Research Question: Can teaching black youth personal development, financial skills decrease recidivism of Black juveniles in detention centers?

Background

Black youth are overrepresented within the juvenile justice system due to stereotypes, systematic racism, high crime environments, and low economic statuses that exist within their community. High poverty rates are within the Black community, from a lack of access to higher education and high paying jobs. Also, there is a lack of socially productive adult role models with acceptable jobs, due to drug dealing or gang affiliation being common in Black communities. This can lead Black youth to a life of crime or being unsupervised only to end up hanging around adults participating in criminal activity. Also, instead of having to worry about traditional things like college or high school prom, Black youth have to worry about economic hardships, police brutality, or “The Code of the Streets”. The “code” refers to resulting in violence for respect or committing illegal acts in order to survive. Majority of the time, the inner city areas that Black youth live in follow different priorities then the rest of society. In their neighborhood they are only worried about surviving by any means necessary. That type of stress on a young adult can make them impressionable to do anything, even commit crimes to survive, which leads them in the justice system. To take things further, incarcerated youth have to deal with the psychological trauma of imprisonment with little to no guidance from a caring adult. Once incarcerated Black youth are released, it will be difficult for them to reintegrate with society, after going through these traumatic experiences, leading them back to a life of crime to survive. Finding alternatives such as personal development, educational, and financial services for incarcerated youth will allow them to focus on wanting a better life. Also, these services will give them the tools and caring adults that will keep them on the right path to success. Not to
mention taxpayers’ dollars will be saved and communities will become safer. In all it will be easier for juveniles to reintegrate into a productive society after a life of crime.

Executive Summary

By not normally having supervision while at home because most Black households have single parent mothers who work two jobs, the only place where Black youth get hope is at school. Unfortunately, most schools in Black neighborhoods have low quality education, teachers who don’t understand the trauma their students go through, and the rough treatment being put on students. This leaves Black students having a bad experience with school, leading them to violence, dropping out, or later engaging in criminal activity. “Before entering the judicial system, many incarcerated juveniles accumulate negative school experiences that include truancy, suspension, expulsion, dropping out, and other forms of academic failure.”(Jäggi et al). Not having a positive life or academic influences at school leave many juveniles to later be incarcerated or unemployed. In order to survive, Black youth will need money to either provide for themselves or help out with family bills. However, Black youth have extremely low employment rates and employer response rates. “In 1983 a bare 45 percent of black men who were aged 16 to 21 and out of school were employed, whereas 73 percent of their white counterparts were employed” (Freeman & Holzer, 3). This disportion can be linked to Black youth not having as many opportunities as their white peers or access to quality education. This leaves them underrepresented in the workforce, and further stimulates the stereotype that Black youth are lazy. So in result, instead of getting a job Black youth will sell drugs, join gangs, or commit burglary as an alternative. These alternatives are not one that Black youth are eager to make, rather it is the only ones they were shown so it feels like they don’t have a choice.

After crimes like these are committed by Black youth, some will inevitably face the consequences of being put into the juvenile justice system. Since American culture believes that punishment and fear can deter crime, Black youth will be used as an “lesson” for others to remember. So for instance Black youth will receive a harsher or longer sentence than their white peers, because Black youth are more likely to get arrested for committing similar crimes. This shows how “race directly and indirectly influences court outcomes, racial biases are more common in the front-end of court processes, and racial disparities accumulate as youth are processed further into the system.” (Rodriguez, 392). Racial influences that heavily influence
Court outcomes are stereotypes that are attached to minorities, specifically Black people. Negative connotations attached to Black people are being lazy, violent, or coming from bad families. So when juveniles are faced in front of a judge these biases will be in their unconscious mind, making it easier for them to want to put Black youth in the system.

Most incarcerated juveniles have high illiteracy scores and no clue of what they want to do with their lives. “Several studies have found that school performance while incarcerated was associated with less recidivism, higher likelihood of community school enrollment, and increased access to college or employment opportunities across sex and race/ethnicity.” (Jäggi et al). With more incarcerated juveniles wanting to go back to school and getting higher education degrees, they have great potential to be employed. It gives hope that Black youth will be able to shy away from a life of crime once released because they will be focused on bettering their future.

Key Stakeholders & Interview Response

The major players within the incarceration of Black youth are police officers and judges. While these two parties have the job of keeping society safe, they also have the job of being fair. However, when it comes to Black youth this is often not the case. Black youth are more likely to get arrested by the police because they are patrolling high crime, inner city areas, rather than majority white neighborhoods. This not only increases the imprisonment of Black youth but it also decreases the police's perception of Black youth being children. If Black youth are seen more as adults, it would be difficult for a police officer to give them a warning, unlike their white peers. This can also be applied to judges because they determine the fate of Black youth with the same perception. Instead of finding rehabilitation alternatives, judges feel as though they must make a statement by presenting a harsh sentence to deter crime. Sometimes judges may do this unconsciously, however it still leaves Black youth in the same predicament.

The major players that can contribute to Black youth having a better future are organizations providing juvenile justice support and juvenile detention wardens. With the help of wardens, they can create a budget that incorporates educational, personal development, and financial service programs. These programs can help juveniles learn how to make effective decisions and how to be financially stable. The warden can also have mandatory sessions for his staff on how to be a positive influence on incarcerated juveniles, and how to deal with difficult
situations without violence or aggression. By seeing officers as an example, incarcerated juveniles can learn the same lessons by having an example. Not to mention that the supporting organizations will have staff that will provide vital information and motivation that will encourage incarcerated juveniles to follow a path away from crime once released.

Appraisal of Past Views

○ Before justice reform became as relevant as it is today, the idea of punishment was the goal of the justice system instead of rehabilitation. By using punishment the justice system thought that prisoners would not want to endure the struggles or prison again. Also, they thought those who saw people get punished would be scared to commit crime in the first place. This can be seen when Black men are sentenced harshly for crimes commonly committed in their area. They are used as an “example” for those who will continue to commit crimes. However, this theory is not effective because crime rates and recidivism are increasing every year. Prisoners will only get used to this harsh treatment and will continue to commit crimes even after being released because their root problems were never addressed. While incarcerated juveniles go through the same trauma as adult prisoners do. They experience aggressive treatment by staff members and mental illnesses, which only worsens the state of juveniles for when they are to be released.

Spring Project Plan

During the spring semester I plan to volunteer at a nonprofit organization in DC that focuses on helping incarcerated Black youth. Some different organizations I’m thinking about working with are Georgetown Juvenile Justice Clinic and Initiative, National Juvenile Justice Network, and the National Juvenile Defender Center. Then I plan to create a blog about my experience and gained knowledge while volunteering for one of these organizations. Some topics I plan to cover are the benefits of educational, career, and financial resources within juvenile detention centers. I would like to provide information on the struggles of Black teens and how they can fall into a life of crime. Lastly, I would like to cover how we as a society can stop projecting stereotypes on Black youth, and instead find ways to empower Black communities. I
plan on making 2-3 blog posts a month and will volunteer with my chosen organization for the entirety of the spring semester.

Conclusion

Based on my findings it is evident that educational/personal development programs are needed within juvenile detention centers. Not only do they make the detention environment safer, but it allows incarcerated juveniles to find productivity within their daily life. It provides them with the care they didn’t receive prior to incarceration and helps them integrate into society easier after being released. Putting these services in detention centers will overwhelmingly help Black incarcerated youth, because they are overrepresented within the community. It can change society’s negative view on Black people as a whole, because they can see the change from a “criminal” to a productive member of society.
Sources


