

ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

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WHITE PAPER

At-Risk Youth Intervention Policy for Pacific Island and Native Hawaiian Communities

*Evidence, Gaps, and Reform for the Populations Most
Underserved by Existing Juvenile Justice Frameworks*

Research Pillar: At-Risk Youth & Community Safety

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RESEARCH INDEPENDENCE STATEMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Native Hawaiian youth are incarcerated in Hawaii's juvenile justice system at rates disproportionate to their population share by a factor that has persisted, substantially unchanged, for decades. The research literature on what produces these disparities — and what reduces them — is well-developed. The policy translation into Hawaii and Pacific Island juvenile justice practice is not.**
- **The research literature on juvenile justice intervention effectiveness consistently and strongly favors diversion, community-based supervision, and structured residential programs over detention for the majority of juvenile offenders. This finding is robust across decades of research. It is underimplemented in Hawaii and Pacific Island juvenile justice practice.**
- **Hawaii's geographic isolation creates a specific policy gap: evidence-based intervention programs are not available in many Hawaii communities, and youth who need them either go without or are placed in detention — not because detention is appropriate but because the appropriate intervention is geographically inaccessible.**
- **The Hawaii National Guard Youth Challenge Academy provides a documented evidence base for effective structured residential intervention in Hawaii that has not been systematically applied to the broader juvenile justice intervention landscape.**

The juvenile justice intervention research literature is unusually consistent on its primary finding: for the large majority of juvenile offenders — including many who have committed offenses that trigger detention in current practice — community-based supervision, structured residential programming, and family-focused intervention produce better long-term outcomes than detention at substantially lower cost.¹

I. The Disparity Evidence

Native Hawaiian youth overrepresentation in Hawaii's juvenile justice system reflects a combination of socioeconomic risk factors, institutional decision-making patterns that produce disparate diversion rates at key decision points, and the absence of culturally grounded intervention programs that engage Native Hawaiian and Pacific Island community structures effectively.² Pacific Islander youth — Micronesian, Samoan, and Tongan youth in particular — are represented in Hawaii Family Court proceedings at rates that mirror mainland disparities documented in African American and Latino youth populations.

The research literature on the causes of juvenile justice racial and ethnic disparity consistently identifies the decision points most

susceptible to implicit bias as: initial detention decisions, diversion eligibility assessments, and dispositional recommendations. These are precisely the decision points where ISPI's analysis suggests Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth in Hawaii receive systematically different treatment than similarly situated youth from other demographic backgrounds.

II. The Cultural Dimension of Island Youth Intervention

Evidence-based juvenile justice intervention programs were developed primarily in mainland continental contexts with demographic compositions that do not reflect the Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander populations most affected by Hawaii's juvenile justice disparities.³ Cultural adaptation is not optional — it is essential. Programs that do not engage with Native Hawaiian cultural values including aloha 'āina, mālama, and 'ohana miss the most powerful motivational and accountability structures available in Native Hawaiian community contexts.

'Ohana Engagement Protocols

Intervention programs that engage only the nuclear family miss most of the available leverage in Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth intervention. Extended family networks — including grandparents, aunts and uncles, and community elders — have significant influence on behavior and significant capacity for accountability and support that nuclear-family-focused programs systematically overlook.

III. The Geographic Access Gap

Hawaii's geographic isolation creates a specific juvenile justice policy problem: evidence-based intervention programs — including multisystemic therapy, functional family therapy, and specialized residential treatment — are not available in many Hawaii communities.⁴ A youth in rural Molokai, Lanai, or a small Pacific Island territory community who needs an evidence-based residential treatment program faces a choice between inadequate local resources and geographic separation from family — a placement that research consistently shows produces worse outcomes precisely because it isolates young people from the family and community accountability structures that effective intervention requires.

IV. Policy Recommendations

1. Commission a comprehensive review of diversion decision-making in Hawaii's Family Court system — specifically examining the decision points

- where Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth are less likely to receive diversion than similarly situated youth from other demographic backgrounds.
2. Fund development of culturally grounded juvenile intervention programs for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth in partnership with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Island community organizations.
 3. Establish geographic access to evidence-based juvenile intervention programs as an explicit Hawaii juvenile justice policy priority — funding program development in communities currently served only by detention because alternatives are geographically inaccessible.
 4. Commission a policy analysis of the Hawaii National Guard Youth Challenge Academy model examining how its documented evidence base can be applied to expand structured residential intervention capacity more broadly.
 5. Commission ongoing island youth intervention research through ISPI and similar institutions to provide the island-specific evidence base that currently does not exist for culturally grounded intervention program development.

V. Conclusion

The Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth overrepresented in Hawaii's juvenile justice system are not more prone to delinquency than other youth populations. They are more exposed to socioeconomic risk factors, less likely to receive diversion at key decision points, and served by an intervention landscape that lacks the culturally grounded, geographically accessible programs the evidence base most strongly supports. ISPI accepts commissions for juvenile justice policy analysis, youth intervention program design, and community safety research. Contact ISPIGlobal@proton.me or visit ispiglobal.com/commission.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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