

Testimony of
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on the subject of
“An Ounce of Prevention: Investments in Juvenile Justice Programs”
before the Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee
of the United States House Committee on Education and Labor
September 8, 2022.

Chair Bonamici, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services, I am Dr. Stephanie Hawkins, I use she/her pronouns, and I am the Vice President and founding director of the Transformative Research Unit for Equity at RTI International. RTI is an independent, nonprofit research institute dedicated to improving the human condition. Research and data are core components to policy making, and I appreciate the opportunity to share my testimony today in my role as a research scientist.

For context, I received doctoral training in clinical psychology from Howard University in a program that is grounded in community-engaged research to serve globally unserved settings. I received postdoctoral training in violence prevention research from Stanford University's Medical Center. During my research career of more than 25 years, prevention and equity has been the through line in my research. I've led national research studies that span several topics relevant to our discussion today, including girls' involvement in the juvenile justice system, boys and men of color and their experiences with community violence, and suspension diversion programming as a strategy to interrupt the school to prison pipeline.

It is important to acknowledge that the risks associated with juvenile justice system involvement are not equally distributed in the United States. In 2020, counties with the highest poverty level had firearm homicide rates 4.5 times as high and firearm suicide rates 1.3 times as high as counties with the lowest poverty level.ⁱ For many Black, Hispanic/Latin, and Native American youth, the trauma they experience in their communities is not fully captured in a post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis. History and research tell us this diagnosis is reserved for experiences of significant trauma that is re-experienced once the trauma has passed. For many young people born into violence-burdened and under-resourced communities, there is no “post” to their trauma.ⁱⁱ They must confront it every day. Investments in prevention need to address the broader structural factors that our young people must live in and navigate.

There are 3 levels of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary prevention is focused on avoiding the initial occurrence of a problem, secondary prevention is focused on preventing repeated occurrences of behaviors through more targeted interventions, and tertiary prevention is the most-intensive level of support and intervention. This prevention level is focused on reducing the impact of behaviors on a person's ability to function in the least restrictive setting.

Investments should include a combination of primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions to achieve a meaningful degree of prevention and protection; however, I believe primary prevention offers the greatest societal value for investment. Primary prevention efforts that prioritize the underlying structures responsible for inequitable distribution of risk can create thriving communities with resource-rich educational institutions, well-functioning public services, and economic opportunity for all residents.

The amended Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP A) states, “Juveniles who are known to the juvenile justice system before attaining 13 years of age are responsible for a disproportionate share of serious crimes and violence.”ⁱⁱⁱ If we embrace primary prevention as a means of avoiding the initial occurrence of a problem, then we can scaffold our young people, their families, and their surrounding communities with structural support.

For example, we’ve known for decades that lead exposure in childhood can increase risk-taking behaviors, which has been connected to an increase in violent behavior and crime later in life. Thus, ensuring families do not reside in homes with lead-based paint is more than a public health effort — it, too, can be an investment in juvenile justice prevention. Similarly, research suggests that interventions to prevent people from experiencing homelessness^{iv} can also reduce their involvement in crime, which makes access to safe and healthy housing a wise investment in juvenile justice prevention.

Secondary prevention efforts, like diversion programs, redirect young people from the justice system through programming, supervision, and supports. A suspension diversion program like the SHAPE program implemented in the Shelby County School District holds great promise. School suspensions have large negative impacts on longer-term outcomes that mirror the negative impact of early exposure to the criminal justice system. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Black students, who account for 15% of total student enrollment, were expelled at rates that were more than twice their share of total student enrollment.^v We can reimagine the type of structural supports and resources needed to support these students and the staff who need effective behavioral management strategies for students who violate discipline policies. A suspension diversion program can also be considered a juvenile justice prevention strategy.

When we focus on the broader structural factors that influence the lives and outcomes of youth, rather than interventions designed only to change their behavior, we can amplify the impact of our federal programs and thereby empower our youngest citizens – especially Black, Hispanic/Latin, and Native American individuals – to achieve their greatest potential.

ⁱ [Firearm Deaths Grow, Disparities Widen | VitalSigns | CDC](#)

ⁱⁱ [Healing-in-Color-Action-Brief-1.pdf \(start2heal.org\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/media/document/JJDP A-of-1974-as-Amended-12-21-18.pdf>

^{iv} [More Jail Time or More Housing? - National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)

^v U.S. Education Department, Office for Civil Rights, 2017-18 Civil Rights Data Collection, released October 2020, updated May 2021, available at <https://ocrdata.ed.gov>