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The Impact of Social Services on Juvenile Recidivism and Youth Behavior: Barriers to Social Services in Oakland High Schools

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Background:

Decades of research reveal the negative effects of zero-tolerance policies and harsh disciplinary actions on youth.¹ On the other hand, research also shows the success of intervention programs and services in reducing recidivism among the youth. For example, one study found that referrals to services significantly reduced recidivism rates by 70%.² Another study found that recidivism rates decreased from 69% to 29% in one semester after implementing a goals-based approach to teaching that fostered a positive relationship between teachers and

¹ Kupchik, A. (2016). *The real school safety problem: The long-term consequences of harsh school punishment*. Shollenberger, T. L. (2015). Racial disparities in school suspension and subsequent outcomes: Evident from the national longitudinal survey of youth. In Losen DJ (Ed.), *Closing the school discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion*, 31-43.

²Kubik, J. & Boxer, P. (2020). The impact of service referral and engagement on juvenile recidivism. *Evidence-based practice in child & adolescent mental health*, 5(3), 288-300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23794925.2020.1765435>

students.³ This research will delve further into the impact of social services in schools on reducing youth recidivism, improving overall youth behavior, and assessing the barriers that prevent access to successful social services.

This research sought to understand how social services in schools impact juvenile recidivism rates and youth behavior. Interviews conducted with four administrators at Oakland high schools who interact with students on a daily basis revealed that social services and programs in schools do help decrease recidivism rates among the youth, impact their behavior, and improve their overall well-being and school experience.

One administrator stated that “a big part of [his] job is making [students] *feel seen*. And [his] work had an impact because of that,” emphasizing how relationship building and making students feel seen and heard through the roles of care managers, psychologists, social workers, etc., strongly impacts their behavior, well-being, and just overall school experience.

Another administrator recounted a situation where a student who had lost two brothers to community violence participated in a school program that included a trip to San Quentin prison where students talked with individuals that are sentenced to life in prison. This administrator talked about how the student “opened up that day about the loss of his brothers” and stated, “As soon as he came back to school I had a one-on-one with him and I ended up referring him to counseling, and from there he received a lot of great service. Now that young man’s GPA has gone from 1.2 to 2.5, he’s on the football team, he had a great year last year, and he’s excited about being a part of a community,” showing a specific example of the huge success and impact social services and programs have on the youth.

Prevalent Barriers:

Funding

One barrier that the majority of administrators brought up was the lack of or restricted funding for services. When asked what some of the challenges or barriers you face in providing services to students are, one administrator responded, “There are quite a few restrictions on funds. And some of our biggest needs and basic needs like housing and food, and when it comes to us being able to give the students monetary rewards, it’s not allowed... As Oakland Unified, it seems like there’s not a lot we can do to alleviate that burden.”

When asked what is something that would help make services more accessible to students, one administrator answered, “The first thing is to really provide unrestricted funds, funding, and resources to schools.” To the same question, another administrator similarly said, “Money. Money to be able to, you know, to just have more adults on campus and more resources” These testimonies show how funding is a huge barrier to accessible and effective services for students in Oakland high schools.

³ Walton, G. M., Okonofua, J. A., Remington Cunningham, K., Hurst, D., Pinedo, A., Weitz, E., Ospina, J. P., Tate, H., & Eberhardt, J. L. (2021). Lifting the bar: A relationship-orienting intervention reduces recidivism among children reentering school from juvenile detention. *Psychological Science*, 32(11), 1747-1767. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976211013801>

Staff

Another barrier that all four administrators touched upon was staffing shortages. When asked about challenges or barriers to providing students with services, one administrator responded, “We have limited psychologists who are on site, they have a waiting list of students trying to get mental health services.”

Administrators noted that personnel shortages served to be a prevalent barrier in making services more accessible to students. For example, an administrator explained, “Definitely more psychologists on site, mental health resources, definitely more social workers at school and year, more case managers. Because, you know, it’s very hard to only have a few but you have a list of kids who need support.” These answers all reveal the issue of staffing shortages in Oakland high schools that either make services less accessible for students due to waiting lists or make services less effective because staff have to manage their time between too many students.

In relation to staffing shortages, administrators also brought up the issue of services not being as effective because of a lack of relationship building between the staff and the students. One administrator stressed the importance of relationship building between staff and students, stating, “But in order for the work to really have an impact, you need more time and dedication to the students. And not just going in and checking in with them, you need to have established relationships.” Another administrator revealed, “I think part of the issue is that we only have some-time curriculum. For instance, we have what’s called the tobacco use prevention person... but the person only comes on Mondays and Thursdays. So we don’t have that constant reminder to get people to get to know this person.”

Larger Oakland Context

Finally, administrators pointed to larger challenges in Oakland as “an underserved community” as a barrier to accessible social services for students. As one administrator put it, “Oakland has always been, I believe, a district that needs a lot of resources, needs a lot of support.” For example, Oakland has become a very expensive area to live in, meaning “students are having to choose either school or work.” As one administrator expressed, “A lot of the students that I work with, especially once they get to like twelfth grade or they’re a bit older, they’re having to help the families make, you know, having to pay rent and having all these other expenses and things,” which takes away from their time at school where they have access to potential services and support.

The city of Oakland has long-standing systemic barriers that directly affect the well-being of students and their access to support lines. For one, lower socioeconomic Oakland residents have and continue to experience displacement, disinvestment, and financial instability, with “moving and moves to crowded housing has been concentrated in Downtown and parts of North/West Oakland, while financial instability and disinvestment have been concentrated in Deep East Oakland and some parts of West Oakland, particularly in historically Black

neighborhoods.”⁴ Additionally, Oakland has and continues to experience a decline in the tech-industry. From the years 2005-2012, “the East Bay has lost 11,100 tech jobs, the data shows. During the same time, the South Bay added 26,700 jobs in tech and San Francisco metro added 13,000.”⁵ The gentrification, housing crisis, and loss of jobs in Oakland impact the generational and community stability in Oakland.

Policy Recommendations:

To increase access to social services in Oakland high schools, policymakers should look to increase funding and flexibility for such services in schools. In 2021, during a steep revenue shortfall, the Legislative Analyst’s Office recommended cutting \$1 billion in funding from the community schools initiative, which would be devastating to a program that brings medical and dental care, counseling, cultural activities, and other services to schools.⁶ With California in another budget crisis, it is highly recommended that policymakers refrain from making funding cuts to such services in schools, and instead advocate for increased and unrestricted funding for social services in schools. Unrestricted funds would allow schools to address the most pressing needs of their students, such as housing and food insecurity. Additionally, increased and unrestricted funding would allow schools to provide monetary rewards and incentives for attendance or program participation.

Another recommendation would be to implement policies to hire more care managers, psychologists, social workers, etc. to work on-site at Oakland high schools. Staffing shortages are a major barrier to accessible and effective social services in schools, as outlined by multiple administrators. Increasing the number of care managers, psychologists, and social workers in schools can help reduce waiting lists and ensure that students get adequate and timely support. Ensuring that schools have the resources to support these staff on-site, five days a week is crucial, as building strong relationships between staff and students is essential for the success of such services, which take time and effort. Implementing these recommendations can help mitigate the barriers identified by administrators help improve access to social services and support the well-being of students in Oakland high schools.

⁴ Hwang, J., Gupta, V., Liang, B., Zhao, A., & Kumar, V. (2021). Oakland Vignette Series: A Tale of Two Cities - Residential Instability and Disinvestment in Oakland. *Changing Cities Research Lab*. <https://ccrl.stanford.edu/blog/oakland-series-4>

⁵ Russell, J. (2012). Oakland is Dying. *SmartCitiesDive*. <https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/ex/sustainablecitiescollective/oakland-dying/34156/>

⁶ Yamada, J. (2024) *CalMatters*. <https://www.ijpr.org/education/2024-05-19/these-california-schools-connect-kids-to-community-services-will-they-survive-budget-cuts>