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ISSUE BRIEF:

PATHWAYS TO EQUITY: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM

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Introduction

Children are our future—and today’s youth are tomorrow’s leaders. Yet far too many young people are denied the opportunity to thrive due to deep-rooted disparities within their communities and the very public systems meant to support them. Nowhere is this injustice more visible than in the juvenile justice system, where marginalized youth—especially Black and Latino adolescents—face disproportionate rates of arrest, incarceration, and recidivism. These outcomes are not inevitable; they are the result of systemic failures that criminalize trauma, ignore potential, and perpetuate cycles of disadvantage. As many are working to build a more just and equitable society, this brief proposes a reimagined approach to youth justice—starting with a framework rooted in healing, opportunity, and hope.

The Social Policy Institute (SPI), a nonprofit affiliate of the SDSU School of Social Work, partners with public systems and cross-sector leaders to strengthen youth leadership and improve community well-being. By bridging academic and community knowledge through training, research, advocacy, and collaboration, SPI supports efforts to transform systems that impact justice-involved youth and families. While acknowledging the persistent challenges highlighted in this brief, we recognize and honor the work of individuals and organizations driving meaningful change. This resource is intended to spark dialogue, encourage collaboration, and inspire progress toward a more just and youth-centered system.

SPI spearheads several community-based projects that support the wellness of local San Diegans and transform county systems. One major project that launched in Fall 2023 is HOPE at SDSU.



Background: Positive Childhood Experiences & the HOPE Framework

The **Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences** (HOPE) framework uses evidence-based principles that support **Positive Childhood Experiences** (PCEs). PCEs allow youth, students, and adults of all ages to form strong relationships and meaningful connections, cultivate a positive self-image and self-worth, experience a sense of belonging, and build skills to cope with stress in healthy ways. [2] .

SPI is passionate about bringing the HOPE framework to San Diego State University (SDSU) and expanding its application outside of childhood to college students, the workforce, and older adults, to foster healthier outcomes.

The HOPE framework identifies **Four Building Blocks** essential for well-being: [2]



This Issue Brief explores the Juvenile Justice System through the lens of the HOPE Framework, examining how its principles can enhance outcomes and well-being for justice-involved youth. It provides an overview of the system, explores its alignment with the HOPE Building Blocks, and proposes a HOPE-inspired approach to diversion and community integration efforts that support meaningful juvenile justice reform.

Unequal Justice: Disparities in the Juvenile Justice System

National Data

Across the United States, data reveal stark racial disparities across every stage of the juvenile justice process. From arrest to incarceration and recidivism, youth of color—particularly Black and Latino youth—are consistently overrepresented and subjected to harsher outcomes compared to their white peers. These disparities are often rooted in systemic factors such as implicit bias, socio-economic inequality, and differences in policing and school discipline policies. [4] The figures below highlight how these disparities manifest in key system indicators.

<i>Arrest Rates</i>	<i>Placement Rates</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Black youth are arrested at a rate of 2,487 per 100,000, which is 2.3 times higher than white youth. [5]• Research from the Sentencing Project suggests that Black and Latino youth are more likely to be arrested even when engaging in the same behaviors as white youth. [5]	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Black youth are 4.7 times more likely to be placed in juvenile facilities than white youth, with a placement rate of 228 per 100,000 compared to 49 per 100,000 for white youth. [6]• Latino youth face a placement rate of 57 per 100,000, which is 16% higher than that of white youth. [5]
<i>Incarceration Rates</i>	<i>Recidivism Rates</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Black youth are nearly five times as likely to be incarcerated as their white peers. [7]• In certain states like Connecticut, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Illinois, Black youth are at least 10 times more likely to be held in juvenile detention than white youth. [7]	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Youth of color face higher recidivism rates due to systemic barriers, including lack of access to rehabilitative programs, and continued over-policing in their communities. [8]• Juvenile facilities often fail to provide adequate education and mental health services, leaving youth unprepared for reintegration into society. [8]

Unequal Justice: Disparities in the Juvenile Justice System

San Diego-Specific Data

Local data mirrors national trends, revealing deep racial inequities within San Diego County's juvenile justice system. Black and Latino youth are disproportionately incarcerated at rates far exceeding those of their white peers, highlighting the urgent need for localized reform efforts. The figures below illustrate the extent of these disparities over recent years.

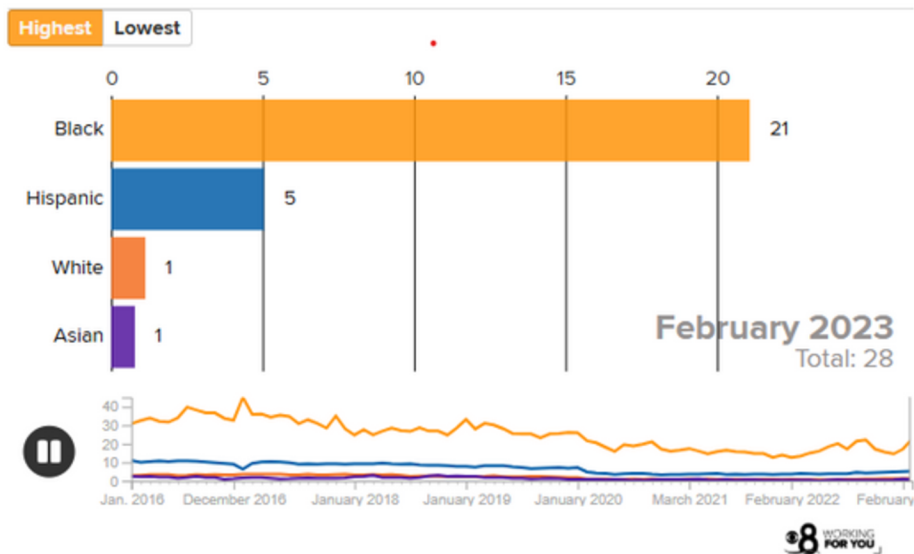
Black Youth

From 2016 through February 2023, Black juveniles in San Diego County were incarcerated at a rate **13 times higher** than their white counterparts. In January 2017, the peak rate was **45 per 10,000** Black youth. [9]

Latino Youth

During the same period, Latino youth were incarcerated at a rate **three times** higher than white youth. The highest rate was in January 2016, with approximately **11 per 10,000** Latino youth incarcerated. [9]

Youth Incarceration Per 10,000 By Race and Ethnicity



Policing the Playground: How School Policies Criminalize Marginalized Youth

The **School-to-Prison Pipeline** is a major factor fueling racial disparities in juvenile justice. It refers to policies and practices that push students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds—out of schools and into the criminal justice system. This systemic issue is exemplified by the case of N.B., a 10-year-old Black girl with a known disability, who was handcuffed and arrested by three police officers at Honowai Elementary School in Honolulu. The incident stemmed from a cartoon-style drawing made by N.B. and other students as a response to bullying. Despite N.B.'s objections, another child shared the drawing with a student mentioned in it. Although school officials initially took no action, a parent demanded police intervention the next day.

Without notifying N.B.'s mother or allowing her to see her daughter, officers interrogated N.B. in a secluded room, handcuffed her, and transported her in a squad car to Pearl City Police Station, where no charges were filed. The handcuffs allegedly left marks on her wrists, and none of the other students, who were not Black, faced investigation or discipline. N.B.'s mother filed a civil rights lawsuit alleging false imprisonment, racial discrimination, and excessive force, emphasizing that her daughter, due to her young age, small size, and disability, did not pose any threat or resist arrest. The officers sought dismissal of the case, claiming qualified immunity protected them from legal action. [10]

The disproportionate arrest rates and sentencing practices among youth of color reflect a highly punitive juvenile justice system that often targets marginalized adolescents rather than supports them. N.B.'s experience illustrates how systemic forces can transform a schoolyard incident into a criminal matter—particularly for Black children with disabilities. Institutionalized racism is evident in school policies that involve law enforcement in minor disciplinary issues. Implicit bias plays out when officers and school officials perceive Black children as more threatening or disruptive, even when their behavior mirrors that of their white peers—none of whom in N.B.'s case were investigated or disciplined. Her story is not an isolated incident, but a vivid example of how systemic failures criminalize normal childhood behavior and expose vulnerable youth to lifelong consequences. Had N.B. attended a well-resourced school with trauma-informed staff, she might have received support for her bullying experience instead of being handcuffed and humiliated—highlighting an urgent need for meaningful reform.

Intersectional Impact: The cross-section of Race & Class in Juvenile Justice

Socioeconomic Inequality & Juvenile Arrest Rates

Socio-economic inequality plays a significant role in shaping the arrest and incarceration rates of juveniles. Due to historical policing practices and political or social pressures, law enforcement agencies often allocate more resources to patrolling low-income neighborhoods, leading to higher rates of police stops, searches, and arrests. [11] This heightened surveillance results in more frequent encounters between juveniles and law enforcement, increasing the likelihood of arrest. Systemic biases and stereotypes about low-income youth, particularly those from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, can lead to harsher treatment by law enforcement. Officers may perceive these juveniles as more likely to engage in criminal behavior, contributing to higher arrest rates. [12] Over-policing can create a **cycle of criminalization**, where juveniles are more likely to have criminal records, limiting their future opportunities and increasing the likelihood of recidivism. [8] This cycle contributes to the long-term entrenchment of crime within these communities.



Socioeconomic Influences of Juvenile Delinquency

Low-income communities often lack access to quality education, extracurricular programs, and employment opportunities, increasing the likelihood of juvenile delinquency as youth seek alternative means of economic survival or social engagement. [13] Environmental and social factors such as poverty, unstable family dynamics, gang violence, and deviant peer influences contribute to criminal behavior, particularly among Black and brown youth. [14] **The Chicago School of Criminology** highlights how social disorganization in urban communities exacerbates delinquency. [15] Underfunded schools frequently rely on law enforcement for disciplinary measures, fueling the **School-to-Prison Pipeline**, disproportionately affecting students of color. [16] Exposure to deviant role models, inadequate parenting, and unstable home and school environments further increase the risk of juvenile involvement in the justice system. [14]

Pathways to Prevention: A Developmental Approach to Juvenile Justice Reform

Over the last 10 years, juvenile justice has moved towards more rehabilitative forms of system reform, utilizing evidence-based practices that incorporate trauma-informed care, gender-specific approaches, and community-based intervention [17]. Diversion programs provide at-risk youth alternatives to formal court processing that aim to redirect young offenders away from the traditional justice system. These programs are used to address minor offenses by providing rehabilitative services such as counseling, education, community service, and mentoring, rather than imposing punitive measures like detention or probation. The HOPE framework can be applied to existing diversion programs by leveraging the four HOPE Building Blocks—**Relationships, Environment, Engagement, and Emotional Growth**. A HOPE-inspired program can amplify existing systems by providing tangible metrics for evaluating rehabilitation efforts. The proposed components of a HOPE-inspired diversion program are outlined on the subsequent page:



Youth Justice Pillars: Diversion Program Components

<i>Relationships: Building Trust and Supportive Connections</i>	<i>Environment: Creating Safe and Nurturing Spaces</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentorship: Pair youth with trained mentors who provide guidance, encouragement, and positive role modeling. • Restorative Justice Circles: Facilitate dialogue between youth, victims, and community members to foster empathy, accountability, and healing. • Family Engagement: Involve family members in the rehabilitation process through family counseling and support services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe Spaces: Establish community centers and after-school programs offering recreational activities, academic support, and life skills training. • Trauma-Informed Care: Ensure that all staff are trained in trauma-informed practices to provide compassionate and effective support. • Culturally Responsive Services: Tailor programs to respect and reflect the diverse backgrounds of participants.
<i>Engagement: Empowering Youth Through Active Participation</i>	<i>Emotional Growth: Supporting Mental and Emotional Well-Being</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education: Offer tutoring, GED preparation, and vocational training to help youth achieve academic and career goals. • Community Service: Involve youth in service projects that allow them to give back and repair harm caused by their actions. • Life Skills: Teach financial literacy, communication skills, and emotional regulation to prepare youth for independent living. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling Services: Provide access to individual and group counseling to help youth process emotions, develop resilience, and improve mental health. • Emotional Regulation Training: Teach youth skills such as mindfulness, stress management, and conflict resolution to help them navigate challenges effectively. • Peer Support Groups: Create peer-led groups where youth can share experiences, build trust, and support one another in their personal growth.

Equity in Practice: Framework Guide for Implementation

Juvenile Justice agencies play a critical role in guiding system-involved youth toward positive futures. The adaptability of the HOPE framework offers a comprehensive approach to diversion, allowing agencies to implement it as a complete diversion program or enhance existing efforts. A Juvenile Justice HOPE framework approach would incorporate robust capacity-building, personalized case management, and routine program evaluation to ensure effectiveness and sustainability. The following section provides a guide that can be used for implementation.

1



Capacity Building & Training

- **HOPE Training:** Deliver targeted training to staff on framework application.
- **Cultural Competency Training:** Offer educational services to partners on cultural awareness & implicit bias to better address diverse populations.

4



Progress Monitoring

- Conduct regular check-ins with youth to track progress and address barriers.
- Use restorative justice practices to ensure youth take responsibility for their actions while focusing on growth and healing.

2



Referral & Intake Process

- Youth are referred by schools, law enforcement, or the justice system as an alternative to formal charges.
- Each youth undergoes an assessment to identify their needs, strengths, and risk factors.

5



Routine Program Evaluation

- **Develop Metrics:** Monitor recidivism, academic performance, and employment outcomes.
- **Youth Feedback:** Collect participant feedback to improve services.
- **Ongoing Training:** Offer staff development to uphold evidence-based practices.

3



Individualized Case Plans

- Develop personalized case plans that outline goals, interventions, and milestones for each youth.
- Assign a case manager to monitor progress, provide support, and coordinate services.

6



Sustainability Planning

- **Secure Funding:** Identify funding opportunities to support ongoing HOPE initiatives.
- **Policy Integration:** Work towards embedding HOPE principles into standard juvenile justice policies and practices for long-term sustainability.

Partnerships in Practice: Community Collaboration & Anticipated Outcomes for Youth Diversion

Collaboration among key stakeholders is integral to the diversion of system-involved youth, ensuring a holistic and coordinated approach that promotes long-term rehabilitation and reintegration. The following identifies three key community partnerships—including, but not limited to, **educational institutions, law enforcement agencies, and social service providers**—that juvenile justice agencies can collaborate with to support the development of a HOPE-inspired diversion program. Additionally, anticipated outcomes are outlined to indicate the projected long-term benefits of adopting this collaborative approach.

Collaboration and Community Partners

Educational Institutions: Schools serve as **early intervention sites** by identifying at-risk youth and referring them to diversion programs, thus preventing formal system involvement.



Law Enforcement Agencies: Officers can utilize **personal discretion** to divert youth from prosecution toward rehabilitative services, mitigating long-term system involvement.



Social Service Providers: Social workers offer **trauma-informed counseling** to address root causes of delinquency and promote healing.



Anticipated Outcomes

Reduced Recidivism: A focus on rehabilitation and personal growth lowers the likelihood of reoffending, reduces long-term system involvement and enhances public safety.



Improved Academic Performance: Educational support and reengagement help youth succeed in school, fosters self-efficacy and reduces risk of dropout.



Increased Employment Opportunities: Job training and internships provide stable career pathways, promoting economic empowerment.



Greater Community Involvement: Community service projects, youth advisory boards, and restorative circles fosters a sense of belonging.



Conclusion

The HOPE framework offers a transformative approach to juvenile justice reform by prioritizing positive childhood experiences, restorative practices, and community-based interventions. By replacing punitive measures with rehabilitative strategies, HOPE offers a pathway to reducing systemic disparities in juvenile incarceration. Implementing a HOPE-inspired diversion program within juvenile justice agencies requires collaboration among key stakeholders to create sustainable, long-term solutions that promote resilience, equity, and opportunity for all youth.

Through evidence-based interventions rooted in the Four Building Blocks—**Relationships, Environment, Engagement, and Emotional Growth**—the HOPE framework not only reduces system involvement but also fosters a sense of belonging and personal development, while facilitating successful reintegration. By shifting the focus from punishment to empowerment, this approach offers a roadmap for a more just and effective system—one that cultivates the potential of justice-involved youth and invests in their future, rather than criminalizing their circumstances.

As communities and institutions work together to integrate HOPE principles into policy and practice, the potential for systemic change expands. By embracing a model that values prevention, rehabilitation, and equity, we can redefine juvenile justice as a system that ensures a brighter future for vulnerable populations and society at large.



About the Author: Jessica Laing is a third-year Criminal Justice major with a minor in Sociology at San Diego State University. She will graduate in December 2025 and plans to pursue a Master's in Public Policy with a focus on social and urban policy. Jessica is passionate about advancing restorative justice and developing federal policies that promote equity and improve outcomes within the U.S. justice system.

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