

Supporting Safer Communities

In 2019, more than 10,615 Georgia youth were under the supervision of the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and approximately 1,357 of these youth were confined by the DJJ.¹ Afterschool and summer learning programs can keep youth safe, connect them to necessary supports, and build protective factors and positive relationships that can help keep young people out of the juvenile justice system.



Adolescence is a Critical Period

Adolescence (ages 10 – 19) is a vital time in building cognitive, social, and emotional skills.² It is “the second most critical period of development” after the early childhood years as it is marked with the opportunity for positive growth, possibility of recovery from negative childhood experiences, and an increased sensitivity to their environment.³ Adolescents are developing their sense of identity, have a growing capacity for self-direction, become increasingly aware of and attuned to their social status, and learn how to make decisions and take responsibility for shaping their own life. This is a time of heightened plasticity, which means that youth are more likely to engage in risky behaviors but they are also more likely to benefit from positive supports and build resiliency. Protective factors such as supportive relationships with family and caretakers and access to resources support positive trajectories. And risk factors such as inequalities in opportunity and access, lack of family and neighborhood resources and supports, and biased and discriminatory interactions with social systems can lead to at-risk or poor trajectories.⁴ **It is imperative to create policies, practices, and programs that are developmentally appropriate for adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system.**

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Georgia's Juvenile Justice Landscape

As previously stated, over 10,615 Georgia youth were under the supervision of the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and approximately 1,357 youth were confined by DJJ in 2019.⁵ The cost of youth confinement remains high at \$91,000 per bed per year.⁶ Approximately 50% of youth screened upon admission in DJJ facilities are referred for a more thorough mental health assessment.⁷ Data shows racially disproportionate responses to misbehaviors in schools (Georgia's public schools refer more children to juvenile courts than law enforcement) and in public safety. In

Georgia, black children are more likely to be suspended for the same offense as their White or Latino peers and children from low income families are four times more likely to be disciplined compared to their peers.⁸ In fact, Black youth were more than 5.6 times as likely to be detained or committed to youth facilities compared to White youth in Georgia.⁹ Implicit biases related to race, gender, ethnicity, geography, and income have pushed countless youth into the juvenile justice system, and increased their likelihood of involvement with the justice system as an adult.¹⁰ Fortunately with the revision of the Juvenile Justice Code in 2013, there has been progress in the past few years through the use of more evidence-based, restorative, and therapeutic practices.

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Georgia Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2013

In 2013, the Juvenile Justice Reform Act was passed with the aim to improve public safety, decrease costs, and preserve and strengthen family relationships to allow youth to live in safety and security. Strategies implemented include increased use of evidence-based programs, treating youth in the community rather than in secure facilities, and utilizing the Juvenile Justice Incentive Grant Program to decrease recidivism. From 2013 – 2018, it has resulted in 45% reduction in short-term secure confinement, 40% reduction in secure detention, and 22% reduction in overall commitment to DJJ.¹¹ In addition, more than 10,000 youth have received evidence-based treatment programming in their home communities.¹² Fortunately, since the number of youth in community-based services has increased, juvenile recidivism rates are expected to decrease over time.¹³

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Placement	Average Daily Population	Percentage in DJJ Care
Community	9,258	87.2%
Residential	327	2.1%
Regional Youth Detention Centers	490	4.6%
Youth Development Campuses	316	3.0%
Adult Jail	224	2.1%
Total	10,615	100%

Average daily population of youth under DJJ supervision in 2019.¹⁴

The Division of Community Services within DJJ is responsible for intake, case management, probation, detention planning, residential care, re-entry services, and aftercare supervision. At intake, youth may be diverted from or formally processed into the juvenile justice system and placed under supervision. Youth awaiting trial or placement are supervised at temporary, secure facilities called DJJ Regional Youth Detention Centers. Youth receiving treatment services for short and long-term placements are supervised at secure facilities called DJJ Youth Development Campuses. The Division of Community Services uses several evidence-based programs and tools such as mental health services, gang prevention training, and support for human trafficking services for victims and families to implement juvenile justice reform. In FY2020, they partnered with major corporations and universities to provide job skills to youth, successfully transitioned youth back into their communities, while providing mentoring programs to ease their transition.¹⁵

Unfortunately, Georgia still remains one of only three states that processes 17 year olds through the adult system regardless of offense – thereby denying them access to restorative practices and increasing their chances of reoffending and deepening their ties with the adult justice system. While Georgia’s juvenile justice system has vastly improved over the past decade by using developmentally appropriate, rehabilitative practices to divert youth from detention and incarceration, practicing restorative justice, providing counseling and therapeutic services, and educating youth, there is room for progress.

At-Promise Youth Center



The **At-Promise Youth Center** serves as the cornerstone of the Atlanta Police Foundation’s (APF) youth crime reduction initiative. It offers specialized services for youth ages 12 to 24 through a network of youth-serving organizations, including APF, CHRIS 180, Urban League of Greater Atlanta, Street Smart and Boys and Girls Club of Metro Atlanta. The At-Promise Center provides a safe, positive, and engaging environment with structured out of school activities, mentoring programs, and job placement and vocational training in order to reduce the number of young people who negatively experience the criminal justice system. The center provides education, recreation, social-emotional, therapeutic and workforce development services and focuses on three major areas:

- **Prevention** – to promote and foster personal growth and development
- **Intervention** – strategies to address behavior
- **Diversion** – an alternative to arrest and probation

CHRIS 180, the lead organization, provides behavioral health services and therapeutic services for youth ages 12–24. These services include assessments, individual counseling, group counseling, expressive therapy, groups, parenting classes, family team/community team meetings, and coordinated referrals for services to other on-site referral partners. As 47% of the youth that are referred to the center have 4 or more Adverse Childhood Experiences and have extensive histories of trauma, the center focuses on helping youth recover from that trauma, provides a sense of belonging, and trains peers to act as trauma support through a Trauma Response Network, which consists of residents using tools and resources to care for each other and reclaim community spaces as safe places after a traumatic event. This way youth not only see their community as a support but also learn how to build resilient communities themselves. One

practice includes healing circles, facilitated gatherings that bring people together to support healing by providing space for listening and reflection without reactive communication, allowing for multiple perspectives, and providing a space for victims (both direct and indirect) to be heard and hear from victimizers if used in reference to a conflict or a wrong.

2020 Outcomes

The At-Promise Center enrolled 504 youth in specialized services such as tutoring, counseling, and vocations training and observed the following results:

- **3%** recidivism rate
- **96%** of participating high school seniors graduated
- **91%** of students who applied for employment secured jobs

Partnership with Fulton County Juvenile Court

The At-Promise Center also partnered with Fulton County Juvenile Court to provide services to 59 high-risk youth. They provided youth with behavioral health and case management services while in jail and after release and partnered with First Step Staffing and Urban League of Greater Atlanta to connect them with jobs. Only 6% of youth were rearrested in 2020.²⁸

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Why Afterschool

Afterschool and summer learning programs provide safe and supervised environments, enrichment activities, positive decision-making and social-emotional skills, along with opportunities to build trusting relationships with caring adults and peers. Regular participation in high quality afterschool programs leads to a reduction in crime and juvenile delinquency.¹⁶ **All high quality afterschool and summer learning programs can serve as prevention programs and those that use evidence-based and trauma-informed practices can also support intervention and diversion.**

Research shows that evidence-based afterschool programs offer protective factors that contribute to positive developmental experiences and improved outcomes for youth, while mitigating the effects of risk factors.^{17,18} These protective factors include strong relationships with caring adults, clearly outlined rules and expectations, and opportunities to learn skills such as self-regulation, problem solving, and decision making, while increasing a sense of belonging in schools. Participation in afterschool is linked to decreased reports of misconduct in school and disciplinary incidents, including aggression, noncompliance, and conduct problems (i.e. impulsivity, discipline concern/challenges, expulsion, truancy) and reduction in risky behaviors such as substance use and misuse.^{19,20}

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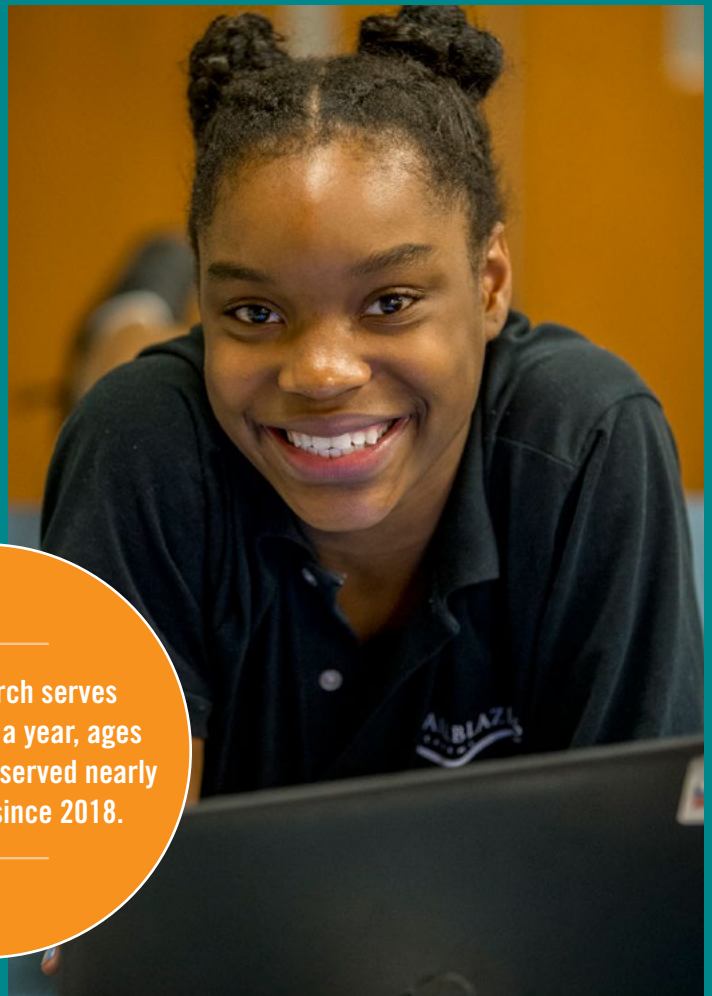
Afterschool provides the opportunity for youth to form relationships with caring mentors and their peers.²¹ Relationships with informed adults are especially impactful when program providers are trained in trauma-informed practices to help youth overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences, which are found in high concentrations in the juvenile population, and reduce their chances of developing substance use disorders.^{22,23} Through peer interaction, youth learn necessary skills like how to voice their opinions, respect others, and work in teams toward shared goals, which also paves the way for increased participation in school and academic success.²⁴ Through healthy relationships with adults and peers, youth also cultivate social emotional skills.²⁵ **Regular participation in high quality afterschool and mentoring programs promotes positive decision-making skills, self-control, and self-awareness and has been linked to increased school attendance, improved work habits and classroom behavior, as well as gains in reading and math, and increased graduation rates.**^{26, 27}

The Front Porch



The Front Porch is a Multi-Agency Resource Center that functions as a community-based risk reduction program designed to identify youth and families at risk of becoming involved with the court and link them to community resources to divert them from the court system. The partnerships include Chatham County Juvenile Court, Chatham County Commissioners, City of Savannah, Savannah-Chatham Public Schools, the Youth Intercept Program at the Chatham County District Attorney's, Talented Individuals with Power, Inc., Parent University, DEEP Center, Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council, Healthy Savannah Inc., Georgia Division of Family and Children Services, Gateway Community Service Board, The Mediation Center, St. Joseph's Candler, and Coastal Georgia Indicators Coalition. The Front Porch serves over 200 youth a year, ages 5 – 18 and have served nearly 700 families since 2018.

Youth who are at risk of becoming delinquent, dependent children or a child in need of services, can be referred to the program by anyone or may self-refer. Each case is assessed by the staff and referred to a multi-agency planning panel, which develops an intervention plan for the youth and their parents who are present during case reviews. The intervention plan includes referrals to Urban Hope, Performance Initiatives, and DEEP Center for youth to partake in afterschool and summer programs, mentoring programs, and positive youth development activities. Front Porch staff work with all agencies involved to educate the youth's parents, guardian or legal custodian on the importance of following the plan and on the consequences if anyone is referred to the court. The staff also make referrals and provide other assistance to facilitate and implement the intervention plan along with following up with youth and their families for at least 90 days to ensure the plan is implemented.²⁹



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Recommendations

Afterschool and summer learning programs keep youth safe, provide necessary developmental supports, build protective factors, and provide opportunities for positive relationships thereby decreasing a young person's chances of interacting with the juvenile justice system.



Create incentive grants for afterschool programs to use trauma-informed practices and evidence-based programs to build protective factors.



Expand state funding to afterschool and summer learning programs to increase access and ensure affordability.



Expand trauma-informed training to afterschool and youth development professionals.



Strengthen partnerships at all levels between community-based afterschool programs, mentoring programs, school districts, juvenile courts, and other community partners to align services for young people.



Increase funding and accessibility of evidence based wraparound models to keep youth in their homes, placements, and communities.



Expand trauma awareness and implicit bias training for public safety officers and law enforcement personnel that engage with children in any way.



Expand the jurisdiction of juvenile courts to encompass children under 18 and eliminate provisions that automatically transfer (without juvenile court approval) certain youth to adult courts.



Increase funding and accessibility of behavior aide services and extend them to afterschool and youth development professionals, in addition to families and classroom teachers, so they can help youth learn behavior modification techniques, supervise behaviors, and de-escalate situations.



For more information on afterschool in Georgia, go to www.afterschoolga.org.
For references, go to www.afterschoolga.org/afterschool-issues.



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GEORGIA STATEWIDE AFTERSCHOOL NETWORK

75 Marietta Street, Suite 401

Atlanta, Georgia 30303

(404) 521-0355 | info@afterschoolga.org

www.afterschoolga.org

 [Facebook.com/AfterschoolGA](https://www.facebook.com/AfterschoolGA)

 [@AfterschoolGA](https://twitter.com/AfterschoolGA)