

Implementing Trauma-Informed Education within Youth Carceral Facilities

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Children in youth carceral facilities are suffering from an alarming mental health crisis that is only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite behavioral correction programs, youth within carceral facilities — disproportionately BIPOC youth — are still 53% more likely to suffer from mental illness than their peers, 39% less likely to graduate from high school and 41% more likely to commit crimes in the future. This policy proposal offers a trauma-informed educational approach to improve mental health and educational outcomes for youth in Los Angeles County juvenile detention camps, mitigating the impact of racial and other traumas. Trauma-informed education is proven to decrease bad behavior caused by trauma, in turn increasing high school graduation rates of students. By creating new curriculums, adjusting classroom settings, and training teachers to utilize trauma-informed education, educators can boost graduation rates, decrease recidivism — breaking the cycle of incarceration — and improve the mental health of children attending school within carceral facilities, while these facilities are simultaneously phased out completely in Los Angeles County.

Background and Defining the Problem

This policy proposal focuses on Los Angeles County's public juvenile detention camps for minors (County of Los Angeles Probation Department, 2021). The children who live and attend classes within these detention camps are primarily low-income and BIPOC, struggling with mental illness often associated with community violence, racism and early childhood trauma (County of Los Angeles Probation Department, 2020). In fact, 90% of the youth in the juvenile justice system have experienced at least one extreme stressor. Moreover, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) scores, which are used to denote extreme stressors such as abuse, neglect and other traumatic childhood experiences, are higher among incarcerated youth. Almost 50% of youth in the juvenile justice system have four or more ACEs, which is 37% higher than the national average of the US (Jamieson, 2019). COVID-19 has further harmed the mental wellbeing of youth within this facility. Due to the suspension of in-person visitation of parents and families amongst other factors, the education of youth within these facilities needs to adapt to the needs of the children within.

Furthermore, BIPOC children disproportionately constitute the population of youth carceral facilities in Los Angeles County (Newell & Leap, 2013). As of September 2020, approximately 35 youth resided at Camp Glenn Rockey, one such detention camp in San Dimas, California. Of that total, on average there were 14 Black youth, 20 Hispanic youth, and just 1 white youth on any given day last September (County of Los Angeles Probation Department, 2020). Given the disproportionate number of BIPOC students affected by trauma and experiencing mental illnesses at Camp Glenn Rockey, for instance, trauma-informed education reform will not only improve the overall mental health of students, it will also address racial and socioeconomic inequalities within the distribution of trauma.

Los Angeles County has a long history of violent youth incarceration, which County Supervisors have been attempting to completely dismantle through proactive policy since 2020. However, the Board of Supervisors is at odds with the Probation Department and associated union of detention staff who would prefer to simply reform the system (Cosgrove, 2020). This policy proposal exists either to be a compromise between the two conflicting entities or, preferably, as a temporary program implemented to mitigate harm as the entire youth carceral system is gradually abolished in Los Angeles County ("A Roadmap for Advancing Youth Diversion", 2017).

Policy Proposal

Implementing trauma-informed education in youth carceral facilities will improve the mental wellbeing and educational receptibility of trauma-impacted students by aiding school systems in addressing situations outside the traditional scope of educator training. It is vital to ensure that

educational staff, who have direct influences on students' educational outcomes, are not only "trauma-sensitive" but also "trauma-informed" through professional development programs that impart broader conceptions of trauma. Deliberate action to implement programs is necessary in order to adequately prepare educators to effectively assist students within the juvenile detention system.

Implementing A Trauma-Based Curriculum Model

A constructive start to incorporating trauma-informed education in the juvenile detention system would be implementing the National Dropout Prevention Center Trauma-Skilled Schools Model. This model prioritizes knowledge acquisition, building resilience through connections, security, and autonomy, skill acquisition for prevention, intervention, recovery, and referral, assessing and implementing policies, practices, and resources that aid in student's well-being, and maintaining and validating effective plans and structures (Gailer et. al., 2018). This model, proven to boost student graduation rates, would be implemented within each classroom at the detention center. Below is a detailed graphic which outlines the curriculum:

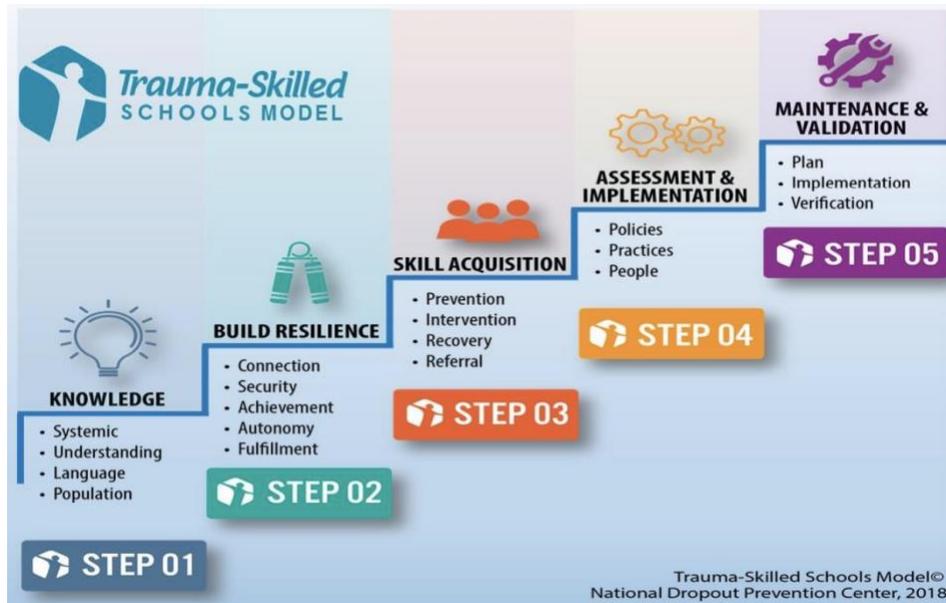


FIGURE 1. Trauma-Skilled Schools Model from Gailer et al., 2018.

Appropriately cohesive and positive responses to student behavior are integral elements of effective trauma-informed education, as negative human interactions are often at the root of childhood traumas. Preparing educators to effectively address student behavior in manners that encourage appropriate, healthy behaviors, in addition to decreasing punitive responses to student behavior, such as “suspension, expulsion, [and] unnecessary segregation” will boost education outcomes and graduation rates (Gailer et. al., 2018).

Replacement of police-adjacent figures with mental health professionals

In addition to adequately preparing educators to implement trauma-sensitive methods in academic structures and curriculums, it is essential to effectively ensure that appropriate resources are available for students. One key tenet of a trauma-informed education is to replace police-adjacent figures in educational spaces with trained counselors, social workers, and other professionals trained to address behavioral issues. Law enforcement figures are unnecessary for the classroom because approximately 87% of students inside youth carceral facilities have not committed violent crimes (Brown, 2009). Furthermore, punitive forms of education may re-traumatize students who have experienced trauma with police due to their past activity and, for BIPOC students, due to systemic racism. Mental health care professionals, already stationed at Los Angeles County juvenile detention camps, will be placed into classroom settings in replacement of police-adjacent figures.

To increase high school graduation rates and reduce recidivism, it is essential that incarcerated students do not leave youth detention camps

with more ACEs than they had when they entered. Educators who are not sufficiently prepared to aid students who are in vulnerable situations can do more harm than good.

Limitations

Funding for hosting recurring teacher trainings may be limiting factor; however, because reduced recidivism rates results in a diminished incarcerated population, the county's carceral system will demand less overall funding the longer the program is maintained (Newell & Leap, 2013). Teachers' ability to act both as educators and extreme empathizers with trauma-impacted students may also limit the scope of the program (Gailer et. al., 2018).

Conclusion

In order to reduce recidivism rates, increase the likelihood of high school graduation, and to mitigate the re-traumatization of its disproportionately BIPOC incarcerated students, Los Angeles County juvenile detention camps should implement a trauma-based approach in their educational program. This approach would include funding for specialized teacher training, distancing from punitive measures in the classroom, and changes in the content and delivery of educational curriculum. Specifically within Los Angeles County, this policy change would help to prevent further harm to youth within juvenile carceral facilities as the county transitions to dismantling them completely.

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