Los Angeles County is home to the largest probation department in the world and maintains one of the highest rates of youth incarceration in the nation. While arrests, prosecutions, and detentions of youth have declined dramatically across California, including in Los Angeles County, spending on justice systems has remained high or increased, and there is a persistent overrepresentation of youth of color, youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and/or other genders, sexes, and sexualities (LGBTQIA+), and youth who are a part of other underserved student subgroups.

This factsheet aims to illuminate the spectra of needs students involved in the juvenile justice system can possess. Justice-involved students can often have an array of identities and needs, yet are less likely than others to access a high quality education. Foundational to their success are adults committed to understanding the intersectionality of students’ identities and lived experiences and how every student is unique in their learning needs.

As we seek to dismantle enduring educational barriers, we must also seek to better understand the students we educate and advocate alongside. Only then can we begin to honor the fullness of students and their triumphs.
Justice-involved students are sharply overrepresented as English Learners, Foster Youth, and students enrolled in Special Education. Many identify as LGBTQIA+, have experienced homelessness, are in low-income households, and have lived through multiple adverse childhood experiences.

The prevalence of certain characteristics amongst justice-involved students, as compared to their non-justice-involved peers, underscores how important it is for educators to foster learning environments that are affirmative of students’ identities and cultures and for systems to integrate resources that are responsive to students’ circumstances and educational needs.

Justice-involved students often encounter punitive school discipline before becoming system-involved, and most have endured high levels of instability and interruptions to instructional time. Despite this, justice-involved students remain committed to their education and aspirations, though they are oftentimes denied the supports they deserve to fully thrive. In 2017, it was determined that even when students involved in both the Los Angeles County juvenile justice and child welfare systems had higher rates of documented education needs, it did not lead to increased referrals or access to education services.

There is an urgent need for educators to connect students with appropriate education resources and for educators to create safe, affirmative, and bias-free classroom cultures. In doing so, educators can not only mitigate the effects of system-involvement, but preempt students from juvenile justice system-involvement altogether.

This profile provides a closer look at the intersections of identities and characteristics of justice-involved youth to inform stakeholders, educators, and policy makers on how our education system can best serve justice-involved students.
TRAUMA

Justice-involved students face systemic barriers that interfere with their learning experiences. Barriers include histories of trauma and exposure to violence, discrimination, and education instability.

EDUCATIONAL INSTABILITY

Educational instability occurs when a student’s school of attendance or out-of-home placement changes.

A single school change during high school can double a student’s risk of dropping out and a single welfare placement change can reduce academic growth by 252 percentile points.

School instability and child welfare placement instability are even more disruptive when experienced together, as students must navigate the challenges of adjusting to a new living situation and a new school.

Youth on Probation average

8 SCHOOL CHANGES & 5 PLACEMENT CHANGES

across their entire educational history by the time of system-contact

Less than 30% of general student youth attend more than one high school

While justice-involved students experience extreme rates of educational instability, they remain unambiguously steadfast in their long-term academic goals and committed to realizing their visions of post-secondary education success.

Amongst Justice-Involved Students

68%

Aspire towards higher education

would like to attend medical school, law school, or other graduate school programs

SCHOOL MOBILITY & HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT

High Schools Attended

Dropout Rate

1

8%

2

19%

3

26%

4

28%

5

28%

6

100%

7

100%


In 2004, Professor Philip Goff and colleagues published an experimental study demonstrating that from the age of 10 Black boys are perceived as older and more likely to be guilty than their white peers, and their police violence against them is more justifiable.

While police officers consistently overestimated the age of black adolescents, thinking that their victimizations were justified.


Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

28% of LA County Youth on Probation identified as CSE survivors

71% of recovered CSE survivors were Black female youth

85% of recovered CSE survivors had households with a prior child welfare system referral

Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE)


Female youth reported higher rates of PTSD symptomatology, and nearly all their households had received a referral to the child welfare system for abuse or neglect.

Female Youth

72% had been shot or

57% had witnessed the murder of a friend or relative

17% had witnessed a suicide

58% reported having had a gun held up to their heads

29% reported having been sexually assaulted or molested

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Youth who possess distinct and intersectional characteristics of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation, gender identity and expression are at heightened risk of being disproportionately subjected to punitive responses in all systems—education, child welfare, and juvenile justice—as compared to their white, cisgender, gender-conforming (GC), and/or heterosexual peers.

Overrepresentation of LGBTQIA+ youth among justice-involved youth:

- Black youth are the most disproportionately enrolled racial subgroup in LA County schools that serve students in juvenile halls and probation camps, but research on racial disparities along every juncture in the school-to-prison pipeline reveals underlying patterns of systemic racism.
- For example, Black students have been documented as being less likely to misbehave at school when compared to White students, but almost two times as likely to receive school-based discipline.
- Systemic racism impacts all students of color. Participation in extracurricular academics and sports decreases school discipline for White students, but—alarmingly—increases rates of school discipline for Black, Latino, Asian, and Multiracial students.

Intersectionality:

- Racial and LGBTQIA+ disparities in the juvenile justice system do not reflect actual rates of youth misbehavior. Rather, they reflect the aggregate effects of adults’ subjective decisions.
- Research on the hypercriminalization of youth shows adult biases impact LGBTQIA+ students who are perceived as non-conforming. These biases also include the persistent adultification of Black female and male children.
- When we as adults hypercriminalize LGBTQIA+ youth of color, we are responsible for their overcriminalization. On the other hand, when we are adult allies and understand who they are and what they need, that support can be life-changing.
Education leads to enlightenment. Enlightenment opens the way to empathy. Empathy foreshadows reform.

DERRICK A. BELL

All youth need a culture of love and spaces in the community to play, heal, and learn.

Justice-involved students, as a result of system contact, have been denied equal access to education stability. They have also been denied the same college and career-ready opportunities and social-emotional resources afforded to non-justice-involved youth. Research shows that the mere fact of incarceration in LA County can induce trauma due to the prevalence of abuse during detention."

We have an unconditional obligation to respond to justice-involved students with practices and actions that center healing.

Educators—by virtue of teaching justice-involved students—are also high in need. We must continue to increase resources available in schools and we must cultivate a framework of support and accountability that is creative, proactive, and restorative—a true praxis of love that sees and embraces students as they are, right where they are: in classrooms, schools, and their own homes in the community.

3. “2016-17 Title I, Part D Demographics by Program.” Data was accessed from the California Department of Education through a Public Records Act request. Calculations were made by CDF-CA.
9. “2016-17 Title I, Part D Demographics by Program.”
11. Herz et al., 44.
13. “Unduplicated Student Poverty - Free or Reduced Price Meals Data 2016-17.”
17. Irvine, 5.
21. D. “2016-17 Title I, Part D Demographics by Program.”
22. E. “2016-17 Title I, Part D Demographics by Program.”
23. F. “2016-17 Title I, Part D Demographics by Program.”
24. G. These programs serve students who reside in juvenile detention facilities, juvenile and adult correctional facilities, students attending facilities for youth who are neglected, and students attending programs directed at preventing school dropout and/or delinquent involvement. The U.S. Department of Education provides financial assistance to education programs for youth in state-operated institutions or community day programs and provides financial assistance to support school districts’ programs that involve collaboration with locally operated correctional facilities.

For more information or to partner on this issue — please contact Betty Fang at cdfca@childrensdefense.org