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Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline: The Development of Strong, Stable Relationships

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DISRUPTING THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE:

THE DEVELOPMENT OF STRONG, STABLE RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

The "school-to-prison pipeline" is a disturbing national trend where school policies and practices unjustly funnel children—namely children who are Black and Brown and/or have disabilities—into the Juvenile Justice system. Students of color are far more likely to be suspended, expelled, or arrested for the same kind of behavior as their white peers, and youth with disabilities are acutely affected by schools who ignore due process protections. Such students would benefit from extra supports and resources but instead face zero-tolerance policies, exclusionary discipline, and unreasonable difficulties with re-entry into school. The following research presents a review of current literature as it relates to the risk and protective factors for juvenile delinquency, as well as an analysis of mentorship as an evidence-based intervention. The Risk and Protective Factor Framework developed by Community Coalition for Healthy Youth informs the proposed intervention and provides a holistic approach for addressing adolescent delinquency. This poster explores why certain youth are punished, penalized, and incarcerated at a drastically higher rate than their counterparts and presents a detailed design for a school-based mentorship program aimed at promoting the development of strong, stable relationships between school adults and students to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

Keywords: School-to-prison pipeline, juvenile delinquency, delinquency intervention

Introduction

The school-to-prison pipeline is the term popularized for the unjust funneling of children—namely children who are Black and Brown, have disabilities, and/or show histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect—into the Juvenile Justice system. The causes for this pipeline are vast. Several explanations include serious lack of resources in public schools, difficulties for re-entry into schools after entering the legal system, and increased police officer presence in school hallways. Other explanations for the pipeline include zero tolerance policies, which impose severe punishment regardless of circumstances, and exclusionary disciplinary policies, which involve suspension and expulsion, that disproportionately affect Black and Brown students, especially males (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022).

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's most recent data found that in 2019, 85% of children held in a detainment center in the United States were males, while only 15% were females. Furthermore, 46% were Black, while only 26% were white, followed by 23% Hispanic (Sickmund et al., 2019). Youth.gov explains that the juvenile justice system consistently shows a significantly higher percentage of involvement with male adolescents of color. They assert that data continually shows that girls are less likely to be petitioned, adjudicated, detained, or committed than boys for most delinquent offenses. Furthermore, girls in 2014 were less likely to receive diversion programming or probation than their male counterparts, who were more likely to be put in residential placement (Youth.gov, n.d.).

The pipeline is further exacerbated by schools ignoring or overlooking due process protections for students with disabilities or mental health diagnoses. Neurodivergent individuals are highly overrepresented in the pipeline; youth who come in contact with Juvenile Court experience higher rates of mental disorders than their non-juvenile justice involved peers

(Youth.gov, n.d.). Most youth in the system in the U.S. meet criteria for or are diagnosed with more than one mental health disorder. The most common is substance use disorder, at 76% of youth involved in the justice system, followed by high anxiety at 33%, ADHD at 14%, depression and PTSD both at 12%, and mania at 7% (Youth.gov, n.d.).

Moreover, many youth in the juvenile justice system have a detailed trauma history. In particular, adolescents who have witnessed or survived violence themselves are more likely to be charged with a violent crime. In other words, exposure to violence leads to more violence (Youth.gov, n.d.). Relationships serve as powerful protective factors against violence-related trauma and can help prevent students from committing violent acts (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, 2020). Academic progress and high academic performance likewise weaken the relationship between early exposure to violence and justice system involvement (Youth.gov, n.d.). Therefore, school faculty and staff can have a great impact on delinquency by developing relationships with students that serve as a buffer or safety net to protect children from any or further involvement with Juvenile Court. This paper will propose a mentorship program for high school adolescents in Metro Nashville Public Schools, aimed at reducing risk and increasing protective factors within student-faculty relationships. Additionally, it will present a review of current literature regarding the school-to-prison pipeline, as well as an analysis of the risk and protective factors for adolescents currently involved or at-risk of becoming involved in the Juvenile Justice system.

Juvenile Division of the Public Defender's Office and MNPS

Two key players in the fight to halt the school-to-prison pipeline in Nashville are the Juvenile Court, specifically the Public Defender's Office (PDO), and Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS). This is because youth served by the PDO often receive their education through

MNPS, Nashville's public education system. Consequently, both groups provide services to largely the same population. The staff at the Juvenile Justice Division of the PDO works together to represent children under 18 accused of various offenses, as well as children set to be transferred to adult criminal court (Nashville Public Defender's Office, n.d.). This division was created in 1978 and currently has a staff of two social workers, three attorneys, and one legal secretary. Additionally, in 2008, the Nashville PDO founded the Education Rights Project (ERP) to help prevent at-risk youth with disabilities from coming into contact with the Juvenile Court. ERP has since grown to a staff of two attorneys and one social worker, as well as incorporating a legal secretary and volunteer social worker from Juvenile, all of whom collaborate with students, families, and schools. By providing advocacy and legal representation, ERP functions under the umbrella of the Public Defender's Office to ensure every student has access to the educational services they need. ERP represents clients in a variety of settings, including individualized education program team meetings, support team meetings, 504 plan meetings, and manifestation determination reviews (Nashville Public Defender's Office, n.d.).

Thus, the juvenile division of the Public Defender's Office and the staff at ERP work closely with students in MNPS to ensure they receive the resources they need to achieve academic and holistic success. The Juvenile Court as a whole describes its ultimate vision to be a national model, focused on the comprehensive well-being of adolescents, families, and their communities (Juvenile Court of Metro Nashville and Davidson County, n.d.). To fulfill the organizational vision and promote successful outcomes, the court must collaborate effectively with MNPS to ensure children stay in school and receive appropriate educational services.

Metro Nashville Public Schools serves over 80,000 students in more than 150 schools in Davidson county. MNPS is one of the nation's largest and the state's most diverse school

districts, with 11,030 staff members and 4,968 classroom teachers serving Black, Hispanic/Latinx, White, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students (Metro Nashville Public Schools, n.d.-b). One of their core values is collaboration–with parents, students, community members, and other educational partners–because teamwork allows for better outcomes for students and the community (Metro Nashville Public Schools, n.d.-a).

The stronger the partnership between MNPS and outside groups like the Public Defender's Office, the better the overall educational experience for adolescents. More specifically, MNPS provides essential educational and interpersonal resources to children as the primary contributors to adolescent education, and the PDO provides knowledge, experience, and advocacy for how the legal system affects these students. In order for adolescents to experience healthy growth and development, a right owed to every student, no matter their background, they must have a community that supports their education and supplies the resources needed for success. Thus, the two systems are closely intertwined and operate at the forefront of the mission to ensure the educational and emotional well-being of children and adolescents.

Social Work and The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) identifies thirteen complex Grand Challenges facing the country. The challenges comprise a call to action, imploring social work researchers and practitioners to address widespread inequities ingrained in our society. One such challenge is to achieve equal opportunity and justice—through work that dismantles inequality and addresses racial and social injustices (AASWSW, 2020). Because the school-to-prison pipeline largely affects students of color, those with disabilities, and children

with histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect, a clear barrier to equal opportunity and justice is at stake.

Black and Brown students are disproportionately pushed out of schools through the use of exclusionary discipline, or suspension and expulsion (ACLU, 2022). In Nashville, these same disciplinary disparities exist and cause educational disadvantages for thousands of students (Beyeler, 2022). The Tennessean found that Black students are three times more likely to be suspended than white students in MNPS due to prejudice and unrecognized bias in school personnel (Wadhwani, 2019). Once a student is suspended, their risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system increases, and if that happens, their risk of being arrested in the future also increases (Beyeler, 2022). Likewise, students with disabilities are disproportionately represented in the pipeline (ACLU, 2022). MNPS schools have sadly neglected to ensure due process protections for all students with disabilities and/or mental health diagnoses, and these students lack access to the required educational services for their disability. In order for these vulnerable students to receive an equitable education, social workers must address the systemic processes pushing certain students into the juvenile justice system.

Social workers are uniquely positioned to fight this injustice, as they serve individuals and families in schools, community organizations, nonprofits, legal and advocacy groups, government agencies like the PDO, and many more places that directly affect the population heartbreakingly funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline. In all of these settings, but especially schools, social workers can form intentional relationships with students, as well as encourage other school faculty and staff to do the same. Developing one-on-one relationships with vulnerable students can protect them from the pipeline because one of the greatest protective factors against trauma caused by exposure to violence is healthy relationships (AASWSW,

2020). The AASWSW specifically addresses this potential by defining one of the thirteen Grand Challenges as building healthy relationships to end violence. Strong relationships between children and a trusted adult can also encourage emotional resilience and strengthen mental and physical health (AASWSW, 2020). As such, social workers can help ensure strong relationships are in place in a child's life to serve as protective factors for youth at risk or currently involved in the Juvenile Justice system.

Moreover, this tendency to criminalize rather than educate children violates a clear core value of Social Work—social justice. As defined by the National Association of Social Work's (NASW) Code of Ethics, one of the six core values of social work is to challenge injustice and pursue social change with vulnerable individuals (National Association of Social Workers, n.d.). The school-to-prison pipeline violates at-risk students' fundamental right to a fair and proper education, and social workers have a professional obligation to help combat the pipeline by providing and advocating for justice for these individuals.

Furthermore, the importance of human relationships is another one of the six NASW core values. Social workers value strong relationships and seek to strengthen them among others because they recognize the power strong rapport can hold to renew, maintain, and improve individuals' well-being (NASW, n.d.). Just as the Grand Challenges emphasize, healthy relationships with a trusted adult can go a long way in supporting students, and they can be utilized as protective factors to help prevent court involvement. Thus, these distinct core values and Grand Challenges, unique to the profession but applicable to all, position social workers as key agents of change for putting a halt to the pipeline that so tragically pulls students into detention centers and out of schools.

Literature Review

Introduction

Not only is funnelment into the Juvenile Court system a fundamental justice issue, but juvenile delinquency, if left unaddressed, also contributes significant financial costs to society at large. According to the Justice Policy Institute, in Tennessee, the most recent cost to incarcerate one youth for a year is $230,000 (2020). Some estimates argue that delinquent behaviors result in up to $1 trillion per year in total costs to society (Anderson, 1999, as quoted in Evans et al., 2016). This is because lack of intervention in adolescent delinquency could cause significant, expensive issues for taxpayers, such as increases in unemployment and underemployment, adult criminal activity, incarceration rates, police presence, and property loss (Evans et al., 2016; Leonard, 2018; Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010).

Juvenile delinquency is a complicated problem, with a variety of associated behaviors. Delinquent acts include, but are not limited to, truancy, underage drinking, vandalism, burglary, robbery, possession of a firearm, motor-vehicle theft, and aggravated assault (Evans et al., 2016; Leonard, 2018). Leonard and Noyori-Corbett & Moon agree that the three most common delinquent behaviors are substance and alcohol abuse, tobacco smoking, and violent behavior (2018; 2010). Noyori-Corbett & Moon's study tested these factors simultaneously and found all three to be strongly interrelated (2010). Surprisingly, however, they also found that prevention programs for substance abuse and violence were not shown to have a negative effect on delinquency and sometimes even caused an increase in delinquent behavior. This could be because the stigma and negative connotation surrounding delinquency itself discourages attendance in such programs (2010). Instead, holistic interventions that implement protective factors might be more successful. Attempts to lower juvenile delinquency ultimately must take a multidimensional approach by applying the person-in-environment theory, which sees

individuals' lives in context with the complex familial, spiritual, physical, and social environments around them.

Risk factors

Different bodies of research across time propose a variety of causes for delinquency; however, many of these are merely proposed factors and are not direct causes. For example, in the early states of criminology, biological factors were largely thought to be the cause of crime. However, modern research shows biological factors more-so interact with social and psychological factors rather than function as the direct cause of delinquency (Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). Furthermore, socioeconomic status and environmental factors, such as impoverished or disorganized neighborhoods, have been presented as explanations for adolescent crime rates but ultimately have more of an indirect effect on delinquency (Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). Person-in-environment theory, a cornerstone of social work practice, emphasizes the idea that people's behavior can be better understood through the lens of their environmental context; in other words, the environments where people live and operate, as well as the social determinants of that environment, highly influence a person's life. The same principle applies to delinquent individuals. It is essential that social workers remember other factors such as involvement with deviant peers, low parental involvement, living in a disorganized community, or moving often, are often increased by lower socioeconomic status, but delinquency is not directly caused by it (Evans et al., 2016; Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, 2012; Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010).

Therefore, a variety of risk factors exist and often overlap to create layers of vulnerability for involvement in the juvenile justice system. In fact, the prevalence of negative life events and stressors have been found to cause juveniles to begin offending earlier (Evans et al., 2016).

These individual, school, family, and community risk factors include extreme economic and social deprivation, the death of a friend or family member, residential moves, parenting style and structure, family conflict, and depressive symptoms (Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, 2012; Evans et al., 2016). Furthermore, lack of commitment to academics–shown by spending little time on homework, viewing coursework as irrelevant, and generally disliking school–is also a significant risk factor for delinquency. Academic failure as early as elementary school, simply because of the experience of failure itself, increases the risk of involvement in the legal system (Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, 2012).

Evans et al. found racial discrimination to be especially impactful for delinquency among African American males (2016); they found that individuals experiencing racially based oppression in early childhood and adolescence are more likely to begin offending early and persist in delinquent behaviors into adolescence. This can be explained by discrimination's association with depression, holding a hostile view of relationships, and disengagement from norms. However, this risk factor remains largely underdeveloped and would benefit from further research (Evans et al., 2016).

While no single risk factor alone can perfectly determine delinquency, consistently across the literature, researchers found deviant peer association to be a prominent predictor (Evans et al., 2016; Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, 2012; Leonard, 2018; Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). Leonard posits that an increase in the acceptability of deviant behavior is associated with an increase in the behavior itself (2018), and congested neighborhoods or overcrowded bedrooms can be major causes of such association. Deviant peer association as a risk factor is supported by social learning theory, or the idea that behaviors such as delinquency are highly influenced by the beliefs and actions of other people, such as friends and family, who

play significant roles in one's life (Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). Life course theory, which argues that as a child develops, they are impacted by differing social ties, also supports this explanation. For example, children and pre-teens are impacted heavily by their caregivers, while older adolescents face more social influence from their peers (Evans et al., 2016). However, the social effects of delinquent peers can be mediated by parental involvement (Evans et al., 2016; Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010) and, as will be discussed later, a strong, supportive relationship with an adult, even one outside of the family.

Protective factors

Involvement in additional school, faith group, or community activities have been shown to help prevent adolescents from exhibiting problem behavior (Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, 2012; Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). For example, Randolph et al. found that adolescents who participate in extracurricular activities stay in school for a longer period of time (2004, as cited in Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). When young people have opportunities to participate in activities at school, they are less likely to engage in drug use and other delinquent behaviors. This is especially true when rewards and recognition are involved for their contributions (Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, 2012). Opportunities for involvement in the community mean children are less likely to engage in substance use, and rewards for participation help secure a bond to the community, lowering risk of substance use (Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, 2012). Furthermore, Yakin and McMahon found that community activities help adolescents see violence as controllable and provide structure that distracts from violence in neighborhoods (2003, as cited in Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). Civic engagement as a potential extracurricular activity in particular requires adolescents to participate in activities

that not only improve their neighborhood but also develop their personal skills and values (Chan et al. 2014, as cited in Leonard, 2018).

Additionally, healthy parental involvement was shown across the research to be a strong, direct protective factor for juvenile delinquency (Evans et al., 2016; Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, 2012; Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). Additionally, parental involvement was an essential mediation factor for other risk and protective factors. Parents have been proven to exert influence over adolescents' conduct problems, even when controlled for low self esteem, attendance of extracurricular activities, and decisions to smoke (Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). Smith et al. also found that parent participation had a major influence on adolescents' substance abuse and violent behavior (2006, as cited in Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). Furthermore, Hahn et al. found that elementary school students in a school-based program were more likely to improve problem behavior—including alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use—when additional parent-child interaction took place (2007, as cited in Noyori-Corbett & Moon, 2010). Therefore, parents hold power over their children's decisions to engage in substance misuse, smoking, and violent behavior—the three behaviors identified as core problems for juvenile delinquency. Authoritative parenting, denoted by warmth as well as appropriately harsh discipline, led to lower likelihood of delinquency regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnicity (Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, n.d.; Simons et al., 2013, as cited in Evans et al., 2016). One interesting thing to note is that youth in households with two parents or caregivers have the most positive outcomes, while single parent or caregiver homes produce more behavior problems by comparison (Evans et al., 2016). One theoretical framework that can be used to explain this phenomenon is social control theory (SCT). SCT explains that adolescents will commit problem

behavior if no control is exerted upon them from groups like family, school, or friends. These social bonds are the factor ensuring they follow written and unwritten rules.

Mentoring

While parental involvement is a well-founded protective factor for delinquency, caregivers often have other essential responsibilities requiring their attention. For example, the need for an income to support their family might draw them away from the children and into multiple job positions, especially if they are unable to attain a livable wage. Noyori-Corbett & Moon express the unfortunate reality that when parents earn low wages and therefore have to work more, parental involvement decreases and delinquent behaviors in turn, increase (2010). Therefore, parents might not always be available to provide the extensive involvement, care, and warmth that protects from delinquency, for a variety of reasons—work hours, other children's needs, life stressors, mental health, etc..

To offset the negative effects of low parental involvement, school faculty and staff can engage in mentorship that provides students with a safe, stable relationship with an adult. Healthy adult relationships—whether they be with parents, coaches, school staff, or teachers—have been shown to significantly affect children's ability to cope with toxic stress (Thompson, 2014). Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child argues that a child's healthy development and actual brain architecture depends on the reliability of their relationships with adults—both inside and outside of the family (National Scientific Council, 2004). They found that children as young as kindergarteners who develop warm, positive relationships with their teachers were more excited about learning and coming to school, achieved more in the classroom, and were more self-confident (2004).

Evans et al. found that factors like low self-control, little or poor parental influence, and cognitive deficits often lead to early interactions with teachers and authority figures (2016). Repeated negative interactions can limit options for a lifestyle change, causing an individual's antisocial acts, such as aggression, hostility towards authority, deceitfulness, and defiance, to snowball until it feels impossible to change the trajectory of one's life. This is known as "cumulative continuity" (Evans et al., 2016). When these negative interactions are replaced with intentional protective ones, strong positive change will result in the life course of a child at-risk for delinquency.

The proposed intervention also incorporates the protective factor of increased school activities. If mentorship takes place within the school setting, not only are students provided with a protective relationship with a supportive adult, but also with activities to complete that will develop a stronger sense of belonging and connection to school. Therefore, delinquency interventions that bolster strong relationships between a child and at least one adult will likely be effective in enhancing connection to school and filling in potential gaps in parental support.

Proposal

In order to combat the school-to-prison pipeline, this research proposes that MNPS and the Juvenile Court can collaborate to create a semester-long mentorship program, called Project 1:1, aimed at providing at-risk students with at least one stable relationship with an adult in their school. This relationship will serve as a powerful protective factor for delinquency by increasing school connection and support from a trusted adult. Adults participating in the program would all be MNPS faculty and staff willing to volunteer to eat lunch and go through the curriculum packet once a week for 30 minutes with the student with whom they are matched. Any MNPS school interested in implementing a delinquency intervention would be encouraged to start the

mentorship initiative. In Davidson County specifically, the school-to-prison pipeline is devastatingly in full effect, with black youth arrests numbering significantly higher than white peer counterparts (Beyeler, 2022) and Black MNPS students having a trifold likelihood of being suspended compared to white students (Wadhwani, 2019). With 29 middle and 23 high schools in MNPS, this intervention could serve a large population in need of delinquency prevention (MNPS, n.d.-b).

Inserted below is a logic model that outlines the Project 1:1 mentorship initiative proposal in more detail:

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
School faculty and staff volunteers 1 program director Funding Scheduled time Meeting spaces (tables, chairs) Guidance materials (topic information packet) Standardized measurement scales (recruitment survey, post-test survey) Research base	Weekly adult-student meetings Facilitated discussion of relevant topics Time for intentional connection Program director feedback and availability for mentors	15 weekly meetings delivered 15 discussion topics covered 7.5 hours of relationally-focused time x students engaged (based on recruitment criteria in each school) x adult volunteers engaged (based on availability in each school)	Reported increase in protective factors, as measured by a survey adapted from Community Coalition for Healthy Youth's Risk and Protective Factor Framework Reported decrease in risk factors, as measured by a survey adapted from Community Coalition for Healthy Youth's Risk and Protective Factor Framework Reported subjective experiences before program Reported subjective experiences after program

The ultimate goals of the program are to reduce the number of risk factors, as well as increase the number of protective factors, for delinquency in each participant's life. This will be measured by pre-test and post-test surveys asking targeted questions about a variety of factors, including school connection, strong adult relationships, commitment to academics, and participation in school activities. Because the intervention will take place in schools, special attention will be placed on the risk and protective factors centered around the school environment, as well as the availability of a strong relationship with an adult in the child's life. Program effectiveness will be measured by counting the number of risk factors, as well as protective factors, on both surveys. The goal is to see a reduction in the score of risk factors *and* an increase in the score of protective factors, on the post-test survey.

Students will be recruited to participate in Project 1:1 based on their results from the pre-test survey questions, adapted from the Risk and Protective Factor Framework developed by the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth (see Appendix). Ideally, the survey would be administered at the beginning of the year to all MNPS middle and high school students in schools participating in the mentorship initiative. The survey will ask whether or not students experience particular risk and protective factors, and they will rank their answers on a scale of 1 to 5. If a student's score is 4 or higher on 3 or more risk factors, coupled with a score of 2 or lower on 2 or fewer protective factors, they will be eligible for the program. In order to get a more complete picture of the students' situation, there will also be opportunities to elaborate on any of the questions with more detail. Example survey questions are included in the "evaluation" section below. If there are more students eligible than available mentors, students will be moved to a list to get the intervention as soon as a mentor can be located.

School mentors will be given a packet with information for each week, including topics to cover and suggested questions to ask the student. Example topics include anger management, career exploration, leadership, grounding techniques, and goal setting. The topics will cover a broad range of subjects, including psychological, familial, and cultural dimensions, to address the multiple systems in a child's life, including immediate family, relatives, friends, school, psychological well-being, culture, religion, and community. This is because, as the person-in-environment perspective emphasizes, a person can only be fully understood when their environment—socially, politically, spiritually, physically, familially, and spiritually—is also fully considered. The topics in the packet will provide guidance for mentors in leading the meeting, reducing mentor uncertainty and confusion. The packet will provide structure while also encouraging the adult to regularly allow the student to take the conversation wherever suits them best, as long as the adult deems it appropriate.

One example of a successful, evidence-based mentorship program is Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, or BBBS. Their evidence-based program has been proven to have an impact on delinquency, with mentees being 46 percent less likely to start using drugs, 27 percent less likely to start using alcohol, and almost one-third less likely to hit someone (Big Brothers Big Sisters, n.d.). This agency matches students with role models in the area, providing a stable, supportive relationship with an adult that has a positive impact on self confidence and education and lowers involvement with the juvenile justice system. Big Brothers Big Sisters provides an excellent model for effective mentorship. The MNPS/PDO initiative could incorporate elements of BBBS's mentorship design, including one-on-one dynamics and intentionally matching youth with adults in their community. However, Project 1:1 would take place solely within schools and

select only school faculty and staff mentors because one of the goals of this distinct design is to enhance the child's protective factors in and connection to their school environment specifically.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the program will be conducted using pre and post-test surveys. The pre-test will be the same as the recruitment survey described in the above proposal section, and it will be administered to all middle and high school students at any MNPS school implementing the mentorship program. The post-test survey will be administered to any middle and high school students in MNPS schools that completed the mentorship program. Surveys will be administered using Google forms to streamline the process, making it easier to interpret results. There will be no comparison or control groups in the evaluation process because students who did not participate in or qualify for the program have a multitude of confounding variables that could affect the data, such as different life circumstances and motivations.

The surveys will collect data on both risk and protective factors for juvenile delinquency, with a special emphasis on the school environment. Students will rank their answers on a likert scale of 1 to 5, 1 being "strongly disagree," 2 being "disagree," 3 being "undecided," 4 being "agree," and 5 being "strongly agree." The risk factor section will include statements like "I have experienced low connection to my neighborhood," "I have experienced family conflict," and "I have a lack of commitment to school." The protective factor section will include statements such as "I have a strong attachment to my family," "I have experienced rewards for my contributions in school," and "I have participated in positive school activities." These questions are specifically based on the Risk and Protective Factor Framework developed by the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth.

In addition to the quantitative, likert scale questions, there will be opportunities for students to elaborate on any of the questions with more detail. This will provide mentors with more qualitative background information on the child's situation, as well as provide a place for students to share their own stories rather than simply rating difficult experiences on a harsh numeric scale. This is necessary in order to collect lived experience data in order to help determine the feasibility of the program, collect information for improving future implementation, and provide a space for students to report additional benefits they may experience.

The ultimate goals of the program are to reduce the number of risk factors and increase protective factors in the lives of children at-risk for delinquency or currently involved in the legal system. Program effectiveness will be measured by counting the number of risk factors with a score of 4 or higher, as well as the number of protective factors with a score of 4 or higher on the pre and post-test surveys. If there is a reduction in the score of 1 or more risk factors *and* an increase in the score of 1 or more protective factors on the post-test survey in comparison to the pre-test, the program will be deemed effective. Qualitative data will also be examined for other potential benefits, such as reduced discipline issues or increased sense of belonging. On the other hand, if there is no reduction in risk factors and/or increase in protective factors in the post-test survey, coupled with no reported changes in other qualitative data, the program will be deemed ineffective.

Strengths and Limitations

One of the key strengths of the proposed program is that it builds on BBBS's evidence-based mentorship design, proven to mitigate all three of the most common delinquent behaviors—using drugs, consuming alcohol, and engaging in violent behavior. The program

specifically targets delinquency risk factors in schools, namely lack of commitment and opportunities for prosocial involvement, and instead introduces one-on-one relationships as a powerful protective measure. The literature asserts that healthy relationships with adults—including those outside of the family—have been shown to significantly improve children's ability to cope with toxic stress and promote healthy development of brain architecture (National Scientific Council, 2004; Thompson, 2014). Therefore, the initiative will provide students with the in-school connections, relationships, and tools they need to thrive. Project 1:1 bridges community connections, addresses a critical gap in programming, and centers on prevention rather than solely addressing delinquent behaviors after they develop. The project will also encourage vulnerability, connection, exploration, goal setting, and more among at-risk students and allow mentors to develop a deeper understanding of and compassion for their students' situations.

Limitations of the proposal and evaluation include threats to internal and external validity. Internal validity refers to the degree to which the mentorship program directly impacts delinquency risk and protective factors and to what extent change is due to outside factors. One such threat is that there is no comparison group for the program. This will prevent thorough analysis of whether the changes are due to extraneous factors, such as natural changes in the mentees' lives. The quality of fit between student and adult could also affect results, regardless of the quality of the program packet and topics. There is a potential for significant variety in results simply because of variability in compatibility between student and adult. Furthermore, there are threats to external validity, or the degree to which the results of the study can be generalized to a larger population. Students may feel pressure to report positive scores on their post-tests, making the results unrealistic and unreliable. Also, the sample is limited to one school

district and may not include the full variety of student experiences. Another limitation regarding program implementation and feasibility may include the availability of school personnel to serve as mentors. In another district, there might be greater, or fewer, mentors available to implement the program, resulting in differing levels of effectiveness.

Implications for Practice

The school-to-prison pipeline is a system of injustices that negatively affect adolescents' chances for success all over the United States. There are a multitude of risk factors that contribute to delinquency, several of them centering around the school environment. In Nashville especially, the pipeline is in full swing, with law enforcement in schools at an all time high (Beyeler, 2022), and Black and Brown students, as well as neurodivergent students, disproportionately facing court involvement all over the state.

Luckily, schools can play a direct role in protecting youth from unfair funnelment into the justice system. MNPS teachers, social workers, and other personnel, through Project 1:1, can intervene in students' lives and create powerfully protective relationships that will reduce the effects of trauma and protect against the pipeline. Programs like BBBS have proven that mentorship is an effective intervention for delinquency, and schools in Nashville would better serve their at-risk students by implementing a mentorship program aimed at reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors.

The social work profession in particular has a commitment to achieve equal opportunity for all people by dismantling inequality and addressing racial and social injustices. The profession has also demonstrated a commitment to encouraging healthy relationships as one of the greatest protective factors against trauma caused by exposure to violence (AASWSW, 2020). Therefore, social workers in and outside of the Public Defender's Office and Metro Nashville

Public Schools are positioned at the frontline of the battle to halt the school-to-prison pipeline, and they can play an instrumental role by both personally participating in, as well as facilitating, Project 1:1.

If this program were to be adopted across Davidson county, at-risk students would likely experience an increase in meaningful school interactions and activities, as well as greater commitment and connection to school—which are all identified by the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth as protective factors for delinquency (2012). Furthermore, students would have a protective relationship with a strong, supportive adult, who could fill in the potential gaps in parental support and protect against trauma caused by exposure to violence. Imagine the powerful effects so many protective factors could have on students throughout MNPS involved or at-risk of becoming involved in Juvenile Court. On the other hand, if we fail to intervene, systemic injustices will continue to unfairly funnel the most vulnerable Nashville students into the juvenile justice system.

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Appendix

Risk and Protective Factor Framework

Risk and protective factor-focused prevention is based on a simple premise: To prevent a problem from happening, we need to identify the factors that increase the risk of that problem developing and then find ways to reduce the risks. Researchers at the University of Washington have identified risk factors that can contribute to five problem behaviors and protective factors that work to buffer children from risk. Risk and protective factors are grouped in 4 domains: community, family, school and peer/individual. In the tables below, the following abbreviations are used:

ATOD stands for Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Use
ASB stands for Antisocial Behaviors
PSI stands for Prosocial Involvement

	YOUTH AT RISK	Problem behaviors: Substance abuse	Delinquency	Teen pregnancy	School drop-out	Violence
Community	Availability of drugs & firearms	✓				✓
	Community norms & laws favorable toward drug use	✓				
	Transitions & mobility	✓	✓		✓	
	Low neighborhood attachment & commun. disorganization	✓	✓			✓
	Extreme economic & social deprivation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Family	Family history of high risk behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Family management problems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Family conflict	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Favorable parental attitudes & involvement in the problem behavior	✓	✓			✓
School	Early & persistent antisocial behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Academic failure in elementary school	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Lack of commitment to school	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Individual/ peer	Alienation & rebelliousness	✓	✓		✓	
	Friends who engage in a problem behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Favorable attitudes toward the problem behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Early initiation of the problem behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

A (✓) indicates that at least two longitudinal studies have found the risk factor to predict the problem behavior.

Source: David Hawkins & Richard Catalano,
Social Development Research Group
University of Washington

Community Domain Risk Factors	
Low Neighborhood Attachment	A low level of bonding to the neighborhood is related to higher levels of juvenile crime and drug selling.
Community Disorganization	Research has shown that neighborhoods with high population density, lack of natural surveillance of public places, physical deterioration, and high rates of adult crime also have higher rates of juvenile crime and drug selling.
Laws and Norms Favorable Toward Drug Use	Research has shown that legal restrictions on alcohol and tobacco use, such as raising the legal drinking age, restricting smoking in public places, and increased taxation have been followed by decreases in consumption. Moreover, national surveys of high school seniors have shown that shifts in normative attitudes toward drug use have preceded changes in prevalence of use.
Perceived Availability of Drugs	The availability of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, and other illegal drugs has been related to the use of these substances by adolescents.
Perceived Availability of Handguns	The availability of handguns has also been related to the use of these substances by adolescents.
Community Domain Protective Factors	
Opportunities for Prosocial Involvement	When opportunities are available in a community for positive participation, children are less likely to engage in substance use and other problem behaviors.
Rewards for Prosocial Involvement	Rewards for positive participation in activities help children bond to the community, thus lowering their risk for substance use.
Family Domain Risk Factors	
Poor Family Management	Parents' use of inconsistent and/or unusually harsh or severe punishment with their children places them at higher risk for substance use and other problem behaviors. Also, parents' failure to provide clear expectations and to monitor their children's behavior makes it more likely that they will engage in drug abuse whether or not there are family drug problems.
Family Conflict	Children raised in families high in conflict, whether or not the child is directly involved in the conflict, appear at risk for both delinquency and drug use.
Family History of Antisocial Behavior	When children are raised in a family with a history of problem behaviors (e.g., violence or ATOD use), the children are more likely to engage in these behaviors.

Parental Attitudes Favorable Toward Drug Use	In families where parents use illegal drugs, are heavy users of alcohol, or are tolerant of children's use, children are more likely to become drug abusers during adolescence. The risk is further increased if parents involve children in their own drug (or alcohol) using behavior, for example, asking the child to light the parent's cigarette or get the parent a beer from the refrigerator.
Parental Attitudes Favorable Toward Antisocial Behavior	In families where parents are tolerant of their child's antisocial behavior (i.e. fighting, stealing, defacing property, etc.), children are more likely to become drug abusers during adolescence.
Family Domain Protective Factors	
Family Attachment	Young people who feel that they are a valued part of their family are less likely to engage in substance use and other problem behaviors.
Opportunities for Prosocial Involvement	Young people who are exposed to more opportunities to participate meaningfully in the responsibilities and activities of the family are less likely to engage in drug use and other problem behaviors.
Rewards for Prosocial Involvement	When parents, siblings, and other family members praise, encourage, and attend to things done well by their child, children are less likely to engage in substance use and problem behaviors.
School Domain Risk Factors	
Academic Failure	Beginning in the late elementary grades (grades 4-6) academic failure increases the risk of both drug abuse and delinquency. It appears that the experience of failure itself, for whatever reasons, increases the risk of problem behaviors.
Low Commitment to School	Surveys of high school seniors have shown that the use of hallucinogens, cocaine, heroin, stimulants, and sedatives or non-medically prescribed tranquilizers is significantly lower among students who expect to attend college than among those who do not. Factors such as liking school, spending time on homework, and perceiving the coursework as relevant are also negatively related to drug abuse.
School Domain Protective Factors	
Opportunities for Prosocial Involvement	When young people are given more opportunities to participate meaningfully in important activities at school, they are less likely to engage in drug use and other problem behaviors.
Rewards for Prosocial Involvement	When young people are recognized and rewarded for their contributions at school, they are less likely to be involved in substance use and other problem behaviors.
Peer-Individual Risk Factors	
Rebelliousness	Young people who do not feel part of society, are not bound by rules, don't believe in trying to be successful or responsible, or who take an active rebellious stance toward society, are at higher risk of abusing drugs. In addition, high tolerance for deviance, a strong need for independence and normlessness have all been linked with drug use.

Early Initiation of Drug Use	Early onset of drug use predicts misuse of drugs. The earlier the onset of any drug use, the greater the involvement in other drug use and the greater frequency of use. Onset of drug use prior to the age of 15 is a consistent predictor of drug abuse, and a later age of onset of drug use has been shown to predict lower drug involvement and a greater probability of discontinuation of use.
Early Initiation of Antisocial Behavior	Early onset of antisocial behaviors such as being suspended from school, arrests, carrying handguns, fighting, etc. makes young people more likely to be involved in substance abuse.
Attitudes Favorable Toward Drug Use and Antisocial Behavior	During the elementary school years, most children express anti-drug, anti-crime, and pro-social attitudes and have difficulty imagining why people use drugs or engage in antisocial behaviors. However, in middle school, as more youth are exposed to others who use drugs and engage in antisocial behavior, their attitudes often shift toward greater acceptance of these behaviors. Youth who express positive attitudes toward drug use and antisocial behavior are more likely to engage in a variety of problem behaviors, including drug use.
Perceived Risk of Drug Use	Young people who do not perceive drug use to be risky are far more likely to engage in drug use.
Interaction with Antisocial Peers	Young people who associate with peers who engage in problem behaviors are at higher risk for engaging in antisocial behavior themselves.
Friends' Use of Drugs	Young people who associate with peers who engage in alcohol or substance abuse are much more likely to engage in the same behavior. Peer drug use has consistently been found to be among the strongest predictors of substance use among youth. Even when young people come from well-managed families and do not experience other risk factors, spending time with friends who use drugs greatly increases the risk of that problem developing.
Depressive Symptoms	Young people who express feelings of sadness for long periods over the past year and who have negative attitudes about them-selves and life in general are more likely to use drugs.
Rewards for Antisocial Behavior	Young people who receive rewards for their antisocial behavior are at higher risk for engaging further in antisocial behavior and substance use.
Peer-Individual Protective Factors	
Religiosity	Young people who regularly attend religious services are less likely to engage in problem behaviors.
Social Skills	Young people who are socially competent and engage in positive interpersonal relations with their peers are less likely to use drugs and engage in other problem behaviors.
Belief in the Moral Order	Young people who have a belief in what is "right" or "wrong" are less likely to use drugs.
Prosocial Involvement	Participation in positive school and community activities helps provide protection for youth.
Rewards for Prosocial Involvement	Young people who are rewarded for working hard in school and volunteering in the community are less likely to engage in problem behavior.

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youth/cchy/student survey/risk protective/risk and protective factor framework overview