

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/it-takes-a-village-blog-series/closing-the-schoolhouse-door-to-the-juvenile-justice-system>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Schools can be a critical diversion point for young people at risk of entering the juvenile justice system, as detailed in Veras recent [report on diversion strategies for youth](#). Exclusionary school disciplinary practices, such as suspensions or expulsions, make it significantly more likely that young people will be arrested in future years. Schools, in many ways, are a front door into the justice systemone that, with creative thinking and collaboration, could be closed.

Jacqui Greene, a senior project associate at the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice (NCMHJJ), says that creating the right resources, assembling the right teams, and developing actionable policies are key to successful diversion strategies. NCMHJJ provides technical assistance to jurisdictions across the country to help schools properly identify and help young people with behavioral health problems.

Greene says the biggest issue schools often face is a lack of resources to identify behavioral health problems as the root cause to some kids acting out. In those cases, the challenge becomes getting young people the clinical services they need. Often, youth are suspended or expelled not for any criminal behavior, but rather for disorderly conduct or something similarvery low-level problems, she says.

Its not that the school is to blame, Greene adds. We dont have an expectation that schools are going to be resourced in a way to do strong identification diagnosis and services, she said. What we really do is work with folks to build a collaborative team.

Greenes work is important because there are clear-cut connections among behavioral health problems, exclusionary discipline in schools, and juvenile justice involvement. According to NCMHJJ, 60 percent of kids in the juvenile justice system have been diagnosed with a mental health illness or substance use disorder. Perhaps most strikingly, about 90 percent of kids involved in the juvenile justice system have had at least some kind of traumatic event exposure, Greene said, which is much higher than the population at large. Therefore, strategies aimed at diversion should take these facts into consideration, and be responsive to young peoples lived experiences.

To tackle these problems, schools and their partners need to think of pragmatic solutions. Its really about assembling the right collaborative team, so you have the school, law enforcement, service providers, and families at the table, Greene said. We encourage them to [identify solutions] in a very intentional way where theyre actually creating policies and procedures. This allows the diversion strategy to live beyond any single person or group, and become fully institutionalized.

Karli Keator, division director for juvenile justice at Policy Research Associates (PRA), which operates NCMHJJ and other resource centers, says that having buy-in on diversion strategies in schools and clear procedures are vital to success, but so is ensuring that good social and community-based services are there to help. You have to have appropriate services to divertto, she said. Too often, a strategy will identify only one service provider, which may not be well-suited for the diverse behavioral health problems encompassed within a jurisdiction or school district.

We like to think of this work as ideally outside the justice system, Greene said. We encourage people not to arrest these kids at all.

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