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“You’re Not Helping Me, You’re Making Things Worse:” Exponential Neglect and the Social Isolation of Latinx Youth

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“You’re Not Helping Me, You’re Making Things Worse:”  
Exponential Neglect and the Social Isolation of Latinx Youth

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Sociology

by

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## ABSTRACT

### “You’re Not Helping Me, You’re Making Things Worse:” Exponential Neglect and the Social Isolation of Latinx Youth

by

Jonathan M. Ibarra

The combination of punitive school policies, racialized policing practices, and the disintegration of social safety nets has produced a highly classed and racialized pattern of youth involvement with the juvenile justice system. Youth of color comprise about 86% of all youth on probation in California. Any attempts to provide rehabilitation services by probation is severely undermined by its focus on surveillance and compliance with terms that are incongruent with and fail to address the social inequality experienced by youth of color in their communities. Instead, any involvement with the juvenile justice system during critical years of adolescence may impact growth, development, and contribute to additional disadvantage. Based on interviews with 22 Latinx youth and over 6 years of fieldwork, I focus on experiences of support or lack thereof within their schools and community. I find that most of the youth involved in the study do not receive adequate support from schools or community-based organizations. Furthermore, this lack of support could potentially increase the probability of becoming system-impacted and support is persistently and gradually withdrawn once involved with the system; a process I have termed exponential neglect. Exponential neglect is a process by which individuals who get in trouble at school or with the juvenile justice system are blamed for their failures and held accountable at every phase of discipline through deeper, more pronounced neglect. The system might tell an individual along the way, “you are a troublemaker therefore, you get no resources” and later, “you have been a troublemaker for some time now, we have decided to ignore you, neglect you, and

abandon you.” This framework is nuanced from other theorizations of racialized punitive social control in that it demonstrates how neglect serves as a severe form of punishment in the modern carceral state. Other theories have examined how over-policing and hyper-incarceration serve as punishment. Moreover, exponential neglect helps us see what happens once over-policing and hyper-incarceration have ensnared themselves around the necks of criminalized populations: they experience forms of extreme neglect. These findings point towards the need to implement restorative justice practices and to develop social programs which support all youth in schools and the community. Additionally, schools and social programs must cut all ties with law enforcement to avoid exponential neglect and embrace and support all youth.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

On a cold late-fall afternoon, I made my weekly drive to visit youth incarcerated at one of the many placement camps deep in the forests of California. I initially started visiting the camp as a volunteer youth mentor for a community-based program which had been working with youth there for over ten years. I left the picturesque city along the California coast where the youth at camp experienced hyper-criminalization, arrest, and eventual incarceration. As I drove up a long windy two-lane mountain road, I began to daydream as I usually do after making the trip hundreds of times. Almost hypnotized, I admired the beautiful change of scenery—from busy city streets to being surrounded by giant ancient trees and building-sized boulders lining the terrain of mountains thousands of feet in elevation on both sides of the highway. I took solace in my weekly drive through the wilderness, often stopping at various places to take in the fresh mountain air, walk around the densely grown woodlands, enjoy a bit of solitude and recharge for busy life back at school and in the city. My daydream about the joys of a short time spent in an isolated wilderness were cut short as I pulled up to the gate of a high chain-link fence, mounted with large cameras, securing the camp. I thought about how this wilderness represented a different type of reality and isolation for the youth at camp.

On this day at camp, I would help put on a Mexican celebration of *Dia De Los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead. This yearly event is a celebration of the lives of relatives who have passed on from this world. In tradition of this celebration, an altar was created at the placement camp with offerings and photos of some of the fallen youth that were at one point incarcerated at the camp. Parents of current campers were invited for the *Dia De Los Muertos* event. As parents arrived, I offered them pan dulce and champurrado (Mexican sweetbread

and a sweet cornmeal-based drink seasoned with cinnamon). I stood around interacting with youth and their parents, seeing the smiles of families as their children showed them around their classroom. It was harrowing to see the shift from smiles on some of the parent's faces as they toured around the room and arrived at the altar. Most parents looked at the pictures of departed youth in silence. While some turned to their child and asked them to change their ways before they end up a picture on the altar. Leaving camp, I thought again about the isolation the youth must feel, especially on visiting day as they watched their families walk away after their interactions were cut short by probation officers saying, "times up." Most families walked to their cars with their heads turned back as if on a swivel to catch every last glimpse of their loved ones before walking back to the dorm and out of sight.

This reminded me of my own childhood during my visits with my father when he was in prison. Every time, these visits were cut short and my family made the same walk back to the car. This experience served as an overwhelming reminder that we had little to no control over our loved one's incarceration. Though most of the responsibility of keeping loved ones out of incarceration has increasingly been placed on families (Comfort 2008; Western 2018). Families might be able to offer modest financial support and housing. But they can't counteract the social isolation and the institutionalized neglect resulting from deindustrialization, unemployment, systemic racism, and the state's increasing reliance on punitive measures to handle their impact on Black, Latinx, and low-income communities. So, families often do the only thing they can; plead with their loved ones to change their ways. If they don't comply, they are typically neglected and socially isolated.

This personal reform approach was shared by camp staff, law enforcement, teachers, and policy makers who in one way or another contributed to youth involvement with the

juvenile justice system both directly by relying on criminalization and indirectly by not meeting youth needs (Noguera 2003a; Rios 2011; Vigil 1999). Desistance—the cessation of acts deemed delinquent—requires more than someone changing *their* ways and self-realization. Sociologist Jamie Fader (2013) found that institutionalization of this type of thinking sets up youth rehabilitation programs, especially during incarceration, to have little impact as they fail to address the socioeconomic conditions leading to crime and delinquency that youth will have to contend with back in their communities. To have youth desist, would require the establishment of alternative systems, in which racial, class, and other forms of inequality are not only resisted, but eradicated for youth to transcend involvement with the juvenile justice system. In addition, as I have found in this study, youth also need to feel embraced and accompanied and not excluded, neglected, and isolated in order to have a successful trajectory.

A short time after the Día de los Muertos event, I met with a youth outreach worker, Hugo, at a local Mexican restaurant. Still thinking about the isolation and neglect the youth at camp experienced while we waited on our food, I asked about the city’s recent perception of a “rise” in youth crime and possible solutions in the city of Paraiso, CA.<sup>1</sup> There had been an increase in attention to these issues by the local media and in turn, residents asking that the city address the issue before it got out of hand. In reality, this community’s crime rate had historically and is still far below the national average and was considered as one of the safest places to live according to national real estate marketing agencies. Still, I thought the city would respond with increasing law enforcement presence in the predominantly Latinx parts

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the identities of these young people I have created a pseudonym for the city where this study was conducted.

of the community, zero-tolerance, and harsher sentencing for any juvenile offenses involving Latinx youth as they had done so in the past.

This type of response—known as “broken windows” policing—had been justified by law enforcement agencies citing broken windows theory by criminologists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in the early 1980’s. Broken windows theory supports the idea that community disorder is a key contributor to the development and sustenance of more serious crime. Community disorder can consist of issues such as deterioration of public spaces, loitering, or public intoxication. Although an enormous and problematic leap of imagination, the authors suggest that if disorder goes unchecked, “A stable neighborhood of families who care for their homes, mind each other's children, and confidently frown on unwanted intruders can change, in a few years or even a few months, to an inhospitable and frightening jungle (Kelling and Wilson 1982).” Law and order responses as such, fail to address the underlying issues affecting these communities and contributing to community disorder such as underfunding public works. This issue was also a topic of concern for local community-based organizations and community members working with youth who had similar worries of increased punitive measures being supported by local law enforcement and the middle-to-upper class citizens in the community.

I asked Hugo what he thought could be done to avoid similar responses in the city. Hugo proceeded to describe a need to support and create opportunities for young Latinx people to avoid the juvenile justice system. He pointed out a lack of well-funded community-based programs that could provide social support for all of the Latinx youth and especially for those who were involved with the juvenile justice system. There was also a lack of employment opportunities for these youth. These programs could serve to establish more

positive social control by connecting youth with others in the community and to the support and economic stability they need to thrive. At its core, social control is thought to maintain social order and cohesion amongst societal members (Kent and Carmichael 2014). Social control has various forms which include some positive forms such as, relationships, belonging, and trust of others, and some negative, such as punitive social control in the form of police and legal coercion. Thought of in this way, positive social control builds connection while punitive social control creates isolation. Regrettably, the US has relied more heavily on punitive measures that have socially isolated people involved with the juvenile justice system and their communities.

Shifts towards punitive government policies, racialized policing practices, and the discriminatory exercise of prosecutorial discretion combined to produce a highly classed and racialized pattern of incarceration in the United States (Gilmore 2007; Alexander 2020; Pfaff 2017). Though momentum towards decarceration has increased, the US nevertheless has the world's largest prison population at over two million people (Sawyer and Wagner 2020). The U.S. accounts for just about five percent of the global population but has around twenty to twenty-five percent of the world's prison population (Alexander 2020; Sawyer & Wagner 2020). Moreover, mass incarceration has disproportionately affected Black, Native American, and Latinx people who make up over sixty percent of people who are incarcerated (Sawyer and Wagner 2020). The forty percent of White people who are incarcerated are usually low-income and working-class. Waquant (2001), demonstrates how mass incarceration has essentially rendered some Black, Latinx, and low-income communities carceral collateral in the U.S. as the response to capital disinvestment, high unemployment,

and general lack of opportunity has become increasingly punitive though crime rates have been declining since the 1990's.

As a result, the US also incarcerates youth at higher rates than any other country in the world. Again, this pattern of youth incarceration disproportionately targets Black, Native American, Latinx, and low-income White youth (Prison Policy Initiative and Sawyer 2019). Scholars have theorized that the increase in population and decrease in age of people involved with the juvenile justice system has been in direct relation to increased surveillance and punitive policies in schools, communities, and the juvenile justice system (Rios 2011, 2017; Flores 2016; Morris 2016). While the institutions that surround youth, both socialize and impact their trajectories, so too does contact with the juvenile justice system, even amongst those community members with less contact (Haldipur 2019; Lopez-Aguado 2016; Simon 2007). The significance of the spillover of the juvenile justice system into the community is that punitive institutions have not only become primary socializing institutions for far too many Black and Latinx youth, but have also become some of the largest institutions funded to provide “support” to for youth after years of experiencing increasing neglect from schools and other community stakeholders. These forms of racialized punitive social control (Rios 2017) have created various adversities for poor youth of color. In this study I find that one such phenomenon is what I call a system of exponential neglect where young people are not only criminalized but also neglected across the various institutions in their lives. At each institutional crossing, their neglect and isolation are confounded. Exponential neglect, while sometimes identified in the literature has yet to be analyzed by researchers.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. *Latinx Youth and School Exclusion*

Telles and Ortiz (2016) have demonstrated that public education continues to serve as perhaps the greatest source of Mexican exclusion, continuing to affect jobs and political involvement as low levels of educational attainment persist across multiple generations. The scholars point out how this is due to institutional discrimination and racialized tracking of Mexican students into lower-level curricula. They point out that, “For Mexican Americans to become successful, we need, above all, a Marshall Plan that invests heavily in public school education, addressing the issues that disadvantage students (Telles and Ortiz 2016).”

Instead, educational institutions serve as sites for racialization across generations of foreign and native-born Mexican students, most often having negative implications on their educational attainment and life trajectories (Gandara 2009; Vasquez 2011). Influencing the racialization of Mexican students in schools is covert discrimination institutionalized into educational policies by state and local actors under the guise of remaining culturally neutral. Valenzuela (Valenzuela 1999, 2002) argues that culturally neutral educational policies—leading to culturally neutral perspectives on teaching—are unacceptable as schools become *culturally subtractive*. That is, schools’ curriculums become “designed to divest youth of their Mexican identities and to impede the prospects for fully vested bilingualism and biculturalism (Valenzuela 1999).” Students who are Spanish-dominant or culturally invested in their Mexican identities become easily tracked into less resourced school programs such as English as a Second Language (ESL). This discriminatory practice essentially segregates many culturally Mexican, Latinx, and Spanish speaking students into separate programs, within the same schools, from most White students. These students’ placements in ESL or

other individualized education plans are more likely to be unwarranted and simply the result of their racial or ethnic background. (Valenzuela 1999; Vasquez 2011). The result of being tracked into these programs often initiates *subtractive schooling*—the subtraction of resources and the opportunity to achieve at an advanced academic level—because of the way the state views the purpose of these programs (Valenzuela 1999).

Subtractive schooling can have detrimental effects on social capital, connectedness to other students, the school administration, and contribute to an all-around negative experience for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. As Valenzuela (1999) described, subtractive schooling measures along with other societal forces create a wedge between students of different racial backgrounds or ethnicities and even between those of similar origins depending on one's tracking in school. Mexican students, both native and foreign-born, tracked into programs viewed as lower achieving often receive differential treatment from school administration (Vasquez 2011). Subtractive schooling leads to social isolation from other students and administration which may negatively impact students' access to opportunities for the development of social capital required for success in education and beyond.

Conchas (2001) similarly demonstrated how school programs construct both failure and success among immigrants and U.S.-born Latinx students by impacting their school engagement to varying levels. Some youth, mostly immigrant, have a stronger desire to learn English and participate in US society but, subsequent generations of Mexican American students may show more ambivalence toward education because they have experience greater levels of racial discrimination. For example, self-described Chicax students were more likely to be placed in the general school program in which they did not benefit from the

strong social and academic institutional mechanisms that promote educational success, including more teacher and peer support, available to students in science-based tracts (Conchas 2001). In the general program, Chicana and Black youth are socially isolated from other high-achieving students and from supportive school systems. Essentially, institutionalized support within school accounts for the variability in success and failure among Latinx students.

Scholars have shown that schools continue to fall short in their attempts at addressing the needs of low-income, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children, and especially those which exhibit behavioral and other problems at schools (Conchas and Vigil 2010; Noguera 2003b; Vigil 1999). Though innovative school programs have addresses some of the needs of particular “at-promise<sup>2</sup>” youth, programs continually miss youth who are more “street-oriented” or involved with the juvenile justice system (Conchas and Vigil 2010). Still, many of these youth continue to aspire towards educational success and attending post-secondary institutions, directly challenging the dominant narrative that young men of color—especially those involved with the juvenile justice system—are not interested in college (Huerta 2018; Huerta, McDonough, and Allen 2018). However, they are provided little support and information by the school to plan for college applications, let alone taught the skills needed to succeed in college (Huerta et al. 2020).

Instead, many of the most vulnerable and least supported Black and Latinx youth are subject to an increasingly punitive rather than supportive school environment. Schools function as institutions which serve to sort, socialize, and socially control youth. Students are sorted based on measures of academic ability. They are socialized to the norms and values

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<sup>2</sup> In 2019, Section 234.1 of the California Education Code was amended to replace the term “at-risk” with “at-promise.”

regarded as central to the given society. Operating as a surrogate parent, schools serve an authoritative function over the care and movement of students. The basis for maintaining these functions is a social contract between the school and its students in which students are expected to give up some autonomy in exchange for the benefits of education (Noguera 2003a). However, this agreement is less effective for students, mostly Black and Latinx, who feel they are not receiving the benefits of education such as knowledge, skills, and ultimately the training for college and good-paying careers. Often resulting in a small proportion of students who don't abide by the social contract, disrupting the core functions of the school which failed to maintain its end of the bargain. For these students, schools take punitive measures—detention, suspensions, and expulsions—which only exacerbate the problem. As Noguera (2003a) mentions, "It is ironic and telling that schools typically punish children who are behind academically by depriving them of instructional time." Furthermore, the factors impacting a student's difficulties in school, be them developmental, behavioral, or environmental, go unaddressed and issues become compounded with punitive responses from schools. Many of these students are eventually isolated into alternative/continuation schools with less support and ultimately pushed out of the educational system.

### *B. Criminalization of Black and Latinx Youth*

With the simultaneous expansion of the juvenile justice system, including school-based police, and zero-tolerance policies in schools, disproportionate numbers of Black and Latinx youth are siphoned into what has been termed the school-to-prison pipeline. Most of which whose socioemotional needs, learning, and general well-being had been neglected in schools. Scholars have argued that the large number of Black and Latinx youth represented in the juvenile justice system is a direct consequence of the shift in schools towards sites of

social control, rather than places which support learning, creating school environments that share significant characteristics reminiscent of carceral institutions (Wacquant 2001).

Schools have increasingly become punitive with implementations of surveillance technologies like metal-detectors and cameras, to having school police officers handle on-campus offenses by students (Flores 2016; Kupchik 2010, 2016; Morris 2015; Rios 2011, 2017; Shedd 2015). For many Black and Latinx youth, an introduction to the juvenile justice system begins on the schoolyard with referrals for issues schools previously addressed internally (Noguera 2003a).

Rios' (2011) study of Black and Latino youth in California demonstrates how the coupling of the punitive arm of the state with institutions tasked with providing support for youth—schools, community centers, and the home—form what he termed the *youth control complex*. The result has been a hypercriminalization of Black and Latinx youth which sets them on a path away from education and toward incarceration. As schools have become increasingly punitive, they also implemented policies which directly contribute to involvement with the juvenile justice system. Some schools in California have even segregated “at-promise” youth of one race or believed gang affiliation from one another in order to avoid violence. These tactics have only led to more criminalization, less integration between races and has influenced some non-affiliated youth to affiliate with gangs because of where they live (Lopez-Aguado 2016). Thus, hypercriminalization has directly contributed to the increasing number of Black and Latinx youths exposed to the juvenile justice system—impacting their development and diminishing their access to supportive environments.

### *C. Youth Reentry*

Once entrenched within the juvenile justice system, youth are increasingly labelled deviant, criminalized, and less likely to receive adequate care and support other than when incarcerated and especially when Black or Latinx. The juvenile justice system in California is inextricably linked to racialized practices—informed by eugenics—implemented by Fred C. Nelles at the Whittier State School in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His program rested on the assumptions that only "normal" youth could be rehabilitated. Those identified as "feble-minded" were deemed "unsalvageable," threats to Nelles' rehabilitative programming, and in need of segregation, long-term care, and sterilization. This program was built at the expense of the most vulnerable as youth who were poor, had learning disabilities, Mexican and Mexican American, and Black youth were most often diagnosed as "feble-minded" by eugenics researchers and staff at the state school (Chavez-Garcia 2012). Viewed as a model for reform, the racialized practices at the Whittier State School and its philosophies were implemented across juvenile institutions leading to increased criminalization and pathologization of youth of color.

Juvenile institutions are more likely to negatively impact the wellbeing of youth, while providing inadequate support for youth on their path away from the juvenile justice system. In her work with Black and Latinx Philadelphia area youth, Fader (2013) documented their experiences of navigating the dual transition into adulthood and reentry following incarceration in a rural juvenile detention camp. She demonstrated how misguided, though well-intentioned, programming at juvenile detention facilities which aim to address "criminal thinking errors" fail to account for the reality youth would experience back home upon release. Pushing back on analyzing recidivism from a "reentry" lens, Fader calls that we

acknowledge the problems youth face upon release were present before incarceration (Fader 2013). I extend on her work by reiterating the permanence of social and racial inequities Latinx youth experience pre- and post-incarceration but demonstrate how contact with the juvenile justice system exacerbates these inequities through social isolation and exponential neglect.

For youth involved with the juvenile justice system, desistance is not a linear process. Rather, most youth often go through cycles of attempting to move away from activities deemed criminal to times of being drawn back towards reoffending (Abrams 2017; Fader 2013; Maruna 2001). It is important to note that being drawn back to reoffending is often directly linked to economic conditions in the home and community. Abrams (2017) found that motivation was an important factor in desistance and that most youth showed some form of motivation to desist. Specifically, those youth who demonstrated a consistent commitment to changing their lives were also those who in fact sustained the longest periods away from juvenile justice system involvement. However, she and others note that while motivation to change is important for desistance, it does not outweigh the hyper-policing and increased punishment for minor offenses that come with being previously involved with the juvenile justice system. Nor can motivation fully counteract the poverty, inequality, and racial discrimination often experienced by Black and Latinx youth.

#### *D. Sociopolitical Abandonment and Social Isolation in Communities*

It would serve us well to examine how we have arrived at such a point: One in which countless Black and Latinx communities have been socially isolated as a result of sociopolitical abandonment, resulting in an intensification and simultaneous justification for disinvestment and hyper-criminalization. Hyper-criminalized communities are thought to

have higher levels of “disorder,” which the state uses to justify increased police presence and its community members excessive involvement with the criminal justice system. Scholars have theorized that in those communities which are residentially segregated, community disorder likely increases due to a concentration of poverty, unemployment, lack of socially and economically beneficial social capital, and less group cohesion (Hagan 1994; Sampson & Wilson 1995; Sampson & Raudenbush 1999). In each of these studies, communities that experienced a milieu of “disorder” and higher rates of involvement with the criminal justice system—police, courts, and incarceration—were overwhelmingly Black, Latinx, and poor communities. Rather than placing the blame upon the people themselves, these studies point us towards much needed analyses of socioeconomic factors which contribute to “disorder” in Black, Latinx, and low-income communities.

Sociologist William Julius Wilson (2012) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how *social isolation* results from a complex web of phenomena which include shifts in the American economy leading to joblessness, in- and out-migration, changes in the overall age structure, and class transformation in communities. In this context, social isolation is defined as “the lack of contact or sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society (Wilson 2012:60).” Directly contesting the “culture-of-poverty thesis” emphasized by conservative scholars and politicians, Wilson demonstrates that the relationship between basic economic changes and joblessness leads to a concentration of social isolation in subsections of predominantly Black and Latinx communities. Social isolation may then perpetuate cycles of poverty and increasing criminalization leading to higher rates of arrest and incarceration. Building on Wilson’s work I look at social isolation at the microlevel as a process created by institutions in their

lack of an attempt to respond to the needs of criminalized populations. I also see social isolation as the first step in the trajectory that leads to exponential neglect.

Hagan (1994) also described the socioeconomic processes that can lead to social isolation and a concentration of disorder in low-income Black and Latinx communities, but demonstrates how White families of comparable socioeconomic backgrounds are mostly safeguarded from similar experiences of disorder in their own community because they often live in the same areas as middle-to-upper-class White people. Though White families of lower-socioeconomic status struggle financially, they benefit from living in middle-to-upper class communities as other residents invest in public service programs such as churches, schools, libraries, parks, etc. Essentially, lower-income White families often but not always benefit from a *social buffer* in which there is a sufficient number of middle-to-upper class working professionals to absorb and balance the effects uneven economic shifts and recessions would otherwise have on their community if there were a concentration of poverty (Hagan 1994).

Capital disinvestment combined with social isolation, leading to economic disadvantage and disorder in Black communities, directly contributes to higher crime rates. Capital disinvestment is one of many sociohistorical processes fueled by deindustrialization and governmental shifts away from welfare policies to neoliberal policies which essentially disintegrated social safety nets while increasing unemployment and decreasing employment opportunities that could sustain costs of living (Hagan 1994). As deindustrialization led to high unemployment rates—particularly for Black, Latinx, and working-class people in the blue-collar industry—and the safeguards of welfare policies stripped away, inner-city Black and Latinx communities began experiencing high concentrations of poverty, disorder, and

crime that were exacerbated by segregation from White communities. The reason for this is that racial segregation sets the stage for the cyclical intensification of problems that combine racial stereotyping and its real-world consequences to support capital disinvestment from a small number of highly visible underserved neighborhoods (Hagan 1994). Therefore, segregation of these communities has multiple effects on Black and Latinx communities in terms of concentration of disadvantage and the disorder that disadvantage can lead to, which reinforces racial profiling by police.

In addition, the negative effects neighborhood-level segregation has on Black and Latinx communities, crime in particular, has at times spilled over into other more affluent and predominantly White neighborhoods. This spill-over or fear of the possibility of crime has influenced support for tough-on-crime policies by members of more affluent communities who have the political capital to enact policy change. Thus, police departments were tasked with *controlling crime* in communities of color by local governments, rather than implementing policy changes that *would target the factors leading to crime*. In response, police departments may shift toward more aggressive crime control tactics that emphasize increased contact with “suspicious” individuals and shifting their focus to crime prevention rather than investigating crimes after they have occurred (Herbert, Beckett, and Stuart 2018). Taking a preventative approach leads to increasing criminalization, police contact, and a concentration of racialized punitive social control in Black and Latinx communities (Epp 2014; Rios 2007; Rios, Prieto, and Ibarra 2020). Furthermore, racialized punitive social control has been utilized to both reinforce or reconfigure racial segregation as communities become gentrified (Muniz 2014; Stuart 2016).

Historically, Black and Latinx communities, have overwhelmingly been the target of racialized punitive social control by US legal institutions. Loïc Waquant (2000) describes the prison system as the fourth “peculiar institution,” succeeding chattel slavery, the Jim Crow system, and urban ghettos which serve as mechanisms for racial social control. The comparison of prisons to these other US institutions illuminates the connection between each and more specifically, their goal of racial social control. Under each of these institutions Black people were forced to live in conditions of marginalization and under systematic control. We may come to view and understand the ghetto and prison as “kindred institutions of forced confinement entrusted with enclosing a stigmatized category so as to neutralize the material and/or symbolic threat it poses for the surrounding society (Wacquant 2000)”. The rise of the penal state and subsequent mass incarceration was not a response to rising crime rates but to the previously discussed social insecurity created by deindustrialization and governmental shifts away from welfare policies. Waquant (2010) takes this assertion further by stating that the rise of “law and order” in advanced societies such as the US, enabled politicians to reassert state authority and combat their deteriorating legitimacy as they abandoned the mission of social and economic protections established in the post-war Keynesian era. Essentially, the government’s response to the national insecurities they created was to hyper-police and incarcerate those most affected by the shifts towards neoliberal policy. Poor working-class, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities were abandoned by politicians and then punished for the results of their abandonment.

More recently, scholars have responded to calls for more nuanced analyses of social isolation which acknowledge the real effects of social abandonment and social isolation, but also demonstrate agency and resiliency in the ways that people resist and overcome their

effects (Bell 2019; Brunson and Weitzer 2011; Flores 2014; Ralph 2014; Stuart 2016). While acknowledging theories of social isolation, Ralph (2014) in particular, asks that we reframe our thinking about the “inner-city” to show how its residents remain connected to broader local, national, global politics, and have dreams that they work towards politically and on personal levels. In this work, the author also provides a new perspective on the physical, emotional, and psychological responses of community members to both social isolation and its outcome, violent victimization (Ralph 2014).

Building upon the literature on social isolation, I demonstrate how social institutions—schools, community, and probation—contribute to Latinx youth’s experiences of social isolation through a process I have termed *exponential neglect*. In this process, some Latinx youth—mostly those impacted by the juvenile justice system—who have ongoing behavioral issues at schools or in the community eventually experience more neglect than support. Once a youth starts getting in trouble, support is both directly and indirectly withdrawn with every misstep. Eventually, “support” for these youth is turned over to higher-funded institutions: law enforcement and juvenile justice. Once involved with the juvenile justice system, exponential neglect is accelerated as youth are labelled, leading schools and some parts of the community to increasingly see them as potential threats. The paradox is that the more attention youth get for getting in trouble, the more that systems of discipline impose systems of neglect, abandonment and isolation. This article contributes to the literature on juvenile justice and desistance by outlining the ways Latinx youth’s needs are systematically neglected and isolated as they navigate various institutions. This points us toward another reason it may be difficult for youth to desist; the more they attempt to change, the less networks of support and institutional resources they have available.

### III. METHODS

#### *A. Interviews*

The interview data for this study comes from a data archive collected by Professor Victor Rios at UC Santa Barbara and his research team. He trained various students to collect ethnographic and interview data. I was one of those students. The results presented in this MA study are informed by these interviews with over 80 Latino young men and my own follow-up fieldwork with other youth who were from the same communities and were placed at the same juvenile detention facilities as the initial cohort of youth that were interviewed for the larger study. I selected a subset of 22 interviews from the interview archive. These interviews were selected because all of these youth had spent time at the same placement camp within their county of residence. The youth ranged in ages from 14-17.

In-depth interviewing allows for a more coherent, complex, and deep understanding of people's experiences and perspectives not usually made available through any other surveys or quantitative analysis (Weiss 1995). The interviews lasted around forty-five minutes to an hour on average. The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions about their experiences of support at local schools, in the community, during incarceration, and after their release. In taking a semi-structured approach, interviews are more free-flowing and allow room for the respondents to guide the conversation. The majority of the data presented in this paper is focused on these 22 interviews but also draws upon fieldwork I conducted following the completion of this larger study for context and insight.

## *B. Fieldwork*

As a follow-up to the larger ethnographic study, I conducted my own fieldwork over the course of 6 years at various local institutions serving youth involved with the juvenile justice system. I “shadowed” some of the adults working with young people to gain a better understanding of the types of support Latinx youth received. By utilizing a “shadow” approach, the researcher is able to follow people as they navigate their daily lives, across institutional settings (Rios 2011). As a participant-observer I volunteered at a local community-based organization (CBO) that works directly with Latinx youth, many of which were involved with the juvenile justice system. With the CBO director’s approval, I documented my experiences at meetings and events with field notes. As a participant-observer I mostly relied upon jottings that I took on a note app on my mobile phone while in the field (Fretz et al. 2012). I referred to these jottings to write more extensive fieldnotes. Additionally, I developed relationships with multiple youth outreach workers directly working with Latinx youth. I also participated in and took notes at weekly meetings with a collective of organizations coordinating as part of a local response to address youth safety issues within the community. These relationships and meetings provided invaluable insight into the community’s response to the needs of local Latinx youth.

In this role, I met and worked with over 100 youth who had been incarcerated at the county juvenile facility. I was able to gain access to the local juvenile institutions in my work with the CBO. However, data collection was not my focus while visiting these institutions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Researchers have called for eliminating the “white space” in urban ethnography (Rios 2015) and in decolonizing ethnography (Tuhiwai-Smith 1997). Part of this approach calls for researchers to stop exploiting marginalized research subjects and to contribute to their research participants. This means that instead of focusing on collecting data at all times, one must maintain a focus on how to support and improve the lives of participants.

The purpose of my visits was to support the young people and help as they transitioned back into the community. As part of the CBO's work, I helped young people prepare for jobs by working on resumes, applications, and mock interviews. I also helped facilitate multiple workshops on education with the focus on matriculating to college. Though data was not collected, my experiences with the youth in the institutions and with the people working with them were invaluable to the structuring of this project and the initial development of programming facilitated by the CBO.

### *C. Data Analysis*

Fieldnotes and interview transcriptions were coded in a mixed-methods data analysis program, Dedoose. Taking a *Grounded Theory* approach, I began my analysis with the raw data and allowed for it to guide the development of theory for this project (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1967). I initially read over interview transcripts and applied *initial* and *in-vivo* codes (Saldaña 2013). Initial coding consisted of reading line-by-line and attributing general codes to the data. In this first round of coding I also attached in-vivo codes which codes portions of important data in verbatim words used by participants. After initial rounds of coding, I used *focused coding* to eliminate inconsistent findings, search for patterns, unique cases, and generate dominant themes (Saldaña 2013).

### *D. The Place*

El Paraíso, California is home to some of the wealthiest people in CA, living alongside working-class Latinxs who experience multiple forms of marginalization. Most Latinxs living in El Paraíso work in the service industry at various restaurants, hotels, resorts, or the homes of wealthy residents. It is not unusual for Latinxs to work two to three jobs in this community. A major portion of the local economy is based around the tourist and service

industry. The economy sustains itself through the low-paid labor of the local Latinx community, many of which are immigrants and some undocumented.

In my time interning at the local housing authority and working as a family advocate at a local non-profit, I witnessed how the high cost of living in this county, like much of the rest of CA, is a major factor dictating the lived experiences of Latinx families in the community. This is perhaps the principle reason for Latinxs working multiple jobs and still living at or below the poverty line. The median price of a home has been over a million dollars since 2015. Since the same time, a modest 2-bedroom rental has fluctuated between \$3,000 to \$3,500 on average. It is not uncommon for multiple Latinx families to live together in a small apartment to split the costs because of the lack of affordable housing in this community. Additionally, the average time a family spends on a waitlist for government-subsidized housing in this community is over 10 years.

Racial, class and other forms of inequality unique to the children of immigrant and US born Latinx families shapes the experience and criminalization of local Latinx youth. This county has one of the highest child-poverty rates in CA. Poverty is directly linked to an increase of criminalization and probability of incarceration (Alexander 2020; Wacquant 2009). Youth arrested in this county are incarcerated at rates almost 40% higher than other California counties, including Los Angeles which has historically had high rates of youth incarceration. A third of youth in juvenile detention are in custody for a probation violation and over 50% are incarcerated for a misdemeanor. 86% of those youths on probation and 89% of those incarcerated are Latinx. Probation officials have stated that incarceration of youth is high because there are few alternatives to incarceration. More troubling, is the fact

that a report released in 2015 showed that most stakeholders in the community did not understand what racial disparities in incarceration were.

#### **IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

##### *A. Latinx Youth and School-Based Exponential Neglect*

Schools served as the first state institutions to systematically neglect the young people I studied. The school district's tactic of isolating Latinx youth into continuation or expulsion schools unintentionally contributed to their vulnerability to violence. Each high school in this district serves youth from mostly specific areas of the city. Meaning, most youth go to school with other youth they live around in their community and most likely already interact with. Many of the Latinx youth who have repeatedly gotten in trouble at their community's high school are eventually transferred over to a centralized district continuation school with heightened security measures.

At this point, social isolation from the larger student community and their peer support groups becomes official and is institutionalized. As the district isolates students—mostly those involved with the juvenile justice system—who get in trouble from their peers at the continuation school, they may also increase the likelihood of negative encounters with youth from other areas of the city. Jerry, a Latinx student, had been transferred over to the district's continuation school in both junior high and again in high school following his release from juvenile detention. He described the precarious situation he found himself in because of the school district's decision of social isolating him from the conventional high school and into the continuation school when asked about his experience there:

Jerry: “And like they would put out here like oh we think it’s better if you go to Cielo (continuation school) because then you won’t be around the homies and shit. and like I didn’t tell them like, you’re going to send me to Cielo where there’s homies there, but then there’s also rivals there. Like because they would put it out there like it’s good for me and I’d be like, no you’re not helping me you’re making things worse.”

As Jerry discussed his worries of being transferred to the continuation school, it is crucial to note that the school district’s solution created additional problems for Jerry that would impact his schooling and could have increased his involvement with the juvenile justice system. Not only did Jerry become socially isolated from his peers and lose access to opportunities at the conventional high school, but then was confronted with a newfound issue of navigating a new school environment that placed him in close contact with “rivals” which he explicitly described as “making things worse.” Additionally, Jerry expressed that he could not appeal the school district’s decision because his explanation of worrying that issues with other students could arise at the continuation school meant he would risk being labelled as affiliated with a gang. This move would most likely increase surveillance, social isolation, and lead to exponential neglect for Jerry as he would officially be labelled by the school district or police.

For students like Jerry, having been transferred to the continuation school directly contributed to exponential neglect through keeping him socially isolated from the conventional high school. He was given a second chance when he was allowed to re-enroll in the conventional high school following completion of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at Cielo. Though, he felt that he couldn’t get around how the school administration viewed him after he spent time at

the continuation school and that time spent at Cielo made his transition back to the high school all the more difficult. In the excerpt below, he described his difficult transition back to the conventional school and his eventual removal.

Jerry:

“Ya so I was there for seventh and eighth grade and then I got to go back to the high school but I wasn’t used to that atmosphere because Cielo’s really like um, what would you say, it’s small and very strict, and the high school it’s like freedom so like when I got to high school, I was just ditching all the time. I didn’t realize it like it was a lot of freedom so I would take advantage of it and um ya

so, I got sent back to Cielo, like after a semester, and then I was there until junior year and then I got to go back. But you could tell they didn’t want me there.”

Jerry felt that the administration at the conventional high school no longer “wanted” him there after spending some of his time in junior high at Cielo Continuation School despite mentioning he was trying to do better. When asked why he felt they didn’t want him there, Jerry mentioned that the high school’s administration was hesitant to allow him back at a conventional school. He also attributed his difficulties in following school rules and to avoid ditching, to the change he experienced in the conventional school’s structure compared to Cielo. At Cielo, class sizes were smaller, there was additional structure to the school day, and of course, the campus is more secure as students are not allowed to leave for lunch. Thus, another consequence of being socially isolated to the continuation school is that students may

get accustomed to a more restricted environment, creating issues for them once they go back to the conventional school.

As Jerry attempted to adjust to the “freedom” at the conventional high school, the principal gave him an ultimatum of going a week without any issue and he could stay at the school. Jerry mentioned, “And I did good like that whole week, like I was on time every day, but then Friday came around and I saw the principal. But this was like off campus during lunch, and he told me like oh well we have a spot for you at Cielo, so you’ll start there Monday. And I even told him, like what the fuck what happened to my chance you know? But like he was just like, oh well it’s better for you and like he just kind of dropped it there. Jerry met the principal’s requirements and was still socially isolated back to the continuation school. Proving to Jerry that the school did in fact not want him there. Fast forward a few years, the exponential neglect of being socially isolated to the Cielo school meant having less programming focused on getting him to college than at the conventional high school. So, Jerry mentioned not knowing how to enroll into a city college and apply for financial aid. Despite this experience, Jerry still wanted to do better, go to college, and become a lawyer someday.

### *B. Exponential Neglect and Individualized Education*

For most students, exponential neglect begins way before any and possibly without any involvement with the juvenile justice system. Leo was one of the students who had not been officially involved with the juvenile justice system at the time of his interview. Though he had not been arrested, Leo had been stopped by the police multiple times beginning in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He was first stopped by the police because his older brother left him in the care of other youth who were on probation. During a probation stop targeting the other youths,

officers also questioned Leo. He mentioned that from this point forward, he would be surveilled and occasionally stopped by police. Now, Leo's experience varied from other youth because he had not been incarcerated by this point. However, he experienced exponential neglect beginning in the elementary school that was related to an undiagnosed learning disability. Leo's experience was similar to other Latinx youth in that exponential neglect usually started in the educational system and before any involvement with law enforcement.

When asked about his experience with school and how he believed he ended up in the continuation school, Leo felt it began with not receiving help from his teachers. He also mentioned that he struggled more because he had a "difficulty with comprehension" and the school did not place him in an individual education plan (IEP) for multiple years. Though he was finally given an IEP, the process of exponential neglect was in full gear as Leo's frustration with his learning difficulties and lack of support from teachers resulted in angry outbursts. Leo recalls:

"Well, there's some teachers that help, like will help us but there's some teachers that doesn't even care, you know. (Mmhmm). But yeah. Like they're trying to help you when like you're struggling. And they'll be like c'mon I know you know this. Like in second grade, they used to, I hated this teacher like. Like she would tell me, "oh what was the answer?" And like I didn't know cuz like I struggled from comprehension and like she would tell me like what's this and like she would get me in trouble for like no reason and like just not answering the questions. And like I'll get mad and like just start like you know like just leave the class."

Leo described his educational path as one of continuous struggle with lack of teacher support and punishment that lead to exponential neglect and eventually being socially isolated at the continuation school. Rather than receive extra or tailored educational support for his learning disability throughout his schooling, Leo was continuously punished for outbursts of frustration in response to the lack of support. Leo was kicked out of class more often by teachers who already had a perception of him as a “trouble” student. The cycle between lack of support, learning difficulties, and punishment in the school, only reinforced the administration’s decision to eventually expel Leo from the conventional school and to send him to the continuation school. There, he would continue to be neglected by the school and struggle with even less support.

Though Leo was given an IEP in the conventional school, the independent education plans students received at the continuation school contributed to their exponential neglect. Leo described how reading comprehension was always difficult for him at the conventional school but believed he was “good in math and sort of science.” This changed when he was sent to Cielo Continuation School. Leo mentioned he began to struggle with math because he didn’t have a specific math instructor and the curriculum consisted of handing out different individualized work packets to each student in the same class. This meant one teacher could have a variety of students all at different levels of learning at Cielo. So of course, lesson plans and classrooms structured like the conventional high school were unproductive for both the teacher and students. But this also meant each student was less supported and on their own as teachers were forced to overextend themselves to meet each students’ individual needs. As Leo mentioned:

“Well, like the teacher, he’s, he’s cool with me. He’ll help you but like at the end, you’ll struggle more because you’re not in a class where like they’re talking about it and all that. Like here cuz it’s too many kids and it’s only one teacher.”

Leo’s experience was representative of other Latinx youths who were socially isolated from the conventional high school and sent to Cielo Continuation School. Students who may have had continuous learning difficulties or behavioral issues did not receive continuous support. Though some support may have been given initially, students were eventually pushed out to the continuation school after continued struggles in the conventional school. Sending students to Cielo presents a paradox as students with individualized needs who need more support, could not all be supported by one teacher. This experience serves as another example of how the school district’s reliance on socially isolating students at the continuation school as a solution contributes to youth’s exponential neglect by placing them into a more disadvantaged position with less opportunities.

For Latinx youth, social isolation into Cielo also meant a loss of opportunities for positive social and educational development normally available to students at the conventional school. Not only did youth lose structured lesson plans, college counseling, and tutoring upon expulsion from the conventional school, they also lost access to extracurriculars such as after-school programs and organized sports. Participation in sports, along with other extracurricular activities has shown positive effects on youth development including fostering life skills such as (1) self-discipline and taking responsibility, (2) character building, (3) social skills and relationship dynamics, and (4) hard work and determination (Mireles-Rios, Rios and Williams 2020). The school’s decision to move youth

involved with the juvenile justice system to continuation schools contributed to their exponential neglect because the primary concern for the administration was social control, rather than supporting youth development. Multiple youth mentioned a desire for opportunities to get involved in sports to avoid hanging out and getting in trouble.

Another one of the youths, Rafa, believed his life would have been “different” had he had access to sports programs. He lived with his single mother who was gone most of the day because she worked multiple jobs to pay for the high cost of rent. He would spend most of his time at home alone. Rather than remain isolated at home, he would often leave for social connection with other youth in his neighborhood. Unfortunately, this led to trouble and involvement in the juvenile justice system and eventual expulsion from school. He mentioned, “if I went to a high school I would have gone to sports. You know, like football or wrestling. At my high school they really don’t have that.” Sports and other programs that support positive development of youth were also taken away from Rafa following his expulsion from the conventional school. So not only was he socially isolated from his mother and peers but, also from any opportunity to develop as a student and to participate in programs for positive development. Again, the conventional school’s solution to socially isolate youth also meant withdrawal of support they need to stay on track and stay out of trouble. Instead, the youth were often reprimanded with social isolation. For students like Rafa, losing access to sports and many other extracurricular activities which have positive effects on youth development contributed to their exponential neglect.

*C. Exponential Neglect in Community Programs & The Desire for Help*

The loss of opportunities in schools followed many of the Latinx youth into their communities. A major issue for the youth in this community of El Paraíso is not having access to a variety of programs that foster success for youth in the present moment and in the future. Over six years of working with youth in and outside of the placement camp, I was often told that there were no programs tailored to the needs of Latinx youth involved with the juvenile justice system. I had heard similar sentiments from multiple youth workers, people in the community, and the youth themselves. Upon further examination of available services in the county, I found that there was an abundance of local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO'S) in the El Paraíso which served a wide breadth of causes—environmental conservation, homelessness, job placement, and housing—though, support for youth transitioning away from the juvenile justice system was underfunded and practically nonexistent. There was also a lack of free or affordable programs for youth such as sports leagues in the community. Furthermore, NGO's which served youth did not always feel welcoming to youth who had been involved with the juvenile justice system.

In an informal conversation with a Latino man in his early-30's who grew up in the community and was formerly involved with the criminal justice system, we spoke about the types of community programs available to him growing up. He was particularly fond of the boys and girls club growing up. He mentioned how having access to the club and sports programs kept him and many his peers out of trouble and gave them an outlet for their youthful energy. The club facilities such as the basketball court used to be open to the community and was a place where youth came together to interact when he was younger. Because of “criminal activity,” perhaps more accurately because of funding issues, the club

was eventually shut down to non-members and the community lost access to its facilities. This action undoubtedly had disproportionate effects on low-income youth who once thrived in these programs. Leo offered similar insights during his interview. When asked what was something that he was good at and liked doing, Leo spoke enthusiastically about sports and specifically soccer that he used to play at the boys and girls club. He mentioned, “I used to play soccer. Like I started like in the [El Paraiso] Boys and Girls Club. I used to play a lot there, since like kindergarten through sixth grade.” Unfortunately, Leo was unable to continue in soccer at the Boys and Girls club as he mentioned it was only offered up until the sixth grade. In essence, the club’s decisions to close to the public and cut sports programs for older youth caused social isolation which contributed to exponential neglect for low-income youth.

What is overlooked in much of the literature on youth involved with the juvenile justice system is their desire to be cared for, whether that be through supportive programs or relationships. Beto, a 17-year-old Latino youth who completed his high school education while in a placement camp, spoke about his upbringing and overall desire for more support in school and his community in particular. Beto and his family were undocumented, and he grew up in fear that one day they’d be deported. Like other youth in the study, Beto’s parents worked most of the time due to the high cost of living in the area. On his own for much of the day, Beto started to get in trouble and was set on a path towards exponential neglect instead of being provided the support he needed and wanted. He offered insights on the lack of support for his community which was shared by many of the other Latinx youth who were interviewed. When asked for his thoughts on what is affecting his community. Beto responded:

“The community? Like, there’s not that many people you know like that are trying to help us out. They say the economy is going down low, but they got money to go build roads and stuff, but they can't give money to like people that are trying to help us out you know? I don't know, I think that's kind of like what it is. They’re doing all the things that they don't need but they can’t help out.”

Beto is keenly aware that he needed support from schools and community-based organizations to cope with his worries and lived reality. Rather than being provided support, Beto felt that he and his community were neglected by stakeholders and policy makers. He understood that not having support was detrimental to his well-being. He connected the lack of support—exponential neglect—he received as a youth to getting in trouble in schools and eventual involvement in the juvenile justice system. Beto mentioned, “if there was more programs that like, that are trying to reach for like the youth you know, and just people in general. Like if there was people there then like I could probably just go some other road you know. Not just go and do bad stuff. I probably would have ended up doing some sport or something you know.”

In the excerpt above, Beto shows his desire for more help and guidance: the total opposite of the exponential neglect he experienced. He goes on to mention that he would have probably had different experiences, focused in school and avoided getting in trouble with law enforcement. This sentiment was also shared by most of the youth in the study. When asked how the community could be supported, Beto mentioned:

“Probably just like, I’m not sure, like, probably just like stopping the crime.

Like people, like having people help out the youth that are going in the wrong

path you know. Help them out and then just always being there helping people out you know? Trying to get them out of the streets out of the violence and stuff. So that way they can grow up and help other people you know?”

Many of the Latinx youth recognized that their community needed more support and the lack thereof was contributing to their collective struggles with avoiding juvenile justice system involvement. Also, the youth understood that to make the community safer, schools, community-based organizations and other community members should foster supportive relationships with those youth most vulnerable to law enforcement contact. As Beto alludes, support begets support. Youth who are cared for and supported may be more willing to do the same for other youth.

Sadly, many of the youth felt overlooked after years of exponential neglect in schools and in the community. What they did expect was for the city to respond with punitive measures and social isolation as they felt law enforcement was the only organization interested in contacting them, and with no good reason. Beto described this predicament in the following excerpt when addressing why he felt law enforcement was always after Latinx youth and why they had no support.

Beto:

“They’re probably like oh why should we help those guys out when they don't, they’re always looking for problems you know? Probably that's why. They rather like, help someone out that they think is going to make something out of it you know, and not us always getting in trouble and locked up and always on the streets you know?”

After years of experiencing increasing social isolation and punishment, many of the youth had lowered expectations for support as they internalized the exponential neglect they received. Furthermore, meritocracy reinforced Beto's perception that only youth who are "going to make something out of it" would be the ones worthy to receive support. The likelihood of the youth asking for help declined as a result. Instead, an increasing detachment to local organizations and schools occurred for many of the Latinx youth. A consequence of exponential neglect was that receiving and relying on support was replaced by anticipation of a response from law enforcement as some of the Latinx youth felt targeted.

*D. The acceleration of Exponential Neglect through The School-to-Probation Cycle*

In multiple meetings with the public and elected officials, law enforcement agencies reiterated much of what was said by the Latinx youth and what I have documented in various field notes from meetings with staff of several NGO's in El Paraíso. Mainly, the most vulnerable Latinx youth who would benefit from more community and after-school programs are not receiving those services, much of the time for lack of accessibility. While they acknowledged that a lack of programs and support available for youth may lead to an increased probability of involvement with the juvenile justice system, their solutions to these problems were to rely on policing and incarceration. These solutions present a paradox because a youth's involvement with the juvenile justice system makes it all the more likely that they will experience an acceleration of exponential neglect and social isolation from their family, school, and community. Furthermore, exponential neglect combined with racialized punitive social control and wrap-around incarceration (Rios 2011, Flores 2016) contributes to the cyclical nature of the school-to-probation-to-incarceration phenomenon experienced disproportionately by Black, Indigenous, and Latino youth.

Once caught within the cycle of school-to-probation-to-incarceration, the Latino youth found that support continued to be withdrawn and their social isolation increased because of surveillance and criminalization. Most youth involved in the study were initially introduced to the juvenile justice system through probation for transgressions within the education system. Many of the youth felt terms of probation set them up to fail and on a path towards incarceration. Being on probation gave officers the ultimate discretion to surveille the youth and seemed to encourage their harassment by law enforcement. Beto expressed his concerns with law enforcement targeting him more often since he was placed on probation: “Well like before I was even getting in trouble like they wouldn't bother me you know. They wouldn't try to pick on me or anything but now since they know I'm on probation, they're after me. I felt like I'm kind of trying, like always be on the run. They're trying to get me.” Probationary terms were a critical function that accelerated exponential neglect for the Latinx youth. The mandates of probation gave police more reason to target and surveille these youths. Latinx youth on probation are often subjected to increasing police contact and unnecessary searches (Rios, Prieto, and Ibarra 2020). The youth expressed that increased police interactions that came with probation served as a precursor to incrimination, arrest and accelerated exponential neglect.

Probation also contributed to exponential neglect by limiting interactions a youth could have in their community, thus, isolating youth from their own support systems. Once labelled a “gang associate,” the terms of one's probation status generally forbids association with other people registered in gang databases. These databases disproportionately impact Black and Latinx communities as they facilitate establishment of injunctions designed to further control the movements of youth and reinforce racial boundaries by criminalizing

activities otherwise legal outside of the injunction area (Muniz 2014). For instance, a group of youth could be subject to arrest for playing basketball in a park if one of them is in the database. The problematic use of these racialized databases by police has been increasingly called into question and banned by the state of California as investigations and lawsuits continue in response to police falsifying data (Chabria, Rector, and Chang 2020). So, youth involved with the juvenile justice system are forced to avoid interacting with their peers—their support groups—or risk reincarceration due to the terms a probation officer places upon a youth. For some, this also means being forced to avoid family members. While discussing his views on probation, Jerry clearly outlined how it was a trap to set him up for incarceration. His response to being asked if probation helps keep him out of trouble was “No, hell no. Probation fucks everybody over.” In fact, he knew the only way to avoid getting in trouble was to be off probation as minor infractions like hanging out with friends could lead to arrest. He mentioned he needed to:

Jerry:

“Get off probation. But it’s hard, it’s hard getting off. Like it seems like every time I am about to get off, I always get that association, oh he’s like, cause I’m not allowed to associate with any known gang members, so it seems like every time I get close they’ll be like oh ya in a month and then boom.”

Though Jerry repeatedly got close to finishing his probation term, which would have made staying out of trouble all the more likely, he would break the terms of probation for contesting the social isolation probation put him in. Rather than give in to forced social isolation—non-association terms—Jerry resisted exponential neglect by maintaining relationships with one of his only support groups. You see, after years of schools and local

organizations failing to support Jerry, he found his own support system. Unfortunately, the terms of probation transformed his social interactions with some of his other peers into violations.

To make matters worse, law enforcement often found loopholes in the terms of probation to implicate the Latinx youth in probation violations. Because many laws or court orders, as in the specific case of these youth, are written in such a way to be open to interpretation, officers are given the discretion to enforce mandates. This amounts to officers making the ultimate decision to arrest a youth or notify probation for a violation. Jerry described how officers manipulated his non-association mandate as follows:

“But I mean like the court, the way their wording, it’s tricky like the laws are tricky as fuck. Because on my terms, like for my probation terms it says like I’m not allowed to hang out or associate with any known gang members or gang associates. So, and I’ve even told cops, and they’re like ya pretty much... so even if I’m with somebody who’s not a gang member, because he’s with me, he’s like considered a gang associate. So, it’s like what the fuck?”

As Jerry described, avoiding violations while on probation terms is almost impossible for many of the youth. The terms require that one would socially isolate themselves from the only support systems they have formed, when schools and communities have failed to provide them with one. Instead, the youth have experienced exponential neglect as the terms given under probation and the tactics law enforcement utilize, further this experience. So, not only is support increasingly withdrawn from Latinx youth involved with the juvenile justice system, but they are punished for maintaining their own support. In the situation mentioned

above, police weaponized the vagueness of legal mandates of probation to keep Jerry isolated. In the eyes of the law, anyone he associates with can be reinterpreted into an associate—regardless of that being true—simply because he is one. In essence, Latinx youth involved with the juvenile justice system are forced to accept exponential neglect in many occasions to avoid violations and incarceration.

The majority of youth on probation shared similar concerns as Jerry. They expressed the difficulty of living on the terms set up by their probation officers as they sought support from their peers that had not been given to them from others. The youth understood that probation and law enforcement directly contributed to exponential neglect by socially isolating them from their peers and even their own interests. Jerry spoke in detail about losing interest in many activities we'd all consider positive because of the terms set up by probation. Most specifically, the social isolation probation required of him towards his peer groups pushed him away from activities he loved to do. As Jerry expressed:

“But, like I like hiking, I like going to the beach, like anything. I like being outdoors pretty much. But what's hard is that, since I am on probation, like I'm not allowed to hang out with any of my friends, so it's like they expect me to be some loner.”

Being on probation does more harm than good for many of the Latinx youth by exacerbating exponential neglect through social isolation. Like Jerry, many of the youth are expected to end relationships with the peers they often grew up with and receive support from or face arrest for refusing to “be a loner.” Not only does this force social isolation upon the youth but, it also pushes them away from potentially positive activities for youth development such as the hiking Jerry mentioned he enjoyed. Studies have shown that exposure to nature has

positive effects on youth's health both physically and mentally (Tillmann et al. 2018). Most youth develop interests and hobbies by participating in groups with youth who have similar interests (i.e. sports, music, debate team, wilderness clubs, etc.). Many of the Latinx youth involved in the study, however, are deprived from similar opportunities as other youth because of their probationary status. The result of being placed on probation is an acceleration of exponential neglect as the youth are required to give up relationships, few with good reason but not all. Furthermore, probation also contributes to exponential neglect as the youth may withdraw from health-promoting activities they enjoy doing with others, such as hiking, going to the beach, and being outdoors for fear of arrest.

In spite of probation, many of the youth resisted exponential neglect by maintaining relationships with their peers as this group provided them with support they had not received elsewhere. Risking arrest, the youth were forced to avoid many public places and lost their right to community spaces such as parks and community centers. Sociologist Jan Haldipur (2019) discovered a similar phenomenon in which an outcome of aggressive policing is community members—including those who were not involved with the justice system— withdrawing from public spaces to avoid police contact. For Latinx youth in El Paraíso, hanging out in public spaces increased the probability of police contact regardless of involvement in arrestable offenses simply because they were on probation and especially if they were hanging out with friends. As Jerry mentioned, “even if I’m not doing nothing bad and I’m walking down the street with like a friend, like that’s a violation of probation that I’ll get locked up for.” To resist additional exponential neglect (i.e. social isolation from their peers) caused by probation, many of the youth were willing to risk arrest to maintain at least

some form of support system. Jerry described the difficulty of living with the mandates under probation:

“No, I’ve even told my PO (Probation officer) I’m not going to stop, like I don’t care what you say. It’s like, how are you going to take away my childhood friends? I could show them pictures of my homies when we were little kids. And just so like they could see it’s true. Like, we’ve been there since day one. Like we’ve always been close, I don’t see how like they want me to give it up. And then like because I have like no more than ten like good, good, friends like we went to elementary and like everything like we’ve always been together, and those are the guys that they’d want me with the least.”

It would be difficult for anyone living on probationary terms to avoid violation when there is an expectation to accept exponential neglect. For Latinx youth on probation, there was an expectation to socially isolate themselves from some of the only support they have received growing up. As Jerry and many of the other youth mentioned, they are forbidden by probation from associating with childhood peers. The youth had experienced social isolation from other youth and adults in the conventional school and in the community. So, they fostered their own support within a group of peers that became criminalized in part because of their racial and ethnic backgrounds. When on probation, they were expected to give up some of the only support they’ve had in their lives and accept exponential neglect.

When asked if it’s possible to live life on the terms set up by probation, Jerry repeatedly stated “NO.” He mentioned there was no way he could give up his friends. He mentioned that even if he did avoid others who were on probation, law enforcement would

find a way to incriminate him. Other youth shared similar experiences of trying their best to live under probationary terms but having increased police contact because of those terms, made it extremely difficult to avoid a violation. Furthermore, the youth felt officers' only intentions were to arrest them for any reason. Beto described, "Well I see their side too you know because they're trying to do their job but sometimes, they go over the limit you know? Like they're often like right there trying to just, even if we're not doing anything, they're still going to try to stop us and do all the stuff. Trying to pick and just lock us up." Even when avoiding any activity that could be considered a crime on its own, many of the Latinx youth faced arrest for hanging out with friends. In a sense, they were held responsible for each other's past offenses if they associated. More specifically, they were held responsible for the fears of other community members. Because of increased criminalization, youth within these groups were forced to experience additional exponential neglect while on probation if they wanted to avoid violations and possible arrest. Probation was more than a tool for crime deterrence: For these youth, probation was a tool to keep them socially isolated and accelerated exponential neglect.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that the trajectory of Latinx youth is dependent on whether they receive institutional and community support. In Black and Latinx communities more impacted by historical shifts in governmental policies which disintegrated social safety nets, increased educational divestment, and increased unemployment or underemployment, youth are less likely to receive the support they need to succeed. Under-supported youth are more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system with the increased expansion of

the punitive arm of the state into social institutions like schools and the community. The result being that the most disadvantaged are more likely to become socially isolated as they experience exponential neglect from those same support systems needed to thrive.

Most youth involved in the study were initially introduced to the juvenile justice system after a series of transgressions within the educational system. To reiterate, this followed with a failure to address the root issue—poverty, trauma, learning disability, or prejudice—leading to punishable behavior, with a supportive social system. Responsibility for the welfare of these youths has shifted almost exclusively towards their family who have little control over the social inequalities they experience. Instead, involvement in the juvenile justice system for Latinx youth facilitates exponential neglect as schools and NGO's withdraw resources at various points where support should be offered. With each additional act deemed wrong by authorities, whether in school, home, or the community, youth experience more neglect until almost all support is withdrawn.

After years of attending schools and living in a town that did not support the specific needs of Latinx youth and their families, some of the most vulnerable youth end up being targeted by the juvenile justice system. Once incarcerated, a variety of programs are made available to them. They are able to catch up on school credits in a shorter time than in regular high schools. There are a variety of mentoring services available to them while incarcerated. Youth receive counseling and medical services. Many of their previously unaddressed needs are met *while incarcerated*. But, once released, youth may reoffend as they no longer have access to support and medical services. Furthermore, their involvement in the criminal justice system will most likely lead to less support and more isolation once released.

On the other side of exponential neglect is a desire for care and support. Youth want to connect, feel safe, be part of a community, and receive unconditional love & support. These are basic human needs. However, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx, are often treated as undeserving and punished for missteps. Most of the youth in this study expressed a desire to be supported by the community and schools. They recognized the exponential neglect they faced in schools and in the community and how the response to their needs was often punitive when they really wanted support. When asked at the end of his interview about what he needed and wanted to see in the community, Beto responded, “try to find more people, like, that actually want to be there for someone and help them out...like helping out like you guys are you know.”

Taking Beto’s advice seriously would mean implementing restorative justice models in schools and the community to welcome youth back into the community after any wrongdoing. Schools need to divest from law enforcement and remove school-resource officers from campuses. This would also prevent other youth from any experience with the juvenile justice system. Youth must be provided with all the support they need to heal and feel as part of the community. Furthermore, we shouldn’t wait until Latinx youth become involved with the juvenile justice system to provide them the access to the support they need. Instead of focusing on “rehabilitation,” we need to focus on building up youth from the start. There has been a renewed focus on creating diversion programs to avoid incarceration; this also means diverting services away from the criminal justice system to community-based programs where the youth will feel welcomed and supported. We can’t have organizations that have historically contributed to the acceleration of exponential neglect leading the programs developed to support youth’s transition away from the criminal justice system.

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