

Education and the Juvenile Justice System: Background on LA County



Setting the stage: who are youth in the juvenile justice system?

Sheer number of probation-involved youth in Los Angeles:

- **LA County has the largest probation department in the country:** in 2009, 18,285 youth probationers were under the supervision of the department. During 2008, roughly 3,400 youth exited camp (at any one time, up to 1,592 youth can be held in one of the county's probation camps, though camps are considerably under capacity now; the average length of camp stay is 4.7 months).

Type of youth caught up in the system:

- **Disproportionately boys of color:** In 2008, 81% of youth exiting a probation camp were male, and 63% were Latino and 31% African American.
- **Vulnerable population:** While very little data is collected and analyzed, we know many youth caught up in the juvenile justice system have been in foster care, experienced trauma and/or abuse, and have mental health and substance abuse needs
- **Most youth are extremely behind academically** – a 2005 LACOE study commissioned by the Education Coordinating Council estimated that regular education students in camp performed at a fifth grade average (math level: 5.5, and reading ability: 5.3).
- **High rates of learning disabilities:** One-fifth of students in camp were classified as special education, and these students performed academically at a fourth grade average.

The extent of the problem: understanding education challenges for these youth

Current challenges:

- **School to prison pipeline:** Poor education opportunities in schools and reliance on punitive, zero tolerance type policies (over-use of suspensions / expulsions, policing of schools, etc) push youth of color away from schools and into the juvenile justice system
- **Poor education programming inside probation camps and halls:** LACOE provides all of the education inside the probation camps and halls. Lawsuits have demonstrated that this education programming is often deficient: many youth are not even receiving the minimum amount of daily instruction or special services they are legally required. Substitute teachers are frequently utilized, and youth are constantly pulled out of the classroom. For many youth, little education progress is made while at the camps or halls.
- **Education barriers during reentry:** Due largely to limited aftercare planning and barriers at the school level, when youth leave camp they often have difficulty re-enrolling in school, having transcripts and credits processed in a timely manner, and staying enrolled

The outcome:

- **Low high school graduation and GED completion rates:** While data is again rarely collected, analyzed and/or shared, researchers and advocates estimate that fewer than 20% of formerly incarcerated youth graduate from high school or receive their GED. In 2005, only 26% of probation youth in LA passed the high school exit exam, compared to a 70% passage rate in LA County (the rate is likely lower for just youth in halls and camps)
- **High recidivism:** Due largely to lack of data, there is not a clear or agreed upon recidivism rate for youth in LA County; estimates are that about 50% or more of youth in probation camp become re-involved in the system. Various studies have shown the link between education opportunities and recidivism

The response:

- The County established a body in 2004 – the **Education Coordinating Council (ECC)** – to address the educational opportunities for youth in foster care and the juvenile justice system. Progress has been made, including pilot programs and improvements in inter-agency collaboration, but problems are still immense. While the ECC, Probation Department and LACOE have acknowledged many of the education challenges listed in this background paper, and are often working through pilots to address them, large-scale change is very slow to move forward. The legal, nonprofit and advocacy community works through various avenues to fill the gaps, from filing lawsuits to offering direct education programs and reentry services, but capacity is limited.

To learn more:

To learn more about the challenges these youth face in LA County reentering their communities from camp and succeeding educationally after incarceration, click here to read a report commissioned by Supervisor Ridley-Thomas and written by Michelle Newell and Angelica Salazar, both former graduate students and current Children’s Defense Fund staff:

<http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/la-county-juvenile-justice.pdf>