



From Prevention to Diversion: The Role of Afterschool in the Juvenile Justice System

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In the United States, involvement with the juvenile justice system can have a long-lasting negative impact on a person's life. When youth are placed in detention facilities, their education, ties to society, and lives are disrupted. Yet any involvement with the justice system—regardless of incarceration—can have implications for one's future earning potential and career trajectory, limiting access to educational opportunities, career fields, and available supports.

Afterschool and summer learning programs can mitigate risk and support the development of protective factors that help keep young people out of the juvenile justice system. Moreover, the afterschool field can also serve as alternatives to detention that keep youth from re-offending. Through programming opportunities, partnerships, and coordinated efforts, afterschool programs keep young people safe, connect them to the supports they need, and help build protective factors and positive social relationships that lead to bright futures.

The Juvenile Justice System

Although the number of young people arrested has steadily declined in the United States since 1996,¹ the far-reaching impacts of involvement with the justice system remains a concern as each component that helps determine one's prospects in life—education, employment, housing, and involvement with the justice system as an adult—can be adversely affected.

The impact of involvement

Opportunities can be limited for system-involved youth. Young people who are incarcerated are less likely to graduate from high school and criminal charges may preclude them from gaining entrance to colleges and universities.^{2,3} Involvement also impacts their future career prospects, as employers consider a prior criminal record when evaluating candidates. The likelihood of future offending also increases; the National Bureau of Economic Research found that youth involved in the juvenile justice system were up to 16 percent more likely than their non-involved peers to be incarcerated as adults.⁴

It is estimated that confinement of young people in the United States costs the country—which includes a loss of future earnings and tax revenue—between \$8 and \$21 billion every year.

Source: Justice Policy Institute. (2014). *Sticker Shock: Calculating the Full Price Tag for Youth Incarceration*.

Current landscape

Young people involved in the justice system are also those who are most in need of additional supports. A study found that more than 9 in 10 youth involved with the juvenile justice system reported having experienced at least one form of trauma in their lives, including having experienced physical violence or sexual assault or witnessed violence against or the death of a loved one.^{5,6} Youth in detention are more likely to be below grade level in academic achievement, suspended or been held back a grade in school, and suffering from learning disabilities or mental health disorders.⁷ The Campaign for Youth Justice reported that 2 out of 3 youth placed in confinement have one or more mental health conditions.⁸

Another key aspect of the juvenile justice system are existing disparities also recognized in adult populations. The Sentencing Project found that between 2003 and 2013, the racial gap between African American and white youth in confinement increased by 15 percent despite the drop in overall commitment rates. Furthermore, African American youth were more likely to be arrested than their white peers for similar behaviors, with this disparity growing by 24 percent over the decade.⁹

Reauthorization of the *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act*

In 2018, after more than 15 years, the *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act* (JJDP) was reauthorized to introduce reforms to the system—improving supports for system-involved youth and instituting measures to prevent initial involvement. Among JJDP's efforts for reform is the implementation of diversion programs and other alternatives to detention, in particular for low-risk status offenders,* and focusing on prevention efforts to curtail youth involvement with the juvenile justice system in the first place.

Afterschool: An Essential Piece of the Puzzle

The reauthorization of JJDP is an opportunity for afterschool programs to play a role in assisting system-involved youth who are in need of support, as well as serving as a valuable space to keep young people safe and help them build the skills and competencies that support positive decision-making. In the hours immediately following the school day, juvenile crime and victimization peak.¹⁰ When this critical window of time is leveraged in an afterschool program, youth have more opportunities to build protective factors, such as positive self-image, supportive relationships, and stability and consistency.¹¹ For example, research indicates that evidence-based mentoring practices in afterschool programs can lead to improved academic skills, better behavior, and increased social capital for students.¹²

The middle and high school years are an especially crucial developmental period. During adolescence, young people develop the skills to control risky behaviors. Adolescence is a time to form critical protective factors and recover from trauma experienced earlier in childhood, making interventions to change risk-taking behaviors for this age bracket more likely to be effective.¹³



* Status offenses are nonviolent, noncriminal acts that are considered a violation of the law because of a young person's status as a minor.

Afterschool programs—which reach more than 4 million middle and high school students¹⁴— function as formative spaces to integrate these interventions by building protective factors among participants, connecting them with resources and mentors, instituting models to help address negative behaviors, and serving as diversion programs to prevent future offending.

Connecting youth to supports in the community

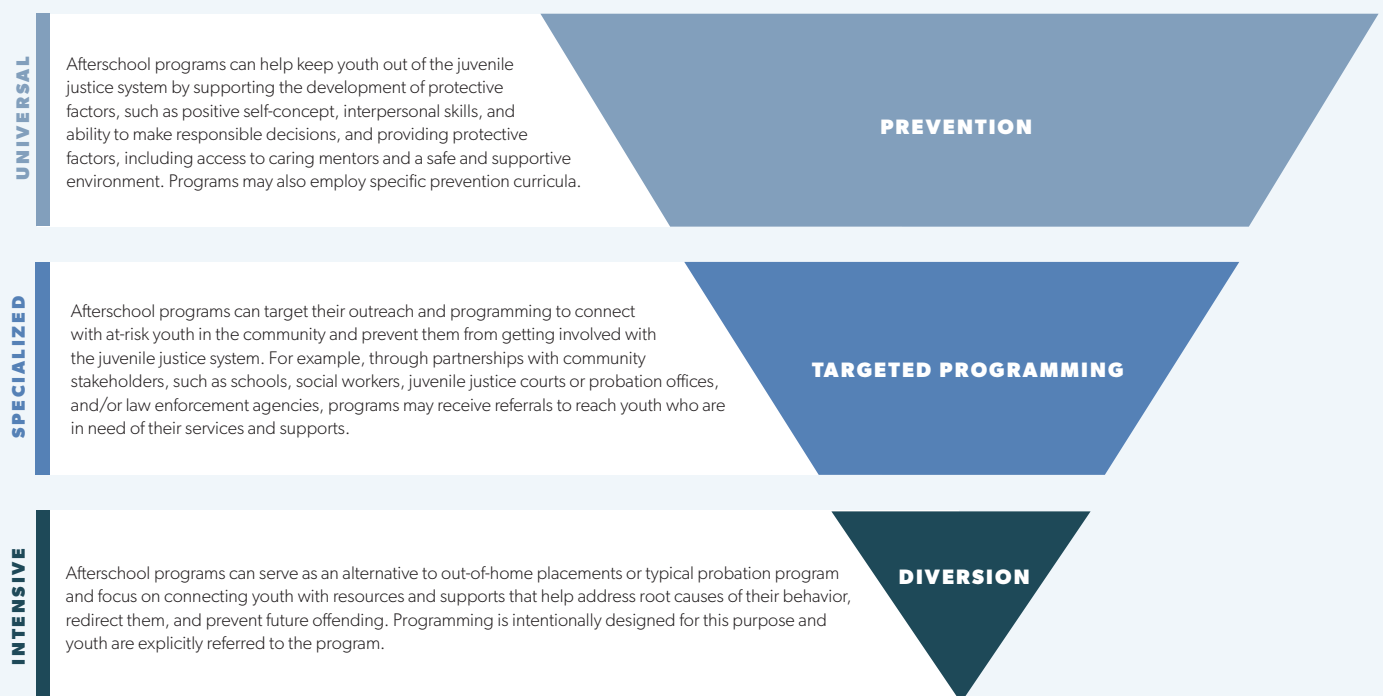
Afterschool can be a critical touch point to direct youth to vital resources and support systems in their communities. For example, **Promise South Salt Lake (PSSL)** in Utah operates afterschool programming at 14 neighborhood centers that are intentionally designed to connect youth and their families to education, health, safety, and housing resources and programs, including academic support, prevention programming, and nutrition and health resources. PSSL has attributed these community efforts to a 67 percent decrease in the city’s juvenile arrest rates between 3 and 6 p.m. from 2010 to 2019. Through **DRAGG (Drag Racing Against Gangs and Graffiti)**, youth who have been or are at risk of being involved in gangs in Oxnard, California, learn about basic automotive repair and creative car customization from local automotive professionals. Working with volunteers and law enforcement officers who run the program, youth develop professional and personal skills, gain meaningful work experience, and form strong bonds with trusted adult mentors.

Instituting restorative practices to build community and mitigate harm

Afterschool programs can implement interventions, such as restorative practices, that promote pro-social behavior during a time when adolescents are establishing the neurological maturity to avoid risky behaviors. **Burlington Expanded Learning Opportunities** in Vermont has incorporated restorative practices—which center on building relationships and fostering emotional

The varying degree of roles that afterschool programs play

Afterschool programs can assist youth at-risk or involved with the juvenile justice system in many ways. Their role can vary depending on a number of factors, including the program’s capacity, structure, and partnerships with other groups working with at-risk or justice-involved youth. Broadly, this involvement exists on a spectrum, with prevention being the most expansive category of activities and diversion focusing more specifically on one form of prevention; each of the three categories outlined build off of each other.



management skills to address conflict¹⁵—into their programming and employ techniques such as de-escalation strategies, shared agreements, and group discussion circles to build community and a sense of inclusion among their youth and staff. Approximately 8 in 10 staff reported that the overall culture and community in their program was better compared to previous years after the implementation of restorative practices and work in social and emotional learning (80 percent), and that they noticed a positive impact on their work with students (86 percent).

Serving as diversion programs that provide alternatives to detention

Diversion programs serve as an intervention strategy, deterring youth at risk of becoming system-involved and offering an alternative option to out-of-home detention placements for youth involved with the juvenile justice system. At their core, diversion programs ensure youth are provided the resources and supports that address root causes of their behavior, redirect them, and prevent future offending.¹⁶ For example, the **Center for Restorative Youth Justice (CRYJ)** in Kalispell, Montana, takes a restorative justice approach with referred, first-time, minor offenders who have become involved with the juvenile justice system. CRYJ staff, youth, and their families discuss the circumstances that contributed to their offense and create a restorative agreement that includes the supports they need to overcome their challenges. A central component of these restorative agreements are afterschool workshop sessions that cover a variety of life and coping skills, including cooking, résumé writing, yoga, and self-reflections through art and writing that help youth learn how to express themselves. CRYJ's participant recidivism rate is approximately 10-15 percent compared to the estimated average state recidivism rate of 55 percent.¹⁷ **Evolution Youth Services**, based in Denver, Colorado, combines therapeutic techniques and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu to provide trauma-informed intervention services to justice system-involved youth. Through mindfulness and honest conversations with each other and program staff, youth develop coping strategies and resiliency skills including self-control, communication, and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

Involvement with the juvenile justice system can have devastating impacts for youth, their families, and their communities. Building protective factors that promote resiliency, fostering connections and trust between young people and their communities, and serving as diversion programs that function as alternatives to detention are examples of the breadth of supports afterschool programs provide. Afterschool can be an essential part of the work to support the young people at risk of becoming involved or currently involved with the juvenile justice system and help reframe and redirect their futures.

For more information on how afterschool programs are helping to keep young people out of the juvenile justice system, check out the full issue brief and program spotlights at: <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/research.cfm>



Endnotes

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**Afterschool
Alliance**

afterschoolalliance.org

The Afterschool Alliance is working to ensure that all children have access to affordable, quality afterschool programs.