Justice by Geography: Comparisons of Youth Poverty Rate and Juvenile Legal System Involvement in Washington State by County

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Abstract

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Justice by geography is the variation of youth outcomes across various stages of the juvenile legal system depending on location. The purpose of the current research is to assess aspects of justice by geography in Washington state by studying the relationship between youth poverty rate, disposition rates, and population density. Quantitative data were analyzed for 15 of Washington's 39 counties. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 10 people working with justice impacted youth and were reviewed for themes. Counties with higher youth poverty rates were found to have higher disposition rates. Geographic variation in case outcomes across Washington's juvenile legal system are supported by the quantitative and qualitative data. Policy recommendations for creating a more just juvenile legal system are vast, with significant

barriers, including lack of resources in rural counties. Straightforward policy proposals could improve youth outcomes including raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility and increasing oversight of counties' pre-file diversion counts.

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This project would not have been possible without the love and support of my Aunt Mary and Uncle Greg.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to every young person living under the pressures and injustices of the

U.S. carceral system.

"If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your

liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together"

– Aboriginal Rights Group, Queensland, Australia

Researcher Positionality Statement

I am a cis-gender, middle-class, white female with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Western Washington University. I am a current Masters student in the School of Social Work at the University of Washington on the unceded territories of the Duwamish and Coast Salish Peoples including the Suquamish, Tulalip, and Muckleshoot Nations. My research is grounded in my lived experience: growing up in deep poverty in rural and urban counties of Washington state, numerous interactions with the criminal legal system as a crime survivor, and trauma history. I acknowledge the systems and structures that have afforded me unearned privilege. I am committed to improving my understanding and practice around decolonizing research guided by anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and Indigenous perspectives and by people with lived experiences different than my own.

Justice by Geography: Comparisons of Youth Poverty Rate and Juvenile Legal System Involvement in Washington State by County

Justice by geography is known as the disparate case outcomes for youth involved in the juvenile legal system in rural and urban counties (Feld, 1991). Feld is credited as one of the original researchers to document justice by geography in the U.S., he hypothesized that urban courts would be more punitive than rural courts because their court systems are larger and more bureaucratic than rural courts. He believed that because urban courts see a higher number of cases they would rely more strictly on a specific set of criteria when deciding outcomes for youth cases; while rural courts would take a more nuanced approach to youth cases and offer more individualized rulings. More bureaucracy and formality in urban courts would result in fewer biases than rural courts because their processes are more standardized, however they would have a higher rate of punitive case outcomes because they would make less individualized decisions based on a youth's circumstances.

Findings since Feld's research have been mixed. Results in various states across the country depend on the demographics of the rural and urban counties that were studied. In contrast to Feld's research, urban counties with a higher proportion of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) were found to be more punitive and viewed white and Black youth similarly (Shook & Goodkind, 2009; Stewart et al., 2022). Many of these studies were conducted in one or two counties within a state and therefore are not generalizable to the whole country.

The generalizability of studies is further complicated by the fact that in the U.S. each state has its own juvenile legal system, with their own culture, dynamics, and biases; and within each state's legal system, each county has its own variation. The varied findings of factors that lead to justice by geography is why this phenomenon is now understood as the variation of youth

outcomes in the legal system depending on where they live along with various court level characteristics, rather than just an urban and rural difference (Zane et al., 2020).

The U.S. has the youngest age of criminal responsibility, the age at which youth can be held criminally responsible for their actions, while incarcerating more youth per capita than any other country in the world (Orendain et al., 2022). Each state sets their own minimum age of criminal responsibility. Twenty-two states have no minimum age of criminal responsibility while the remaining 28 range from 7-13 years old (National Juvenile Justice Network, 2025). Washington state's minimum age of responsibility is eight years old; however, prosecutors must illustrate to the court that children aged 8-11 can understand the crime they committed (RCW 9A.04.050, 2011).

Studies have shown that disparities in case outcomes for youth occur due to legal and extralegal factors within individual counties and states (Feld, 2018). Extralegal factors include race/ethnicity, sex, age, and socioeconomic status. Legal factors include whether a youth has had prior referrals to the juvenile legal system, previous probation violations and the severity of the crime that was committed (Armstrong & Rodriguez, 2005). While studies have not agreed on which of these factors lead to more punitive outcomes for some youth, each study has illustrated a variety of disparate outcomes based on where youth live. Additionally, these studies have provided substantial examples of community, county, and state level variation in the processing of youth cases (Feld, 2018; Pupo & Zane, 2021; Shook & Goodkind, 2009).

Prior research has highlighted the lasting impacts of the policies stemming from the War on Drugs in the 1980s and 1990s that led to a shift from rehabilitation to criminalization and incarceration in the juvenile legal system (Feld, 2018; Brown, 2007). Fear of youth crime during this time led to states implementing "tough on crime" policies that meant more severe

punishments for youth, more youth being transferred to adult court at younger ages, and an increase in racial disparities seen across the country that continue today (Feld, 2018).

Race is a significant factor in case outcomes for youth in the juvenile legal system, especially among Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous youth (Zane et al., 2020; Feld, 2018; Brown, 2007). Crime committed by white youth is seen as irregular and their criminality externalized, while crime committed by BIPOC youth is seen as normal and their criminality internalized (Feld, 2018). For white youth this means that their behaviors are attributed to external factors, for example, hanging out with the wrong crowd. For BIPOC youth this means that their behaviors are deemed to be because of their own internal moral failing.

Literature Review

Justice By Geography

Juvenile courts were intended to be handled at the state level rather than federal, with the assumption that each state would know best how to rehabilitate their youth. It was expected that local courts would be able to look at each case individually and determine the appropriate intervention. However, the individualized nature of the juvenile legal system has led to a system more focused on punishment than rehabilitation and significant disparities for youth leading to justice by geography (Pupo & Zane, 2021; Goldstein et al., 2019). Justice by geography may be especially likely in juvenile contexts because of the emphasis on individualized treatment of youth (Pupo & Zane, 2021).

One study in a Northeastern state found differential treatment of youth in pre-adjudication detention was attributable to both individual and contextual characteristics that varied within and between counties (Armstrong & Rodriguez, 2005). These contextual characteristics of a county include the racial makeup of a county, income inequality levels, crime

rate, and population density. Findings included that pre-adjudication detention increased the likelihood of later detention and that the detention and disposition rates (the number of youth entered into the formal legal system and found responsible) of Black youth were higher than for white youth. Pupo & Zane (2021) similarly found that pre-adjudication detention varied across counties based on their level of urbanism in Florida. They concluded this could mean that geographical context may be more influential in some stages of the juvenile legal system than others. This study found that Black and Hispanic youth were significantly more likely to be detained by police, have formal charges filed with the court, and be committed to a juvenile detention center than white youth.

In an example of extralegal factors impacting outcomes for youth, Shook & Goodkind (2009) found in Michigan that Black youth were three times as likely to be detained by police than white youth. Additionally, Black youth were seen as a threat by the legal system whether they lived in the city or in the suburbs, while white youth in urban areas were perceived similarly to Black youth. Shook & Goodkind posited that the difference in the treatment of white youth was due to the poverty level of the counties that the white youth lived in and the higher number of Black youth present in those counties. This study suggests that race and geography interact to create justice by geography. Stewart et al. (2022) found that in rural counties in Minnesota, the closer Native youth lived to Tribal lands the harsher they were penalized.

Armstrong & Rodriguez (2005) found in a study of 65 counties in a Northeastern state that contextual characteristics such as racial composition, income inequality, and urbanism of counties explained more of the variation in court outcomes for youth than individual characteristics. These findings differ from previously mentioned studies that found individual factors like race to be stronger indicators of variation across courts. This study also found that

racially diverse counties may place marginalized youth at increased risk of detention regardless of crime rate.

The variation of juvenile legal systems across the U.S. has made it challenging for researchers to pinpoint exactly which extralegal and legal factors or individual and county level characteristics lead to justice by geography in any one state. These similar but different findings across states and counties suggest that each state has its own version of justice by geography that is determined by that state's unique set of demographics, priorities, and view of the legal system.

Risk Factors for Juvenile Legal System Involvement

Risk factors are defined as characteristics, environmental factors, or individual attributes that occur before a person is involved in the legal system and can predict an outcome such as criminal legal system involvement (Beardslee et al., 2021). Risk factors that may lead to legal system involvement for youth include disproportionate minority contact (DMC), policing, schools, socioeconomic status, adolescent development, and concentration of disadvantage. These risk factors have been shown to intersect and interact with each other and differ across geographies (Abrams et al., 2021; Shook & Goodkind, 2009; Zane et al., 2020).

Abrams et al. (2021) uses the term *carceral continuum* to discuss the flow of decision making from the moment of a report of potential illegal activity through to the decision to prosecute, sentence, and/or incarcerate a child. Prosecutorial and judicial discretion in youth cases have been shown to lead to different outcomes for youth across all levels of the system (Fairchild et al., 2019; Feld, 2018; Brown 2007). Prosecutorial discretion includes a prosecutor's ability to decide how and when to prosecute cases while judicial discretion refers to the broad decision-making judges can make when deciding the outcomes of juvenile cases. The risk factors

in this section are either part of this carceral continuum or impact how the carceral continuum operates in a given location. Individual, family, school, neighborhood and youth demographic factors all impact these as well (Mallet et al., 2013).

Disproportionate Minority Contact

A major topic in justice by geography is disproportionate minority contact (DMC) (Schlesinger, 2018; Zane et al., 2020; Mallett et al., 2013; Shook & Goodkind, 2009; Abrams et al., 2021). DMC is defined as the racial and ethnic disparities at different stages of processing in the juvenile legal system (Zane et al., 2020). The reasons for DMC have been identified as police patrolling BIPOC neighborhoods more than white ones and increased surveillance in urban neighborhoods (Brown, 2007). This disproportionate contact puts BIPOC youth at increased risk of later in life adversity, poverty, adult confinement, and mental health disorders (Zane et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2022; Sittner & Estes, 2023). The impact of DMC cannot be understated and intersects with the other risk factors covered in this literature review. While youth across races engage in risky and criminalized behavior at similar rates, racial and ethnic disparities persist across all levels of the juvenile legal system (Henning, 2012).

Findings from earlier research have indicated that one of the reasons DMC occurs is due to the perceived culpability of BIPOC youth (Henning, 2012). Black youth are seen to be more responsible for their behavior and have pervasive negative stereotypes attributed to them such as being more prone to violence and criminal activity. Legal decision makers are less likely to see youth of color as developmentally immature which can lead to harsher punishments causing these youth to go further into the juvenile legal system than white youth.

Black youth are disproportionately represented in detention and other out of home placements and this persists in transfers to adult court. Abrams et al. (2021) found that in

California overrepresentation of Black youth increased at every stage of the carceral continuum. In Florida, Peck et al. (2019) found being Black and/or Hispanic predicted the likelihood of juvenile legal system involvement more than being poor. Incarceration exposes youth to high levels of violence, including excessive force. Incarceration is associated with poorer educational and employment attainment, and it increases the odds of rearrest and formal court processing compared to youth who are diverted. Additionally, Black youth are not offered diversion or rehabilitation at the same rate as white youth (Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009).

While much of the research focuses on Black and white differences, in the few studies available, Indigenous youth are shown to experience disparities similar to Black youth in the juvenile legal system. In one study conducted in Minnesota, Indigenous youth were 30% more likely to be referred to juvenile court than to have their charges dropped compared to white youth (Stewart et al., 2022). This same study found a relationship between rurality and harsher punishments for youth, differing from Feld's (1991) earlier research on justice by geography that hypothesized that urban counties would be more punitive. Justice involvement for Indigenous youth carries significant consequences for later health, family stability, substance use/abuse, and socioeconomic status (Sittner & Estes 2023).

One systematic review of Congressional hearings on youth crime found that Black youth were associated with gang violence and white youth with school violence (Brown, 2009). In the hearings representatives called for the transfer of youth out of juvenile court for gang violence while school violence could be solved legislatively, implying that Black youth needed to be incarcerated while white youth could be rehabilitated.

There are very few studies that have reviewed how gender and disproportionate minority contact are connected. However, in a study of one county in Arizona, Hispanic and Indigenous

girls were more likely to be adjudicated than white girls while being female only reduced perceptions of dangerousness and blameworthiness for white girls (Freiburger & Burke, 2010).

Several studies have established a connection between DMC and justice by geography (Brown, 2007; Taylor et al., 2012). Taylor et al. (2012) found courts were more punitive towards BIPOC youth in some cities while in others BIPOC and white youth had similar outcomes. Zane et al. (2020) found that racial disparities in various stages of the juvenile legal system were greater in Connecticut and Utah than Alabama and South Carolina.

Policing

Where and how a city or county chooses to police have ramifications for youth. Referrals to the legal system for youth often come from the police as they are one of the first legal system actors justice-involved youth encounter. Immigrant generational status, parental marital status and socioeconomic status are all associated with disproportionate arrest rates (Kirk, 2008). In other studies race was more of a contributing factor in disproportionate arrests for youth than socioeconomic status (Peck et al., 2019). Kirk (2008) found that higher levels of concentrated poverty led to higher arrest rates for all youth, however Black youth still had the highest arrest rates.

Schools

One of the first places youth become ensnared in the legal system is through their schools. Overrepresentation of Black youth in school discipline has been shown to begin as early as preschool (Abrams et al., 2021). In one review of the literature, Washington et al. (2021) highlighted how schools with a higher concentration of BIPOC students led to higher rates of locker searches for all students (Washington et al., 2021). Black youth are disproportionately suspended and had worse outcomes than their suspended peers (Rosenbaum, 2020).

Additionally, School suspensions may increase the likelihood that a youth will engage in criminal behavior and may lead to lower educational attainment (Rosenbaum, 2020). After suspensions students carry the label of deviant and troublemaker throughout their schooling which may decrease their likelihood in engaging in school in the future.

One study found that more schools are moving to punish children for normal developmental behavior, like acting out repeatedly in class, while others are more frequently referring minor offenses, like a school yard fight, to courts (May et al., 2016). Abrams et al. (2021) found that police and student resource officers disproportionately arrest Black youth on school grounds.

May et al. (2016) found that rural schools refer youth to the juvenile legal system for less serious crimes, like status offenses, more than urban counties. However, urban schools had higher overall referral numbers and dealt with much more serious offenses. Rural schools may refer more youth to the juvenile legal system for less serious crimes because they have less resources to deal with students at school. Overall, this study found that schools are generally less tolerant of their students and referrals are much higher than in the past.

Socioeconomic Status

Children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately impacted by the juvenile legal system (Orendain et al., 2022; Mallett et al., 2013). Lower socioeconomic status increases the likelihood that youth will become involved in the legal system and keep their families in a cycle of poverty and criminalization (Connolly et al., 2017; Henning, 2012; Sittner & Estes, 2023).Youth impacted by the juvenile legal system can even be evicted from their public housing and excluded from public schools, which has significant negative impacts on their

stability and family cohesion (Henning, 2012). Low socioeconomic status may be a pervasive risk factor for youth criminality in rural and urban areas.

Status offenders, or those youth that engage in activities that are only illegal for minors (e.g. underage drinking, truancy, and running away), are more likely to come from families who receive government assistance, to be adjudicated guilty, and be sentenced to confinement (Spivak et al., 2014). Higher poverty rates are found among BIPOC youth, linking another risk factor with disproportionate minority contact (Peck et al., 2019). In one study, socioeconomic disadvantage was a risk factor for being charged for all racial groups (Ericson & Eckberg, 2016).

Adolescent Development

Compared to adults, youth make more impulsive decisions, are easily influenced by their peers, and have a lesser understanding of the short- and long-term consequences of their actions (Arnett, 1992). In a review of the literature on reckless behavior in adolescence, Arnett (1992) highlighted studies that found that one-to-three-quarters of youth have recently engaged in misconduct or criminal activity. According to Arnett, the prevalence of this risky behavior (engaging in drunk driving, criminal activity, and illegal drug use) should lead us to understand this risk taking as a feature of adolescence rooted in biology, rather than attributed to individual deviance. The juvenile legal system was intended to take adolescent development into consideration and view youth as less culpable due to their brain development (Henning, 2012) However, the punitive nature of the legal system in the U.S. leads to increased criminalization of youth, making adolescent development a risk factor for criminal behavior (Goldstein, 2019; Dierkhising et al., 2013). When youth engage in criminal activity it is usually limited to adolescence and most will grow out of these behaviors if not entered into the formal legal system (Henning, 2012; Goldstein, 2019).

It is a normal part of adolescent development to challenge norms but for communities that are over-policed, over-surveilled and under resourced their youth disproportionately end up entangled in the juvenile legal system (Goldstein et al., 2019; Orendain et al., 2022; Sittner & Estes, 2023). Once in the system youth are more likely to continue engaging in criminalized behavior and to be incarcerated as an adult. Incarcerating youth makes it more likely they will develop relationships with peers who are also involved in the juvenile legal system thereby increasing their likelihood of engaging in the behaviors that are trying to be prevented (Evangelist et al., 2017). Evangelist et al. (2017) found that the intersections of race, gender, and age create both lenient and harsher outcomes for youth involved in the legal system. Specifically, Black preteen boys were most likely to have their cases formally adjudicated.

Concentration of disadvantage

Youth entering the juvenile legal system face multiple disadvantages at home and in their communities, including poverty, negative peer influences, few positive role models, early childhood trauma, and over-policing (Henning, 2012; Orendain et al., 2022). These disadvantaged youth are more likely to experience poor school performance, mental health problems, and unstable and unsupportive family connections (Henning, 2012). Ultimately all these compounding disadvantages result in worse outcomes for youth involved in the legal system and varies by location (Sittner & Estes, 2023).

In one multistate sample, researchers found that justice-involved youth have been exposed to trauma at high rates and that trauma begins early in life and in multiple contexts (Dierkhising et al., 2013). Sixty-two percent of youth surveyed by Dierkhising et al. (2013) were five years old at the onset of their trauma and one-third of the youth reported exposure to multiple or co-occurring traumas each year into adolescence. Orendain et al. (2022) identified a

youth's adversity burden as their cumulative lifetime exposure to adverse events, including juvenile detention. Juvenile detention can be another form of trauma and adversity and contributes to a youth's adversity burden and can impact their cognitive development and quality of life outcomes.

Historic and systemic oppression imposed on BIPOC communities such as enslavement, Jim Crow era policies, and the murder and displacement of Indigenous Peoples expands the concentration of disadvantage communities experience which increases the chances their youth will become involved in the juvenile legal system (Stewart et al., 2022). Multiple studies have found that the greater the concentration of BIPOC youth in a county, the higher the juvenile legal system involvement for all youth in that county (Stewart et al., 2022; Mallett et al., 2013).

Adjudication

Adjudication is the formal finding of responsibility for an offense in the juvenile legal system. It can result in multiple outcomes for youth including diversion, deferred disposition, or detention resulting in the youth having a record. Adjudication includes the more punitive aspects of the juvenile legal system. These more punitive outcomes include probation, deferred dispositions, and incarceration. Rehabilitative measures include diversion programs aimed at working with youth on behavior modification and empowering them to make different decisions. Adjudication decisions have been found to differ depending on a youth's age, gender, race, and location (Sittner & Estes 2023; Armstrong & Rodriguez 2005; Freiburger & Burke, 2010).

The juvenile legal system has been shown to reproduce the marginalization of poor and BIPOC youth through disproportionate minority contact, justice by geography, and the disproportionate incarceration of poor and BIPOC youth (Sittner & Estes, 2023; Feld 2018). Sittner & Estes (2023) found that for Indigenous youth, legal system involvement leads to

significant consequences for later health, family stability, substance use/abuse and socioeconomic status. This perpetuates the risk factors Indigenous youth already face due to the systemic oppressions experienced by their communities. Freiburger & Burke (2010) found that adjudication rates in one county in Arizona were higher for Hispanic and Native youth because judges were more likely to perceive those youth as blameworthy and dangerous. Living in a racially diverse or impoverished area may put marginalized youth at greater risk of incarceration, regardless of the crime rate in that area (Sittner & Estes, 2023; Armstrong & Rodriguez, 2005).

Recidivism

Recidivism can either refer to any further adjudication of a youth in the system or adjudications that lead to incarceration (Mallet et al., 2013). Recidivism is often used as a metric to assess the effectiveness of diversion programs and other interventions. Incarceration is traumatic for youth and abusive practices in detention facilities may exacerbate their traumatization, increasing their likelihood to recidivate (Dierkhising et al., 2013; Mallet et al., 2013). This creates a vicious cycle as detention has been found to be worse for youth's mental health which in turn continues to increase their risk of recidivism (Dierkhising et al., 2013). Mallet et al. (2013) found that past suicide attempts made recidivism five times more likely for boys and seven times more likely for girls. Punishment is an ineffective deterrent to crime and does not reduce recidivism rates for youth, and any initial change in behavior from punishment lessens over time (Goldstein, 2019; Orendain et al., 2022).

Diversion

Diversion occurs at different stages of the juvenile legal system. Informal diversions can be a police officer deciding to warn and release a youth, a probation officer's decision not to report a violation, a prosecutor deciding not to prosecute, and a judge's decision to dismiss a case

(Schlesinger, 2018). Formal diversions are decisions made by court actors like police, school resource officers, probation officers, and prosecutors to move cases away from formal court processing to programs that provide services and include requirements that youth must fulfill. Informal diversions usually mean that a youth does not end up with any kind of record while formal diversions may mean the youth retains a criminal record until the diversion requirements are fulfilled. Diversion rates in counties can give researchers a sense of whether jurisdictions are relying more on adjudications or are trying to find alternatives for youth through diversion programs. Police, judges, probation officers, and prosecutors have immense discretion to decide what happens to youth (Ericson & Eckberg, 2016). In a study of a Midwest County, Ericson and Eckberg (2016) found that police diverted less youth than were qualified for diversions and prosecutors chose to formally process more of those youth.

Courts use risk assessments to decide if a diversion is right for individual youth (Brown, 2007). These risk assessments define some youth as riskier than others by using existing inequities (e.g. living in poverty or living with a single parent) to formulate the definitions of what makes a youth risky. These assessments compound existing disparities for youth caught in the system and are often based on racist stereotypes. While the legal system treats these assessments as if they are race neutral, the idea of who is most risky has become synonymous with BIPOC youth (Brown, 2007). There are consequences for youth who do not receive a fair chance at diversion. Youth whose cases are adjudicated have an official charge on their record, it harms future opportunities and the outcomes of their lives and impacts how they view themselves (Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009; Sittner & Estes, 2023; Schlesinger 2018).

Diversion has been found to be less expensive than juvenile court processing and incarceration (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2024). One study posited that

diversion may have the potential to remedy disproportionate minority contact by diverting BIPOC youth who wouldn't have been caught up in the system at all if they were white (Schlesinger, 2018). However, disparities exist in which youth are offered diversions. One study found that court intake workers in Florida formally diverted white youth more than Black or Native youth (Nadel et al., 2018) Additionally, how diversion programs are implemented impacts the success of the youth in them. Diversion can also be used as a net widening tool, expanding the scope of the court rather than limiting it. For example, youth who could be let off with a warning for a behavior may instead get entered into a formal diversion agreement with the court, resulting in a juvenile record and pushing them further into the legal system. Lack of culturally competent and relevant diversion programs for BIPOC youth, especially Indigenous youth, is concerning because it may impact the efficacy of the program for these youth and may lead to higher recidivism rates (Sittner & Estes, 2023).

Washington State's Juvenile Legal System

Washington was not exempt from the panic and fear that gripped states during the War on Drugs (Brown, 2007). Harsher punishments and heightened surveillance only deepened racial disparities within the carceral system and made recidivism rates worse. Through legislation Washington has begun to undo some of the policies from that era (Drake, 2012). The state has made many investments in evidence-based reforms and programming. While these have been important changes, they haven't changed things for youth of color (Brown, 2007). Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic youth are still disproportionately represented in Washington's juvenile legal system (Washington State Minority and Justice Commission, 2025). In 1992 the Washington State Legislature created a task force to research the racial disparities in the juvenile

legal system (Brown, 2007). According to Brown (2007) the task force found that racial disparities largely existed because of the discretionary practices of court officials.

Washington states' legislature has acknowledged that the state has a justice by geography issue (RCW 13.40.080, 2025) In Washington, juvenile courts are handled by each county. How these counties choose to handle youth cases is largely discretionary. Diversions can occur at multiple stages of the juvenile legal system in Washington and refers to any informal resolution that interrupts the ordinary, formal prosecution of a criminal matter (Washington State Minority and Justice Commission, 2025). Pre-file diversions occur after a case is referred to a prosecutor's office but before charges are filed, which allows youth to avoid the traditional court process entirely. Post-file diversions or formal diversions occur after the prosecutor has charged the youth with a crime and results in a diversion agreement between the court and the youth.

In Washington white youth referred to the court are more likely to have their case result in a diversion than youth of color (Washington State Partnership Council on Juvenile Justice, 2024). This matters because young people who are offered diversion have lower rates of recidivism and higher likelihood of academic success.

Washington state participates in the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) started by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The goal of this initiative is to find alternatives to detention for youth, make the court process move faster, reduce racial and ethnic disparities, and improve conditions inside detention facilities (Office of Juvenile Justice, 2021). Counties that participate receive additional funding to support JDAI initiatives. As of 2025, only seven counties out of Washington's 39 formally choose to participate in supporting these initiatives. The lack of participation is likely due in part to the amount of work required for a county to meet the requirements set by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in order to receive funding. While others

have decided not to participate because they believe they are already doing the work to reduce disparities in the system while increasing alternatives to incarceration (The Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, 2003).

The varied findings of research on the effects of race, geography, and socioeconomic status in the juvenile legal system highlights the need to study individual states to determine which factors are leading to justice by geography. Thus, the current research hopes to identify contributing factors of the differential treatment of youth in the legal system across the state. If youth in Washington are facing higher rates of adjudication because of where they live or the socioeconomic status of their parents which will have lasting impacts on their future, then we must discover which factors are leading to justice by geography and find solutions (Sittner & Estes 2023).

The current research study aims to provide additional context for the justice by geography phenomenon in the state of Washington. Based on the literature reviewed, this researcher hypothesizes that more rural counties will have higher disposition and adjudication rates than urban counties and that those counties with a higher youth poverty rate will have higher disposition and adjudication rates. This research will provide additional context on professionals' experiences with the juvenile legal system and their recommendations for policy options through semi-structured interviews. As far as this author knows, no prior published research has reviewed the connections between poverty, population density, and case rates in Washington state.

Methods

Study Design

The current study analyzes secondary quantitative and primary qualitative data. Quantitative data from 2022 were provided by the Washington State Center for Court Research (WSCCR) to measure county disposition and diversion rates. Youth poverty rate data were obtained from the 2022 U.S. Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program (SAIPE, 2022). Population density data for 2022, measured by people per square mile in each county, were retrieved from the Washington State Office of Financial Management, Forecasting and Research Division (Washington Office of Financial Management, 2025a).The year 2022 was chosen to evaluate because it was the most recent year with fully available data through WSCCR.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 community professionals working in various stages of Washington's juvenile legal system. The intent was to understand the perspectives of these professionals and how their experiences and perceptions align with the quantitative results regarding justice by geography and youth poverty.

Analysis of State Juvenile Legal System Data, Youth Poverty Rate, and Population Density

Upon completion of a formal data request by the researcher, the Washington State Center for Court Research provided data on adjudication, diversion, and disposition counts for youth in 2022 ages 8-17. Due to the limited time to complete this project, including all 39 counties in Washington state was too time consuming. The researcher developed a process to select a relevant, regionally representative number of counties to study. Counties were selected by grouping them into Washington State's Department of Children, Youth, and Families' six regions, as this department oversees juvenile rehabilitation and juvenile detention centers in the state. Once divided into the six regions, each county's arrest rates for 2022 were reviewed. The three counties with the highest arrest rate in each region were selected. Exceptions for Regions 4

and 5 were made because these are larger, urban areas, which only include a total of one and two counties respectively. The 15 initial counties selected for study were: Adams, Lincoln, Douglas, Benton, Franklin, Kittitas, Whatcom, San Juan, Skagit, King, Pierce, Kitsap, Clallam, Cowlitz, Lewis. However, upon receiving the data from WSCCR, Lincoln and San Juan County's data and were too small to be measured, so the counties with the next highest arrest rates in those regions were selected: Chelan and Snohomish. See Appendix A, Figure A1 for the arrest rates of the selected counties and their respective regions.

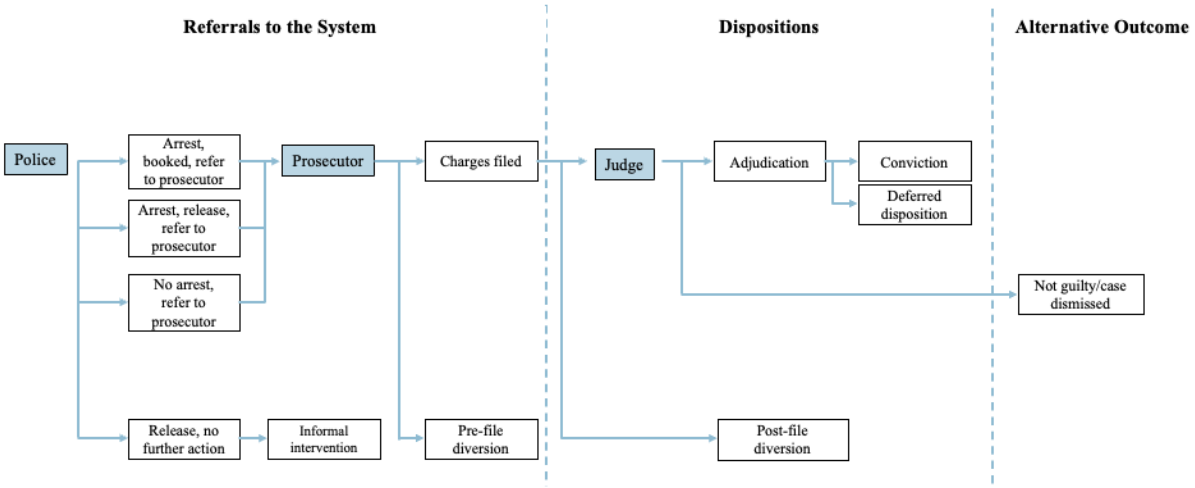
Outcome Variables

Operational definitions of outcome variables were provided in the 2024 Washington State Center for Court Research's biennial report. *Dispositions* are defined as case outcomes including convictions, deferrals, and diversions. *Adjudications* include convictions and deferrals but not diversions. Diversions occur at multiple stages of the legal system. Informal diversions occur when a police officer chooses not to refer youth to the prosecutor's office. Prosecutors can also divert youth before they file charges with the court called a pre-trial or pre-file diversion. *Post-file diversions* occur after charges are filed by the prosecutor but before a trial. The current study is only studying these post-file diversions included under dispositions. Informal and pre-trail diversion data is not captured by the state and was unable to be included in the study. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the various diversion pathways available to youth in Washington state. Data for this study occurs at the dispositions section of the pathway.

To calculate the disposition rate per 1,000 youth, the researcher took the total number of youth aged 8-17 in a county and divided that by the number of dispositions in that county and then multiplied that by 1,000. Diversion percentages were calculated by dividing the total number of diversions in a county by the total number of dispositions.

Figure 1

Washington Juvenile Legal System Pathways



Note. This infographic provides a simplified version of the diversion and legal system pathways for youth going through the juvenile legal system. This does not include every possible outcome and the exact steps may vary by county.

Independent Variables

Youth poverty rate is defined as the number of youth under age 18 living in poverty. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates this rate by county by reviewing the following components: the number of child exemptions on tax returns for those whose adjusted gross income falls below the official poverty threshold, the number of SNAP benefits recipients in July of the previous year, the estimated population of youth under age 18, the total number of child exemptions indicated on tax returns, and the log of Census 2000 estimate of the number of people under age 18 in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025).

Population density of a county is determined by the number of people living in a county per square mile. The Washington Office of Financial Management (OFM) estimates the population density using a variety of state and local government data based on the most recent

federal census and by reviewing a county's annual changes in births, deaths, housing supply, school enrollment, voter registrations, motor vehicle registrations, and employment (Washington Office of Financial Management, 2025b).

Analytical Approach

Analysis was conducted by bivariate correlation analyses to examine relationships and differences in five key areas: 1) Youth poverty rate and population density 2) Disposition rate and population density 3) Diversion percentage and disposition rate 4) Diversion percentage and youth poverty rate and 5) Youth poverty rate and disposition rate. In consultation with the University of Washington's Biostatistics Consulting Program, it was determined that the significance results utilizing a two-tail p test of Pearson's r were insufficient to determine the strength of the statistical significance. Once the correlation value was calculated using Pearson's r, Fisher z-transformation were conducted to calculate the confidence intervals to test statistical significance of the findings. Correlation coefficients were found in excel and the study used SPSS to confirm the accuracy of the data. Scatter plots were then created for each of the analyses of interest to further illustrate the relationships between the variables. Descriptive statistics were done to evaluate differences in mean and median to compare rural and non-rural counties.

Semi-structured Community Interviews

The qualitative portion of this research project relied upon purposive and convenience sampling to recruit research participants through the researcher's relationship with Statewide Poverty Action Network and their connections to organizations working in the juvenile legal system as well as the researcher's own review of organizations working across the state. This sampling technique allowed for a diverse range of perspectives on the topic and allowed the

researcher to locate participants swiftly given the limited timing for this study. Participants were chosen for their various levels of experience working with youth impacted by the legal system, their willingness to discuss their work, and their geographical location. A total of 21 organizations across the state were asked to participate. Eight organizations agreed to participate.

Data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 participants. One interview was a focus group with three people. The remaining seven interviews were individual. The average interview lasted 58 minutes. Interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom and were transcribed via Zoom transcription. Interviews were conducted by the same researcher and followed a set of 12 questions. Questions were focused on three main topics, including the following: the impacts of poverty on the juvenile legal system, the impacts of dispositions on youth, and potential changes and policy shifts in the legal system. Interview questions were developed from initial quantitative research findings and commonalities found during the literature review process. The researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the interview and transcript coding procedure. This allowed the researcher to keep track of decision making throughout the progression of the study and to be aware of their own biases and interpretations that arose during interviews and coding (Ahmed, 2024).

Thematic analysis was used to review the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading and re-reading transcripts. Names, places, and other identifying information were anonymized. Transcripts were coded by hand for themes using deductive and inductive coding methods. Deductive codes were chosen based on the literature review and initial findings of the quantitative analysis. Inductive codes were selected through careful analysis of the interview transcripts and refined through an iterative process throughout the data analysis. To determine the themes from this data, the researcher

reviewed the inductive and deductive codes for patterns and connections and consulted the reflexive journal to verify patterns. The researcher identified these patterns through writing, deep analytical thinking, and using various frameworks as guidance. Codes were then separated into different initial themes and then refined to determine the final themes. Additionally, the researcher reviewed quotes in the results section with interview participants and the context they would be utilized in to validate the research findings. The interview protocol is found in Appendix B. The University of Washington Human Subjects Division qualified this research for exempt status. Interview participants were emailed an exempt research consent form ahead of the interviews.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 includes descriptive statistics for the 15 counties studied divided by rural and non-rural designations made by the Washington State Office of Financial Management. Rural counties include those counties with a population density of less than 100 people per square mile or a county smaller than 225 square miles (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2025a). In 2022, the average disposition rate of rural counties (n = 9) was 84% higher than in non-rural counties (n = 6) and the average diversion rate of non-rural counties was 11% higher than rural counties. This highlights the disparities in the disposition rates for rural and non-rural counties. Of note, there is a gap between averages and median rates for all these metrics indicating that there are both smaller and large data sets that could be skewing the numbers in either direction.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics by County for 2022

County	Youth Population 8-17	Dispositions per 1,000 youth	Disposition Count	Diversion Count	Diversion Percent	Youth Poverty Rate	Population Density people per square mile
			Rural Counties				
Adams	4408	17.01	75	54	72	17.4	10.96
Chelan	10530	9.21	97	60	62	12.3	27.61
Clallam	7586	13.58	103	59	57	15.8	44.64
Cowlitz	14254	13.40	191	111	58	16.5	98.45
Douglas	6449	15.51	100	67	67	11.8	24.19
Franklin	18092	3.54	64	0	0	12.9	80.34
Kittitas	5659	11.84	67	37	55	11.3	20.55
Lewis	9820	10.69	105	44	42	14.6	34.71
Skagit	16379	5.92	97	37	38	13.3	75.86
		M=11.19			M=50	M=13.99	M=46.37
			Non-Rural Counties				
Pierce	122521	4.82	590	418	71	10.1	562
Snohomish	105,832	2.91	308	205	67	8.3	406.08
Benton	30,942	17.81	551	405	74	13	124.87
King	263,293	0.80	211	22	10	9	1095.95
Kitsap	30556	3.50	107	58	54	10.5	710.96
Whatcom	26597	6.58	175	105	60	11.2	109.9
		M=6.07			M=56	M=10.38	M=484.04

Disposition Rate Outcome

The relationship between the disposition rate and youth poverty rate was the strongest of all the variables studied ($r = .70$, $p = .004$), 95% CI [.30, .89]. Figure 2 shows the scatter plots and linear relationship of these variables. With the data points largely following the linear line it indicates a strong positive linear relationship. This is indicative of higher rates of youth poverty being associated with higher disposition rates.

The relationship between the disposition rate and population density was similarly strong and significant (r = -.68, p = .005), 95% CI [-.88, -.25]. While the correlation coefficient and confidence intervals indicate a relationship between these two variables, the linear relationship is inverse compared to the youth poverty rate. As can be seen on the scatter plot in Figure 2, there is considerable variation around the line and there are several counties with very high and very low population density that may be impacting the results. More research is needed with a larger sample of counties in Washington.

Figure 3 shows a map of the disposition rate by county with lighter blue counties having a lower disposition rate while darker blue indicates the highest disposition rates. Many of the rural counties fall into this darker blue category with the urban counties ranging from light blue to medium blue.

Diversion Rate Outcome

The diversion rate and youth poverty rate is not statistically significant (r = .13, p = .651), 95% CI [-.41, .60]. This indicates that there may be other factors creating the disparities in diversion rates in counties and that it is not the youth poverty rate. However, a study of all the counties in the state would be helpful to solidify if that is true.

Similarly, the relationship between the diversion rate and population density was not statistically significant (r = -.3, p = .277), 95% CI [-.70, .25], again, indicating that the population density of a county is not related to the discrepancies seen in diversions. However, caution here is needed as several of the counties included in this study had very small and very large population density that may have skewed the results. Additional research with all of Washington's counties may help in learning more about this relationship.

Figure 2 includes the scatter plots of the relationship between diversion rates and the youth poverty rate and between diversion rates and population density. The scatter plot showing the relationship between youth poverty rate and diversion rates is more evenly distributed than the population density plot but does not closely follow the linear line. The data points showing the relationship between the population density and diversion rate are clustered around the low density, high diversion area of the plot with a few points with very high density and low diversion that are bringing the whole line down.

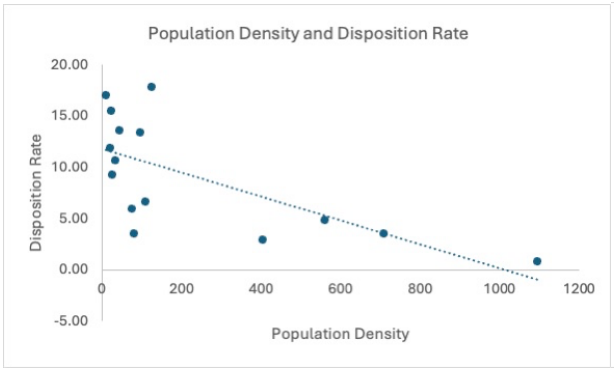
Additionally, the relationship between the population density and diversion rate was in an unexpected direction, lower population density was associated with higher diversion rates. This is likely due to the findings being skewed by King County. Specifically, King County's significant use of pre-file diversions is not tracked in state data. It is difficult to ascertain what the diversion disparities might be in the state without data on pre-file diversions.

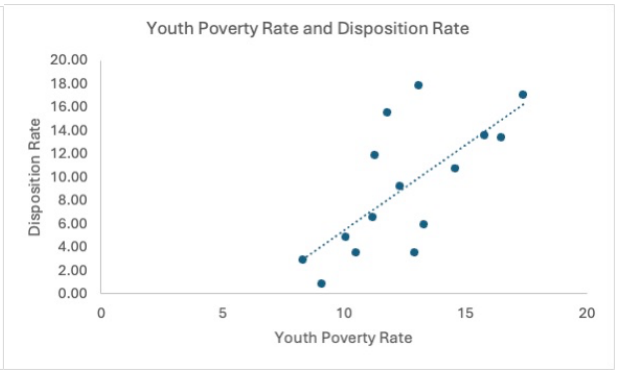
Youth Poverty Rate and Population Density Outcome

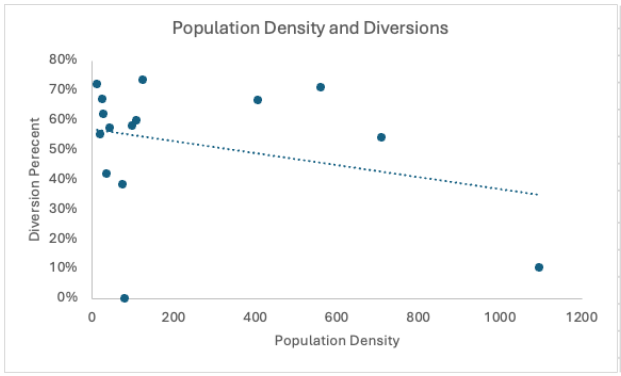
This finding was not part of the initial research question but in studying the data a moderately significant relationship between the youth poverty rate and the population density of a county was found (r = -.65, p = .009), 95% CI [-.87, -.19]. Lower population density was associated with higher youth poverty rate, highlighting that many of the rural and least populous counties are experiencing the highest rates of youth poverty. Although caution here again as the sample size is small and there are several high population density counties with very low youth poverty rates that may be skewing the results. Appendix C includes the correlation coefficients and Fisher z confidence intervals for all of these data sets.

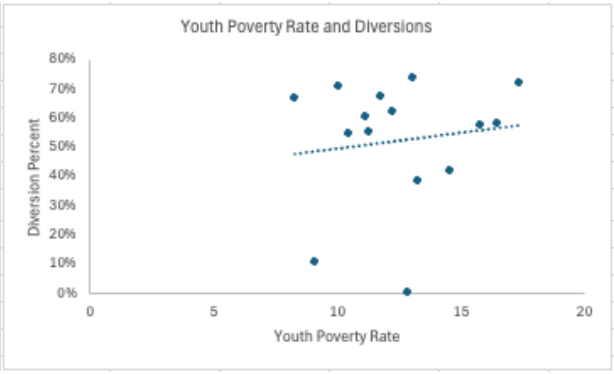
Figure 2

Scatter Plots of Data Analysis of Variables









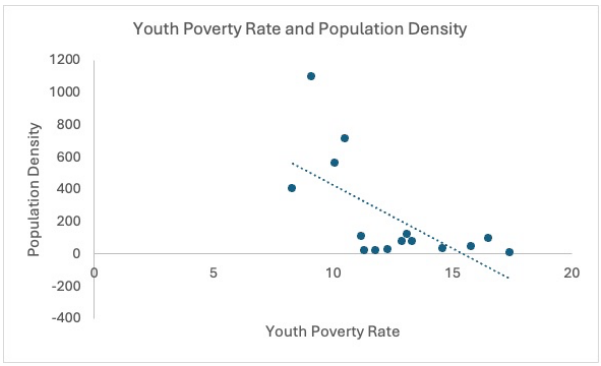
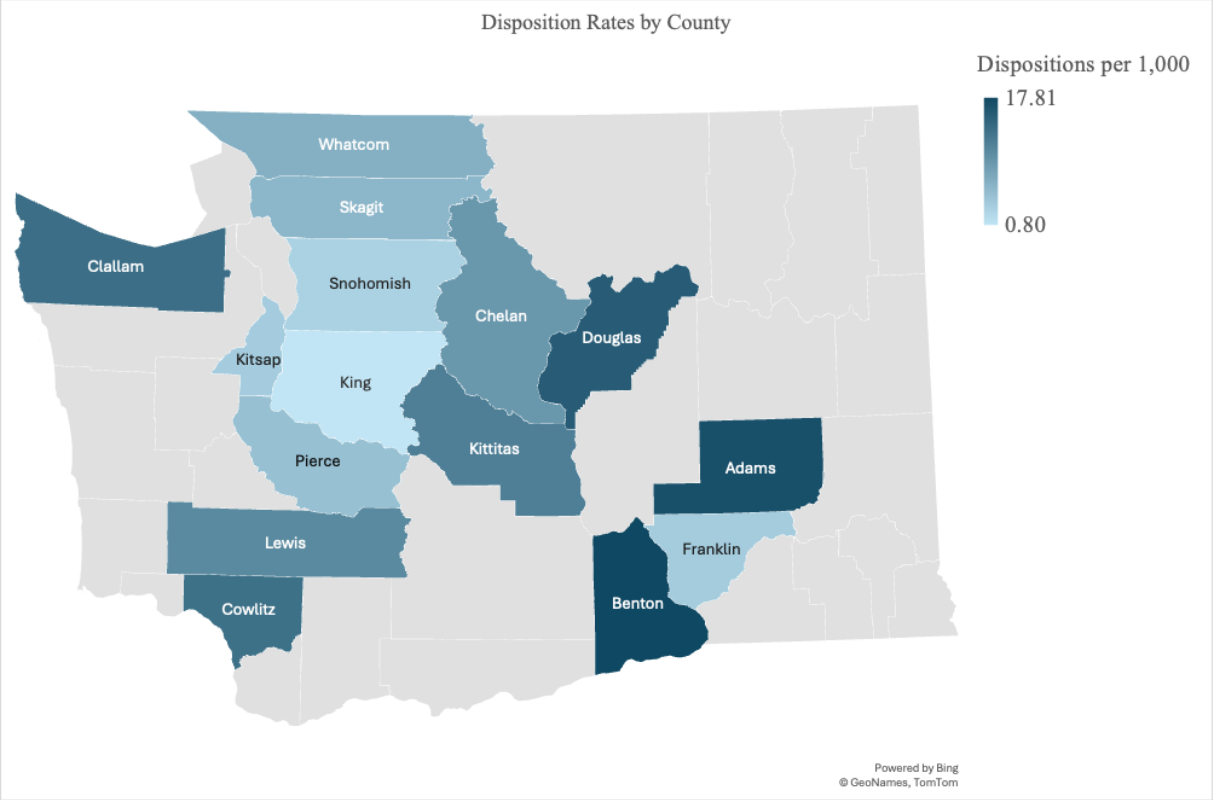


Figure 3

Map of Disposition Rates by County



Qualitative Findings

Interview participants had an average of 11.6 years of experience working with youth involved in the juvenile legal system. The most experienced had 25 years and the least had two years of experience. A total of 11 counties in the state were represented by the participants. Forty-seven percent of participants worked in urban counties, 13% in rural, 20% in agricultural counties, and 20% in urban/rural. Urban/rural refers to counties that have an urban city center, but the vast majority of the county is rural. Agricultural counties referred to counties that are just outside of the numeric population density needed to be considered rural but have large swaths of farmland with a dispersed population. The researcher used these definitions to provide greater

distinction between the counties outside of the urban/rural divide and is based on how these counties describe themselves.

The first review of the transcripts included editing them for clarity and transcription errors. Filler words like “right”, “like”, “you know”, and “so” and repetitive words were removed, unless they were important for sentence structure or context. Quotes were selected from each participant to highlight the themes that arose from the interviews. Care was taken to ensure anonymity and all quotes were double checked for identifiers before being included. Participants were given the opportunity to review the quotes used in the results section and several interviewees opted to lightly edit their quotes for clarity.

The codes, themes, and selected quotes are based on the researcher’s own interpretations of the meaning of patterns in the data, based on the researcher's own background and analytical skills, and the framework of this study. Another researcher reviewing this same data may come to different conclusions.

Thematic Analysis

Five main themes were identified based on the interviews: (1) We’ve Juvenilized an Adult System (2) We Aren’t Meeting the Needs of Youth and are Causing them Harm (3) Discretion of Court Actors Leads to Geographic, Racial, and Socioeconomic Disparities (4) It Comes Down to Shared Responsibility, Compassion, and Understanding, and (5) What Youth Need to Thrive. Table 2 provides additional information on themes and subthemes. Each of the themes involves poverty as a contributing or exacerbating factor to the impacts of the juvenile legal system on youth.

Table 2
Themes and Subthemes of Semi-Structured Interviews

Themes	Subthemes
We've Juvenilized an Adult System	• Juvenilizing an adult system • Consideration of youthfulness for some • Opaque and confusing rules, processes, and outcomes • Poverty limits a youth's ability to navigate the system
We Aren't Meeting the Needs of Youth & Causing them Harm	• Traumatic experiences • Internalized messaging • Youth trying to meet their own needs through criminal activity • Punitive nature of system • Poverty and lack of supports
Discretion of Court Actors Leads to Geographic, Racial, & Economic Disparities	• Unequal access to alternative programs • The amount of money a family has determines the outcomes for youth • Justice by geography
It Comes Down to Shared Responsibility, Compassion, & Understanding	• Lack of accountability in the current system • Economic reliance on the juvenile legal system limits changes to the system • Root causes of systems involvement not being addressed • People lack empathy and understanding for criminalized youth • More money is spent on the carceral system than on diversion and prevention
What Youth Need to Thrive	• Youth need to be able to see opportunities for themselves • Poverty impacts access to protective factors • Love, care, and concern • Mentorship/Caring adult

"We've Juvenilized an Adult System"

Every interviewee discussed the complexity of navigating the juvenile legal system for youth and their families. The complexity occurs in many forms, from the way the state has juvenilized the adult system, the use of specialized and technical legal language, how no court actors are provided to explain the processes to youth in age-appropriate terminology, how some

youth aren't being treated like kids, and how unclear all of the processes are. Poverty was identified as a major factor for families and youth navigating these systems – from their ability to pay for a private attorney and the amount of associated fees that push families further into poverty to whether they can participate in incarceration alternatives. Participants who have worked with youth in legal advocacy talked about how hard it is to explain the court process to young children.

One participant explained what this system is like for systems involved youth:

> P2: "It's scary. It's lonely, because you are subject to a system that one is hierarchical, that has very clear, their own, dynamics, and you are completely powerless. Powerless in the sense that you don't know the legal processes, you don't necessarily know your rights, even if you do have them. It's all scary. It's lonely."

Another participant highlighted how the juvenile system is just like the adult system which goes against the very purpose of the juvenile system:

> P5: We've essentially juvenilized an adult system, and if it's hard for adults to comprehend the adult system, it's even more challenging for young people to understand the system. I think a lot of the young people that come through the juvenile justice system don't really understand what they have done.

Others discussed the impacts living in poverty has on families while trying to navigate this complex system:

> P3: Just the cost on a family to deal with incarceration, and being able to, put money on someone's phone, paying for their DOC supervision. I go visit someone in the [Rural City] prison, I am lucky in that I have a car, and I have transportation to get there, but what does that look like for families who have to spend, from [Agricultural City] that are traveling 4 or 5 hours each way, and having to figure out if someone can watch their kids, or bringing the kids with them.

Participants also explained the differences in how youth are perceived by the courts and court actors. White middle- and upper-class youth are able to be perceived as making a mistake while BIPOC and poor youth are seen as "inherently dangerous" and that they put public safety at risk by being out in the community.

We Aren't Meeting the Needs of Youth and are Causing them Harm

Participants discussed how the current system is not meeting the needs of youth and is actively causing harm to youth and their families. Systems involvement was discussed as impacting the way youth feel about themselves, the way the system perpetuates the trauma and adverse experiences youth have already lived through before becoming systems involved, and how diversions are being reserved for youth with more stable home lives and more resources. The system rarely considers how youth are often engaging in 'criminal activity' to meet their basic needs.

Many youth have gone through multiple traumatic experiences by the time they enter the system.

> P8: The kids that we work with probably have gone through more than half of the adverse childhood experiences, or the most common ones, whether that's abuse, neglect, household challenges, DV, physical, emotional neglect, all of the above. The kids that we work with, that we see, that we talk to on a day-to-day basis that feel comfortable and safe expressing these things to us have shown, not only in their words, but in their actions, that these adverse childhood experiences really play a factor into the choices that they make.

Interviewees discussed how one bad decision can have lasting impacts on a young person's life.

> P10: And then juvenile court - study after study after study shows both juvenile court involvement and, in addition, incarceration reduces kids' educational prospects, it exacerbates mental health conditions, it increases recidivism.

Being labeled by the juvenile legal system can have profound impacts on how youth view themselves and the opportunities they envision for themselves later in life.

> P3: I think all of us can think back to when we were kids, or maybe not even that long ago, young adults, where we made decisions that weren't the best, and I think that's just a part of living and a part of life, especially when you're 12, 13, 14, and so it feels so harsh to just lock a young person up and be like, well, this is the best we can do for you. I think that's kind of what they internalize about themselves. Of, like, oh my gosh, I've been removed from my home, I'm a lost cause, I'm a bad kid.

Every interviewee talked about how youth end up in the juvenile legal system because they are trying to meet their own needs, to provide for their families, to find a sense of belonging, or all of the above.

> P2: And when a person, especially a child, is in the state of trying to survive, they're going to resort to activity that is skirting, what is legal, what we consider legal, or is completely outside of what we consider legal. For example, stealing food to help take care of younger siblings when mom or dad is at work or trying to get some rest between work, just to survive. I think that's [poverty] something that has a significant impact.

Youth living in poverty often have limited opportunities to participate in rehabilitative approaches because of the requirements set by the court.

> P5: Well, for one, there are certain programs, alternatives, that require you to basically be at a stable home and not be moving around. And if you're let's say, homeless, you're not gonna be able to qualify for that alternative, and therefore you're going to get the more extreme punishment.

After youth have been traumatized by their experiences interacting with the legal system they get little to no support to help them be successful in moving forward with their lives:

> P4: Then the majority of individuals don't receive therapy afterwards [after incarceration]. Majority of individuals are not talking to anybody about what they just experienced. But they are expected to get back out and become productive members of society. This is an oxymoron. Now, you have a lot of individuals who do rise, like myself, and a lot of individuals who work in [organization], who do rise, after being incarcerated as kids, going through such an abnormal experience and coming out, and returning back to society, and making something of ourselves. But as we see with statistics. We still got over half individuals who recidivate. Part of that is due to the effects. Part of that is due to the trauma that was experienced, and individuals end up going back to what they know, because as we know, that place is not built for rehabilitation, it's just built for punishment.

Discretion of Court Actors Leads to Geographic, Racial, and Economic Disparities

In the interviews all participants discussed the impacts that the discretion of court actors have on the disparities seen across the juvenile legal system. Interviewees named probation officers, judges, and prosecutors as the main contributors of these disparities. Participants shared the way this discretion is utilized can vary by county. This variation often depends on how the

county a youth resides in views rehabilitation versus punishment and the resources the county has to provide alternatives to adjudications. One participant discussed a Washington law that requires that first time misdemeanor offenders get automatic diversions. However, because of prosecutorial discretion and lack of oversight from the state these diversions are not being offered to youth equally across the state.

Every participant talked about how the amount of money a family has impacts the type of defense their child receives. Families living in poverty are working with overworked and overburdened public defense attorneys, while families with money can get their children out of trouble using a private attorney. In conversations, some counties are more resourced than others which allows them to have more public defenders and lighter caseloads while other counties have very few public defenders.

> P4: And so, individuals who don't come from these impoverished areas, or are able to pay for their legal representation, we don't really see them receiving as much time. We don't really see them with charges sticking. They're not receiving bad consultation. And we're talking about some of the same crimes. But individuals who come from impoverished areas are still getting more time, are still getting charged for crimes that should have or could have been dropped.

Judges have a significant amount of discretion when it comes to sentencing youth and statewide discrepancies are seen as to lengths of sentences, suspended sentences, and youth being sent to the adult system. As several participants highlighted these disparities can be seen in the statewide data available and varies by county. Participants relayed that these differences are likely due to the priorities and values in the counties across the state and the resources that are available to them to offer alternative options to youth. One participant discussed how this discretion may be valuable in some instances because it allows court actors to take youthfulness and adolescent development into account when weighing outcomes for cases. However, later in the interview this participant talked about the downside of this discretion in how prosecutors choose to file

charges. Most participants noted that more often than not judicial and prosecutorial discretion is being used to punish some kids more than others and may be circumventing state laws that disproportionately impact youth of color and youth living in poverty.

> P3: Our system is also punishing people for being poor. If you can't make your bail, well, I guess you're gonna sit in jail. I see the bail system as a huge thing that really is just punishing people because they don't have the money, and I kind of see it as extortion, because you're like, well, if you pay us enough, we can just let you out.

"It Comes Down to Shared Responsibility, Compassion, & Understanding"

All 10 participants discussed the lack of accountability within the legal system and how much money is invested in the carceral system while nonprofits working on rehabilitation and prevention are underfunded. Participants highlighted how the juvenile legal system relies on the imprisonment of youth to keep local economies going, is actively profiting from the harm being done to children, while being ineffective at its stated goal of rehabilitation. Societal beliefs were included as a significant barrier to change within the system as many people still have a strong fear of criminal activity and "dangerous youth".

One participant spoke about the economic reliance on the juvenile legal system for rural communities and how closing prisons for youth and providing them supports closer to home will lead to job losses.

> P1: Prison jail staff lose their [jobs] and the weird thing about how we build prisons in rural communities, where it's one of the biggest employers in the community, is a prison. If you close a prison, 200 people could lose their jobs in a community that doesn't have a lot of other jobs. A state worker with a state pension, benefits. So, yeah, it's so complex. You need to restructure the entire economy.

Another participant explained their perception of lawmakers' and court actors' resistance to changing the juvenile legal system while not acknowledging or working to address the root causes that lead to juvenile legal system involvement like poverty and racism.

> P10: There were people vehemently opposed to expanded disposition alternatives in [Urban County] Juvenile Court, who also have never spent a day in juvenile court. I don't know what people think happens in juvenile court, but it's not a magical place…and I think people think that that's the way to respond, because they don't have the will to actually address the underlying causes that bring kids before court.

Many participants talked about society's lack of empathy for youth involved in the juvenile legal system.

> P3: [It] comes back to that shared responsibility and compassion and understanding, and that sounds like such a simple, nice-sounding thing, but I think it's so hard to have people access - it's not always about you and having empathy for young people or having understanding. And I think coming back to that black and white - it's not just black and white, and really coming back to - can we also see people for the things that they're doing and what they need, and that people aren't getting what they need?

One of the biggest barriers participants talked about to changing this system is the fear around crime and how that fear impacts most people's ability to envision something better for youth:

> P5: This is what's plaguing all of our issues on juvenile justice reform. That even though crime, juvenile crime, is lower than it's been for a long time, there is still this growing panic of people don't feel safe.

Multiple participants stated that "what we value is where we put our money" and right now punishing youth is what is valued. Those working directly with youth discussed their frustration with the limited funding they are given while being held to higher standards than the criminal legal system.

> P7: If we physically harmed or hurt the people that we're trying to protect in our program as a [diversion organization], we would be stripped of all of our grants, and we would no longer have an organization. If we had a group of people complaining about the harm that we're doing in their community with public tax dollars we probably wouldn't have a program anymore. We have to be very meticulous about what we spend our money on, and then how we go about proving that we spent our money on those things.

Participants discussed the reforms and interventions they believe could be most impactful for youth and how those reforms might lead to economic changes for the state.

> P1: Recidivism rates are pretty high for kids coming out of long-term prison, so how do we really get a commitment to the new ideas, and a commitment to the resources to the

> new ideas, that could redirect resources to supports for youth outside the legal system. It might mean that judges lose their jobs, probation counselors do, prosecutors and defenders lose their jobs, right?

Others talked about how ineffective the current system is at helping youth.

> P10: There's just no positive research findings that anyone has been able to come up with of someone benefiting from prosecuting children in the legal system.

Several participants discussed how youth need to be shown more love, compassion, and caring to change their behaviors and to do things differently.

> P4: First of all, I would like to see more love and concern. Things will not be the same if individuals treated these young men as if they were theirs. We talk about love and concern and consideration. That alone will change everything. In my opinion, because now it's not just the punitive approach. Now, if I'm operating out of love and concern, my response is different, my interactions are different, my approach is different. That ultimately leads to the results being different. And the youth and young adults will feel that. And if they feel that, 9 times out of 10, [that's] gonna lead to some change within them.

What Youth Need to Thrive

Interviewees discussed what youth need in order to thrive either to prevent systems involvement or to get help exiting the system all together. Youth need to be able to see a future for themselves and have equitable access to opportunities and resources – especially activities that are known to prevent legal system involvement.

Interviewees explained the need for youth to be able to see opportunities for themselves and their communities and feel like they have other options outside of engaging in criminal behavior.

> P1: When you do those things, like provide young people with a sense of agency, the supports they need, access to education and housing, when you have purpose and can see a future, you're less likely to have juvenile justice involvement than when it feels like there isn't an option or a future for you, or you feel hopeless.

One participant discussed how society has created a financial barrier to factors that protect youth from legal system involvement like engaging in the arts, sports, and other extracurricular activities if they are offered at all.

Several participants shared that what youth really need is love, compassion, and concern rather than punishment.

> P4: You have these prisons and these institutions that don't rehabilitate. People say, well, how did you become rehabilitated? It wasn't the prison that did it. It was the individuals that were there who wanted better for themselves and wanted better for those around them. That's who helped change [me]. It was individuals from community that was coming into prison and said: we need you out here, our young men need you out here. Those were the remarks that really unlocked my brain. That had me thinking in a different way, because I never was told I'm needed…Those remarks were said out of love and concern. You see the difference?... The system don't operate out of love and concern. And so, until we do. Shit.

Multiple people mentioned that mentorship and having a caring adult significantly improves youths' views of themselves and their opportunities outside of the juvenile legal system.

> P6: I've been thinking about what could be done in the juvenile system to help these youth rehabilitate themselves. Having that mentorship, or that big brother person going in there talking to them, not necessarily talking to them about, you need to walk away from this gang, or you need to walk away from this criminal activity, but going in there as a friend, or as a brother, and showing them that love that they've been looking for in the wrong places. Because I'm a very big believer that when you bless someone with that love, they're gonna start thinking: why does this person care so much about what I'm doing when nobody ever did, ever in my life. That will get their little hamster spinning.

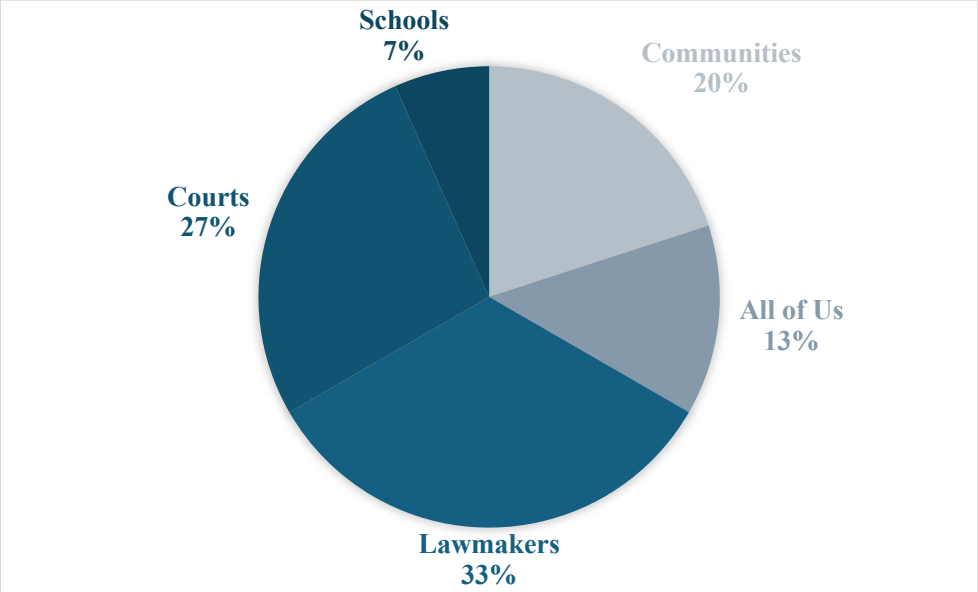
Responsibility

Towards the end of the interviews participants were asked who they believed was responsible for creating a more just juvenile legal system. Their responses were illuminating as there was almost a one third split between courts, communities, and lawmakers. In talking about responsibility for communities the responses were largely around them wanting communities to have more say and an active role in what happens to youth who have done harm. For lawmakers and courts the responsibility was about how these actors are perpetuating harm and are at times the barriers to any change in the system. The breakdown of their responses are shown in Figure 4.

> P10: I think everyone bears a responsibility, but few people except us and community partners, from what I can tell, is embracing that and saying that you should make changes…I think a lot of people bear responsibility, and I think a lot of people completely abdicate that responsibility because it's not politically convenient. And people have so ingrained the idea that we need to punish that the public has a hard time accepting other things.

Figure 4

Who Holds the Responsibility for Creating a More Just Juvenile Legal System



Discussion

The purpose of this study was to research the potential relationships between a county's disposition and diversion rates, youth poverty rate, and population density. The strongest association was between the youth poverty rate and the disposition rate. The descriptive statistics showed that rural counties had a significantly higher average disposition rate than non-rural counties. The qualitative interviews also supported these findings. Each of the five themes highlighted the disparate outcomes and experiences for youth living in poverty. These findings

highlight that youth in Washington state may be experiencing higher rates of dispositions based on the youth poverty rate within the county they reside.

Given the Washington specific context that so few rural counties participate in the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) it would make sense that their average disposition rates were higher than in urban counties. It is possible these rural counties lack the resources to participate in JDAI because of the reporting requirements and work it takes just to participate. Based on the qualitative interviews, it is also possible these counties don't share the desire to lower the number of youth in detention due to cultural differences between counties. Lower population density was also associated with higher youth poverty rates indicating that these counties may have less resources than their urban counterparts to offer juvenile legal system alternatives. This finding corresponds with research from May et al. (2016) that found some of the county level variation in their study may be due to a lack of resources to offer diversion programs or probation in rural counties.

The qualitative results demonstrated that the discretion of court actors may be a major contributor to justice by geography. This would also support the idea that some of these differences may be due to the different values and belief systems of rural counties and/or the resources available to them to offer pre-file diversions or diversions more generally. As Henning (2012) points out, prosecutors have immense power when it comes to deciding the fate of youth whether it's declining to prosecute, diverting youth, and finding alternatives to adjudication. It would make sense that disparities would stem from this discretion as prosecutors and other court actors are not immune to the effects of biases. Poverty was a key component in each of the qualitative themes, providing additional context and support for the quantitative findings, that

living in poverty may increase a youth's chances of entering the formal legal system and may lead to worse outcomes for youth across all stages of the legal system.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Washington state prioritizes through funding, the use of evidence-based programs for diversion that are shown to reduce crime cost-effectively (Drake, 2012). The Partnership for Youth Justice (PYJ) is one such program that operates in King County, Washington. PYJ is a diversion program that works with justice-involved youth to build skills and address the risk factors that led to systems involvement (Diversion and Partnership for Youth Justice, 2026). While an effective program, the emphasis on evidence-based programs creates a system that lacks culturally responsive and community-based interventions for youth that have been shown to be successful at rehabilitation (Orendain et al., 2022). As one of the interview participants pointed out, the downside of this emphasis on evidence-based programming is that it creates a barrier for other diversion programs that cannot afford to do the rigorous research required to show they are evidence-based. According to the Washington State Minority and Justice Commission's (2025) report there are six approved evidence-based diversion programs in Washington. Due to the limited number of evidence-based programs approved by the state, it is likely that these programs are not meeting the needs of all youth. If we continue to disconnect, ignore, or disregard the ways in which the historical and systemic oppressions of BIPOC communities leads to the disparate outcomes seen in the juvenile legal system without offering relevant interventions, then we will continue to disproportionately criminalize and incarcerate BIPOC youth (Stewart et al., 2022; Sittner & Estes, 2023).

Multiple participants mentioned the importance of mental health professional's ability to work with criminalized youth in a way that respects their current emotional state and life

situation without judgement while understanding the root causes of juvenile legal system involvement. For social work practitioners being aware and critically working through the multitude of historic and systemic oppressions that youth involved in the juvenile legal system face is of utmost importance. Without understanding the context of these youth then social workers may continue to further these harms and disparities.

Social workers often work in professions that make decisions or provide input on what happens to youth in these systems. Because of this, social workers must critically engage with the individual and structural biases these youth are facing that have led to their involvement with the legal system (Evangelist et al., 2017). The use of biased risk assessments may subject youth to harsher punishments and social workers must reconcile the use of these assessments and understand that they are not neutral tools (Feld, 2018; Schlesinger, 2018; Brown, 2007). Social workers must take an active role in pushing back against these assessments and finding better ways to work with youth in the juvenile legal system.

The continued public policy choices that shift "social and economic resources" away from employment opportunities, education, and neighborhood supports in poor communities undermine community and family supports that serve as a deterrents to crime (Henning, 2012). Social workers should be focusing their advocacy efforts on increased resources for the underserved communities they serve.

Policy Recommendations

The state needs better data to determine where and why disparities are occurring in Washington state (Zane et al., 2020). Zane et al. (2020) argued that changes to the legal system that only impact one level of the system will likely not have any effect on the disparities present within it. Abrams et al. (2021) argued that legislation to reform the juvenile legal system should

focus on helping all youth. Their thought was that if reforms focused on all youth it would also help youth impacted by racial and socioeconomic disparities. However, as research participants noted in the qualitative interviews of this study - even when we have state laws that are supposed to be applied equally to all youth, they are not and disparities for poor and BIPOC youth are exacerbated.

One policy recommendation would be to have greater oversight of courts across the state by collecting data on pre-file diversions without formalizing these types of diversions (Washington State Minority and Justice Commission, 2025). As participants pointed out, the pre-file diversions are good for youth because it keeps them out of the formal system. This informality should be protected while greater oversight of courts can provide the state with a more robust understanding as to how many youth are being offered diversions in the state and if there are any gender, race, ethnic, socioeconomic, or regional differences. It would also allow the state be aware of counties that are not giving youth their first mandatory diversion as required by state law. However, if policy makers are unwilling to accept the data that is being put in front of them then it is unclear how useful this extra data will be. Participants shared that they have utilized this data in advocacy efforts to illustrate to legislators how harmful and ineffective the current juvenile legal system is with little to no movement on legislative fixes. This doesn't mean that nothing can be done but that advocacy needs to occur within communities, courts, and the legislature and may need to focus on something other than the data to shift viewpoints on this issue. One potential solution would be to have more youth voices in advocacy to share their stories about their experiences in the juvenile legal system. However, this is challenging on multiple levels. Many youth who have been in the system just want to leave it in their past and not talk about it. It can also be challenging to feel like youth can fully consent to participating in

this type of advocacy because they may not understand the ramifications of speaking out and then having that information out in the public discourse and following them into adulthood.

Raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Washington from 8 to 14 was mentioned by several research participants as a straightforward way to have less youth caught up in the juvenile legal system. This type of reform is supported by other researchers with the idea being that policy reforms that would help all youth, regardless of race, may be more effective (Abrams et al., 2021). We must be mindful of not replacing one unjust system with another. If there is no oversight of counties in implementing these changes like mandatory diversions or raising the age to ensure that they are being provided to all youth equally than these policy changes won't help all youth.

Multiple research participants and other researchers have pointed out that the root causes of youth involvement in the legal system must be dealt with. Most of these policy options won't solve racism or poverty and as long as these continue the disparities in the legal system are likely to continue. The work needs to be two-fold by treating youth currently impacted by the system for their trauma and mental health while simultaneously dealing with the root causes that led to their systems involvement – poverty, targeted policing, and disproportionate minority contact (Henning, 2012; Orendain et al., 2022). Dierkhising et al. (2013) recommended focusing prevention and intervention policies on young children exposed to violence to reduce the likelihood of their re-victimization and prevent future justice system involvement.

For youth to thrive and actually rehabilitate we need a system that moves away from punishment and towards culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate diversion options that are based in communities (Orendain et al., 2022). Several interview participants talked about the significant impact positive mentorship has on youth, which is supported by previous research

showing that youth are more sensitive to rewards (Henning, 2012). Rewarding youth has been shown to improve learning behaviors and limit criminalized behaviors.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several key limitations in this study. The researcher was unable to review potential relationships between the variables studied with race, ethnicity, and gender. These are important factors in relation to the juvenile legal system's impact on youth and their communities and is an opportunity for future study. Based on the literature review, there are few studies that reviewed how gender and disproportionate minority contact may be related in disparate outcomes for youth and would be an important area for future research. Likewise, this study does not include the direct voices of youth because of the limited time for this project. The researcher attempted to offset this by speaking with professionals who work directly with youth. Future research should include youth's experience of the juvenile legal system in their own words.

This research project studied a small number of Washington's counties and therefore the results are not generalizable to the rest of the state. However, this research underscores the disparities present in Washington's juvenile legal system based on where youth live. This research does not include a multilevel analysis, nor does it control for multiple factors to provide additional context on what other factors may be impacting the disparities seen in Washington's juvenile legal system.

Due to the lack of data on pre-file diversions, it is challenging to get a true picture of which counties are or are not offering diversions to youth. One example was in King County where it appears that they adjudicate 90% of their cases. However, King County has a strong

emphasis on offering pre-file diversions to youth and because of this the true percentage of their diversions are not available publicly.

For the variables used in the study, the youth poverty rate and disposition rate aren't one to one because the youth poverty rate includes all youth under 18 while disposition rate includes only those youth who can be held criminally responsible (8-17 yr olds) This analysis provides a glimpse into the relationship between youth poverty rate and dispositions in Washington state and can be a starting point for future research. The quantitative data results are uncorrected exploratory findings and were not adjusted for multiple comparisons. This research highlights the need for further exploration on this topic in Washington State.

As Pupo & Zane (2021) discussed in their research we may get a better understanding of the disparities across counties by studying the politics and internal culture of the different courts within a state. An interview participant brought this up as a contributing factor to disparities seen in the juvenile legal system.

Conclusion

The results of the current study emphasizes the need for additional research into the factors leading to disparate outcomes for youth in Washington's juvenile legal system. While there was an association found between the youth poverty rate and disposition rates a full statewide analysis would provide greater context for this relationship. The relationship between population density and disposition rate was also statistically significant and with additional analysis of all the counties in the state there may be a stronger association. Because this analysis did not control for any additional factors there may be unexplored reasons for the disparate outcomes for youth. This paper provides a starting point of one of the potential factors leading to justice by geography in Washington state. The qualitative analysis provided additional context

for these disparities including how the current system only perpetuates the harm youth have experienced in their lives. Additionally, youth who live in poverty have worse outcomes in the legal system and have less access to protective factors like sports and after school programs because of the cost of extracurricular activities. Youth in Washington deserve the best chance at a childhood free of juvenile legal system involvement and it is the responsibility of all of us to make that a reality through policy reforms dealing with the root causes of legal system involvement like poverty and racism, and hearing from the youth impacted by these systems.

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Appendix A

County Arrest Rates

Table A1

Highest 2022 County Arrest Rates by Region

County by Region	Arrest Rate per 1,000 Youth
Region 1	
Adams	24.5
Douglas	13.7
Chelan	13.2
Region 2	
Benton	14
Franklin	11.8
Kittitas	10.9
Region 3	
Whatcom	11
Skagit	8.8
Snohomish	7.5
Region 4	
King	3.6
Region 5	
Pierce	3.5
Kitsap	5.2
Region 6	
Clallam	18.5
Cowlitz	16.4
Lewis	11.3

Appendix B

Interview Process

Introduction & Consent (Before Interview Begins)

- Before I start the recording, I wanted to confirm that you are okay with being recorded.
- Now that the recording has started, can you reiterate your consent for recording and transcription of the interview?
- Hello, my name is Bree Rabourn and I'm the lead on the study "Justice by Geography: Comparisons of Youth Poverty Rate and Juvenile Justice Involvement in Washington State by County"
- I am conducting this study to learn about the county level differences in the juvenile legal system in WA and to see what relationship there might be in counties with higher youth poverty rates and that are more rural. I'm hoping to learn about your work and personal experiences with the juvenile legal system to provide context for the quantitative (numbers) data I'm researching and to inform policy options I will be suggesting at the end of my paper.
- **Your participation in this study is voluntary and if you decide to continue with this interview, you can decide to stop at any time.**
- **If you agree, you will participate in a 45–60-minute recorded interview with me. I will ask questions about your experience working in the juvenile legal system but you're more than welcome to share anything about your personal experience with the system as well. I will ask you to reflect on differences you've noticed in the juvenile legal system proceedings.**

- The information you provide will be kept confidential and all study data will be stored securely with interviews and the data from them being stored separately. The transcripts of this interview will be coded for themes and will provide context for the data analysis and policy proposals. You will receive a copy of the completed thesis paper in June of this year.
- Do you have any questions before we start?
- **If you have any questions later about this research, you can contact the UW study team aka me. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can contact the UW Human Subjects Division. I will send you an email after our interview with my contact information and the Human Subjects Division's. Or I can provide that contact information right now.**
- Are you ready to begin the interview? Please start by saying your full name and confirming that you consent to be in the study.

Conclusion of the Interview

Thank you for your time and insight on this topic. I will be completing this Master's Thesis in June of this year. Once it's complete, I will send you a copy of the research. Again, if you have any questions or want to follow up about anything please reach out to me.

Interview Questions

Background

1. How long and in what context have you worked with justice involved youth or youth at risk of being justice involved?
2. What counties do you primarily work in?

Poverty

3. What factors put youth at risk of legal system involvement?

4. What is it like for youth navigating the legal system in Washington State?
    - Do you notice county/city level differences? What are they?
5. What effects do you believe poverty has on the juvenile legal system in WA, if any?

Dispositions

6. What impact does interacting with the juvenile legal system have on youth, if any?
7. What decisions go into which youth get offered diversion programs? What observations have you made about this decision-making process?
8. What outcomes do you notice for kids whose cases are adjudicated (even if found innocent) versus those in diversion programs?

Policy

9. What do you think are the barriers to systems change in our current legal system?
10. Who do you think holds the responsibility for creating a more just juvenile legal system?
11. What changes would you like to see made in the juvenile legal system?
12. What else would you like to say about this topic that you have not yet had a chance to say?

Appendix C

Quantitative Data Analysis

Table C1

Correlations and Confidence Intervals for Study Variables

Variables	Pearson Coefficient	SE	95% CI		p (two-tail)
			LL	UL	
Disposition Rate & Youth Poverty Rate	0.7	0.29	0.30	0.89	0.004
Disposition Rate & Population Density	-0.68	0.29	-0.88	-0.25	0.005
Youth Poverty Rate & Population Density	-0.64	0.29	-0.87	-0.19	0.009
Youth Poverty Rate & Diversion Rate	0.13	0.29	-0.41	0.60	0.13
Population Density & Diversion Rate	-0.3	0.29	-0.70	0.25	0.277