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Data Network



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THE INTERSECTION OF CHILD WELFARE & JUVENILE JUSTICE:

Key Findings
from the Los Angeles
Dual System Youth Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research convincingly demonstrates that many youth cross between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and there is a need for reliable point estimates to better address “dual system” contact. Using data from the Los Angeles (LA) Probation Department, all youth born in/after 1998 with a first juvenile justice petition between 2014 and 2016 were matched to statewide child welfare records. 6,877 youth were identified with a petition and 64.1% of those youth had touched both systems (i.e., the youth matched to a child welfare record with an investigation, case, or out-of-home placement).

The majority of youth with a petition were male (74.1%) and Hispanic (59.7%). The patterns of dual system involvement varied across gender and race/ethnicity. Overall, female youth in all racial/ethnic groups were more likely than their male counterparts to have dual system involvement, and Black youth were more likely to have dual system involvement than other racial/ethnic groups. The risk for dual system contact was even greater when gender and race/ethnicity were examined together: 80% of Black females were identified as having dual system involvement compared to 55% of White males.

Dual system involvement varied by type and timing and was defined by four pathways based on which system the youth interacted with first and whether the youth had contact with both systems at the same time. The majority of these youth did not touch both systems at the same time, and nearly all had contact with the child welfare system before juvenile justice. Comparison of pathways of dual system involvement also revealed differences in duration and intensity of child welfare involvement (e.g., low and limited, long and extensive) and differences in juvenile justice system experiences (e.g., offense type, recidivism). Youth with the most extensive child welfare involvement had the greatest risk of juvenile justice detention and of subsequent recidivism.

The finding that almost two-thirds of youth in the LA County juvenile justice system were previously involved with child welfare suggests an opportunity for prevention, as well as a need for recalibration and realignment. The results underscore the importance of a prevention-oriented approach to supporting children, youth, and families across the board, both to prevent and reduce contact with child welfare and to reduce delinquency and dual system involvement. Prevention of dual system contact should be anchored within a full array of preventive supports and services, starting with community-based supports for families (primary prevention), services to mitigate and address risk (secondary prevention), and continuing services for families during and after their involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (tertiary prevention). The study underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to support children, youth, and families in their communities and public-private sector partnerships to fund and administer needed resources, supports, opportunities, and services.

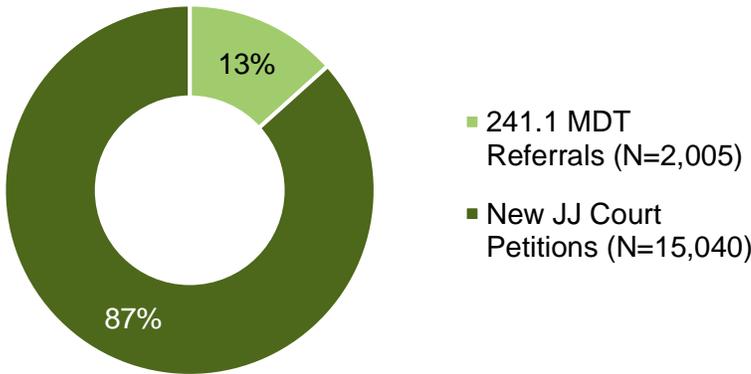
PROJECT BACKGROUND

Youth with an open child welfare case who enter the juvenile justice system are typically described as “dual status”. In LA County, these youth are identified through the County’s Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) 241.1 Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) Protocol. Beginning in 2012, all 241.1 referrals were entered into a single database.

The WIC 241.1 Protocol requires the delinquency court to refer all youth with an open child welfare case to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) WIC 241.1 Unit. The DCFS 241.1 Unit then convenes a multidisciplinary team comprised of representatives from the DCFS 241.1 Unit, the Probation Dual Supervision Unit, Juvenile Court Mental Health Services, and an education specialist to complete a joint assessment for the delinquency court.

241.1 MDT referral numbers between 2016 and 2018 were used to estimate the prevalence of dual status youth relative to all delinquency petitions. As shown in Figure 1, only 13% of all delinquency petitions in LA County involved youth with child welfare involvement. Such a low number can easily lead policymakers and agencies to believe that dual status youth represent a small population of the juvenile justice system; however, recent studies conducted in LA County and other jurisdictions cast doubt on this conclusion.

FIGURE 1
Percentage of Dual Status Youth Using 241.1 MDT Referrals and Number of First Petitions in LA County Between 2016-2018





The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Dual System Youth Design Study (Dual System Youth Design Study)

Child welfare and juvenile justice records were linked to measure the incidence of dual system contact for youth petitioned to the delinquency court for the first time in Cook County, IL, Cuyahoga County, OH, and New York City, NY. Results for these sites showed between **45% and 70% of petitioned youth also touched child welfare.**

Herz, D.C., Dierkhising, C.B., Raithel, J., Schretzman, M., Gultinan, S., Goerge, R.M., Cho, Y. Coulton, C., & Abbott, S. (2019). Dual System Youth and their Pathways: A Comparison of Incidence, Characteristics and System Experiences Using Linked Administrative Data. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48(12), 2432-2450.



The Los Angeles County Probation Outcomes Study, Part II

This study matched statewide child welfare data to youth exiting from Probation placements and found **83% of youth had touched the child welfare system.**

Herz, D.C. & Chan, K. (2017). The Los Angeles County Juvenile Probation Outcomes Study, Part II: Assessing the Experiences of Probation-Involved Youth Exiting from Out-of-Home Placements across Two Cohorts. *Cal State LA*.

McCroskey, J.M., Herz, D.C., & Putnam-Hornstein, E. (2017). Crossover Youth: Los Angeles County Probation Youth with Previous Referrals to Child Protective Services. *Children's Data Network*.

These studies raise important questions about how dual system youth are defined and how the prevalence of dual system contact is measured. To explore this issue in LA County, the current study replicates the methodology used in the Dual System Youth Design Study to examine the prevalence of dual system youth overall and their pathways.

DEFINING DUAL SYSTEM YOUTH AND PATHWAYS

Researchers and practitioners describe youth involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems using a number of terms (e.g., crossover youth, dually-involved youth, dual status youth, and so on) which often leads to confusing estimates of dual system involvement. To address this issue, the Dual System Youth Design Study proposed a framework to consistently define youth who touch both systems. Under this framework, youth who touch both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems are considered “dual system youth”, and dual system pathways delineate the timing and type of system contact. The Dual System Youth Design Study framework originally identified six pathways; however, findings supported

consolidating groups into four pathways (see Table 1): Youth who touch the child welfare and the juvenile justice system non-concurrently (Dual Contact Child Welfare First, or DCCW); youth involved in child welfare who subsequently touch the juvenile justice system with or without a historical child welfare case (Dually-Involved Child Welfare First, or DICW); youth involved in the juvenile justice system with a historical child welfare case who then touch child welfare (Dually-Involved Juvenile Justice First + a Historical Child Welfare Case, or DIJH); and youth involved in the juvenile justice system who then touch child welfare with no prior child welfare contact, non-concurrent and concurrent contact combined (Dual System Juvenile Justice First, or DSJJ).

TABLE 1
Definitions of Dual System Pathways

Dual System Pathways	Brief Description	time →
Dual Contact Child Welfare First (DCCW)	Touch both systems non-concurrently & first contact is with child welfare	
Dually-Involved Child Welfare First (DICW)	Touch both systems concurrently & first contact is with child welfare (may also have a historical child welfare case)	
Dually-Involved Juvenile Justice First + a Historical Child Welfare Case (DIJH)	Touch both systems concurrently and this contact is with the juvenile justice system first; however, there is historical contact with child welfare	
Dual System Juvenile Justice First (DSJJ)	For both non-concurrent and concurrent contact, touch juvenile justice system before child welfare	

Child Welfare Involvement

Juvenile Justice Involvement

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Probation records were probabilistically linked to state child welfare data from 1998 through 2017. Using Probation data, all youth with a first juvenile justice petition between 2014 and 2016 and who were born in/after 1998 were identified and linked to records in the Child Welfare Services-Case Management System (CWS/CMS). All first petition cohort youth who received at least one child welfare investigation were defined as “dual system youth” and youth with no child welfare investigations were classified as “juvenile justice only youth”.

KEY FINDINGS

The Prevalence of Dual System Contact

A total of 6,877 youth had their first juvenile justice petition between 2014 and 2016 and were born in/after 1998. Of this cohort, 4,410 (64.1%) were identified as “dual system youth” and the remaining 2,467 (35.9%) were considered “juvenile justice only youth” (see Figure 2).

Two-thirds of youth were identified as dual system.

FIGURE 2

Dual System Youth Prevalence for the First Juvenile Justice Petition Cohort



■ Dual System Youth □ Juvenile Justice Only Youth

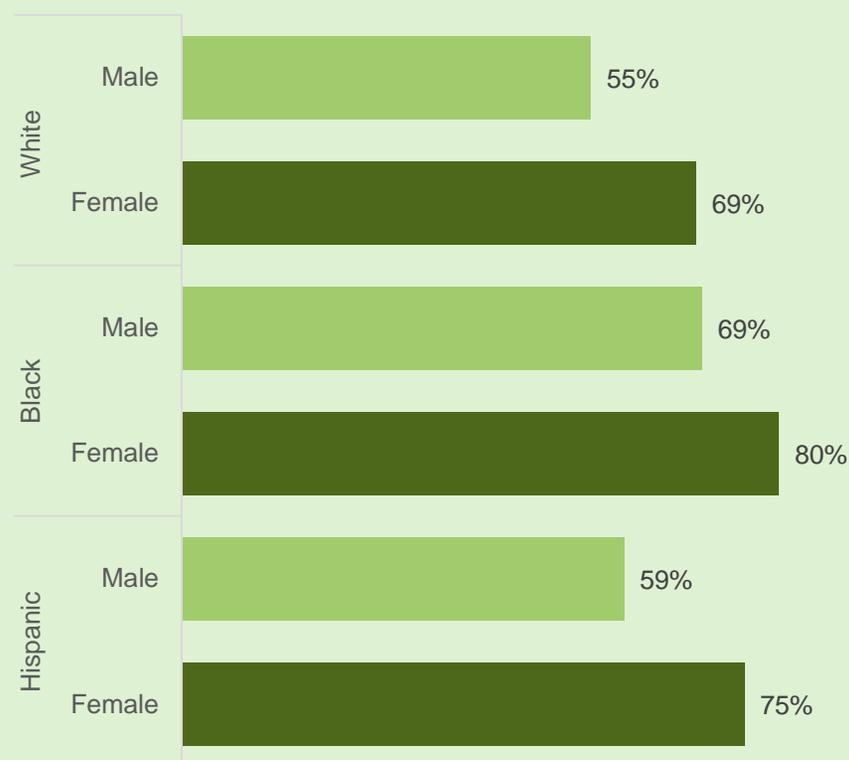
Dual System Youth: Gender and Race/Ethnicity

The majority of youth in the study were male (74.1%) and Hispanic (59.7%); yet, dual system involvement varied across gender and race/ethnicity. Figure 3 explores the risk of dual system contact for all youth in the first juvenile justice petition cohort across gender and race/ethnicity. Overall, females in all race/ethnicity groups were more likely than their male counterparts to be dual system youth, and Black youth were more likely to be dual system youth than those of any other race/ethnicity. The risk for dual system contact was even greater when gender and ethnicity were examined together, as seen in Figure 3.

Four-fifths of Black females were dual system compared to just over half of White males.

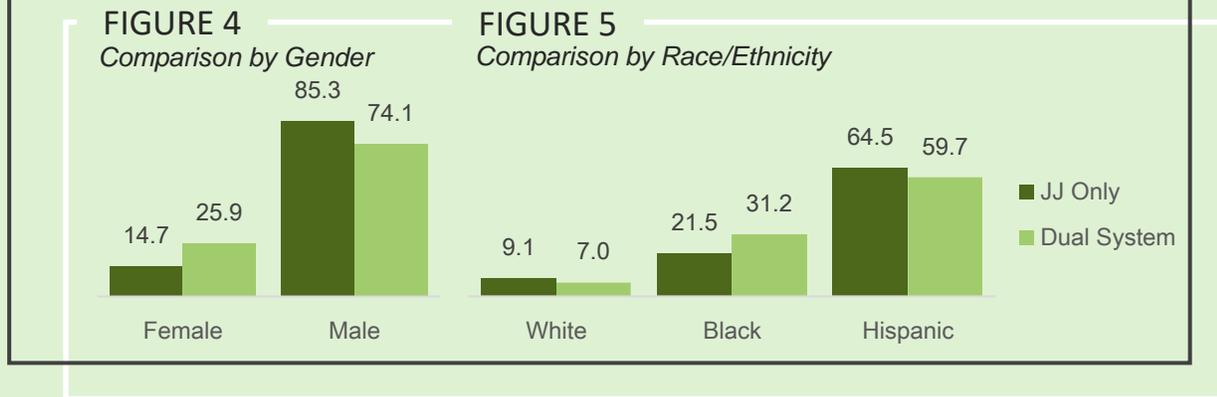
FIGURE 3

Percentage of Dual System Youth by Gender and Race/Ethnicity



As displayed in Figures 4 and 5, dual system youth were more likely to be female (26% compared to 15%) and more likely to be Black (31% compared to 22%). When the gender and race/ethnicity were both examined, Black females (35%) and Black males (30%) were more likely to be dual system than juvenile justice only (28% and 20%, respectively).

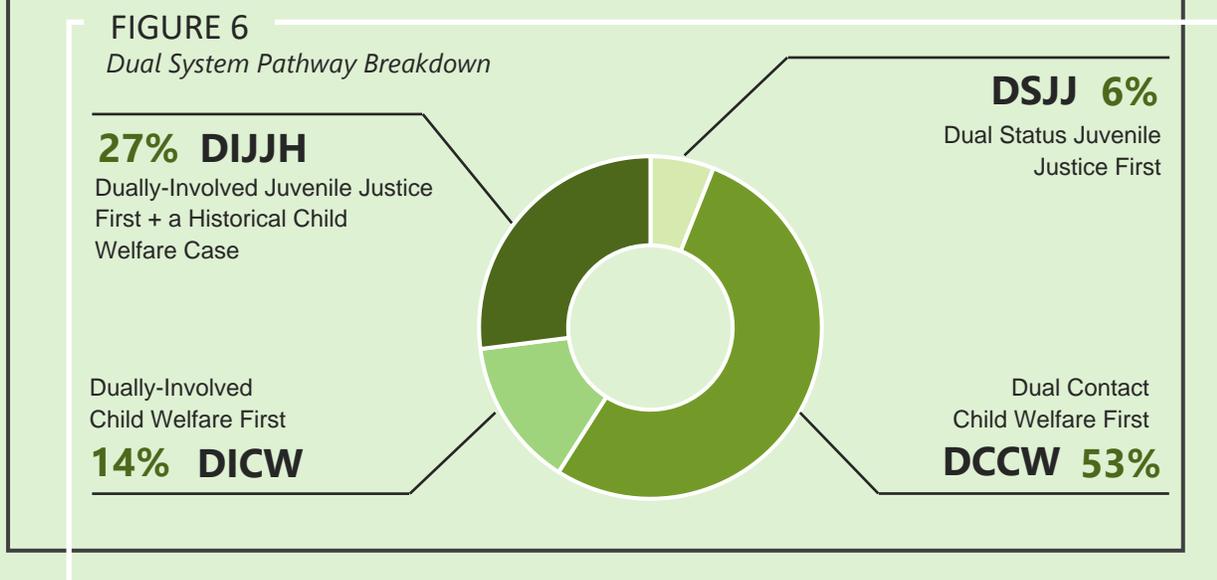
Dual system youth are more likely to be female and Black compared with juvenile justice only youth.



Dual System Pathways

Dual system youth in LA County touch the child welfare and juvenile justice systems differently. As shown in Figure 6, 53% of dual system youth (DCCW) touched both systems non-concurrently, and 41% of youth touched both systems at the same time (DIJH and DIJJH youth combined). Among dual system youth, 94% touched the child welfare system before the juvenile justice system, with only 6% interacting with the juvenile justice system without any previous child welfare contact. Youth in the dual system—juvenile justice first pathway group were excluded from the current study due to their small number and uniqueness related to system involvement.

The majority of dual system youth touched both systems at different times (53%). Nearly all dual system youth interacted with the child welfare system before entering the juvenile justice system (94%).



Dual System Pathways: Gender and Race/Ethnicity Breakdowns

Race/ethnicity and gender varied significantly across pathways. Just under half (43%) of DICW youth and 33% of DIJH youth were female compared to only 18% of DCCW (see Table 3). With regard to race, Black youth were more likely to fall into the DICW pathway (40%) while Hispanic youth were more likely to fall into the DCCW and DIJH pathways. The representation of White males and females were low and similar across all pathways.

DCCW youth (those with non-concurrent contact) were more likely to be male and Hispanic, and DICW youth (those with concurrent contact) were more likely to be female and Black.

TABLE 3
Race/Ethnicity and Gender Characteristics
Across Dual System Pathways

	DCCW	DIJH	DICW
Female			
White	6.5%	--	7.9%
Black	30.9%	38.3%	42.9%
Hispanic	60.4%	50.0%	48.5%
Male			
White	7.0%	8.1%	7.5%
Black	28.7%	26.2%	38.3%
Hispanic	62.2%	61.9%	53.1%

Note. Cell sizes <10 left blank given data sharing requirements.

Dual System Pathways and Child Welfare Experiences

Dual system pathway comparisons revealed important differences across child welfare experiences. Table 4 displays a comparison of child welfare experiences across pathways: DCCW youth had the smallest average number of investigations; were the least likely pathway to have a case opened; were most often placed with relatives or a resource family through a foster family agency (FFA); and spent the least amount of time in out-of-home care. DIJH youth were younger than DCCW youth but older than DICW youth at the time of their first investigation, were the least likely group to be placed with relatives and spent 6 months longer in DCFS care than DCCW youth and 9 months fewer than DICW. DICW youth, on the other hand, had the highest average number of investigations, were the most likely group to have cases opened (100%) or experience at least one placement in a group home, and spent the greatest amount of time, on average, in out-of-home care.

Dual system youth with non-concurrent contact (DCCW) had more limited child welfare involvement compared to youth with concurrent contact (DIJH and DICW).

TABLE 4

A Comparison of Child Welfare Experiences Across Dual System Pathways

	DCCW	DIJH	DICW
Number of investigations (average)	3.6	7.8	11.6
Age during investigations (avg. years)	6.6 to 11	6.1 to 15	5.2 to 11.6
Cumulative time with an open case (avg. months)	25.3	32.6	40.3
Cumulative time in out-of-home care (avg. months)	17.7	19.9	38.5
Number of placements (average)	2.3	2.5	5.5
Experienced placement with a relative	52.6%	45.7%	51.6%
Experienced placement with a resource parent	57.4%	52.5%	69.9%
Experienced placement with a group home	47.4%	70.1%	83.2%

Dual System Pathways and Juvenile Justice Experiences

Juvenile justice experiences also varied across dual system pathways (see Table 5). DCCW youth were older when they touched the juvenile justice system, were less likely to be detained or charged with violent, assault-related offenses, and were more likely to receive formal diversion. Youth with moderate to high levels of child welfare involvement (DIJH and DICW), on the other hand, were more similar than different. Youth in both groups were older at the time of their petition and about half of these youth were detained in juvenile detention prior to adjudication. Approximately two-thirds were charged with a violent offense, most of which were related to some type of assault. The only difference found between DICW and DIJH youth was in the dispositions they received. DICW youth were more likely to receive formal diversion (47% compared to 38%) and to be placed in a group home (29% compared to 20%) while DIJH youth were more likely to receive probation supervision in the community (38% compared to 16%).

DCCW youth experiences were quite similar to those for juvenile justice only youth; however, DIJH and DICW youth were significantly different from juvenile justice only youth across all juvenile justice experiences, including recidivism. Recidivism was defined as having at least one new arrest within one year of disposition. Recidivism rates were lowest for juvenile justice only youth (19%) followed closely by DICW youth (23%). Recidivism was highest for DICW and DIJH youth, with nearly a third (29%) of these youth experiencing a new arrest.

Dual system pathways with extensive child welfare involvement and concurrent contact (DIJH and DICW) were at increased risk of detention, violent offenses, and juvenile justice recidivism compared to juvenile justice only youth and DCCW youth (non-concurrent contact).

TABLE 5

A Comparison of Juvenile Justice Experiences Across Dual System Pathways

	JJ Only	DCCW	DIJH	DICW
Age at first JJ petition (average)	15.3	15.3	14.9	14.7
Detained prior to adjudication	34%	38%	48%	51%
Charged with a violent offense	43%	49%	66%	62%
Violent offense related to an assault	62%	63%	74%	73%
Delinquency court disposition (outcome)				
Formal diversion	53%	48%	47%	38%
Probation supervision in the community	34%	36%	16%	38%
Placement in a group home	6%	7%	29%	20%
Placement in a correctional facility	4%	5%	6%	4%
Recidivism	19%	23%	29%	29%

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Taken together, pathway comparisons across demographics, child welfare experiences, and juvenile justice experiences revealed significant patterns. Specifically, juvenile justice experiences and outcomes in this study, as well as the Dual System Youth Design Study, were aligned with different levels of experiences with the child welfare system. Figure 7 summarizes these findings and indicates the following:

- Youth with more limited child welfare involvement had less intensive juvenile justice outcomes. This group was more likely to include DCCW youth and Hispanic males.
- Youth with the most extensive child welfare involvement had the most serious juvenile justice outcomes. This group was more likely to include DICW youth, Black females, and Black males.

FIGURE 7

Characteristics of Dual System Pathways

Low (Short & Limited): Dual Contact--Child Welfare Pathway (DCCW)

- Most likely to be Hispanic Males
- Lower levels of juvenile hall detention
- Lower levels of violent charges that include assaults
- Lower levels of intrusive intervention from the juvenile justice system
- Lower rate of recidivism

Moderate (Mixed Level of Involvement): Dually-Involved Juvenile Justice with a Historical Child Welfare Case Pathway (DIJJH)

- Most likely to be Hispanic Males and Females
- Higher levels of juvenile hall detention
- Higher levels of violent charges that include assaults
- Lower levels of intrusive intervention from the juvenile justice system
- Higher rate of recidivism

High Level (Long & Extensive Involvement): Dually-Involved Child Welfare Pathway (DICW)

- Most likely to be Black Females and Males
- Higher levels of juvenile hall detention
- Higher levels of violent charges that include assaults
- More intrusive intervention from the juvenile justice system
- Higher rate of recidivism

SIGNIFICANCE

This study reconceptualizes how dual system contact is understood, defined and measured. It broadens our understanding of the maltreatment-delinquency relationship from a narrow definition of co-occurring dual status involvement to identifying young people with dual system contact across their lifespan. Under previous legal definitions used in LA County, the rate of dual status youth among youth adjudicated in the juvenile justice system was estimated to be no more than 13% in any given year, reinforcing assumptions that this was a small population. When examined using any type of child welfare contact, however, the rate of dual system involvement increases dramatically to 64%, demonstrating that this contact is far more common than previously believed.

A CALL TO ACTION

The majority of youth adjudicated in the juvenile justice system experience some level of contact with the child welfare system. For most, their contact with the child welfare system occurs before they enter the juvenile justice system, presenting a significant opportunity for prevention and reduction of delinquency.

This finding combined with others from this study underscore the need to build a delinquency prevention continuum of care that begins in the community and continues throughout child welfare and juvenile justice system involvement.

Prevention of dual system contact should be anchored within a full array of preventive supports, resources, and opportunities, starting with community-based supports for families (primary prevention), services to mitigate and address risk (secondary prevention) and continuing services for families involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (tertiary prevention).

Furthermore, delinquency prevention efforts should be tied to existing efforts already underway in the county¹ to develop a more comprehensive array of prevention and early intervention services supporting families at risk for and involved with child welfare.

1 For example, planning for the Family First Prevention Service Act; Thriving Families, Safer Children; DCFS Invest LA Strategic Plan; and the Office of Child Protection Prevention Plan.

THE DUAL STATUS YOUTH WORKGROUP

In 2018, the LA County Board of Supervisors created the Dual Status Youth Workgroup under the Office of Child Protection (OCP).

OBJECTIVE

Identify ways to prevent delinquency and dual system involvement among DCFS-involved youth.

RECOMMENDATION

Develop a delinquency prevention continuum of care by recognizing and addressing the relationship between maltreatment and delinquency into the current (a) countywide prevention strategy, (b) related county reforms, and (c) the services provided by the Department of Family Services, the Office of Youth Development and Diversion, and the Probation Department.

The Workgroup highlights Action Areas (summarized below) that build and strengthen efforts to reduce dual system contact and improve the lives of children and youth who enter the child welfare system.

ACTION AREAS

1

PRIMARY PREVENTION

- Connect existing community resources and provide additional opportunities and services to support families, prevent maltreatment, and reduce delinquency.
- Support resource centers trusted by communities to help families access the services they need when they need them.

2

SECONDARY PREVENTION

- Prioritize the voices of children, youth, and families at all stages of child welfare decision-making.
- Keep children and youth with their families whenever possible.
- When out-of-home care is necessary, ensure that decisions are informed by children, youth, parents, and family members and utilize the least restrictive setting appropriate to meet their needs.
- Appropriately address, stabilize, and support educational performance and success.
- Provide trauma-informed services and address mental health and substance abuse concerns.

3

TERTIARY PREVENTION

- Reduce involvement in the juvenile justice system and decrease detention, particularly during the pandemic, through diversion and other alternatives whenever possible.
- Track current and previous involvement with DCFS when youth enter the juvenile justice system to connect youth and their families with services, reduce system involvement, and prevent re-entry.
- Hold systems and agencies accountable for delivering best practices and maintaining high standards of care for children/youth and their families.
- Stabilize and improve the living situations, educational performance, and behavioral health of youth involved in all levels of the juvenile justice system.

CONCLUSION

Coming to the attention of the juvenile justice system can provide an opportunity to stabilize and support healthy, productive family relationships, improve living situations, and reconnect to educational programs and options. A prevention continuum of care must be holistic, comprehensive, and integrate practices that promote the overall well-being of youth and their families. Investing in a continuum of prevention, supports, and services gives LA County the opportunity to invest in improving the futures lives of thousands of young people, rather than perpetuating a pipeline that sends too many vulnerable youth into the juvenile justice and adult criminal justice systems.