

Focusing on diversion yields positive results for kids with behavioral issues

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Of the 5,300 children enrolled in the Ohio Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice Initiative since 2006, 21% reported that someone close to them had been murdered in the past year. Nearly half of the boys and more than a quarter of the girls in the program have both a substance abuse and

mental health disorder.

But there's good news, too: From 2017 through 2019, 81% of the participants—aged 10 through 17—successfully completed the state's juvenile diversion program, and data indicated that 79% of [youth](#) reduced their contact with police while in treatment.

Those findings are from a new detailed evaluation of the Ohio Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice Initiative (BHJJ) by researchers at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University.

The key conclusion: Many youthful offenders can benefit from community-based diversion programs designed to address [mental health](#) and substance use issues in lieu of commitment to local or state-run detention centers.

"The majority of justice-involved youth have a history of mental health and/or substance-use issues, and have experienced a great deal of trauma," said Jeff Kretschmar, co-author of the study and the research associate professor at the university's Begun Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education. "However, local jurisdictions are often ill-equipped to accurately assess youth for behavioral health problems and provide appropriate treatment. Ohio's Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice Initiative was intended to transform and expand the local systems' options to better serve these youths."

The report focused on youth currently enrolled in the program rather than retrospectively, Kretschmar said, to "identify emerging behavioral health trends and better understand the effectiveness of the model as it operates across Ohio today."

Report highlights include:

- Youth reported a [significant decrease](#) in trauma symptoms and problem severity from intake to termination, and a significant improvement in functioning.
- Since 2015, only 3.8% of youth enrolled in BHJJ were committed to a state-run detention facility after enrollment.
- BHJJ costs about \$5,200 per child, compared with \$196,000 per child who enters a state-run detention facility.

"The breadth of the data provides us with an opportunity to examine outcomes for youth in BHJJ from a variety of angles and provides practitioners with enough information to match programming with behavioral health needs," said Fredrick Butcher, research assistant professor at the Begun Center.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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