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## JUVENILE DETENTION ALTERNATIVES INITIATIVE — JDAI

### IT'S JUST TRUANCY ...

*School attendance is mandatory in Minnesota until age 18. A youth is considered "habitually truant" if he/she is under the age of 17 and is absent from school without lawful excuse for seven days or for one or more class periods on seven school days—see Minn. Stat. 260C.007. **Truancy isn't just truancy.** It is an important predictor of life outcomes. A recent report from the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform cited a series of studies that demonstrate "Poor school performance is a significant indicator of delinquency, and delinquency is a strong predictor of poor school performance." Further, "High school dropouts are about three to four times more likely to be imprisoned than high school graduates." The statistics, powerful as they are, can also be impersonal. This issue of the JDAI Newsletter features a piece from the truancy trenches. It is written by Ana Negrete, a Dakota County Probation Officer whose job is intervening with truanting youth.*

I skipped science class once, in seventh grade. I left the building (avoiding a test) and went into the woods behind my school along with a friend who just didn't like school. That was what I thought truancy was prior to becoming a truancy officer for Dakota County. Truancy to my 7th grade self was skipping one or two science classes. The truancy I work with is far more complicated, the behaviors more ingrained than the occasional absence. It isn't unusual for me to get referrals from schools for youth who have 40 to 70 unexcused absences. To put that into perspective, there are 175 to 180 school days per year.

Truancy intervention in Dakota County is divided by two departments (Community Corrections and Social Services) along geographic lines. I am in my assigned schools each week, working with 40 or more students on my caseload year-round. I also have contact with another 70-100 who are showing signs of school attendance problems, but for whom early and quick interventions will prevent more truancy.

I meet with young people and their families, along with school staff, several times to intervene and prevent additional truancy, part of what we call 'pre-diversion' efforts. This is a key piece of my work. I make sure families and students have information about truancy laws, as well as the facts about their students' attendance histories. I have learned how important it is to let them tell their stories. Sometimes, I can use this infor-

mation to connect with community based resources if the problem is clear. For most of the 70-100 pre-diversion students, one or two meetings is enough to help them turn the corner and attend school more consistently. Those students who don't make that change are formally referred to the Truancy Program, which is also called Student Success. That's when the most intensive work begins.

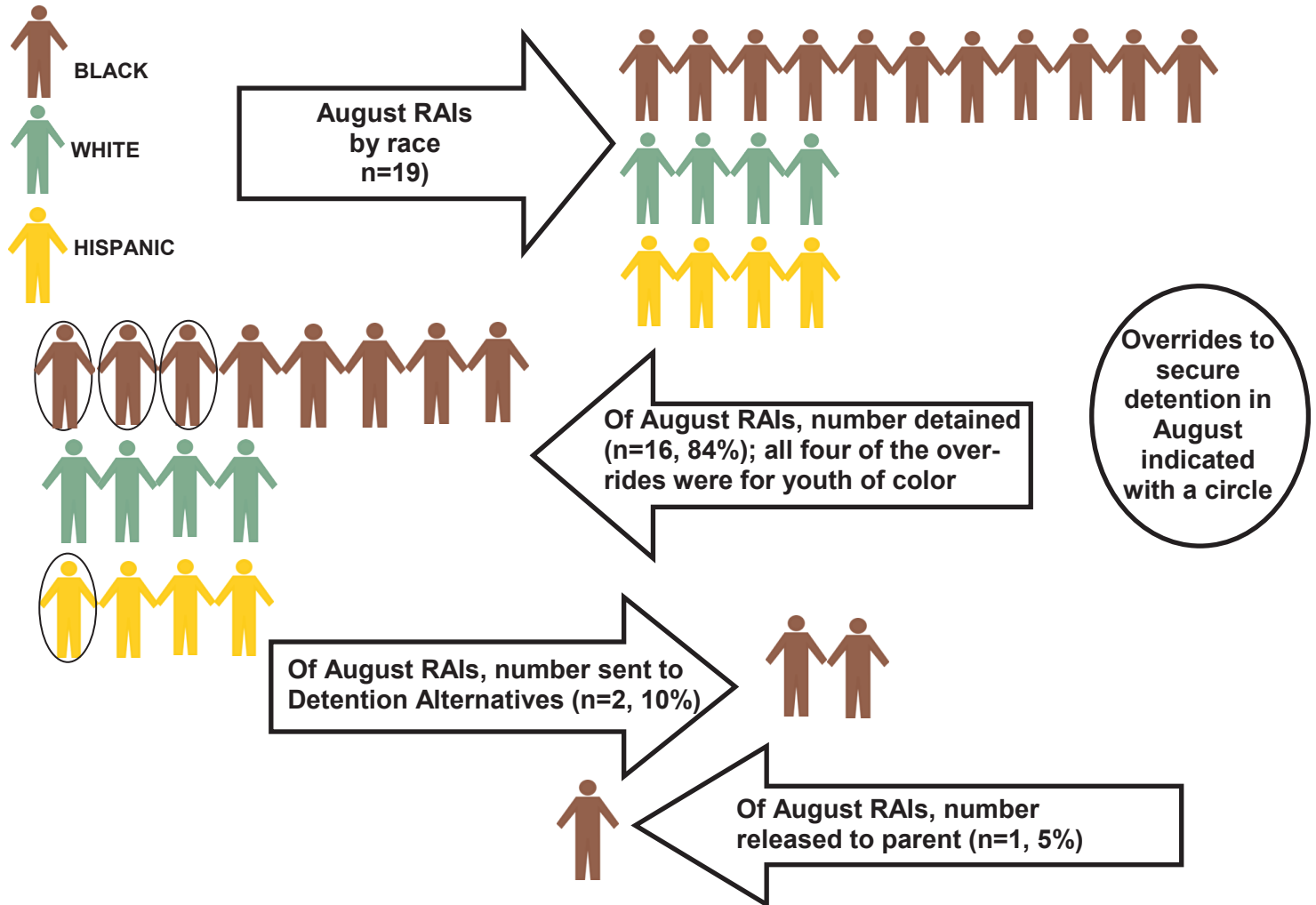


A snapshot of my caseload over the past three years paints a picture of my clients. Of 103 students in my assigned Apple Valley schools, nearly 67% were students of color. Compare that to the overall ISD 196 racial makeup — approximately 32% are students of color. Lesson One: students of color are disproportionately represented among all students considered habitually or chronically truant.

A variety of factors contribute. Behavioral issues such as insubordination, theft, and altercations with peers are common: 48% of my clients had behaviors serious enough to result in having two or more suspensions during the school year. Mental health concerns were present in 44% of my clients. Few if any of the families of those clients were addressing the issues. Chemical use was a factor in at least 30% of my clients, although my sense is that this issue was underreported by young people and families. Those on truancy are not universally drug tested.

# Risk Assessment Instrument (RAI): August Screening Results

Dakota County's Risk Assessment Instrument (RAI) is the product of collaboration between Community Corrections, local law enforcement, the County Attorney's Office, and public defenders. According to Minnesota state law, secure detention can only be used between the time of arrest and first court appearance if a young person is a risk to public safety, and/or at risk of failing to appear for his/her first court hearing. The RAI uses objective criteria to determine a young person's risk level. Those who pose low levels of risk are released to their families. Those who pose moderate risks may be sent to detention alternatives such as a shelter or foster care, while young people who pose the highest risks are held in secure detention at the JSC. RAI results may be overridden under certain circumstances by a judge or a JSC supervisor.



Placement Decisions by Race: 2016 Year to Date

Outcome	White	Black	Hispanic	Am. Indian	Asian	Other	Total
Released to ATD*	24	19	4	0	0	0	47
Shelter	19	16	2	0	0	0	37
GPS	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
House Arrest	3	3	2	0	0	0	8
Released to Parent/Guardian	4	6	2	0	0	0	12
Held in Secure Detention	53	61	15	3	3	2	137
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>196</b>

\* Alternative to Detention

## CONTINUED: "IT'S JUST TRUANCY..."

For my caseload, the most glaring and unaddressed problems for families is really a constellation of issues having to do with consistency and effectiveness of parenting. I realize that raising my children in a two-parent home is a luxury that most of my clients do not share. I also have the benefit of training in child development and parenting. I am aware of the research around the four main parenting styles (Authoritative, Authoritarian, Permissive, and Uninvolved) and which is most effective. I keep in mind always that raising children can be overwhelming, let alone the stresses caused by chemical health, mental health, single parenting, housing, and employment issues. Lesson Two: Add it all up and it is easy to see why some truancy families are barely keeping their heads above water.

I enter the picture, want to meet regularly, develop case plans, call, text, email and communicate with parents about attendance and grades. Schools are also on them, asking that doctor's notes be provided after five-ten "ill" calls to school. Everyone wants the families to demonstrate their buy-in by actively addressing the mental, physical or chemical health concerns, although they may not have the financial resources to do so. With all that, who wouldn't want to meet with me, brimming with parental suggestions and armed with Motivational Interviewing? Lesson Three: Habitual or chronic truancy is complicated and not easily or quickly resolved.

I've described a number of individual core issues but keep in mind they are compounded by larger social pressures such as bullying, academic failure, the decline of social skills due to today's tech saturation. It is tempting to believe that bringing families to court is going to solve problems. Those of us who do this work realize court has little impact for most clients. It can provide a short term intervention for some, perhaps to spur a disengaged youth or parent. Ultimately, a short term intervention does not work for a long term problem. Still, we must work hard to assess and reassess, striving to build the relationships that have been most impactful for clients we work to support.

Not long ago, I attended a forum where I learned that youth are most successful if they were able to identify five adults in their lives to whom they could turn for support. My goal is to be one of those five.

*For more information on the report from the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, click on this link: <http://cjjr.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Lifeline-for-Justice-Involved-Youth-August-2016.pdf>*

*For more information on Dakota County's Truancy Prevention program, click on this link: <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/HealthFamily/Parenting/SchoolTruancy/Pages/default.aspx>*

## ELIMINATING RACIAL DISPARITIES COMMITTEE

The JDAI Executive Committee met on August 25, 2016. The members heard updates on several JDAI and Deep End efforts, including:

**Welcome/Introduction of Guests**—Commander John Grant will be the Committee's point of contact for the Dakota County Sheriff's Department; Joe Marshall is the School Resource Officer at Eagan High and Dakota Hills Middle Schools; and Adriana Temali-Smith is the Dakota County Diversity/HRD Administrator.

**Disorderly Conduct (DOC) Diversion Data**—The topic was tabled until the next meeting. Committee members were asked to email Forbes with suggestions regarding what data to be pulled by the County Attorney's Office.

**Site Visit Follow Up**—The Annie E. Casey Foundation did a Dakota County site visit July 20-22, 2016. A recommendation was to create community focus groups to discuss obstacles and barriers created when youth are removed from their homes. Focus groups would consist of all community members without any Dakota County representative present. Forbes is working with a community partner to create the focus groups.

**Work Groups**— Committee members identified three work groups: law enforcement agencies data and contact, school resource officer connections, and community member liaison.

**Pathways to Poverty**—Jamie Johnson, Dakota County's ICMA Fellow, presented "*Pathways from Poverty to Thriving in Dakota County*" which provided committee members with information about poverty in Dakota County. For more information, contact [Jamie.Johnson@co.dakota.mn.us](mailto:Jamie.Johnson@co.dakota.mn.us) ((651)554-5778).

**The next ERD Committee meeting is scheduled for September 22, 2016, in the JSC Training Room, noon - 1:30pm**

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