

APSAC Research to Practice Brief

Study Title: From Child Welfare to Jail: Mediating Effects of Juvenile Justice Placement and Other System Involvement

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Introduction:

Previous studies have identified a relationship between involvement in the child welfare system and later involvement in the justice system. There is, however, a gap in the research on how different experiences in the child welfare system, receipt of services, and juvenile justice system involvement relate to later jail involvement. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between child welfare experiences, other system experiences, and later jail system involvement.

Research Questions and Hypotheses:

The researchers posed the following questions: (1) How are child welfare system experiences related to jail involvement? (2) How are mental health and substance abuse treatment related to jail involvement among child welfare-involved youth? (3) Does juvenile justice placement mediate these relationships?

They hypothesized that out of home placement (OOHP) in the child welfare system, placement instability, running away, and congregate care placement were positively associated with jail involvement and that the relationships would be mediated by juvenile justice placement. They also hypothesized that youth who received mental health and substance abuse services would be more likely to have future jail involvement and that those relationships would be mediated by juvenile justice system involvement. Lastly, they hypothesized a stronger association between child welfare system involvement and jail involvement for Black youth.

Study Sample and Variables:

The authors used a birth cohort sample of all children born between 1985 and 1994 in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, who received in-home child welfare services and/or out-of-home care for any period of time. Since the birth cohort was 94% Black or White, only these two racial groups are included in the analysis. The authors further limited their analysis to children whose families were involved in the child welfare system prior to the juvenile justice system. This led to a full sample of 37,079 children from 19,782 families. They also created an OOHP subsample, which included 8,317 children from 4,872 families. The authors provide separate analysis for White and Black youth for both the full sample and placement subsample.

The authors defined the dependent variable of jail involvement as a dichotomous measure for whether a youth spent time in a county jail (yes/no). They also looked at the child's sex (m/f), age, age when child welfare case was closed (before age 10, between 10–14, 14+), juvenile justice detention (yes/no), receipt of mental health service prior to juvenile justice detention (or, if no detention, receipt of mental health services at any time) (yes/no), receipt of drug and alcohol services prior to juvenile justice detention (or, if no detention, receipt of drug and alcohol services

at any time) (yes/no), placement in congregate care (yes/no), length of time spent in OOHP, total number of OOHPs, and whether the child ever ran away from a child welfare placement (yes/no).

Findings:

Among White youth in the full sample (n=18,218), the researchers found that (1) males had higher odds than females of both juvenile justice placement and jail involvement, (2) juvenile justice placement was positively associated with jail involvement, (3) prior receipt of drug and alcohol services was associated with higher odds of jail involvement and was not mediated by juvenile justice placement, (4) the relationship between mental health services and jail involvement was mediated by juvenile justice placement.

Among Black youth in the full sample (n=18,218), the researchers found that (1) males had higher odds than females of both juvenile justice placement and jail involvement, (2) age was negatively associated with juvenile justice placement and positively associated with jail involvement, (3) receipt of drug and alcohol services decreased likelihood of juvenile justice placement but increased odds of jail involvement, and (4) receipt of mental health services, having a case open after age 14, and being in OOHP were all associated with jail involvement and mediated by juvenile justice placement.

Among White youth in the OOHP subsample (n=2,755), the researchers found that (1) males had higher odds of juvenile justice placement, and sex mediated the relationship between juvenile justice placement and jail involvement, and (2) having a case open after age 14 was associated with higher odds of juvenile justice placement, and juvenile justice placement mediated the relationship between cases open after 14 and jail involvement.

Among Black youth in the OOHP subsample (n=5,562), the researchers found that (1) males had higher odds of juvenile justice placement, and sex mediated the relationship between juvenile justice placement and jail involvement, and (2) having a case open after age 14, receipt of drug and alcohol services, amount of time in OOHP, and number of OOHPs were all associated with jail involvement and all mediated by juvenile justice placement. Notably, however, drug and alcohol services and more time in OOHP decreased odds of juvenile justice placement, while cases being open after 14 and number of placements increased odds of juvenile justice placement.

Interpreting the Findings in the Context of Systemic Racism and Recommendations:

Because the authors use a birth cohort, even the descriptive statistics of this study speak to the issues of disproportionality and systemic racism in the child welfare system. While the White and Black full samples are about the same size (between 18,000 and 19,000), the OOHP subsample of Black youth is more than double that of White youth. Within that placement sample, Black youth had higher rates of congregate care, longer lengths of time in OOHP, more OOHPs, lower rates of drug and alcohol and mental health services, and higher rates of juvenile justice and jail involvement. While rates of juvenile justice placement and jail involvement were higher for both groups in the OOHP subsample, drug and alcohol services and fewer OOHPs reduced juvenile justice placement for Black youth. As professionals in the child welfare system seek to improve the outcomes in the child welfare system for all youth, it is imperative to understand that the experiences therein are not universal and may differ extensively across racial lines. Working to improve the service offerings and placement stability for Black youth specifically may reduce juvenile justice and jail involvement, which, in turn, could improve outcomes across the lifespan.

It is also important to note that by using juvenile justice detention, rather than arrest, as the indicator of juvenile justice involvement, the authors saw relatively small percentages of juvenile justice system involvement in the full sample (9% overall), which doubled in the OOHP subsample (18% overall). This both counters the narrative that justice system involvement is an inevitability for child welfare-involved youth and suggests that targeted child welfare services that work to prevent the need for OOHP could have a positive impact on justice system involvement overall. When OOHP cannot be avoided, targeting services toward children in OOHP and seeking to reduce placement instability, especially for Black youth and youth over the age of 14, may reduce justice system involvement.

This study found juvenile justice placement increased the likelihood for jail involvement for all individuals in the sample. The authors suggest better cross-system collaboration, communication, and formalized training toward the goal of updating policies and practices to reduce the number of justice-involved youth overall. More research is needed on new models, such as restorative justice programs and coordinated child welfare/juvenile justice system models, to determine if they help reduce the overall level of justice-involved youth.

Lastly, we must acknowledge the over-surveillance and differential treatment of Black vs. White people in the justice system. While all the above strategies are important pieces of reducing justice system involvement for child welfare-involved youth, this work will continue until we are able to build more equitable juvenile and criminal justice systems for all.

Bottom Line:

Juvenile justice system involvement increases the likelihood of jail involvement for child welfare-involved youth. Experiences in the child welfare system impact the likelihood of both juvenile justice placement and jail involvement and differ for White and Black youth. Child welfare and juvenile justice professionals must work collaboratively toward the goal of reducing juvenile justice system involvement and improving efficacy of services for child welfare-involved youth, thereby reducing later criminal justice involvement.

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About the Research to Practice Author:

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