

Criminal Justice Coordinating Council

# A Study of the Root Causes of Juvenile Justice System Involvement

Report

Prepared by:  
Kaitlyn Sill, PhD, Statistician  
November, 2020



SECTION I

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# Executive Summary

While the juvenile justice system is intended to rehabilitate children, involvement in the system, particularly secure detention, is well-established to have lasting negative effects on youth such as increased risk of adult incarceration, decreased likelihood of high school graduation and success in the labor market, and worsening of mental health disorders (Azier and Doyle 2015; Gatti, Tremblay, and Vetaro 2009; Holman and Ziedenberg 2006; Lundman 1993). Society, therefore, has a vested interest in targeting resources to serve the needs of youth to prevent them from engaging in delinquent behavior. Rigorous analysis to identify what factors contribute to youth engaging in delinquency and becoming justice system involved is intrinsic to any efforts for prevention. Research suggests that youth crime is a symptom of underlying economic and social conditions. Recent attention has turned to the importance of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) for a variety of individual outcomes including criminal behavior and long-term health (Felitti et al. 1998).

To that end, the Council of the District of Columbia mandated the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) submit a report to the Mayor and Council on the root causes of youth crime and prevalence of adverse childhood experiences that incorporates results from a voluntary survey of justice-involved youth on their perspectives. The CYJAA specified that the report should examine factors “such as housing instability, child abuse, family instability, substance abuse, mental illness, family criminal involvement, and other factors deemed relevant by the CJCC” (D.C. Law 21-23).

In accordance with this mandate, CJCC obtained administrative data<sup>1</sup> from multiple sectors on a representative sample of youth enrolled in public schools in the District during the 2016 – 2017 school year and identified who was justice-involved, which was defined as being arrested<sup>2</sup> or petitioned/charged<sup>3</sup> the following year. During the fall of 2018, we conducted surveys and focus groups with DYRS-committed and DOC-incarcerated youth under the age of 21, and, during the spring and summer of 2018, we conducted interviews with youth service providers. This report integrates the results and addresses the following questions:

1. How do justice-involved youth differ from non-justice involved youth?
2. What factors affect the likelihood that youth become involved in the juvenile justice system?
3. How and why do these factors impact youth behavior?

To answer these questions, we examined how justice-involved youth differ from non-justice-involved youth with regard to economic resources; experiences with childhood maltreatment; educational experiences; mental, behavioral, and neurodevelopmental disorder diagnoses; and residential proximity to crime using descriptive statistics. We then constructed a mathematical model to identify which factors were statistically associated with the probability that a youth became justice system involved. We then described the results of the model in light of the academic research literature, interview responses, and focus group themes. Additionally, throughout the report we present relevant youth survey responses as a snapshot of the self-reported experiences of committed and incarcerated youth. Finally, we provide recommendations to enhance or expand the District’s prevention-based initiatives and programs. The report’s key findings and recommendations are highlighted in the next section.

---

1 Administrative data are derived from the operation of an administrative system, including data collected by government agencies for the purposes of registration, transactions, and record keeping (Connelly et al 2016).

2 Arrests exclude youth who were pre-arrest diverted and youth who had interactions with police that did not result in arrest.

3 Youth who are petitioned have had a charging document filed in juvenile court by the state alleging that the juvenile is delinquent and describing the alleged offenses committed by that child. A petition is comparable to a charging document in criminal court.

## *How do justice-involved youth differ from non-justice involved youth?*

We find that **males** and **Black youth** are overrepresented in the District of Columbia’s juvenile justice system. Additionally, for the indicators we included to measure economic Resources; childhood maltreatment; educational experience; mental, behavioral, neurodevelopmental disorders; IEP eligibility; and neighborhood environment, we found youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system have significantly higher rates of:

### Economic Resources

- Homelessness
- TANF reciprocity
- Medicaid reciprocity

### Childhood Maltreatment

- Removal to foster care
- Reported childhood abuse
- Reported childhood neglect

### Educational Experiences

- Excused absences
- Unexcused absences
- Suspensions
- Grade retention
- Changed schools

### Mental, Behavioral, and Neurodevelopmental Disorders and IEP Eligibility

- Comorbid externalizing and internalizing disorders<sup>4</sup>
- Externalizing-only disorders
- Psychotic disorders
- Specific developmental learning disorders
- Specific developmental motor disorders
- Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)

### Neighborhood Environment

- Violent crime incidents within a quarter mile of their residences
- Residence on gun violence “hot blocks”

---

<sup>4</sup> The internalizing domain represent disorders with prominent anxiety, depressive, and somatic symptoms; the externalizing domain represent disorders with prominent impulsive, disruptive conduct, and substance use symptoms (Achenbach et al. 2016). Internalizing-externalizing comorbidity is when youth have disorders in both the internalizing and externalizing domains

We find that among justice-involved youth, petition rates are significantly higher among:

- Males
- Hispanic youth
- Homeless youth
- Youth who have been suspended

We find that among youth who are petitioned, findings of delinquency<sup>5</sup> are significantly higher among:

- Males
- Youth who have been suspended

## ***What affects the likelihood that youth become involved in the juvenile justice system?***

We conducted a multivariable regression analysis<sup>6</sup> using the administrative data to identify factors that have a statistical impact on the likelihood of juvenile justice system involvement within one year. Our results find that males, Black youth, and youth around **age 15.4** are at the highest risk of involvement. Specifically, **males** are, on average, two times more likely to become juvenile justice system involved than females, and **Black youth** are 1.86 times more likely to become involved than White youth.

The data show that a youth who experiences **homelessness** has a 1.42 times greater likelihood of justice system involvement than had they not experienced homelessness. The data also demonstrate that youth with a history of **abuse** and/or **neglect** are 1.33 and 1.25 times more likely to become justice system involved, respectively. This finding is consistent with the perspective of interview participants that family environment is one of the most important factors for whether youth engage in delinquency.

Our findings suggest that educational indicators have the largest magnitude of association with justice system involvement. A youth with the average number of **unexcused absences** is 3.16 times more likely to become justice system involved than had they had no unexcused absences. Being **grade-level retained** is associated with a 1.75 times greater likelihood of justice system involvement, while one **suspension** increases the risk by 1.57 times. **Changing schools** at least once during a school year is associated with an increase by 1.77 times in the likelihood of justice system involvement the following year.

A youth who has both internalizing and externalizing disorders (**comorbid**) is 1.86 times more likely to become justice involved, while a youth with **externalizing disorders only**, no internalizing disorders, are 1.83 times more likely to become justice involved than a youth with no externalizing disorders. **Among youth who are internalizing-externalizing comorbid, having an IEP** in place increases

---

<sup>5</sup> Percentage of youth who were found delinquent by October 2018 on cases arrested or petitioned between June 2017 and July 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Multivariate regression analysis is a statistical technique that estimates the extent to which multiple independent variables (predictors) are associated with one dependent variable (outcome). The method is used to predict the outcome associated with changes in the predictors.

the likelihood of justice system involvement by 2.32 times compared to comorbid youth without an IEP. Our results found no statistically significant effects of IEPs independently or conditioned on other disorder diagnoses categories.

Finally, our analysis suggests that community environment impacts youth. Living on one of the blocks with the highest number of gun violence incidences (“**hot blocks**”) is statistically associated with a 1.44 times greater likelihood of involvement. The research literature and our interviews suggest that the statistical finding may be capturing community environment more broadly in addition to exposure to violence, particularly as the number of violent incidents within a quarter mile radius was not significant when controlling for living on a hot block.

Beyond our statistical findings, the interviews and focus groups identified **peer influence, future uncertainty**, and a **lack of future expectations** as having an important effect on whether youth engage in delinquent behavior.

## *Recommendations*

In alignment with our statistical findings, the needs identified by interview and focus group participants, and the research literature, we recommend the District explore the following opportunities for prevention-based programs and initiatives:

- Bring the Becoming a Man (BAM)© program to District schools, which is an evidence-based, trauma-informed school-based counseling, mentoring, and character development program for 7th – 12th grade males.
- Pilot a community-based, cross-age peer mentoring program where high school-age youth are paid to mentor elementary-age children under the supervision of formal program staff.
- Create a year-round youth employment program that includes vocational job training.
- Create universal ACEs screening for youth by providing training to primary care providers and Medicaid reimbursement for screenings, and increase funding for, and information dissemination around, age-appropriate and alternative trauma-informed treatment services.
- Expand capacity to provide ongoing, community-based case management services to youth and families who have not touched the legal system, and explore establishing a process where Birth-to-Three providers can connect families to case management systems once they age out.
- Provided stable, long-term funding for HealthySteps© Specialists and Birth-to-Three “community navigation service” coordinators.
- Create a process to facilitate a warm hand off between HealthySteps© providers and home visiting services for families-in-need.

Based on the findings in this report, we propose the following analyses for subsequent reports in accordance with the CYJAA:

- 2022: Conduct an analysis to identify the extent to which the relationship between educational experiences and juvenile justice system involvement is driven by underlying explanatory factors such as family environment, economic resources, and mental health needs.
- 2024: Conduct an analysis that identifies what types of school-based incidents led to a law enforcement referral and/or arrest, and whether factors such as economic resources, race, IEP eligibility, mental health conditions, school location, and SRO assignment statistically affect the likelihood of referrals/arrests, or
- 2024: Conduct a representative survey of District youth on self-reported delinquent behavior and potential explanatory factors such as exposure to ACEs.

We also identify the following research questions that extend from this analysis:

- Are there racial differences in arrests resulting from calls-for-service or police-initiated stops?
- Do runaway and throwaway youth experiencing homelessness have a different probability of juvenile justice system involvement than youth who are experiencing family homelessness?
- How does the establishment of IEPs affect youth with internalizing-externalizing comorbidity? Does the nature of the intervention or timing of the establishment mitigate the impact? Does the effect of an IEP differ from the effect of a 504 plan<sup>7</sup>?
- Does early identification and treatment of ACEs exposure and mental health disorders mitigate the impact on juvenile justice system involvement?
- What are the ecological factors in the top-35 hot blocks for gun violence that are affecting juvenile justice system involvement?

---

<sup>7</sup> Similar to an IEP, a 504 plan is a formal educational plan that provides accommodations for students with disabilities under the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. § 701) rather than the IDEA. A 504 provides for accommodations under a broader definition of disabilities and, unlike an IEP, is not special education but is a disability accommodation.