 2014 and August 2017. Logistic regression models estimated the effects of intervention type, controlling for SU treatment need, supervision level, and site characteristics. Results showed that youth in "Enhanced" intervention sites had approximately 9% lower recidivism rates during the intervention phase compared to youth in Core-only sites, translating to an estimated 1,627 fewer recidivism events across the full sample. While the effect size was small, the findings suggest that structured facilitation of interagency workgroups, particularly those focused on improving screening, referral, and treatment practices, can contribute to meaningful reductions in youth reoffending.

Intervention Spotlight: Lifting the Bar

Summary: Lifting the Bar is a relationship-centered school reentry intervention designed to foster trust between justice-involved youth and educators by humanizing students and promoting meaningful adult-student connections. In a pilot randomized trial, the intervention significantly reduced risk of reincarceration as well as school disciplinary citations for these youth.

Research consistently demonstrates that the relationships between youth and caring adults in schools, particularly their teachers, critically shape their educational outcomes.[254] Mentoring relationships, particularly informal mentoring that involves caring relationships organically formed between adolescents and non-parental adults such as teachers, counselors, and coaches, are consequential for long-term educational outcomes. These mentors often help students navigate personal challenges, develop life goals, and build social and emotional competencies. Schools are a primary setting where such relationships emerge, particularly given the frequency and depth of student-adult interactions in these environments.

Kraft, Bolves, and Hurd (2023) offer compelling evidence of the long-term consequences of these relationships.[255] They applied a quasi-experimental analysis to data from a nationally representative sample of youth to assess the association between having an informal school-based mentor in adolescence and long-term educational outcomes. They found that having a school-based mentor was associated with a 9.4 percentage point increase in college attendance and an average gain of two-thirds of a year of schooling. These effects were especially pronounced for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Notably, however, just 15% of students reported having informal school-based mentors. A recent survey in California found that 40% of 9th grade students reported that they did not have one caring adult relationship in school.[256]

253 Ibid.
254 Hattie, J. (2023). *Visible learning: The sequel: A synthesis of over 2,100 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge; Cornelius-White, J. (2007). Learner-centered teacher-student relationships are effective: A meta-analysis. *Review of educational research,* 77(1), 113-143.
255 Kraft, M. A., Bolves, A. J., & Hurd, N. M. (2023). How informal mentoring by teachers, counselors, and coaches supports students' long-run academic success. *Economics of Education Review*, 95, 102411.
256 Austin, G., Hanson, T., Bala, N., & Zheng, C. (2023). *Student engagement and well-being in California, 2019-21: Results of the 18th Biennial State California Healthy Kids survey, grades 7, 9, and 11.* WestEd. https://data.calschls.org/resources/18th_Biennial_State_1921.pdf

For youth involved in the juvenile legal system, relationships with teachers are especially important to both their success in school and their risk of recidivism. In their study of a large longitudinal sample of justice-involved youth, Smith et al (2025) found that stronger student-teacher relationships predicted both higher grades and reduced recidivism over the course of a year, with effects partially mediated by more hopeful expectations for the future.[257] This evidence suggests that student-teacher relationships have a critical role to play in facilitating reentry success for justice-involved youth.

Youth returning to school after involvement with the juvenile legal system face some of the most severe stigmas in the educational system, disproportionately affecting Black, Latino, and American Indian students. This stigma often acts as a key impediment to the formation of relationships between these students and their teachers that can help redirect their life trajectories. In fact, in our interviews with formerly justice-involved students across California, the formation of a caring relationship with a teacher was one of the most important turning points in their lives.[258] However, for most students, the existing literature highlights how negative stereotypes, low expectations, and educator mistrust can undermine their sense of belonging and derail the formation of supportive relationships.[259]

The Lifting the Bar Intervention

Addressing this challenge, Lifting the Bar (LTB) was developed as a school reentry intervention to promote trust and connection between students returning from juvenile detention and the educators they encounter upon reentry. The intervention is grounded in research from social psychology on psychologically "wise" interventions and was designed over 15 months through collaboration with school and juvenile justice personnel, afterschool programs, and the youth themselves.[260]

In Lifting the Bar, students participated in a 45–60-minute one-on-one session with a research team member at their school several days after release. The experience is represented to students as an opportunity to help future students. It's not presented as an effort to help them or to help them introduce themselves to an adult. Furthermore, even as the exercise primarily involves activities that the student completes, the intervention itself fundamentally targets adults. It opens their eyes to who a student is and can be and what role they can play in supporting that young person. Key elements of the intervention include:

1. **Normalization of Reentry Challenges:** Students learned that difficulties upon returning to school, such as feeling behind academically or wearing a GPS tracker, were common and temporary.

2. **Identifying values and goals:** Students selected up to three personal values associated with school (e.g., "Help support my family," "Prepare myself for college") and wrote about their importance. The goal of this activity was to help students think through what school genuinely is or can be for them and what they would like it to be. This activity reinforced students' prosocial identities and connected their goals to school engagement.

257 Smith IV, C. D., Beardslee, J., Frick, P. J., Steinberg, L. D., & Cauffman, E. (2025). Teachers as Beacons of Hope: The Mediating Role of Future Expectations on the Association Between Student-Teacher Relationships and Justice-Involved Adolescents' Grades and Offending. *Crime & Delinquency*, 00111287241311249.
258 Field interviews conducted in California.
259 Greene E., Duke L., Woody W. D. (2017). Stereotypes influence beliefs about transfer and sentencing of juvenile offenders. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 23(9), 841–858; Okonofua J. A., Walton G. M., Eberhardt J. L. (2016). A vicious cycle: A social–psychological account of extreme racial disparities in school discipline. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 11(3), 381–398
260 Walton, G. M., Okonofua, J. A., Remington Cunningham, K., Hurst, D., Pinedo, A., Weitz, E., ... & Eberhardt, J. L. (2021). Lifting the bar: A relationship-orienting intervention reduces recidivism among children reentering school from juvenile detention. *Psychological Science*, 32(11), 1747-1767; Also see Walton G. M., Brady S. T. (2020). The social-belonging intervention. In Walton G. M., Crum A. J. (Eds.), *Handbook of wise interventions: How social psychology can help people change* (pp. 36–62). Guilford Press.

3. **Hearing peer stories:** Students read and listened to stories from older peers who had returned to school after detention and built supportive educator relationships. Participants were encouraged to reflect on and annotate these stories.

4. **"Saying-is-Believing" exercise:** Students wrote and recorded advice for future youth reentering school, reinforcing their role as contributors and mentors, not as recipients of help.

5. **Introducing themselves to a supportive adult:** Students identified an adult in their school that they wanted to get to know better who wasn't yet, but could be, an important source of support for them. These adults included teachers, counselors, or coaches. The students wrote a short self-introduction describing who they are, their values, their goals, and challenges they faced that the adult could help them with. Challenges described in these self-introductions are part and parcel of schooling and the teachers' role (e.g., "I'm behind in math and I'd like some extra help"). Teachers were not asked to or expected to solve all the child's problems.

6. **Delivering the student's letter to the chosen educator:** For half the students, a form letter was developed by the research staff that included the student's self-introduction in step 5 and content addressing a number of key themes (e.g., anticipating good days and also bad days; honorific representation of the teacher; no accountability or specific requirements of the teacher). In short, the letter framed the reentry process as challenging but full of promise and asked the educator to support the student. The letter has no requirements of teachers, there is no program for them to follow, no report to file, no monitoring. They are just asked to reach out to the student soon to support them as they see fit. Teachers are treated as trusted, skilled and well-intended professionals.

Evaluation of the Intervention

The LTB intervention was evaluated with a randomized controlled trial conducted in Alameda County, California.[261] The study sample included 47 youth (mean age of 16; range 13–17) who were released from the local detention center and returned to middle or high schools in the Oakland Unified School District. The sample was predominantly male (87%), 62% Black, and 21% multiracial. Compared to the broader reentry population in the district, study participants were slightly older and had longer periods of confinement.

Youth were randomly assigned to either one of two treatment conditions or an active control condition.

- **Student Treatment + Letter Condition:** The first treatment condition included items 1 through 6 above.

- **Student Treatment Condition:** The second treatment condition was identical to the first with the exception that no letter was prepared and delivered to an educator.

- **Active Control Condition:** Like the treatment conditions, the active control condition included activities that normalized challenges in returning to school after experiencing juvenile detention, as well as included student stories and interactive elements. However, rather than emphasizing goals, values, and relationships, the material emphasized ways for students to overcome challenges by developing "better study skills to catch up and be more successful in school."

Recidivism data were collected using official juvenile detention records during the semester following release. Youth who received the full intervention, including delivery of their letter to a selected educator, were significantly less likely to recidivate. Only 29% of the treatment group were reincarcerated,

261 Walton, G. M., Okonofua, J. A., Remington Cunningham, K., Hurst, D., Pinedo, A., Weitz, E., ... & Eberhardt, J. L. (2021). Lifting the bar: A relationship-orienting intervention reduces recidivism among children reentering school from juvenile detention. *Psychological Science*, 32(11), 1747-1767.

compared to 69% in the active control condition. Moreover, school disciplinary citations were reduced by 91% among treated students.

Why the Intervention Works

The intervention works because it targets the relationship, not just the student or the teacher alone. Additionally, it targets the representation of the student in the mind of the teacher. By giving students a chance to reflect on their goals and values, and by allowing them to communicate these to a supportive adult of their choosing, the approach helps humanize the student and build trust. As Greg Walton, the co-developer of the intervention explained, "the intervention was developed to help those who are at risk of being put in a box or not being seen at all. Who has a voice and who doesn't have a voice is often defined by hierarchy and power dynamics. Lifting the Bar gives kids a platform to introduce themselves to a person they've chosen who can make a difference for them and to communicate what they want that person to know. It creates space for teachers to hear from a student about the challenges they face that the teacher could possibly help with. The letter also gives educators a starting point for building a meaningful relationship of growth with a student who might otherwise be seen only through the lens of their past."[262]

Impact on Teacher Perceptions

In a separate study reported in Walton et al (2021), the researchers sought to extend the study findings by exploring how a separate group of teachers would react to receiving letters containing the actual student self-introductions generated in the Lifting the Bar intervention.

The researchers tested the effect of the same student-authored letters on teachers' attitudes and expectations. A total of 349 middle and high school teachers (66% female, 32% male, 1% nonbinary; average teaching experience = 16.8 years) were recruited from an online pool derived from public school district websites. Teachers were not told the topic of the study beforehand, thereby minimizing self-selection bias. Recruitment emails described the study simply as a "brief research study that will take 15–30 minutes." Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: a control group or a letter-treatment group.

Results showed that teachers who received the student letter reported more positive attitudes toward the student, including greater commitment, higher expectations for success, and stronger feelings of respect, hope, and trust. They were also less likely to react punitively to a hypothetical classroom misbehavior and less likely to express curiosity about the student's criminal background, indicating a shift away from stereotype-driven interpretations. These effects held regardless of teachers' prior experience with justice-involved students.

A subsequent randomized trial involving 315 teachers replicated these results, finding similar improvements in emotional responses, expectations, and relationship orientation, with no variation in effects based on student race.[263]

Commenting on these findings, Walton in an interview noted that "For a teacher in our world, it's not unreasonable for them to have a terrible response or question in their mind about a student returning from incarceration. The challenge is, how can we anticipate that and create a world where they can set that aside to support the student." Commenting on the response of teachers to the intervention, he noted, "about a third of teachers, I think, cried when they received the Lifting the Bar letter. Another teacher

262 Interview with study lead author.
263 Michael Ruiz, Vicky Isarraras, Hinojosa, Tognozzi, Courtney, Moskowitz, Tate, Okonofua, & Walton (Forthcoming) "A Platform for Student Voice Helps Teachers Welcome Students: Evidence From Lifting the Bar."

remarked, 'I think you've made my week…No, I think you've made my year.' I think this reflects the kind of latent support that exists among educators for justice involved youth and other youth who are in very difficult circumstances, and also the power of structured approaches that can unlock that support."[264]

Conclusion

Together, these findings illustrate the powerful role of relationships in shaping reentry outcomes for justice-involved youth and the importance of targeted intervention for helping to create those relationships. Informal mentoring and supportive adult connections are associated with long-term gains in academic attainment, and Lifting the Bar demonstrates how schools can be intentional in cultivating those relationships at the critical moment of school reentry. By enabling student voice, fostering empathy among educators, and establishing a foundation for trust, the intervention helps reframe the reentry experience as one of opportunity and growth rather than stigma and surveillance.

Walton and colleagues are developing partnerships with school districts, including Chicago Public Schools, to train staff to deliver Lifting the Bar in a sustainable manner. In relaying the broader meaning that Lifting the Bar should hold for district leaders and educators, Walton emphasized that "these kids are not a lost cause. There is a lot of potential to do better with this population of students. We've known for 50 years in education that teacher-student relationships are the foundation of learning and when teachers have high expectations for a student's success and for a student's growth, that becomes self-fulfilling. Going from zero caring teacher relationships to even just one is a huge difference."[265]

To learn more about Lifting the Bar, contact Greg Walton at gwalton@stanford.edu

Make it Right

Summary

The Make-it-Right program is a pre-charging diversion initiative that allows eligible youth arrested for certain felonies to avoid prosecution by participating in restorative justice conferencing. Upon successful completion, charges are dropped and no conviction is recorded.

Restorative justice programs have emerged as a promising approach to reducing juvenile recidivism by fostering accountability, promoting victim-offender dialogues, and offering meaningful alternatives to traditional prosecution. However, few have been found in randomized controlled trial evaluations to effectively reduce juvenile recidivism.[266] One exception is the Make-it-Right (MIR) program, launched in 2013 by the San Francisco District Attorney's Office, a pre-charging diversion initiative that offers youth arrested for certain felony offenses an opportunity to avoid formal prosecution by participating in restorative justice conferencing.[267] Facilitated by Community Works West, the program brings together the youth, the harmed party, their families, and a community representative to engage in structured dialogue and to develop a mutually agreed-upon plan to repair harm. The process includes pre-conference preparation, conference facilitation, and post-conference compliance monitoring, where youth must demonstrate accountability and willingness to participate throughout. Among those assigned to the program, 52.5% completed it, with most finishing within six months. Of those who enrolled, two-thirds successfully completed the process and had their charges dismissed.

264 Greg Walton field interview.
265 Ibid.
266 Kimbrell, C. S., Wilson, D. B., & Olaghere, A. (2023). Restorative justice programs and practices in juvenile justice: An updated systematic review and meta-analysis for effectiveness. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 22(1), 161-195
267 Shem-Tov, Y., Raphael, S., & Skog, A. (2024). Can Restorative Justice Conferencing Reduce Recidivism? Evidence From the Make-it-Right Program. *Econometrica,* 92(1), 61-78.

Make-it-Right was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial conducted with youth ages 13-17 in San Francisco, California. Of the 143 youth included in the study sample, 52% were Black, 32% were Latino, 90% were male, and the average age for all juveniles was 16 years. Most participants were arrested for felony theft (65%). A smaller share were charged with burglary (40%) or felony assault (around 14%). 99 of the study's participants were randomly assigned to MIR and 44 to traditional prosecution. Youth assigned to MIR were 19 percentage points less likely to be rearrested within six months, a 44% reduction compared to the control group. These effects persisted over time: youth in the treatment group were 15 percentage points (20%) less likely to be rearrested within three years and 27 percentage points (32%) less likely within four years, with the largest effects among those who completed the program (51%). The study found that these crime-reducing effects were not driven primarily by diversion from felony convictions. This suggests that the core conferencing experience, particularly face-to-face dialogue and victim engagement, was central to the program's impact.

Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT)

Summary

Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) is a family-centered intervention targeting adolescent substance use, delinquency, and behavioral problems. Over 6 to 9 months, the program engages youth, parents, the family system, and the broader community through both individualized and joint sessions. The goals are lasting behavioral change, improved family functioning, and positive engagement across multiple life domains.

Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) offers a family-centered approach to address adolescent substance abuse, delinquency, and various emotional and behavioral challenges. Under this program, trained therapists engage with four interlinked domains: the adolescent, the parent, the family unit, and the broader community. The therapy process is multifaceted. Initially, therapists conduct separate sessions with the adolescent and their parent(s). Following this, joint sessions involving both parents and youth are conducted. Once a strong therapeutic bond is formed and motivation levels are elevated, the emphasis shifts to promoting behavioral transformation and improved interactions. The concluding phase centers on reinforcing these positive changes to ensure benefits are sustained after treatment.

In the adolescent-focused sessions, therapists support youth in their treatment engagement, bolster their communication skills with parents, and foster coping and problem-solving abilities. These sessions also aim to enhance social aptitude, academic or occupational performance, and provide healthier alternatives to substance use and delinquent behaviors. Concurrently, in the parent-focused sessions, therapists collaborate with parents to actively participate in the therapy, intensify their emotional and behavioral connection with their child, refine their parenting techniques, and reaffirm their parental roles and responsibilities. The family-centric sessions target the enhancement of familial bonds and overall family dynamics. Meanwhile, the community-oriented sessions aim to strengthen family capabilities within their social surroundings.

Sessions are typically scheduled one to three times a week and, can last between 6 to 9 months. They can take place in various locations, including the family's residence, clinics, or community venues. Additionally, MDFT offers tailored versions suitable for diverse juvenile justice environments, ranging from jails and detention centers to day treatment programs and residential treatment facilities.

MDFT was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial with a sample of 113 mostly Latino (68%), Black (18%), and male (74%) adolescents from Florida with an average age of 15.4 years. All youth were also diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder with at least one comorbid psychiatric disorder (excluding suicidality, psychosis, autism spectrum and intellectual disability). At around 12 months post-intervention, youth in MDFT experienced a decrease in self-reported delinquent behaviors of .42 standard deviations.[268]

268 Liddle, H. A., Dakof, G. A., Rowe, C. L., Henderson, C., Greenbaum, P., Wang, W., & Alberga, L. (2018). Multidimensional Family Therapy as a community-based alternative to residential treatment for adolescents with substance use and co-occurring mental health disorders. *Journal of substance abuse treatment*, 90, 47-56.

Multisystemic Therapy

Summary

Multisystemic Therapy (MST) is an intensive, family- and community-based intervention for juveniles with serious offenses and potential substance use issues. Grounded in ecological systems theory, the program uses a structured, therapist-led approach to address risk factors across multiple levels, from individual and family to peer, school, and community. The goals are to reduce criminal behavior and out-of-home placements.

Multisystemic Therapy (MST) is an intensive, family-focused and community-based treatment program for juveniles with serious criminal offenses who are possibly abusing substances. MST's core objectives center around curbing juvenile criminal activities and minimizing out-of-home placements. It aims to comprehensively address risk factors spanning family, peers, schools, and communities and foster behavioral transformation within the youth's daily environment. The treatment process typically involves a dedicated team comprising two to four therapists as well as a supervising therapist. Collectively, they deliver approximately 60 to 100 hours of direct services over a span of three to six months. MST incorporates elements from strategic and structural family therapy, as well as cognitive behavior therapy. Grounded in ecological systems theory, MST addresses risk factors from individual to neighborhood levels that contribute to antisocial behavior. A foundational belief of MST is the pivotal role of the family in driving change. Consequently, the therapy zeroes in on enhancing parenting skills, fortifying family ties, and optimizing family functioning to mitigate antisocial tendencies. MST was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial with 155 most Black (81%) and male (82%) adolescents (avg age 15) from South Carolina in the early 1990s. Youth had a family median income of between $5,000 and $10,000 per year, had committed a serious criminal offense, and had an average of 3 prior arrests. The majority (59%) had been incarcerated at least once prior. MST was found to decrease re-incarceration rates by 47% at 1.5 years post-intervention.[269]

Conflicting Evidence

Although this and other small studies have found MST effective for delinquency reduction, two studies suggest caution in concluding MST is an effective program. A meta-analysis incorporating 16 randomized controlled trial evaluations of MST found that MST had "no clinically important effect" on delinquency or new offenses. Many of the evaluation studies for MST rely on small samples which makes "their conclusions fragile to small changes in outcomes."[270] To buttress this concern, a large study of MST in Los Angeles County found that MST poses a risk of harmful outcomes for some populations. Fain et al (2014) studied the juvenile justice outcomes for 757 youth participating in MST in LA County and 380 comparison youth who qualified for MST participation based on eligibility criteria, but who were not accepted for MST (most often due to a lack of Medicaid coverage). Participant data was gathered over an 8-year period.[271] More than 90 percent of the sample was Latino or Black, and 77% were male. This study contained one of the largest samples of any MST study. Overall, the researchers found that MST youth had significantly lower incarceration rates (11.2% vs. 20.3%) and probation violation rates (7.9% vs. 12.2%) than comparison youth at 6 months following program completion. However, in results stratified by race, Latino youth in the MST program had significantly lower rates of arrest (23.7% MST vs. 37.2% comparison) and incarceration (10.7% MST vs. 25.5% comparison), as well as significantly higher rates of completion of probation (7% MST vs. 3.3% comparison), compared to Latino comparison youth. **Black youth, in contrast, had a 70% *higher* re-arrest rate in the MST group (34.1%) than the comparison group (20.2%) and nonsignificant results for the remaining outcomes.**

269 Henggeler, S. W., Melton, G. B., Brondino, M. J., Scherer, D. G., & Hanley, J. H. (1997). Multisystemic therapy with violent and chronic juvenile offenders and their families: the role of treatment fidelity in successful dissemination. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology,* 65(5), 821.
270 Hunkin, H., Malvaso, C. G., Chittleborough, C. R., Gialamas, A., Montgomerie, A., Falster, K., ... & Pilkington, R. M. (2025). Systematic review and meta-analysis: Multisystemic therapy and functional family therapy targeting antisocial behavior in adolescence. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 64(4), 427-446.
271 Fain, T., Greathouse, S. M., Turner, S. F., & Weinberg, H. D. (2014). Effectiveness of multisystemic therapy for minority youth: Outcomes over 8 years in Los Angeles County. *Journal of juvenile justice*, 3(2), 24.

Correctional Education/Literacy

One educational program administered in juvenile correctional facilities was found to improve reading test scores: Read 180.

Table 13. Reading Interventions

Intervention	Population Treated	Outcome
Read 180	Participants were 70% Black, roughly one quarter White, and 96% male. Half (50%) had a disability status and nearly half (45%) received special education services. Students ranged in age from 14-22 with the majority between the ages of 18 and 22. About half (55%) had reached the 9th or 10th grades, and a quarter (25%) had graduated high school.	Increased reading test scores by .21 standard deviations.

Read 180

Summary

Read 180 is a comprehensive academic intervention for students in grades 4–12, including those in juvenile confinement. The program combines computer-assisted instruction, teacher-led lessons, independent reading, and small group work, using differentiated instruction and continuous progress monitoring to improve reading skills.

Read 180, which has proven effective for struggling readers in traditional schools, has also been evaluated in juvenile confinement settings. Developed by Scholastic, Inc., the program serves 4th through 12th graders through a reading curriculum with computer-assisted, teacher-led, independent study, and small group components. Teachers use a computer-supported assessment system to group students by skill level, monitor daily progress, and plan differentiated instruction. Instructional materials include textbooks, trade books, software, and supplemental worksheets.[272] Evidence across two evaluation studies has shown statistically significant differences for students' reading comprehension and language skills attributable to Read 180.

The first and largest study to date was a randomized controlled trial of 1,245 students across eight Ohio correctional facilities from 2006 to 2011. Students in the treatment group received 90 minutes of Read 180 daily; the control group received equivalent instruction time using the standard language arts curriculum. The treatment sample was 70% Black, 25% White, and 96% male. Half had a disability status and 45% received special education services. Most students were between 18 and 22 years old, though ages ranged from 14 to 22. About half had reached 9th or 10th grade and a quarter had graduated high school.

Each classroom was equipped with five computer stations and headphones, a reading area with couches, and books and tables arranged individually or in clusters depending on space. Classes began with a 20-minute

272 Davis, L. M., Steele, J. L., Bozick, R., Williams, M. V., Turner, S., Miles, J., ... & Steinberg, P. S. (2014). *How effective is correctional education, and where do we go from here? The results of a comprehensive evaluation*. Rand Corporation.

whole-group session, then transitioned into three rotating 20-minute stations for computer work, independent reading, and small-group interaction. The model prescribes a 10-minute wrap-up session, but facilitators rarely implemented it. Group work occurred only occasionally because reading levels within a typical class ranged from 4th to 12th grade. The presence of students with disabilities added further complexity.

A certified English/Language Arts teacher and a certified aide supervised each classroom. Teachers had access to literacy coaches, but coach positions were vacant at three of the eight facilities for periods ranging from 3 months to a year. One facility also lacked a teacher for 3 months.

At the end of the 20-week intervention, students receiving Read 180 scored 0.21 standard deviations higher on the reading portion of the California Achievement Test than the control group. At one-year follow-up, gains increased to 0.26 standard deviations for students still enrolled at one of the eight facilities.[273]

A second randomized controlled trial took place at a long-term juvenile correctional facility in a southeastern state, where typical stays lasted 6 to 9 months. The study assigned 16 teachers and 464 male students ages 12-18 to treatment or control groups. Students in the treatment group received 110 minutes of Read 180 instruction daily, five days per week. Control students received the standard language arts curriculum used at other schools in the county. The sample was 48% Black, 40% White, and 10% Latino, with a mean age of 16. Over 40% had an Individualized Education Plan, and 58% took psychotropic medications.[274]

As in the first study, sessions began with 20 minutes of whole-group instruction covering academic vocabulary, reading strategies, grammar, and writing skills, accompanied by a motivational video. Students then divided into three ability-based groups for 20-minute rotations through small-group instruction, computer-based instruction, and independent reading. Teachers tailored small-group sessions to student needs, while the Read 180 software provided individualized literacy practice. A 10-minute whole-group wrap-up concluded each session. At the end of the study period, students showed significant gains in comprehension (d=.22) and 6th grade language skills but no improvement in decoding, oral reading fluency, or spelling.

Substance Use

One program was identified that reduced substance use: Multidimensional Family Therapy.

Table 14. Substance Use Programs

Intervention	Population Treated	Outcome
Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT)	Adolescents aged 13–18 and predominantly male (80%). They were 51% White, 18% Black, and 15% Latino. Participants were referred primarily through the juvenile justice systems, schools, and health agencies across sites in San Francisco and Miami.	At the 1-year follow-up, 45% of MDFT participants reported clinically significant reductions in drug use, compared to 26-32% for alternative treatments.

273 Loadman, W. E., Moore, R. J., Ren, W., Zhu, J., Zhao, J., & Lomax, R. (2011). *Striving Readers Year 5 Project Evaluation Report: Ohio. An Addendum to the Year 4 Report.* Ohio State University.
274 Houchins, D. E., Gagnon, J. C., Lane, H. B., Lambert, R. G., & McCray, E. D. (2018). The efficacy of a literacy intervention for incarcerated adolescents. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth,* 35(1), 60-91.

Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT)

Summary

Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) is a comprehensive, family-centered intervention targeting adolescent substance use, delinquency, and behavioral problems. Over 6 to 9 months, the program engages youth, parents, the family system, and the broader community through both individualized and joint sessions. The goals are lasting behavioral change, improved family functioning, and positive engagement across multiple life domains.

Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) is a family-centered intervention that treats adolescent substance use, delinquency, and co-occurring behavioral and emotional issues. Therapists work across four domains: the adolescent, parent, family system, and broader community. The approach uses a phased model with separate and joint sessions for youth and parents. The program first establishes motivation and therapeutic alliances, then targets behavior and relationship changes, and finally consolidates gains to promote long-term stability. Clinical strategies are tailored to developmental needs and emphasize family engagement, system coordination, and skill building.

A 2001 randomized controlled trial by Liddle and colleagues compared MDFT to adolescent group therapy and a multifamily educational intervention. The study enrolled 182 adolescents aged 13-18 (80% male; 51% White, 18% Black, 15% Latino) referred through the juvenile justice system, schools, and health agencies in San Francisco and Miami.[275] All treatments were delivered weekly in outpatient settings. At one-year follow-up, 45% of MDFT participants reported clinically significant reductions in drug use, compared to 32% in group therapy and 26% in the multifamily intervention. School performance also improved: 76% of MDFT youth had a GPA of 2.0 or higher, compared to 60% and 40% in the comparison groups. No significant differences emerged for acting-out behaviors. Limitations included reliance on self-reported data and a predominantly male, majority-White sample.

A second trial by Liddle et al. (2008) compared MDFT to individual cognitive behavioral therapy among 224 adolescents aged 12-17 in a Philadelphia community clinic. Participants were primarily Black (72%), male (81%), and from low-income, single-parent homes, recruited through juvenile justice and child welfare systems.[276] Over 12 months, both treatments reduced cannabis and alcohol use, but MDFT was superior in reducing substance use severity and use of other drugs. Youth in the MDFT group reduced their use of other drugs by 77%, while the CBT group experienced increased use. Treatment effects persisted at both 6- and 12-month follow-ups. Limitations included the absence of urinalysis verification and reliance on self-reported data.

High School Graduation

One program boosted high school graduation rates for confined youth: Avon Park Youth Academy and Street Smart.

275 Liddle, H. A., Dakof, G. A., Parker, K., Diamond, G. S., Barrett, K., & Tejeda, M. (2001). Multidimensional Family Therapy for adolescent drug abuse: Results of a randomized clinical trial. *American Journal of Drug & Alcohol Abuse,* 27(4), 651–688

276 Liddle, H., Dakof, G., Turner, R., Henderson, C., & Greenbaum, P. (2008). Treating adolescent drug abuse: A randomized trial comparing Multidimensional Family Therapy and cognitive behavior therapy. *Addiction*, 103(10), 1660–1670

Table 15. Interventions that Increase School Reentry and Completion

Intervention	Population Treated	Outcome
Avon Park Youth Academy and Street Smart (APYA/SS)	Youth were aged 16-18 and were 44% White, 41% Black, and 14% Latino. Nearly half were chemically dependent. Educational challenges were pervasive: 41% were not attending school or had severe educational problems at arrest or referral, 44% had completed no more than the 8th grade, 32% had dropped out, 40% had special education needs, and 63% read at or below the sixth-grade level. The average stay was 10 months, with 86% reaching age 17 or older at release	Over an average incarceration length of 10 months, diploma completion was significantly higher for the treatment group (44.1%) than for the control group (26.9%). Diploma completion was defined as earning a high school diploma, GED, or special diploma for students with special needs.

Avon Park Youth Academy and Street Smart (APYA/SS)

Summary

The Avon Park Youth Academy (APYA) is an intensive, campus-based residential program in Florida for incarcerated youth. The program provides individualized, competency-based instruction with a strong emphasis on vocational education, life skills, and high school completion. Youth can earn trade certifications through the Home Builders Institute, and progression follows a phased, incentive-based model tailored to each youth's educational and psychological needs.

The Street Smart (SS) Reentry Program complements APYA by supporting youth as they transition back into the community. Beginning at intake and continuing post-release, the program provides coordinated case planning, job placement, mentorship, family engagement, and transitional assistance to promote long-term success and reduce recidivism.

Avon Park Youth Academy (APYA) and Street Smart (SS) are complementary components of a program in Florida developed to improve the educational, employment, life skills, and community outcomes for incarcerated youth. Operated by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, APYA is an intensive and individualized program that uses competency-based instruction tailored to each student that focuses on vocational education. It also includes services for special needs students. The program is administered in a facility located on a former Air Force base in Avon Park, Florida and features a campus-like environment with youth residing in 12 fully furnished duplexes where they are responsible for the upkeep of their homes, yards, and the overall campus. SS is a reentry program that is a complement to APYA and offers job placement, employment, community support, and mentorship services to APYA participants after they are released to the community. The program had an average cost of around $25,000 per participant when it was evaluated in 2003.[277]

277 Davis, L. M., Steele, J. L., Bozick, R., Williams, M. V., Turner, S., Miles, J., ... & Steinberg, P. S. (2014). *How effective is correctional education, and where do we go from here? The results of a comprehensive evaluation*. Rand Corporation.

APYA

A central feature of the APYA program is the vocational training provided by the Home Builders Institute (HBI). HBI provides training in various trades, enabling youth to apply learned skills through supervised community service, on-the-job training, and paid employment. For APYA participants, roughly 80% of the day revolves around learning vocational trades and employability skills, such as problem-solving and social skills. Trade programs offered by HBI include plumbing, electrical work, carpentry, building and apartment maintenance, and landscaping. To attain certification in a trade, youth are required to complete 870 hours of work in that trade. The program ensures adequate opportunities for youth to accumulate the necessary work hours for certification. The approach to programming is an incentive model whereby youth are promoted through up to five phases based on meeting goals for each phase. A comprehensive assessment of each youth's educational, vocational, and psychological needs is used to develop treatment plans that are case managed by a multidisciplinary team focused on addressing education, job training, and reentry needs. Educational programming beyond vocational training is focused on attaining a high school diploma or equivalent while youth are in residential stay at APYA.

The SS Reentry Program

SS transition specialists, based at the APYA campus, serve as a bridge connecting APYA correctional staff with SS community specialists who support youth after they are released from custody. From the moment youth arrive at APYA, transition specialists are involved in intake procedures and advising and monitoring case planning for youth that include periodic needs assessments and the development of reentry plans. Reentry plans contain specific goals in the areas of family, employment, education, housing, independent living skills, physical and behavioral health issues, and legal issues pertaining to release. SS community specialists offer a range of transition services, including job placement, employment training, community adjustment support, mentoring, and other supports. They foster and maintain relationships with the youths' families, employers, juvenile justice staff, local Workforce Investment Boards, School-to-Work partnerships, community service organizations, and local volunteers. Incentives play a significant role in the reentry phase, taking the form of gift certificates for dining and shopping, movie passes, and gifts like electronics. HBI and SS transition specialists aid the youth in securing employment before their release from APYA. Additional support in the form of transitional assistance funds, loans, tool kits, and scholarships are provided to facilitate each youth's return to the community. SS places a significant focus on positive use of leisure time, an area strongly associated with recidivism. Community specialists also foster positive working relations with probation officers to help align and support each other's roles.

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency evaluated the program between 2002 and 2003 using a randomized controlled trial and a sample of 714 incarcerated youth.[278]

Eligibility for the study was restricted to youth aged 16 to 18. The study sample was 44% white, 41% Black, and 14% Latino. Nearly half (46%) of all participants were assessed as chemically dependent, 41% were not attending school or had severe educational problems at the time of their arrest or referral, 44% had only completed school up to the 8th grade, nearly a third (32%) had dropped out of school, 40% had a special education need, and almost two thirds (63%) had reading skill levels at or below the sixth-grade level. The average length of stay for APYA youth was 10 months, with 86% reaching the age of 17 or older at release. The average length of participation in SS was around 11 months, and 90% of participants were over the age of 18 at program completion.

The evaluation found that participation in the program increased diploma completion, which was significantly higher for the treatment group (44.1%) than for the control group (26.9%). Diploma completion was defined as earning a high school diploma, GED, or special diploma for students with special needs. The evaluation also found a difference in average employment rates one year post-release: 72.4% for the treatment group compared to 64.4% for the control group. However, the study found no statistically significant difference in recidivism rates.

278 National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2009). *In Search of Evidence-Based Practice in Juvenile Corrections: An Evaluation of Florida's Avon Park Youth Academy and Street Smart Program*, Madison, Wisc.: National Council on Crime and Delinquency

Systemic Barriers to Successful School Reentry

Research identifies numerous barriers to successful school reentry for justice-involved youth. Some relate to student or family circumstances: mental health and substance use issues, below-grade reading proficiency, severe credit deficiencies, limited family involvement in schooling, transportation challenges, and housing instability.[279] More troubling are systemic barriers. Interviews with stakeholders across California, combined with a synthesis of the research literature, identified 14 systemic obstacles to school reentry.

1. Insufficient Collaboration and Coordination Across Agencies

Poor coordination and communication across agencies is a major barrier to school reentry for justice-involved youth. Fragmented interactions among schools, juvenile justice, social services, and mental health providers lead to inadequate transition planning and support. Youth frequently leave or arrive at facilities without notice to education staff, disrupting academic continuity. For youth involved in both child welfare and juvenile justice, confusion over agency responsibilities creates gaps in care. Organizations involved in reentry, spanning housing, mental health, substance use, education, and disability services, often operate with conflicting priorities and rigid processes that impede coordination. Promising practices to enhance interagency collaboration include shared policies, memoranda of understanding, co-located staff, joint professional development, and designated lead coordinators to ensure clarity in roles and responsibilities.[280] See the Systems Reform Spotlight on ***Cross-Agency Collaboration*** below for a practical framework to improve coordination for justice-involved youth.

2. Delayed Transfer of Records

The failure to promptly transfer educational records is a widespread and recurring challenge that undermines the reentry process. Delays in obtaining transcripts and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) hinder appropriate placement, continuation of services, and credit recognition for previously completed coursework. Youth returning to school often encounter grading discrepancies or class failures due to missing documentation of completed work. These issues are especially detrimental to students with disabilities, who are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system and depend on timely and accurate records to receive mandated educational supports. Inefficiencies within administrative systems, coupled with privacy concerns and a lack of standardized protocols, contribute to the slow or absent exchange of information. Recommendations to address this include secure digital records systems, reduced timeframes for records transfer, and flexible enrollment practices.[281]

3. Absence of Direct Instruction While in Confinement

Many confined youth do not receive adequate academic instruction during their incarceration. Educational programming in juvenile facilities is often limited to worksheets and self-guided packets with minimal teacher interaction. Such instructional approaches fail to provide the direct, structured learning necessary for academic progress, further distancing youth from school success. Evaluations across various states consistently found a lack of meaningful instruction as well as inconsistent or absent transition services. This undermines efforts to prepare youth for reentry and reintegration into school.[282]

279 Sinclair, J. S., Unruh, D. K., Griller Clark, H., & Waintrup, M. G. (2017). School personnel perceptions of youth with disabilities returning to high school from the juvenile justice system. *The Journal of Special Education*, 51(2), 95-105; O'Neill, S. C., Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. M. (2017). Systems barriers to community re-entry for incarcerated youths: A review. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 79, 29-36.

280 Sinclair, J. S., Unruh, D. K., Griller Clark, H., & Waintrup, M. G. (2017). School personnel perceptions of youth with disabilities returning to high school from the juvenile justice system. *The Journal of Special Education*, 51(2), 95-105; Sheldon-Sherman, J. A. (2010). No incarcerated youth left behind: Promoting successful school reentry through best practices and reform. *Child. Legal Rts. J.*, 30, 22; O'Neill, S. C., Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. M. (2017). Systems barriers to community re-entry for incarcerated youths: A review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 29-36.

281 Sinclair, J. S., Unruh, D. K., Griller Clark, H., & Waintrup, M. G. (2017). School personnel perceptions of youth with disabilities returning to high school from the juvenile justice system. *The Journal of Special Education,* 51(2), 95-105; Sheldon-Sherman, J. A. (2010). No incarcerated youth left behind: Promoting successful school reentry through best practices and reform. *Child. Legal Rts. J.*, 30, 22; O'Neill, S. C., Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. M. (2017). Systems barriers to community re-entry for incarcerated youths: A review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 29-36.

282 Noorman, K., & Brancale, J. (2023). Barriers to school reentry: Perceptions of school reentry among detained and committed youth. *Youth violence and juvenile justice,* 21(3), 175-194.

4. Insufficient Transition Services or High Turnover Among Transition Coordinators

Transition support is critical to successful school reentry, yet it is often absent or unstable. In some cases, dedicated transition services are entirely lacking. Where such roles exist, low salaries and poor working conditions contribute to high staff turnover, disrupting continuity and trust-building with youth and families. These disruptions can prevent the implementation of effective transition plans and leave youth navigating reentry without adequate guidance or support.[283]

5. Lack of Youth Involvement in Transition Planning

Youth are frequently excluded from decisions about their own transition planning, which limits the relevance and effectiveness of the resulting plans. Many report being unaware of their plans or frustrated that the plans do not reflect their personal goals. Exclusion from the planning process reduces youth engagement and ownership over their education and reentry success, and in the case of youth with IEPs, is a violation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Effective planning should incorporate the youth's voice and align with their aspirations, fostering empowerment and improving compliance. Genuine relationship-building with youth is essential to create space for a collaborative alliance and tailored support.[284]

6. Stigma and Stereotypes Facing Re-entering Youth

Justice-involved youth returning to school often encounter stigma and negative stereotyping from educators and peers, especially those wearing ankle monitors. These perceptions can result in biased expectations, punitive responses to behavior, and reluctance from schools to welcome students back. Stigmatization not only affects students' self-perception but also contributes to a hostile school climate that impedes their academic and social reintegration.[285]

7. Denial of School Re-enrollment Upon Release

Youth frequently face bureaucratic and structural obstacles when attempting to reenroll in school after incarceration. Enrollment delays, sometimes lasting weeks or months, disrupt educational continuity and leave youth unsupervised and disengaged, increasing recidivism risk. Mid-semester returns complicate placement decisions and are particularly challenging for students who are already behind in credits. Inflexible enrollment policies exacerbate these delays.[286]

8. Failure to Notify Schools Prior to Student's Attempt at Reenrollment

School reentry efforts are often undermined by the failure to notify receiving schools in advance of a youth's release. Without access to a student's prior educational history, schools are ill-prepared to provide appropriate placement, services, or supports. This lack of communication disrupts planning and contributes to reentry failures.[287]

9. Denied Transfer of Full or Partial Credits

Youth who complete coursework while in detention often face barriers when trying to transfer credits to their home schools. Schools may disregard, undervalue, or fail to recognize these credits, despite legal requirements that they honor them.[288] These challenges result in academic setbacks and discouragement. Inconsistent information sharing further compounds the problem, leaving students uncertain about their credit standing. Dual enrollment policies have emerged as a promising solution to streamline reenrollment and ensure

283 Sinclair, J. S., Unruh, D. K., Griller Clark, H., & Waintrup, M. G. (2017). School personnel perceptions of youth with disabilities returning to high school from the juvenile justice system. *The Journal of Special Education*, 51(2), 95-105; O'Neill, S. C., Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. M. (2017). Systems barriers to community re-entry for incarcerated youths: A review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 29-36.

284 O'Neill, S. C., Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. M. (2017). Systems barriers to community re-entry for incarcerated youths: A review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 29-36.

285 Sinclair, J. S., Unruh, D. K., Griller Clark, H., & Waintrup, M. G. (2017). School personnel perceptions of youth with disabilities returning to high school from the juvenile justice system. *The Journal of Special Education,* 51(2), 95-105.

286 Bondoc, C., Meza, J. I., Ospina, A. B., Bosco, J., Mei, E., & Barnert, E. S. (2021). "Overlapping and intersecting challenges": Parent and provider perspectives on youth adversity during community reentry after incarceration. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 125, 106007; Sheldon-Sherman, J. A. (2010). No incarcerated youth left behind: Promoting successful school reentry through best practices and reform. *Child. Legal Rts. J.*, 30, 22; O'Neill, S. C., Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. M. (2017). Systems barriers to community re-entry for incarcerated youths: A review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 29-36.

287 Sheldon-Sherman, J. A. (2010). No incarcerated youth left behind: Promoting successful school reentry through best practices and reform. *Child. Legal Rts. J.*, 30, 22.

288 CA Educ Code § 51225.2 (2024)

credit continuity. Such policies allow youth to remain on the enrollment rolls of their home school while detained, facilitating easier transitions and record access. Assigning a dedicated case manager to oversee academic coordination between detention and community schools enhances the effectiveness of these policies.[289]

10. Inadequate Training, Templates, and Checklists for Staff

The absence of standardized training and tools undermines interagency coordination and effective transition planning. Unlike the healthcare sector, which utilizes structured communication protocols to standardize, facilitate, and improve the level of care, most youth-serving agencies lack consistent handover tools, templates, and meeting structures. Implementing common training practices, simulation exercises, shared communication protocols, and transition planning checklists would strengthen collaboration and improve service continuity. These tools can also help raise awareness of the complex needs facing justice-involved youth.[290]

11. Discontinuation of Medicaid Enrollment

The automatic suspension of Medicaid during incarceration creates serious barriers to healthcare access upon release. Youth frequently encounter delays in reactivating coverage, which in turn disrupts continuity of care, delays medication refills, and makes it difficult to schedule follow-up appointments. These gaps are especially detrimental for youth who engaged positively with healthcare services while incarcerated. A seamless transition between detention-based and community-based healthcare is essential to sustain treatment, ensure stability, and reduce reentry risk.[291]

289 Sinclair, J. S., Unruh, D. K., Griller Clark, H., & Waintrup, M. G. (2017). School personnel perceptions of youth with disabilities returning to high school from the juvenile justice system. *The Journal of Special Education*, 51(2), 95-105; Sheldon-Sherman, J. A. (2010). No incarcerated youth left behind: Promoting successful school reentry through best practices and reform. *Child. Legal Rts. J.*, 30, 22; O'Neill, S. C., Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. M. (2017). Systems barriers to community re-entry for incarcerated youths: A review. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 79, 29-36; Sheldon-Sherman, J. A. (2010). No incarcerated youth left behind: Promoting successful school reentry through best practices and reform. *Child. Legal Rts. J.*, 30, 22.

290 O'Neill, S. C., Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. M. (2017). Systems barriers to community re-entry for incarcerated youths: A review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 29-36.

291 Bondoc, C., Meza, J. I., Ospina, A. B., Bosco, J., Mei, E., & Barnert, E. S. (2021). "Overlapping and intersecting challenges": Parent and provider perspectives on youth adversity during community reentry after incarceration. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 125, 106007.

Systems Reform Spotlight: Diversion

A growing body of research indicates that diversion programs are associated with reduced youth recidivism and fewer school-based arrests, particularly programs implemented at early stages of juvenile justice involvement. Effects vary by program type, population, and evaluation design. Across the reviewed literature, diversion is typically defined as an alternative to traditional system processing and prosecution, with interventions ranging from minimal contact to referral to comprehensive service provision.

General Evidence on Diversion Versus Formal Processing

Petrosino et al. (2010) conducted a review of 29 studies comparing formal processing to either "diversion with services" or "diversion alone" between 1973 and 2008.[292] Their findings suggest that formal system processing had no crime control benefits and, in many cases, even increased delinquent behavior. Effect sizes were more negative for processing when compared to diversion with services, suggesting a modest benefit for intervention-based diversion strategies. However, none of the included studies directly compared various forms of diversion to each other.

Building on this work, Wilson and Hoge (2013) analyzed 45 studies of 73 diversion programs from 1972 to 2010.[293] Their findings support the effectiveness of diversion in reducing recidivism, particularly when initiated at the pre-charging stage. No significant difference was observed between issuing a caution and more structured intervention programs. However, the review found notable variation across studies and reported that programs

292 Petrosino, A., Turpin-Petrosino, C., & Guckenburg, S. (2010). Formal system processing of juveniles: Effects on delinquency. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 6(1), 1-88.

293 Wilson, H. A., & Hoge, R. D. (2013). The effect of youth diversion programs on recidivism: A meta-analytic review. *Criminal justice and behavior*, 40(5), 497-518.

with predominantly White youth showed greater reductions in recidivism than those serving primarily Black youth.

Wilson et al (2018) further investigated "police-led diversion" in 19 studies published between 1973 and 2011, including both randomized (k=13) and quasi-experimental designs (k=6).[294] The authors reported an average 6% reduction in recidivism for diverted youth compared to those processed traditionally. Diversion approaches included simple release, referral to services, and restorative justice models, but no substantial outcome differences were observed across these types. The authors concluded that pre-charge diversion consistently produced preventative effects on recidivism.

Finally, Gaffney, Farrington, and White (2021) conducted a review of reviews and judged the Wilson et al. (2018) meta-analysis to provide the strongest evidence.[295] They concluded that pre-court diversion is effective in reducing reoffending compared to formal processing. However, like the original studies, they were unable to parse the unique contributions of referral versus services.

School-Based Diversion in Philadelphia

Two recent evaluations of the Philadelphia Police School Diversion Program assessed the effects of diverting youth from school-based arrests to community-based services.

Goldstein et al (2021) employed a quasi-experimental design to compare recidivism among 2,302 students (67% male; 76% Black; ages 10–22), either arrested in the year prior to program implementation or diverted through the program.[296] Since the program's launch, school-based arrests declined by 84%, and serious behavioral incidents dropped by 34%. Initially, diverted youth showed lower recidivism rates than arrested peers. However, after applying propensity score matching to adjust for baseline differences, these recidivism differences were no longer statistically significant. In a follow-up study, NeMoyer et al (2023) used a quasi-experimental design to assess the effect of diversion on long-term outcomes (4–5 years post-diversion) of diverted youth in the Philadelphia Police School Diversion Program.[297] They found that diverted youth were significantly less likely to be re-arrested (OR=0.73) than non-diverted youth. However, no significant differences were observed in educational outcomes including school dropout, suspension, or on-time graduation. These findings suggest that school-based diversion may have time-limited or context-specific impacts on school-related measures, even when criminal justice outcomes improve.

Conclusion

Multiple reviews and evaluations show that diversion, particularly at the pre-charge stage, modestly but consistently reduces youth recidivism compared to traditional processing. The strongest effects appear in police-led, pre-court, and school-based programs.

294 Wilson, D. B., Brennan, I., & Olaghere, A. (2018). Police-initiated diversion for youth to prevent future delinquent behavior: A systematic review. *Campbell systematic reviews*, 14(1), 1-88.
295 Gaffney, H., Farrington, D. P., & White, H. (2021). *Pre-Court Diversion: Toolkit Technical Report. Youth Endowment Fund.*
296 Goldstein, N. E., Kreimer, R., Guo, S., Le, T., Cole, L. M., NeMoyer, A., ... & Zhang, F. (2021). Preventing school-based arrest and recidivism through prearrest diversion: Outcomes of the Philadelphia police school diversion program. *Law and Human Behavior,* 45(2), 165.
297 NeMoyer, A., Le, T., Taylor, A., Pollard, A., Kreimer, R., Anjaria, N., ... & Goldstein, N. E. (2023). Long-term arrest and school outcomes of the Philadelphia Police School Diversion Program. *Psychology, public policy, and law*, 29(4), 471.

Systems Reform Spotlight: Cross-Agency Collaboration

Summary: When justice-involved youth return to their communities after detention, their path back to school often runs through a maze of disconnected agencies: probation, education, child welfare, and mental health, each operating with its own mandate, funding streams, and professional culture. This fragmentation leads to missed enrollment windows, lost credits, and the kind of instability that undermines educational success.

This spotlight examines why such collaboration remains difficult, exploring how categorical funding, siloed organizational structures, and restrictive confidentiality rules create barriers, and what the research reveals about overcoming these obstacles. It shares a practical, three-phase framework for building county-level collaboratives, details the critical role that neutral facilitation plays in sustaining them, and offers an in-depth case study of Placer County, where a multi-disciplinary team and a decades-old system of care have institutionalized the kind of coordination that most counties struggle to achieve.

Effective Collaboration Supports Reentry Success

The lack of cross-system collaboration poses significant challenges for justice-involved youth seeking to reenter school successfully after detention, treatment, or correctional placement, leading to missed enrollment opportunities and increased school instability. Fragmentation among key agencies, including education, behavioral health, child welfare, and probation, results in poorly coordinated educational planning and systemic breakdowns that disrupt school continuity.[298] The research literature and interviews conducted for this report identify several challenges associated with this lack of collaboration and coordination.

However, evidence from Oakland's Second Chance strategy shows that effective interagency collaboration can significantly improve school reentry for justice-involved youth. Jain et al (2018) found that interagency collaboration in the form of structured forums like monthly case conferences, the establishment of multidisciplinary reentry teams, comprehensive multidisciplinary assessments of youth needs (e.g. MAYSI-2, YLS-CMI, etc.) information sharing, the creation of a juvenile justice transition center with co-located school district representatives, and the creation of "community navigator" roles dramatically improved school reentry.[299] After the Second Chance reforms were implemented, almost all youth (98%) released from confinement were placed in a public school within three days, down from more than eight days before the reforms. Enrollment in school after confinement also rose from 24% to 86% within the first year of implementation.

298 Gonsoulin, S., & Read, N. W. (2011). *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems through Interagency Communication and Collaboration. Practice Guide.* National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk; Bishop, A. (2018). *Educational Planning of Court-involved Youth: A Guide for Counties, Systems, and Individuals*. Routledge.

299 Jain, S., Cohen, A. K., Jagannathan, P., Leung, Y., Bassey, H., & Bedford, S. (2018). Evaluating the implementation of a collaborative juvenile reentry system in Oakland, California. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, 62(12), 3662-3680.

Barriers to and Enablers of Successful Collaboration

Structural misalignment hampers collaboration among agencies involved in school reentry, forcing justice-involved youth and their families to navigate siloed systems.

These youth typically confront many intersecting challenges, yet from a practical standpoint, each agency involved in reentry tends to pass along unmet needs to the next agency, risking an endless relay without resolution. Understanding why requires examining how county agencies are structured. Child welfare, mental health, social services, alcohol and drug programs, public health, education, and probation each operates as a stand-alone institution with its own mandate, staff, rules, funding, professional culture, and facilities. These are not merely distinct offices; they are separate organizations with different training pathways, job titles, compensation structures, schedules, unions, and even retirement systems. This decentralized structure has long made it difficult to adopt a 'whole child' approach in youth justice that effectively addresses young people's diverse and intersecting needs. In California, the passage of AB2083 offers counties a new opportunity to examine how their agencies can better coordinate and align to improve outcomes for young people and their families [300]

Funding streams to counties are authorized for specific services, routed through separate budgets and accounts, and tightly linked to guidelines that specify who may deliver which service to which population. Oversight relies on a top-down "funding food chain": federal agencies authorize and fund categorical programs, state agencies pass those dollars down with additional rules and match requirements, and counties add local funds to operate the authorized programs.

The only common denominator is that all serve children and families, but they do so independently and in parallel. The result is a landscape of silos designed to keep services, personnel, and dollars from mixing.[301]

Compounding these structural issues are restrictive confidentiality rules, uneven understandings of legal mandates and best practices among stakeholders, limited opportunities for cross-agency training, and high rates of staff turnover. A broad literature has catalogued both the barriers to and enablers of forming cross-agency collaboratives, not only in the field of juvenile justice, but government more broadly.[302] See Figure 15 for a summary of these barriers and enablers.

300 Gray, David (2004) *Safe, Healthy, At Home, In School, and Out of Trouble: Making Child and Family Services Work for Children and Families.*
301 Ibid.
302 Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of public administration research and theory*, 18(4), 543-571; Chandler, S. M. (2017). Managing innovative collaborations: The role of facilitation and other strategies for working collaboratively. *Human service organizations: Management, leadership & governance*, 41(2), 133-146; Gonsoulin, S., & Read, N. W. (2011). *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems through Interagency Communication and Collaboration. Practice Guide*. National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk

Figure 15. Barriers and Enablers in the Formation of Cross-Agency Collaboratives

Barriers

- Philosophical differences
- History of conflict among stakeholders
- Rigid bureaucratic structures
- Categorical funding restrictions
- Confidentiality and data-sharing restrictions
- Separate and misaligned management priorities
- Siloed operations
- Power dynamics
- Lack of resources
- Incompatible organizational cultures
- Redundant procedures
- Disparate terminologies, acronyms
- Staff resistance to increased responsibilities, reduced autonomy
- Disciplinary parochialism

Enablers

- History of cooperation among stakeholders
- Strong Leadership
- Incentives for participation
- Available resources
- Shared problem definitions
- Committed membership

Once formed, there are also several identified conditions for sustaining cross-agency collaboratives and helping them to be successful, including trust-building, face-to-face dialogue, fostering shared understanding, inclusive participation, clear ground rules, process transparency, and starting with manageable, early successes that can help reinforce commitment and trust.[303]

The work of Chandler (2017) points to evidence that many of the purported impediments and enablers to forming successful and sustained cross-agency collaboratives can be addressed through the use of a neutral facilitator.[304] Drawing on her research into the formation of Wrap Hawai'i, a wraparound planning initiative for youth and families, Chandler (2017) illustrates how facilitated collaboration can overcome initial fragmentation and distrust. A neutral facilitator played a critical role in shaping the group's governance processes by guiding discussion, managing conflict, and fostering trust. The facilitator also helped develop ground rules, maintained meeting records, and ensured all voices were heard, including those from less powerful agencies. The leadership provided by a university-based researcher and the support of a family court judge added legitimacy to the effort, while the collaborative benefited from consistent data tracking, performance measurement, and feedback mechanisms. Initially focused on individual case resolution, the group gradually shifted toward systemic change as trust and shared understanding deepened. For example, a case involving delayed school reentry for a youth released from detention prompted interagency dialogue and immediate problem-solving, which in turn built momentum for broader reforms.

Overall, the study affirms that while textbook conditions for collaboration are helpful, they are not always attainable or necessary. Yet through neutral facilitation, thoughtful governance design, mutual accountability, and relational trust-building, effective cross-sector collaboration remains both feasible and impactful, even in complex, high-stakes service environments.

This claim is supported by evidence from the evaluation of the Juvenile Justice-Translational Research on Interventions for Adolescents in the Legal System (JJ-TRIALS). JJ-TRIALS was a national initiative that tested the effectiveness of organizational interventions to improve substance use service delivery and reduce recidivism among justice-involved youth. These interventions ranged from interagency

303 Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of public administration research and theory*, 18(4), 543-571
304 Chandler, S. M. (2017). Managing innovative collaborations: The role of facilitation and other strategies for working collaboratively. *Human service organizations: Management, leadership & governance*, 41(2), 133-146.

training and system mapping to intensive external facilitation.[305] The initiative involved two types of organizational interventions with 20 county sites that consisted of interagency collaboratives between juvenile justice and behavioral health agencies in five states (Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and Texas). All sites received the "Core" intervention, which included interagency workgroups, needs assessments, system mapping, training in evidence-based substance use treatment and family engagement, and capacity-building around data-driven decision-making. In addition, "Enhanced" sites received one year of intensive external facilitation. Facilitators trained in organizational change and collaborative problem-solving guided local workgroups through structured quality improvement cycles using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model. They helped agencies set SMART goals, analyze site-specific data, and implement sustainable procedural changes. A cluster randomized delayed-start evaluation of JJ-TRIALS found that sites receiving Enhanced intensive facilitation had approximately 9% lower recidivism rates during the intervention phase than Core-only sites, translating to an estimated 1,627 fewer recidivism events across the full sample.[306]

Creating Effective Cross-System Collaborations: Promising Approaches

Successful cross-agency collaboration for improving reentry success, requires moving beyond surface-level coordination to a deeper level of organizational learning that includes "double-loop" learning, where collaborators reflect not only on operational failures but also question the values and assumptions guiding current practices.[307] Such depths of collaboration require systematic efforts both at the county-level and within individual agencies themselves.

In her book ***Educational Planning for Court-Involved Youth: A Guide for Counties, Systems, and Individuals***, Bishop (2018) offers a comprehensive framework for the planning and development of collaboratives that facilitate educational continuity and success among youth involved in the juvenile legal system.[308] Drawing on current research, best practices, and practitioner insight, the author outlines a multi-tiered, cross-agency strategy for educational planning. The book emphasizes a three-phase planning framework encompassing county-level, agency-level, and individual-level efforts aimed at fostering collaboration, reducing school instability, and addressing the unmet academic and behavioral health needs of justice-involved youth. This framework can offer guidance to counties looking to create more effective approaches to youth reentry.

Phase 1: County-Level Strategies

As described in Bishop (2018), the centerpiece of a county-level strategy is a multi-agency collaborative known as an Education Action Team (EAT).[309] This team brings together representatives from juvenile justice, child welfare, local education agencies, mental health services, the courts, public defenders, and other relevant agencies to formalize cross-system coordination and break down silos.

Motivated by the evidence regarding the importance of neutral facilitation cited above, EATs could employ neutral facilitators to support their planning and implementation work. Such facilitators can play a central role in guiding collaborative processes. Acting as neutral process guides, they do not contribute to the substantive content of discussions or evaluate ideas. Instead, they focus on structuring inclusive, respectful, and efficient dialogue. Their responsibilities include helping to develop and enforce ground rules, ensuring equitable participation, managing group dynamics, and steering discussions toward shared understanding and agreement. Facilitators often use visual tools such as process maps or

305 Robertson, A. A., Gardner, S., Dembo, R., Dennis, M., Pankow, J., & Wilson, K. J. (2023). Impact of implementation interventions to improve substance use service delivery on recidivism among justice-involved youth. *Health & justice,* 11(1), 12.
306 Ibid.
307 Chandler, S. M. (2017). Managing innovative collaborations: The role of facilitation and other strategies for working collaboratively. *Human service organizations: Management, leadership & governance,* 41(2), 133-146.
308 Bishop, A. (2018). *Educational Planning of Court-involved Youth: A Guide for Counties, Systems, and Individuals*. Routledge.
309 Bishop, A. (2018). *Educational Planning of Court-involved Youth: A Guide for Counties, Systems, and Individuals*. Routledge.

brainstorming exercises to introduce collaborative methods and gradually build the group's confidence in engaging with more complex decision-making. They also collaborate with group chairs to construct time-bound agendas, establish expectations, and help participants stay focused and realistic about meeting outcomes. This groundwork is foundational to fostering trust, modeling constructive interpersonal behavior, and enabling participants to co-create processes that support long-term collaboration.[310]

A key support to the facilitator is the recorder, who captures and displays the group's ideas without alteration or judgment, helping to build a collective memory and inform accurate meeting documentation. This practice enhances continuity across meetings and supports accountability. As the group advances, facilitators introduce structured methods for idea generation, prioritization, and evaluation, such as force-field and SWOT analyses. These tools help participants explore options systematically and move toward implementation planning. Facilitators also guide the group in adopting consensus-based decision-making, which aims to generate collective buy-in even when full unanimity is not possible. Unlike majority voting, consensus allows all voices to shape decisions and fosters broader commitment to implementation. Through these roles and techniques, facilitators help transform diverse stakeholder groups into cohesive, purpose-driven collaboratives.

County-level efforts seek to overcome philosophical and operational barriers that impede collaboration, such as incompatible data systems, unclear interagency roles, and mistrust between agencies and schools. The core responsibilities of the Education Action Team include identifying educational service gaps, standardizing records transfer processes, establishing notification protocols, and otherwise defining common goals, data indicators, and cross-agency protocols for sharing information. Bishop (2018) recommends that EATs meet regularly, often monthly in the first year, and conduct focus groups to identify the most pressing barriers to educational stability in their jurisdiction. These efforts should culminate in the development of a written action plan tailored to county-specific needs.

A critical task of EATs early in their formation is to create memoranda of understanding (MOUs) to formalize interagency cooperation. Effective MOUs should clearly define governance structures, agency responsibilities, shared funding mechanisms, data confidentiality, a common consent form, infrastructure for secure information sharing, and mechanisms for training and dispute resolution.[311] To further support collaboration, agencies are encouraged to align core policies and practices, particularly in the areas of data sharing, staff co-location, funding strategies, and coordinated service delivery.

Data integration is highlighted below as a key strategy, with recommendations for creating cross-system information warehouses. Creating shared databases requires interagency agreements on data access, training on data use, and sustainable infrastructure for data analysis. Such data sharing enhances case coordination and enables agencies to collectively monitor educational outcomes.[312] In addition to data integration, cross-agency training has been emphasized as an essential mechanism to build a shared understanding of policy, programming, and youth needs. Regular joint staff development activities help agencies break down silos, foster a common language, and facilitate mutual understanding of each agency's roles and responsibilities. Training topics may include special education rights, youth development, educational transitions, permanency planning, and data-informed decision-making.[313]

310 Chandler, Susan Meyers (2025) Making Collaboratives Work: How Complex Organizational Partnerships Succeed. *ASPA Series in Public Administration and Public Policy.* Taylor & Francis

311 Also see Gonsoulin, S., & Read, N. W. (2011). *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems through Interagency Communication and Collaboration. Practice Guide*. National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk.

312 Ibid.

313 Also see Gonsoulin, S., & Read, N. W. (2011). Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems through Interagency Communication and Collaboration. Practice Guide. National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk.

To support the sustainability of cross-agency collaboratives, Bishop (2018) proposes that EATs commit to three new goals each year related to improving educational outcomes. They should also institutionalize cross-agency training as a long-term strategy, with each agency contributing annually to shared learning around educational planning for system-involved youth.[314]

Phase 2: Agency-Level Interventions

Phase two of the Bishop (2018) framework centers on aligning systems and practices at the level of direct service provision to embed educational planning into the broader case management process and to ensure that youth receive continuous support across placement and custody changes. This involves training and coordination among professionals in agencies including probation, child welfare, mental health, and education to address knowledge gaps. Sustained cross-agency training helps to clarify roles, improve information flow, and build mutual trust among professionals. Additional strategies include establishing points of contact (POCs) in each agency for educational coordination, implementing standardized procedures for school notification of court involvement, and developing shared tools such as common intake forms, enrollment checklists, and transition summaries. Agencies are also encouraged to develop "process and procedure maps" that visually document how educational planning is handled from the point of entry into the juvenile justice system through reentry into school.

Phase 3: Individual-Level Supports

The final phase, focuses on the range of supports that can be provided to justice-involved youth once a coordinating infrastructure is in place. It involves the core activities of frontline staff such as education liaisons, caseworkers, and navigators who help youth successfully navigate the transition back to school after involvement with the juvenile legal system. This includes assessing academic histories, identifying learning needs, addressing trauma-related barriers to learning, and ensuring access to appropriate educational placements. Bishop (2018) outlines a series of practical tools to support this work, including customizable educational planning forms, transition summaries, and progress monitoring templates.[315]

For a more detailed elaboration of tips, templates and planning guides see Bishop (2018) *Educational Planning for Court-Involved Youth: A Guide for Counties, Systems.* Contact the author at https://www.educationstabilityconsultant.com/ or (720) 206-4270

Placer County Multi-Disciplinary Team and the SMART Policy Board: A Case Study in Cross-Agency Collaboration

Placer County, California, provides an important case study of how local government can reduce service fragmentation and create a more coherent approach to supporting youth reentry following juvenile confinement. Over the past three decades, the county has built a durable system that aligns probation, education, child welfare, behavioral health, and the courts into a coordinated framework. At the practice level, this alignment is operationalized through the Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT), which manages the day-to-day work of helping justice-involved youth return to their communities and schools. At the policy level, this work is embedded within a broader cross-agency governance structure known as the SMART system of care. Together, these mechanisms illustrate how county government can both institutionalize collaboration across agencies and ensure that services are delivered seamlessly to youth and families.

314 Bishop, A. (2018). Educational Planning of Court-involved Youth: A Guide for Counties, Systems, and Individuals. Routledge.
315 Ibid.

The Multi-Disciplinary Team: The Operational Engine of Reentry

The MDT serves as the front-line structure that makes school reentry possible for youth coming out of juvenile detention. Meeting weekly, the team brings together representatives from probation, the County Office of Education, health and human services, and the courts. What distinguishes the MDT is not only its broad representation but also its commitment to treating reentry planning as an immediate and ongoing process. Youth are enrolled in school within twenty-four hours of booking, and reentry planning begins right away, rather than being deferred until a release date is set. Each week, the MDT reviews every youth in custody, addressing school placement, special education needs, credit mapping, behavioral supports, and links to community services.

Specific staff are designated to carry out critical coordination functions. A Student Support Practitioner and Academic Counselor employed by the County Office of Education take the lead on educational transitions, working to secure transcripts, align coursework completed in custody with the requirements of receiving schools, and ensure that credits transfer properly upon release. A social worker from the Children's System of Care (CSOC) provides continuity for health and mental health needs, ensuring that youth are connected with services upon their return to the community. A probation officer maintains oversight of programming within the facility and links it to reentry plans. The clarity of these roles minimizes confusion and prevents gaps at the point of transition.

Communication between agencies is deliberately structured. For example, probation sends out a daily morning email to the county office of education to notify them of bookings and releases. These updates help prevent youth from falling through the cracks when court decisions accelerate release timelines. When records are delayed, a program data analyst is tasked with escalating issues directly between managers across agencies, while also reminding districts of the state's requirement that records be transferred within five days of a request (or two business days for Foster Youth). This persistence helps reduce the delays that often plague reentry efforts in other counties.

The MDT also maintains strong ties with the county's Plan for Expelled Students committee, which convenes representatives from every district. Through this committee, the MDT ensures that district contact lists are current, partial-credit policies are consistently applied, and schools are prepared when students are scheduled to exit court school. Regular agenda time is devoted to discussing credit practices, which has significantly reduced disputes between the county office of education and local districts over applying partial credits awarded during periods of confinement.

Support continues after youth return to their schools. Before release, MDT staff visit receiving campuses, review reentry plans with site administrators, and identify a specific adult who will serve as a contact for the youth. If difficulties arise after a student's return, the MDT can intervene directly to stabilize the placement and avoid unnecessary returns to court or community school. Importantly, the MDT is not sustained by special project funding but by embedding responsibilities into the normal roles of staff. This design choice provides resilience against shifts in budgets and leadership.

The culture within which the MDT operates also reinforces its effectiveness. County leaders emphasize that there should be "no dead time" while youth are in custody and that every youth must have a reentry plan before release. The countywide adoption of Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), implemented across court schools, community schools, and district campuses, further contributes to consistency. This reduces the disruptions that often occur when youth move across school settings with different behavioral expectations.

The SMART System of Care: Embedding Reentry in a Larger Framework

The MDT does not stand alone but operates within the broader SMART system of care, which provides governance, accountability, and policy direction for cross-agency collaboration. SMART ensures that the expectations set by county leaders cascade down to the operational level, where the MDT translates them into concrete actions for individual youth. This vertical alignment creates a "through line" from executive decision-making to frontline practice.

The origins of SMART trace back to the late 1980s, when Judge J. Richard Couzens convened county leaders to address the persistent failures of fragmented services. At the time, agencies often worked at cross purposes, leaving families to navigate a maze of disconnected systems. Recognizing the harm caused by this fragmentation, Judge Couzens brought together the heads of probation, mental health, and child welfare services to establish a new cross-agency forum. Within a year, these leaders formed SMART, which stood for the Special Multi-Agency Administration and Resource Team. The early agreements established a principle that there would be no more "your kid/my kid" divisions: children with multi-system involvement were to be considered "our kids."[316]

SMART was designed to operate at two levels. At the executive level, the SMART Policy Board brought together administrators who agreed to share leadership, fiscal responsibility, and accountability for youth. At the practice level, the SMART Team assessed the needs of individual families, authorized cross-agency services, and coordinated case management. Challenges persisted in the early years, particularly as staff continued to operate within their own agency cultures. Nevertheless, SMART began breaking down the silos that had long undermined effective service delivery.

The 1990s brought a major development with the passage of Assembly Bill 3015, which provided funding for counties to develop systems of care for children with serious emotional disturbances. Placer used this funding to create the Placement Prevention, Intervention Collaborative, a unit that co-located staff from multiple agencies in a single workspace. Although this arrangement sometimes replicated silo dynamics in new ways, it represented an important step toward breaking down categorical boundaries and fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration. Staff learned each other's roles, worked across agency lines, and developed a shared identity as "system of care" workers.[317]

How SMART Operates Today

Over the decades, SMART has matured into a durable and institutionalized governance structure. The SMART Policy Board meets every other week and includes the presiding juvenile court judge, the Chief Probation Officer, leadership from the Children's System of Care, and the executive leadership of the County Office of Education. Family and youth representatives, once absent from these discussions, are now regular participants, bringing lived experience into policy deliberations. Meetings are managed with formal agendas and supported administratively by Children's System of Care staff, ensuring continuity even when individual leaders change.

Several design features explain SMART's longevity. First, co-location of staff is a standard practice, with probation, education, and social services personnel embedded within each other's operations. This arrangement minimizes handoffs, reduces information gaps, and allows problems to be addressed informally through daily interactions. Second, the structure is stabilized by assigning the Children's System of Care (CSOC) the responsibility of convening and documenting SMART meetings. This reduces reliance on any single agency or personality to sustain the collaboration.

316 Gray, David (2004) *Safe, Healthy, At Home, In School, and Out of Trouble: Making Child and Family Services Work for Children and Families*.
317 Ibid.

Legal and policy tools have also been critical. The county developed a local rule of court that authorizes pragmatic information sharing under a "best interest of the youth" standard. This approach counters the frequent misuse of privacy laws as absolute barriers to collaboration. Placer also embraced California's dual-status framework, which allows youth to be considered simultaneously within probation and child welfare. By co-authoring reports across systems, staff could determine whether a youth should be treated primarily as a dependent or a ward and align services accordingly. This practice reflects the county's emphasis on placing youth in the right system and ensuring access to the full continuum of supports, including housing, food security, and transition-age youth services.

Knowledge-sharing mechanisms have evolved alongside these governance tools. Early reliance on staff relationships and personal notes has given way to electronic directories and, eventually, the 2-1-1 system, which catalogs available services. New staff are oriented not only through formal training but also through informal practices such as "van tours," where they meet connector people at partner agencies. These practices help to sustain the system's collaborative culture even as staff turnover occurs.

Placer County's integrated system of care illustrates how counties can reduce fragmentation by building durable governance structures and embedding collaborative practices into everyday operations. The SMART Policy Board has provided executive leadership and accountability for more than three decades, while the MDT ensures that these commitments translate into concrete support for youth reentering school. Judge-led meetings, co-located staff, and a shared mission reinforce a culture of collaboration where cooperation is expected.

Perhaps most importantly, Placer has institutionalized the voice of families and youth within its governance structures. This shift reflects a broader recognition that cross-system collaboration must remain grounded in the lived realities of those most affected by the system. While many counties have only recently begun to experiment with integrated approaches under state mandates such as Assembly Bill 2083, Placer offers a model of mature practice developed over decades.

The experience demonstrates that reducing fragmentation requires both structural reforms and cultural change. Structures such as the SMART Policy Board and the MDT provide the forums and processes through which collaboration occurs. But equally significant are the norms, expectations, and shared mission that sustain those structures over time. Placer's case shows that when counties commit to treating youth as "our kids," embed collaboration into routine practice, and maintain durable governance forums, they can create systems of care that are resilient, effective, and centered on the needs of children and families.

To learn more about Placer County's SMART system of care, contact Michael Lombardo at mlombardocollaboration@outlook.com or (916) 421-1612.

Conclusion

Given the significant variation in county agencies across California, a single, comprehensive state-level policy is unlikely to resolve persistent challenges to sustained cross-agency collaboration. Rather, a collaborative strategy between state and local levels to support the development and maintenance of cross-disciplinary, cross-system teams may be the most promising avenue going forward. Evidence underscores the pivotal role of sustained facilitative support in enabling effective collaboration among agencies. In this context, dedicated support for facilitation could significantly enhance the feasibility and impact of cross-agency collaboration throughout California. Such support would be especially valuable if aligned with statewide efforts to build robust county-level continuums of care following the enactment of AB 2083 in 2018.

Systems Reform Spotlight: Cross-System Data Sharing

Effective school reentry for justice-involved youth depends on timely information flowing between juvenile probation, education, and child welfare. When a young person is released from detention, the professionals responsible for supporting them need immediate access to enrollment status, academic history, special education records, and case management details. Yet California lacks a comprehensive, real-time data system that connects these agencies. The state's primary education data infrastructure, CALPADS, updates too slowly for service coordination and faces confidentiality restrictions that limit its usefulness for justice-involved populations. This gap leaves counties to build their own solutions or, more commonly, to rely on fragmented workarounds that delay enrollment and disrupt educational continuity.

Santa Clara County offers a model of what becomes possible when jurisdictions invest in cross-system data infrastructure. This spotlight examines how the system was built and details how the platform works in practice. For counties seeking to strengthen their own data-sharing capacity, Santa Clara's experience offers both a practical blueprint and a candid assessment of lingering challenges.

Santa Clara County's Foster Vision

A frustrated judge and a bench order issued in 2008 set in motion the creation of the Foster Vision data system that supports juvenile reentry in Santa Clara County. As a system manager explained, "The whole system came about because there was a bench order around 15 years ago where a judge sought for education, child welfare and probation departments to share the information needed for judges to make better decisions with pending juvenile cases." The bench order provided a legal mandate for data sharing, which was a critical impetus for action by the stakeholders.

Data-Sharing MOUs formed between partners

Sparked by the bench order, a comprehensive data-sharing agreement was initially formed between the Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE), the lead agency, and both the county's Juvenile Probation Department (JPD) and Department of Family and Child Services (DFCS). In the ensuing years, SCCOE secured memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with all 32 school districts in Santa Clara County. These MOUs are renewed every five years.

Notably, there were early challenges in creating Foster Vision. One interviewee noted, "I can remember when we were just starting to talk about the concept of Foster Vision. Trying to get people to start submitting data was a hard sell. School districts did not immediately embrace it, especially those that had their own data warehouse systems. Getting all the districts in Santa Clara County on board took several years." As of 2025, Foster Vision has been operational for almost a decade and has become a central vehicle for collaboration between schools, juvenile probation, and DFCS. The Santa Clara County Office of Education, funded system development and maintenance with one-time funding, grants, and ongoing department resources. Staff noted that resources for efforts like these are not typically available to county offices of education.

System Governance

While SCCOE directly manages Foster Vision, an advisory Steering Committee meets quarterly to review the system and identify possible changes. The Steering Committee is comprised of the leadership of SCCOE, JPD, DCFS; school district leaders; judges; and community-based partners. Authorized users are determined by agency or school district leadership, and those who interact with the system are required to have training in regulations related to the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

The most prominent user groups are JPD probation officers, SCCOE education managers and school district liaisons.

How Foster Vision Works

SCCOE manages a comprehensive data warehouse for the county and the 32 school districts in Santa Clara County. The student data warehouse is the backbone of education data sharing and contains data from all student information systems. Data extracted from SCCOE's data warehouse, as well as data from servers for JPD and DFCS, are transformed to fit the data structures necessary for loading into the Foster Vision server. Education and JPD data are updated nightly, and DFCS data are updated twice weekly. This update frequency means that educators know where a student is enrolled, or where they are disenrolled, the day after it happens. Data indicating that a student has entered the juvenile probation system are also updated nightly by overwriting the current record. Once a student is no longer in the probation or DFCS systems, their records are deleted from Foster Vision.

Data provided in Foster Vision are not only extraordinarily timely; they are exceptionally extensive, providing a comprehensive student profile that is ordinarily unavailable in most county jurisdictions in California. The profiles include several academic, child welfare, and probation indicators. See "Data Indicators" depicted in Figure 16.

User Applications

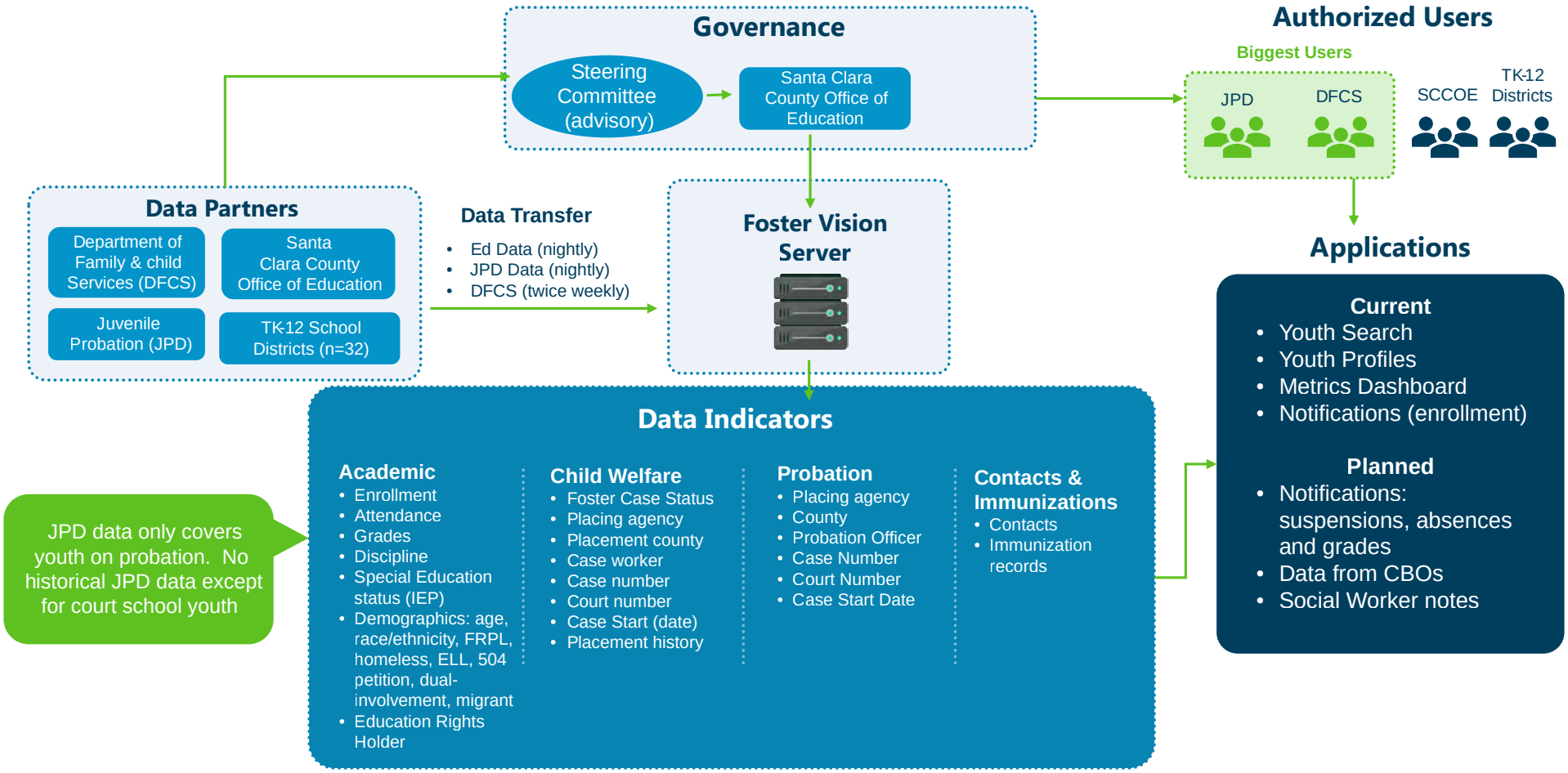
Youth Profile Search: Foster Vision supports three main user applications that include a Youth Profile Search, a Metrics Dashboard, and system notifications. The Youth Profile Search allows users to find students by name, student ID, or alias. The Student Profile displays demographic and contact information along with placement, education, and immunization histories. These profiles, as a system manager described, "basically helps build a case management system. Anybody that is authorized, like a probation officer, could go in and look at any kid that's on probation. They could see if that kid's dually involved. They can see who their social worker is and get that social worker's contact information. They can also see what school district that student is in and what their enrollment history has been. They can also see if they've been suspended and what their grades are like. The system compiles all that information every night and allows probation officers and social workers to identify critical needs and strategize support in almost real time."

Metrics Dashboard: Shows graphic representations of data for all students countywide. Users can easily view the number of students represented as well as print or download the metric or graph to a local device.

Notifications: This feature updates users when a student's data is created or changes. The system manager explained that "if they get a new student that enrolls, that's on probation, they get a notification that says, hey, a new student has enrolled in your district at this school." The managers of Foster Vision are also building additional notification features related to student suspensions, chronic absenteeism, or grades. The notification feature around suspensions helps the County better comply with AB 740, a 2022 law that requires schools to notify a foster youth's attorney and county social worker in the event that disciplinary actions are taken against that student.

Additional planned features include adding notes and data provided by social workers to student profiles, as well as including data provided by community service partners.

Figure 16. The Foster Vision System



Limitations of Foster Vision

Foster Vision offers an extraordinary window into the history and potential needs of youth involved in the juvenile legal system, but it includes data only for youth on probation. Youth who experience brief confinement but do not receive probation are not included, nor are youth who are arrested and booked but ultimately not placed on probation. Another limitation is the lack of historical data that would allow the County to assess long-term educational outcomes for youth on probation. Once a youth is no longer in the juvenile probation system, their data are removed from Foster Vision. This prevents associating their probation data with their long-term educational records in the state's CALPADS system for evaluation purposes.

Conclusion

Foster Vision demonstrates how a clear legal mandate, formalized data-sharing agreements, and cross-agency governance can produce a near-real-time tool that supports school reentry for youth involved in the juvenile legal system. By integrating education, probation, and child welfare data, the system enables timely identification of needs and coordination of services across partners. At the same time, California still lacks a comprehensive statewide, real-time data system. Foster Vision's scope also constrains long-term evaluation and broader coverage, as it is limited to youth on probation and does not retain historical records. Together, these realities underscore both the progress made in Santa Clara County and the remaining gaps that continue to affect service coordination for justice-involved youth.

To learn more about Foster Vision, contact Nabil Shahin, Director of Integrated Data Research & Evaluation at the Santa Clara County Office of Education. He can be reached at NShahin@sccoe.org or (408) 453-4299.

Conclusion

When we examine two different pathways that young people can travel in California, school-to-prison or the road to opportunity, we are talking about the future of a generation that will define the success of our state. There is no denying that today's youth will play vital roles in their families, communities, and places of employment in the future, and correspondingly there is no sense ignoring our responsibility to do all we can to direct today's youth onto life trajectories that position them to thrive. Even with good intentions, however, we remain stuck in a cycle that leads far too many young people towards futures defined by punishment and diminished life prospects.

In this report, we clarify and examine the reasons behind many of the pitfalls facing youth across our state, especially young Black, Hispanic, and Native American males. Evidence has grown for decades demonstrating that once youth become entangled in the juvenile legal system, they are diverted away from paths of opportunity. Mapping the contributing factors that have too often led to young people becoming mired within the confines of the legal system is crucial to identifying the problems we need to focus energy on solving. The focus of this report, however, has not been on simply identifying the many disparities and difficulties we're faced with, but to signal very clearly that there are practices that have been used to successfully help youth navigate the twists and turns along these paths. The message here is one of hope—many programs cited here have demonstrated victories in reversing the destructive patterns that have existed for so long.

Final Thoughts

Despite many years of struggle for our youth, there is hope to be found in effective programs and strategies that have come into recent use. The title of this report references the classic preschool game Chutes and Ladders; our real-world goal is to eliminate the damaging chutes detailed in this report while we build ladders to success using what we've learned from the approaches outlined here.

While understanding our goal may be simple, succeeding at this is complicated, demanding careful assessment of what has been shown to work and coordinating action from multiple stakeholders.

This report describes several interventions that have shown success in disrupting those chutes into juvenile legal involvement. While there are unfortunately far fewer programs and policies designed to support youth as they exit detention and climb ladders to reenter schools and communities, the hope is that there is enough data from them that we can identify common attributes and create high-impact strategies for positive change.

We must acknowledge that there is no single solution—rather, success depends on coordinated efforts that address the many needs of our youth. Instead of relying on traditional, damaging punitive approaches, we must focus on mentoring, trust-building, and the alignment of efforts across school, probation, and mental health systems. Through collaboration, the strategies we build can create lasting improvements, disrupting the school-to-incarceration pipeline and redirecting youth toward more positive pathways. By providing the right supports and opportunities, we can help young people alter the course of their lives in meaningful ways, lighting the path to a better future for all of us.

Fewer Chutes, More Ladders:

Preventing Juvenile Legal Involvement and Ensuring Successful School Reentry for California's Youth

ForwardChange
www.fwdchange.org