

## Education for Youth Under Formal Supervision of the Juvenile Justice System

Education and school attendance are normal developmental milestones for youth and can serve as important protective factors against delinquency and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Development Services Group, 2015c). They can also have long-term positive effects on employment and desistance from crime (Laub and Sampson, 2001; Lochner and Moretti, 2001). However, poor academic performance, school suspension and expulsion, and school dropout are among known school-related risk factors for delinquency, crime, and involvement in the justice system (Cuellar and Markowitz, 2015; Development Services Group, 2015a; Lee and Villagrana, 2015; Pettit and Western, 2004).

Youth involved in the juvenile justice system are less likely to benefit from education-related protective factors and more likely to experience negative outcomes related to learning challenges and school failure (Foley, 2001; Sedlak and Bruce, 2010). Although system-involved youth are guaranteed an education under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965<sup>1</sup>, providing education for detained and confined youth is particularly challenging, given their highly transient nature and their complicated mental health and academic needs (Foley, 2001; Gagnon and Barber, 2010; Sedlak and McPherson, 2010). However, those youth who do achieve higher levels of education while in the juvenile justice system are more likely to experience positive outcomes in the community once released (Blomberg et al., 2011; Cavendish, 2014).

This literature review will discuss the intersection of the educational and the juvenile justice systems. Specifically, it will outline the academic characteristics and challenges of youth in the juvenile justice system (including those in detention and long-term secure residential facilities, and under probation supervision) and interventions aimed at improving educational outcomes for this high-risk population.

### Scope of the Problem

Educational risk factors are associated with juvenile and adult offending, justice system involvement, and recidivism (Cottle, Lee, and Heilbrun, 2001; Cuellar and Markowitz, 2015; Moffitt et al., 1981; Moretti, 2005; Pettit and Western, 2004; Wang, Blomberg, and Li, 2005). These risk factors include low academic achievement, academic failure, negative attitudes toward school, low bonding to school, low school attachment and commitment to school, frequent school transitions, low academic aspirations, suspensions and expulsions, truancy and absenteeism, inadequate school climate, and school dropout (Development Services Group, 2015a).

<sup>1</sup> H. R. 2362, 89th Cong., 1st Sess., Public Law 89-10.

**Suggested Reference:** Development Services Group, Inc. 2019. "Education for Youth Under Formal Supervision of the Juvenile Justice System." Literature review. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.  
<https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/Education-for-Youth-in-the-Juvenile-Justice-System.pdf>

Prepared by Development Services Group, Inc., under cooperative agreement number 2013-JF-FX-K002. Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of OJJDP or the U.S. Department of Justice.

While some researchers have found that involvement in the juvenile justice system can also serve as a risk factor resulting in poor educational outcomes (Aizer and Doyle, 2015; Hirschfield, 2009; Kirk and Sampson, 2013; Widdowson, Siennick, and Hay, 2016), others have posited that the causal relationship is not clear (Moretti, 2005; Witte, 1997).

### **Education-Related Characteristics of Youth in the Juvenile Justice System**

Most of the research on the relationship between academic problems and delinquency has been implemented with confined and detained populations. The research on youth involved with the juvenile justice system but who are not incarcerated is much more limited.

**Low IQ and Academic Achievement.** Research suggests that those in the juvenile justice system exhibit intellectual deficiencies and low academic achievement at a greater proportion than their non-system-involved peers (Foley, 2001; Krezmien et al., 2013). Almost half (48 percent) of youth responding to a national survey of more than 7,000 in custody during 2003 indicated that they were achieving below their grade level, compared with 28 percent in the general population (Sedlak and Bruce, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005; Lugaila, 2003). Specific challenges include lower scores on standardized achievement tests (Krezmien, Mulcahy, and Leone, 2008; Zamora, 2005); lower levels of language and literacy skills (Harris et al., 2009; Krezmien et al., 2013; Wilson, Zablocki, and Bartolotta, 2007); lower math scores (Wilson, Zablocki, and Bartolotta, 2007); and lower GPAs and overall grades (Finn, Stott, and Zarichny, 1988; Wang et al., 2005). A small study of youth who had brief contact with the Maryland juvenile justice system but were not incarcerated found that more than 60 percent demonstrated problems in academic performance and school functioning (Brown et al., 2008).

Academic measures can also predict recidivism among system-involved youth. In their study of 12- to 18-year-old boys in a Nebraska correctional facility, Archwamety and Katsiyannis (2000) found that boys who were in the remedial education group were twice as likely to recidivate or violate their parole than boys who were not in the remedial group. In their study of more than 4,000 juveniles released from secure facilities in Florida, Blomberg, Bales, and Piquero (2012) found that youth with above average academic achievement while securely confined were more likely to return to school after release, and that youth with above average attendance in public school were less likely to be rearrested. Additionally, a meta-analysis of 23 studies examining over 15,000 juveniles found that lower standardized achievement scores, lower full-scale IQ scores, and lower verbal IQ scores were associated with increased risk of recidivism (Cottle, Lee, and Heilbrun, 2001).

**Special Education Needs<sup>2</sup>.** In their analysis of data from a national survey completed by 38 heads of state departments responsible for youth in long-term secure residential facilities, Quinn et al. (2005) found that during the 2000–2001 school year, one third of youth in secure juvenile facilities received special education services, compared with less than 9 percent of students nationally. Prevalence of disabilities varied greatly across juvenile residential facilities, ranging from 9 percent to as high as 77 percent. These prevalence rates included all disabling conditions such as emotional disturbances, specific learning disabilities, and multiple disabilities.

Disability types vary in their association with juvenile justice system involvement. In a study of youth in Minnesota, Kincaid (2017) found that youth with emotional-behavioral disorders, specific learning disabilities, and other health impairments were overrepresented in the juvenile courts, while youth with autism spectrum disorder, developmental cognitive disabilities, physical or sensory impairments,

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, see the *Model Programs Guide* literature review on [Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in the Juvenile Justice System](#).

and speech-language impairments were underrepresented.

Students with disabilities may struggle more to be successful in school while involved in the juvenile justice system. A study of youth in juvenile justice facilities in Florida found that although juveniles with disabilities earned high school credits and grade point averages on par with their peers without disabilities during commitment, they were less likely to earn a grade promotion or obtain any type of high school diploma, compared with students without disabilities (Cavendish, 2014). A history of special education can also be a predictor of recidivism among justice-involved youth (Black et al., 1996; Cottle, Lee, and Heilbrun, 2001). However, at least one study found that students with disabilities were more likely to return to school after release from a juvenile justice facility, compared with juveniles without disabilities (Cavendish, 2014).

**School Enrollment.** The most recent and comprehensive data on the educational characteristics and backgrounds of youth in confinement comes from the 2003 Survey of Youth in Residential Placement (SYRP). Results from this national survey show that 76 percent of the youth (12–17 years old) in placement were enrolled in school when taken into custody (Sedlak and Bruce, 2010), which is less than the 88 percent of youth enrolled in school in the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

**Truancy and Absenteeism.** Truancy and absenteeism<sup>3</sup> are prevalent among youth in the juvenile justice system (National Center for School Engagement, n.d.; Wang et al., 2015). Considered a status offense, truancy is a noncriminal violation of the law based on the youth’s status as a minor (Development Services Group, 2015b; Mallett, 2016). Out of 100,000 petitioned status offense cases in 2015, 55 percent were for truancy, with most resulting in probation as a disposition. Historically, the number of petitioned truancy cases outnumber all other status offense cases across genders and race groups (Hockenberry and Puzanchera, 2018).

Schools play a large role in the referral of truancy cases to juvenile court; specifically, schools referred 92 percent of truancy cases to juvenile court (Hockenberry and Puzanchera, 2018). In their analysis of data from the 2003 SYRP data, Sedlak and Bruce (2010) found that over half (53 percent) admitted to skipping classes in the previous year. These rates vary by jurisdiction. In their examination of data from youth on probation in Chicago, Axelrod et al. (2017) found that more than three quarters were chronically absent.

**Grade Repetition.** Data from the 2003 SYRP also revealed that 26 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds repeated a grade in the year prior to entering custody (Sedlak and Bruce, 2010), which is more than twice the lifetime rate of grade retention (11 percent) among youth of the same age in the general population (Lugaila, 2003). Individual studies of specific jurisdictions have found varying rates of grade repetition. A study of more than 500 boys in a juvenile correctional facility in a mid-Atlantic state reported that more than 60 percent had been held back a grade (Krezmien, Mulcahy, and Leone, 2008), while another study of almost 300 incarcerated girls found that 55 percent had been held back a grade (Wilson, Zablocki, and Bartolotta, 2007). Balfanz et al. (2003) found that ninth graders in a large mid-Atlantic city were the most likely to be dropped from the school rolls because of incarceration, and that two thirds were repeating ninth grade when securely confined. In their study of youth in Maryland who had brief contact with the juvenile justice system but were then returned to the community, Brown et al. (2008) found that one quarter had failed a grade.

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<sup>3</sup> Truancy is a child’s unexcused absence from school exceeding a certain amount decided by the state. For more information, see the *Model Programs Guide* literature review on [Truancy Prevention](#).

Wang et al. (2015) conducted research that compared students who were confined to juvenile justice facilities in Florida with a matched nondelinquent group. They controlled for a series of variables (such as age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, disability status, and individual school) that could explain education-related differences between the groups. However, the results showed that confined students were still more likely to have been held back a grade.

**School Exclusion.** School suspension and expulsion are also related to juvenile justice system involvement. Examining data from the 2003 SYRP, Sedlak and Bruce (2010) found that most youth (57 percent) had been suspended in the same year that they entered placement. Individual studies found similarly high levels of risk, but they varied in the exact rates. A study of more than 500 male youth from a juvenile correctional facility in a mid-Atlantic state found that more than 80 percent had been suspended, and more than half had been expelled from school (Krezmien, Mulcahy, and Leone, 2008). In addition, a study of 300 incarcerated girls found that 46 percent had been expelled from school (Wilson, Zablocki, and Bartolotta, 2007). A 2008 study by Brown et al. of non-incarcerated youth in Maryland found that 70 percent reported having been suspended (2008).

Cuellar and Markowitz (2015) incorporated controls for offenses committed and suspensions in the prior academic year to examine the effect of school suspension on referrals to the juvenile justice system among a group of youth from an urban school district with a history of offending behavior. Even after taking into consideration these prior behaviors, the results suggested that out-of-school suspension increased referrals to the juvenile justice system. They also found that this effect was larger for African American students.

**School Dropout.** Because of the timing, most studies of school dropout examine involvement in the adult system instead of the juvenile system. For example, a 2004 evaluation by Pettit and Western, using more than 30 years of time-series data on imprisonment, found that youth who dropped out of high school were three to four times more likely to be imprisoned than those who completed high school. They found that among black men born between 1965 and 1969, 30 percent of those without college education and nearly 60 percent of high school dropouts went to prison by 1999. However, some research has been done on the effect of school dropout on juvenile crime. In an examination of policies related to the minimum age at which youth can legally drop out of high school, Anderson (2012) found that higher minimum age dropout requirements have a statistically significant effect on property and violent crime arrest rates for individuals ages 16 to 18.

## **Juvenile Justice System Involvement and Educational Outcomes**

In addition to educational risk factors (discussed above) that can increase the likelihood of delinquency, crime, and justice system involvement, some researchers have studied the effect of the justice system itself on educational outcomes. Many concluded that system responses to delinquent behavior (such as arrest, secure detention, and secure confinement) can be contributing factors to negative educational outcomes (Aizer and Doyle, 2015; Eren and Mocan, 2017; Kirk and Sampson, 2013; Robinson et al., 2017).

**Arrest.** Many studies have demonstrated the relationship between arrest and subsequent high school dropout (Bernburg and Krohn, 2003; Hjalmarsson, 2008; Sweeten, 2006; Tanner, Davies, and O'Grady, 1999). However, some researchers have looked more closely to try to isolate the effect of the arrest from other related factors that may predict both arrest and school failure. In an analysis that controlled for demographics, family characteristics, behavioral factors, academic behaviors and attitudes, and community-level variables such as the crime rate, school dropout rate, and concentrated disadvantage, Hirschfield (2009) found that contact with the legal system still increased school dropout above and

beyond those other factors in a sample of more than 4,500 inner-city students in Chicago. Similarly, Kirk and Sampson (2013) found that arrest had a large impact on dropping out of school and not attending college, independent of other characteristics (such as neighborhood and family factors) and frequency of criminal offending.

Widdowson, Siennick, and Hay (2016) compared arrested youth with a matched group of non-arrested youth in a national sample and found that arrest still reduced the odds of enrolling in a 4-year institution directly after high school. Arrest also had a continued impact on college attendance that extended into adulthood. Litwok (2014) found a sizeable positive effect of expungement<sup>4</sup> on college attendance for youth who had juvenile delinquency records. Finally, in their analysis of students in Louisiana, Robinson et al. (2017) found that contact with the juvenile justice system was a statistically significant predictor of school dropout, even after controlling for race, gender, socioeconomic status, school failure, age, and school expulsion.

**Probation.** Probation placement is the most common juvenile court disposition for youth who have offended (Development Services Group, Inc., 2017b) and can also affect school outcomes. Attending school is a common requirement for youth who are on probation (Arthur and Waugh, 2008; NeMoyer, et al. 2016). Probation officers are often responsible for checking that youth are attending school and frequently make in-school visits. These relationships provide the opportunity to better engage youth in their schooling and educational development. In some communities, probation officers are physically located in schools to increase supervision and monitoring of probationers (Griffin, 1999; Torbet et al., 2001).<sup>5</sup> Other jurisdictions have created advocacy units within their probation departments to advocate for appropriate educational services and increase parental awareness about their children’s educational rights (Burke and Dalmage, 2016).

However, many youth do not successfully comply with their school requirements of probation, which may lead to revocation of probation status and deeper involvement in the juvenile justice system (Arthur and Waugh, 2008; NeMoyer et al., 2016). In their study of 268 review hearings in a large, urban county in the mid-Atlantic region, NeMoyer et al. (2016) found that one of the four most significant factors leading to probation revocation and placement in a residential facility was failure to attend school. Even in truancy cases, failure to comply with probation conditions can lead to deeper system involvement. Although the truancy process varies across states, generally once a truancy petition has been referred to the court and there is a guilty disposition, the judge can order mandatory school attendance. If there is failure to comply, the youth may receive a legal response such as a fine, probation, community-based programming, or community service (Gleich-Bope, 2014; Mallett, 2016; White et al., 2001).

**Secure Confinement.** While the current level of educational attainment among juveniles in the juvenile justice system at the national level is unknown, there have been studies of certain jurisdictions. In research on juvenile justice residential facilities in Florida, Cavendish (2014) found that only 9 percent of returning youth earned a diploma during their commitment. Similarly, another study (Blomberg et al., 2011) found that only 7 percent of the more than 10,000 delinquent youth returning from residential facilities in Florida had earned a high school diploma or GED before their reentry into the community.

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<sup>4</sup> Juvenile records are typically sealed, which means that they are not accessible to the public. In certain circumstances, such as a specified offense or a court order, court records are unsealed. Expungement laws allow for the erasure or destruction of juvenile records once a juvenile becomes an adult. These laws and policies vary by state.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see the *Model Programs Guide* literature review on [Formal, Post-Adjudication Juvenile Probation Services](#).

There is also some evidence to suggest that youth in state-run facilities have a higher rate of high school graduation and GED achievement, compared with those in locally run facilities (Suitts, Dunn, and Sabree, 2014).

Youth reentering the education system after secure confinement in a residential facility face many barriers that put them at risk of dropping out of school (Wallace, 2012)<sup>6</sup>. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016b), while most youth returning to their communities from a residential facility wish to reenroll in school, only about one third actually do so. Other studies report that two thirds of youth do not return to school after they are released from confinement (Sweeten et al., 2009; Osgood et al., 2010). Cavendish (2014) found that only 44 percent of youth released from juvenile residential facilities in Florida returned to school, and only 8 percent leaving the facility without a high school diploma earned a diploma within 3 years after release. Additionally, more than a quarter of youth housed in juvenile justice facilities drop out of school within 6 months, and only 15 percent of students in ninth grade released from confinement graduate from high school in 4 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a).

Some researchers have attempted to isolate the effect of secure confinement on educational outcomes separate from other confounding variables such as involvement in crime, family risk factors, and disadvantaged neighborhoods. For example, a study by Aizer and Doyle (2015) analyzed data across 10 years looking at judges randomly assigned to cases in Chicago and found that, after controlling for demographic characteristics and crime severity, juvenile incarceration reduced high school graduation rates by 13 percent and increased adult incarceration rates by 22 percent. In their analysis of individuals convicted of a crime as a juvenile in Louisiana, Eren and Mocan (2017) found that incarceration had a detrimental impact on high school completion on earlier but not on later cohorts. They argued that this may be because of school reform in the late 1990s.

However, this does not mean that all youth who have contact with the juvenile justice system experience negative educational outcomes. Educational achievement can be a protective factor for youth in secure residential facilities (Leone et al., 2005). For example, Blomberg et al. (2011) found that confined youth in Florida with higher levels of educational achievement during confinement were more likely to return to school after release. Cavendish (2014) found that an increase in the number of credits earned during confinement was related to an increase in the likelihood of returning to school and earning a diploma after release.

## **Provision of Education for Youth in Residential Facilities**

All youth, including those in custody, have the right to a publicly funded education in the United States<sup>7</sup> and education in juvenile justice residential facilities is subject to federal civil rights laws such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.<sup>8</sup> However, the agencies charged with overseeing and providing education in juvenile residential facilities vary by state and type of facility. For example, in some states the juvenile justice system is responsible for providing educational services, while in other states the department of education remains responsible for educating youth in confinement (The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015). Also, in some states (such as California, Texas,

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<sup>6</sup> For more information, see the *Model Programs Guide* literature review on [Juvenile Reentry](#).

<sup>7</sup> Two federal statutes often cited to demonstrate this right include the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the No Child Left Behind Act. Examples of Supreme Court cases related to education while youth are in custody include Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400–1482 (2000); No Child Left Behind Act, 20 U.S.C. §§ 6301–7941 (Supp. V 2005) and *Id.* § 6315(b)(2)(D); *Donnell C. v. Illinois State Board of Education*, 829 F. Supp. 1016 (N.D. Ill. 1993); *Green v. Johnson*, 513 F. Supp. 965 (D. Mass. 1981).

<sup>8</sup> H. R. 2362, 89th Cong., 1st Sess., Public Law 89-10.

Massachusetts, and Colorado), state-level juvenile justice systems and agencies are responsible for the schooling of committed youth while local school districts are responsible for the education of detained youth (Benner et al., 2017; California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, n.d.; Colorado Division of Youth Corrections, 2014; Suitts, Dunn, and Sabree, 2014; Texas Juvenile Justice Department, n.d.). Some states also rely on private external vendors to provide educational services (Kaufman, Ellis, and Moore, 2008; Macomber et al., 2010).

**Screening and Assessment.** When juveniles enter a residential facility, screening or assessment can assist in determining the appropriate educational services. In 2016, 86 percent of residential placement facilities reported conducting educational screenings of youth within 1 week of admission. This is an increase from 2000, when only 64 percent of facilities reported doing so (Puzzanchera and Hockenberry, 2018).

**Education Quality.** There is a sparse body of literature on the provision of effective instructional approaches in secure juvenile facilities; however, the research that does exist demonstrates several shortcomings (Gagnon, Houchins, and Murphy, 2012). Studies have found that education within facilities may not meet the same standards as education in the community. For example, one study investigated educational policies within detention facilities at the state level and found that facility staff often do not receive adequate training on how to address the developmental needs of the population of youth in confinement and how to ensure continuity of education (Geib et al., 2011). A 2015 national survey sent out to all state juvenile correctional agencies found that only eight states provided educational and vocational services of equal quality to the services that youth received in the community (The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015).

A survey of 78 juvenile justice educators from facilities in Louisiana found several factors identified as barriers to providing quality education to incarcerated youth, including lack of support from administration, low staff morale, safety issues, unrealistic expectations for students, and low student motivation (Houchins et al., 2009). Additional barriers to educational services provided in residential facilities can include challenges with the physical space, insufficient funding, inadequate time for classes, lack of incorporation of research-based instructional and behavioral approaches, and changes in the daily schedule (Gagnon and Barber, 2010). There is also research that suggests that educating incarcerated girls is particularly challenging given their small numbers, compared with boys, and because of their placement in a system historically designed for boys that may not meet girls' unique needs (Chesney-Lind, 2001; Morris, 2016).

Compounding these challenges, the disruption inherent in changing schools can also have a negative effect (National Research Council, 2013). Youth who enter the juvenile justice system may experience disruption in access to and continuity of education as they transition at various points during and after their case proceedings. For example, the transition from receiving public education in the community to education within a juvenile residential facility requires coordination between the educational and juvenile justice systems to ensure the timely transition of academic records and overall continuity of schoolwork (NDTAC, 2016). The transition from educational programming in a short-term detention facility to that in a long-term incarceration facility requires a similar degree of coordination. Lack of coordination between the juvenile justice and educational systems may also inhibit the delivery and continuity of service provision as youth experience numerous transitions inherent in justice-system involvement (Suitts, Dunn, and Sabree, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

**Provision of Education for Youth with Special Education Needs.** As previously discussed, a disproportionate number of youth in the juvenile justice system have special education needs. Youth

with disabilities are required to receive educational services under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)<sup>9</sup>, which extends to youth in state and local juvenile residential facilities. Under IDEA, it is required that all youth who are identified as having a disability receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP),<sup>10</sup> which is to be enacted at the beginning of each academic year. Elements of the IEP include measurable goals and a statement of provided educational supports and services (Mallett, 2008).

The education system assumes responsibility for determining if a child is IDEA eligible and for the development of the IEP; however, issues involving the timely transfer of academic records and psychological screenings to juvenile correctional facilities and juvenile courts have been cited (Rutherford et al., 2002; Leone and Wruble, 2015). For example, one qualitative study involving 48 teachers working within pretrial detention facilities in Connecticut found that 46 percent had received no academic or psychological screening information about students before youth entered the facilities, 67 percent reported that school districts drastically differed in their ability to provide academic records to detention center education staff in a timely manner, and 31 percent reported that youth did not receive any educational screening assessments upon admission to a detention facility, which would serve to designate whether the youth is in need of special education facilities (Macomber et al., 2010). Given the high levels of special education needs among youth in residential facilities, there is a high financial cost associated with appropriately serving them. Specifically, because of the special accommodations and documentation necessary to process this population, youth who qualify for education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) cost twice as much to educate as their nondisabled counterparts (Chambers, Parrish, and Harr, 2004).

**Unique Needs of Youth in Short-Term Detention.** A comparative study (Krezmien et al., 2008) used a sample of more than 500 males in secure confinement and detention and found that detained and committed youth share similarly poor academic profiles and complex mental health needs. This underscores the similarity of youth involved in the justice system at different points, and the importance of determining their special education or mental health needs, even if they are only in detention for a short time (Krezmien et al., 2008; Chassin, 2008). Despite having academic and mental health needs similar to those of youth in confinement, youth awaiting adjudication in detention experience distinct challenges to education delivery because of 1) the relative transience of this population; 2) the relatively limited educational resources, compared with those resources in confinement facilities; and 3) their undetermined legal status (Krezmien et al., 2008; Koyama, 2012).

**Educational Guidance.** In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education partnered with the U.S. Department of Justice to issue the Correctional Education Guidance Package (U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, 2014; Gagnon, Read, and Gonsoulin, 2015). The five suggestions presented by the two agencies were as follows:

1. Prioritize safety and education throughout the facility climate, provide optimal conditions for learning, and encourage use of social support services that address needs for all youth.

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<sup>9</sup> The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 20 USC 1400 Public Law 108-446 - 108th Congress, 2004. <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cstatute%2C>

<sup>10</sup> 34 C.F.R. § 300.323 (c)(1)



2. Ensure that facilities receive the necessary funding to provide educational opportunities for justice-involved youth that are comparable to those provided to youth who are not justice-involved.
3. Hire and retain high-quality educators who have skills to tend to the needs of system-involved youth and positively impact them by providing compelling and enriching learning environments.
4. Apply challenging and up-to-date curricula that meet state academic or career and technical standards and that employ instructional methodology and materials encouraging college or career readiness.
5. Facilitate successful system navigation and reentry transition for every youth through the utilization of formal processes and procedures (U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, 2014).

## Alternative Schools

Alternative schools are specialized educational environments designed to provide academic instruction to students expelled or suspended for disruptive behavior or weapons possession, or who are unable to succeed in the mainstream school environment (Ingersoll and Leboeuf, 1997). Youth involved in the juvenile justice system and living in the community may also be served by alternative schools.

Tobin and Sprague (2000) recommend eight evidence-based practices for alternative schools: 1) reduce class size, 2) provide high-quality academic instruction, 3) foster positive class climate, 4) provide highly structured classroom with behavioral classroom management, 5) offer social skills instruction, 6) conduct functional behavior assessments, 7) use school-based adult mentors, and 8) foster parent involvement.

Although alternative schools use a case-by-case approach for each student's educational needs, classrooms are highly structured to eliminate the anxiety or uncertainty that at-risk learners often experience in the classroom (Solar, 2011). Alternative schools may use social skills instruction to improve at-risk students' interpersonal problem solving (Kazdin, Siegel, and Bass, 1992). Such trainings have been found to decrease disruptive behaviors and negative interactions, which correspond to an increase in academic engagement (Lane et al., 2003). Many alternative schools also pair students with mentors<sup>11</sup>, which as numerous studies show, result in social, emotional, and academic benefits for at-risk students (Komosa-Hawkins, 2012; Herrera, DuBois, and Grossman, 2013).

Much of the recent research on alternative schools focuses on student perspectives of the programs (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Zolkoski, Bullock, and Gable, 2016). For example, one study examined the traditional and alternative school experiences of at-risk students who attended a public alternative school, and asked students about their experiences in both their former traditional schools and in their alternative school. Results indicated that students felt traditional schools lacked the personal relationships with teachers, schoolwide focus on maturity and responsibility, understanding about social issues, and positive peer relationships provided by alternative schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Some alternative schools are designed specifically for youth in the juvenile justice system. For example,

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<sup>11</sup> For more information, see the *Model Programs Guide* literature review on [Mentoring](#).

the State of Texas implements the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP). The goal of this language arts, mathematics, science, social studies and self-discipline intervention is to assist students in performing at grade level. Students are assigned to a JJAEP program as a result of a mandatory expulsion from their home school for serious infractions, a discretionary expulsion for serious infractions, a court order, or under an agreement with the local school district (Texas Juvenile Probation Commission, 2009).

## Outcome Evidence

Limited research is available on the effect of educational interventions for youth in secure residential facilities. However, there is not a lot of available research for interventions targeted to youth under court supervision who are not in secure facilities. There is research, however, on more general types of interventions for system-involved youth that have resulted in positive educational outcomes.

## Educational Interventions in Confinement

Research on the impact of educational programming for youth while in confinement is limited (Cavendish, 2014; Gagnon and Barber, 2010; Leone et al., 2005). In general, Lipsey et al. (2010) found that skill-building interventions that focus on cognitive-behavioral techniques, social skills, and academic and vocational skill building can lead to decreases in recidivism by juvenile offenders.

An evaluation of education reform at the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS) found that DHS was able to make changes to educational services, transition services, and system management capacities (Kaufman, Ellis, and Moore, 2008). Preliminary analysis suggested that these changes resulted in increases in perceptions of educational quality, decreases in teacher turnover, increases in the percentage of teachers holding a teaching license, greater implementation of recommended educational practices, and a stronger professional culture among the education programs.

One systematic review assessed and compared the strength of evidence relative to types of juvenile educational programs in correctional facilities (Davis et al., 2014). The analysis was conducted by program type and included packaged and branded reading programs, computer-assisted instruction, personalized instruction, GED completion, vocational education, and other remedial education programming. Of the 18 studies included in the review, the strength of evidence favored 1) Read 180, a computer-based curriculum, which addresses reading improvement; and 2) the Avon Park Youth Academy, an educational and vocational training program, which targets diploma completion and postrelease employment<sup>12</sup>. Specifically, across two evaluation studies (Slavin et al., 2008; Loadman et al., 2011) the preponderance of evidence suggested a positive impact of participation in Read 180 on reading for juveniles in correctional facilities. Participation in the Avon Park Youth Academy program was associated with a statistically significant increase in diploma completion (high school diploma, GED, or diploma for those with special education needs) at the time of release. Program participants' rate of diploma completion was about 27 percentage points higher than the rate for comparison youth. However, despite these educational findings at the 1-year follow up, no statistically significant difference in recidivism rates (defined as rearrests) was found for the Avon Park program (Davis et al., 2014). Other evaluations (Malmgren and Leone, 2000; Drakeford, 2002) have found statistically

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<sup>12</sup> While the same evaluation of the Avon Park Youth Academy program (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2009) received a No Effects rating through the *Model Programs Guide* review process, it should be noted that the program *did* show statistically significant findings at the 1-year follow-up period. However, *Model Programs Guide* scored the most distal, 3-year postrelease outcomes, which were largely nonsignificant. For more information, see the program profile on *CrimeSolution.gov*: [Avon Park Youth Academy and STREET Smart Aftercare Program](#).

significant gains in reading scores and oral fluency for juveniles who participated in the Corrective Reading program, a literacy curriculum.

One synthesis of results from 16 studies of education interventions for adolescents in secure confinement found that implementing targeted and explicit academic interventions that show promise with adolescents in a general school setting can also be successful with system-involved juveniles (Wexler et al. 2014). For example, a study of incarcerated students in three different states showed that an intensive, explicit, and highly structured reading instruction intervention can increase reading performance in a relatively short period (Houchins et al., 2008).

### **Interventions that Impact Educational Outcomes**

Although not exclusively designed as educational interventions, several programs have shown promise in improving academic outcomes among youth in the juvenile justice system. A few examples can be found on OJJDP's *Model Programs Guide*:

[Boys Town Family Home Program](#) is a residential program that targets behavioral, interpersonal, and academic skills among both delinquent and at-risk youth. The average length of stay is 12 to 18 months, and youth attend an on-campus school run by the Boys Town organization. While the program showed a statistically significant increase in children's grade point averages and their perceived level of importance of going to college, it did not have an impact on the years of school completed or receipt of a high school diploma or GED (Thompson et al., 1996).

[YouthBuild Offender Program](#) is a full-time, comprehensive, community-based training and youth-development intervention for youth convicted of a crime. Participants live, learn, and work in a family-like environment, where there are various work and educational opportunities available. The program showed a statistically significant reduction in recidivism and an increase in the likelihood of youth receiving a high school diploma, GED, trade license, or training certificate; however, there was no effect on enrollment in postsecondary courses or employment (Cohen and Piquero, 2015; Miller et al., 2016).

Additionally, there are educational interventions that serve at-risk and high-risk youth, many of whom may also be on probation or otherwise court involved. For example, [Career Academies](#) are schools within schools that link students with teachers, peers, and community partners in a disciplined environment, fostering mental and emotional health, academic success, and labor market success. Each Career Academy has a specific career concentration, including law enforcement, homeland security, tourism, finance, and health. This program has evolved into a multifaceted, integrated approach to reducing delinquent behavior and enhancing protective factors among at-risk youth. A large-scale, multisite experiment design with random assignment, which was conducted at nine high schools, found that the program had a statistically significant, positive effect on earnings among young men who participated (Kemple and Scott-Clayton, 2004; Kemple and Willner, 2008; Page, 2012). High school completion rates and postsecondary enrollment and attainment were the same for both the intervention and the comparison groups; however, among those students most likely to drop out, there was a statistically significant decrease in the dropout rate for those who participated in Career Academy (Kemple and Scott-Clayton, 2004; Kemple and Willner, 2008).

### **Gaps in Evaluation Research**

There are notable gaps in the evaluation literature surrounding education interventions with youth in the juvenile justice system. There are also no rigorous research studies examining educational interventions for youth being served in the community who are on probation or parole.

In their synthesis of educational interventions for confined youth, Wexler et al. (2014) found that it was difficult to draw conclusions regarding the relative effectiveness of educational interventions for adolescents in confinement because of methodological limitations and a general lack of research in the area. They identified the following three intervention characteristics as areas that would benefit from further research:

1. ***Delivery of instruction.*** This refers specifically to the degree that a program provides instruction that is targeted, explicit, and systematic.
2. ***Intervention duration and session length.*** Notably, no studies included in the synthesis analyzed the impact of session length and duration on youth outcomes.
3. ***Group size.*** The majority of educational interventions have focused on the youth's ability to work independently or as a member of a small group; however, little research has addressed the impact of group size on youth performance.

Several studies cited the challenges of conducting controlled evaluation research in correctional settings (Leone et al., 2005). Similarly, as it relates to juvenile delinquency programs more broadly (those that target academic outcomes and are not limited to those administered in a correctional setting), much of the synthesized effectiveness research that *is* available is not current and may not account for the current state of programming in this area (Sander et al., 2012, Leone et al., 2005).

Furthermore, some researchers have pointed out definitional challenges. Gagnon and Barber (2010) explained that broad constructs such as “disability” are frequently used to identify effective approaches instead of more specific student characteristics. Compounding this challenge, the research on effective strategies for system-involved youth requiring special education services is especially limited (Burke and Dalmage, 2016).

Additionally, the existing research on education in residential facilities largely focuses on the population of youth in secure confinement, as opposed to detained youth; thus, more research is necessary to evaluate best practices for this population (Koyama, 2012). Lastly, there is a lack of research available that has been conducted within the past decade. More recent datasets could shed more light on the current state of education within secure facilities.

## **Conclusion**

Youth in the juvenile justice system face a myriad of challenges in educational engagement, performance, and outcomes. Their unique and varied educational needs and transient nature are just a few of the obstacles that may hinder or prevent them from consistently accessing education (Krezmien and Mulcahy, 2008; Chambers, Parrish, and Harr, 2004; Sedlak and McPherson, 2010).

In addition, contact with the juvenile justice system can result in more negative educational outcomes. For example, arrest has been linked to higher school dropout rates and lower levels of college enrollment, and placement in a juvenile residential facility has been linked to lower rates of high school completion and increased odds of criminal involvement as an adult (Aizer and Doyle, 2015; Kirk and Sampson, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). However, academic achievement while securely confined has been shown to be related to returning to school after release, and participation in school after release can result in lower recidivism (Blomberg, Bales, and Piquero 2011).

Finally, when educational programs in residential facilities are delivered effectively, researchers have been able to demonstrate that these programs may improve students' math and reading scores (Suitts, Dunn, and Sabree, 2014) and diploma completion (Slavin et al., 2008; Loadman et al., 2011), even though

there are significant research gaps on how certain program characteristics (such as delivery intensity, length, and group size) impact academic outcomes (Wexler et al., 2014). Other broader interventions for youth under formal juvenile justice system supervision have also demonstrated positive impacts on educational outcomes; however, the research on these programs is less rigorous.

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