

UNIQUE JUVENILE DIVERSION PROGRAM REDUCES RECIDIVISM

THE ISSUE

Although juvenile crime rates have fallen considerably over the past decade and a half, juvenile delinquency continues to be a pressing societal problem. In 2012, over one million juvenile arrests occurred throughout the country, with an overrepresentation of male and/or minority youth. Moreover, at approximately 250 youth per 100,000 citizens, the U.S. leads all industrialized nations in juvenile incarcerations. Nationwide, more than 25 percent of those arrested for property crimes and nearly 20 percent of those arrested for violent crimes are under the age of 18.

Contact with the justice system in adolescence carries lifelong consequences. Juvenile convictions have been shown to decrease job stability, lessen the likelihood of employment, and stunt pay growth. Juvenile delinquency is also a strong predictor of criminal activity as an adult, although not all youth embroiled in the justice system become adult offenders.



People arrested for **property crimes** who are under the age of 18



People arrested for **violent crimes** who are under the age of 18

CURRENT SOLUTIONS

Diversion programs are designed for reducing future involvement with the court system, lowering stigma associated with having a criminal record, increasing system efficiency, and lowering court costs. Historically, programs have consisted of a justice component and a service component; however, beyond these basic tenets, programs differ substantially from one another and few national standards have been established. Despite the diversity of interventions, there is one criterion used for determining program success: the rate of recidivism.

READING FOR LIFE SOLUTION

The Reading for Life (RFL) diversion program is designed for non-violent juvenile offenders. A unique and innovative alternative to prosecution in the court system, RFL allows low-status juveniles to study works of literature in small groups led by trained volunteer mentors. The intervention attempts to reduce recidivism through cognitive behavioral therapy, which has shown some promise in this area, but has not previously been tested via mentoring. LEO worked with St. Joseph County, Indiana to implement a randomized control trial (RCT), providing the greatest possibility for internal validity.

The key outcome is recidivism; therefore, results from this work are easily comparable to existing literature. The samples are relatively large compared to other research.

LEO'S STUDY

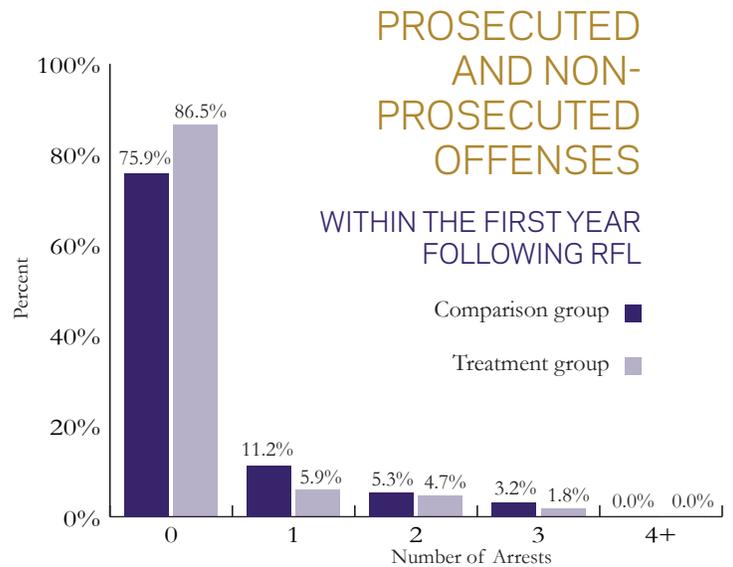
Students were randomly assigned by researchers to participate in RFL or to complete the usual diversion program of community service hours. Those who completed the general diversion program serve as the study's comparison group. From 2010-2015, the St. Joseph County Juvenile Justice Center referred juvenile offenders to the Reading for Life program. To date, 898 participants have completed the 12-week program from St. Joseph County.



WILSON SHEEHAN
LAB FOR ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITIES

RESULTS

The RFL program generated large and statistically significant drops in future arrests. On average, two years after successful completion of RFL, there were 63 percent fewer prosecuted arrests, and 80 percent fewer prosecuted felony arrests compared to the control group. Those assigned to the RFL treatment group had a 60 percent reduction (statistically significant at the 0.05 level) in the probability of being prosecuted for an offense of any type within two years of completing RFL. The program was particularly successful at reducing the recidivism of more serious offenses for those groups with the highest propensity for future offenses - prosecuted felonies fell by 50 percent over the control group mean.



Reading for Life participation reduced felony arrests by 50 percent for program participants.

Since mentors are volunteers, program costs total about \$1,000/person in the treatment group. The average cost of managing a youth in the control program was roughly \$300/person, so the marginal cost of RFL was \$700. The treatment group reduced counts of prosecuted offenses by 39 percent, saving society \$463,370. This is almost four times the cost of the program, a solid, positive cost-benefit for the program.

IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

These findings have important implications for providers and policymakers:

- Reading for Life is featured in the What Works Clearinghouse for juvenile justice and was featured by President Obama's Council of Economic Advisors in the report, "Economic Perspectives on Incarceration and the Criminal Justice System."
- Reading for Life, Inc. is currently running two replication sites with LEO conducting a randomized controlled trial across sites.
- LEO is also expanding its study to look at education outcomes for the original sample.

LEO is scaling up the research study in order to examine whether these promising early results can be replicated in a variety of locations. The primary outcome will be re-arrest rates but we plan to expand the set of outcomes to include high school completion and post-secondary enrollment. By testing this program in different contexts, we can also understand the driving mechanisms that lead to success.