



# **BUILDING SAFETY THROUGH RESOURCES**

**A Better Path to Public Safety in D.C.**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Relying on outdated approaches to public safety—such as over-policing and over-incarceration—is ineffective and does not make our communities safer. Instead, leaders in the District of Columbia (D.C.) should prioritize systems and programs that support our communities and provide holistic security in various aspects of everyday life. This report details ways that leaders can help provide such safety and security by supporting families, youth, and community reentry.**

## Supporting Families

Child poverty is higher in the District of Columbia than it is in the nation, at 17.1 percent versus 13.7. A low income may put a family in the stressful situation of struggling to access nutritious meals, enriching learning environments, and high-quality childcare.

D.C. can fully fund and expand programs, such as the child tax credit and the DC Childcare Subsidy Program, to help families meet their children’s needs. Nationally, the increased child tax credit in 2021 led to significant improvements for families and children, including at least a 30 percent decline in child poverty rates. The program helped alleviate poverty for 25,000 District children.

Accessible, affordable, and high-quality childcare is also vital for families so that parents can work, attend school, and ensure that their children are receiving the care they need. Currently, the DC Childcare Subsidy Program helps nearly 7,700 families pay for the cost of childcare.

## Supporting Youth

Research has shown that the best way to prevent young people from engaging in risky behaviors is by providing a holistic system of support and services that address the root causes of challenges that present as behavioral problems.

Programs like these exist in the District and include Teen Council and the D.C. Office of the Attorney General's Restorative Justice Program, among others. However, these programs lack adequate funding and consistent personnel. Thus, D.C. leaders must increase funding for agencies and community organizations that work closely with young people and their families to ensure success.

## Supporting Reentry

In 2023, approximately 1,000 people were released from federal prisons and returned to D.C. Individuals who return to their communities after incarceration face significant challenges, including navigating complex bureaucratic systems and even daily tasks such as using unfamiliar technology.

Research has shown that tailored interventions and holistic services provided by community-based programs and supported by government, can help address these challenges so that people can return to their communities successfully. Typically, these types of programs provide comprehensive service delivery that includes housing, mental health support, and employment training and opportunities. Such programs in the District include the Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop and Voices for a Second Chance.

Reentry programs need adequate funding to increase their likelihood of success. Several states have passed legislation to ensure funding for their reentry programs, and D.C. would benefit from the same.

# INTRODUCTION

We know what keeps communities safe—solutions that address the root causes of public safety issues and stop crime before it happens. However, rather than investing in common-sense social supports and programs that increase safety, President Donald Trump has advocated cutting them—while sowing chaos and fear, fueling mass criminalization and incarceration, and lining the pockets of private prison corporations with his mass deportation agenda.

These policy choices exacerbate the effects of decades-long divestment from largely Black and poor communities.<sup>1</sup> Research has shown that places with higher rates of poverty experience more crime.<sup>2</sup> The failure of “the War on Drugs” era<sup>3</sup> and tactics focused on criminalization and punishment have made clear that carceral approaches do not, and will not, actually make our communities safer.

Further complicating this issue for the District of Columbia is federal interference in local laws, which means that the community does not have the autonomy to make the best local decisions. Congress has been taking actions to repeal or undermine laws and policies that have shown promising results.

To keep people safe during this presidential administration and beyond, local leaders in the District of Columbia need to focus on proven solutions to prevent crime and support communities. The District needs to invest in providing needed resources—rather than sending people to jail and giving them criminal records that make it more difficult to get a job, housing, or education. This report examines ways that D.C. can reframe community safety, support programs and initiatives that address the underlying causes of crime, and support communities from within.

Section I of the report discusses why it is important to invest in the economic stability of families who are the most vulnerable to shifts in the economy. Then, it highlights the critical need for social safety nets and economic assistance programs that place families in a better position to weather the storms of political and economic turmoil. Section II discusses youth<sup>4</sup> programs and initiatives. It begins by giving an overview of factors that contribute to misbehavior exhibited by young people, presents a brief discussion of research on the most effective types of programs that address the underlying challenges that young people face, and highlights promising youth crime prevention programs and initiatives. Section III discusses reentry and the importance of programs that address multiple barriers to reentry. It then highlights reentry programs and initiatives that have demonstrated success in reducing recidivism and helping formerly incarcerated people reintegrate into their communities.

# SUPPORTING FAMILIES



A basic tenet of American society is to build for a better future. To do this, we need to invest in families' stability and safety so that children can thrive. The current presidential administration's policy choices have shown what Larry Handerhan calls a "... quiet but devastating effort to transfer resources from children in low-income families to wealthy people."<sup>5</sup> This transfer only exacerbates the conditions that force many families with young children to struggle because of rising costs of such services as childcare and basic necessities.<sup>6</sup>

When families cannot meet their basic needs at home, it causes instability for children. Conversely, when families have better financial stability, children are able to thrive. Erica Williams of the DC Fiscal Policy Institute explained:

Parents with low incomes may struggle to provide nutritious meals or enriching learning environments in the home, or they may lack the means to access high quality child care. Parents with little income also carry enormous stress of how to pay the rent, buy food and other necessities, and for some, of living in less healthy or safe neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup>

Economic assistance programs are integral to helping families achieve a stable income, and benefits extend beyond the families who are receiving assistance to the communities in which they live and local economies as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

In the District, child poverty is higher than it is for the nation at 17.1 percent, versus 13.7.<sup>9</sup> Thirty-six percent of Black children in D.C. are living below the poverty line.<sup>10</sup> Black and brown children are also the majority of children in low- and middle-income families, attributable at least in part to what Erica Williams called "... a history of racist policy and practice and its ongoing effects."<sup>11</sup> As of 2022, the median income for white households with children in the District was estimated to be \$280,000, compared to \$62,300 for Black households with children.<sup>12</sup>

The District needs to support the most disadvantaged families' ability to meet their children's basic needs. The District already has some programs in place that need to be funded fully or expanded, and there are also programs in other jurisdictions from which the District could learn.

## *Child Tax Credit*

Nationally, the increased child tax credit in 2021 resulted in at least a 30 percent decline in child poverty rates to their lowest level on record, and it reduced food insecurity and other hardships among children.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the tax credit affected 25,000 D.C. children by easing poverty.<sup>14</sup> Most families with low incomes used the money overwhelmingly for payments on necessities such as food, rent, clothing, and utilities.<sup>15</sup> An expanded monthly and fully refundable child tax credit gives greater stability to families, reduces poverty and hardship, and benefits children's educational and health outcomes.<sup>16</sup>

One study found that a \$1,000 increase in tax credits raised students' test scores, which increased the children's likelihood of attending college. Such college attendance, the study reasoned, could increase the children's potential earnings as adults, and thus eventually pay a decent portion of the government's initial cost of funding these tax credits.<sup>17</sup> Another study in Washington state found that for each additional \$1,000 of a child tax credit refund, the state saw a five percent decline in reports to child welfare authorities in the five weeks following the payments.<sup>18</sup>

Income assistance programs that benefit households with children have also been associated with improved education, income, socio-emotional, and health outcomes in adulthood for those children. They are also related to reduced contact with both the criminal legal and child protective services systems.<sup>19</sup> The Earned Income Tax Credit has been shown to promote work participation and improve child development outcomes.<sup>20</sup>

In 2024, the D.C. Council included a child tax credit in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 Budget Support Act of 2024.<sup>21</sup> However, the Council did not fund the credit in the FY 2026 budget.<sup>22</sup>

This failure to fund is particularly concerning because the amount of the child tax credit in the FY 2025 Budget may not even have gone far enough to provide much-needed relief. The DC Fiscal Policy Institute (DCFPI) recommended:

Provid[ing] a larger credit for the lowest income families to ensure a greater reduction in poverty. Analysis of DCFPI's proposal that would have provided \$1,500 per child to all families up to 200 percent of the official federal poverty line before phasing down the credit value finds that it would reduce poverty by 18 percent under the supplemental poverty measure. DCFPI's proposal would ease hardship for tens of thousands more children. For moderate- and lower-middle-income families, the credit would also lower the taxes they pay as a share of their income, making the District's tax code more progressive and helping these families invest in their children's futures. More broadly, raising incomes through tax credits could support more children in the District growing up to innovate for the economy of the future.<sup>23</sup>

Increasing the amount of the local child tax credit per child would go further to ensure that the benefits reach the families who need it the most and hence, give vulnerable communities a boost.

With such numerous benefits associated with a child tax credit, the District needs to fund this program and give low-income children and children in poverty a better chance to succeed.<sup>24</sup>

## *Childcare Subsidies*

Accessible, affordable childcare is vital for families, as it allows parents to work, attend school, and ensure that their children are receiving the care that they need to develop. Research has shown that high-quality childcare and early education programs lead to long-term learning and developmental benefits for children. D.C. has the highest costs for childcare compared to the rest of the country, and families pay over \$23,000 on average per year to enroll their children in infant care.<sup>25</sup>

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a family should have to contribute no more than seven percent of their income on childcare for it to be considered affordable. This means that a family would need to earn over \$180,000 annually for the average national cost of infant care (\$12,655) to be seven percent of their income,<sup>26</sup> and in the District, families would need nearly twice that income.

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) runs the DC Childcare Subsidy Program.<sup>27</sup> The program helps nearly 7,700 families with low and moderate incomes to pay for the cost of childcare.<sup>28</sup> However, the District's FY26 budget did not include the \$5.5 million necessary to fund this program.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, only half of child development facilities participate in the subsidy program because of a variety of barriers and financial concerns. As DCFPI explains, "This limits the subsidy program's ability to connect families with childcare providers that meet their needs and provide affordable care, reducing the program's overall reach and effectiveness."<sup>30</sup>

DCFPI surveyed 79 childcare providers in D.C. to gain a better understanding of the barriers to participating in the subsidy program. They identified several solutions that could increase participation:

- Make it easier for directors to apply to participate in the subsidy program;
- Increase reimbursement rates so that they meet the true cost of care;
- Streamline data systems and reporting requirements;
- Increase the number of childcare facilities that can determine family eligibility for the childcare subsidy program, rather than have the families go through the application process with the D.C. Department of Human Services; and
- Improve OSSE communication with childcare providers.<sup>31</sup>

It is imperative that the District funds the DC Childcare Subsidy Program and makes the improvements necessary so that more families can access the subsidy. This is how families in D.C. can truly reap the benefits for their children.

**Other jurisdictions have had success with much more robust programs.**



**New Mexico**

In 2022, New Mexico amended their state constitution to guarantee a right to early childhood education.<sup>32</sup> The Childcare Assistance Program makes childcare free for those families who earn up to 400 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, which makes approximately half of the children in the state eligible.<sup>33</sup> This change gave 70 percent more families access to free childcare.<sup>34</sup>

New Mexico chose to focus on early childhood education because “... research shows that interventions targeted at ages 0-5 are both critical and cost-effective. One Nobel Laureate economist found that early childhood programs can improve outcomes for disadvantaged children in education, health, income, and behavior, ultimately resulting in a 13 percent return on investment.”<sup>35</sup>

While the program is only three years old, the total number of children who have benefited has increased by approximately 39 percent already, from 19,366 to 26,941.<sup>36</sup> These families may now have as much as \$1,000 per month that can pay for other household expenses, which leads to decreased family stress.<sup>37</sup>

New Mexico has recognized the success of this program and the benefits it provided to children and families. On September 8, 2025, the Governor announced that starting on November 1, 2025, New Mexico would go even further and guarantee no-cost universal childcare. The governor said, “Childcare is essential to family stability, workforce participation, and New Mexico’s future prosperity. By investing in universal childcare, we are giving families financial relief, supporting our economy, and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to grow and thrive.”<sup>38</sup>



## Cleveland, OH

Cleveland used COVID-19 stimulus funds to provide childcare payments for families and to give retention bonuses to childcare workers.<sup>39</sup> Ohio provides childcare subsidies only for families at or below 145 percent of the federal poverty limit, but the program in Cleveland helped families that earn up to 300 percent of the poverty level.<sup>40</sup> One scholarship provider of this program, Starting Point, awarded \$2.3 million in scholarships for 370 children in 238 families.<sup>41</sup>

To address the issue of finding qualified childcare providers, Cleveland also gave employers \$800,000 to use as signing bonuses for employees and sometimes as retention bonuses. Overall, 1,067 employees received 1,643 bonuses.<sup>42</sup> These bonuses allowed 73 percent of new hires to stay in their jobs for more than 90 days. This level of staffing allowed childcare providers to create an additional 2,500 slots for children to enroll in childcare.<sup>43</sup>

Continued funding for these childcare programs has not been established as of May 2025, but in advocating for the budget, Starting Point highlighted some key metrics:

- Half of unemployed people surveyed said childcare was their number one barrier to entering the workforce.
- Northeast Ohio lost \$114 million in income tax revenue because workers were sidelined by a lack of affordable childcare options.
- Maintaining the scholarship program would cost Cleveland \$122,000 every month.<sup>44</sup>

Programs that support families are an investment in the future. Children do not choose the conditions into which they are born, but policymakers can choose the way that our system is positioned to support them and strong communities of tomorrow. Child tax credits and childcare subsidies are just two programs that have been shown to have potential long-term benefits that justify the investment.



# SUPPORTING YOUTH



Too often, young people are offered critical services only when they have become engaged with the criminal legal system. Similar to what we have seen with adults, the current overreliance on incarceration to address social-emotional and behavioral issues that young people exhibit has proven to be ineffective. Research has shown that incarceration undermines public safety, is harmful to young people’s physical and mental health, exposes them to abuse, and impedes their education and career attainment.<sup>45</sup> Further, carceral approaches increase the likelihood of future engagement with the criminal legal system.<sup>46</sup>

To help our young people thrive and avoid the school-to-prison pipeline, D.C.’s elected officials, advocates, and communities must prioritize non-carceral<sup>47</sup> approaches that address the underlying challenges that young people face. These challenges may affect healthy socio-emotional development and can present as behavioral problems. D.C. leaders must invest in both crime prevention and diversion programs and initiatives. Prevention programs are intended to keep young people from becoming involved with the criminal legal system in the first place. Diversion programs are meant to provide rehabilitative alternatives to confinement. Some programs serve both functions, with the goal of ensuring that those who have been system-involved do not recidivate.

The District has had some fits and starts in attempting to address young people’s needs, such as through passage of the Youth Rehabilitation Act of 2017 (YRA).<sup>48</sup> However, as shown by the failure to implement the YRA strategic plan,<sup>49</sup> a plan without action sustains pre-existing gaps that allow young people to fall through the cracks.<sup>50</sup>

## *Why Young People Engage in Risky Behaviors*

A major factor that contributes to young people’s engagement in risky behaviors is brain development. Experts report that the human brain does not develop fully until around age 25. This is particularly true for the part of the brain responsible for making decisions and controlling impulses—the prefrontal cortex.<sup>51</sup> During brain development phases from adolescence to early adulthood, young people have a greater likelihood of taking risks.<sup>52</sup>

Brain development and behavior are also highly influenced by one's environment and experiences,<sup>53</sup> which affect and in turn, are affected by emotions. Young people are more susceptible to seeking rewards and wanting to belong and feel accepted by peers. Accordingly, they are more likely to adopt maladaptive<sup>54</sup> and contradictory behaviors and lapses in judgement<sup>55</sup> in order to fit in. These tendencies are greater in the age of social media.<sup>56</sup> However, it is through these risks that the brain's neural pathways are strengthened, and risks are a natural part of the way that we all develop the ability to discern right from wrong.

Another major contributor to brain development is trauma and adverse childhood experiences, whether they are experienced directly or witnessed. Traumatic experiences can include physical, sexual, or psychological abuse or neglect, natural disasters, being removed from home by the foster system,<sup>57</sup> community and police violence, and discrimination, among others.<sup>58</sup> Young people who become involved in the legal system are more likely than their peers to have had traumatic experiences.<sup>59</sup>

Although it is often not recognized as such, poverty is a form of trauma that too many young people, particularly young Black people, experience.<sup>60</sup> Research has shown that families living in poverty face disproportionate exposure to trauma and environmental stressors. Repeated exposure can lead to severe and chronic reactions that affect the individual, intergenerational family systems and relations,<sup>61</sup> and the wider community. Criminal legal system involvement exacerbates trauma<sup>62</sup> and reactionary survival coping mechanisms. Therefore, it is vital to teach young people how to process emotions and self-regulate effectively, so that they are not merely reacting to triggers.

In addition to the underlying circumstances outlined above, the major factors that lead young people to disengage from school include:

- Failing to see why school matters;
- Believing that they are incapable of succeeding in school; and
- Feeling that school is a hostile or unsafe place.<sup>63</sup>

Students with disabilities face even more challenges. Some may go undiagnosed, misdiagnosed, or misidentified. This can lead students to not receive a necessary Individualized Education Program (IEP), for example.<sup>64</sup> Black, Indigenous, and other students of color, in particular, face these challenges.<sup>65</sup> Some students are labeled as simply having behavioral problems and then become subjected to more disciplinary action than their peers (particularly students of color and Black girls especially).<sup>66</sup> For some students with disabilities, there is a perception that they are too difficult to teach or do not have the capacity to learn at all. This is particularly true for those from low-income backgrounds and students of color.<sup>67</sup>

# *Overview of Research on Effective Youth Crime Prevention Programs*

Research has shown that the best way to prevent young people from engaging in risky behaviors is to provide a holistic system of support and services that address the root causes of challenges that present as behavioral problems. These systems include building healthy relationships with trusted adults; providing stable housing; ensuring access to mental and behavioral health services that include skills for self-regulation and de-escalation; creating places where young people feel that they belong; and establishing pathways to viable employment training and opportunities. Young people also need environments that encourage positive risk-taking and pro-social behaviors.<sup>68</sup> Whether a program is designed for crime prevention or diversion from a criminal conviction, the program should focus on repairing harm, rehabilitation, and promoting success, rather than simply punishment and control.

There are many models and forms that programs, services, and support for young people can take. The Sentencing Project highlights several alternative-to-incarceration models that achieve better outcomes and at lower costs than incarceration. These include:<sup>69</sup>

- Credible messenger mentoring programs;
- Advocate/mentor programs;
- Family-focused, multidimensional therapy models;
- Cognitive behavioral therapy plus mentors for youth and young adults at extreme risk;
- Restorative justice interventions that target youth accused of serious offenses;
- Wraparound programs;
- Employment-focused programs; and
- Homegrown, locally designed programs.<sup>70</sup>

Best and promising practices suggest that youth crime prevention programs should be primarily community-based and led by community organizations. The proposition is that community-based organizations are equipped better than criminal legal system agencies to support young people in their communities. Because these organizations are rooted in the community, they can form long-term connections that provide opportunities to garner trust and confidence from young people and their families.<sup>71</sup> These organizations can also hire staff with similar backgrounds to the people whom they serve. In addition, because they are not directly connected to the criminal legal system, community organizations are able to employ methods that may not be found in or implemented as effectively by the system, including restorative justice practices, for example.<sup>72</sup>

Research has found that restorative practices are an effective alternative to punitive responses to wrongdoing. Studies have shown that these practices help produce safe learning environments and the development of positive, supportive, and authentic relationships.<sup>73</sup> Restorative practices view misconduct and harm as disrespect to oneself and others in the community, rather than as a violation of institutional rules. These practices use dialogue and relational teachings to build empathy in the wrongdoer for the person whom they harmed, to humanize the injury. While not appropriate for every circumstance, by promoting dialogue and accountability, restorative practices create a stronger sense of community, improve relationships, reduce exclusionary discipline referrals, and increase equity in discipline, particularly in school contexts.<sup>74</sup>

To truly encourage engagement and increase the likelihood of success, programs must include young people actively and directly; this is particularly true for programs designed to re-engage young people with education. Like anyone else, young people wish to have a sense of agency and not feel like they are being controlled. They want to feel that they have a choice and that their voice is important in matters that pertain to them.

A joint Annie E. Casey Foundation and Education Northwest study of two school reengagement programs found that young adults' involvement in setting goals and planning was important in successful alternative education placements.<sup>75</sup> Programs such as these may begin with an intake interview that initiates the establishment of trust between program staff and young adults. This study showed that personalized support with wrap-around services and scheduling flexibility were leading factors associated with young adults engaging and sustaining engagement with programs.

Personalized support meant that each young adult's individual needs were determined and then a plan was set jointly to meet those needs. Scheduling and timeline flexibility concerned both chronological timing and recognition of other factors, such as childcare responsibilities. The relationships with and support from program staff, together with program flexibility, made it more likely that young adults stayed engaged in the program. These program aspects were particularly critical for young adults who felt that their K-12 education experience was not very supportive.

Leadership development and employment are other key ways to prevent young people from engaging in risky behaviors. Leadership development programs help young people acquire life skills that they typically do not learn in school. These skills build their confidence, help them develop a sense of responsibility, and empower them to be active contributors to solutions in their communities. Among other things, young people learn to improve their communication, time management, conflict de-escalation, and problem-solving skills.<sup>76</sup>

Employment provides a structured environment, teaches young people financial management, and can contribute to financial stability, which makes them less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Jobs also provide opportunities to learn collaboration and teamwork, as well as other hard and soft skills that increase their future employability. For example, summer youth employment programs have been shown to reduce crime and incarceration effectively.<sup>77</sup> Compared to young people without jobs, those who are employed have better school attendance rates, are less likely to drop out of school, and are more likely to graduate high school on time.<sup>78</sup> These benefits are particularly profound for male students, those with limited English proficiency, and low-income students.<sup>79</sup>

In D.C. and across the country, there are various programs and initiatives that strive to help young people face their challenges and provide them opportunities to become the best versions of themselves. The next section gives some examples of promising programs that exist currently in the spectrum of youth crime prevention and diversion programs and initiatives.

## *Examples of Promising Programs and Initiatives*



### In D.C.

**1. Teen Council** – Teen Council describes itself as a “... paid leadership opportunity through DC Public Library. The Council is constituted of twelve teenage members from across the District. Members’ duties are split between working at a library in their community and meeting with other members and the Teen Services Coordinator to advise on teen services for the DC Public Library at large. Selected candidates are expected to be leaders in the library, in their communities, and among their peers.” Participants learn customer service and communication skills, and receive professional development in such areas as event planning.<sup>80</sup>

Teen councils<sup>81</sup> have been shown to be effective in teaching young people leadership skills and amplifying their voices by providing opportunities to share their perspectives and to engage in decision-making.<sup>82</sup> While this specific program has not been assessed formally, youth engagement makes youth programs more relevant and inclusive, increases awareness of issues that affect young people, helps them develop solutions, and encourages stronger connections to one another and their communities.<sup>83</sup> Involving young people in peer leadership and education can also help them gain confidence to talk about uncomfortable subjects and encourage positive behaviors.<sup>84</sup> One of the excellent things about the teen council model is that it can be integrated into nearly any area, whether it is mental health, sexual health, recreation, educational settings, or government and civic engagement.

**2. DCPS Persists** – This program is “... dedicated to empowering and supporting graduates of DC Public Schools (DCPS) on their journey through higher education.” It provides guidance to navigate the transition from high school, explore career possibilities, or seek personalized support, as well as the resources needed to succeed in college and beyond. DC Persists provides tailored workshops and career support; personalized coaching; microgrants and emergency funding; financial aid and scholarship assistance; and networking opportunities.<sup>85</sup> Currently, the program supports 3,420 DCPS alumni and since 2020, has awarded \$792,500 in microgrants and emergency funds to help participants with college expenses.<sup>86</sup>

Studies have shown that education and the pursuit of higher education reduce an individual’s risk of incarceration.<sup>87</sup> Higher educational attainment typically increases employability, which in turn, reduces economic motivations for crime.<sup>88</sup> Postsecondary education transition programs can help young people navigate college life, job training, and career planning.

**3. Black Swan Academy (BSA)** – Founded in 2014, BSA “... empowers Black youth in under-served communities through civic leadership and engagement, giving them a comprehensive set of tools needed to succeed in life and become active social catalysts in their communities.”<sup>89</sup> The organization provides after-school programming<sup>90</sup> and hosts an annual civic engagement summit.<sup>91</sup> BSA also strives to introduce young people to their ancestral roots by taking them on trips to visit African countries.<sup>92</sup>

The students develop the Black Youth Agenda every year in collaboration with program staff. This template of demands “... raises the unique concerns of Black youth living in [D.C.] and aims to create positive systemic change through public policy and youth organizing at the local level.”<sup>93</sup> Young people in BSA have testified before the D.C. Council on issues related to their schools, policing, and resources for their communities.

Between 2020 and 2022, BSA redistributed \$85,000 through mutual aid and directly supported more than 150 Black, Indigenous, and other youth of color in over 15 D.C. schools. One of the participating middle schools worked to establish a self-defense class to address gender-based violence and street harassment. Another cohort learned non-violent, conflict resolution, and de-escalation techniques. One of the greatest successes for BSA during this period was leading a local effort to remove school police from DCPS schools gradually and replace them with more appropriate supports for students and school communities.<sup>94</sup>

**4. D.C. Office of the Attorney General’s (OAG) Restorative Justice Program** – Started in 2017, the OAG’s Restorative Justice program “... offers victims an opportunity to pursue an alternative path to address crime, involving a restorative justice dialogue facilitated by a trained professional.” The program allows victims and those accused of harm to opt into a facilitated conversation about the harm that was experienced. Both sides can bring supporters to provide a safe environment for an honest conversation. The program does not take cases that involve firearms or intimate partner violence.<sup>95</sup> The program also requires that youth involved in serious violent crime complete a course of eight to ten weekly group cognitive behavioral therapy sessions.<sup>96</sup>

An early internal recidivism analysis conducted at OAG shows that youth who participate in restorative justice are less likely to commit future crimes compared to a similar cohort that was prosecuted in a traditional manner.<sup>97</sup>



### **Other Jurisdictions**

**1. Spaces of Her Own (SOHO)** – **SOHO** is a program for preteen girls from under-resourced communities based in Alexandria, VA. Through visual arts, carpentry, life-skills lessons, and creative one-to-one mentoring, the program is designed to help “... girls make good choices, live healthfully, communicate openly, progress academically, and give back to others.”<sup>98</sup>

According to SOHO’s 2022 annual report, the organization served 452 girls and had 456 volunteer mentors. The report also highlighted that 98 percent of the participants avoided delinquency.<sup>99</sup> In October 2024, SOHO was awarded the Champion of Mentoring Award from MENTOR Virginia.<sup>100</sup> The “... award recognizes organizations embodying the spirit of building positive relationships and strengthening communities.”<sup>101</sup>

**2. Roca, Inc.** – **Roca** began in Chelsea, MA with the mission “... to relentlessly disrupt violence by engaging young people, police, and systems to heal trauma, find hope, and drive change.”<sup>102</sup> The program serves young people ages 16-24, and their programming focuses on creating safety and stability, teaching life-saving skills, practicing skills, learning from relapse, and engaging systems and institutions in the criminal legal system.

In 2024, Roca served 2,000 young people in three states.<sup>103</sup> A three-year, mixed methods evaluation of Roca’s Young Mothers’ Program (YMP) by Tufts University found that participants experienced “... significant reductions in emotion dysregulation, depressive symptoms, PTSD, relationship violence and unhealthy relationships, and alcohol use.”<sup>104</sup> Other positive outcomes that the participants shared included, “feeling less ‘stuck’ and able to move forward from trauma”, “making progress toward reunification<sup>105</sup> with their child”, and “staying out of jail.”<sup>106</sup>

Although the programs discussed above may take different approaches, they all ultimately have the same goal: helping young people navigate systemic challenges. As emphasized in the study of school reengagement programs, a major challenge that these types of programs face is the lack of adequate funding and personnel. To operate at their full potential and to have the possibility of expansion, it is critical that jurisdictions, including D.C., increase and expand funding opportunities for agencies and community organizations that work most closely with young people and their families.

Jurisdictions around the country have been encouraging new programs by creating fiscal incentives that discourage incarcerating young people. In Wisconsin, the state has been incentivizing community treatment for young people by providing counties with funds that go directly toward juvenile justice programs (more than \$100 million per year as of 2023). In addition, counties are required to pay the full cost of every young person placed in a state correctional facility, which further incentivizes alternatives.<sup>107</sup> In Ohio, the RECLAIM Ohio program allocates over \$32 million annually to counties to support alternatives to state incarceration, and each county's annual allocation is based upon their success at limiting the number of young people incarcerated. More than \$12 million is allocated separately to community-based programs for youth.<sup>108</sup> Between 1992 and 2021, the population of young people incarcerated in Ohio state youth correction facilities decreased from 2,500 to 300. An offshoot of RECLAIM, called Targeted RECLAIM, also provides \$6 million per year for evidence-based alternatives to incarceration programs for young people who would be placed in a correctional facility otherwise.<sup>109</sup>

Another route that other states have taken is redirecting savings acquired from decarcerating youth to fund alternative to incarceration programs. Connecticut is considered to have made the greatest investment in these programs. Between 2000 and 2009, the state's annual budget for alternative programs for court-involved young people increased from \$300,000 to \$39 million.<sup>110</sup> This funding went toward family-focused, research-driven adolescent treatment programs, which included intensive family therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. In FY12, 955 youths on probation participated in intensive evidence-based family therapy programs and 652 in cognitive behavioral therapy.<sup>111</sup> By 2011, the number of young people committed to residential placement in Connecticut decreased by approximately 70 percent, from 680 in 2000 to 216.<sup>112</sup> Alternative incarceration programs received nearly \$60 million in Connecticut's 2025 state budget.<sup>113</sup> Some of Connecticut's alternative to incarceration programs include the Family Violence Education Program, the Drug Education and Community Service Program, Accelerated Rehabilitation, as well as record expungement for some individuals who were charged with felonies committed when they were between 15 and 17 years old.<sup>114</sup>

In 2023, Washington state provided more than \$10 million to counties to support youth programs designed to reduce delinquency. Types of programs included Functional Family Therapy, Multisystemic Therapy, a cognitive behavioral therapy curriculum, and a program to enhance success in education and employment.<sup>115</sup>

Recognizing the costliness of incarceration, states have also enacted rules that prohibit incarceration for less serious offenses. In 2022, Maryland enacted a comprehensive juvenile justice reform bill that prohibits state incarceration of young people who commit misdemeanors, as well as those who are cited for violating probation rules.<sup>116</sup> In California, the state can incarcerate only young people found guilty of serious or violent felony offenses. As a result, the population of young people in California state correction institutions has declined by 69 percent since 2007.<sup>117</sup>



# SUPPORTING REENTRY



Some young people who fall through the cracks become adults in the criminal legal system.<sup>118</sup> Once people are involved with the criminal legal system, it can be difficult to extricate themselves. Therefore, it is critical that people who are reentering are supported when they reintegrate into their communities.<sup>119</sup>

Formerly incarcerated individuals are met with an uphill battle that includes navigating complex bureaucratic systems that dictate their transition, as well as everyday tasks, like using unfamiliar technology. These challenges are exacerbated by the stigma of having a criminal record.<sup>120</sup>

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights estimates that 700,000 people are released from U.S. prisons, and approximately 9 million are released from jails every year.<sup>121</sup> In 2023, approximately 1,000 individuals returned to D.C. from federal prisons.<sup>122</sup> Most who are attempting to reintegrate into society—some after decades—are not allowed to vote, have little access to education, have limited employment opportunities, and are ineligible for public benefits, public housing, and student loans.<sup>123</sup> In addition, formerly incarcerated people typically do not have consistent and reliable transportation and have limited access to mental health services that are not associated with the carceral system.

## *Why Reentry Programs Are Important*

Reentry programs are important because they improve health, wellbeing, and public safety.<sup>124</sup> Non-carceral programs that support those who are reentering reduce recidivism by fostering personal growth and providing resources and opportunities to steer people away from reoffending. Employment-oriented programs promote economic empowerment by helping individuals become self-reliant, while giving them the ability to contribute to their own wellbeing and that of their communities. Educational and vocational training programs help them develop skills and improve employability. Adequate access to mental health and substance use services improves their likelihood of rehabilitation. These programs encourage successful reintegration and reduce recidivism by meeting individual needs, supporting rehabilitation, fostering relationships, and building community.<sup>125</sup>

# *Overview of Research on Anti-Recidivism & Reentry Programs*

A report by the Harvard University Institute of Politics identified various dynamic risk factors that affect reentry. These include health, employment, housing, skill development, mentorship, social networks, and the type of organization running a program. The report analyzed different interventions' magnitude of success and compared community-based and government-run reentry programs. Overall, the report found that tailored interventions that address the risk factors listed above have the most significant effect on reentry success. The report noted that community-based programs are able to tailor interventions better, which is important for considerations such as race, gender, age, etc. On the other hand, government entities are ideal for data collection. Both serve complementary functions, as they often have different priorities.<sup>126</sup>

Programs that include mental health service components, like cognitive behavioral therapy, are particularly effective.<sup>127</sup> As the Harvard report emphasized, a person's physical and mental health can influence other factors related to crime and recidivism (e.g., employment, finance, relationships). Therefore, programs that focus only on one aspect, such as employment, but do not include health services as well, are not as helpful (particularly for individuals with chronic physical and mental health needs).<sup>128</sup>

A report by the University of North Carolina Criminal Justice Innovation Lab found that holistic wraparound services that address multiple factors of reentry have the most positive effects compared to programs that focus on only one aspect of reentry. Wraparound programs intend to reduce the challenges to those reentering that can occur when services are provided by separate entities. These types of programs typically provide comprehensive service delivery that includes housing, mental health support, and employment training and opportunities. Wraparound services are also considered more flexible and can be individualized to each person's needs.<sup>129</sup>

**Below are examples of reentry support programs in D.C. and other jurisdictions.**

## **Examples of Promising Reentry Programs**



### **In D.C.**

**1. Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop (Free Minds)** – Free Minds was founded in 2002 to share the “... power of reading, writing, and community building with teens at the D.C. Jail.” Its behind-bars services include book clubs and writing workshops for young people and adults in the D.C. Jail, juvenile detention center, and federal prisons. Its reentry services include job training and placement, peer mentoring, advocacy and leadership development opportunities, and referrals to other services in the community.<sup>130</sup>

Free Minds is a convener of the Thrive Under 25 Coalition,<sup>131</sup> and members of Free Mind testify before the D.C. Council on a regular basis about issues that affect people who were formerly incarcerated and those incarcerated currently.

Initiatives like Free Minds are critical because literacy has significant effects on education, employability, and long-term self-reliance. The National Literacy Institute estimates that three out of five incarcerated people are illiterate, and 85 percent of young people who are incarcerated have difficulty reading. Some states even use student performance on reading tests to determine how many prison beds they will need in future years<sup>132</sup>—creating a seemingly inseparable link between literacy and the carceral system. Enhancing the literacy of young people and adults who fall through the cracks can empower them to pursue higher education. It also increases their employability and allows them to tap into creativity through writing.

Free Minds’ reentry book club, “The Build Up,” has regularly had about 160 members who gather weekly to discuss the current book that they are reading and to support each other.<sup>133</sup> “The Build Up” also hosts guest speakers for in-depth discussions on special topics.<sup>134</sup> “Free Minds Connect” Magazine is sent to over 800 incarcerated members in more than 100 facilities across the country. The magazine provides opportunities for members to engage in dialogue through books, writing, and sharing stories about their reentry.<sup>135</sup>

**2. *Voices for a Second Chance (VSC)*** – This organization provides a comprehensive continuum of care from pre-release to community reintegration. Their First Responder phase conducts outreach and direct support in jails, prisons, halfway houses, and to those living on the streets. The Welcome Center offers a mobile and office-based reentry center that assists individuals who are released from incarceration, leaving halfway housing, or who are on community supervision. It provides assistance with such aspects as short-term hotel rooms for those at risk of being unhoused and obtaining birth certificates and social security cards. The Moving Toward Stability phase provides intensive case management and peer support groups, as well as information and connections to housing, employment, treatment, and education, including know your rights information and financial literacy.<sup>136</sup> Community of Voices is an advocacy-focused area that strengthens people’s advocacy, community movement, and organizing capacity through education and training.

In 2023, VSC had 1,728 people on its caseload in various intervention phases.<sup>137</sup> The First Responder staff screened and supported 193 new clients in the D.C. Jail and halfway houses, and there were 1902 office visits in the Welcome Home phase.<sup>138</sup> 41 clients completed job training, 62 became employed, and 37 moved to independent housing.<sup>139</sup>

## In Other Jurisdictions

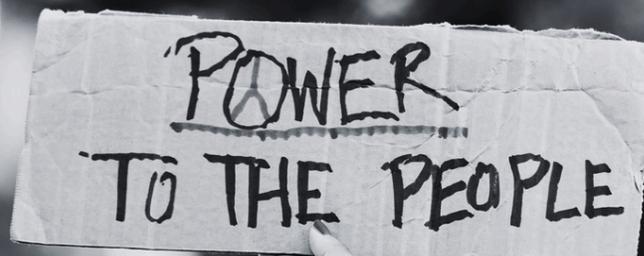
1. Colorado Second Chance Center (SCC) – SCC started as a grassroots effort to create a space to support formerly incarcerated people as they rebuild their lives. SCC provides comprehensive, trauma-informed services, including permanent supportive and transitional housing and care management; mentoring; mental and behavioral health; substance use recovery; and career pathways programming.<sup>140</sup> The Center is funded through donor contributions and state funds.<sup>141</sup> In 2024, SCC served more than 3,500 people in the Denver metropolitan area. 1,020 individuals received housing navigation services, and 540 people were placed in stable employment.<sup>142</sup>



2. CEO Works Returning Citizens Stimulus Program – The Center for Employment Opportunities began this program in April 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose was to provide immediate financial support to people returning from incarceration during the pandemic.<sup>143</sup> Funded through philanthropy, the pilot was implemented in 28 cities including Denver, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, and Tulsa. Stipends were distributed by 32 partner organizations. Each participant received three stipends totaling \$2,750, dependent upon milestone conditions. The program distributed over \$24 million to more than 10,400 formerly incarcerated individuals.<sup>144</sup>

A study of the program’s outcomes in Los Angeles and Alameda County found that participants had fewer parole violations after one year than comparison groups.<sup>145</sup> More than 90 percent of participants received two or three payments after they reached their financial milestones, and participants attributed finding and maintaining a job to the program.<sup>146</sup>

Similar to crime prevention programs and initiatives for young people, adult reentry programs need adequate funding to increase their likelihood of success and to engage people with their communities. Several states have passed legislation to ensure funding for reentry programs. In 2019, Colorado passed SB 64,<sup>147</sup> which created a community-based reentry cash fund to ensure that money is available from year to year.<sup>148</sup> In 2022, Maryland enacted HB 158,<sup>149</sup> which transitioned a previous pilot program into the Maryland New Start Grant Program to provide grants to organizations to create or support existing entrepreneurship development programs for individuals reentering society.



# CONCLUSION

**At the ACLU-D.C., we believe that everyone deserves dignity, fairness, and an opportunity to thrive. We want a world in which people have an equal right to go about their lives without invasive, humiliating, or violent encounters with the criminal legal system regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or disability. We seek to limit the current system's harm and reach and to transform our approach to safety into a system focused on prevention, not punishment. However, we cannot do it alone. District leaders have a vital role to play in realizing this vision.**

As many people face uncertainty during these turbulent economic, political, and social times, it is crucial that D.C. residents are able to rely on their local leaders to act with their best interests in mind. Keeping D.C. residents out of the criminal legal system is particularly important when federal government officials are targeting the D.C. legal system. To protect the wellbeing of the most vulnerable District residents from unpredictable actions on the federal government's part, D.C. leaders must invest in programs and services that provide a holistic sense of security. The programs and initiatives discussed in this report are non-exhaustive. They are simply the tip of the iceberg of non-carceral solutions to the challenges that too many District residents face. Still, they are an important start to altering an outdated narrative and to providing avenues for District residents to set out on a path to thriving, not merely surviving. These avenues can provide a path to a safer, stronger D.C. for all.

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