

Submitted to the US Senate Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights  
“Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline”

# Keeping Youth out of the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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A community-based approach to keeping students safely in schools and communities and saving taxpayer dollars

December 12, 2012



# About YAP

YAP was founded in 1975 in Pennsylvania by a group of innovative thinkers who successfully returned juveniles housed in the Camp Hill State Correctional Institution for adults (located just outside Harrisburg, PA) to their home communities. Our mission since our founding has been to provide community-based alternatives to institutionalization by providing individualized, flexible and holistic services to system-involved youth and families.

YAP's unique service combines best practices from the fields of wraparound, mentoring, family support, positive youth development and restorative justice. Our efforts are geared toward helping individuals and families build upon their strengths, natural resiliencies and supports to provide a positive path for development and ensuring each youth and family has a voice and a choice in the services they need and receive. Today, YAP serves children, youth and young adults with diverse needs at various levels of involvement with juvenile justice, child welfare and mental health systems.

Since our founding, local governments across the country have asked YAP to help deinstitutionalize vulnerable populations, and today YAP operates community-based programs in 25 major US cities including the South Bronx, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Newark, Camden, Pittsburgh, Toledo, Chicago, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Tampa, Jacksonville and Denver as well as dozens of other urban, suburban and rural communities. We are the largest non-profit service provider in the nation with deinstitutionalization as its mission and sole focus. YAP currently provides direct services and advocacy in 100 communities throughout 18 states impacting 12,000 families each year. We also support programs in Ireland, Guatemala and Sierra Leone.

We work with marginalized and disadvantaged people most likely to be subject to institutionalization and mistreatment in the US and around the world. Historically, the people we serve include racial and ethnic minorities, gang members, sex-trafficked youth, Native American young people, youth with disabilities, inter-generational families in poverty, Irish Travelers and other Roma people, former child-combatants and "street children."

YAP is accredited by the Council on Accreditation and recognized by OJJDP, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, the American Youth Policy Forum and the National Gang Center as a "promising, best practice model".

This publication is a product of the Youth Advocate Programs Policy & Advocacy Center, whose mission is to promote policies and influence change that create or invest greater resources in families and communities and reduce reliance on institutionalization.

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## Background

Youth Advocate Programs Inc., (YAP) works with youth in 18 states across the country. The youth we work with are those most likely to be kicked out of schools and end up in jails, detention centers and prisons. Using a family-centered, individualized community-based approach, we work to give the youth and school the supports they need to stop the pipeline. In this report, we will demonstrate how our approach helps to address the underlying causes of behaviors that often subject youth to school push out and how we work to address those causes.

## Common Causes of School to Prison Pipeline

Numerous studies and reports have come to the same conclusion about the causes of the school-to-prison pipeline. Students are being kicked out of schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems due to zero tolerance policies, overreliance and discriminatory use of school discipline and overly broad student codes of conduct that lead to discipline for innocuous behavior. Vulnerable youth, such as children living in impoverished communities, youth with educational disabilities, students of color, students with involvement in the child welfare or juvenile justice system, homeless youth, gang-involved youth and youth who are chronically truant or absent are most likely to fall victim to the pipeline. Zero tolerance policies ushered in during the 1990's coincided with the misguided "tough-on-juvenile" policies premised on the now discredited "teenage superpredator" label. These policies resulted in more kids being kicked out of school and into the justice system. <sup>1</sup>

Schools often push the "bad apples" through the pipeline - those 5% of students who seem to cause 95% of the problems. The thought is that if we remove the bad apples, other kids will do well. While that may seem logical, it is a misguided approach. Many of those "bad apples" for example, are kids suffering from trauma and many kids who suffer trauma at an early age learn aggression as a vital response<sup>2</sup>. When we kick them out without understanding their behavior we send a message that we are giving up on them. Other students also learn to be dismissive of youth who behave differently, reinforcing negative stereotypes. "Throwing away" these youth has come back to haunt many communities in the form of increased welfare, incarceration, violence and dependencies.

Policy changes at the school and local levels are necessary to end the school to prison pipeline. In the last several years, important work by organizations like the Advancement Project and the Center on State Governments have documented the harmful policies that lead children into the pipeline and promoted efforts to change those policies. For example, the Advancement Project's report *Education on Lockdown: the School to Jailhouse Track*, recommends solutions such as limiting school arrests and zero tolerance policies, introducing more due process and providing more resources for youth and schools, such as access to social workers.

These reports also argue for more investment in prevention and intervention, A key component of effective prevention and intervention is to engage families and communities to support at-risk youth. Parental engagement has been shown to decrease suspensions and instances of violent behavior, two leading causes of the pipeline. The good news is we have the knowledge of "what works" to prevent youth from being pushed into the pipeline and can effect change for more and more

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<sup>1</sup> President Clinton's Gun Free Schools Act, which financially incentivized schools to expel students who brought guns to school for at least one year led more schools to mandate expulsions under zero tolerance policies for myriad offenses, not limited to gun possession. It had the effect of painting students with a broad brush rather than identifying their individual strengths, needs. *The Columbine Effect*, by John Cloud, Time Magazine December 6, 1999, <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,992754,00.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Trauma and Recovery*, by Dr. Judith Herman

students, improving not only the students' futures, but also their families and communities and ultimately, society at large.

We know that programs like Peer Juries, volunteer panels that act as alternative courts for youth in the juvenile justice systems and alternatives to expulsions and suspensions for things like fighting can make a difference. Yet, these programs are frequently underfunded or unfunded, while policymakers favor the destructive and expensive paths of school discipline that lead to youth dropping out or being involved in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. We need the political will to shift our foci and invest in resources to keep high risk students thriving in schools and communities.

## We Can't Afford the Costs of School to Prison Pipeline

The costs of pushing children out of school and into the pipeline are both avoidable and excessive.

Consider these statistics:

- Annual cost of incarcerating a youth averages \$89,000<sup>3</sup>
- Annual cost to incarcerate a person in the adult system averages<sup>4</sup>: \$31,286<sup>5</sup>
- Annual income of HS Dropout: \$17,299
- Annual income of HS Graduate: \$26,933
- Costs to society of a high school dropout over their lifetime: \$260,000
- Costs to society of the approximately 6.7 millions disconnected youth<sup>6</sup>:
  - Annually: \$252 billion to society (\$93 million to each taxpayer)
  - Lifetime: \$4.7 trillion to society (\$1.6 trillion to each taxpayer)

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“...if the students who dropped out of the class of 2007 had graduated, the nation's economy would have benefited from an additional \$329 billion in income over their lifetimes.”

-Alliance for Excellence in Education Policy Brief, 2007

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These numbers demonstrate that while it might appear to serve the immediate need of a classroom or school to kick a “bad apple” out, the long-term social and economic costs are unaffordable. The bottom line is that it benefits everyone to keep a child in school. Students who stay in school and graduate will earn more money, have more earning power, more financial and social security, rely less on government benefits, be contributors (taxpayers), and are more likely to have stronger family and community connections. For the community and taxpayers, we benefit greatly from having fewer people in costly, ineffective institutions and also by having more working people in the community contributing to our economy as taxpayers and consumers.

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<sup>3</sup> The Costs of Confinement: Why Good Juvenile Justice Policies Make Good Fiscal Sense, May 2009 , [http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/09\\_05\\_REP\\_CostsofConfinement\\_JJ\\_PS.pdf](http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/09_05_REP_CostsofConfinement_JJ_PS.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Because many youth in high school are waived into adult court or because the states they live make youth as young as 16 or 17 automatically adults for purposes of criminal activity, this number is also relevant to school-to-prison pipeline issues. Importantly, youth in the adult criminal just system are far less likely to get the services they need or access to education.

<sup>5</sup> The Price of Prisons: What Incarceration Costs Taxpayers, Christian Henrichson & Ruth Delaney, [http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS\\_Assets/2012/http\\_\\_\\_www.vera.org\\_download\\_file=3495\\_the-price-of-prisons-updated.pdf](http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS_Assets/2012/http___www.vera.org_download_file=3495_the-price-of-prisons-updated.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> The costs associated with “disconnected youth” come from a report by John Bridgeland of Civic Enterprises, called Opportunity Road, [http://www.civicenterprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/opportunity\\_road.pdf](http://www.civicenterprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/opportunity_road.pdf). In that Report, Bridgeland notes that 6.7 millions youth, ages 16-24 are “opportunity youth” because they feel promise about their futures; but absent help, they will remain disconnected from work and school, at a staggering cost to society. Certainly students who are most susceptible to the pipeline can be considered among our nation’s disconnected youth.

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## Case Study: Chicago Youth Advocate Programs - Focus on Keeping Students Safe and Improving Educational Outcomes

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After the brutal beating death of Chicago Public Schools student Derrion Albert went viral, CPS partnered with YAP to work with the youth it determined to be 20 times more likely to be victims or perpetrators of gun violence.

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From 2009-September 4, 2012, YAP Served 557 youth from Chicago's most gang-involved and impoverished communities on the south and west sides. At its peak, our program had 200 men and women from these communities working day and night to create and execute service plans to help these youth achieve educational success and stay safe. Here are some important outcomes:

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- We re-enrolled 179 students who were chronically truant or hadn't been to school in years.
  - Our Advocates, available 24/7, kept 93% of our students safe, despite predictions that they would not be safe.
  - Of our seniors, 87% graduated high school or received their GED's, with 41% enrolled in college and 9% enrolled in trade school.
  - 13% of seniors achieved honor roll status while enrolled in our program.
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If we push kids out of schools and do not work to reconnect kids to school and work, the costs are staggering.

The question is, in addition to changing zero tolerance policies, how can we support more students and schools so that youth stay in school and out of the pipeline, avoiding detention, jail and prison?

## YAP Approach to Interrupting the School to Prison Pipeline

Youth Advocate Programs, (YAP) specializes in working with the most vulnerable youth and families in the country, those most at risk of being victims of the school to prison pipeline. Our work can be simply defined as providing intensive, community- and strength-based, individualized wraparound and advocacy services for youth and their families. We partner with youth, adults and families to move them from where they are to where they want to be, providing intensive (7-30 hours of service per week), unconditional support to those with the highest need and in crisis, helping them achieve personal, educational and social success. This kind of advocacy is becoming widely accepted as an intensive form of mentoring, targeted to meet the complex needs of youth at highest risk of dropping out. Importantly, by supporting students and their families, we are also supporting the school administration and enhancing school safety. Our services are transitional and designed to effect long term change.

Key to our success is the people we hire to work with YAP kids and families. We strategically hire people – who we call Advocates - who live in the same communities as our kids and families. The Advocates are natural experts in understanding the neighborhood's assets and challenges. They come from diverse backgrounds and hold credentials from GED to PhD; the only requirement is that they have care and concern for their communities. This approach positions our Advocates to be credible messengers to their youth and families.

YAP also matches youth with Advocates based on shared interests and strengths to further help engage youth and build the trust needed for true growth and change. Our Advocates know their communities and the schools; they build relationships with teachers, principals, school counselors and school security, and they advocate for what their kids need most.

While our approach is individualized and flexible to adjust for inevitable changes, a key part of our success is also collaboration with other community organizations and resources. We not only

work to help the youth improve his or her behaviors, but we also work to strengthen communities.

Our experience shows us that working with the community to help keep kids safe and thriving is the most desirable outcome, and that communities have untapped resources to help. As the sociologist John McKnight says, “[t]he community is more hospitable than it is not.”

Some of the unique ways our Advocates have helped keep students out of the pipeline include:

### Family Engagement:

Every youth we work with has an Individualized Service Plan. The plan is created with a Program Director, Advocate, parents, youth and other formal or informal supports the youth identifies as important to him or her, comprising what we call a “child and family team.” Together this team works to devise a plan that identifies and builds on individual and family strengths and assets. The family, youth and team members participate as equal members of the team; everyone is considered a contributor. The plan is developed using assessment tools that target needs and purposefully plan to address each need using community resources. This entire process is intended to improve youth outcomes, but also to engage the family and team members in the process. Keeping the family involved gives them ownership over the plan, and in the school setting, helps parents to participate in the youth's educational plan. Parental engagement is key to a youth's educational success.

### Children Exposed to Trauma

Many of the youth we work with have been exposed to early childhood trauma, as exposure to community violence or victims of sexual or physical abuse. Youth who have grown up living in multiple foster care homes, residential placement or group homes or have been locked up in the juvenile justice system are angry and fearful resulting in behaviors in school that may lead teachers or administrators to kick them out and back into the systems they came from. In many instances, schools do not possess the resources or skilled staff to reach these youth. But with the right supports, with an Advocate they trust, these youth can change behavior and get the help they need to stay in school and avoid being pushed out.

Our staff is trained to identify root causes of trauma that may lead to behavior likely to push them into the pipeline. Because our approach is individualized and relationship-based, once we identify the trauma, we can help the youth access counseling or other formal and informal supports to help improve school relationships and behavior.

### Youth Living and Attending Schools in Violent Neighborhoods

For many students, simply getting to and from school safely is a challenge due to the violence in their neighborhoods. As we witnessed in the brutal videotaped beating of Chicago Public Schools student Derrion Albert, school closings that force youth to go to schools in neighborhoods that may be dangerous for them to travel to or through, inhibit access to education. For example, more than 1,300 Chicago Public Schools students have been shot since 2008 through June 2012, 127 fatally<sup>7</sup>, creating an environment that is clearly dangerous for students. Community violence is a complicated and misunderstood issue that our community-based advocates are skilled at understanding. They can help

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<sup>7</sup>Number of CPS students shot rises, as does fear of more to come, by Noreen S. Ahmed-Ulla, June 26, 2012 [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-06-26/news/ct-met-cps-student-violence-0625-20120626\\_1\\_cps-students-students-shot-safe-haven-program](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-06-26/news/ct-met-cps-student-violence-0625-20120626_1_cps-students-students-shot-safe-haven-program); Two Hundred and Fifty Eight Public School Students Shot in Chicago Last Year, July 10, 2012, <http://www.care2.com/causes/two-hundred-and-fifty-eight-public-school-students-shot-in-chicago-last-year.html#ixzz2EcM9rFOg>; 508 Chicago Kids Shot in Just 16 Months, March 10, 2009, <http://tutormentorconnection.ning.com/profiles/blogs/508-chicago-kids-shot-in-just>.

youth get safely to and from school, doing things as basic as driving them there themselves and being available before and after school, targeting the times when youth are most likely to be exposed to community violence. This kind of support and supervision often results in youth giving up the weapons that many young people view as essential to their survival for the circumstances in which they live.

## Educational Help

Many of the youth in our programs have Individualized Education Plans. Some youth are placed into alternative programs or classes that do not challenge them leading to boredom, and in some cases, acting out that may lead to involvement in the pipeline. In other cases, youth may need IEP's and do not get them. Traditional mental health services may also be offered but for many young people, not accepted. Through our individualized service planning, our Advocates will have identified each youth's unique needs and strengths so they can advocate for appropriate placement in schools and educational support services that are culturally sensitive, non-traditional and most important, accepted by youth and families as beneficial to addressing their challenging circumstances.

## Poor attendance / chronic absenteeism

Students may have all kinds of reasons for not attending school, although failure to attend or chronic absenteeism does not mean that students do not want to attend to school or that they will not attend school. In some states, the pipeline is codified; where truancy is a status offense, for example, youth who are truant are sent to local detention centers.

In Pittsburgh, PA, we work in partnership with the Allegheny Department of Human Services to help return truant youth back to school. In the 2009-10 school year, we served 233 youth, and when they graduated from our program, 73% of students who were chronically truant and at-risk of being in detention, were attending school 4-5 days a week. And in our Chicago program, we were able to re-enroll nearly 200 youth in school that live in violent, impoverished neighborhoods.

Key to our success are simple yet effective interventions; ensuring that kids wake up and get to school; accompanying youth during the school day as needed; supporting the young person in addressing the underlying reasons for truancy (e.g., bullying, sexual identity issues, conflict with other students or teachers, domestic violence at home; homelessness); providing or arranging for tutoring and other educational supports and working with the family to ensure that schooling is reinforced and supported after hours in the home.

A community-based model that meets youth where they are and develops a plan to get them back on track can help reduce the number of high school dropouts and youth in the pipeline.

## Poverty & Work

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## A Case Study: Disconnected or Opportunity Youth (Youth Ages 16-24)

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YAP also has tracked our progress with a cohort of 723 youth ages 16-24 who were either not attending school or engaged in work when they entered our program in August 2010.

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At the time of their discharge from our program, 64% were either working or in school or both, and post-discharge, that number rises to 84%.

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Our model of service not only addresses the needs of each youth, but we build on strengths, all with the goal of reconnecting youth to their communities and families and to the opportunities that exist for them.

Almost 100% of the youth YAP serves live in poverty and receive school lunches. Research shows that students eligible for school lunches and who live in poverty-stricken neighborhoods are disproportionately caught up in the pipeline. We can help to alleviate the symptoms of their poverty by, for example, planning for time with a caring adult while a parent works two or three jobs; helping to involve the youth in activities that interest him or her; helping a youth access counseling or treatment and finding employment for the youth.

Wherever possible and necessary, we include "supported work" to our service delivery. Supported work is YAP's subsidized work program where we match youth in jobs at community businesses or nonprofits and pay the wages. We search for supported work placements that reflect the youth's interests. Importantly, supported work teaches the youth job skills, gives a youth work experience, meets important economic needs and helps the community invest in the youth's success. Our Advocates are also trained job coaches, and with the new employer, are another set of eyes in the community focused on the youth's well-being.

YAP Advocates can improve the chances that a youth living in impoverished conditions can achieve personal and social success if they have the support they need. When they feel supported, behavior changes and the pipeline can be averted.

## Conclusion

Kicking students out of school and into the pipeline has a reverberating effect on youth. Youth who do not graduate high school end up more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system, on public welfare, underemployed or unemployed and have a lifetime of disconnectedness. They will suffer chronic collateral consequences, especially if they end up with criminal histories that will disable them from opportunities to work, receive benefits they need and have access to affordable housing, among others consequences.

We have to ask, when we kick a youth out of school and in to the pipeline, have we done all we can do to help that child have the best outcome possible? If not, then we need to do more. If we don't the youth will not be the only ones who feel the effects; society and taxpayers will suffer, as will whole communities. The pipeline affects us all.

Approaches like YAP strengthen schools, supports youth, families, communities and school administrators. This inclusive approach leads to far better outcomes. The approach outlined above is one of several that demonstrates how we can stop the pipeline. There are ways to keep youth and schools safe that do not include kicking them out of school.

Our experience shows us that kids are quite redeemable and we should invest in them.

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