



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Exploring Secondary and Postsecondary Attainment Among Juvenile Justice-Involved Youth in Massachusetts

Overview

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has one of the highest high school graduation rates in the country. Massachusetts youth who are involved in the **juvenile justice system**, however, graduate at rates more than **three times lower** than the statewide public school student population. Twenty six percent (26%) of young people involved with the Department of Youth Services completed high school within five years. Comparatively, 82.4% of high-needs students in the class of 2021 graduated from high school on time.¹

To date, there are few insights into the educational outcomes of youth in the juvenile justice system, and even fewer insights into the correlates that predict **high school completion and college attendance**. This study represents the first time in Massachusetts history that **DYS and DESE data** have been integrated in order to understand the educational outcomes of youth involved in the juvenile justice system and explore the relationships among juvenile justice involvement and measures of youth educational attainment.

The full report² is the result of a year-long partnership among DYS, DESE, and CERES Institute for Children & Youth at Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development. This executive summary briefly describes the report's methodology, key findings, and questions for further exploration. The results and recommendations are designed to inform Massachusetts policymakers and practitioners who want to sustain promising practices and strengthen strategic supports for young people during and after justice system involvement. To read the full report, contact David Chandler at the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services, david.chandler@state.ma.us.

Study Design

This study set out to answer the following questions:

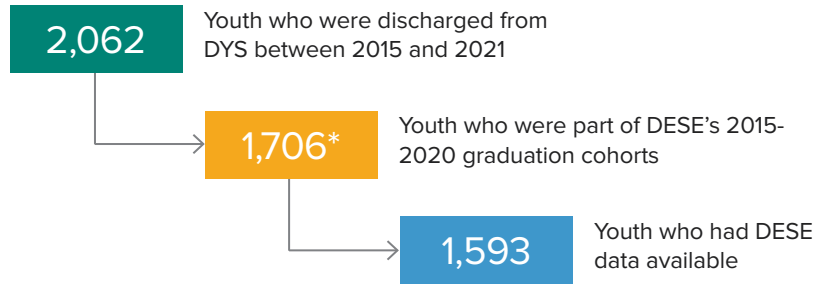
- At what rates are DYS-involved youth graduating from high school, earning a high school equivalency, or dropping out?
- What factors contribute to persisting towards a high school diploma or equivalency?
- How do young people fare in the educational system once they transition out of DYS?
- At what rate are DYS-involved youth enrolling in and completing postsecondary degrees?
- How might DESE and DYS continue supporting young people's academic and career goals?

Using a rigorous sampling strategy to align available data from both DYS and DESE, the research team created **three discrete samples**: one to analyze graduation, high school equivalency, and dropout; a second sample to analyze students' educational status in the school year following their discharge from DYS; and a third sample to analyze postsecondary enrollment and graduation. Multivariate logistic regression models and other statistical methods surfaced patterns and trends. A qualitative approach was used to illustrate postsecondary pathways for the small number of youth who earned postsecondary degrees.

1 See profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/gradrates.aspx.

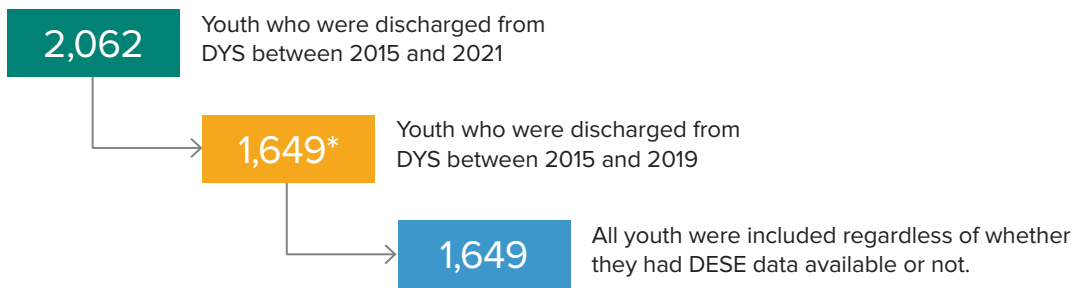
2 Suggested citation: Lynch, A.D., Zaff, J.F., Huang, Y., Cole, M.L., Hynes, M. (2022). Exploring Secondary and Postsecondary Attainment Among Juvenile Justice-Involved Youth in Massachusetts. Boston, MA: CERES Institute.

Sample selection process for analyses related to high school outcomes (Sample 1: N=1,593)



*We examined youth’s four-, five-, and six-year high school educational outcomes since first enrollment in the 9th grade. Given that the available DESE data covered enrollment status up to the Spring of 2021, only youth who were part of DESE’s 2015-2020 graduate cohorts were included in the sample to ensure adequate data coverage.

Sample selection process for analyses related to post-discharge educational status



*We examined youth’s educational status during the school year following discharge. Given that the available DESE data covered enrollment status up to the Spring of 2021, only youth who were discharged from DYS between 2015 and 2019 were included in the sample to ensure adequate data coverage.

Summary of Key Findings

The report describes in further detail the method and the secondary and postsecondary outcomes. Below are a few highlights from each of the Results sections.

High School Graduation, High School Equivalency, and Dropout

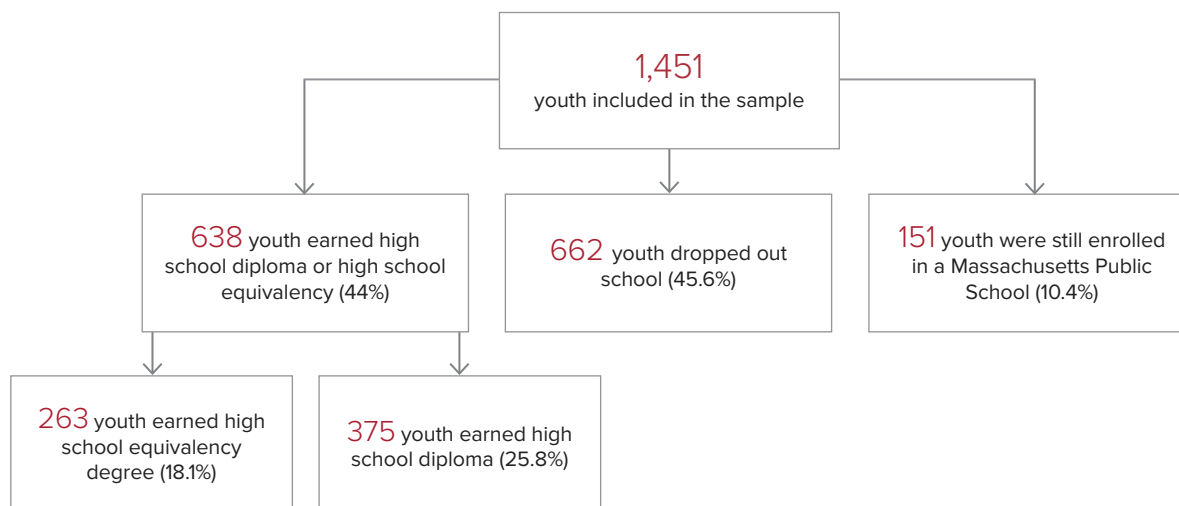
There is a notable trend suggesting that DYS-involved youth continue to persist in high school past the four-year “on time” graduation cutoff, with meaningful portions of youth going on to attain a high school diploma **within five or six years**. Among all DYS-involved youth in the 2015–2020 graduation cohorts, 16.6% graduated on time and 25.8% graduated within five years—representing a 55.4% increase between four- and five-year rates.

DYS-involved youth earn a **GED/HiSet** at a far higher rate than students statewide. On average, the five-year high school equivalency rate among previously DYS-involved youth was 18.1%, compared to just 1% of students statewide. This suggests that for DYS-involved youth, earning a high school equivalency may represent a promising alternative to a high school diploma.

Combining the five-year high school equivalency and high school graduation rates shows that, on average, 44% of previously DYS-involved youth complete a high school diploma or GED/HiSet within five years of entering 9th grade. In comparison, the statewide average five-year graduation rate for all youth was 90%—more than twice that of juvenile-justice involved youth.

Among DYS-involved youth in the 2015-2020 graduation cohorts, 45.6% dropped out of high school within five years of their first-time enrollment in 9th grade. DYS-involved youth were 88% more likely to drop out of high school each year than youth statewide.

Five-year high school outcomes among DYS-involved youth (N=1,451)



*In line with DESE's procedures for calculating graduation and dropout rates, 142 youth in Sample 1 (N=1,593) who were deceased or transferred out were removed from the denominator.

Factors Correlating with High School Outcomes

Multiple factors were correlated with the likelihood that a young person would complete high school. These factors include gender, race, ethnicity, special education (SPED) status, DYS-designated service region (where a young person was committed), offense severity, timing of discharge, and whether or not the young person elected to participate in the Youth Engaged in Services (YES) Initiative.

Notably, for SPED students who are DYS-involved, the high school equivalency pathway (GED/HiSET) was a popular alternative to a traditional high school diploma. These students were 104% more likely to earn a high school equivalency than non-SPED students. Although there were gender and race differences in four-year graduation rates, there were no statistically significant differences in six-year graduation rates—suggesting that gender- and race-related inequities in graduation rates may resolve when students are given **more time to complete high school**.

Students' **DYS-designated service regions** were an important differentiator of high school success. Students in DYS's Central service region demonstrated the highest graduation rates and were at least 51% more likely to graduate from high school within four years than youth in any other region. Students in the Northeast region demonstrated the highest rates of high school equivalency attainment and were 60% more likely to earn a high school equivalency than students in the Central region.

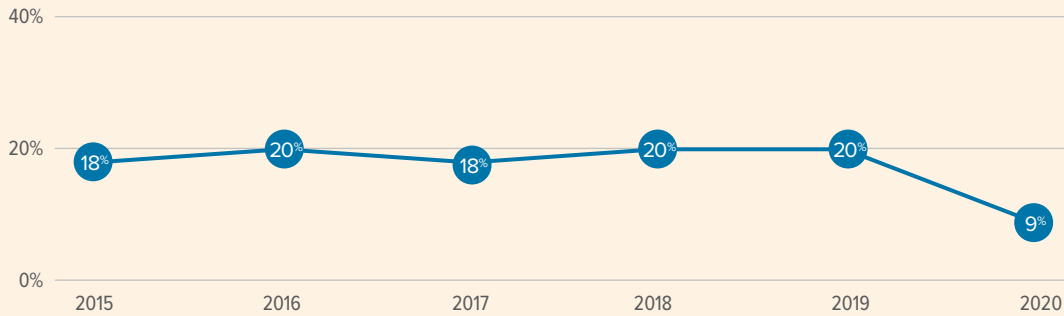
Timing of DYS discharge also played an important role in students' high school success. Youth whose DYS discharge occurred after their expected four-year graduation date were 126% more likely to graduate in four years than youth who were discharged before their expected four-year graduation date.

Youth who enrolled in the **YES Initiative** (DYS's voluntary program that offers continued supports and relationships with DYS caseworkers following discharge from DYS) were more likely to graduate high school, and less likely to drop out. YES Initiative participants were 47% more likely to graduate in four years, and 50% more likely to graduate in six years than youth who did not participate in YES. Although these findings suggest that the YES Initiative may promote graduation and decrease the rate of dropout, these findings are correlational. Understanding this effect, and the specific supports that YES offers, requires further study.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY ATTAINMENT

The figure below highlights high school equivalency rates among previously DYS-involved youth who were part of the 2020 graduation cohort—the cohort whose high school completion status was most directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the 2020 graduation cohort, only **8.5%** of the youth in our sample earned a high school equivalency within five years, compared with 20.2% of youth in the 2019 graduation cohort. This represents a **57.9% decrease** in the five-year high school equivalency attainment rate between the 2019 and 2020 graduation cohorts.

Five-year high school equivalency rates among DYS-involved youth by graduation cohort



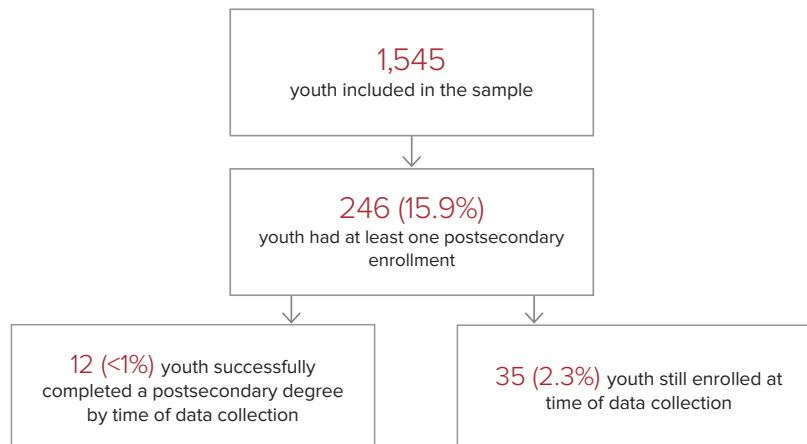
Postsecondary Enrollment and Completion

Combining data from DYS and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), the research team analyzed postsecondary enrollment information for youth discharged from DYS between 2015 and 2021.

Overall, **246** previously DYS-involved youth (15.9%) had at least one postsecondary enrollment record. Interestingly, high school graduates and those with a high school equivalency appeared to enroll in postsecondary institutions at a similar rate. Considering students' first postsecondary enrollment record, the majority (80%) first enrolled in **two-year, public** institutions.

Twelve (12) young people in the current sample of youth successfully completed postsecondary degrees by the time of data collection. Among the **12 youth** who earned postsecondary degrees, eight were YES participants, ten were high school graduates and two were non-graduates with a high school equivalency. Six students earned a Bachelor's degree from a four-year institution, three students earned an Associate's degree from a two-year institution and three students earned Certificates.

Summary of postsecondary enrollment and graduation rates among DYS-involved youth (N=1,545)



Supporting Stronger Outcomes for Justice-Involved Youth in Massachusetts

Based on our examination of the available data, the research team found several factors that play a role in DYS-involved youth's attainment of a diploma or high school equivalency, as well as their potential enrollment in postsecondary education programs. As the state strives to support all students to attain a diploma or high school equivalency, the following topics merit further examination.

- **Timing.** Young people enter and leave DYS at various points on their educational journeys and that timing impacts their later success. How can providers identify the most promising intersection between DYS commitment and discharge and where students are on their educational path to increase a young person's likelihood of academic success?
- **Place.** DYS-involved youth are more (or less) likely to graduate and drop out of high school based on the geographic service region. What are the educational systems youth are leaving and returning to in these regions and what supports are needed to ensure that youth have equal opportunities for success, regardless of geography?
- **Pathways.** DYS-involved youth pursue a variety of non-traditional paths through high school and postsecondary education. How can we better understand what academic pathway is the best fit for each student? When should students be encouraged to continue to persist towards a high school diploma and when should the alternative, high school equivalency pathway be pursued? How can students be supported as they select a pathway through postsecondary education?
- **YES Involvement.** YES involvement was an important predictor of high school success and postsecondary enrollment. What are the specific services and supports that YES provides that allow students to continue on their educational journey? How can providers ensure that the services that are the most helpful are offered to all young people enrolling in YES? And, how can more young people be encouraged to enroll in YES?

When youth are committed to DYS care during their high school years, and then released to their home communities, both their overall educational experience and the transition from place to place require intentional support from multiple systems. The findings in this report suggest that the individuals and systems supporting this group of youth may need to prepare for a longer path to attaining key educational milestones.

Policymakers and practitioners could focus on the question, **whose youth are these?** That is, who is responsible for supporting these youth as they transition out of DYS care and attempt to re-enter the public education system? When we all answer **"our youth,"** then we may be more likely to apply what we know about high school persistence and postsecondary success to this group of young people who need not only caring adults, but systems of support and care, to stay on a path to adult success.

Acknowledgements

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The CERES Institute for Children & Youth at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development is dedicated to community-engaged research and evaluation. Our work is premised on the belief that the best solutions for strengthening programs for children, youth, and families emerge by authentically partnering the expertise in communities with the expertise of community-engaged researchers and evaluators. Through a co-constructive process, communities and community-engaged researchers can identify the core problems that young people are facing, design solutions that capitalize on the inherent assets of young people and their communities, and continually learn and improve on these solutions until positive education and life outcomes are realized for all. Importantly, these partnerships should result in community-based organizations building their internal capacity to learn and improve.

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