

WIA YOUTH OFFENDER STUDY:

Characteristics and Program Experiences of Youthful Offenders
within Seattle-King County Workforce Investment Act (WIA)
Programs

Prepared for:

**The Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County
Research & Development Committee
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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	3
1. Overview of WIA	5
2. Youth Offenders in WIA	7
- <i>Self-Reported Offender Status</i>	7
- <i>Findings from Court Records</i>	9
- <i>WIA Youth Offenders: Criminal History</i>	10
- <i>Qualitative Data on Youth Offender Characteristics</i>	13
3. Characteristics of Offenders vs. Non-Offenders	15
- <i>Areas of Similarity between Offenders and Non-Offenders</i>	16
- <i>Differences between Offenders and Non-Offenders</i>	17
- <i>Modified Analysis</i>	19
4. WIA Program Retention and Termination	20
5. Barriers to Enrolling and Serving Offenders in WIA	22
- <i>WIA Programmatic Barriers</i>	22
- <i>System Factors Influencing Enrollment and Participation</i>	26
6. Supports to Enrollment and Participation of Offenders	28
7. Conclusion and Recommendations	29

WIA Youth Offender Study: Executive Summary

Introduction

As part of its efforts to anticipate emerging youth programming issues and needs, the Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council (WDC) commissioned the *WIA Youth Offender Study*. Implemented by an external evaluation team, the study focused on youth offenders who recently had been served by either WIA In-School or Out-of-School programs within the county. With the assistance of the King County Juvenile Court, evaluators examined the court records of recent WIA program participants to learn more about the youth offender population being served in WIA and how it compared with non-offenders participating in WIA. In addition, through key informant interviews and other qualitative data sources, the evaluation explored how various program policies and practices may be influencing youth offender participation in WIA.

Key Findings

- ▶ *Self Report Data:* Self reported data collected on the WIA application provided a highly inaccurate picture of youth offender participation in the program, substantially undercounting the number of participants who had been court-involved.
- ▶ *Proportion of Youth Offenders in WIA:* At a minimum, court involved youth comprised one-third of the recent WIA youth population. At least 27 percent of those in the In-school programs and 43 percent in the Out-of-School had a court record within King County prior to enrollment. However, since youth involved with other criminal courts were not captured by the available data, the actual proportion of offenders with some prior court involvement likely constituted closer to one-half of all participants.
- ▶ *Criminal Histories of Youth Offenders:* WIA youth offenders were primarily low-level offenders who did not have extensive histories with the juvenile court. Among youth under 18 at the time of enrollment, about 75 percent had very low criminal history scores. About half had no record of court involvement for at least two years. About one-quarter had been referred to court on a felony charge, but only nine percent had been convicted. However, 23 percent had had multiple referrals to court.
- ▶ *Comparison of WIA Youth Offenders and Non-Offenders:* The WIA offender group did not look that different from the non-offenders. They tended to be somewhat older, had completed more months of school and were racially more diverse. As a group, they experienced more homelessness and had more problems with literacy. However their program experiences were not that distinctive from non-offenders. They stayed in the program slightly longer, on average, than non-offenders. Out-of-School youth offenders, however, had significantly poorer outcomes, with almost half exiting the program with a neutral or negative outcome.
- ▶ *Internal Program Barriers to Youth Offender Participation:* Key informant interviews revealed a number of potential barriers to the enrollment and successful participation of youth offenders in WIA programs. Certain WIA program structures were thought to disproportionately effect enrollment of youth offenders. Often-cited barriers included (1) WIA documentation and paperwork requirements; (2) staff concerns about meeting WIA performance outcome requirements; and (3) Lack of access to In-School Program slots. Although not mentioned as frequently by WIA program staff, other informants felt that

program outreach, referral and intake practices tended to screen out youth offenders, particularly on the In-School Program side.

- ▶ *System barriers to Youth Offender Participation:* Other frequently mentioned system barriers included (1) lack of sufficient information sharing and general coordination between WIA and probation staff; (2) Lack of adequate information on the youth's criminal history; (3) Employer attitudes and practices that limited youth offender's employment options; and (4) Federal financial student aid policies that discouraged certain youth offenders from pursuing postsecondary training or education.
- ▶ *Supports to Youth Offender Participation:* WIA programs also exhibited a number of potential supports to enrolling and serving youth offenders. These included: (1) Clear policy emphasis on serving harder-to-serve youth; (2) Blended funding models available to some programs, which allowed case managers greater flexibility in considering high needs youth; (3) strong case management models (4) New enrollment policies that encourage more year-round enrollment in the In-School programs.

Recommendations

The study findings suggest that enrollment and successful participation of youth offenders in WIA might be further strengthened in three main areas:

- ▶ *Coordination with Probation:* Currently the level of communication and coordination between WIA and probation staff appears uneven, and at the systems level there are few formal mechanisms to support coordination between these two staffs. Representatives from the Probation Department and WIA service providers should explore ways to strengthen information-sharing, referral mechanisms and case coordination. If WIA programs have not already done so, consider designating a person or persons to act as a liaison with probation staff. Having a single point of contact from probation staff may support better information exchange, encourage relationship-building and help identify future coordination needs.
- ▶ *WIA Program Structures:* Encourage providers to review and discuss among each other different approaches to referral, intake and enrollment and how these approaches may be impacting service to youth offenders. In particular, programs with low enrollment of offender youth may want to examine their program practices carefully. In-school programs that rely primarily on youth self-referral, that stretch out the already inherently difficult WIA enrollment process and/or that employ motivational screening mechanisms may need to revise their approach if they are serious about enrolling more offenders. In addition, programs may wish to examine their follow-up procedures and, if possible, bolster the transition services provided to harder-to-serve youth, including youth offenders.
- ▶ *Data Collection and Analysis:* WIA programs need better information on the criminal histories of the youth they serve for both ongoing case management and evaluation purposes. Continue to explore with the Juvenile Court the possibility of making juvenile justice records of participants available to WIA program staff. The Court also has an interest in learning more about the effectiveness of youth development programs in reducing the risk of future involvement with the juvenile justice system. Explore ways in which the WDC and the Juvenile Court might collaborate in supporting future research on youth offenders.

Introduction

This report presents findings from a recent study of youth offenders served in programs funded through the Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council (referred to as the WDC). Established in 1999, the Council is mandated by the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) to implement an integrated workforce training system serving both employers and job seekers. This study was commissioned by the WDC's Research and Development Committee, in response to a concept proposed by the King County Superior Court Juvenile Probation Department. Because juvenile offenders often face significant barriers to successful employment, educational achievement and economic self-sufficiency, the Department proposed a study that would examine youth offender participation in WIA youth workforce development programs.

The main purpose of the resulting WDC study was to learn more about the youth offender population participating in WIA-funded programs. A second purpose was to identify factors that affected youth offender enrollment and participation in WIA.

Focus of the Study

As part of its efforts to anticipate emerging youth programming issues and needs, the WDC's Research and Development Committee commissioned the *WIA Youth Offender Study*. Implemented by an external evaluation team, the study focused on youthful offenders who recently had been served by either WIA In-School or Out-of-School programs. The programs were not operated directly by the WDC, but rather by two consortiums of local youth service providers. A primary goal of the study was to identify and profile youth that have been served in both the juvenile justice and the WIA systems. Key questions addressed through this research include:

- To what extent are WIA programs serving low, moderate and high-risk youthful offenders?
- How does the youth offender subpopulation compare with non-offenders in terms of their demographic and other personal characteristics? How do they compare in terms of their length of stay in the program and their termination status?
- How have policies and practices, both internal and external to WIA, supported or impeded youth offender enrollment and participation in WIA programs?
- How might the system for identifying eligible youth offender participants and linking them to appropriate WIA services be strengthened?

Study Data Sources

The study addressed these questions using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. The four main data sources included:

- *WIA youth participant data set*: The evaluation analyzed a WIA participant data set drawn from the SKIES¹ database, which stores WIA data from WDC's across the state. The data

¹ SKIES is the acronym for the Services, Knowledge and Information Exchange System developed by the Washington State Employment Security Department.

included a variety of participant demographic and program services variables, as well as some limited outcome information for a cohort of participants entering Seattle-King County WIA youth programs over a two-year period between July 1, 2000 and June 30, 2002.

- *Criminal history data:* The evaluation identified participants in the study cohort who had also been court-involved prior to entering a WIA program, using juvenile court records provided by the King County Superior Court.²
- *Key informant interviews:* The evaluator conducted semi-structured in-person and telephone interviews with 23 system stakeholders, including WIA program case managers, program supervisors and managers, WDC staff and probation staff. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain more in-depth, qualitative information that complemented information derived from the quantitative analysis of participant data.
- *Document Review:* The evaluator also examined local WIA program descriptions, RFP/contract documents and commentary on pending WIA re-authorization in order to place the study findings in a broader program context.

Report Organization

The report is organized into the following six topical areas:

- *Overview of WIA:* Provides background on the three major programs that comprise WIA youth services in King County
- *Youth Offenders in WIA:* Describes how many and what kind of youth offenders are participating in WIA.
- *Characteristics of Offenders vs. Non-Offenders:* Compares selected characteristics of WIA offenders vs. non-offenders, identifying areas in which the two groups differ.
- *Program Retention and Termination Outcomes:* Compares the program experiences of offender and non-offender youth in terms of length of stay and immediate outcomes at termination.
- *Barriers to Enrolling and Serving Offenders:* Examines both program and larger system barriers to serving offenders.
- *Program Supports for Offenders:* Identifies supports to enrolling and serving offenders in WIA.

A final section offers tentative conclusions and recommendations for enhancing youth offender participation in WIA programs.

² The King County Juvenile Court provided this study with criminal history data extracted from the County's Juvenile Justice Wide Area Network (JJWAN) system, which tracks youth who have been referred to the court by a law enforcement agency. A limitation of JJWAN is that it primarily captures information about a youth's juvenile court involvement within King County. Moreover, criminal history information for youth 18 and over is not included because these youth are referred to adult court. In addition, under certain restricted conditions persons 18 or older can request (through a court order) that their records related to a minor juvenile offense be sealed or destroyed. However, according to court staff, it is likely that only a small fraction of the total JJWAN cases are affected in this manner. Use of the more comprehensive state juvenile criminal history database (JUVIS) and/or adult criminal history database (SCOMIS) was not feasible within the scope and resources of the current study.

I. Overview of WIA

The non-profit Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council (WDC) administers WIA-funded programming for both adults and youth. Youth residing in King County are eligible to receive WIA-funded services if they are between the ages of 14 and 21, are low-income and face recognized barriers to completing school and attaining economic self-sufficiency. WIA-defined barriers include conditions such as lack of basic skills, single parenthood, homelessness and involvement in the juvenile justice system.

In-School and Out-of-School Components

As required by the Act, WIA funds two separate program strands: an *in-school program* and an *out-of-school program*. These two programs will frequently be referred to throughout this report. As the names imply, the first strand is oriented towards youth who are currently in school, but who manifest academic performance, school attendance and/or behavioral issues and are deemed to be at-risk for dropping out. The second strand serves youth who are already out of school and who are not likely to return or do well in a traditional school setting.

During the study period, the WDC contracted with three umbrella organizations to provide education and workforce development services to WIA-eligible youth. These organizations included:

- *The Seattle In-School Youth Employment Consortium*, with the City of Seattle Youth Employment Program (SYEP) acting as the lead contractor
- *The King County Stay-In-School Youth Consortium*, with the King County Work Training Program (KCWTP) acting as the lead contractor
- *The King County Out-of-School Youth Consortium*, with the KCWTP acting as the lead contractor

These three consortia provided a range of youth development services throughout the county in a variety of school and community-based sites. During the two-year study period (July 1, 2000 through June 30, 2002) approximately 628 youth enrolled and were served in these programs through WIA funding. The split between the two programs was approximately 61 percent In-School and 39 percent Out-of-School. Since youth often remain in a program for more than a year and receive follow up services for 12 months after leaving the program, more than 1,000 youth were served in some capacity by WIA in any given year.

Common Characteristics of the Programs

The In-School and Out-of-School programs shared some common elements, which included the following:

- Programs were designed to be long-term (at least one year long, plus a year of follow-up).
- Programs provided integrated education, workforce preparation, leadership, community service and other youth development activities.³

³ The Act requires that any program receiving WIA youth funds must make available ten specific program elements to participants that *support academic improvement* (e.g., tutoring, alternative secondary school services), *enhance work-related skills* (e.g., work experience, occupational skills training) and *provide key services for youth success* (e.g., leadership development opportunities, mentoring, support services).

- An assigned case manager comprehensively assessed youth needs and barriers⁴, prepared an individual service plan and coordinated wrap-around services for the youth.
- Support services and incentives were available to participants.
- Youth over 18 could transfer into WIA adult services or utilize blended funding if participation in adult programs seemed more appropriate.
- WIA-funded services were frequently embedded in a larger program in which WIA and non-WIA youth were served side-by-side through a blended funding model.

Overview of Different Program Models

Although the three consortia-run programs shared many characteristics, the referral, intake, assessment, case management, service delivery and follow-up strategies appeared to vary, sometimes significantly. Moreover, program strategies of individual partners varied within each consortium. Within the scope of the current study it was not possible to develop a detailed description of these program variations. However, it is important to acknowledge that these variations existed and may have led to different experiences in identifying, enrolling and serving youth offenders. Therefore, later discussions about service to WIA youth offenders may not be universally applicable across all program sites within the three consortia. Below is a brief overview of each of the three WIA-funded programs of interest in this study.

The King County Out-of-School Youth Consortium

The consortium consisted of 19 community-based organizations and educational institutions and over 130 employers providing a range of services to WIA eligible high school dropouts ages 16 to 21. In addition consortium members served non-WIA disadvantaged youth, age 16-24. Youth were served through a network of learning centers and community college training programs located throughout King County that were designed to re-engage high school dropouts. The County's Workforce Training Program headed the consortium and served the largest number of WIA youth; several community colleges also served a significant portion of youth in the program. The County provided centralized intake, referral and eligibility services. Each youth was assigned an on-site case manager. In the most recently completed program year (PY 2001), the consortium served 477 WIA youth and over 1500 non-WIA youth.

The King County Stay-In-School Youth Consortium

Also headed by the Work Training Program, the Stay-In School Consortium provided year-round youth development services to students ages 14-16 who were considered to be at risk for dropping out of school. Consortium members included 11 school districts and over 20 local community agencies. Partnering middle and high schools and local agencies referred youth in early spring to a school-assigned WTP case manager who assisted youth with the application process. Eligible youth were enrolled into a summer "Earn and Learn" program in which they worked, earned school credit and participated in structured leadership and social activities. During the following year participants continued to meet for group and individual activities and to receive case management services. Activities and services were school-based and occurred primarily after school. Youth received incentives that rewarded school attendance, academic performance and positive behavior. In PY 2001, 175 WIA youth participated in the program.

⁴ It was beyond the scope of the study to determine how much case managers also emphasized youth interests and strengths, as well as risks and needs when assessing and designing a service plan. Some program sites overtly embraced a strength-based approach in their case management activities; at other sites the degree to which a strengths-based approach informed case management was less clear.

This program did not routinely use blended funding to serve non-WIA youth, although a small number of non-WIA In-School youth were sometimes supported in the program, according to informants.

The Seattle In-School Youth Employment Consortium

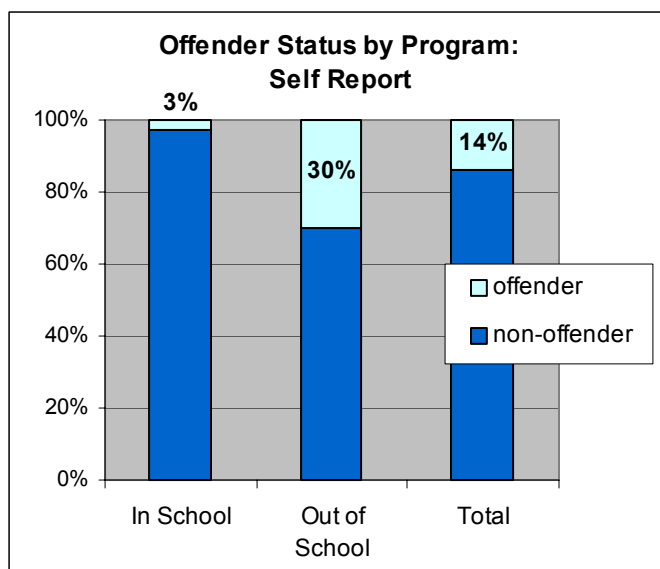
The City consortium also targeted youth 14-16 who lived within the city of Seattle and were at risk for dropping out of school. Acting as the lead agency, the (City of) Seattle Youth Employment Program operated in partnership with three other primary agencies, including the Seattle School District. In addition, a number of other community-based agencies provided workshops and special group projects involving occupational training, leadership development, the arts and other youth development activities. In the summer youth were paid a stipend for work experiences activities. During the school year youth received educational support services (tutoring, homework assistance), case management and other youth development services, such as leadership and school-to-work transition services. In PY 2001, approximately 375 WIA youth participated in the program along with non-WIA youth who received program services from other funding sources. Services provided during the school year were primarily based out of the program's office in downtown Seattle.

2. Youth Offenders in WIA

The study began with some key questions about the characteristics of youth offenders served in WIA. To what degree were youth offenders being served through WIA programs? Did the offender population in WIA consist largely of youth who had been convicted of a single, minor infraction or rather of youth involved in more serious and repeat offenses? Did offender youth look substantially different from non-offender youth in terms of their personal characteristics and barriers? These questions appear deceptively simple, but turn out to be challenging to answer. This section begins with an examination of court vs. self-reported data on the offender status of participants. It then describes additional findings on participants' criminal history derived from court administrative records.

Self-Reported Offender Status of WIA Participants

The WIA application asked youth about their past and current involvement with the criminal justice system. Youth simply indicated whether they had current or past involvement with the police or courts. According to WDC records for the last two completed program years and as shown in the chart below, only 14 percent of all participants admitted on their application to any criminal justice involvement. Reported rates of youth offender participation were noticeably asymmetrical: The two In-School programs showed negligible participation by youth offenders, while the Out-of-School program reported one-third of participants to have some criminal justice involvement.



Source: SKIES PY 2000, 20001 data provided by Seattle-King County WDC.
N=628

Almost all agency informants concurred that this self-reported data on youth offender status significantly undercounted the number of youth offenders actually being served in WIA, particularly for the In-School programs. The juvenile court records of WIA participants obtained for this study and discussed below bear this perception out.

Factors Influencing Self-Report on Offender Status

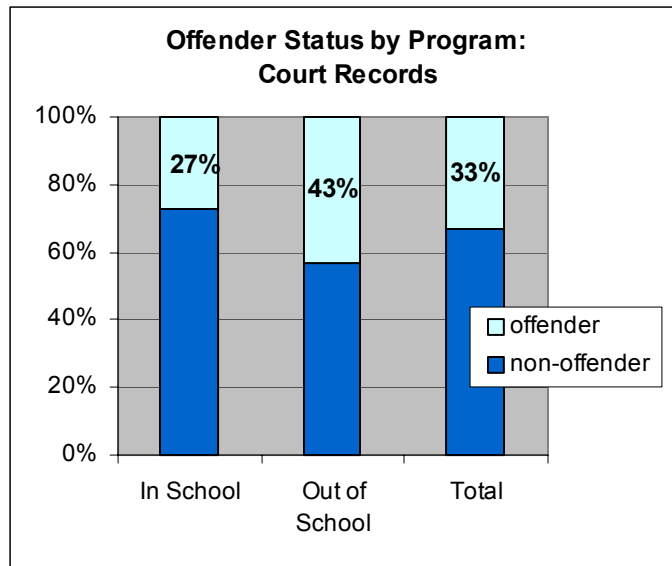
Informants identified several factors that contributed to significant underreporting of court involvement. First, youth mistakenly believed that revealing past or current criminal justice-related problems would disqualify them from receiving services. This belief motivated them to dissemble on the application. While program staff discussed with youth the importance of being truthful about their background when it came to planning for a summer work, a WEX or a regular job placement, it is not clear whether this theme was consistently stressed at the time of application.⁵ In addition, youth were sometimes confused or in denial about their juvenile justice status. For example, if charges were not immediately filed on a case they might (wishfully) believe that their case was not going forward. Finally, the definition of offender provided by the WDC to contractors was not clear-cut: It suggested that the case manager might choose to omit information on a youth's criminal history if the case manager felt it had no bearing on service planning for the youth.⁶ Interviews with case managers and other program staff confirmed that the meaning of this data element was subjectively interpreted in a variety of ways by case managers; some percentage of youth who admitted court involvement to program staff still may not have been captured in the self reported data.

⁵ Note: One provider had set up an eligibility pre-screening system that included asking very specific questions about the nature of the youth's involvement with the juvenile justice system.

⁶ An "offender" is defined in the SKIES data dictionary as "an individual who (1) has been subject to any state of the criminal justice process for whom services under WIA may be beneficial; or (2) requires assistance in overcoming artificial barriers to employment resulting from a record of arrest or conviction.

Juvenile Offender Status: Findings from Court Records

The evaluation matched WIA and King County juvenile court participant records to identify those youth who had court involvement prior to WIA enrollment. The administrative court data used to accomplish this record match had many limitations (as described in footnote 2 above) but offered the best option, given time and resource constraints, for examining participant involvement with the juvenile justice system. As the chart below indicates, information on offender status derived from court records confirmed that the self-report data only captured a portion of offenders enrolled in both In-School and Out-of-School programs. According to court records, a total of 209 youth, or *one-third of WIA participants in the study sample*, had been or currently were court involved. This was more than double the percentage of youth that initially reported involvement with the criminal justice system.⁷ Moreover, this higher figure still undercounted the true number of offender youth by an unknown amount because it did not include youth who were referred to court on a criminal matter or convicted outside of King County or older youth who were charged as an adult.⁸



Source: 2003 WIA Youth Offender Study Database for PY 2000-2001
N= 628, including 209 youth who were court-involved prior to WIA entry.

⁷ Note: The self-reported data is more inclusive in the sense that it asks about any criminal involvement, including arrests and convictions that occurred at any point in time prior to enrollment and in any jurisdiction. In contrast, the court data used here only include youth who have been referred to the King County Juvenile Court for a criminal offense prior to turning 18.

⁸ No reliable estimates of the number of participants with out-of-county court referrals/convictions were available to the evaluation. However, knowledgeable informants suggested that the number was not negligible for two reasons. (a) The participating population as a whole was fairly transient; and several informants noted that noticeable numbers had recently migrated from neighboring states. b) A number of participants resided in communities bordering the south end of the county so that their criminal activity could easily occur in neighboring Pierce County. In addition, a percentage of WIA offenders within King County likely were not captured through the automated matching of records from the two systems. For example, if the youth used a different first name or nickname on the WIA application, the match might not be detected.

Although both In-School and Out-of-School groups appeared to have under-reported their criminal justice involvement, most of the under-reporting occurred on the In-School program side (three percent self-reported as offenders vs. 27 percent actually in the King County Court system).

Interestingly, of the 87 youth who identified themselves (on their application) as having some involvement in the criminal justice system, 36 (or 41 percent) did not show up in court records. A few of this group may have actually been court involved, but were not captured in the automated match of the two systems. Some may have been processed in a court outside of King County; others possibly were only arrested, but never actually became court-involved. These numbers suggest that non-reporting of court involvement was the norm, with perhaps as little as one in four youth offenders admitting to court involvement at the time of program intake.

WIA Youth Offenders: Criminal History

What is the composition of the WIA youth offender population in terms of the relative seriousness of their offenses? Are WIA programs serving youth with lengthy or serious criminal records or first time, low-level offenders? Out of the 209 WIA youth known to have been court-involved, 146 cases had more detailed court records, permitting further examination of their criminal histories. *Unfortunately, the evaluation was unable to obtain this more detailed criminal history data on participants who were 18 or older at the time of program enrollment.* Thus, the more detailed criminal history study sample of 146 youth is not strictly parallel to the larger study sample of youth offenders, which includes all ages. In particular, the criminal history findings for Out-of-School youth were affected in unknown ways since a significant percentage of all youth in this program were 18 years or older and had their histories excluded from the analysis.⁹

The analysis approached the youth's criminal background in several ways, including looking at the types of crimes involved, the number of court referrals and convictions and the overall severity of the criminal record. *Note:* Because individual risk assessment data were not available to the evaluation, the analysis was not able to consider the youth's risk of re-offending. The criminal history data used in the report provide indicators of the seriousness of the crimes committed but not the risk of re-offending.

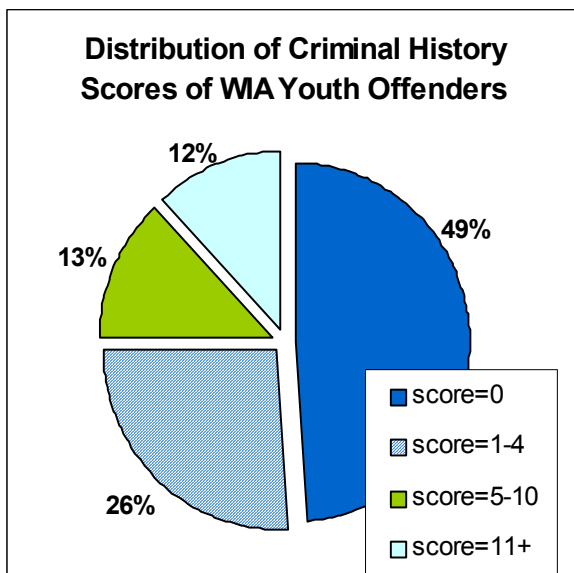
Total Criminal History Score

One way to describe this group of 146 WIA youth offenders is by their *criminal history score*, which is based on a scoring system used by the King County Superior Court, as well as other jurisdictions.¹⁰ The score takes into account a number of factors, including age at first offense, the number of convictions, the type of convictions and whether violence was involved in any of the offenses. The more offenses committed, the younger the offender and the more serious the nature of the offense(s), the higher the cumulative score. In and of itself, the score is not indicative of how high risk the youth is, but it gives a rough idea of whether the youth is a comparatively lower vs. higher level offender (repeat offender, more serious crimes, crimes involving violence or threat of violence).

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all criminal history findings involve the more restricted sample of 146 youth less than 18 years at the time of WIA program entry. Therefore, when making comparisons, the analysis also included only non-offender WIA youth who were under 18 at enrollment.

¹⁰ Criminal scores were calculated by an automated program developed by the King County Superior Court, which is based on ten elements contained in the Washington State Juvenile Court Pre-Screen Risk Assessment, Section I, Criminal History.

The scores for WIA offenders were surprising and revealing. As the chart below indicates half of all offenders under 18 years old had the lowest possible score of “0” out of 31 points. They appeared to be almost exclusively youth whose referral to the court did not result in a conviction, diversion or deferral of prosecution. In other words, these were youth whose cases had not gone forward with a formal charge or the cases had been dismissed by a judge.¹¹ Some who scored a “0” at the time of enrollment may also have had pending cases and were later convicted.



Source: 2003 WIA Youth Offender Study Database for PY 2000-2001
 N= 146; restricted to youth under 18 years who were court-involved prior to WIA entry.

Moreover, the distribution of scores for all remaining cases was still heavily skewed towards the low end, with 75 percent of all scores falling below a “5,” which is still considered a relatively low score. Only 12 percent scored over 10 points, and the mean score for everyone was 3.25. However, Out-of-School youth had significantly higher criminal history scores, averaging close to a score of 5, compared to a score of 2.3 for In-School youth.¹²

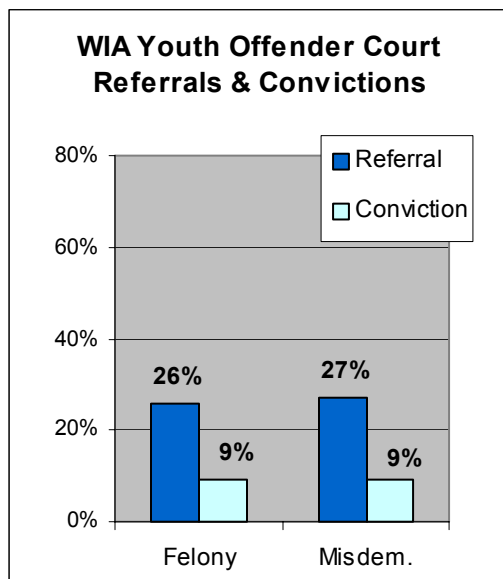
Misdemeanors vs. Felonies (Two Years Prior to Program Entry)

Another way to describe criminal background is by type of offense committed. The analysis included information on both referrals and convictions for WIA youth offenders for the two years prior to their entry into the program. Out of the 146 youth with criminal history data only 70 had court referrals in the two years prior to applying to WIA, and these cases were almost evenly split between felony and misdemeanor referrals. As the chart below indicates, 26 percent of all

¹¹ It is also possible to get a criminal history score of “0” if the offender only has one minor offense and committed that offense at the age of 16 or 17. However, it appears that few if any WIA offenders met those criteria.

¹² Findings of significance use a level of < .05. A set of frequency distribution tables and tests of significance on key characteristics is available as a separate document.

offenders in the sample had a felony referral in the two years prior to program entry, while 27 percent had a misdemeanor referral. Almost 47 percent had no referral (because they had had no court involvement for at least two years prior to entering WIA).



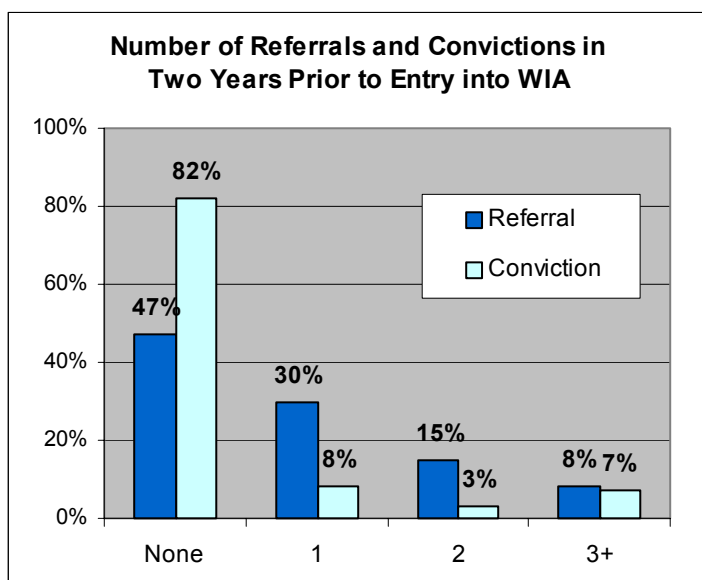
Source: 2003 WIA Youth Offender Study Database for PY 2000-200, N= 146
 Restricted to youth under 18 years of age who were court-involved two years prior to WIA entry.

In other words, almost half of the (under 18 years old) offender population in WIA had not been court-involved for some time prior to entry into WIA. The percentage of those actually convicted of an offense plummeted to only 18 percent of all offenders; these convictions were evenly divided between felonies and misdemeanors. The In-School and Out-of-School offender groups differed in that the Out-of-School youth offenders were more likely to have been referred on a felony offense, but the difference did not rise to the level of statistical significance.

Number of Court Referrals (Two Years Prior to Program Entry)

The analysis also examined how frequently in the two years immediately prior to program entry WIA youth offenders had been referred to court on a criminal charge and, subsequently, how many convictions resulted in that same time period. Of the group of 146 WIA offenders, about 47 percent had no referrals during the two-year time period prior to program entry. Approximately 30 percent received a single court referral on a criminal matter, 15 percent had two referrals and eight percent had three or more referrals in that time period. Those with multiple felony referrals only accounted for six percent of all offenders.

As the chart below indicates, the proportion of offenders (under 18) with any convictions in the last two years prior to entry was relatively small—about 18 percent. Those with multiple convictions made up only 10 percent of the total (under 18) WIA youth offender population and multiple felony convictions only three percent. A higher percent of Out-of-School youth had multiple convictions (17 percent), but the numbers were too small to show significance.



Source: 2003 WIA Youth Offender Study Database for PY 2000-200, N= 146
 Restricted to youth under 18 years of age who were court-involved two years prior to WIA entry.

Days in Detention

Court data also included information on the number of days in detention each youth had spent in the two years prior to program entry. On average court-involved WIA youth had spent five days in detention, but this average masked a lopsided distribution. Over two-thirds (67.8 percent) of the youth had spent no time in detention and 81 percent had spent under three full days. The average was driven up by the 10 percent of youth who had spent two or more weeks in detention, including a small number of youth with very long stays.¹³ Significant differences were apparent between the In-School and Out-of-School youth, with the former group averaging 2.3 days of detention vs. 9.7 days for the latter.

Qualitative Data on Youth Offender Characteristics

It was beyond the scope of this study to obtain and analyze risk and protective factor data on youth offenders served in WIA. However, qualitative interview data provided an additional source of information about the characteristics of youth offenders who applied to WIA-funded programs. In discussing the characteristics of offenders, most informants distinguished between low-risk offenders who had committed minor offenses and higher-risk offenders who

¹³ When one outlier score of 135 days in detention was removed, the average dropped from five to four days.

had committed more numerous and/or more serious crimes. Informants tended to associate this latter group with participants who had been on probation or parole or were currently under court supervision. Therefore descriptions of offenders presented here reflect informants' experiences with a subset of adjudicated youth, rather than all offenders. The description of offenders presented below also generally refers to this subset of moderate to more serious offenders who have had more substantial involvement with the court, as opposed to having been diverted or deferred. As shown in the criminal history data just presented, those with more substantial court involvement clearly constituted a minority of all WIA offenders.

Key informants perceived that youth offenders, particularly felons and repeat offenders, often exhibited personal characteristics that had implications for providing services under WIA. Not surprisingly, the offender profile presented by case managers, probation officers and other system actors closely mirrored descriptions of risk factors presented in the research literature.¹⁴ Frequently mentioned characteristics included those presented below:

Family Issues

Informants largely concurred that a higher proportion of court-involved youth came from families in which the parents could not or did not set boundaries or provide guidance and support for the youth. Families were frequently characterized by informants as “unstable” “chaotic” or “dysfunctional.” In addition, some providers indicated that a significant proportion of the offender or gang-involved youth they dealt with came from immigrant or refugee families who faced numerous cultural and linguistic barriers. These family social and demographic features can pose significant barriers to service in any youth development program, but as described later, are particularly relevant to the WIA enrollment process.

Unstable Living Situations

Court involved youth were more likely to face unstable living conditions. They more frequently were not living with parents, had no permanent address or moved frequently. Because of housing authority regulations, low-income youth living with their families in public housing who were convicted of certain offenses were then barred from rejoining their families. (About 10 percent of offender youth were labeled as homeless on their application. Interview data suggested that the proportion of youth who were in temporary, unstable living circumstances was higher.)

School Issues

Providers portrayed youth offenders as unsuccessful in school or unable to function in a traditional school setting. They also expressed concerns about the high percentage of youth offenders with (frequently undiagnosed) learning problems and the inability of many to pay attention for a sustained period or focus on a learning task. These perceptions were consistent with the very high proportion of offender youth in the study cohort assessed as having a literacy deficiency. These findings have significant implications in terms of meeting WIA educational outcomes.

Drug and Alcohol Problems

A high percentage of youth offenders displayed chemical dependency issues, which interfered with their ability to function in school, work and other social settings. Again, the prevalence of drug and alcohol issues in the youth offender population and the typical pattern of relapse and

¹⁴ A summary of findings from recent relevant research is contained in a separate literature review prepared in conjunction with this report and available through the Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council.

recovery over many months also has implications for participant retention, length of stay in the program and outcomes.

Psychological Issues

Many informants commented on the psychological barriers that they found prevalent in the offender population. Many offender youth manifested low or inconsistent motivation, which case managers felt was often connected to hopelessness about changing their lives and/or a fear of failure. Informants also felt that many higher-risk youth, including more serious youth offenders, had trouble handling conflict and controlling their anger. Interestingly, relatively few informants mentioned other mental health-related issues (such as depression), which studies have found to be prevalent among youth in detention.

Gang Affiliation

In describing the youth offender population, many providers made no distinction between gang-involved and court-involved youth. Most felt that the two populations overlapped so extensively in terms of risk and protective factors that virtually the same set of descriptors could be used for both. Some described attachment to a gang as an additional and special barrier to success in WIA because gang-affiliated or gang-identified youth were reluctant to relinquish counter-productive language, dress and attitude associated with their peer group.

3. Characteristics of Offenders vs. Non-Offenders

Using the initial sample of 209 court-involved WIA youth (all ages) the analysis compared WIA youth offenders with non-offenders on a variety of demographic and social characteristics to see how the two groups differed from each other. Technically, many of these court-involved youth might not be considered “offenders” because they had only been referred to court, not convicted. However, for purposes of comparison, all WIA court-involved youth are referred to as “offenders.”

For the majority of characteristics, no statistical differences between the offenders and non-offenders emerged. The areas in which the two groups appeared roughly comparable are shown in the table that follows.

Characteristics that were Similar for Offender and Non-Offender Groups

Characteristic	% Offender (N=209)	% Non-offender (N=419)
• Disability	16	17
• Literacy Deficiency	73	66
• Homeless	10	6
• Public Assistance	37	37
• Employed	4	7
• Hispanic Ethnicity	8	8
• Non-White	69	65
• African-American	45	42
• Asian	11	16
• Male	54	46

Source: 2003 WIA Youth Offender Study Database for PY 2000-2001, all WIA Youth.

Areas of Similarity between Offender and Non-Offender Groups

- **Disabled:** The proportion of disabled was almost identical for both groups, with 16 percent of the client records within the offender group indicating a disability and 17 percent within the non-offender group. *Note:* Within the In-School program, youth with one or more disabilities constituted 23 percent, compared with only seven percent for the Out-of-School side. If anything, one might expect the Out-of-School side to have a higher percentage of youth with learning or behavioral disabilities. One possible explanation is that the disabilities of Out-of-School youth may not have been as readily or consistently identified during the application process. If this is the case, then the total percentage of youth with disabilities in WIA may be substantially higher than 17 percent. Moreover, if substantial numbers of disabilities in the Out-of-School group went undetected, it is possible that there were some significant differences in disability rates between offender vs. non-offenders that were not captured by the available data.
- **Literacy Deficient:** While a higher proportion of offender youth had a literacy deficiency, the difference was not statistically significant. Approximately 73 percent of the offender group were characterized as having a deficiency, compared with 66 percent of non-offenders. However, as with the disability data, the distribution of this characteristic is hard to explain: The proportion of all Out-of-School youth with a literacy deficiency (59 percent) is much lower than for all In-School youth (74 percent). Since one of the main correlates of dropping out or being expelled from school is low basic skills, one would expect the opposite to be true. Again, a likely explanation is that the information gathered

on Out-of-School youth during the admission process may be less compete and accurate than for In-School youth.

- *Homeless*: The rate of homelessness was somewhat higher for offenders (10 percent) than for non-offenders (six percent). However this difference was not statistically significant.
- *Public Assistance*: Receipt of public assistance was equally prevalent among offender and non-offender youth. About one-third in each group received some form of public assistance, according to data taken from the WIA application.
- *Employment Status*: Only six per cent of all WIA youth were employed at application. While more non-offender than offender youth had a job, the numbers for both groups were very small and the difference not statistically significant.
- *Hispanic Ethnicity*: Comprising about eight percent of the study cohort, Hispanics were equally represented in the offender and non-offender groups.
- *Male*: The offender population was just over half male while the non-offender group was just under half male. The difference approached statistical significance.¹⁵
- *White vs. Non-White, African American*: There were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of the proportion of white, non-white or African American participants.

Differences between Offender and Non-Offender Groups

Only a few characteristics differentiated the offender and non-offender groups, as described in the chart below:

Significant Differences between Offenders And Non-Offenders		
Characteristic	% Offender*	% Non-offender**
• Pregnant/parenting	14	7
• Limited English	8	21
	<i>Mean offender</i>	<i>Mean non-offender</i>
• Age at enrollment	16.9	16.5
• Highest grade completed	9.9	9.6

Source: 2003 WIA Youth Offender Study Database for PY 2000-2001

* N=209 youth with a record of court involvement prior to program entry

**N=419 youth with no record of court involvement prior to entry.

¹⁵ Significance for this comparison was at .06 using a two-tailed test.

- *Pregnant and/or Parenting*: The offender group had nearly twice the proportion of pregnant and/or parenting youth as the non-offender group. Virtually none of the pregnant or parenting youth in either group was in school.
- *Limited English Proficiency*: The two groups differed the most in terms of English language proficiency. Only eight percent of the offender population was characterized as having limited proficiency in English, whereas 21 percent of non-offenders was considered to lack English proficiency. However, these findings are suspect for a couple of reasons. First, the characteristic appeared to be tied directly to school status. The overwhelming majority of both offenders and non-offenders considered to have limited English were enrolled with the In-School program. As with disability and literacy barriers, it is possible that language barriers for Out-of-School youth may not be as readily identified during the application process. Schools may have actively sought to identify students with limited English and provided information on the language status of the youth to program staff.¹⁶
- *Mean Age at Enrollment*: The average age for youth offenders in WIA was nearly 17 vs. 16.5 for non-offenders. Virtually all of this age difference stemmed from the Out-of-School program side; the mean age for In-School offenders and non-offenders alike was 15.4 years.
- *Mean Grade Level Completed*: On average offenders entered WIA having completed about a third of a year more than non-offenders (9.9 vs. 9.6 grades completed). While there is a significant difference between the two groups, it is not clear what the statistic is actually measuring. At the high school level it is possible to “complete” a grade level without actually earning credits towards graduation. Therefore, grade level may more accurately reflect the last grade in school the youth attended, as opposed to true educational attainment.¹⁷
- *Race*: (Not displayed in above table) When the distribution of participants across all racial categories was considered, the offender and non-offender populations were statistically different, primarily because of differences in the incidence of Native Americans (four percent of offenders vs. two percent of non-offenders), Pacific Islanders (five percent of offenders vs. two percent of non-offenders) and Asians (11 percent of offenders vs. 16 percent of non-offenders).

The above analysis suggests that there were relatively few significant differences between those WIA participants who had been court involved and those who had not. A number of informants theorized that the so-called “non-offender” group actually contained a high percentage of delinquent youth who simply had not yet been “caught.” Or, as suggested earlier, a number may have committed crimes in a neighboring jurisdiction and thus did not show up in the King County Court system. Another possible explanation is that the offender group contained a large percentage of first time, low-level offenders whose risk profile may not have been substantially different from that of non-offenders.

¹⁶ In addition, data presented here are problematic since most limited English proficiency youth should also be included in the count of “literacy deficient” youth.¹⁶ However, in the study cohort, a substantial percentage of limited English youth were not counted as having a literacy issue.

¹⁷ A more accurate measure of attainment would be high school credits earned, but this information was not captured in the WIA data collection system.

Modified Analysis

The evaluation originally called for analyzing a sub-group of moderate to more serious offenders to see how their profile compared with low level and non-offenders. However, because the overwhelming majority of offenders identified in the King County Juvenile Court system were, in fact, low level, this breakdown was not feasible. Instead, the approach used was to eliminate only the very lowest level of offenders, those who received a total score of “0” on their criminal history assessment.¹⁸ Typically, these offenders had had a single referral to the court but had not been convicted of a criminal offense. Once this group of offenders was eliminated, a total of 74 cases remained. This more narrowly defined group of offenders was then compared with the non-offenders to see if greater differences emerged. The table below summarizes comparisons of offenders and non-offenders from both the first and second analyses.

Comparison of Characteristics of Offenders vs. Non-Offenders		
<i>Offenders & Non-Offenders Did Not Differ in These Areas (Either Definition of Offender)*</i>	<i>Offenders & Non-Offenders Differed in These Areas When All Offenders Considered*</i>	<i>Offenders & Non-Offenders Differed in These Areas When Offenders Scoring a “1” or Higher Considered**</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender • Ethnicity • White and Non-White participants • Disability • Public Assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pregnant/Parenting • Limited English • Age at Enrollment • Highest Grade Completed • Race 	<hr style="width: 100px; margin-left: 0;"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited English • Age at Enrollment • Highest Grade Completed • Race • Literacy Deficiency • Employed/Unemployed • Homeless

Source: 2003 WIA Youth Offender Study Database for PY 2000-2001

*Using unrestricted study sample composed of 419 non-offenders and 209 offenders

** Using restricted study sample of youth under 18 at time of enrollment, which included 322 non-offenders and 74 offenders with a criminal history score greater than “0.”

As is highlighted above, some new differences between the offender and non-offender groups emerged with the second analysis. *Literacy deficiency* was a prominent characteristic of the second, more restricted offender group, with fully 81 percent of offenders assessed as deficient, compared with 68 percent of non-offenders. *Employment* status also varied significantly for offenders vs. non-offenders with none of the offender group being employed at enrollment (vs. two percent of non-offenders). Finally, the rate of homelessness also was significantly higher among the offender group, with nine percent of this group homeless at program entry, vs. three percent for the non-offender group.

¹⁸ The evaluation also considered only including those who were known to have a conviction within the last two years. However, as described earlier, that subgroup only included 26 youth—too small a number to use in the analysis.

In the original (unrestricted) analysis, the proportion of pregnant or parenting youth offenders was much higher than non-offenders. However, with the second, more restricted definition of “offender,” the difference between the offender and non-offender groups diminished and was no longer statistically significant.

4. WIA Program Retention and Termination

Another key question is whether youth offenders demonstrated substantially different retention and outcome patterns compared to non-youth offenders in WIA. Again, using court data, the study examined length of stay and immediate program outcomes for the two groups. As before, the offender group included youth younger than 18 at enrollment who scored higher than “0” on the Juvenile Court Pre-Screen Risk Assessment.

Retention Data

Many key informants believed that youth offenders tended to drop out (or terminate for other not purely voluntary reasons) earlier than non-offenders. If offenders as a group were at higher risk for problem behaviors, it would make sense that their willingness/ability to stay in a program might suffer. However, the data did not support this view. In fact, as the table below illustrates, the average length of stay for WIA youth offenders was 20 days longer than for non-offenders. The difference between offenders and non-offenders, though, was not statistically significant.

When the narrower definition of “offender” was used (youth who scored at least a “1” on their criminal history), the same pattern persisted. Although the gap between the two groups increased to 29 days longer for youth offenders, the difference still was not significant.

Length of Stay in WIA: Comparison of Offenders and Non-Offenders

	<i>Number of days in WIA</i>
All WIA youth offenders (n=206)	274
All WIA youth non-offenders (n=419)	254
WIA youth offenders under 18 years with a conviction (n=74)	269
WIA non-offenders under 18 years (n=322)	240

Source: 2003 WIA Youth Offender Study Database for PY 2000-2001

Interpreting length of stay is complicated by the fact that the distinction between a truly active vs. non-active participant tended to become blurred, particularly in the In-School program settings. During the school year relatively few youth were dropped from the roster of active participants. Even a youth who had minimal interest in services or activities and minimal contact with a case manager might still be maintained as an active participant. Thus, length of stay measures were likely inflated, perhaps especially for non-offenders because they tended to be concentrated in the In-School programs.

Outcome Data

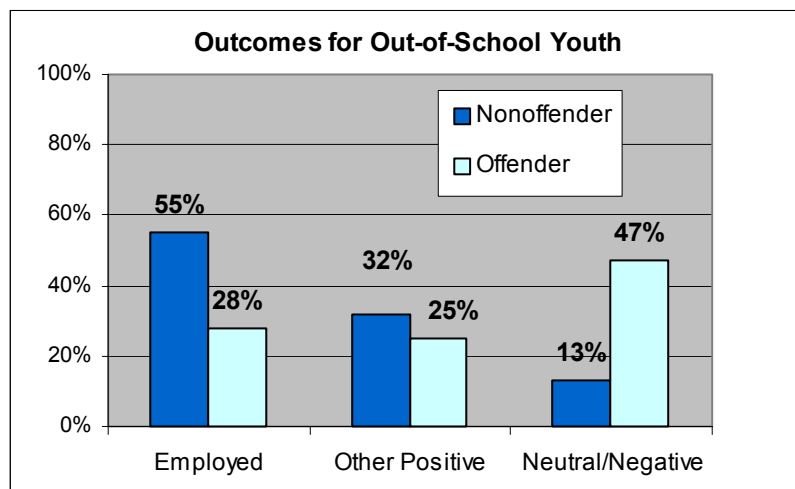
The study analyzed selected WIA program outcomes for offender and non-offender youth to see if any differences emerged. Because the outcome goals of the In-School and Out-of-School programs differed, these sub populations were first analyzed separately.

In-School Program Outcomes

For In-School youth the analysis showed no significant difference between offender and non-offender populations. On the key outcome of school status at exit close to half of offenders and non-offenders alike remained in school. Most of the rest in each program were exited as having achieved an employability enhancement.

Out-of-School Program Outcomes

For Out-of-School youth, however, significant differences between the offender and non-offender groups emerged, as the chart below indicates. Offenders were far less likely to achieve subsidized employment or other positive outcomes¹⁹ at exit. They were more likely to exit with a neutral or negative outcome, which was often related to having to leave the program early for family or personal reasons.²⁰



Source: 2003 WIA Youth Offender Study Database for PY 2000-2001
N=79 Out-of-School youth with a recorded exit code in SKIES.

¹⁹ Other positive outcomes included: entered advanced training; achieved an employability enhancement; attending secondary or postsecondary school.

²⁰ Neutral/ Negative exit categories that were combined included: exited to care for family member(s); institutionalized (prison, hospital); cannot be located; and other miscellaneous reasons.

However the numbers in these groups were small and therefore the results have to be viewed with caution. Moreover, discussions with WDC staff suggest that SKIES exit code-data from which this information was derived may be inaccurate due to data-entry inconsistencies across WIA youth programs.

5. Barriers to Enrolling and Serving Offenders in WIA

Key informant interviews revealed a number of potential barriers to the successful enrollment and participation of youth offenders in WIA programs. Some of these barriers were inherent in WIA program requirements and structures. Others flowed from policies and practices of actors within the broader workforce training and juvenile justice systems. This section summarizes major themes regarding challenges to youth offender participation in WIA, beginning with internal programmatic barriers.²¹

WIA Programmatic Barriers

Documentation Requirements

The most commonly cited barrier to enrolling youth offenders in WIA-funded programs was the documentation the youth were required to present as part of the eligibility process. Virtually all case managers, program managers and probation staff felt that the WIA documentation requirements (birth certificate, social security card, income verification documents) were generally burdensome, requiring a substantial effort on the part of the youth and the family to complete. In addition, they saw these requirements as disproportionately excluding youth offenders and other harder-to-serve youth.

Many youth offenders were in conflict with or estranged from their parents. Parents themselves led chaotic lives, faced additional family issues and were often unable to assist the youth in following through on the application process. Some offender youth were out of touch with the birth parents and did not even know their place of birth. Tracking down and paying for the birth certificate became yet another hurdle that the youth were ill equipped to handle on their own. In addition, some WIA-funded youth development programs targeted delinquent and gang involved youth from immigrant and refugee communities. Case managers in these programs reported additional language and cultural barriers to completing required documentation.

As a result, offender youth who might have otherwise been eligible for and could have benefited from WIA-funded services, were unable to obtain the parental cooperation and support needed to complete the application process. One informant's remarks typified the sentiments of many key informants:

"It seems like the tougher the kid, the harder it is to document them (to get them into WIA.)"

Several informants noted that especially for youth coming directly out of detention or JRA, completing the requisite WIA paperwork posed a substantial barrier to program entry. As a group, these youth generally lacked the perseverance, the self-confidence and the peer or family support necessary to weather the attendant frustrations and delays.

²¹ As was mentioned in Section 2, informants tended to describe client characteristics that they associated with moderate to more serious offenders. Similarly, discussions about program barriers reflected this orientation.

Income Criteria

Many informants also questioned the extremely low income cut-off under WIA. Income criteria eliminated many high need youth, including youth offenders with multiple barriers, whose families were poor, but not poor enough to qualify under program guidelines.

Pre-Enrollment Policies and Practices

It was beyond the scope of the study to examine the specific intake, orientation and screening practices of multiple WIA providers and their effects on enrollment of offenders. Based on limited informant data, some of the following factors may have differentially impacted youth offenders:

- *Limited enrollment period for In-School Programs:* The In-School programs generally started a yearlong cycle at the end of a school year (or sometimes in the fall) in order to hook the youth into the program through an intense summer work and education program. Program slots were typically not available during the remainder of the year. Eligible youth whose need for WIA services emerged during the school year had no access to services through WIA unless they dropped out of school. Probation staff reported confusion and frustration over not being able to place probationers who were still in school into WIA.
- *Intake procedures:* Intake procedures varied considerably among programs and providers. Some providers streamlined the application and enrollment process and emphasized rapid case processing. Others put greater emphasis on lengthier intake procedures that may have worked as a disincentive to certain harder-to-serve groups, including youth offenders.
- *Motivational screening:* Performance-driven systems generally induce programs to employ various mechanisms to screen potential enrollees for motivation and commitment to the program. WIA case managers reported using pre-enrollment assignments and individual appointments to test an applicant's ability to follow-through. These screening devices were seen as a rational response to the pressures of meeting mandated outcomes. However, they also may have unintentionally functioned as a discouragement to higher risk youth.

WIA Performance Outcome Measures

Over half of the informants believed that the current WIA system of performance outcomes²² inevitably led to program screening strategies that discouraged the enrollment of more high need youth, including offenders. Perceptions of different stakeholder groups on this topic, however, varied. While most managers expressed concerns about meeting performance outcomes, they also underscored how successful their programs had been to date in meeting and exceeding WDC expectations. They portrayed outcome requirements as a concern, but not an overriding one, as far as impacting enrollment of youth offenders. Targeting and outreach

²² The seven federal and four state-mandated performance measures²² were designed to measure how successful WIA-funded programs were in terms of:

- 1) Retaining younger participants in school and developing their skills
- 2) Obtaining secondary or post secondary school credentials
- 3) Obtaining and keeping employment
- 4) Increasing earnings
- 5) Maintaining customer satisfaction

A full description and definition of WIA Youth Program outcomes is available on the web site of the Washington State Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board.

practices, they believed, helped to maintain a focus on serving hard-to-serve youth, including offenders.²³

Interestingly, case managers on the front lines, more so than managers, tended to highlight WIA outcomes as a barrier to enrollment of higher risk youth offenders. As a group, case managers appeared to worry more about meeting performance goals and described how this concern led them at times to channel certain WIA eligible offenders into the non-WIA side of their programs, when possible. Particularly youth on probation or parole and those with more extensive contact with the juvenile justice system were often seen as “inappropriate” for WIA-funded services. The following quote typified the attitude of the majority of front line staff working with youth offenders:

The higher risk youth offender we (as providers) can't even touch (through WIA funding). They have to jump through too many hoops (to enroll), they are too unstable, have too many barriers and won't be able to meet WIA outcomes.

Both case managers and probation staff emphasized that these more seriously delinquent youth commonly faced multiple barriers that made success, as defined by WIA performance measures, much less likely. (Refer to the offender characteristics described earlier in Part 2.) For example, many offender youth had to deal with chemical dependency and/or mental health-related problems that significantly interfered with their ability to perform in an educational setting.²⁴

WIA Requirements and Youth Development Model

A related theme to emerge from interviews was the mismatch between WIA program requirements and effective youth development programs. A number of interviewees perceived WIA 's uniform set of outcome measures to be inconsistent with a true youth development program model. A central feature of the model, they argued, was the recognition that youth enter a program at all different points on a developmental continuum and that program interventions should be geared to serving each youth from where they were situated on that continuum. The WIA emphasis on achieving certain pre-determined outcomes did not take into account the developmental progress and incremental change of youth who faced multiple barriers, such as offenders, youth with learning disabilities and English as a second language youth.

Moreover, providers serving a high proportion of youth offenders and more serious youth offenders reported that it was quite common for participants to drift in and out of services, or avoid services altogether for a period of time. Motivational issues, fear of failure, drug and alcohol problems, gang involvement and family dysfunction, housing instability and other barriers all might contribute to a youth's inconsistent participation. However, dropping out of the program did not necessarily mean these youth had completely rejected services. Informants reported that a percentage inevitably returned, and many were able to progress to a more focused and sustained participation. Again, the WIA program model of continuous service

²³ For example, for its in-school program, King County WTP largely relied on partnering schools to identify and refer problem youth. Schools had a strong motivation to pick the youth that were giving them the most difficulties and little motivation to “cream.” Similarly, staff from the City's in-school program described screening practices that gave priority to youth with multiple barriers.

²⁴ WIA programs were held accountable for school-related outcomes, but success in education was often dependent on first achieving success in treatment. The ability of WIA program staff to influence treatment program options and outcomes appeared to be limited.

through a set progression of activities and timeframe was not well suited to serving this kind of higher risk youth.²⁵

Non-WIA Placement Strategy

As a result of these concerns, case management staff often sought to enroll harder-to-serve youth, including youth offenders, in non-WIA funding slots when such slots were available. This strategy took the pressure off meeting (what they believed to be) unrealistic program requirements and outcome goals while still serving higher risk youth. Blended funding permitted WIA and non-WIA youth to be served side-by-side in a single program without distinction. However, this strategy had its limitations. Some service providers had virtually no funds outside of WIA and therefore had to screen out the youth who were seen as not “WIA ready,” due to the multiplicity or severity of their needs.²⁶ At the same time, it appeared that for at least some programs WIA funding slots were more continuously available than non-WIA slots. Programs were under pressure to fill these open slots even as potential eligibles swelled the ranks of the non-WIA side of programs or went unserved.

Insufficient Program Resources

A related theme that repeatedly surfaced across many stakeholders was the inadequacy of both WIA and non-WIA resources to meet youth development needs in the county. Some programs reported turning away many WIA eligible youth due to insufficient staff resources. It appeared that some programs stretched WIA dollars by allowing enormous caseloads, which virtually assured that the program could not offer much depth or intensity of case managed services to most participants.

Lack of Criminal History Data

As reported earlier, the self reported offender status provided at application substantially undercounted the true number of offenders in WIA programs. In many instances even after enrollment, the case manager had no way to verify the offender status of the applicant.²⁷ Unless the referral came from probation or other sources knowledgeable about the youth’s criminal history, the case manager might suspect, but wouldn’t know for certain whether the youth was currently or previously court-involved. A significant number of referrals to WIA-funded program services were self-referrals and therefore no external agency information accompanied the referral.

The WIA application, which asks about offender status, was often filled out early in the intake process before the youth had had much contact or opportunity to form a trusting relationship with the case manager. Both In-School and Out-of-School program staff reported that it was quite common for the case manager to learn about the participant’s true status one or more

²⁵ However, retention patterns discussed earlier may reflect a willingness to tolerate a certain amount of drifting in and out of a program.

²⁶ A couple of informants acknowledged the possibility that case managers might sometimes initially place a higher-risk youth in a non-WIA program to see how he/she fared. If after a trial period of time the youth performed adequately, then he/she might be transferred to a WIA slot. Blended funding available to some providers made this a seamless transition as far as the youth was concerned. It was unclear how widespread this practice of testing higher risk youth was.

²⁷ At one time, staff from one program had had electronic access to participants’ criminal records through an agreement with the juvenile court. However, according to interview data, none of the programs currently had access to this information tool. One WIA-funded program site indicated that they currently obtained the criminal background history on all participants, including those funded under WIA. However, it appeared that the program staff received this information in batches and not necessarily at the beginning of the enrollment process.

months after enrollment.²⁸ Frequently this information was revealed because the youth was suddenly facing a warrant or other difficulty and sought the assistance of a case manager in resolving the matter. Also, information about past offenses tended to emerge just as youth were being placed at a work site or being interviewed for a job. Case managers would caution them at this juncture about the importance of revealing and dealing with past offenses that were of concern to the potential employer.

Many staff believed that having reliable information on offender status up front at the time of enrollment would be an important support to case managers for at least two reasons. First, the case manager would find out about and be able to assist the youth with pending court matters. Several informants commented on how disruptive court matters could be to ongoing programming with the participant, especially if the youth had missed court dates, ignored a warrant or failed to satisfy other court requirements. If the case manager knew a youth was court-involved, he/she could help the youth stay on track with the court and avoid missteps that might jeopardize the youth's ability to stay in the program. Case managers also wanted better criminal history so that they could plan more effectively with participants around their job placement.

Follow-Up Strategies

The evaluation had insufficient information to assess the depth and consistency of follow-up activities. However, it appeared that at least in some program settings follow-up was treated in a fairly pro forma manner, with scant time and resources invested into follow-up activities. The research literature suggests that youth offenders (and other harder-to-serve populations) oriented towards employment and postsecondary training may typically require more intensive, content rich follow-up services in order to help the youth transition into and remain successful in a career path.

System Factors Influencing Enrollment and Successful Participation

Court Restitution Policies

Adjudicated youth frequently had substantial restitution obligations and other fines or fees owing to the court. Probation staff reported that if they did not pay off the restitution and fines by the time they left the system at age 18, they could be levied an additional fine. In addition unpaid debt was sent to a collection agency, creating additional financial difficulties long after the youth was out of the juvenile justice system. Youth could feel overwhelmed by these financial responsibilities and pressured to work full-time, according to probation informants. This employment orientation would put them at odds with the WIA program model, which emphasized skills building for long-term success in the labor market over immediate employment.

Probation's Limited Knowledge of WIA

A number of informants, including probation staff, concurred that system-wide, many probation staff had limited knowledge of the WIA program structure and content. For example, informants reported that a portion of probation officers were not aware that a WIA year-round youth

²⁸ *Note:* One provider had set up an eligibility pre-screening system that included asking very specific questions about the nature of the youth's involvement with the juvenile justice system and encouraging candid responses. Provider staff felt that they obtained reasonably accurate information on the criminal background of youth through this individual screening system. However, it appeared that this information was used primarily for administrative purposes and not routinely passed on to the case manager ultimately assigned to a youth.

development model had completely supplanted the old JTPA summer youth employment program. Some therefore had misplaced expectations that WIA programs were focused on finding youth a job. In addition, as a result of not knowing the complexities of the WIA program structure, probation officers sometimes referred youth who were not eligible for WIA due to family income or other factors. Probation's lack of knowledge about the specific program services and requirements of In-School vs. Out-of School programs caused referral difficulties, according to informants. For example, probation officers might try to get an In-School youth into WIA only to discover that the In-School program rarely had open slots after the application and enrollment window in spring had passed. These experiences frustrated and discouraged some probation officers from making referrals, according to informants.

Probation Referral Practices

Probation officers employed a variety of approaches to making a referral to WIA. Some contacted provider staff before referring to see about the availability of services. Others sent the youth directly to a WIA provider and then followed up with that provider to see if the youth had applied. Still others apparently referred a youth to a WIA provider but did not follow up on the referral. Blind referrals without knowledge of the availability of slots ran the risk of disappointing and discouraging youth. When probation officers were more actively involved in a referral and followed-up with WIA staff, case managers had an opportunity to learn more about the referred youth early on—a real benefit to planning and working with the youth. Providers' estimates of the percent of referrals coming from probation ranged from a low of 10 percent to a high of 50 percent. In general, In-School Program providers concurred that probation staff made relatively few referrals to their programs.

Case Coordination with Probation

There appeared to be little consistent case coordination between WIA and probation staff in many provider sites. As mentioned earlier, part of the lack of coordination was due to the fact that case managers and probation staff were not necessarily aware that they shared a youth on their caseloads. Especially on the In-School Program side there appeared to be few formal or informal communication and coordination structures linking the two organizational entities. Most program staff reported limited contact with probation officers. Turnover or reassignment of probation staff in some offices may also have limited coordination efforts.

Employer Practices

Informants reported that many employers were reluctant to hire ex-offenders and that older youth had fewer career ladder opportunities open to them. Especially as the economy worsened and unemployment surged, program staff worried that employers would not be as willing to take youth who had been involved with the juvenile justice system. However, a few program staff reported that although offenders might face some additional hurdles in the job market, they worked with youth to mitigate these circumstances.

Policy Barriers

Informants also reported that youth offenders encountered legal policy barriers that sometimes hampered full and successful participation of certain types of youth offenders within WIA. These included:

- Federal financial aid policies that placed restrictions on federal postsecondary financial aid, preventing youth convicted of certain drug crimes from accessing this major source of support for further education and training.

- Public housing policies that prevented youth convicted of certain crimes from returning to live with their families in public housing.
- State of Washington policies on license revocation for minors convicted of certain drug and alcohol-related crimes, which restricted full participation of offenders, particularly those who lived in areas with limited access to public transportation.

6. Supports to Enrollment and Participation of Offenders

The previous section outlined a number of structural barriers to enrolling and successfully serving youth offenders through WIA. Discussions with informants also suggested a number of potential supports to youth offenders, which are summarized below.

Policy Emphasis on Service to the Hard-to-Serve

The lead agencies of the two consortia serving WIA youth in King County had policy frameworks in place that were conducive to serving harder-to-serve youth, including youth offenders.

Evolving Coordination Mechanisms between Youth Development Programs and Probation

Key informant data suggests that actors in the youth development system were increasingly aware of the need to improve communication and coordination between probation and other WIA youth-serving agencies. They also had begun to establish stronger ties at the management level. As this study was being completed, County managers from both sides were planning for increased cross training of staffs. Probation had just begun to explore the possibility of co-locating an office at a “one-stop” WorkSource center where the largest Out-of-School Program site and other service providers already resided.

Blended Funding

The blended funding model available to many of the providers allowed case managers greater flexibility in their enrollment practices. High needs/high risk youth, including more serious offenders could be considered for a WIA-funded slot. However, the case manager had the option to place the youth in a non-WIA slot, if he/she believed that the youth could not meet WIA performance outcomes within a reasonable timeframe. Although the blended funding approach perhaps is not entirely in keeping with the spirit of using WIA to serve youth with the most barriers, it offers a pragmatic solution to the issues raised earlier concerning the difficulties in serving offenders and other high needs groups under the program.

Case Management Model

In keeping with recommended best practices, all programs used a case management model to ensure more comprehensive, wrap-around services to youth.

Employment Strategies for the Hard-to-Serve

Providers developed employment strategies that directly or indirectly supported offender youth. For example, case managers actively coached offender youth about how to present their past history honestly and directly with an employer. Some programs reported cultivating and maintaining strong ties with local employers. When they had a longstanding relationship with a program, employers were generally more willing to place a youth offender in a summer work

experience or unsubsidized employment. These programs tended to see a felony conviction as less of a barrier for their court-involved youth.

Changes to In-School Model

As this study was being completed, the WDC instituted changes to the In-School program's enrollment policy. As of the current program year, the two In-School programs must reserve at least one-third of program slots for enrollments during the year. Note: While this change will potentially provide youth offenders and others some additional access to the In-School program, other factors, such as agency outreach and coordination, referral, intake and screening may have a greater influence on youth offender participation rates.

Access to AOD, Mental Health and Family Counseling Services

Many of the programs structured in access to affordable physical and mental health services that are so important to the youth offender population, where the incidence of AOD, mental health and family problems can be significantly higher.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The WIA youth system serves many more youth offenders than is represented by the numbers of youth who self report involvement with the juvenile justice system. Although exact percentages remain unknown, probably close to one-half of all WIA youth have been court involved at some point prior to program entry. Youth offenders were concentrated in the Out-of-School programs, but the reasons for this may go beyond the fact that youth offenders are older and more likely to be truants and dropouts. Outreach, referral, enrollment, and service delivery components may all contribute to greater or lesser enrollment of offenders.

The vast majority of these youth appear to be low-level offenders who have either been diverted, deferred, had the charges dropped or dismissed or have not yet been adjudicated. Almost half of those with a criminal history in King County Juvenile Court have had no court involvement for at least two years prior to entering WIA-funded programs. Youth with multiple convictions or serious felonies make up a very small portion of the total offender population in WIA. However, youth offenders in the Out-of-School program side tend to have more extensive and/or more serious criminal histories than their In-School counterparts.

WIA Youth offenders in general do not look that different from non-offenders. They tend to be older, have completed more months of school and are racially more diverse. As a group they have experienced more homelessness and tend to have more problems with literacy. However, their program experiences may not be that distinctive from non-offenders. They actually stay in the program longer, on average, than non-offenders. Only Out-of-School youth offenders have poorer outcomes than non-offenders, with almost half exiting the program with a neutral or negative outcome.

Recommendations

Coordination with Probation

- Improve the probation department's understanding of WIA programs and their benefits and limitations. Explore ways to strengthen referrals from probation. Ensure that probation staff

have up-to-date information on which programs are receiving new participants and how a referral should be made. Explore the feasibility of cross training for WIA and probation staff in order to promote mutual understanding and systems collaboration.

- If WIA programs have not already done so, consider designating a person or persons to act as a liaison with probation staff. Having a single point of contact for probation staff may support better information exchange, encourage relationship building and help identify future coordination needs.
- Currently, the level of coordinated case planning between WIA and probation staff appears very uneven. Develop coordination mechanisms that support increased involvement of probation staff in WIA case planning for individual youth.

In-School Program Enrollment

The In-School Program structure, with its emphasis on summer enrollment may inadvertently discourage enrollment of youth offenders in need of services during the school year. As this study was being completed, the WDC instituted changes to the In-School program's enrollment policy. In the new program year, the two In-School programs must reserve at least one-third of program slots for enrollments during the school year. At this point, it is not clear what effect this policy change may have on youth offender enrollment. Below are some suggestions for exploring this issue further.

- Bring representatives from different stakeholder groups, including the WDC and probation to discuss the current and planned enrollment policies to identify more clearly how the changes will likely impact programming and enrollment.
- Ensure that In-School Program staff and administrators are aware of the numbers of offenders enrolled at their own program sites so that agencies who do not enroll many offenders will have greater awareness of this potential service issue.
- Consider ways to strengthen referrals through probation and other channels that are likely to identify and encourage delinquent youth to participate in In-School programs during the school year.
- Heavy reliance on youth self-referral for some In-School programs may have contributed to much lower enrollment of offenders in those programs. If a program has not already done so, clarify with referring school personnel and other referral sources the program's interest in reaching out to offender youth and ask for assistance in identifying and referring these youth.

Other Program Structures

- Encourage providers to review and discuss among each other different approaches to referral, intake and enrollment and how these approaches impact service to youth offenders. In particular, programs with low enrollment of offender youth (primarily In-School programs) may wish to examine their outreach, referral and intake systems in terms of how these systems touch offender youth. Programs that stretch out the already inherently difficult WIA enrollment process and/or employ motivational screening mechanisms may need to revise their approach if they are serious about enrolling more offenders.

- Although research has underscored the importance of providing follow-up services to harder to serve youth, many programs do not appear to have put sufficient resources into this component. (They may not have the resources to do so.) Programs may wish to examine follow-up procedures and, if possible, bolster the transition services provided to harder-to-serve youth, including youth offenders.

Data Collection and Analysis

- Case managers can be more proactive in working with offender youth if they know up-front about the youth's current and past involvement with the juvenile justice system. Continue to explore the possibility of obtaining a youth's records from the juvenile court. In the meantime, explore ways to increase youth's voluntary disclosure of their status on the front end of the program. Some case managers felt they were very successful in eliciting this information, whereas others were less so. Consider surveying case managers and youth themselves about the factors that tend to encourage or inhibit self-disclosure.
- Information currently collected on the juvenile justice status of WIA youth applicants is problematic, in part, due to the ambiguous wording on the SKIES application, which cannot be altered at the local program level. If access to court records is not feasible in the near-term, consider tracking more specific information on the youth's criminal history status on a supplemental form. Key questions from a case management perspective include whether the youth is recently or currently court-involved and what the nature of the involvement is.
- The King County Juvenile Court is the main source of criminal history data on juveniles being served by the Seattle-King County WDC. The Court also has an interest in learning more about the effectiveness of youth development programs in reducing the risk of future involvement with the juvenile justice system. Explore ways in which the WDC and the Juvenile Court might collaborate in supporting future research on youth offenders.