

## DIVERSION PROGRAM IMPACTS ON RECIDIVISM RATES IN SONOMA COUNTY

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## **INTRODUCTION**

When looking at the current crime rates and our nations soaring murder rates it could be easy to go back to being tough on crime and turn to a zero tolerance model. This way of thinking has led to the highest levels of incarceration that the United States has ever seen. Our group began to wonder what happens when those offenders are children. We started by talking about what we know to be true about youth. We know that children have a much smaller and still developing amygdala, the portion of the brain that controls choices and decision making. We know that children are more likely to fall into peer pressure and we know that children are the most likely to be victims of predators. All this knowledge about children made our group wonder if incarceration is the right choice. We wondered if we should be looking to rehabilitate youth and help them to make positive contributions to society instead of simply using punitive measures. Our group set out to see what types of diversion programs were available to children and youth in Sonoma County. We wondered if these programs were enough to support positive changes in struggling youth populations. We got curious and began to ask “Are youth diversion programs positively impacting recidivism rates among Sonoma County youth?”

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A *Comprehensive Multi Agency Juvenile Justice Plan* tells us that the juvenile population at-risk had increased in Sonoma County by 33% between 1990 and 2000. A Juvenile Justice Plan implemented by Sonoma County aimed to reduce recidivism for those aged 10-17 during the 1990 and 2000 era. This phenomenon called for a different response than previous actions which

included high rates of criminal charges involved in arrests. Sonoma county then expanded diversion and early intervention programs as suggested by a county Needs Assessment. This brought the number of at-risk juveniles from 5,613 to 5,129. The Probation Department then went on to fund organizations which specialize in youth rehabilitation and aimed to assist the families in need of diversion in 1998, therefore, strengthening the community group technique.

This repeated practice of utilizing detention programs for juvenile offenders is also costly for the offenders and their families. In an article published in Press Democrat, Julie Johnson writes there are more than \$4 million of unpaid fees by the families of juvenile offenders in Sonoma County. The county's juvenile system includes large expenditures which charge the offender's family and bring financial complications/insecurity.

"It costs the county \$292.77 per day to house a child...Most children get out quickly after an arrest. For children ordered by a judge to serve time in the hall, the average stay is 107 days, costing parents a minimum of \$3,424, according to the probation department numbers...Children stay longer at the probation camp, with an average stay of 190 days, costing parents \$6,080 at the daily rate of \$32...The monthly cost for just the daily fee -- about \$960 -- is about 38 percent of the monthly median income in Sonoma County, according to the 2014 Portrait of Sonoma County" (Johnson,72)

However, over the past two decades, juvenile arrests and detention rates have declined. An article published on Press Democrat reveals the demographics, Johnson, J. (2019) *Sonoma County Reviewing its Juvenile Hall and Other Criminal Justice Programs for Youth*, 72-73

“There were 50% fewer children in juvenile halls in 2016 compared with 1990. In 2017, 65% of the beds at the state’s juvenile detention centers and probation camps were empty - reflecting the trend in Sonoma County.”(Johnson,72)

Johnson’s *Sonoma County Reviewing its Juvenile Hall and Other Criminal Justice Programs for Youth* reveals the direction which probation and justice is taking in Sonoma County. The county’s probation chief, David Koch, declares that the county diverts 70% of juvenile offenders towards specialized programs opposed to a detention center. According to San Francisco's nonprofit Center of Juvenile and Criminal Justice, millennial youth are reported to have lower arrest rates yet.

Julie Johnson entails that the society has shifted from certain programs with little effect such as detention programs and have rather alluded towards the rehabilitation route. With this, there are reported claims of schools dealing with disruptions without the need of involving police authority.

Dave Ress Article titled, *New approaches in juvenile probation seek to reduce incarceration rate*, also helps understand how probation officers see change when the children participate in these programs.

An approach established by the University of Cincinnati, where according to Bruce Call, probation supervisor, “”Probation used to be a slap on the wrist. Now, we make them work.” They have implemented different activities when meeting with the juveniles like a session with a whiteboard labeled "Behavior Chain" which will most likely be held. Some role-playing would

also be held, to figure out alternatives to the types of circumstances that a child has gone through in difficulty, such as a fight.

As well as blue skill cards containing recommendations on how to do some of the fundamentals of social interaction. For example, apologizing, asking for help, and listening, are all skills that an adolescent may not have learned. Although a requirement that has not been implanted has been the plan of making homework as a requirement. Other programs that have implemented new skills include anger management classes, gang intervention programs and alcohol treatment as well as family counseling. Having the option to use these community services and diversion programs as an alternative to court has shown that 84% are successful in the young people diverted by probation officers.

Early prevention is also an important tool in order to stop what the article *Prevention and Early Intervention*, called “cradle to prison pipeline”. According to the article by Youth.org early intervention helps avoid delinquent conduct and promotes the development of a young person's assets and resilience. In the past, they have focused on addressing apparent and/or long-term disruptive behavior. While research has shown that preventive and early intervention are more beneficial than jail time. It has even shown, as a good investment as the benefits of an effective prevention program can be greater than the cost.

According to a study done by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, good delinquency-prevention programs can save taxpayers seven to ten dollars for every dollar invested, owing to lower jail costs. According to current research, successful programs are those

that try to intervene as soon as feasible and focus on identified risk factors and adolescent behavioral development.

The youth.gov program directory contains current information on effective programs that address risk and protective factors in juvenile justice and delinquency prevention and grades their effectiveness of programs on a three-tier scale:

- Level 1: In general, these programs provide strong empirical findings when performed with a high degree of fidelity (effectiveness), employing a respected conceptual framework and a high-quality assessment approach.
- Level 2: In general, these programs produce appropriate empirical findings when executed with sufficient accuracy, employing a good conceptual framework and a high-quality assessment approach (quasi-experimental).
- Level 3: In general, when implemented with minimal fidelity, these programs produce promising (though possibly inconsistent) empirical findings, based on a reasonable conceptual framework and a limited evaluation design (single group pre-test) that necessitates confirmation of causality using more appropriate experimental techniques.

Wilson and Robert D. Hoge gives insight on a principle which relates to how youth's brain is still developing which includes the amygdala which controls the decisions and choices one makes.

"The risk/need/responsivity model of offender intervention suggests that, under some circumstances, focused therapeutic interventions are required for the diversion program to effectively address the youth crime issue"(Wilson/Hoge,176)In Hoge and Wilson's study the results showed that the diversion programs had a higher effect than the juvenile justice system in reducing recidivism.

Cora M. Guy, Chief Probation Officer of Sonoma County, states that the Probation Department in Sonoma County decreased by 23% since 1996. They also explain the importance of aftercare

that also plays a role in transitioning back to their community as well as reducing recidivism.

Source?

“Since 1996, Sonoma County has aggressively implemented procedures to identify and assist youth in need prior to their introduction into the juvenile justice system. It has also greatly expanded its diversion and early intervention programs in various regions of the County.”(Guy,18)

In Wendy Sawyer’s article *Youth Confinement: The Whole Pie 2019* she explains how since 2000 the number of juveniles in confinement has dropped 60%.

Youth also tend to react a certain way when around certain people. If a youth commits a low offense crime and is hanging around other youth that choose to make bad choices repeatedly the chance that the youth with a low offense will start to make bad choices as well which is why incarceration for youth offenders is not always the best option. Sawyer stated “Juvenile justice experts have pushed for “no reject policies,” recognizing that home- and community-based interventions are more effective than incarceration for youth charged with *all* kinds of offenses”(Sawyer,158)

Danielle Marie Dupuy (2019) *The Impact of Youth Incarceration on Violent Crime and Behavior: an examination of youth arrests, incarceration and recidivism by race among male youth in Los Angeles* also verifies that the impacts of a detention facility rather than social/community interventions can include the increase of juvenile anxiety. This effect can then have its own consequences of poor mental health and lead to antisocial behaviors, therefore causing the offender to fall back to previous habits. “The studies reviewed concluded that prison has the potential to exacerbate poor mental health due to isolation, the promotion of substance

abuse, bullying, and other forms of victimization for youth. Moreover, they found that the experience of incarceration for youth fosters antisocial behavior due to removal from pro-social environments.” (Dupuy, 35)

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Are youth diversion programs positively impacting recidivism rates among Sonoma County youth?

## **METHODS & STUDY DESIGN**

### **Purpose and Method**

Our research examines how youth diversion programs are positively impacting recidivism rates among Sonoma County. Our purpose was to gain understanding of existing youth diversion programs and then from there, see what has been done to prevent recidivism rates and how these programs can be improved to better benefit Sonoma County youth. With an inductive, qualitative approach of in-depth interviews, this allows different perspectives to the barriers and limitations of youth diversion programs. It also emphasizes the areas where programs could be improved and policies that can be made to effectively help with decreasing youth recidivism rates in Sonoma County

### **Participants and Tools**

Our participants consisted of 13 individuals with firsthand experience, as either previous youth offenders (now over 18) or adults currently working with youth offenders. The sample of this population was chosen because their experience can bridge the understanding of youth diversion programs in Sonoma County and what is desired in needed to decrease recidivism rates among youth. Some of the participants include gang prevention advocate, diversion program

coordinator, facilitators from local agency that focus on restorative justice and community outreach specialists. All interviewees involved were a range in age and gender. Some participants were referrals that were given to us from those contacted and invited to participate in our interviews. Interviewees of this study were informed of the importance and purpose of this research and invited to the interviewing process. Most participants were open to answer every question on our interview guide whether they were short brief answers or long, in depth responses. Some participants also allowed us to record the interview for later, for our own personal in depth note taking of the interview, being that the interviews were anonymous.

The tools developed were an interview guide, which directed each of the interviewers on how to introduce the study to every participant. The guide provided the interviewers a consistent method of questions to maintain the data collection consistent and organized. The interview guide (Appendix A) consisted of ten questions that we came up with as a group to obtain the most information possible for our data collection. These questions were directed towards what each participant experienced with youth diversion programs. Some of these questions were in regards to resources, funding, how youth diversion programs can be approved and how often youth reoffend.

## **RESULTS AND QUALITATIVE DATA**

Qualitative research data obtained through interviews with key figures involved in diversion programs (whether youth or adult) or other related organizations within Sonoma County yielded data overwhelmingly supporting the assertion that diversion programs are a more effective method of reducing recidivism rates, in comparison to incarceration. The bulk of this qualitative data was obtained through interviews with program coordinators and administrators.

We found more difficulties with securing interviews with current or former program participants either because of privacy and anonymity concerns, or less social accessibility among participants for this study, especially regarding youth offenders. However, program administrators and coordinators were able to provide a wide range of experience, detailing, in many cases, many years of work with individuals in diversion programs. The results from these interviews will be detailed below, and they broadly demonstrate that diversion programs have had a strong, positive impact on lowering recidivism rates.

Rich Ortiz, one of our interview participants, has over forty years of experience in the criminal justice field, working within probation and parole systems on the federal and county levels (in Sacramento and Sonoma), as well as several years of volunteer work with California Youth Authority during his time at Sacramento State University. Ortiz noted through his experience that there were different challenges in working with youth versus adults Ortiz claimed that addressing youth peoples traumas and maladaptive behaviors by far more effective than the more traditional, punitive approach of incarceration. Incarceration often only exacerbated their traumas and behaviors, leading to a cycle of criminal recidivism. Ortiz observed that the majority of offenders and individuals with criminal histories have experienced trauma in their lives, and stated that trauma-informed diversion programs, with the availability of counselors and therapists, have shown, in his decades of experience, to be incredibly effective at addressing the problems that are overlooked among offenders, thus helping them greatly with preventing them from reoffending.

Another interviewee, Rafael Vazquez-Guzman, who has been involved in gang-prevention work in northern California for over twenty-five years, provided more detailed information regarding the positive impact of diversion programs on recidivism rates. Guzman

has been involved in many various programs throughout his career as a gang researcher and a advocate and noted that the most effective programs combine both education and mental health into their curriculum. In terms of concrete numbers regarding the effectiveness of such programs, Guzman stated,

*"I used to run a diversion program, in contract with this non-profit that no longer exists, years ago. We did that for six years. Our recidivism rate was, out of every 100 kids that entered our program, 93, three years later had not been in contact with police, had not been detained, or been on probation—no issues. It was the most successful program."*

Guzman also cited Father Greg Boyle of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles as a more high-profile example of an effective program that is successful because it employs a rehabilitative approach in working with gang members and other criminal offenders.

Rhonda Findling, the Second Chances Club Coordinator at Santa Rosa Junior College, provided more qualitative feedback through her 26 years of experience as a counselor, with 22 of those years being within EOPS (Extended Opportunity Programs & Services) counseling, and the last four years with the SRJC, at the Second Chances Club (which was established by Findling herself four years ago). Findling provided insight on why youth in Sonoma County may get caught in a cycle of crime, stating that,

*"It's a complicated question, but I'll give you a couple of reasons for why I think this happens. I think, for example in California, or in this county, the cost of living is so expensive, that the parents of underserved youth, are having to work multiple jobs just to make rent and feed their kids, right? So they're not around, very much, because they're working so much. So what happens? The youth join gangs, so that they can feel like they belong to something, and they feel protected. If you grew up in a gang community, among underserved youth in Santa Rosa, and if you don't join the gang, you're not protected. And you're certainly not protected by your parents, who are working all the time. So that's one issue. The other thing that I've seen is also maturity. The pressure is too intense, they don't have anywhere else to go, and they're not*

*emotionally strong enough to resist that pressure. That's the only community they have and they know.”*

Findling noted that more community-focused programs and, once again, rehabilitative approaches to criminal offenders, have in her experience shown to be a much more effective method in reducing recidivism.

Verónica Cruz and Jane Weil, the Executive Director and the Programs & Training Director, respectively, at Restorative Resources, a non-profit organization in Santa Rosa that works with juveniles and young adults, provided more general feedback. Cruz and Weil cited surveys from previous program participants that overwhelmingly stated that these individuals benefited from participating in a program based on the restorative justice model. The restorative justice model is related to diversion programs, with a focus on conflict resolution, mediation between offender and victim, counseling, and other similar rehabilitative approaches). In support of this approach, versus the traditional model of incarceration, Cruz stated that,

*“If every program was restorative there would be a bigger impact not just on the person, but the community. It ripples out. A crime here doesn’t affect someone just broken into. If everyone had the restorative model then there would be a much better outcome than what is happening now. A lot of 18-24 year old are first-time offenders with this [current] model and get a slap on the wrist—they do not have to examine much of what they did.”*

Both interviewees have personally observed much more successful outcomes for program participants in comparison to individuals who are not offered restorative justice or other related programs (diversion-based program in general).

Various other interviewees that are involved with working with youth and/or adult offenders, but wished to remain anonymous for this study, provided qualitative data that supports

the argument for diversion programs being more effective for reducing recidivism, in contrast to the traditional criminal justice model.

One such interviewee, who is a Circle Facilitator (a position involved in direct work with participants in a restorative justice program) at Sonoma County's Juvenile Hall, stated that while these types of programs are theoretically effective, they have not been as effective in practice in Sonoma County due to several factors. all of which appear to revolve around inadequate funding. The interviewee noted that his program helps create community links for participants, providing job opportunities and vocational training, all of which help reduce recidivism. However, he noted that funding is often easily stripped, there is usually not enough emphasis on supporting youth, and that there is currently an insufficient amount of such organizations. With these factors taken into consideration, the interviewee stated that programs that help "create space for authentic dialogue, create space where restorative principles are embraced and practiced," are of benefit to reducing recidivism.

Another anonymous participant who are a Substance Use Disorder Counselor, and has been involved in related fields for eight years, provided further support for diversion programs according to their own personal and professional experience. They stated:

*"Diversion programs could be successful as long as they have the resources to help rehabilitate them into society. It comes from a compassionate model that can meet them where they are at. They do have resources now, but diversion programs are set up to be the alternative rather than being incarcerated, so as long as these programs have these resources and the trained staff to help these adolescents get out of that cycle, I see it's better to go that way."*

An anonymous Community Outreach Specialist with nine years of experience stated that "people are looking more for data instead of the impact of relationship-building with the youth that are receiving the services. Yes, they [diversion programs] have been successful, the youth

were successful during their time with the program.” This provides further evidence in support of the assertion that diversion programs are a better model for reducing crime and recidivism.

Finally, we interviewed several previous youth offenders, in order to obtain more research on the experience and perspectives of individuals who have been through the criminal system in Sonoma County. All but two interview participants, Andrew Valencia and Lisa Diaz-McQuaid, among our interviewees of previous youth offenders, wished to remain anonymous. Valencia, who is now 40 years old, and had a previous history within the criminal justice system in his youth (90 days at Juvenile Hall, and three years of incarceration) stated that “everything was just set up to do time. There was no counseling or any resources. No diversion was available. They just tried to keep us busy by playing things like basketball or handball.” Valencia went on to suggest that focus on anger management and drug abuse would have been more helpful, but that such opportunities were not awarded to more serious offenders at that time.

Diaz-McQuaid, who is 47 years old, entered juvenile hall for a month at age 12, and ended up reoffending as an adult. Diaz-McQuaid was asked about her view of diversion programs versus incarceration, and stated that she,

*“was just a runaway [at 12] — that’s why I was sent to Juvie, and it was because I was being sexually abused at home. Having someone who would check on me at home and see what I was going through — it would’ve helped.”*

In the cases of these two interviews and the remaining anonymous interviewees who were previous youth offenders, we observed a lack of availability of diversion programs, and a general lack of rehabilitative support offered to both youth and adults within the criminal justice system. All previous offenders interviewed appeared to eventually remove themselves from a

cycle of reoffending through eventual personal experience and independence, without receiving support within the system itself.

Throughout all the qualitative data obtained within our interviews, both with those individuals who work in programs and those who were previous offenders, we can confidently assert that diversion programs have a strongly positive impact on reducing recidivism rates. While quantitative data may be more difficult to obtain on the subject in Sonoma County, this is largely due to a general lack of such programs, and the very meager funding available for the few programs that do exist diminishes the observable impact that such programs have on reducing recidivism. However, the feedback from program administrators and participants speaks for itself, clearly demonstrating that diversion programs are effective and have been beneficial for the vast majority of the individuals who have participated in them.

## **SIGNIFICANCE AND BROADER IMPACT**

Youth Diversion programs are successfully lowering recidivism rates among Sonoma County Youth. Our research was conducted in order to inform people on the effectiveness of diversion programs in Sonoma County. After interviewing several previously incarcerated youth (now over 18 years old) and multiple adults who are currently working with youth offenders, the results demonstrated that diversion programs are more effective in reducing recidivism in comparison to incarceration.

These results were consistent with all interviews conducted demonstrating that diversion programs are effective as long as funding, resources, and staffing are made to adequately fit the needs of the youth in these programs. The lack of opportunities that are created with inadequate

funding of programs limits resources and staff. Sonoma County's lack of funds towards their diversion programs is hindering the recidivism rates of the entire county.

Diversion programs encompass a different level of effectiveness, however the level of effectiveness depends on the youth offender's overall risk to society. It is evident that certain backgrounds and criminal charges will ensure that youth offenders receive unfair and insufficient treatment in these programs. A variety of different factors can significantly influence the effectiveness of a diversion program. These results suggest that particular factors will increase the effectiveness of diversion and should be focused on in order to create programs that ensure recidivism rates amongst Sonoma County youth decrease. Most interviews demonstrated that these programs resulted in lower rates of reoffending than typical juvenile court processes.

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This research project was completed as part of an Investigative Sociology class Sociology 336

instructed by Peter Phillips.

## **APPENDIX**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDES**

#### **Finalized research question:**

“Are youth diversion programs positively impacting recidivism rates among Sonoma County youth?”

#### **INTERVIEW GUIDE - Adults working with youth offenders**

My name is (----- )

I am a Sonoma State Student working with Sociology Professor Phillips. My group and I are publishing a research study to determine “Are youth diversion programs positively impacting recidivism rates among Sonoma County youth?” We are interested in your expertise in the area of youth diversion and how it applies to youth in Sonoma County. This study will be published. Participants may remain anonymous if they so desire. Are you willing to participate in this interview?

- What is your job or job title?
- How long have they worked in this field?
- What has your personal experience been working with youth in diversion programs?
- Do you feel your program has adequate funding and staffing?
- Have you observed any biases as to which youth are offered or will receive diversion programs, instead of incarceration?

- What do you personally feel about diversion programs – have they been successful? Why or why not?
- What are the programs' strengths, and what could be improved?
- Why do you think youth reoffend?

### **Adults - Previously Youth Offenders**

My name is (----- )

I am a Sonoma State Student working with Sociology Professor Phillips. My group and I are publishing a research study to determine “Are youth diversion programs positively impacting recidivism rates among Sonoma County youth?” We are interested in your personal experiences as a youth offender in Sonoma County, in particular your experiences with diversion programs. This study will be published. Participants may remain anonymous if they so desire. Are you willing to participate in this interview?

- How old are you?
- How old were you when you were sentenced to a diversion program or incarcerated?
- How long were you in the diversion program or incarcerated?
- What was your experience as a youth offender?
- If you were incarcerated do you think a diversion program would have been more helpful?
- If you were in a diversion program, do you think doing time incarcerated would have been more helpful? -Why or why not
- Did you reoffend?
- What do you think would have helped to support you?

- What is an experience or person that helped change the path you were on?
- How has having a record at a young age affected your career choices?

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