

From Courtrooms to Community Programs: Assessing Juvenile Diversion Effectiveness in Cuyahoga County

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Abstract: This study employed a data-driven analysis to examine juvenile diversion programs designed to redirect adolescents from formal court adjudication toward rehabilitation-oriented interventions. Such programs offer a potential mechanism for reducing recidivism and improving long-term outcomes among at-risk youth. The research specifically evaluated the effectiveness of Cuyahoga County's Phoenix Court–Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) diversion initiative by comparing participant outcomes to those of similarly situated adolescents processed through conventional juvenile justice pathways, including probation and secure detention. The Phoenix Court–BHJJ program serves probationary youth presenting with mental health or substance use disorders who are identified as being at elevated risk for reoffending. Rather than utilizing custodial sanctions, the program facilitates engagement with community-based treatment and support networks. Participants are required to attend regular court hearings, engage in weekly therapeutic sessions, and maintain ongoing communication with a court-appointed coordinator. Progress is systematically monitored through a structured framework of incentives and sanctions, with the overarching objective of fostering behavioral stability, addressing individualized needs, and mitigating future justice system involvement. Methodologically, the study applied a case study approach to assess program completion rates, recidivism rates, and additional performance metrics indicative of program efficacy. A comparative analysis was conducted between BHJJ participants and a matched nonparticipant cohort to evaluate differential outcomes. The results of this investigation aim to contribute to the empirical literature on diversion-based interventions, provide evidence-based insights into their rehabilitative impact, and inform policy discourse surrounding the integration of alternative, treatment-focused strategies within juvenile justice reform.

Keywords: Juvenile Diversion, Youth Rehabilitation, Recidivism Reduction, Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice, Phoenix Court Program, Community-Based Interventions, Alternative Sentencing, Juvenile Justice Reform, Mental Health And Substance Use Treatment, Case Study Analysis, Program Evaluation, Cuyahoga County Juvenile Justice, Evidence-based Interventions, Court-To-Community Transition, Probation Alternatives

Introduction

The juvenile justice system faces persistent challenges in reconciling the goals of accountability, rehabilitation, and the promotion of long-term public safety. Although traditional court-based processes are intended to deter delinquent behavior, they frequently expose youth to settings that may inadvertently reinforce criminal tendencies while neglecting underlying behavioral health needs. In response, juvenile diversion programs

have emerged as a viable alternative, redirecting eligible youth away from formal adjudication and toward community-based interventions that emphasize rehabilitation, treatment, and individualized support. These programs seek to address root causes—such as mental health disorders and substance use—while reducing recidivism and fostering positive developmental trajectories. Cuyahoga County’s Phoenix Court–Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) program represents a model of this diversionary approach. Designed for probationary youth with significant behavioral health challenges, the program substitutes confinement with a coordinated framework of therapeutic engagement, structured court oversight, and targeted support services. By embedding treatment-oriented strategies within judicial processes, the Phoenix Court–BHJJ program aims to disrupt patterns of reoffending and facilitate lasting behavioral change.

This study evaluates the impact of the Phoenix Court–BHJJ program by comparing participant outcomes with those of youth processed through conventional juvenile justice measures. Utilizing a combined case study and comparative analysis design, the research examines completion rates, recidivism trends, and additional indicators of program efficacy. The findings are intended to contribute to the empirical foundation for diversion-based juvenile justice reform and to inform policy deliberations regarding the integration of evidence-based alternatives into existing judicial frameworks.

Literature Review

Evidence from Prior Research

Juvenile diversion programs represent a foundational element of contemporary juvenile justice reform, designed to steer youth away from formal court adjudication and toward rehabilitative, community-based interventions. These programs operate on the premise that addressing behavioral, social, and environmental risk factors early in the justice process can mitigate long-term system involvement and foster more positive developmental trajectories. National-level research has extensively evaluated the efficacy of such programs, with a substantial body of evidence indicating their capacity to reduce recidivism while simultaneously targeting underlying criminogenic and behavioral health needs (Mears et al., 2016).

Mears and colleagues (2016) conducted a comprehensive analysis of diverse diversion models implemented across the United States, revealing both the substantial benefits—such as reduced system costs, improved youth outcomes, and lower rates of reoffending—and the potential unintended consequences, including disparities in access and inconsistent program quality. Complementing this work, Sheppard (2008) focused on diversion programs for non-serious and status offenders, emphasizing the pivotal role of early intervention in preventing escalation into more severe forms of delinquency. Together, these studies underscore the critical importance of tailoring diversion strategies to the unique needs and circumstances of participating youth, ensuring that interventions not only avert formal adjudication but also address the root causes of offending behavior.

Evidence-Based Treatments in Ohio’s Juvenile Justice System

At the state level, Ohio has implemented a range of diversion strategies aimed at minimizing juvenile justice system involvement. Sheppard (2008) examined the integration of evidence-based interventions, including Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) and Wraparound programs, within Ohio’s juvenile justice framework. Complementing this, Butcher et al. (2020) evaluated the Mental Health Juvenile Justice Initiative in Cuyahoga County, highlighting localized efforts to address the complex relationship between mental health needs and juvenile justice outcomes. Ohio’s legislative and judicial policies, as

codified in the Ohio Revised Code, support various diversion options such as community service, behavioral therapies, and restorative justice programs, emphasizing rehabilitation over punitive measures (Sheppard, 2008). Recent reforms have prioritized decreasing incarceration rates for low-risk youth while expanding access to empirically supported services (Park, Sullivan, & Holmes, 2024). These state-level initiatives align with broader national trends advocating for the reduction of formal court processing in favor of alternative, more effective interventions.

Comparative Analysis of Diversion Versus Traditional Adjudication Outcomes

Evaluating the effectiveness of juvenile diversion programs necessitates a comprehensive analysis of recidivism rates and long-term outcomes. Mears et al. (2016) explored various methodologies for assessing program effectiveness, highlighting that while many studies report reductions in recidivism, outcomes are influenced by differences in program design and participant characteristics. Research by Park, Sullivan, and Holmes (2024) on juvenile justice reforms in Ohio found that youth placed in diversionary programs exhibited significantly lower recidivism rates compared to those undergoing traditional adjudication processes. Furthermore, Butcher et al. (2020) demonstrated that behavioral health-centered interventions in Cuyahoga County substantially enhanced youth outcomes by simultaneously addressing mental health, substance use, and involvement with the justice system.

Sheppard (2008) emphasized the importance of integrating multiple service systems to enhance the effectiveness of juvenile diversion programs, finding that approaches incorporating mental health treatment, family involvement, and community-based support yielded improved outcomes. Complementing this perspective, Stewart (2008) examined the benefits of early diversion for non-serious offenders, noting a reduction in subsequent justice system involvement. Despite considerable research on the general efficacy of juvenile diversion programs, gaps persist in understanding their specific impacts within individual jurisdictions, such as Cuyahoga County. Although Butcher et al. (2020) provided a comprehensive evaluation of the Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) Initiative, comparative analyses of various diversion strategies within Cuyahoga County remain limited. Additionally, while Stewart's work addressed broader diversion outcomes, there is a critical need for updated research that reflects evolving policy frameworks and demographic shifts.

Understanding Long-Term Educational and Employment Outcomes for Diverted Youth

Research on the long-term socioeconomic impacts of juvenile diversion programs within Cuyahoga County remains limited, particularly with respect to critical outcomes such as educational attainment, employment stability, and overall life course development. While broader studies like those conducted by Park, Sullivan, and Holmes (2024) provide valuable insight into statewide recidivism patterns, their failure to disaggregate data at the county level limits the ability to discern localized variations in program efficacy. This lack of granularity poses challenges in understanding how specific community factors—such as economic conditions, availability of social services, and demographic characteristics—interact with diversion program implementation and outcomes. Addressing these research gaps is imperative to develop a comprehensive, context-sensitive understanding of how juvenile diversion initiatives operate within Cuyahoga County. Such knowledge would enable policymakers and practitioners to tailor interventions more effectively, allocate resources efficiently, and implement evidence-based reforms that not only reduce recidivism but also promote positive socioeconomic trajectories for at-risk youth. Ultimately, advancing county-specific research could play a pivotal role in shaping juvenile

justice policies that foster rehabilitation, community reintegration, and long-term well-being for youth populations in Cuyahoga County.

Empirical Questions

This study builds upon existing research concerning the effectiveness of juvenile diversion programs in reducing recidivism rates within adolescent populations. Specifically, it seeks to evaluate the impact of the Phoenix Court–Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) program on recidivism outcomes in Cuyahoga County. Additionally, the study aims to compare these outcomes with those of youth processed through traditional juvenile justice pathways, thereby providing a comparative analysis of diversion versus conventional adjudication approaches. Based on the identified literature gaps, this study addresses these empirical questions:

- 1) What are the recidivism rates among adolescents in Cuyahoga County who participate in the Phoenix Court–Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) diversion program compared to those processed through standard juvenile court procedures?
- 2) How do program completion rates for BHJJ participants compare with those of juveniles subjected to traditional court interventions such as probation or detention?
- 3) To what extent do BHJJ participants exhibit improved behavioral health outcomes relative to their non-diverted counterparts?
- 4) What differences exist in school enrollment rates between BHJJ participants and youth processed through conventional juvenile justice pathways?
- 5) What proportion of BHJJ participants experience subsequent detention compared to juveniles who did not receive diversion services?

Data Analysis

Design

The effectiveness of Cuyahoga County’s Phoenix Court–Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) diversion program was examined using a quasi-experimental, collaborative 2×6 factorial design. The independent variable was intervention group status, categorized into two levels: (1) BHJJ participants and (2) a matched comparison group of participants. The study assessed program outcomes across five dependent variables: program completion rate, behavioral health improvements, school enrollment, rearrest rate, and reentry to detention. This design enabled a comprehensive evaluation of the program’s impact by comparing behavioral and legal outcomes between participants and non-participants. Given the non-random assignment of participants, the study employed a quasi-experimental methodology to approximate causal inferences regarding the program’s effectiveness.

Participants/Demographic

Participants in the BHJJ program consist of juvenile offenders diverted to Cuyahoga County’s Phoenix Court–Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice initiative, a specialized program designed to address the behavioral health needs of youth involved in the justice system. This cohort includes both male and female juveniles between the ages of 12 and 18 who have been adjudicated for misdemeanor or felony offenses and reside within Cuyahoga County. These youth typically present with co-occurring mental health or substance use challenges, which the program specifically targets through integrated therapeutic and court-supervised interventions. The comparison group comprises juvenile offenders with similar demographic characteristics—including age, gender, and residence—and comparable

criminal histories who were processed through traditional juvenile justice pathways, such as probation or secure detention, but did not participate in the BHJJ program. This group serves as a baseline for evaluating the relative effectiveness of the diversion program by providing insight into outcomes for youth receiving conventional juvenile justice services without specialized behavioral health support. By comparing these two groups, the study aims to discern the impact of the BHJJ program on factors such as recidivism, program completion, behavioral health improvements, and social outcomes like school enrollment and community reintegration.

Methodology

Data Collection/Procedures

Data for this study were collected from existing records and publicly accessible sources, including prior evaluations conducted by Butcher et al. (2020) and Kretschmar et al. (2016), as well as administrative datasets obtained from the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court and the Ohio Department of Youth Services. These datasets encompassed demographic, behavioral, and justice-related information pertinent to both the BHJJ participant group and the comparison cohort. To organize the data, a matrix was developed with the independent variable (group status) positioned along the x-axis and the dependent variables arrayed on the y-axis. Outcome measures such as recidivism rates and program success indicators were extracted and formatted accordingly. The collected data were analyzed and converted into statistical results, then presented in graphical form. All dependent variables were assessed for independence using Chi-square tests. The selection of this statistical test was based on the measurement scale and underlying assumptions of each variable, employing methodologies acquired through prior academic training. Given that the research utilized only pre-existing and publicly available data, no informed consent procedures or survey instruments were necessary.

Results

The analysis systematically compared multiple outcome measures between juveniles who participated in the Phoenix Court–Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) program and a matched comparison group of youth processed through conventional juvenile justice pathways, including probation and detention. Prior to outcome comparisons, demographic equivalency between the two groups was rigorously assessed to ensure the validity of subsequent findings. Statistical tests confirmed that key demographic variables—such as age distribution, gender composition, and offense types (including misdemeanors and felonies)—did not significantly differ between the BHJJ cohort and the comparison group. This demographic parity established a solid foundation for the quasi-experimental design, reducing the likelihood that observed differences in outcomes could be attributed to baseline disparities. By controlling for these potentially confounding variables, the analysis could more confidently attribute variations in recidivism, behavioral health improvements, program completion rates, and other critical indicators to the intervention effects of the BHJJ program rather than to underlying demographic or criminal history differences. This methodological rigor strengthens the reliability of conclusions drawn about the program’s relative effectiveness compared to traditional juvenile justice processing.

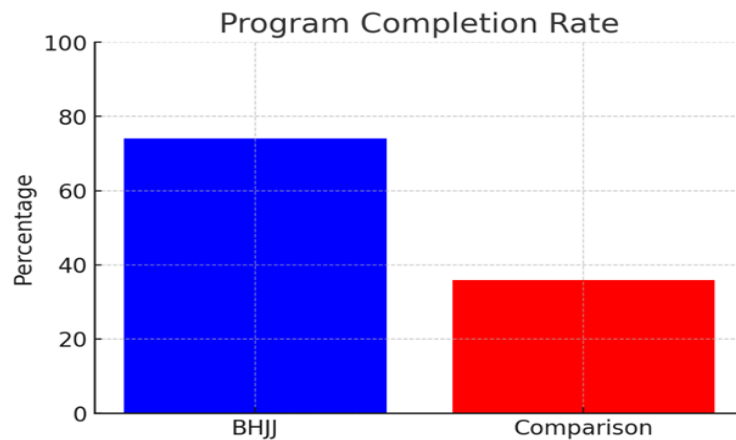


Figure 1. Rate of Program Completion (N=200)

Note: Figure 1 illustrates that participants in the BHJJ program demonstrated a significantly higher program completion rate compared to those in the comparison group, as indicated by the Chi-square test results ($\chi^2 = 27.66, p < 0.001$).

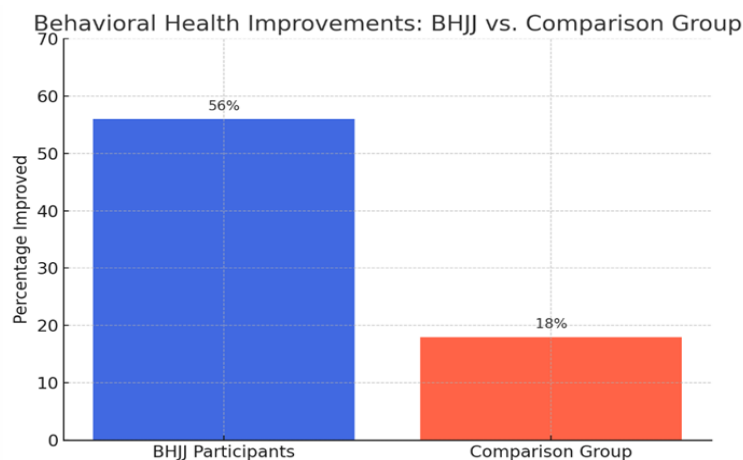


Figure 2. Behavioral Health Improvements (N=200)

Note: Figure 2 demonstrates that the BHJJ diversion program effectively addresses mental and behavioral health needs, with a statistically significant difference observed between groups ($\chi^2(1) = 30.6, p < 0.001$).

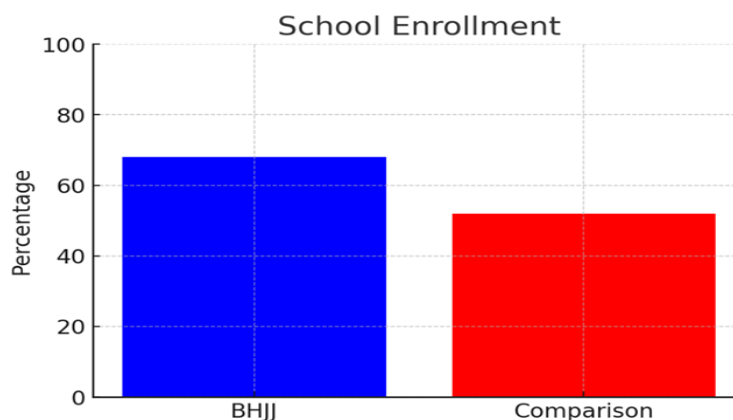


Figure 3. School Enrollments (N=200)

Note: Figure 3 illustrates that BHJJ participants exhibited a higher likelihood of maintaining school enrollment, as indicated by a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 4.69, p = 0.030$).

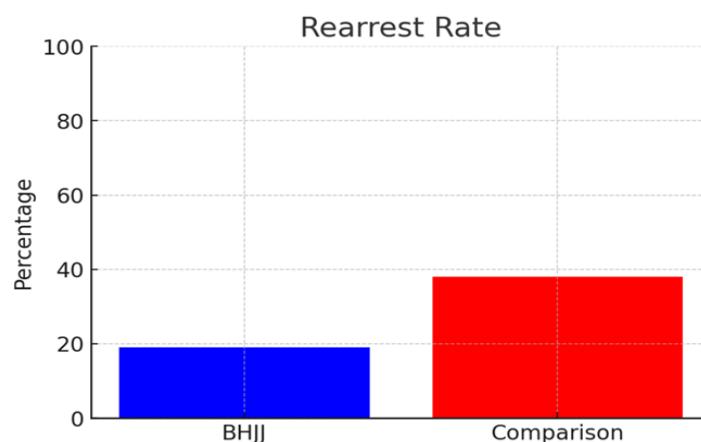


Figure 4. Rearrest Rate (N=200)

Note: Figure 4 illustrates a significant difference in the risk of rearrest between groups, with BHJJ participants demonstrating reduced risk ($\chi^2 = 7.95$, $p = 0.0048$).

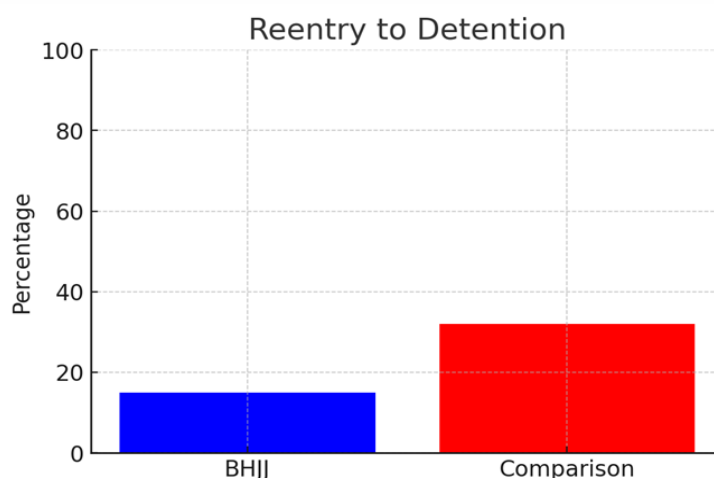


Figure 5. Reentry to Detention (N=200)

Note: Figure 5 illustrates a significant difference in the rate of return to custody between BHJJ participants and non-participants, $\chi^2(1) = 7.12$, $p = 0.0076$.

Discussion

This study's findings indicate that Cuyahoga County's Phoenix Court–Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) diversion program is significantly more effective than traditional juvenile justice processes in improving outcomes for youth. Consistent with prior research, this study contributes to the growing evidence base supporting diversion programs that incorporate behavioral health treatment as a means to achieve improved short-term legal, educational, and mental health results (Mears et al., 2016; Butcher et al., 2020). The BHJJ program demonstrated a notably higher completion rate (74%) compared to youth processed through standard juvenile justice pathways (36%), reflecting greater participant engagement and commitment. This aligns with Sheppard's (2008) conclusion that evidence-based, individualized treatments enhance program adherence and success, highlighting the value of therapeutic rather than punitive approaches in maintaining youth connection to supportive systems.

Behavioral health improvements were observed in 56% of BHJJ participants, compared to only 18% in the comparison group, underscoring the critical role of integrating mental health services into diversion frameworks—a finding that corroborates the work of

Butcher et al. (2020). Additionally, school enrollment rates post-intervention were higher among BHJJ participants (68%) than their non-diverted counterparts (52%), supporting Stewart's (2008) assertion that early intervention and diversion reduce justice system involvement while fostering positive developmental trajectories, including educational stability. Notably, recidivism outcomes favored the BHJJ group, with rearrest rates approximately half those of the comparison cohort (19% vs. 38%) and a substantially lower rate of reentry into detention (15% vs. 32%). These results align with statewide findings by Park, Sullivan, and Holmes (2024), confirming that diversion programs contribute to reduced system re-involvement and that the Phoenix Court–BHJJ model meaningfully advances these outcomes at the local level.

This study adds to the expanding literature on juvenile diversion by providing a focused, empirical evaluation of a specific program within Cuyahoga County—a jurisdiction previously underrepresented in research. It addresses calls by Butcher et al. (2020) and Stewart (2008) for more localized investigations that consider jurisdictional variability, evolving policies, and demographic changes. Furthermore, it responds to critiques by Park, Sullivan, and Holmes (2024) regarding the limitations of aggregated state data by offering a detailed county-specific analysis. Collectively, these findings reinforce the importance of behavioral health-integrated diversion programs in enhancing both youth outcomes and juvenile justice system efficacy.

Limitations

Despite these encouraging findings, this study is constrained by several important limitations. The exclusive reliance on archival and publicly available datasets restricted the scope of measured variables, leaving critical factors unexamined—such as long-term employment success, housing stability, social integration, and sustained behavioral change—that are essential to fully understanding the holistic impact of diversion programs on youth development. Moreover, the quasi-experimental nature of the study, with non-random participant assignment, limits the ability to make definitive causal claims regarding program effects, as potential confounding factors may influence observed outcomes. Recognizing these limitations, future research should endeavor to incorporate longitudinal study designs that follow participants into adulthood, thereby capturing longer-term social and economic outcomes. Furthermore, integrating qualitative methodologies—such as interviews or focus groups with program participants, families, and service providers—would enrich quantitative findings by providing deeper insight into the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges of youth engaged in BHJJ. Such mixed-method approaches could illuminate the mechanisms driving program success, identify areas for improvement, and support the continued refinement and scaling of diversion programs that are tailored to meet the multifaceted needs of justice-involved youth.

Conclusion/Future Scope

This study provides robust and compelling evidence supporting the efficacy of Cuyahoga County's Phoenix Court–Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) program as a highly effective and viable alternative to traditional juvenile court processing. By integrating comprehensive mental health treatment, proactive educational engagement, and sustained individualized support, the program has demonstrated a significant capacity to reduce recidivism rates among youth participants while fostering healthier, more stable developmental trajectories. These outcomes reflect not only improvements in the lives of individual adolescents but also contribute meaningfully to enhanced public safety and broader community well-being. The multifaceted approach of the BHJJ program—addressing behavioral health, educational needs, and ongoing social supports—embodies a

holistic, rehabilitative philosophy that effectively responds to the complex challenges faced by at-risk youth. This positions the Phoenix Court–BHJJ model as an evidence-based framework that juvenile justice policymakers and practitioners should seriously consider when seeking innovative and effective reform strategies aimed at transforming juvenile justice systems.

Looking forward, future research efforts should extend beyond short-term outcomes to comprehensively evaluate the long-term impacts of the BHJJ program. Areas of particular importance include sustained educational attainment, long-term employment stability, housing security, and social integration as participants transition into adulthood. Understanding these longitudinal outcomes is crucial for assessing the program’s full contribution to youth development and societal reintegration. Additionally, incorporating qualitative research methodologies—such as in-depth interviews and focus groups with participants, their families, and program staff—would provide richer insights into the lived experiences of youth within the program, illuminate the specific mechanisms through which the program achieves success, and identify potential areas for improvement or tailoring of services. Moreover, comprehensive cost-benefit analyses are essential to determine the economic feasibility and potential fiscal savings associated with diversion programs like BHJJ. Demonstrating cost-effectiveness would provide policymakers with important justification for the allocation of resources toward such initiatives, potentially catalyzing broader adoption and sustainability. Finally, replicating and adapting the BHJJ model in diverse jurisdictions with varying demographic and socio-economic characteristics would be invaluable for assessing its external validity and generalizability. Such efforts would also help identify best practices for customizing program components to meet the unique needs of different communities and juvenile justice systems.

By pursuing these research directions, scholars and practitioners can strengthen the empirical foundation supporting juvenile diversion initiatives, ensuring that these programs evolve to maximize positive outcomes for vulnerable youth populations. Ultimately, this will contribute to the ongoing optimization and reform of juvenile justice systems nationwide, fostering more equitable, effective, and supportive pathways for at-risk adolescents.

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