

# Report: Juvenile justice system schools “do more harm than good”

The education provided to the 70,000 juveniles incarcerated on any given day across the nation is “substandard” and “is setting them even further back in their ability to turn their lives around,” according to a report released today by the [Southern Education Foundation](#), a nonprofit based in Atlanta.

The report – *Just Learning: The Imperative to Transform Juvenile Justice Systems into Effective Educational Systems* – found that the effects of the juvenile justice programs are “profound and crippling,” setting youth back instead of helping them.

Many of these students have learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral problems, and health issues, the report found. Overall, 30 percent reported they had been physically or sexually abused, 37 percent had problems with hearing, sight or teeth, and 20 percent “wished they were dead,” according to the report.

In addition, most (63 percent) were incarcerated for offenses that did not involve harming another person, such as burglary, shoplifting, trespassing, truancy, running away from home, auto theft, and underage drinking and smoking.

“We conducted this study to get a clear look at what happens to a truly invisible population,” said Steve Suits, vice president of the foundation and co-author of the study with Nasheed Sabree, in a press release. “The juvenile justice education programs that serve hundreds of thousands of students are characterized by low expectations, inadequate supports to address student needs, and ineffective instruction and technology. Students come out of the juvenile justice system in worse shape than when they entered, struggling to return to school or get their lives back on track.”

The vast majority of students in juvenile justice facilities are male and African-American or Latino. California, Hawaii and New Jersey had the highest rates of children of color (which includes African-American, Latino, Asian, and Native American) incarcerated, according to the report, which relied on national data from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

In California, 58 percent of incarcerated students were Latino, 26 percent African-American, 13 percent white and 3 percent Asian. These data are similar to state and [national suspension and expulsion data](#), with African-American youth in particular being over-represented. In California, only about 6 percent of the student population is African-American.

California high school students in juvenile facilities were more likely than youths nationwide to earn course credits. In 2011, 58 percent of students earned high school credit in California compared with 46 percent nationally. However, they were less likely to receive a high school diploma while incarcerated. In 2011, 5 percent of California students were able to earn a high school diploma while locked up, compared with 8 percent nationally.

The report references an [earlier study](#) of young men in the California juvenile justice system. That study found that “finishing high school served as a turning point in offenders’ lives,” especially for those youth arrested as teenagers.

Based on its findings, the Southern Education Foundation report released today recommends:

- Reorganizing programs so they are designed and operated to advance teaching and learning.
- Setting and applying the same educational standards for incarcerated students as students in regular schools.
- Tracking the educational status of every juvenile in the system.
- Developing and implementing an individual educational plan for each student.
- Providing a seamless transition back to a regular school.
- Creating data systems to measure institutional educational progress and identify areas that need improvement.

## **Character-building, not jail time, in a Texas juvenile court program**

DALLAS — Many kids who commit crimes end up behind bars. There is a unique program in Dallas meant to avoid that. It is the Diversion Male Court and a large number of youth are enrolled in it.

Diversion Male Court (DMC) is a six-month rehabilitation program for boys of color who get in trouble with the law. The people who work with them are all men of color.

The court system that deals with youth who break the law is called the juvenile justice system. A major problem is that many of the teens who enter the juvenile justice system are black or Hispanic. Many of the lawyers and judges are white.

DMC tries to help minority offenders in Dallas by connecting them with adults who they can identify with. These boys have been accused of everything from aggravated assault to burglary. DMC uses a variety of methods to help them improve their behavior.

### **Importance Of Respect And Responsibility**

The program is unique in Texas, and there are only a handful of other programs like it in the country. George Ashford is the judge at DMC. He says the program is about more than simply telling the boys to stay out of trouble. He and his team teach the boys life lessons about accountability, respect, responsibility and empathy.

Alex R. Piquero is a criminologist at the University of Texas at Dallas. He said that DMC has an interesting new approach to helping youths who get into trouble with the law. "We should continue to experiment with new approaches and alternatives to sentencing, treatment and rehabilitation," Piquero said.

The program is still relatively new, though. Piquero noted that this approach needs to be evaluated over a long period of time before we will know how effective it really is. One mother whose son entered DMC recently described it as "an answer to prayer." "Him getting into trouble was real hard for me. I need him to learn to follow the rules," she said of her son.

DMC does not hand out the usual punishments to boys who break the law. Instead, these teens are enrolled in a multi-level program that helps them to grow.

### **Strict Rules To Follow**

Ashford wears a suit and tie instead of a traditional judge's robe. When he talks to DMC boys, and sits with them and has personal conversations. With one boy, he discusses boxing; with another, auto repair. Every conversation leads back to a life lesson.

Ashford and his team go out of their way to let each youth know that they really care about him. At the same time, they enforce strict rules and expect a lot from the kids. All boys in the program have to be at home by 7 p.m., and DMC workers meet with them every week to see how

they are doing at school. Boys have to keep up with their school work and are tutored if necessary.

All participants are also required to learn “character traits” such as trustworthiness and respect. They must write a half page in their journals every day about how those traits affect their behavior.

Dr. Terry Smith is the executive director of the Dallas County Juvenile Department and is DMC's founder. When she decided to create the program, she approached an experienced juvenile officer named Mario Love with her idea.

“I actually laughed,” Love said.

He was doubtful that the program could work, and so was Ashford.

“I’m happy to say I was proven wrong,” said Love. He is now a passionate supporter of the program.

### **Turning Lives Around**

Since DMC began, 258 boys have been recommended for the program. Some 143 of them enrolled, and 25 more are currently under consideration.

Overall, DMC focuses on building character. Sometimes this requires adapting to the needs of each youth. When Love learned that one 17-year-old had recently become a father, he arranged parenting classes for the teen.

Ashford said the program can help kids who have developed bad habits and made bad decisions to turn their lives around.

“Those cases are deeply satisfying,” he observed.

DMC deals directly with the issue of race. Smith recognizes that race can be an “uncomfortable topic.” Nevertheless, she does not think the issue should be ignored.

For example, an unusually large proportion of black youth end up in the juvenile justice system. The proportion of whites who enter the system, on the other hand, is below the overall average.

### **Special Treatment?**

According to many experts, boys and girls of color do not necessarily commit more crimes than white youth. Rather, they may just be more likely to be caught and punished.

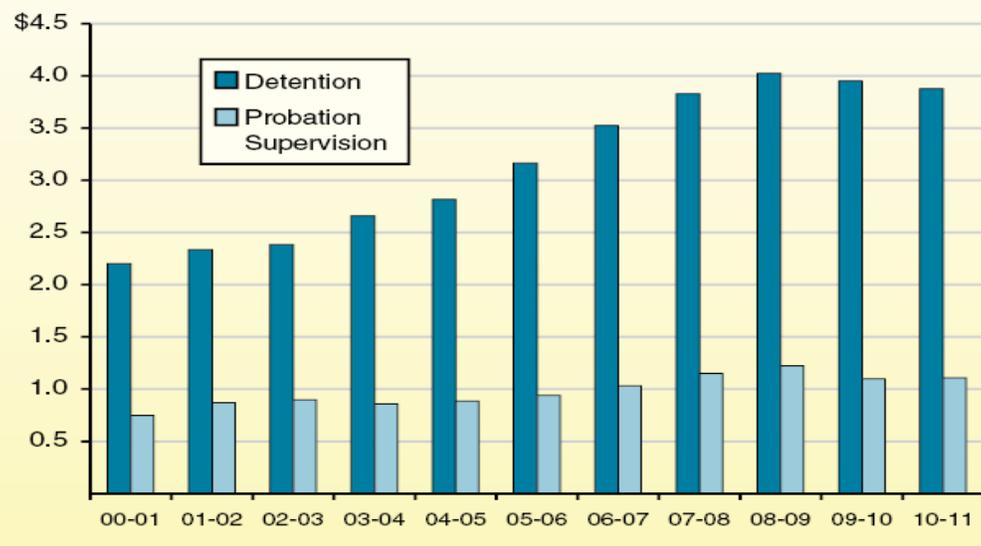
Darlene Byrne is a state district judge in Travis County. She said that the juvenile justice system treats youth of different races differently.

Experts point to the case of Ethan Couch, a white teenager who killed four people in Tarrant County two years ago while driving drunk. Couch was 16 at the time of the crash, and it was his third alcohol-related offense, yet a judge did not sentence Couch to serve jail time. It would have been very unlikely for a black teen to receive such a forgiving sentence, the experts say.

Piquero said that it is hard to know why boys and girls of color end up in the juvenile justice system more than white boys and girls. He said that the system may treat youth of different races differently, but this is not necessarily the case. “That may be true at some level or to some extent. We just don’t know how much.”

## Spending on Local Adult and Juvenile Corrections Has Increased Most of Past Decade

(In Billions)



## Eighth Grade: Argumentative Prompt Set 1

Write an argumentative essay justifying whether or not juvenile justice centers are beneficial for troubled teens. Support your claim using evidence from the texts.

Manage your time carefully so that you can:

- Read the passages
- Plan your essay
- Write your essay
- Revise and edit your essay

Be sure to:

- Include a claim
- Address counterclaims
- Use evidence from multiple sources
- Avoid overly relying on one source

Your written response should be in the form of a multi-paragraph essay. Remember to spend time reading, planning, writing, revising, and editing.

STUDENT NAME \_\_\_\_\_

**PLANNING SHEET**

Use this sheet to plan what you will write. The writing on this sheet will **not** be scored.

A large rectangular box with a black border, containing 25 horizontal lines for writing. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the box.

**This sheet will not be scored.**

Lined writing area with 25 horizontal lines.



A large rectangular area containing 25 horizontal lines, intended for writing or drawing.