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Exploring Educational Stability and Justice Involvement among Youth of Color in California

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This brief seeks to explain how educational stability (measured by school enrollment and dropouts) relates to arrests among youth of color with other intersecting identities (gender and English-learner status) in California. Though the relationship between education and justice involvement is well established, there is a gap in the field's understanding of local, structural inequities contributing to educational disparities and disproportionate juvenile justice system involvement among youth of color in California communities.

Education and school attendance can serve as important protective factors from juvenile justice system involvement (Development Services Group 2015), and attendance and dropout rates can have long-term impacts on involvement in the adult justice system (Pettit and Western 2004). Furthermore, many researchers have found that justice system responses to "delinquent" behavior can contribute to negative educational outcomes, which can create a cycle of continued justice involvement (Kirk and Sampson 2013; Robison et al. 2017). Research has shown that in California, this cycle disproportionately affects youth of color. For example, a 2012 report from the W. Haywood Burns Institute noted that nonjudicial drivers—such as school responses to delinquent behavior and disorderly conduct—resulted in higher rates of incarceration among youth of color in the state. The report also found that youth of color, particularly Black youth, were more often transferred from juvenile to adult court and less likely to be diverted from formal processing than white youth—contributing to long-term racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile and adult systems and increasing the risk of future justice involvement among youth of color.[1]

This brief builds on state-level work by examining county-level arrests and measures of educational stability among California youth. It explores arrests, enrollment, and dropouts by race, gender, and English-learner status to investigate the relationship between educational stability, justice involvement, and intersecting identities. It provides changemakers county-specific information that can help them understand and address structural issues related to educational stability and justice involvement among youth of color in California.

Data and Analytic Plan

We used two primary datasets: the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) data and the California Department of Education's data collections. (For more information about the datasets, see this brief's appendix.) We conducted a linear regression to examine the relationship between arrests, enrollment, dropouts, race, gender, and English-learner status at the county level. We used a linear regression model because it enabled us to investigate whether there is a relationship between youth justice involvement (measured by arrest data) and several measures of educational stability, exploring each measure's influence on justice involvement independent of the other variables. It also allowed us to examine specific identities—race,[2] gender, and English-learner status—to understand the influence not only of race, but of gender identity and language.[3] To capture county-level relationships between our key variables, we conducted linear regressions for each county in California.

Before discussing our findings, a few limitations should be noted. First, the available data did not allow us to include ethnicity or immigration status in our analysis. Though we aimed to conduct a deeper analysis of youth of color—particularly because roughly half of California youth are Latinx[4] and hundreds of thousands are immigrants[5]—we used race categories as control variables because of these constraints. In addition, we were unable to include actual population estimates in our dataset. Because of this limitation, we used the average racial and gender composition of each county from the education data, as well as arrest data broken down by race. However, one of our results suggests a possible issue with the available racial estimates: whereas 14 percent of California youth ages 10 to 17 in 2016 were Asian,[6] the county-level averages in the education data indicated that Asian youth accounted for one-third of enrolled students and dropouts from 2001 to 2016.

Findings

We developed our analysis using UCR arrest data and California Department of Education enrollment and dropout data for youth in grades 7 to 12 from 2001 to 2016.[7] We created a dataset with this information broken down by race, gender, and English-learner status.

Annual Arrests Have Declined, but Have Declined More Slowly among Asian and American Indian Youth Than among White and Black Youth

Annual Youth Arrests in California by Race, 2002 to 2016

■ Black ■ White ■ American Indian ▪ Asian

Number of youth
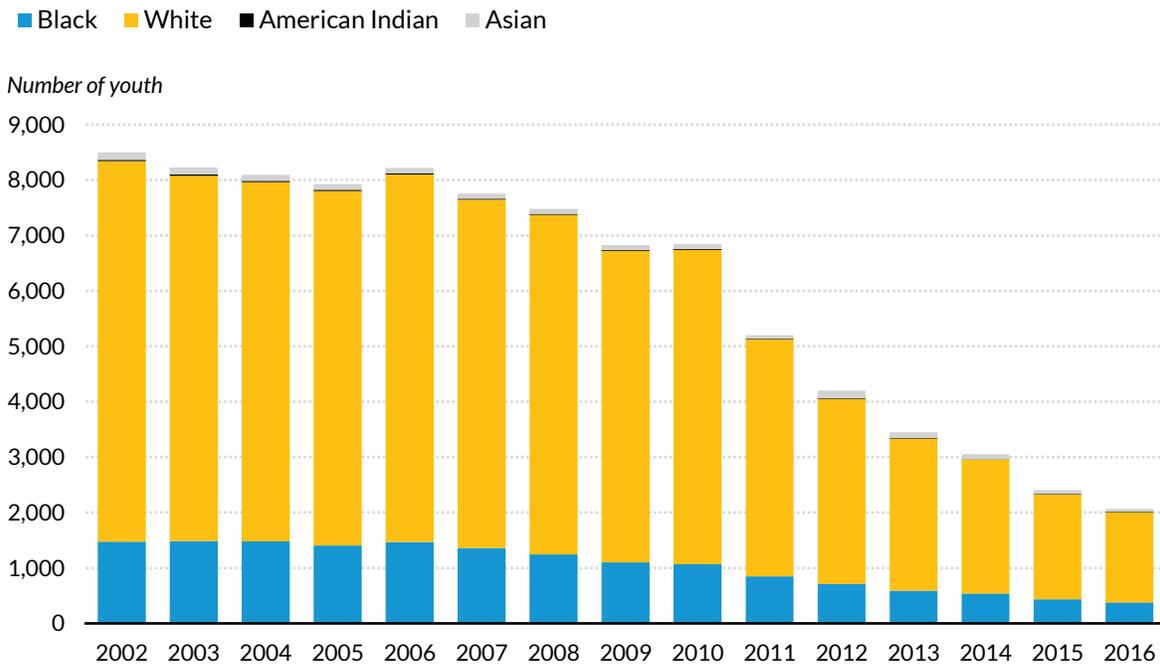
Source: FBI, Uniform Crime Reporting Program (2002–2016).

Our examination of UCR data revealed that, though annual arrests of all youth declined significantly from 2002 to 2016,[8] arrests declined most for white youth (76 percent). During that period, arrests declined by 75 percent for Black youth, 69 percent for American Indian youth, and 60 percent for Asian youth. In addition, though arrests steadily declined for American Indian, Black, and white youth (particularly from 2006 to 2016), arrests fluctuated for Asian youth, falling from 2002 to 2011, increasing significantly in 2012, and falling again from 2012 to 2016.

Ten Counties Showed Strong Relationships between Educational Stability and Youth Justice Involvement

In our analysis of arrest, enrollment, and dropout data, we identified 10 counties that showed particularly strong relationships between youth arrests and average school enrollment and dropouts.[9] Table 1 includes average total arrests, enrollment, and dropouts for each of these counties from 2001 to 2016.

Arrests and Educational Stability for the Most Significant Counties

Average annual arrests, enrollment, and dropouts from 2001 to 2016 for the 10 counties with the strongest relationships between educational stability and justice involvement

	Average total annual arrests	Average total annual enrollment	Average total annual dropouts
Calaveras County	274	7,033	108
Contra Costa County	3,675	180,037	2,620
Fresno County	7,219	206,591	4,864
Los Angeles County	47,602	1,736,603	45,771
Plumas County	339	2,875	44
San Diego County	16,482	534,833	10,579
San Mateo County	2,932	98,126	1,150
Sonoma County	2,979	76,783	1,458
Stanislaus County	3,327	110,558	2,530
Ventura County	6,476	148,471	2,284

Source: FBI, Uniform Crime Reporting Program (2001–2016); California Department of Education enrollment and dropout data (2001–2016).

Through our state-level regression, we found a statistically significant relationship between youth arrests and school enrollment, including race and gender variables as controls. We also found a statistically significant relationship between youth arrests and dropouts. When we included both enrollment and dropouts in the model, statistical significance was maintained. At the county level, 43 counties showed statistically significant relationships between total arrests and educational stability, including average race and gender variables as controls.[10] Table 1 includes the 10 counties where the variables in our model—enrollment, dropouts, race, and gender—accounted for more than 95 percent of the variance in youth arrests. These findings demonstrate the particular importance of investing in and supporting youth education in these 10 counties. (For more information about our state- and county-level regressions, see the appendix.)

Though our linear regression indicates that statistically significant relationships between educational stability and justice involvement exist, further research should explore how and why enrollment and dropouts affect youth arrests in these counties. In addition, the varying sizes of the counties showing statistical significance may be influencing our analysis. Future research can also shed additional light on underlying educational issues and needs, and focus on developing and examining strategies to keep youth in school to reduce involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Discussion

Educational stability is a critical factor in youth involvement in the justice system. Pettit and Western (2004) found that risk of incarceration was highly stratified by education level, with higher incarceration rates among men (particularly Black men) who did not graduate from high school. Furthermore, though inconsistent attendance, high dropout rates, and low graduation rates are considered *risk* factors for justice system involvement, youth who become justice involved are also less likely to benefit from *protective* factors related to education that could prevent further justice involvement (Development Services Group 2019). To address justice involvement among youth of color, it is critical that changemakers take preventive action to ensure their educational stability.

Our research can inform funders' investments in youth education and other social supports at the county level. Funders can use our findings to prioritize investments in educational services and nonprofit programs in counties with youth at higher risk of justice involvement. They can also use our research to focus their assistance on specific opportunities to identify and address structural issues and inequities that contribute to educational disparities and disproportionate justice system involvement among youth of color. In addition, state funders can use our findings to understand cross-county variation, and local funders can use them to compare their counties with others.

Policy solutions focused on educational stability are also integral to achieving systemic change and reducing youth justice involvement. For example, California Senate Bill 419 aims to address unequal student suspensions. Though our analysis did not include suspensions, suspensions are an important aspect of educational stability, and policies like Senate Bill 419 that explicitly focus on preventing dropouts and supporting students in need are promising.

Our identification of 10 counties with the most significant relationships between educational stability and youth justice involvement can help funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders address unique needs in those counties. In those counties, funders should invest not only in services related to education and juvenile justice, but in other social supports that address racial inequities and serve as protective factors from youth justice involvement.

Appendix. Datasets and Regressions

Datasets

We used two primary datasets: the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting data and the California Department of Education's data collections. The UCR data include California county-level arrest data broken down by race from 2001 to 2016, and the California Department of Education data include county-level enrollment, dropout, and English-learner totals from 2001 to 2016, including each county's average racial and gender composition. The UCR data include youth ages 10 to 17, and we filtered the education data to include youth in grades 7 to 12.

State-Level Regression

At the state level, our regression found statistically significant relationships between youth arrests and school enrollment and between youth arrests and dropouts, including race and gender variables as controls. When enrollment and dropouts were both included in the model, statistical significance at the 0.001 level was maintained. The R-squared value for our state-level regression was close to 1, meaning that more than 90 percent of the variance in youth arrests is explained by the independent variables in our model—enrollment, dropouts, race, and gender.

County-Level Regressions

At the county level, 43 counties showed relationships between total arrests and educational stability that were statistically significant at the 0.001 level, including average race and gender variables as controls. In most of the 43 counties, the model showed the expected result of a negative association between enrollment and arrests and a positive association between dropouts and arrests, meaning decreased enrollment and increased dropouts were associated with increased youth arrests. Unexpectedly, Calaveras County, Los Angeles County, Plumas County, Siskiyou County, and five other counties showed the opposite: increased enrollment and decreased dropouts were associated with increased arrests.[11]

Notes

[1] Brian Heller de Leon, "Report highlights racial disparities in CA's juvenile justice system," Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, January 5, 2012, http://www.cjcj.org/mobile/news/5439#:~:text=The%20Burns%20Institute%20highlights%20the,incarceration%20among%20youth%20of%20color.&text=In%20their%20data%20analysis%2C%20the,processing%20than%20youth%20of%20color.

[2] The UCR data include race—including American Indian, Asian, Black, and white youth—but not ethnicity. Therefore, youth who identify as Latinx (an ethnic rather than racial category) are included in categories other than Latinx.

[3] Though English-learner status was originally included as a variable in the model, it was not found to be significant and as such was excluded from the final model.

[4] "Easy Access to Juvenile Populations," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, updated July 31, 2020, https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezapop/.

[5] "Immigrants in California," American Immigration Council, August 6, 2020, https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-in-california.

[6] "Immigrants in California," American Immigration Council.

[7] "Jacob Kaplan's Concatenated Files: Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program Data: County-Level Detailed Arrest and Offense Data," Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, accessed January 11, 2021, https://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/project/108164/version/V4/view; California Department of Education enrollment and dropout data, accessed November 24, 2020, retrieved from https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/.

[8] Arrests for 2001 were excluded from figure 1 because 2001 did not appear to be a reliable base year. The UCR data can fluctuate based on which departments report in a given year. Arrests in 2001 were much lower than 2002 arrests, and we were unable to confirm whether 2001 arrests were actually lower or whether departments were missing from the data.

[9] The regression analysis for these 10 counties resulted in p values of less than or equal to 0.001, showing the relationships to be statistically significant, and R-squared values of more than 0.95.

[10] Counties with statistical significance at the 0.001 level include Alameda, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, Contra Costa, Del Norte, El Dorado, Fresno, Glenn, Humboldt, Imperial, Inyo, Kern, Lake, Los Angeles, Madera, Marin, Merced, Modoc, Monterey, Napa,

Nevada, Orange, Placer, Plumas, Riverside, Sacramento, San Benito, San Diego, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Shasta, Siskiyou, Sonoma, Stanislaus, Sutter, Tulare, Ventura, and Yolo Counties.

[11] These five other counties were Amador, Del Norte, El Dorado, Glenn, and Nevada Counties.

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Acknowledgments

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