

Virginia youth from areas with high rates of crime and economic disadvantage are at the highest risk of recidivism

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A new study by researchers at the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University

provides insight for policymakers on ways to reduce recidivism among youth in Virginia.

The researchers analyzed five years of statewide data from the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice and a sample of 8,615 people to reveal that Virginia juveniles from areas with high rates of crime and economic disadvantage are at the highest risk of recidivism. This finding applied to youth of all races, but the most pronounced effects were among Black youth.

Additionally, the researchers found that prior contact with the most punitive punishments in the [juvenile justice system](#)—such as incarceration—were significantly associated with recidivism, with the effects being strongest for Black youth and comparable between nonwhite Hispanic and white youth.

The findings are aligned with interpretations of the "racial invariance thesis," contending that [crime rates](#) are primarily attributed to high levels of concentrated poverty, residential mobility, population turnover and family disruption, but also that [racial minorities](#) are most affected because of structural racism.

"We did find it somewhat surprising that African Americans living in areas of economic deprivation and high rates of crime were the most likely to recidivate, but that's part of what the racial invariance thesis predicts: that due to the unique structural conditions African Americans face and the multigenerational effects of those conditions, they are at the highest risk of adverse outcomes such as recidivism, and the outcomes are the most negative among the poorest African Americans," said Patrick Lowery, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the criminal justice program of the Wilder School, who authored the study with doctoral student Dominic Zicari.

"Economic deprivation and crime predicted recidivism across all racial categories, which is also something the racial invariance thesis predicts, but again the strongest effects were among Black juveniles," Lowery added.

The study's findings provide key takeaways for policymakers looking to reduce recidivism among youth.

Prior research has found that local nonprofits are significantly associated with reductions in violent and property crimes because they often focus on [crime](#) and community life within a city. The study, Lowery said, reinforces the importance of investing in nonprofit organizations in the most disadvantaged communities.

"Having a vibrant community supported by nonprofits and where people feel a sense of community would help reduce recidivism, especially in the poorest African American communities," he said. "Policymakers would be wise to look for ways within which they can support existing local nonprofits and support the creation of new local nonprofits."

Given the study's finding that incarceration was correlated with [youth recidivism](#), policymakers may also want to consider adopting more alternatives to jail, Lowery said.

"There's a significant amount of disruption that comes from a child being institutionalized, and we should consider everything within reason to keep a delinquent child in the community and sanctioned on the outside rather than on the inside of a juvenile institutionalization facility," he said.

The study, "The Latino Paradox, the Racial Invariance Thesis, and Recidivism Among a Sample of Juvenile Offenders," was published in the journal *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*.

"We hope future juvenile justice scholarship will continue to consider community-level context, as our research shows it is important in outcomes for justice-involved children," Lowery said.

More information: Patrick G. Lowery et al, The Latino Paradox, the Racial Invariance Thesis, and Recidivism Among a Sample of Juvenile Offenders, *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/15412040221137295](https://doi.org/10.1177/15412040221137295)

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