



Data-Driven Deflection: A Systems Approach to Reducing Juvenile Arrests

By Logan Seacrest

If we want to help youth succeed, improve public safety, and save taxpayer money, avoiding youth arrest in the first place is the best solution.

Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, the United States has made significant strides in adopting evidence-based approaches to juvenile justice. However, America still has relatively high juvenile arrest rates, which are correlated with negative life outcomes. Pre-arrest diversion, also known as “deflection,” is a promising approach to reducing juvenile arrests. Juvenile deflection redirects young people away from the formal justice system at the earliest point of contact, avoiding the adverse consequences associated with an arrest. This policy paper evaluates the evidence supporting deflection, using case studies to highlight data collection techniques essential to success.

By sharing the successes and challenges from a variety of real deflection programs, this paper outlines the quantitative metrics necessary to enhance performance, processes and outcomes. Robust data collection has made Florida’s civil citation program one of the most successful deflection initiatives in the country, realizing millions in cost savings and reducing racial disparities. Another is the Cambridge Safety Net Collaborative, which uses data sharing agreements to foster multiagency cross-system cooperation, connect youth with services and reduce recidivism. Exploring how these and other programs leverage data provides juvenile justice professionals a roadmap to minimize youth contact with the justice system.

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Introduction

What should happen when a teenager gets in a fight, is caught smoking marijuana or is picked up for shoplifting? Law enforcement faces a crucial choice when encountering a young person who makes a mistake. If arrested, the child's future takes a dramatic turn. However, a simple warning is not always sufficient or appropriate, as misconduct can indicate unaddressed needs, suggest ongoing trauma or require more serious consequences. Since the late 1990s, states and cities nationwide have developed promising new approaches to address nonviolent, low-level offenders outside of the formal juvenile justice system.

"Diversion" is a broad term that encompasses many types of justice system offramps. Ideally, it occurs before an arrest ever takes place. This type of diversion—known as "deflection," or "pre-arrest diversion"—achieves better public safety outcomes at a lower cost to taxpayers than other types of diversion.¹ This policy paper reviews a diverse set of deflection initiatives, all of which leverage data to inform clear, objective protocols that minimize youth contact with the juvenile justice system. This study evaluates the evidence supporting deflection and explores how these programs use data to continually improve.

Twenty Years of Decarceration

During the last two decades, the juvenile justice system has made substantial progress in adopting evidence-based approaches to juvenile justice. A national consensus has emerged that arresting and incarcerating young people is not only expensive, but can do more harm than good.² This lighter touch has produced astonishing results. Juvenile crime rates are at their lowest levels ever, falling by approximately 70 percent from their high in the late 90s.³ Since peaking in 2000, the number of youths confined in detention facilities has dropped by 60 percent, and the number of residential facilities housing juveniles has declined by 42 percent.⁴

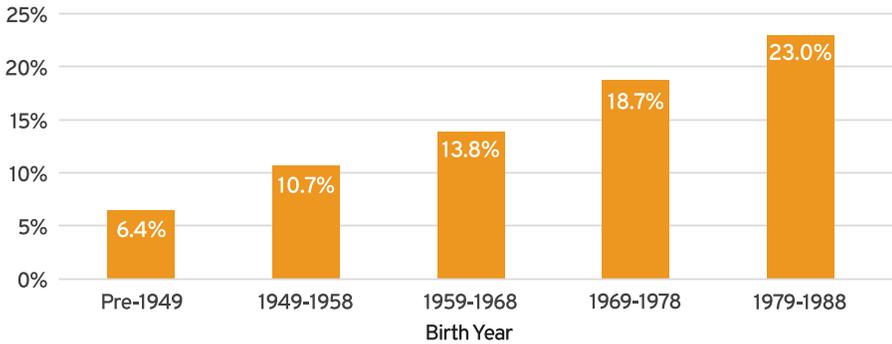
While this progress is important to acknowledge, there is always room to improve. For example, those born after 1979 are more likely to have been arrested than Americans from previous generations (Figure 1).⁵ In addition, of the hundreds of thousands of youths that still come into contact with the juvenile justice system annually, 92 percent continue to do so for nonviolent incidents, which suggests an opportunity to avoid contact with the justice system for many.⁶



Of the hundreds of thousands of youths that still come into contact with the juvenile justice system annually, 92 percent continue to do so for nonviolent incidents, which suggests an opportunity to avoid contact with the justice system for many.

1. Josh Weber et al., "Transforming Juvenile Justice Systems to Improve Public Safety and Youth Outcomes," The Council of State Governments Justice Center, May 2018. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/transforming-juvenile-justice-systems-to-improve-public-safety-and-youth-outcomes>.
2. Ibid.
3. Charles Puzanchera et al., "Youth and the Juvenile Justice System: 2022 National Report," National Center for Juvenile Justice, December 2022. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/publications/2022-national-report.pdf>.
4. "Highlights From the 2020 Juvenile Residential Facility Census," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, October 2022. https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/snapshots/DataSnapshot_JRFC2020.pdf.
5. James P. Smith, "The Long-Term Economic Impact of Criminalization in American Childhoods," RAND Corporation, July 2018. https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP67678.html.
6. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Statistical Briefing Book," U.S. Department of Justice, last accessed May 8, 2023. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb>; Charles Puzanchera, "Trends in Youth Arrests for Violent Crimes," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, August 2022. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/publications/trends-in-youth-arrests.pdf>.

Figure 1: Percentage of U.S. Population Arrested at least Once Before Age 26



Source: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6874402/pdf/nihms-1017647.pdf>.

This is an important issue to address because the more contact youth have with the juvenile justice system, the higher their risk of negative outcomes.⁷ Locking up teenagers is not only more costly than deflecting them into treatment, but it can also sever social ties and delay educational milestones, which only increases the chances of further system involvement.⁸ As one landmark study revealed, once a youth becomes entrenched in the court system, they are three times more likely to be convicted of a crime as an adult.⁹ One analysis of 7,300 children over 35 years concluded that “rather than providing a public safety benefit, processing a juvenile through the system appears to have a negative or backfire effect.”¹⁰ The myriad consequences of arrest are detailed in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2: Consequences of Arrest

Being arrested can negatively impact a young person’s life trajectory. Juvenile justice involvement has been linked with:

Increased rates of recidivism ¹¹		Decreased test scores in English and math ¹⁵	
Increased delinquent behavior ¹²		Decreased educational achievement ¹⁶	
Increased likelihood of adult incarceration ¹³		Decreased chances of marriage ¹⁷	
Increased mortality rates ¹⁴		Decreased lifetime earning potential ¹⁸	

7. “Leah Zeidler-Ordaz, “Addressing Legal Issues in Youth Diversion: A Toolkit.” UCLA School of Law Criminal Justice Program, last accessed May 8, 2023. https://law.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/PDFs/Criminal_Justice_Program/Addressing_Legal_Issues_in_Youth_Diversion.pdf.
8. “Sticker Shock 2020: The Cost of Youth Incarceration,” Justice Policy Institute, July 30, 2020. <https://justicepolicy.org/research/policy-brief-2020-sticker-shock-the-cost-of-youth-incarceration/>; Richard Mendel, “Why Youth Incarceration Fails: An Updated Review of the Evidence,” The Sentencing Project, March 1, 2023. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/why-youth-incarceration-fails-an-updated-review-of-the-evidence>.
9. Amélie Petitclerc et al., “Effects of juvenile court exposure on crime in young adulthood,” *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 54:3 (Sept. 26, 2012), pp. 291-297. <https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2012.02616.x>.
10. Anthony Petrosino et al., “Formal System Processing of Juveniles: Effects on Delinquency,” *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 6:1 (March 10, 2010), pp. 1-88. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.4073/csr.2010.1>.
11. “What are the outcomes for youth placed in group and institutional settings?,” Casey Family Programs, June 29, 2022. <https://www.casey.org/group-placement-impacts>.
12. “Transforming Juvenile Probation: A Vision for Getting it Right,” The Annie E. Casey Foundation, May 7, 2018. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/transforming-juvenile-probation>.
13. E. Jason Baron et al., “Pretrial Juvenile Detention,” National Bureau of Economic Research, March 2022. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w29861/w29861.pdf.
14. Donna A. Ruch et al., “Mortality and Cause of Death Among Youths Previously Incarcerated in the Juvenile Legal System,” *JAMA Network Open* 4:12 (Dec. 23, 2021). <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2787434>.
15. David S. Kirk and Robert J. Sampson, “Juvenile Arrest and Collateral Educational Damage in the Transition to Adulthood,” *Sociology of Education* 86:1 (Jan. 15, 2013), pp. 36-62. <https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/savvy/journals/soe/Jan13SOEFeature.pdf>.
16. “The Use of Criminal History Records in College Admissions: Reconsidered,” Center for Community Alternatives, 2010. <https://communityalternatives.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/use-of-criminal-history-records-reconsidered.pdf>.
17. James P. Smith, “The Long-Term Economic Impact of Criminalization in American Childhoods,” *Crime & Delinquency* 65:3 (July 18, 2018), pp. 422-444. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6874402>.
18. Ibid.

Deflection Versus Diversion

A young person’s journey in the juvenile justice system usually begins with an encounter with law enforcement. When an incident occurs, no matter the circumstances, police typically have two choices: make an arrest or let the person go. Deflection programs create additional options for law enforcement at this pivotal moment. For some young people, contact with the police may provide the first opportunity they have ever had to access mental health support. As the initial point of contact for vulnerable individuals, police can be an essential link to treatment that disrupts patterns of justice system engagement.

The basics of juvenile deflection are easy to understand because the goal is in the name. The purpose is to deflect children away from formal justice system involvement. While diversion programs span the justice system continuum, deflection intervenes at the earliest point in the process, avoiding the costs and collateral consequences that result from an arrest. Instead, police may issue a citation requiring the juvenile to pay a fine, perform community service or undergo restorative justice. It is a holistic, systems-level approach that encourages collaboration between police, prosecutors and community service providers with the goal of preventing future arrests. **Table 1** lays out the baseline differences between deflection and diversion.

Table 1: Deflection Versus Diversion

Deflection or pre-arrest diversion	Post-arrest or post-petition diversion
Occurs at the initial point of contact with law enforcement, before a youth is arrested or detained. Typically, youth deflected before arrest are warned and released, referred to community-based services with a case management plan or issued a civil citation. ¹⁹	Occurs after a youth is arrested or charged in court. Youth are often required to admit responsibility for breaking the law and voluntarily agree to comply with diversion requirements. If successful, they avoid an adjudication, and the charges are dismissed. ²⁰

Addressing delinquent behaviors before they require punitive court measures avoids all the negative downstream effects associated with an arrest. Think of it like fixing a leaky faucet before it breaks, instead of having to mop up a flooded house after. From a first-principles perspective, one of the main benefits of deflection programs is this focus on early intervention, enabling benefits to compound over time. This compounding effect makes deflection programs superior to post-arrest diversion programs. For example, a 2018 meta-analysis found that youth in pre-arrest diversion programs were significantly less likely to reoffend than similar youth in post-arrest diversion programs.²¹



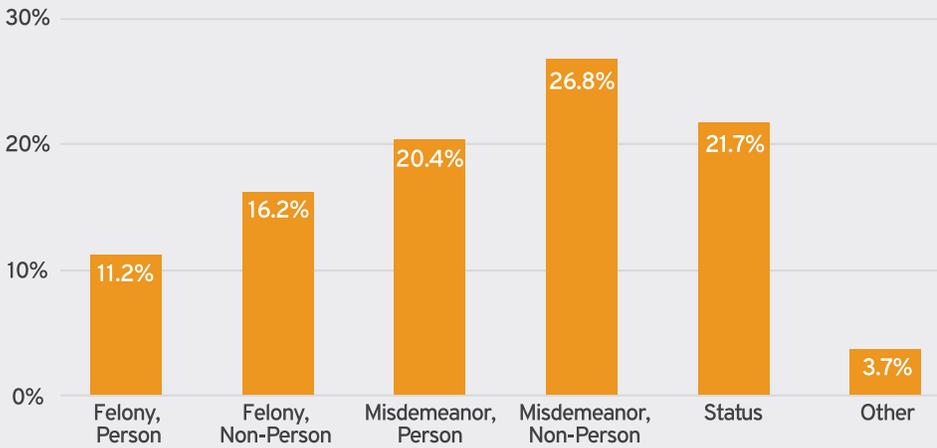
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19. “Preventing Youth Arrests through Deflection: Best Practices and Recommendations,” Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission, November 2020. <https://ijjc.illinois.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IJJC-Deflection-Report-November-2020.pdf>

20. Ibid.

21. David B. Wilson et al., “Police-initiated diversion for youth to prevent future delinquent behavior: a systematic review,” Campbell Systematic Reviews, June 1, 2018. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.4073/csr.2018.5>

Figure 3: Michigan Juvenile Petitions by Offense Type, 2016-2019



Half of all Michigan juvenile petitions between 2016 and 2019 were for so-called “status offenses,” such as skipping school, possessing alcohol or minor misdemeanors (Figure 2).²² These infractions are good candidates for deflection because they pose no immediate risk to public safety and are often signs of unmet behavioral health needs.

Source: <https://micounties.org/wp-content/uploads/Michigan-Taskforce-on-Juvenile-Justice-Reform-Final-Report.pdf>.

Making the “Case” for Deflection



Other research has found deflection to be more effective at reducing recidivism than conventional judicial interventions. A study following youth from age 6 to age 25 showed that children who had been deflected from juvenile court were half as likely to be arrested after becoming an adult than those processed through the traditional system.²³ Deflected youth are also significantly less likely to be suspended or expelled from school than those who were arrested, thereby improving educational outcomes.²⁴ Deflection works because it avoids labeling effects and minimizes children’s contact with negative peer influences in juvenile detention, both of which create a self-fulfilling cycle that further perpetuates behavioral problems.²⁵ However, despite the compelling evidence of the efficacy of deflection, only one-third of law enforcement agencies nationwide currently have a juvenile deflection program.²⁶ Table 2 illustrates some of the varieties of deflection that police departments offer.

22. “Report and Recommendations: Michigan Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform,” Michigan Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform, July 22, 2022. <https://micounties.org/wp-content/uploads/Michigan-Taskforce-on-Juvenile-Justice-Reform-Final-Report.pdf>.

23. Petitclerc et al. <https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2012.02616.x>.

24. Naomi E.S. Goldstein et al., “Keeping Kids in School Through Prearrest Diversion: School Disciplinary Outcomes of the Philadelphia Police School Diversion Program,” *Law and Human Behavior* 45:6 (December 2021). <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2022-16195-001.html>.

25. Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (Free Press of Glencoe, 1963); Kenneth A. Dodge et al., “Deviant Peer Influences in Intervention and Public Policy for Youth,” *Social Policy Report* 20:1 (Spring 2006), pp. 1-20. <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2006.tb00046.x>.

26. Richard Mendel, “Diversion: A Hidden Key to Combating Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Juvenile Justice,” The Sentencing Project, Aug. 30, 2022. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/diversion-a-hidden-key-to-combating-racial-and-ethnic-disparities-in-juvenile-justice>.

Table 2: Options for Deflection

Type of Deflection	Description
Warn and Release	Police officers provide warning or encouragement and assist youth in arriving at home or school immediately after contact.
No Conditions	Youth are discharged, and if no new contact with the law occurs, charges are automatically dismissed within a certain time period.
Conditions and/or Services	Certain conditions (restitution, community service, etc.) and/or referral to services (minor services such as skill building to major services such as substance abuse treatment) must be fulfilled. These conditions constitute an agreement between the state, youth and their families. Upon successful completion, the charges are dismissed.

Even in the absence of official deflection programs, forward-thinking police departments have made it a matter of policy to arrest youth as rarely as possible. For example, it is the explicit goal of the Round Rock Independent School District Police Department in Texas to not arrest youth unless absolutely necessary. This goal is instilled in Round Rock school resource officers during early training. In contrast, most police academies spend 1 percent or less of total training hours on youth-specific issues, focusing mostly on juvenile criminal codes, with no instruction on the unique needs of young people.²⁷ As a result, youth with mental health problems are often arrested for behaviors resulting from their condition.²⁸ In their unique program, Round Rock trains mental health professionals and police officers side by side.²⁹ This type of interdisciplinary training can help police develop de-escalation skills, foster positive interactions and proactively connect youth to needed services before they get in trouble, which keeps students in school where they belong.

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Hypothetical Deflection in Action

Officer Snider receives a call about Wayne, a 16-year-old high school student loitering outside a convenience store during school hours. Based on department policy that states offenders should not be arrested, she approaches Wayne and counsels him about the importance of attending school. After some prodding, Wayne reveals that he didn't go to school because he is scared of some nearby gang members. In response, Officer Snider promises to patrol Wayne's route to school and provides a counseling referral. On his way to school the next day, Wayne feels safer when he sees Officer Snider in her patrol car and later talks to the counselor about how to handle bullies.



27. Paige Pihl Buckley and Geneva Gann, "If Not Now, When? A Survey of Juvenile Justice Training in America's Police Academies," Strategies for Youth, February 2013. <https://strategiesforyouth.org/sitefiles/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SFY-If-Not-Now-When-Report-Feb2013.pdf>.
 28. "Intersection between Mental Health and the Juvenile Justice System," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, July 2017. https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/intsection_between_mental_health_and_the_juvenile_justice_system.pdf.
 29. Logan Seacrest, "Voices from the Field: Alternatives to Arrest Keep Youth out of the System," R Street Institute, Jan. 11, 2023. <https://www.rstreet.org/commentary/video-voices-from-the-field-alternatives-to-arrest-keep-youth-out-of-the-system>.

Civil Citation in Florida

Despite its reputation as a solidly red state, Florida has among the most mature and successful statewide juvenile deflection programs in the country. Florida law requires local circuit courts to develop pre-arrest diversion programs, commonly called civil citations, for first-time offenders who commit certain misdemeanors.³⁰ Civil citations are akin to traffic tickets that never become part of a person’s criminal record if the terms of the citation are completed. Typically, police issue them for misdemeanor offenses, such as shoplifting, underage drinking and marijuana possession. Though there is wide variation in the application of civil citations across Florida, most programs refer youth to community services and require some form of community service or restitution. If the child successfully completes the requirements of the citation, the case is closed, and they avoid an arrest record.³¹ Florida’s civil citation program is based on local control through Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) that build consensus among prosecutors, schools, court officials, community service providers and participating law enforcement agencies on how to coordinate deflection efforts.³²

One analysis of Florida data that compared juveniles who received a civil citation to a similar group of eligible youth who were arrested found that those who received civil citations were 54 percent less likely to recidivate.³³ Another study found an even greater effect, showing deflected youth reoffending at an average rate of 4 percent versus 11 percent in the comparison group—a nearly two-thirds reduction in recidivism.³⁴ The researchers concluded that these promising results come with a “minimal amount” of additional system involvement.³⁵

Statewide civil citation data has also demonstrated significant cost savings in Florida, where prosecution, adjudication and incarceration of a juvenile case typically costs between \$1,467 and \$4,680.³⁶ By comparison, processing a civil citation costs an average of \$386.³⁷

Florida’s fourth circuit now issues civil citations about 90 percent of the time, reducing juvenile arrests by over 1,000 each year and resulting in almost \$5 million in savings annually.³⁸ This does not include the long-term savings of reduced recidivism, nor does it take into account the efficiency benefits of having an officer immediately back in service after issuing a citation, rather than having to undergo the time-intensive arrest and booking process.

“Civil citation may prove to be one of the most important innovations in the juvenile justice system, perhaps since the founding of the Juvenile Court concept in 1899.”

Retired Senior Judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, Arthur L. Burnett

1. Laura L. Lambert, “Juvenile Civil Citation: An Effective Innovation in Reducing Juvenile Crime and Recidivism,” *Criminal Justice* 34:2 (Summer 2019), pp. 4-9. <https://sao4th.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Juvenile-Civil-Citation-Article.pdf>.

30. “Civil citation or similar prearrest diversion programs,” 2022 Florida Statutes, Fla. Stat. §985.12 (2019). http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0900-0999/0985/Sections/0985.12.html.

31. Melissa Nadel et al., “An Assessment of the Effectiveness of Civil Citation as an Alternative to Arrest among Youth Apprehended by Law Enforcement,” Office of Justice Programs, December 2019. <https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/assessment-effectiveness-civil-citation-alternative-arrest-among-youth>.

32. Dewey Caruthers, “Stepping Up: Florida’s Top Juvenile Pre-Arrest Diversion Efforts,” Caruthers Institute, 2018. <http://caruthers.institute/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-Study-Report-final-draft-06.22.2018.pdf>.

33. Nadel et al. <https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/assessment-effectiveness-civil-citation-alternative-arrest-among-youth>.

34. Caruthers. <http://caruthers.institute/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-Study-Report-final-draft-06.22.2018.pdf>.

35. Nadel et al. <https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/assessment-effectiveness-civil-citation-alternative-arrest-among-youth>.

36. Caruthers. <http://caruthers.institute/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-Study-Report-final-draft-06.22.2018.pdf>.

37. Ibid.

38. Lambert. <https://sao4th.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Juvenile-Civil-Citation-Article.pdf>.

Florida has also used data to reduce racial disparities, enhance model fidelity and make continuous improvements to their civil citation program. For example, when it was discovered that citation-eligible Black youth in Gainesville were being arrested at a much higher rate than eligible white youth, the Gainesville Chief of Police instituted an additional level of supervision when an officer chooses to override the citation protocol and make an arrest. Although discretion to issue a citation remains with the officer, the MOU now requires officers to articulate why they chose to arrest instead of issuing a citation. This change immediately increased the number of citations issued to non-white youth in lieu of arrest.³⁹ The Jacksonville Sheriff's Office reviews data biweekly to ensure that citations are being utilized to their full extent. If citations are being underutilized, mandatory training is conducted to remind officers of the importance of deflecting juveniles away from the justice system.⁴⁰

Cambridge Safety Net Collaborative

Up to 70 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system have undiagnosed psychiatric issues or substance use disorders.⁴¹ To address this population, creative jurisdictions have begun to blend funding streams, case planning processes and staff expertise across the law enforcement, child welfare, education and behavioral health systems. The Safety Net Collaborative is an effort in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that remedies fragmented services through multiagency, cross-system cooperation to provide contextually relevant treatment for deflected youth. At the core of Safety Net are biweekly meetings that link police officers, psychologists, school personnel and social services staff.⁴²

Recognizing that police are the principal gatekeepers of the justice system, Safety Net relies on specially trained police officers called "youth resource officers" (YROs). The YRO is the point-person for deflection, essentially acting as a case manager who coordinates all outreach, prevention and support activities. The term YRO is used instead of "school resource officer" (SRO) because YROs interact with youth outside of school at sporting events, home visits and in the community. By building meaningful relationships with youth and families, YROs reframe the role of police from antagonist to advocate. The Cambridge model stands in stark contrast to the usual protocol for police-mental health partnerships, which typically involve the officer handing off the juvenile with no further officer outreach.⁴³ YROs are trained in a unique curriculum that includes the application of child development



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39. "Alternatives to Arrest for Young People," National League of Cities, July 2015. https://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/804/Issue_Brief_Alternatives_to_Arrest_for_Young_People.pdf.

40. Lambert. <https://sao4th.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Juvenile-Civil-Citation-Article.pdf>.

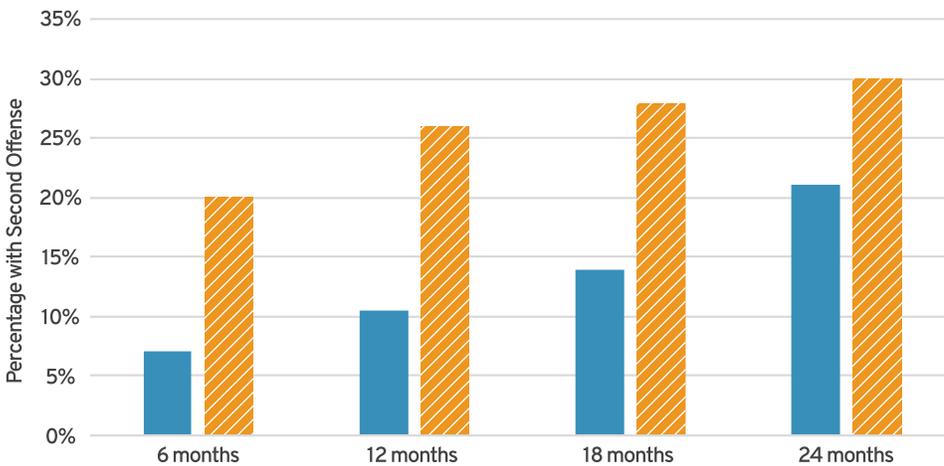
41. Jennie L. Shufelt and Joseph J. Cocozza, "Youth with Mental Health Disorders in the Juvenile Justice System: Results From a Multi-State Prevalence Study," National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, June 2006. <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/youth-mental-health-disorders-juvenile-justice-system-results-multi>.

42. James G. Barrett et al., "Police-Based Juvenile Diversion: A manual for creating a diversion program based on the Cambridge Safety Net Model," Health Equity Research Lab, 2020. <https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/policedepartment/Safety%20Net%20Manual%20FINAL.pdf>.

43. James G. Barrett and Elizabeth Janopaul-Naylor, "Description of a collaborative community approach to impacting juvenile arrests," *Psychological Services* 13:2 (2016), pp. 133-139. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2016-21027-002>.

and trauma-informed theories. According to the risk-needs-responsivity principle, the level of intervention should match an individual’s specific risk level, as overtreatment can result in unintended outcomes.⁴⁴ Cambridge is one of the only police departments in the country to train officers on the Youth Level of Service-Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI), an empirically validated strength and needs assessment for at-risk youth.⁴⁵

Figure 4: Percentage of Youth with Second Offense



Source: <https://irp.cdn-website.com/45a58767/files/uploaded/2019-Do%20Diverted%20Kids%20%28Barrett%29.pdf>.

The Safety Net Collaborative’s sophisticated data collection system has demonstrated a significant impact on juvenile arrests, recidivism and service utilization. In the city of Cambridge, juvenile arrests have declined at a statistically significant rate compared to local and national averages.⁴⁶ Safety Net has also had an observable impact on juvenile recidivism rates and time to recidivism compared to arrested youth (Figure 4).⁴⁷ In addition, in terms of linking at-risk youth to mental health treatment, Safety Net was able to connect youth with needed care more often than if they were arrested, thereby achieving a primary goal of the program.⁴⁸ When the reduction in recidivism diminished over a two- and three-year time period, program evaluators were able to make data-driven suggestions, recommending booster interventions for youth at 18 months after deflection to reduce the risk of long-term recidivism.⁴⁹ The Safety Net Collaborative in Cambridge also uses interviews with officers and service partners to evaluate program implementation.



The Safety Net Collaborative’s sophisticated data collection system has demonstrated a significant impact on juvenile arrests, recidivism and service utilization.

44. “Risk-need-responsivity model for offender assessment and rehabilitation 2007-06,” Public Safety Canada, 2007. <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/rsk-nd-rspnsvty/index-en.aspx>.

45. Barrett and Janopaul-Naylor. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2016-21027-002>.

46. Ibid.

47. James G. Barrett et al., “Do Diverted Kids Stay Out of Trouble?: A Longitudinal Analysis of Recidivism Outcomes in Diversion,” *Journal of Applied Juvenile Justice Services* (2019), pp. 125-137. <https://irp.cdn-website.com/45a58767/files/uploaded/2019-Do%20Diverted%20Kids%20%28Barrett%29.pdf>.

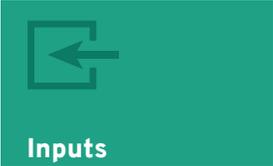
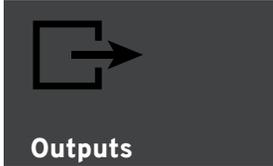
48. E. Janopaul-Naylor et al., “Promising approaches to police-mental health partnerships to improve service utilization for at-risk youth,” *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 5:2 (2019), pp. 206-215. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-31170-009>.

49. James G. Barrett et al., “Diversion as a Pathway to Improving Service Utilization Among At-Risk Youth,” *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* (Sept. 13, 2021). <https://www.mass.gov/doc/diversion-as-a-pathway-to-improving-service-utilization-among-at-risk-youth-psychology-public-policy-and-law-2021/download>.

Data-Driven Success

The continuous evaluation and quality assurance demonstrated in Florida and Cambridge are possible only because program designers had the foresight to establish a data collection plan at the outset of the programs.⁵⁰ Data can be collected on performance, processes, utilization, fidelity and outcomes and used for a wide array of purposes, from analyzing participant characteristics to determining whether program goals are being met. Data can also be used to guard against unintended outcomes, such as “net-widening,” a term for the inadvertent expansion of system involvement by programs intending the opposite effect. Some basic elements of a data-driven process include a logic model (Table 3), data dictionary, data collection protocols, reporting templates, benchmarks for key indicators and real-time data dashboards.⁵¹

Table 3: Example Juvenile Deflection Program Logic Model

 Inputs	 Activities	 Outputs	 Short-Term Outcomes	 Long-Term Outcomes
MOU Funding Staff Data Training	Identify eligible juveniles Risk screening and assessment Develop case plans Monitor program fidelity Identify areas for improvement	Personalized interventions Community-support programs Key data to inform future deflection	Reduction in juvenile arrests Improved academic performance Increased likelihood of high school graduation Improved decision-making among youth	Reduction in recidivism Reduction in overall delinquency Increased employment and lifetime earnings Enhanced community safety and well-being

While recidivism is the most commonly measured outcome of deflection programs, other metrics are just as important to track. Educational attainment, changes in family relationships and mental health status are all connected to juvenile outcomes. Another aspect to consider is how to get the best performance out of service providers. Some jurisdictions have accomplished this by instituting performance-based contracting, which requires extensive information gathering. Protocols for collecting and sharing data should include set data elements, performance measures, uniform definitions, and business rules that allow for statewide data aggregation, analysis and reporting.

KEY TAKEAWAY

While recidivism is the most commonly measured outcome of deflection programs, other metrics are just as important to track.

50. Nadel et al. <https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/assessment-effectiveness-civil-citation-alternative-arrest-among-youth>.

51. Jill Farrell et al., “Best Practices in Youth Diversion: Literature review for the Baltimore City Youth Diversion Committee,” The Institute for Innovation & Implementation, Aug. 16, 2018. <https://theinstitute.umaryland.edu/media/ssw/institute/md-center-documents/Youth-Diversion-Literature-Review.pdf>.

A comprehensive data plan should include:

- Most serious offense by category
- Program participant demographics
- Risk assessment domain scores
- Program completion
- Subsequent arrests
- Services utilized by youth
- Academic achievement
- Enrollment and suspension
- Officer demographics
- Deflection overrides resulting in arrest
- Program financial data
- Program participant feedback

An inadequate data plan can result in failed program evaluations. For example, a recent Council of State Governments Justice Center analysis of Michigan highlighted severe data gaps at the county and state levels preventing a robust program evaluation. These challenges include non-standardized and incomplete demographic, offense and risk data. The report states:

Data are unavailable or unreliable to answer basic questions about the juvenile justice system’s performance [...] Michigan lacks statewide performance measures, data systems, analytic capacity, and reporting processes to measure community-based and out-of-home placement outputs, outcomes, or performance such as recidivism or other youth outcomes.⁵²

Similarly, the Chicago Office of Inspector General’s audit report concluded that after 15 years in operation, it remains unclear whether the city’s juvenile deflection program has been successful. This uncertainty stems from inadequate record-keeping, record destruction, insufficient data sharing among city agencies, poor coordination between program partners and an overall absence of a data governance framework.⁵³

Unfortunately, these data challenges are common. Evidence for deflection can be elusive, due to the inherent difficulty of measuring crimes that do not occur. Although randomized, controlled trials would be the ideal way to measure such outcomes, randomizing youth into an “arrest” condition would inappropriately expose them to the negative effects of system involvement and would be considered unethical. In addition, deflection programs are generally only available for minor offenses, so comparing deflected juveniles against those arrested for more serious offenses can also be problematic. Many deflection studies therefore



An inadequate data plan can result in failed program evaluations.

52. “Report and Recommendations: Michigan Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform.” <https://micounties.org/wp-content/uploads/Michigan-Taskforce-on-Juvenile-Justice-Reform-Final-Report.pdf>.

53. “Preventing Youth Arrests through Deflection: Best Practices and Recommendations.” <https://ijjc.illinois.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IJJC-Deflection-Report-November-2020.pdf>.

suffer from methodologic issues due to a lack of appropriate comparison groups, without which it can be tricky to assess the exact impact of deflection.⁵⁴

Thus, measurable success is only possible if deflection is designed with ongoing data collection in mind from the beginning. Florida and Cambridge rely on existing police records, school records and electronic medical records from health care providers participating in the deflection program to determine the need for periodic program adjustments over time. To conduct an advanced data analysis or outcome evaluation, police departments may need to partner with a local university or research institution to form an evaluation team and submit an Institutional Review Board application, especially when sharing data across agencies.

Conclusion

Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline requires keeping students from entering the juvenile justice system entirely. Deflection programs achieve this goal in two primary ways. First, deflection provides young people with the opportunity to complete an individually tailored program in lieu of arrest, stopping the negative outcomes of formal justice system involvement at the source. Second, deflection promotes positive youth trajectories by connecting at-risk youth with community-based services to address the underlying causes of delinquency. Rather than passively relegating courts to the role of de facto service providers because no other system exists, deflection programs proactively position police officers as the gateway to rehabilitation.

No single agency has the resources to effectively support youth at risk of delinquency. Effective deflection programs, such as the Cambridge Safety Net collaborative, do not operate in isolation. Buy-in from community partners is imperative because negative adolescent behavior happens in a variety of settings, and many individuals impact youth development. Robust data collection, like that of Florida's civil citation program, provides vital information to improve the quality of deflection programs and allow for more consistent program implementation. If we want to help youth succeed, improve public safety, and save taxpayer money, avoiding youth arrest in the first place is the best solution.



Effective deflection programs do not operate in isolation. Buy-in from community partners is imperative because negative adolescent behavior happens in a variety of settings.

54. Daniel P. Mears et al., "Juvenile Court and Contemporary Diversion: Helpful, Harmful, or Both?," *Criminology & Public Policy* 15:3 (June 15, 2016), pp. 953-981. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1745-9133.12223>.

About the Author

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Juvenile Deflection Flowchart

