

2022

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Aimee Truscott

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### Recommended Citation

Truscott, Aimee (2022) "On The Right Track: An Analysis of Efforts Aimed at Mitigating Juvenile Crime and Recidivism," *Silicon Valley Sociological Review*. Vol. 21, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/svsr/vol21/iss1/10>

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## **On The Right Track: An Analysis of Efforts Aimed at Mitigating Juvenile Crime and Recidivism**

**By**

**Aimee Truscott**

### **ABSTRACT.**

This article investigates the current options, as well as potential avenues, for mitigating both juvenile crime and recidivism. Focusing primarily on the efforts within Santa Clara County, I examine the implementation of alternative services for youth in at-risk communities. By emphasizing the importance of alleviating youth crime and recidivism, both in the immediate community and beyond, this article works to identify the steps necessary for change.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A common behavioral trait among many throughout society, delinquency can occur during every phase of one's life. Especially within youth and adolescents, this reality is driven largely by a habitual sense of defiance and self-righteousness. Delinquency, although a seemingly innate and ordinary trait of our individuality, has long been frowned upon by the public and strictly monitored by enforcement. In its many forms, delinquency often yields different outcomes depending on the situation and individual responsible for such behavior. Proving unjust in deciding *who* or *what* is seen as delinquent, this reality has grown to target and inflict harm on specific groups of people. A population we often tend to disregard, youth involved with the juvenile justice system have long faced inadequate care and treatment—especially in the handling of mental health related matters.

Despite having declined over the last decade, juvenile delinquency and recidivism rates continue to inflict harm within certain communities. Racial minorities, predominantly African American and Latinos, as well as youth with mental health problems, are especially likely to face complications with the juvenile justice system. Faced with a variety of societal obstacles, these specific groups of individuals have been found 'at-risk' for negative interactions with law enforcement—and consequently, exposure to the inadequate systematic handlings of delinquent youth. Recidivism, referring to the tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend (Oxford Dictionary), proves highly dependent on the resources provided to this population, both while incarcerated and after their release.

Though understanding that one should be held responsible for their crimes, many scholars highlight the long struggle faced by the juvenile justice system in their handling of delinquent youth. Among many things, the mere lack of resources to appropriately address this population results in higher conviction and recidivism rates. A reality more commonly experienced by certain groups of youth, specifically amongst racial minorities and individuals with mental health concerns, this increased exposure to the highly flawed juvenile justice system places such

youth at an extremely disadvantaged position. The absence of necessary resources and connections within these communities, ones that work to deter and refocus potential temptations leading to delinquent behavior, forces these vulnerable individuals to navigate life's difficult moments on their own. By not addressing the discrepancies and core needs of at-risk populations, their chances of committing and being convicted for a crime significantly increase. The same has unfortunately been found true for youth already involved in the juvenile justice system, as both insufficient treatment during one's punishment period and a meager provision of continued services post-release provide virtually no support. Just one of its many consequences, such reality acts as a revolving door which continues the facilitation of convicted youth in and out of prison. Having recognized the immense defects within their system, the Santa Clara County juvenile department pioneered a shift to a more rehabilitative approach. Much discussion has applauded Santa Clara County for their efforts, delivering at-risk youth with a second chance at life. Nonetheless, with a lack of current research—both on juvenile delinquency and the efficacy of such alternative programs—minimal information and overall awareness towards this problem only contribute to their presence.

In totality, this project aims to decipher the most appropriate and beneficial measures juvenile justice systems can take to help at-risk youth—both from an initial engagement into criminal behavior, as well as from reoffending. Through my research, involving lengthy content analysis and personal interviews, I plan on identifying the specific measures and forms of support that have been proved to mitigate this problem. With a heightened sense of clarity into how juvenile justice systems can best handle and assist those in at-risk communities, my work is intended to help guide future change within these structures.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Detailing the prominence of juvenile crime and recidivism rates, particularly among individuals with mental health concerns, sufficient background information on this issue allowed for a deeper recognition of the problem. Within the examined research, common themes describing current efforts made to address youth offending and recidivism, in addition to an overview of the prominence in mental health courts, highlights the admirable curiosity and dedication of these scholars.

Existing research on recent efforts to combat both juvenile incarceration and recidivism rates focuses on alternative measures and interventions that focus on punishment through a self-growth mindset. Through an examination of recent efforts to combat both juvenile incarceration and recidivism rates, much of the discussion shared information on alternative measures that harbor more rehabilitative features. Though noted by many a lack of research on this change within the handling of delinquent youth (Correia, 2019; Heretick & Russell, 2013; Matsuda, 2019), that which has been uncovered shows an overwhelming preference towards this rehabilitative approach—opposed to that of more traditional punitive measures. Emphasizing the importance of identifying one's needs and providing assistance, especially towards that of younger offenders, many of the highlighted options incorporated a restorative and 'second chance' mindset (Correia, 2014; Edelman, 2009). Aimed towards both at-risk youth, as well as those who have already been incarcerated, these efforts work to supply such communities with the necessary resources for achieving and maintaining their well-being. Much attention and

praise have been awarded to Santa Clara County in specifics, highlighting its role in initiating change within their juvenile justice system. Implementing the country's first juvenile court solely for assisting delinquent youth with mental health problems, Santa Clara County is considered the catalyst for shifting the ideas of how to address troubled youth and/or juvenile offenders. Referred to as the Court for the Individualized Treatment of Adolescents, or CITA, its introduction embraced and focused on implementing a more rehabilitative model. A recurring topic of discussion in the limited literature provided, the recognized benefits of CITA have proved key in mitigating youth offending and recidivism rates (Behken, 2008; Heretick & Russell, 2013;) Having expanded to include a variety of opportunities, such as Victim Awareness Classes and probation programs (Do, 2006; Edelman, 2009), Santa Clara County's Juvenile Court system models a reality in which we should strive for.

Several studies prove the benefits of increasing access to mental health services in disadvantaged communities, as well as providing awareness through classes and other programs, in reducing the likelihood of committing criminal behavior. (Behken, 2008; Correia, 2014; Do, 2006; Rankin, 2019). These methods work to deter such individuals from the initial engagement into criminal behavior by supplying at-risk youth with new opportunities and an outlook on their future. Supplying at-risk youth with new opportunities and an outlook on their future, these methods work to deter such individuals from the initial engagement into criminal behavior (Behken, 2008; Rankin, 2019). A similar approach is utilized for youth already involved in the criminal justice system, focused on providing continued guidance and connections once released. While unfortunately it is common for families of delinquent youth to face difficulties finding and securing these needed services, many of these programs work specifically to link these individuals with such crucial resources. Ultimately addressing the core of potential issues, these methods have led to overall decline in juvenile delinquency (Behken, 2008; Correia, 2014; Do, 2006; Edelman, 2009). Looking to work *with* these individuals instead of *against* them, much of the recent work done to assist youth offenders strives to meet the specific needs of each juvenile. At different levels, the goals of alternative measures, like that in Santa Clara County, strive to address juvenile delinquency and/or criminal behavior in a new light. Across much of the presented research, findings indicate the benefits of restorative justice models—in that youth offenders were less likely to engage in initial criminal behavior, as well as leading to a reduction in recidivism rates (Behken, 2008; Correia, 2014; Do, 2006; Edelman, 2009; Rankin, 2019). Other, less discussed options for decreasing juvenile offense rates have also proved a new option. More specifically, organized sport and increased physical activity have shown promising results in decreasing recidivism rates (Poole, 2010). Though having seen admirable progress, there is no question that additional change is needed. When considering youth with mental health issues, the juvenile justice system simply does not have the means to adequately serve these individuals. With this commonly perceived inattention and ability to meet one's needs, “each stage in the juvenile justice process presents a decision point and an opportunity to evaluate a youth's mental health and rehabilitative potential. Although some jurisdictions have incorporated resources to assess and address the mental health of youth within the system, more must be done”(McGarvey, 2012).

Stressing the extremity of this issue, much of the literature provided ample background information on juvenile delinquency and incarceration as a whole—predominantly centered around offenders with mental health concerns. Within this discussion, the effects of

incarceration on youth highlight the flaws within traditional preventative measures. Though findings indicate a decline in youth delinquency over the years (Edelman, 2009; Rankin, 2019;) the realities of juvenile incarceration continue to disproportionately affect certain, and especially vulnerable, groups of individuals. Specifically, as racial minorities and youth with underlying mental health issues have been found more likely to engage in and commit criminal behavior, (Heretick & Russell, 2013; Rankin, 2019; Woojae, 2020;), they consequently have a higher rate of exposure to the flawed juvenile justice system. Historical attempts to deal with and mitigate youth offenders often consisted of harsh prison sentences and little-to-no guidance after their stay. A reality leading to a plethora of related problems—including increased offending and recidivism rates, as well as a higher likelihood of drug abuse—incentive to utilize more humane services began to rise (Edelman, 2009 ;Rankin, 2019). For at-risk communities, referring to both racial minorities and those with mental health issues, this reality posed more of a harm and threat to their future success. Recognizing again that those with mental illness residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to commit crimes than their affluent peers (Behken, 2008; Woojae, 2020) these initiatives were designed to provide such youth with the opportunity for guidance and self-improvement. For juveniles who have previously been incarcerated, the toll of such punishment—and necessity for a change in the system—proves extreme. Many scholars on this topic, “identify incarceration as the sanction that may have the greatest impact on young offenders' ability to achieve psychosocial maturity’(Chung, Little, & Steinberg, 2005). They suggest the withdrawal from family, school, friends, and community life in addition to added responsibilities of learning how to navigate this new environment can lead to adjustment problems” (Matsuda, 2009 pg 19; McGarvey, 2012).

Due to the proven severity of youth offenders with mental health diagnoses, as well as the higher risk these individuals have in offending at all, lengthy analysis on mental health courts and their role in assisting this vulnerable population grew evident. Found to be a more appropriate solution, mental health courts are utilized as an alternative to incarceration for individuals with mental health issues (Behken, 2008; Heretick & Russel, 2013; Woojae, 2020). In general, “the court seeks to hold offenders accountable for bad behavior while providing them with the necessary diagnostic, therapeutic, and aftercare interventions to reduce the likelihood of recidivism” (Behnken, 2008 pg. 28). While still ensuring juveniles are held accountable for their actions, mental health courts prove to approach this ‘punishment’ in a very different manner. Among many things, they have been credited with their ability to offer a viable alternative with access to community resources, adapting to meet the specific treatment needs of each juvenile, as well as fostering new relationships between at-risk youth and larger societal agencies. (Behnken, 2008; Heretick & Russell, 2013). Though generally reserved for youth already engaged in criminal behavior, mental health courts, in conjunction with other restorative justice approaches, have shown to reduce both recidivism rates and initial offenses from occurring (Correia, 2014; Edelman, 2009; Heretick & Russell, 2013; Woojae, 2020) Dependent on cooperation from a variety of parties, including the juvenile, their family, and a team of qualified professionals, the success of mental health courts is not always guaranteed. (Heretick & Russel, 2013; Woojae, 2020). Nonetheless, recognizing the presented changes within the juvenile justice system, as well as the rise in mental health courts, more appropriate steps are being utilized to handle youth crime and recidivism rates.

I did notice what seemed to be a lack of current research on mitigating youth crime and

recidivism rates, finding it difficult to secure up-to-date information. As all but two of my sources were published over a decade ago, I question the decline in examination of this topic.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS**

As has been made clear, juvenile offending and recidivism rates disproportionately harm certain at-risk communities, specifically racial minorities and those with mental health problems. Aiming to identify the alternative measure(s) that most efficiently work to reduce youth criminal behavior and recidivism rates, I plan on utilizing my gained knowledge to better suggest changes to other juvenile justice systems.

Utilizing a qualitative study design, I will acquire various forms of data to help deepen my understanding of this problem. A large part of my information, roughly half that I acquire, will come from secondary sources. As I work to analyze the already discussed literature of my topic, I hope to gain ample insight into the explored avenues and findings made by previous scholars. Concerned with the efforts made in Santa Clara County in specifics, an area considered to have pioneered a change within their juvenile justice system, a core theme presented within the texts indicates their use of rehabilitative measures. Through this examination of lengthy dissertations and other credible literature on juvenile delinquency and recidivism, I plan to include ample discussion on the perceived benefits of these techniques—especially when targeted towards at-risk communities. These means of content analysis will allow for a translation of my findings into descriptive statistics. By examining patterns and themes found within these secondary sources, many of my published statistics will aim to describe common themes throughout the provided discussion—such as how many times the word ‘delinquent’ was mentioned, or the rates of youth involved in rehabilitative programs. From my extensive reading and subsequent inquiry into these pieces, the highlighted importance of such rehabilitative alternatives, and overall lack of investigation into this topic, indicate the need for further research. Providing me with the means to discern the most beneficially effective means of mitigating youth delinquency and recidivism rates, analysis of this literature and the additional work done in Santa Clara County grows to be an essential component of my project.

Another part of my research, relating to the qualitative aspects of my project, will be composed and examined through primary sources. More specifically, through the engagement of face-to-face interviews, I plan to develop a better understanding of the personal experiences and thoughts of those who have been affected by the juvenile justice system. Though a quite broad term, ‘affected’, for the purposes of my study, will be used to refer to having either been personally involved, or had a direct family member who was involved, with law enforcement at its various levels. With my focus aimed at better understanding the experiences of Black youth and those with underlying mental health concerns—those of which are deemed as ‘high-risk’—the parameters of my interviews will ensure Participants of my study, limited to residents of Santa Clara County, will be selected through snowball sampling. This method, allowing me to select members of the community who I feel will provide the best information for my project (Dawson, 2023), will help to ensure we reach participants who fit our scope of interest. With my proposal focused on those under 18 years of age, select individuals and their families will be chosen based on their fitting of certain criteria, including the listed age guidelines and association with the juvenile justice system. I will reach out to local organizations with the same

focus population, in hopes of deriving my interviewees through these connections and referrals to similar groups. Through a well thought out and written letter, a brief overview of my study and its perceived benefits will hopefully secure access to the desired populations.

Interviews will be conducted in person, each expected to take around two hours to complete, and will occur in the safety of the individual's own home. Through a total of 50 interviews, each recorded and later transcribed, various open-ended questions will aim to engage participants on their perceptions of Santa Clara's juvenile justice system. This attempt at a more participant-driven interview will hopefully convey a heightened sense of security and trust among my interviewees. Allowing for what I expect to uncover a more personal perspective on this topic, the findings of my interviews will help add depth to those of our content analysis. clarity into both individualized, and larger social, patterns, findings from these interviews will uncover a more intimate perspective on this topic. Roughly 80% of the referred literature dates back nearly two decades ago, engaging in these interviews will provide for a more current insight into the influence more rehabilitative interventions have on mitigating this problem.

I am aware of my place as an outsider; therefore, I expect to encounter a variety of complications throughout the interview process. Finding subjects who are willing to talk about their personal circumstances is already difficult, and my being from outside their community only amplifies that. I hope that referrals from organizations with a similar topic can help set me in the right direction, but there is no guarantee the subjects will be open to conversation. Considering the personal nature of this topic, especially in relation to oneself or family members, difficulties engaging in these conversations is to be expected.

## **IMPLICATIONS & CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE**

As mentioned throughout this paper, much of the literature surrounding efforts to mitigate youth offending and recidivism comes from dated research. Potentially unrepresentative of current realities, my investigation plans to uncover a more up-to-date insight into juvenile delinquency, and the alternative efforts taken to reduce its presence. Furthermore, I strongly believe that my provided proposal will help spread awareness and knowledge on this topic, as well as work to improve the current measures working to mitigate juvenile delinquency and recidivism rates. Sparking what I hope to be an initiative for change within the countless juvenile's justice systems across our country, the findings of my research will highlight alternative means which prove most effective in preventing criminal behavior among predominantly African American and mentally ill youth. My results will emphasize the benefits these rehabilitation-forward methods and services have provided in combating this problem. Additionally, this proposal will help shift the general narratives and discussion surrounding youth crime and recidivism. Challenging current perceptions on how delinquent youth should be handled, I hope for my work to reframe the societal image of these individuals into a more positive light.

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