Youth in Fragmented Systems: Examining Inequity and Barriers to Justice in Massachusetts

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Author's Note

This white paper began as a landscape analysis of youth-serving systems in Massachusetts, focused on identifying where education, juvenile justice, housing, and mental health systems fall short for young people ages 14-24. These systems were selected because they represented the most consistent institutional touchpoints in young people's lives during this period and serve as key sites where access to stability, support, and opportunity is shaped.

The initial approach examined each system independently, expecting discrete gaps and policy failures to emerge within each domain. Across the research, however, a different pattern became clear. Youth outcomes were not shaped by isolated breakdowns, but by overlapping system failures, as young people navigated multiple systems simultaneously and encountered barriers that compounded over time. A central barrier across all systems was not only the availability of services, but the ability to access them—often constrained by fragmented information, language barriers, and unclear or inconsistent pathways between agencies.

This shift reframed the analysis. Rather than focusing on systems in isolation, the paper examines how their interaction and lack of coordination produce and reinforce inequitable outcomes. Across systems, gaps in information access operate alongside structural failures, shaping whether young people and their families can understand, navigate, and ultimately benefit from the supports intended to serve them.

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Introduction

This paper examines the systemic factors contributing to inequitable outcomes for youth ages 14-24 in Massachusetts. While education, juvenile justice, housing, and mental health systems are often analyzed independently, this analysis finds that disparities are more accurately understood as the result of interacting system failures rather than isolated deficiencies. Across these domains, fragmentation in service delivery, limited coordination between agencies, and barriers to accessing information consistently shape youth experiences. These challenges are particularly strong for young people involved in multiple systems, who encounter overlapping forms of surveillance, service gaps, and discontinuities in support, especially during the transition to adulthood. By focusing on the intersections between systems, this paper highlights how inequities are produced and sustained through both structural disconnection and uneven access to existing resources.

System-Level Failures

Schools are one of the most consistent institutional touchpoints in young people's lives and frequently function as gateways into other systems, including juvenile justice and mental health services. Because schools are often the first place where behavioral, academic, or emotional needs are identified, their responses can shape whether students are connected to supportive resources or drawn into more punitive systems. In Massachusetts, the education system reflects persistent inequities in both access and outcomes. Exclusionary discipline continues to disproportionately impact Black and Latine students, who experience higher rates of suspensions and removals from instructional time (Dankoff, 2023; Lloyd, 2020). These disparities persist even as overall suspension rates decline, suggesting that reforms have not fully addressed underlying structural inequities in how discipline is administered.

These disciplinary disparities are closely linked to deeper system involvement. Black students are disproportionately represented in school-based arrests, reinforcing pathways into the juvenile legal system (Dankoff, 2023). At the same time, Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ students report lower levels of school belonging, which is strongly associated with disengagement and increased risk of system involvement (Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2026).

Housing instability reflects a similar interconnected pattern of system failure that spans multiple institutions rather than a single domain. Youth exiting foster care or juvenile justice systems frequently do so without stable housing or long-term support networks, making instability a predictable outcome of system disengagement. In Massachusetts, only 34.1% of youth who need

housing assistance are able to access it (Ross, 2024). At the same time, a substantial portion of youth exiting foster care do so without permanent family connections or stable placements, leaving them vulnerable to immediate housing instability (Children's League of Massachusetts & Transition Age Youth Coalition, 2024). These outcomes are especially severe for youth transitioning out of multiple systems simultaneously, where responsibility for housing placement is often diffused across agencies with limited coordination. In the short term, this instability can lead to homelessness, frequent moves between temporary arrangements, and disruptions to education, employment, and access to care.

Structural barriers further reinforce these gaps. Eligibility requirements, documentation processes, and long waitlists create administrative obstacles that disproportionately affect youth without stable adult support or assistance. Many young people are also unaware of available housing programs or lack the guidance needed to determine eligibility and navigate application systems. In practice, this lack of information and navigational support can mean missing key steps in the process or failing to access available resources altogether. As a result, access to housing often depends not only on the system's capacity but also on a young person's ability to understand and move through fragmented system pathways.

Mental Health needs among youth in Massachusetts follow a similar pattern: they are widespread and particularly pronounced among system-involved populations, yet access to consistent, ongoing care remains limited. Research indicates that 50-70% of justice-involved youth meet criteria for a mental health disorder (Jaggers et al., 2023), while approximately half of youth in Massachusetts with identified mental health needs do not receive adequate care (Newport Academy, 2025). Suicide is also among the leading causes of death for youth in the state, underscoring the severity of unmet needs (Office of the Child Advocate, 2020).

These disparities are especially significant given the strong relationship between mental health and outcomes in education, housing, and justice involvement. However, mental health is often treated as an isolated service rather than a cross-cutting determinant of youth well-being. Access barriers extend beyond service availability to include fragmented information, unclear eligibility requirements, and lack of continuity across providers. Youth frequently move between school-based services, community providers, and state systems without clear guidance on how these systems connect or how responsibility shifts between them. LGBTQ+ youth experience these gaps with particular severity, with nearly half reporting persistent sadness or hopelessness, reflecting both higher levels of need and reduced access to affirming care environments (Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2026).

Cross-System Patterns of Fragmentation

While education, housing, mental health, and other youth-serving systems demonstrate distinct structural failures, they also reveal a shared underlying pattern. Across domains, inequities are produced not only by internal system limitations but also by the absence of coordination among institutions serving overlapping populations of youth.

This becomes most visible in how young people move through systems over time. Youth rarely experience education, juvenile justice, housing, or mental health systems as separate domains. Instead, they encounter them sequentially and simultaneously, with outcomes in one system shaping access and treatment in another. The result is not a set of separate service pathways, but a network of disconnected institutional responses to the same individuals.

A growing body of research on Massachusetts youth systems demonstrates that system involvement is highly overlapping, yet structurally uncoordinated. Approximately 72% of youth in the Department of Youth Services (DYS) have prior or concurrent involvement with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) (Dankoff, 2023), and roughly 71% of LGBTQ+ youth in detention systems have also been involved with DCF services (Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2026). Despite this overlap, systems largely operate independently, with separate case planning processes that do not consistently communicate or align across agencies (Citizens for Juvenile Justice, n.d.). As a result, youth often navigate multiple systems simultaneously without coordinated oversight or shared planning structures.

At the same time, coordinated models do exist, though their structure further highlights the absence of system-wide integration. The Hampden County Dual Status Youth Initiative brings together child welfare and juvenile justice agencies through joint case planning teams (Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice, 2013). The Safe and Successful Youth Initiative (SSYI) coordinates employment, housing, mental health, and education support for "proven-risk" youth across multiple cities (Boston Public Health Commission, n.d.). Similarly, Brookline Center's Multisystem Youth Projects embed multidisciplinary teams within schools to coordinate services for youth involved in multiple systems (The Brookline Center for Community Mental Health, n.d.). These programs demonstrate that coordination is both possible and effective; however, their limited scale underscores that integration is not the default design of Massachusetts youth systems but rather an intervention applied selectively to specific populations.

In the absence of such models, fragmentation produces compounding pathways of disadvantage. School exclusion increases the likelihood of juvenile justice involvement (Dankoff, 2023), while justice system involvement is strongly associated with housing instability and reduced educational continuity (Ross, 2024). Housing instability, in turn, increases the likelihood of continued system contact and disengagement from services. Rather than operating as independent institutions, these systems reinforce one another's failures through disconnected decision-making processes.

These dynamics are especially visible during the transition to adulthood, when eligibility structures shift sharply around age 18, with some services extending to 21 or 24 depending on the agency. This creates a structural gap between child-serving and adult-serving systems, where youth frequently lose access to services before stable housing, employment, or care networks are established. This result is not a coordinated transition but rather a point of fragmentation in which responsibility becomes unclear, and continuity of care is disrupted.

Information Access as a Structural Barrier

Across systems, one of the most consistent and underexamined drivers of inequitable outcomes is access to information itself. In Massachusetts, language access is formally defined as essential to ensuring "meaningful access" to services, rights, and participation (Executive Office for Administration and Finance, 2012). Yet in practice, access to information remains uneven, reactive, and deeply shaped by institutional capacity rather than individual need.

Within education systems, persistent failures exist in translating key documents such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), disciplinary notices, and enrollment materials. Compliance with translation requirements often occurs only after formal complaints are filed, placing the burden of enforcement on families who may already lack the institutional knowledge to recognize violations (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2021). This gap is reinforced by a broader mismatch between need and access: while approximately 25% of students in Massachusetts speak a language other than English as their first language, only 4% are enrolled in dual language programs (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2024). Although the state has committed $11.8 million and a long-term plan to expand bilingual education through 2032-33, implementation remains uneven across districts, with local control producing significant variation in the availability and quality of language supports (Jmaynard, 2025). Together, these patterns illustrate that access to information in schools is not systematically ensured but is delivered inconsistently based on local capacity and response.

A similar dynamic is evident in juvenile courts, where interpreter access is legally required but inconsistently implemented. Statewide reporting indicates that interpreters frequently fail to appear, and that key forms, instructions, and procedural information are often available only in English (Matta, 2025). As a result, youth and families may move through critical legal processes without fully understanding their rights, obligations, or the consequences of court involvement. The absence of accessible information in these settings does not simply create confusion; it limits individuals' ability to advocate for themselves or make informed decisions.

These system-specific gaps are compounded by a broader lack of coordination across agencies. Schools, child welfare systems, housing authorities, courts, and mental health providers each operate with distinct and largely unaligned communication structures. There is no unified mechanism for conveying eligibility criteria, legal rights, or service navigation across systems, particularly for youth who move between them. For transition-age youth, this fragmentation is especially consequential, as responsibilities for guidance and information sharing are often unclear or entirely absent.

Critically, when young people are not explicitly informed of their rights, whether in education, housing, or legal systems, those rights become effectively inaccessible. Access to services is therefore not determined solely by formal eligibility but by institutional literacy: the ability to interpret these complex systems, identify points of entry, and advocate within bureaucratic structures. Youth and families who lack this knowledge, particularly those facing language barriers, are systematically disadvantaged, even when they qualify for support.

Research Gaps

Despite extensive documentation of disparities within individual systems, significant gaps remain in understanding how these systems interact over time. Current research remains largely siloed by agency, with limited longitudinal tracking of youth across multiple systems. There is also limited data on how transition planning is implemented across agencies, including when planning begins, how responsibilities are assigned, and what outcomes result from existing processes.

Similarly, there is little comprehensive data on housing stability following system exit, particularly across different entry points such as foster care, juvenile justice, and homelessness services (Ross, 2024). In addition, there is little understanding of how agencies share information in practice, where coordination breaks down, and how responsibility is distributed when youth are involved in multiple institutions simultaneously (Citizens for Juvenile Justice, n.d.).

An additional gap lies in the limited evaluation of interventions aimed at addressing these challenges. While some programs aim to improve cross-system coordination, there is insufficient evidence on their effectiveness or long-term impact. More research is needed to assess how these programs operate in practice, the extent to which they successfully facilitate interagency coordination, and whether they lead to improved outcomes for young people navigating multiple systems.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests that inequitable outcomes for youth in Massachusetts are not primarily the result of isolated system failures but of structural disconnection across systems intended to serve overlapping populations. While education, juvenile justice, housing, and mental health systems each contain identifiable gaps, the more persistent issue is that these systems operate in parallel rather than in coordination.

As a result, youth experiences are shaped less by any single institution and more by the cumulative effects of navigating fragmented systems over time. Existing coordinated interventions demonstrate that integration is possible and often effective, but they remain limited in scale and are not embedded as standard practice. System coordination, in this context, remains an exception rather than an expectation.

Improving outcomes for youth requires more than strengthening individual systems in isolation. It requires addressing how systems connect, communicate, and share responsibility across institutional boundaries. Without structural coordination and accessible pathways for navigation, inequities will continue to emerge not only from what systems fail to provide, but from how difficult those systems are to navigate together.

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