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The Impact of COVID-19 on Community-based Juvenile Service Aid Programs

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The Impact of COVID-19 on Community-based Juvenile Services Aid Programs

Erin Wasserburger, Anne Hobbs, J.D., Ph.D., and Julie Garman, Ph.D.

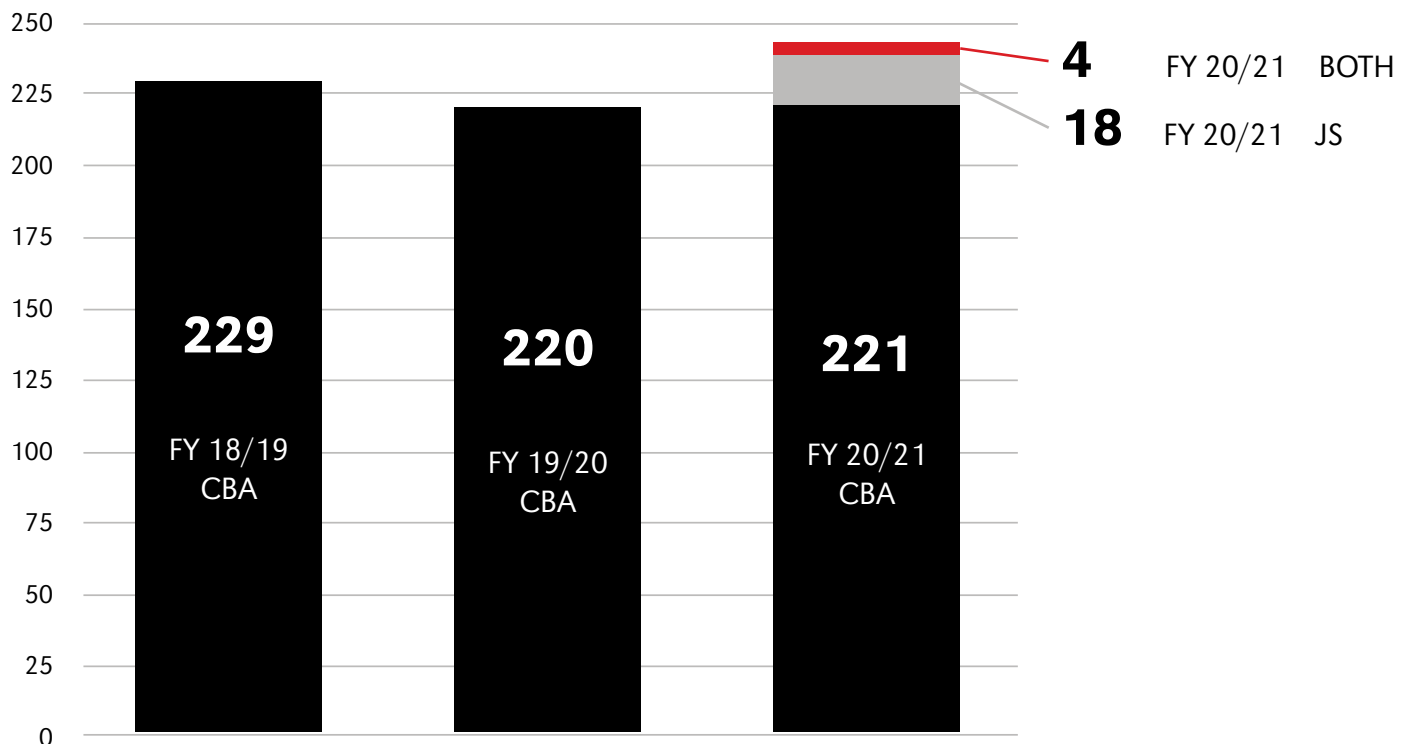
Community-based Juvenile Services Aid Programs

The Community-based Juvenile Services Aid Division (CBA) is a program funded by the Nebraska legislature and housed within the Nebraska Commission on Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice (NCC). The guiding statute requires that funds be used for programs and services that divert youth from the juvenile justice system. The overarching aim is to effectively intervene with youth while they are in the community, and thereby reduce youth going to court or being placed in juvenile detention.

To assess the efficacy of the interventions, the legislature allocated 10% of the fund for the development of a common data set and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the CBA program. The common dataset is currently maintained by the NCC; evaluation of effectiveness of programs is conducted by the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s Juvenile Justice Institute (JJI). The goal of collecting data in a common dataset is to have comparable measures across the state and to help programs determine if they are effectively keeping youth out of the system.

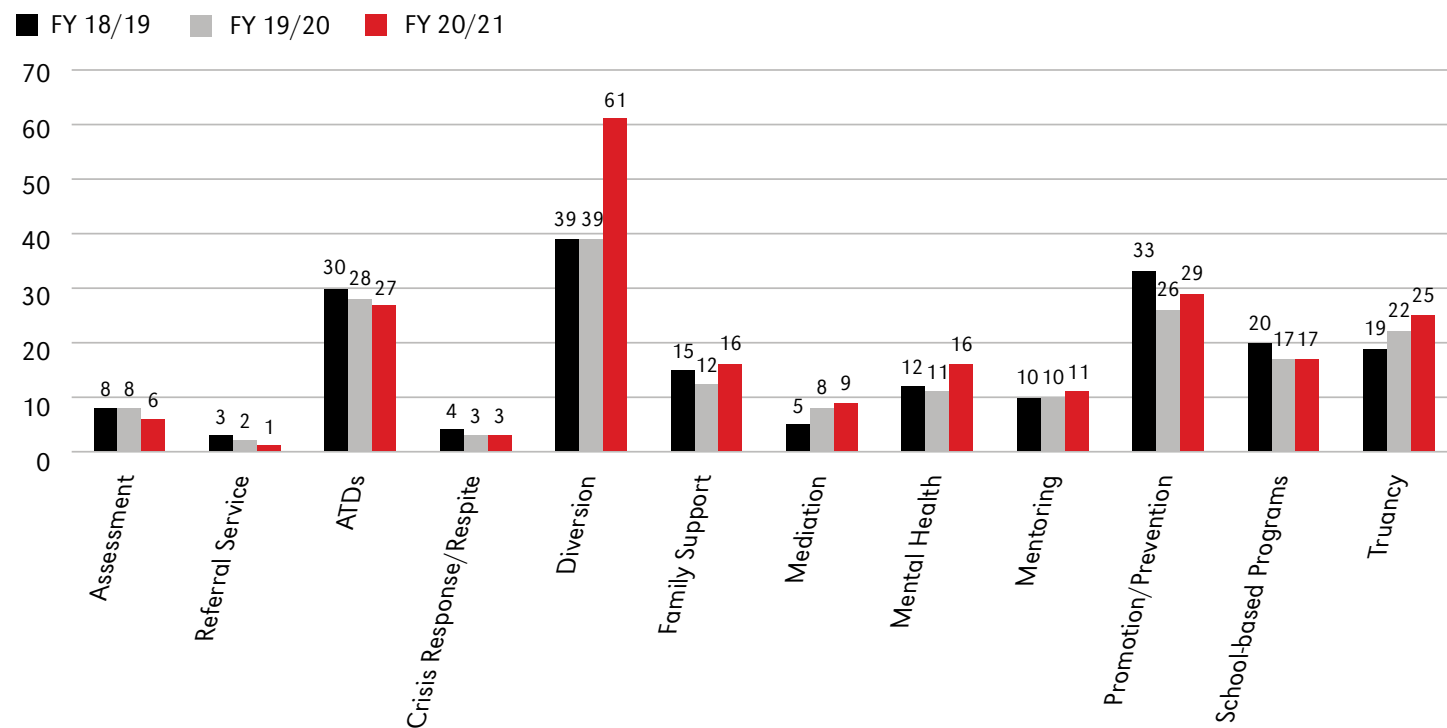
For the past three fiscal years (July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2021), the number of funded programs has remained fairly consistent, although the types of programs being funded have fluctuated some (see Figures 1 and 2 below). Although the chart below appears to show an increase in programming, this is because programs receiving funding through the Juvenile Services Commission Grant Program (JS) also began entering youth data into the common dataset for FY 20/21.

Figure 1. Total Number of Programs Funded by Fiscal Year



Note. In FY 20/21 there were 221 CBA and 18 JS funded programs, and four programs funded by both grants.

Figure 2. Programs Funded Each Fiscal Year by Program Type



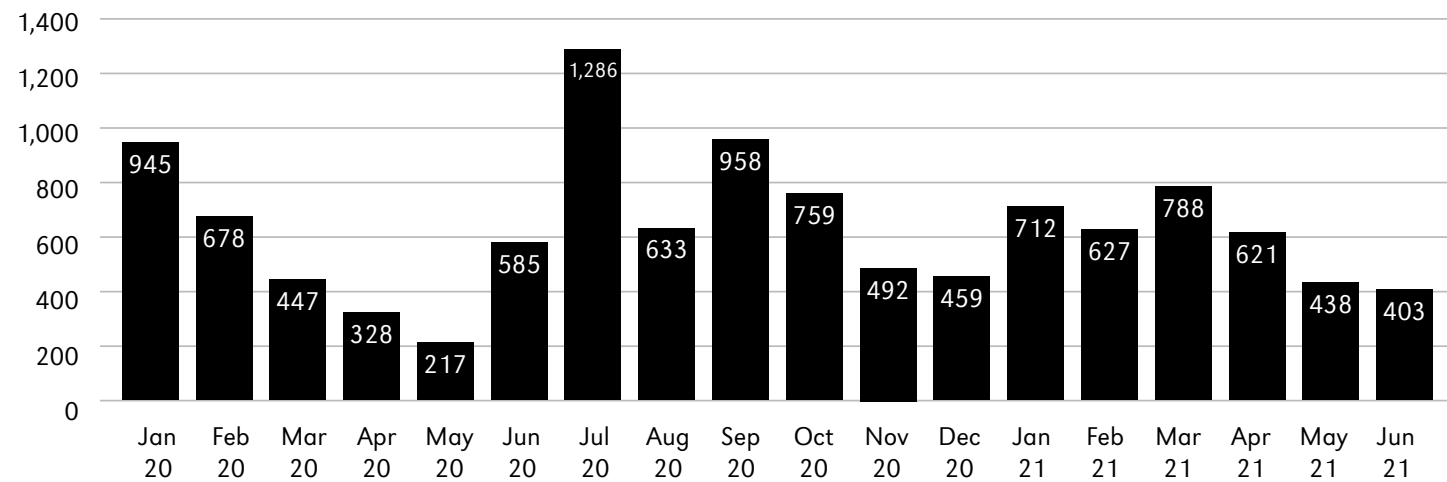
Note. In FY 20/21, the way diversion programs were counted in the dataset changed. In previous years, a multi-county group funding diversion in each county are counted as one program; for FY 20/21, each county within the multi-county group receiving funding for a diversion program is counted individually.

Referrals to Community-based Programs¹

The number of referrals to CBA funded programs decreased by 36.62% between FY 18/19 and FY 19/20, and then increased by 1.71% in FY 20/21. The number of referrals in FY 20/21, while an increase from the previous year, were still 4,455 referrals lower than in FY 18/19 ($n = 8,082$ and $n = 12,537$ respectively).²

When the pandemic began to impact Nebraska (FY 19/20), programs were almost to the 4th quarter of the fiscal cycle. Despite this, many CBA programs, schools, and services experienced a hard shut down during the 4th quarter, causing sharp decreases in referrals to programs (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Referrals to CBA and JS Funded Programs by Month

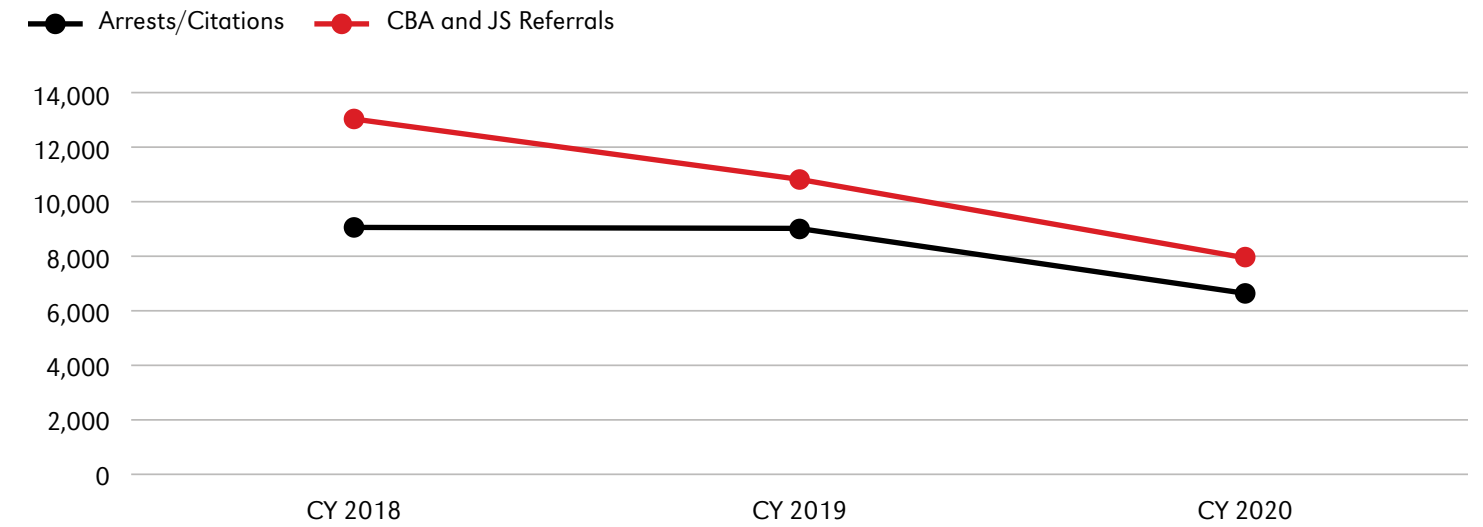


Note. In July 2020, one promotion/prevention program recorded 839 referrals, leaving the remaining 242 programs with a combined total of 396 referrals.

¹ As the data provided by the JCMS may duplicate youth enrolled in programs (e.g., the same program at different times or youth enrolled in more than one program at a time, etc.), referrals numbers for programs may not accurately capture the unique number of youth referred
² Data provided by the Nebraska Crime Commission, Juvenile Case Management System

We then compared the number of youth involved with law enforcement and cited to referrals to CBA programs by calendar year (Figure 4). The number of referrals and arrests decreases at approximately the same rate during calendar year 2020, with arrests/citations decreasing by 25.39% and CBA referrals decreasing by 26.26%.

Figure 4. Juvenile Arrest/Citations and CBA and JS Referrals by Calendar Year³



Note. When the arrest/citation data was extracted from the NCC website, only the counties receiving CBA funding were included; these figures do not include all 93 counties in Nebraska.

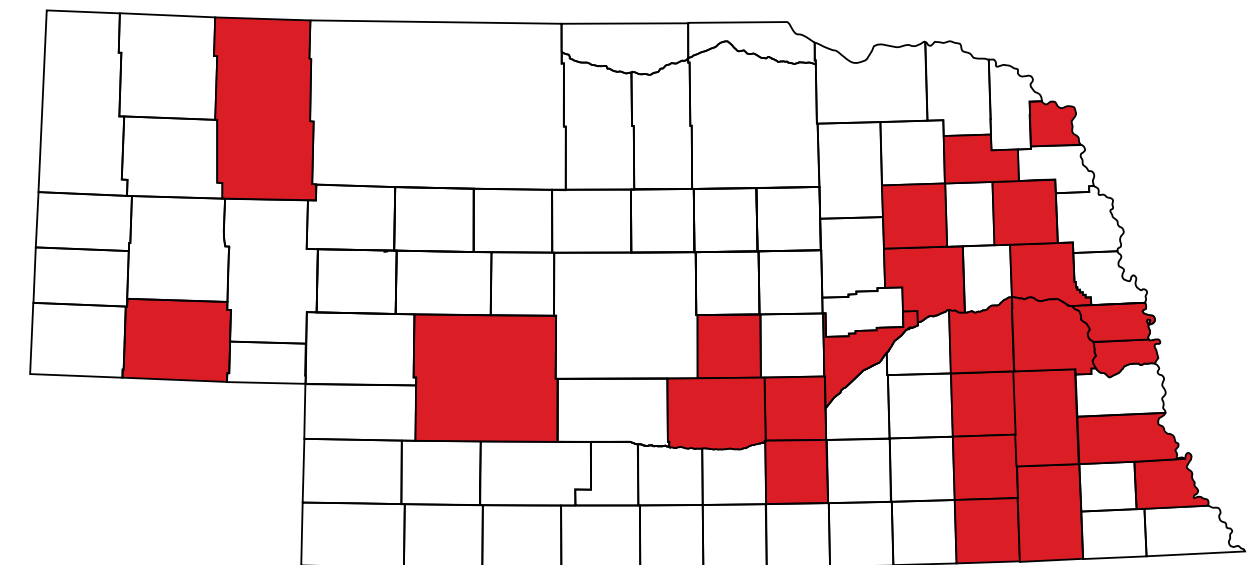
The Impact of COVID-19 on Community-based Aid Programs

Methodology

To increase our understanding of downward trends and how the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted referrals to CBA funded programs, JJI selected a sample of funded agencies to interview. First, we selected all programs funded in FY 19/20 and FY 20/21, identified by program type (e.g., truancy, diversion, family support, etc.). Next, we utilized an online random number generator to select 33.33% from each type of program.

The final list included 50 programs across 25 counties, with at least one program from each program type (see Figures 5 and 6). All 50 programs were contacted by phone or email, with 74.0% participation ($n = 37$). The questions are included in the Appendix.

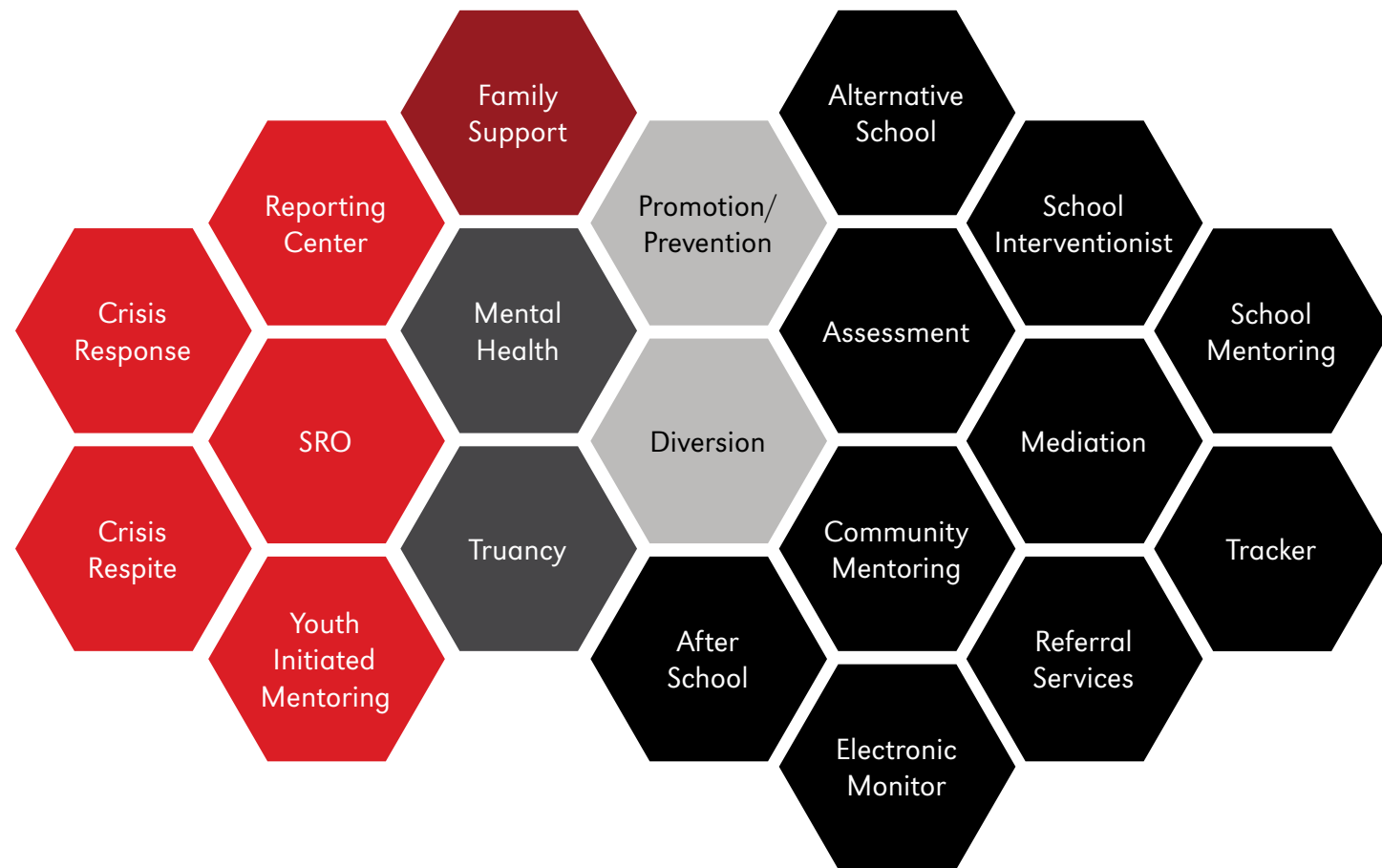
Figure 5. Counties selected through random sample to contact



³ Data provided by the Nebraska Crime Commission, Crime Statistics: <https://crimestats.ne.gov/public/Browse/browsetables.aspx> and the Juvenile Case Management System

Figure 6. Selected programs' response to COVID-19 by program type

● 0% response rate ● 33% response rate ● 50-60% response rate ● 80-92% response rate ● 100% response rate



Of the programs interviewed, 78.4% ($n = 29$) indicated that they did not suspend service delivery, but instead changed service delivery methods, which allowed them to continue to work with youth. The most utilized change to service delivery was implementing virtual meetings and phone contacts (67.6%, $n = 25$), with outdoor meetings and larger spaces utilized to socially distance being the next most utilized change to services.



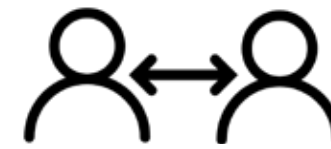
Three of the 11 diversion programs interviewed indicated that fulfilling community service hours was the biggest challenge, and in two cases, the total number of hours required were reduced. All three stated that they found other ways for youth to complete their required hours including online museum tours, outdoor neighborhood clean-up, and projects within the family home. The majority of programs (91.9%, $n = 34$) returned to in-person services as soon as health measures allowed, and most reported that relationship building was easier face-to-face. Virtual meetings and phone contacts are still being utilized for

youth and families that request it (due to COVID-19 symptoms or diagnosis), but also for some families who are more comfortable keeping the number of people entering their homes to a minimum. Almost all programs (83.8%, $n = 31$) indicated that they will be keeping virtual meetings and phone contacts as an option moving forward.

For those programs that suspended service delivery (21.6%, $n = 8$), the length of time not providing services ranged from one week to 13 months based on service type. The program that indicated being shut down for 13 months was a school-based program that relied on high school students coming into an elementary school to work with and mentor the younger students. As no one was physically in the school building from March 2020 – August 2020, the program was not able to run. The school board policy for much of the 20/21 school year directed that only staff and students from the elementary school could enter, which meant the high school students were not allowed in the building. These measures were lifted in April 2021.



The location of programs impacted whether they continued services or had to close down and for how long. Programs who met only in public offices or county buildings (27.0%, $n = 10$) and at multiple locations including family homes and community locations (27.0%, $n = 10$) were more likely to remain open, reporting that they moved quickly to virtual and phone meetings, meeting outside in public spaces, or utilizing large conference rooms with masks and cleaning protocols. Programs that met primarily in the schools (16.2%, $n = 6$) indicated more difficulty with keeping up normal programming. Although virtual meetings helped programs stay in contact with youth, it was difficult to keep programming consistent.



Through virtual and socially distanced programming, the majority of programs interviewed (89.2%, $n = 33$) indicated they were able to serve the same number of youth or had the capability to serve the same number of youth. As stated earlier, with youth being out of school and not able to go to local businesses, the overall number of referrals and police contacts went down. Truancy and school-based programs in general indicated a lower number of referrals as youth could attend school remotely in the 20/21 school year. Some districts did not track attendance on remote learning students, and remote students were not participating in the in-person tutoring programs.

One family support program saw an increase in referrals and need for services in their community during the pandemic, and one alternative school program that changed to alternative programming for youth (e.g., art, cooking, stress management, etc.) reported consistently being at capacity.

Please see Appendix B for success stories reported by programs during these interviews.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Youth

Preliminary research is being done on the impact of COVID-19 on youth across the country, specifically with regard to mental health needs and learning loss.

Learning Loss

Per the *Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) Growth Test Scores Analyses Across Year*, a report compiled by the Nebraska Department of Education, the average test scores for 3rd – 8th graders decreased in language usage, reading, and math from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021. Test scores for science increased during the same time frame. These findings are consistent with an evaluation of the MAP Growth test scores conducted by the Omaha World Herald which examined data from 43 Nebraska school districts. This study indicated that the learning loss in math was consistent across rural and urban districts “with few exceptions.” The Omaha World Herald also noted that within high schools in Douglas, Lancaster, and Sarpy counties, a quarter to a third of students who were participating in remote learning failed two or more courses during the fall of 2020. In-person learning students failing rates were mixed across districts.⁴ Lincoln Public Schools also found that 26.9% of middle and high school students who completed remote learning had two or more failing courses compared to 8.89% of in-person learning students.⁵

Mental Health

While local mental health data were not available for Nebraska youth, programs indicated that they were seeing youth struggle with anxiety, depression, aggression, and irritability at higher rates than in the past. One diversion program indicated they were currently referring more youth with mental health issues compared to the time pre-pandemic. Two school-based interventionists reported more suicide screening this academic year, than in all the prior years combined. An alternative school indicated that the referrals to their program for fights were up this year, and last year they had 82 teenagers who had to be moved to a higher level of care due to suicide ideation. This program also runs a stress management class and has experienced a 68% increase in enrollment (from 150 FY20 to 252 kids FY21).

This information is consistent with data nationwide. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) saw a 24% increase in mental health emergency room visits for kids aged 5 to 11-years-old, and a 31% increase for kids 12 to 17-years-old between March and May of 2020. In 2021, the CDC reported the number of kids coming to hospitals for mental health needs in 2021 was 15% higher than it was two years ago.⁶ While anxiety was common for both younger and older youth, the reasons differ. For younger youth, they were more concerned about getting sick or having someone close to them getting sick; older youth were worried about social and academic issues, including stress about returning to school in-person and if rising cases would mean returning to social isolation. Experts note that youth with existing anxiety, depression, or separation related issues, are more vulnerable to feeling anxious with the current pandemic.⁷

⁴ Dejka & Nichter, 2021

⁵ Wiltsey, 2021

⁶ Leeb, Bitsko, Radhakrishnan, Marinex, Njai, & Holland, 2020

⁷ Chatterjee, 2021

Conclusion

Even though the number of referrals to CBA funded programs decreased in recent fiscal years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the programs responded with flexibility, resourcefulness, and resilience to continue to serve the youth of Nebraska. As schools and programs attempt to return to “normal,” Nebraska’s young people are still facing challenges with mental health and academic issues. Continued support from school and community-based programs is crucial to assisting youth lead healthy lives and return to a new normal.

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Appendix A

1. Where is your program physically located, and where do you serve the youth and/or families?
2. Did your program have to suspend service delivery during COVID?
 - a. If yes, for how long?
3. If you did not suspend services, did you change how you provided services, e.g., moving online, meeting outside, etc.?
 - a. If you changed services, will you be keeping these changes?
4. Were you able to serve the same number of youth?
5. Please share a success story from during the COVID timeframe

Appendix B

Success Stories During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite the challenges faced by moving to remote and distanced services during the COVID-19 pandemic, programs receiving Community-based Aid Juvenile Services grant funding still noted several success stories. Below are examples of successes shared by randomly selected programs during interviews with Juvenile Justice Institute staff in the fall of 2021.

Keeping Kids Out of Court Using Diversion

- One diversion program indicated that switching to remote services during the pandemic allowed youth to move forward with the court cases. Parents of the youth expressed appreciation at the ability to have cases move forward and be resolved remotely.
- Another diversion program also reports being able to continue their work through the pandemic which allowed them to be available to serve kids to the best of their ability and kept cases moving forward.

Meeting Mental Health Needs

- A diversion program assisted a struggling youth in finding a therapeutic telehealth provider. Further, they assisted the youth with finding an organization where the youth could complete required community service hours. In exchange for discounted services, the youth continued to work there after the required hours were complete.
- A diversion program indicated a youth they serve had a parent commit suicide during the pandemic. The youth disengaged from online classes, so the diversion program thought of inventive ways to reengage the youth, such as weekly Zoom check-ins and mailing workbooks. As of September 2021, the program reports the youth is doing well and will soon complete programming.
- A mediation program held a seven-person conflict class on Zoom that lasted two hours with videos. Feedback from the class indicated that participants gained skills and appreciated being able to connect virtually.
- Even amidst multiple stressors, a mental health program reported resiliency among their clients. One youth in the program identified a passion for poetry through therapy which served as a coping skill and helped them manage their mental health issues. The youth even won a competition with a cash prize for a poem they wrote.

Improving Attendance

- A diversion program reported that a number of youth in the program appreciated the online aspect of learning during the pandemic.
- Through a family support program, a mom and three children were able to see improvements in school attendance, grades, and reduced family tension at home.
- As schools became overwhelmed with connectivity related issues during remote learning, a truancy program reported that they were able to assist with responding to family needs to keep youth attending virtually.
- Another truancy program shared that youth in their program did well during virtual learning by successfully attending classes and not taking undue advantage of quarantine absences.
- With some youth not on track to graduate, a truancy program offered students summer and alternative education courses which allowed the youth to finish schooling. Program administrators report that students at a new school in the community with several programs, social workers, and counselors are also doing well.
- An afterschool program that shut down due to the pandemic has successfully reopened and is again providing homework and tutoring services to youth. The program has been at full capacity since September 2021.

Responding to the Needs of Youth

- An alternative school provided life skills training to youth, including partnering with a 4-H program. This provided youth with the opportunity to create projects and enter them into the county fair for a chance to win ribbons and cash prizes.
- A diversion program was still able to graduate juveniles off the program because of the juvenile accountability officer's willingness to find new ways to continue to communicate with their current cases and report back to diversion officers.
- When COVID hit, a mentoring program had to find new ways to connect a mentor with a mentee. One program mentor kept up contact remotely and delivered goodie bags to the youth. This continued contact allowed the relationship to continue throughout the pandemic.
- A promotion/prevention program found an opportunity to make programming content relevant for a high school graduate that was resistant to participating. This was done by having conversations with the youth to help understand what needs they had. For this individual, financial and money management classes were added in addition to the classes that were required. When given the opportunity to have a voice, the youth successfully completed the program and still checks in with program staff even though they are no longer required to do so.
- By delivering materials to homes and providing incentives for attendance or completing activities, a promotion/prevention program was able to keep youth engaged and maintain/increase referrals for the next school year.
- An electronic monitor intake program at probation has continued to work with their provider smoothly and has maintained communication to keep serving youth.

Reaching Goals

- A promotion/prevention program that also works with probation youth celebrated having their first three probation youth successfully complete all probation and program requirements (ISP) and graduate from the program.
- Despite COVID interruptions to the school year, a school-based interventionist program reported that all their enrolled high school senior students graduated in 2020 and 2021. They also noted that the middle school youth were very responsive to change and took responsibility to log in for meetings.
- Even with a high number of truant youth, one assessment program was still able to work with the youth and assist them in reaching their goal of graduating from high school.

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