Addressing the Culture and Climate of Juvenile Corrections to Reduce Youth Recidivism: A Conceptual Review of a Collaborative Approach Between the Juvenile Justice System and Academia in Alabama

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Abstract

The U.S. juvenile justice system prioritizes rehabilitation over punishment, yet youth recidivism remains alarmingly high, with rates exceeding 50% across states. Addressing this persistent challenge requires innovative strategies, including enhancing the culture and climate within juvenile justice facilities. A positive culture and climate not only improves staff performance and service delivery but also creates an environment conducive to better behavioral outcomes for youth. Facility culture, defined by shared values and norms, and climate, shaped by staff perceptions of their work environment, are crucial to organizational effectiveness and youth rehabilitation. This paper explores how partnerships between academia and juvenile justice agencies can strengthen facility culture and climate, ultimately fostering improved outcomes for both youth and staff. By integrating research expertise and practical insights, collaborations between academia and juvenile justice agencies promote evidence-based and equitable practices. This study spotlights the Alabama Department of Youth Services' partnership with the University of Alabama and the Administrative Office of Courts, showcasing how data-driven approaches and inclusive policymaking lead to meaningful organizational changes. Importantly, this work underscores the value of amplifying the voices of youth, families, and direct care staff to ensure equitable representation in policy design. Through fostering trust, respect, and engagement, such collaborations can reduce recidivism, enhance staff well-being, and create more effective rehabilitative environments. This conceptual exploration contributes to the growing discourse on facility culture, climate, and systemic reform, offering actionable insights to inform juvenile justice practices.

Introduction

The U.S. juvenile justice system is built on the principle that rehabilitation, rather than punishment, should be its central focus, stemming from the belief that children's developmental immaturity makes them less accountable for their actions than adults (April et al., 2023; Steinberg, 2009). However, the juvenile justice system continues to face challenges in achieving its goals, as youth recidivism, a complex indicator of behavior, remains a significant issue nationwide. Although comprehensive national data on juvenile recidivism is unavailable due to a lack of standardized metrics (Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators, 2009), Robertson et al. (2020) reported a two-year recidivism rate of 51.2% in Virginia, and a technical report by Lee et al. (2021) found that over 55% of youth released from Alabama's juvenile justice system in 2014 and 2015 reoffended within three years. These elevated recidivism rates reveal the substantial barriers adolescents face both within the justice system and in the community when attempting successful reentry (Lee & Kim, 2022; Lee et al., in press; Steinberg et al., 2004). This cycle of reoffending reinforces negative consequences, including continued involvement with the juvenile justice system and restricted opportunities for positive development.

To effectively address youth behavioral issues, researchers emphasize the need for collaboration between academia and the juvenile justice systems by leveraging each sector's strengths (Leukefeld et al., 2017). The juvenile justice system offers practical insights, policy guidelines, and access to target populations, while academia contributes research expertise, innovative solutions, and program evaluation skills (Leukefeld et al., 2017). Together, these entities can design and implement strategies that are both empirically sound and sensitive to the unique processes, jargon, and

culture of the juvenile justice system (Leukefeld et al., 2017). This partnership can yield impactful and sustainable outcomes for at-risk youth, especially those affected by high-risk behaviors.

Research suggests that the scope of this collaboration should expand to include measures aimed at enhancing the culture and climate within juvenile justice facilities, as these factors are essential in shaping youth behavior and outcomes (Glisson et al., 2013; Ouellette et al., 2020; Visher & Eason, 2021). A positive culture within the system can promote a sense of safety, respect, and fairness, which are essential for fostering trust and engagement among youth (La Vigne, 2024). Similarly, a supportive climate encourages staff to adopt rehabilitative rather than punitive approaches, creating an environment where youth feel valued and motivated to change (Glisson & James, 2002; Johnson-Kwochka et al., 2020).

Collaboration between the juvenile justice system and academia is vital for addressing the challenges faced by at-risk youth and staff. Evidence shows that these partnerships foster positive facility climates, creating supportive environments for rehabilitation and personal growth. By integrating research into practice, they promote safer, more respectful settings that reduce recidivism and enhance staff well-being (Johnson-Kwochka et al., 2020; Leukefeld et al., 2017). Ultimately, improving facility culture and climate can drive better outcomes in the juvenile justice system, including reduced recidivism, addressing a critical issue in the field (Glisson & Green, 2006). To advance this discussion, this paper explores existing literature and practical insights from ongoing collaborations between the state juvenile justice system and academia. By conceptually examining these partnerships, particularly within the context of Alabama's juvenile justice system, we seek to explore how intentional efforts to strengthen facility culture and climate can lead to better outcomes for youth. In doing so, this paper contributes to the growing understanding of the ways in which interdisciplinary collaboration can promote systemic change and support the long-term success of at-risk youth, reducing the likelihood of recidivism and enhancing the overall effectiveness of juvenile justice practices. To set the stage, we first delve into the foundational concepts of culture and climate within youth service settings, including juvenile justice facilities, examining their distinct characteristics and their roles in shaping organizational and youth outcomes.

Literature Review

2.1. Understanding Facility Culture and Climate

While some studies suggest that at-risk youth demonstrate a desire or motivation to change (Brewster et al., 2019), others highlight the significant barriers that justice-involved youth face in sustaining this motivation, particularly in restrictive or punitive settings (De Nike et al., 2019). For many, family and other prosocial relationships serve as protective factors that support engagement in positive behavior change (Visher & Eason, 2021). However, the environments within many juvenile justice facilities can hinder youth from developing and sustaining the motivation necessary for long-term behavioral change (Visher & Eason, 2021). This underscores the critical need to reexamine facility culture and climate, also referred to as "organizational social contexts" (Glisson et al., 2013, p. 493), which are both shaped by these environments and, in turn, influence them.

The distinction between culture and climate in juvenile justice facilities is essential to understanding their impact on youth outcomes within the juvenile justice system. To provide clarity on these concepts, we must explore their definitions and characteristics as they are conceptually examined in the literature. In the juvenile justice system, culture and climate broadly refer to the shared beliefs, values, and behaviors that define the environment and influence how youth are treated (Johnson-Kwochka et al., 2020). However, studies like Glisson and James (2002) and Johnson-Kwochka et al. (2020) emphasize the distinct characteristics of climate and culture, underscoring the importance of not using these terms interchangeably.

2.1.1. How Is Culture Defined and Measured?

Culture refers to the shared norms, values, and behavioral expectations within an organizational unit (Glisson & James, 2002). While culture is often considered an intangible construct, with underlying values and assumptions that are not directly observable, its visible aspects play a critical role in an organization's functioning. These visible elements, such as shared behaviors and explicit norms, are essential for shaping the daily experiences of employees and influencing organizational effectiveness. Research suggests that culture is primarily expressed and transmitted through shared behavioral expectations and normative beliefs, underscoring the importance of these visible components in fostering a cohesive organizational environment (Glisson & James,

2002). A widely recognized tool for measuring cultural climate is the Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI), which identifies multiple dimensions, including humanistic-helpful, affiliative, approval, conventional, dependent, avoidance, oppositional, power, competitive, competence/perfectionist, achievement, and self-actualization (Ingersoll et al., 2000; Scott et al., 2003). Research indicates that the OCI typically achieves Cronbach's alpha values exceeding .80 across most of its individual cultural scales, demonstrating a strong level of internal consistency (Shim, 2010).

2.1.2. How Is Climate Defined and Measured?

In contrast to culture, climate has a dual definition, encompassing both psychological and organizational dimensions (Glisson & James, 2002). First, psychological climate refers to an individual employee's perception of how the work environment affects their personal well-being (Glisson & James, 2002). The psychological effects of the workplace on staff are evaluated through various aspects, such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and role conflict (Glisson & James, 2002), as well as more positive experiences like role clarity, professional efficacy, and a sense of purpose (Foà et al., 2020). A supportive climate can foster resilience, job satisfaction, and engagement, while a negative climate may contribute to burnout and disengagement (Foà et al., 2020). Underpinning these aspects is a broader, overarching construct referred to as the "general psychological climate factor or PC_g" (Glisson & James, 2002, p. 769). The PC_g factor reflects an individual's perception of how the work environment affects them, either positively or negatively, as a whole (Glisson & James, 2002).

Second, organizational climate is defined by the shared perceptions of employees within a work unit regarding the impact of their work environment (Glisson & Green, 2006; Glisson & James, 2002). According to Schneider et al. (2013), it also encompasses the collective meaning employees assign to workplace events, policies, practices, and procedures as well as the behaviors that are encouraged, recognized, and expected. The literature consistently emphasizes that organizational climate is shaped by employees' shared understanding of their environment, including how it influences their experiences and the meaning they attribute to various workplace factors. These definitions highlight the critical role of collective perceptions in forming an organization's climate (Glisson & Green, 2006; Glisson & James, 2002; Schneider et al., 2013). Organizational climate factors affecting staff are evaluated across multiple dimensions, including leadership behavior (e.g., transformational leadership, employee empowerment), communication patterns (e.g., openness, transparency, information sharing), work environment (e.g., physical conditions, work-life balance), employee relations (e.g., trust, respect, team cohesion), performance management (e.g., recognition and rewards), and organizational values (e.g., client focus, ethics, and integrity), among others (Furnham & Goodstein, 1997; Lehman et al., 2002). The Organizational Climate Survey (OCL) is commonly used to assess climate, particularly in mental health and social service organizations. This tool has been shown in prior research to be highly relevant, with demonstrated links to key outcomes such as staff turnover, work attitudes, service quality, and client outcomes (Glisson & James, 2002). Notably, the OCL captures elements of both psychological and organizational climates, providing a comprehensive measure of employees' perceptions and the broader organizational environment (Glisson & Green, 2006). The reliability of an OCL is generally regarded as good, depending on the context. Glisson and Green (2006) reported a reliability coefficient of .95, reflecting exceptionally high internal consistency in the measures. Additionally, a systematic review conducted by Powell et al. (2021) offers comprehensive insights into the various scales of climate utilized in contemporary research literature.

2.1.3. Functional Interactions Between Culture and Climate

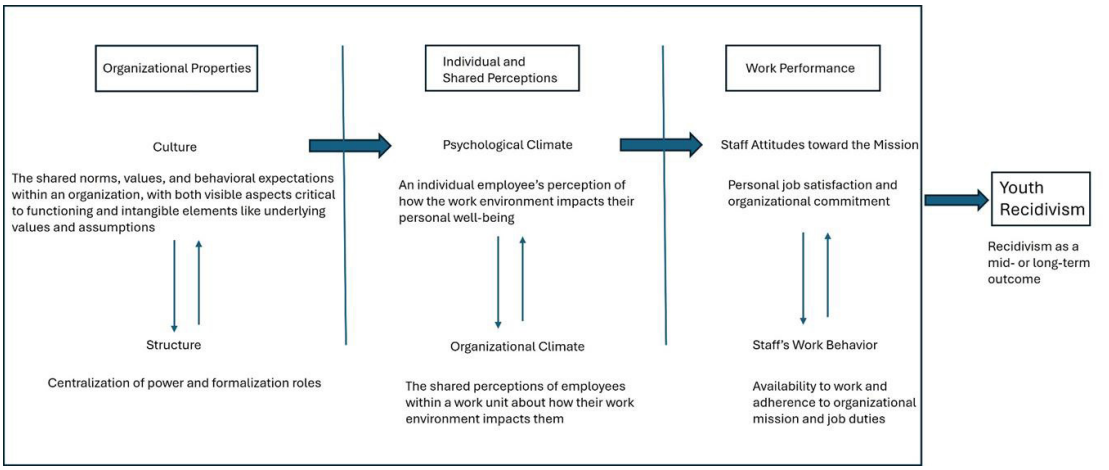
Figure 1, adapted from Glisson (2002) and Johnson-Kwochka et al. (2020), presents a composition model illustrating the functional interactions between key concepts. This model emphasizes the interconnectedness of climate and culture, which are qualitatively distinct phenomena operating at both the individual and work-unit levels. By highlighting their relationships, the model illustrates the dynamic interplay of these elements within the organizational framework, offering a nuanced understanding of how they influence and shape organizational processes and outcomes. As shown in Figure 1, the relationship between climate and culture is intricate, and the interpretation of whether one is nested within the other varies based on the theoretical framework or

perspective (Glisson, 2002; Johnson-Kwochka et al., 2020). In the commonly accepted view, where climate is nested within culture, climate is regarded as a subset or expression of culture, reflecting how culture is experienced and perceived in daily organizational life. Conversely, an alternative perspective suggests that culture is nested within climate, with the broader organizational climate shaping and reinforcing cultural norms and values over time. In this view, culture emerges from and is sustained by the prevailing climate of the organization (Glisson, 2002; Johnson-Kwochka et al., 2020; Schein, 2010; Schneider et al., 2013). However, empirical investigation is needed to clarify the hierarchical relationship between climate and culture.

managers' ability to lead initiatives, such as the implementation of evidence-based practices (Glisson, 2002; Johnson-Kwochka et al., 2020). To evaluate these aspects, tools like the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) are widely used. The JDI measures job satisfaction through five subscales comprising 72 items (Stanton et al., 2002), and demonstrates sufficient internal consistency reliability (Kinicki et al., 2002). Similarly, organizational commitment is frequently measured using the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ), a well-established 15-item scale with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .82 to .93 (Mowday et al., 1979).

Organizational culture and climate significantly shape these dimensions of work performance.

Figure 1. A Composition Model Illustrating the Functional Interactions Among Culture, Climate, and Work Performance, with Youth Recidivism as a Mid- or Long-Term Outcome



Note. The model is adapted from Glisson (2002) and Johnson-Kwochka et al. (2020).

2.2. The Impact of Facility Culture and Climate on Staff Work Performance and Its Relation to Youth Behavior and Rehabilitation

In Figure 1, employees' work performance is depicted as a key outcome influenced by both culture and climate. Work performance is conceptually defined as the overall anticipated value an individual contributes to the organization through distinct behavioral actions performed within a given time frame (Chernyshenko & Stark, 2005; Motowidlo & Kell, 2012). Work performance encompasses various elements, including employees' behaviors, such as participating in training sessions and successfully completing tasks, as well as attitudes toward their mission or work (Chernyshenko & Stark, 2005; Glisson, 2002). These attitudes include perceptions of

Culture creates the foundation for how employees approach their roles and interact within the facility (Glisson & James, 2002). A positive culture, particularly in juvenile justice facilities, fosters collaboration and prioritizes trauma-informed care and evidence-based practices, empowering staff to perform effectively and support youth rehabilitation (Branson et al., 2017; Sheppard et al., 2022). Conversely, a negative culture can perpetuate stress, resistance to change, and disengagement, undermining staff performance (Sheppard et al., 2022), and likely affecting youth outcomes. Similarly, climate, reflecting staff perceptions of the work environment, directly influences their job satisfaction and performance (Glisson, 2002). A supportive climate encourages staff to participate in training, adopt new practices,

and develop stronger relationships with youth, facilitating successful rehabilitation efforts (Ouellette et al., 2020).

Beyond measuring work performance, addressing the challenges of maintaining a positive culture and climate in juvenile justice facilities, such as staff burnout and high turnover rates, is essential (Sheppard et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges is critical for improving both staff well-being and the outcomes for youth. Research shows that staff members who experience greater job satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, and positive relationships with coworkers tend to report lower levels of burnout and reduced rates of both intended and actual turnover (Sheppard et al., 2022). By fostering environments that prioritize these positive cultural and climate characteristics, facilities can enhance staff performance, reduce burnout, and ultimately improve the rehabilitation and behavior of youth in their care.

Building on the conceptual connection between these elements, culture and climate are likely related to staff work performance, which, in turn, can impact youth recidivism outcomes. Glisson et al. (2013) propose that culture and climate, as organizational characteristics, function as contextual common factors affecting service delivery, which is closely related to work performance. Therefore, it can be inferred that enhancing facility culture and climate may improve youth behavior (e.g., lower antisocial/offending behavior scores, or recidivism rates) by positively impacting staff performance. As a result, recidivism could be positioned as a mid- or long-term outcome, aligning with the model's ultimate goal of promoting better organizational and youth outcomes.

Despite the conceptual relationship between these elements (Glisson et al., 2013; Johnson-Kwochka et al., 2020), establishing empirical evidence linking them to youth recidivism outcomes has been challenging, even in non-juvenile justice settings. Few studies have employed rigorous methodological approaches. One notable example is the study by Glisson et al. (2013), which utilized randomized controlled trials to examine whether programs that achieved greater improvements in organizational culture and climate through a longitudinal intervention demonstrated better youth outcomes (i.e., youth psychosocial functioning) compared to those with less improvement. This intervention, known as the Availability, Responsiveness, and Continuity (ARC) model, was specifically designed to enhance culture and climate in community-based service settings. The study found that youth mental health outcomes were most favorable in programs where organizational social contexts (i.e., culture and climate) showed the greatest improvement following the intervention.

In contrast, Ouellette et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of 31 studies examining organizational and workforce interventions aimed at improving culture and climate in youth service settings. Studies were included if they offered organizational supports, such as staff training, team development, or system-level interventions, and reported at least one pre- and post-intervention measure related to organizational culture, climate, or social context. The review focused on youth-serving contexts, including juvenile justice, child welfare, education, and community mental health, and excluded studies that lacked organizational-level aggregation or did not implement a change effort. While some studies reported statistically significant improvements in youth outcomes, others found no change, and only a few showed consistent improvements across all outcomes (Ouellette et al., 2020). Despite these insights, the review offered limited analysis of specific youth outcomes such as recidivism, academic performance, or mental health. Most studies emphasized organizational-level impacts, and only six addressed youth outcomes—most of which were mixed or limited in scope. This gap highlights the need for future research using rigorous methodologies to clarify how organizational culture and climate influence youth outcomes, particularly recidivism.

Recognizing the distinct characteristics of facility culture and climate is essential for shaping both organizational and youth outcomes, and translating this understanding into meaningful change requires collaboration among key stakeholders. Academic institutions bring methodological expertise, research infrastructure, and an external perspective that can enhance the development, implementation, and evaluation of system reforms (Kapp et al., 2013). Collaborations with researchers can also support the generation of actionable evidence to inform policy and practice within juvenile justice settings. However, previous studies have highlighted significant limitations in their approaches, particularly in measuring the impact of culture and climate on youth recidivism, as there appears to be no empirical evidence supported by rigorous methodologies

(e.g., Ouellette et al., 2020). Addressing this gap necessitates further research through collaborative efforts between the juvenile justice system and academic institutions.

In particular, the relationship between facility culture and climate and staff work performance suggests that youth recidivism should be understood as a long-term outcome that underscores the importance of fostering a positive organizational environment (La Vigne, 2024; Leipoldt et al., 2019). To the best of our knowledge, the direct empirical link between facility culture and climate and youth recidivism remains limited and largely conceptual. Building on this foundation, it is important to more explicitly delineate how improvements in facility culture and climate might reduce youth recidivism. A culture that promotes shared values such as respect, accountability, and fairness—paired with a climate that supports staff well-being and collaboration—can lead to improved staff morale, greater consistency in implementing behavioral interventions, and increased use of trauma-informed care (Kim & Jung, 2022). These organizational characteristics shape the daily experiences of youth by enhancing their sense of safety (Center for Youth Justice, n.d.), fostering trust in staff (Sweeney et al., 2018), and increasing their willingness to engage in rehabilitative programming (Young et al., 2017). These proximal changes in youth perception and behavior lay the foundation for long-term outcomes, including reductions in recidivism. This conceptual pathway—moving from culture and climate to staff performance, to youth behavioral change, and ultimately to reduced reoffending—can be evaluated using both intermediate (e.g., staff satisfaction, youth rule violations) and distal (e.g., re-arrest, re-adjudication) outcome metrics (Wong et al., 2024).

Taken together, these insights lay the groundwork for the conceptual design of the Alabama collaboration, which is presented in the next section as an evolving model that brings together the Alabama Department of Youth Services (DYS), the Administrative Office of Courts (AOC), and the University of Alabama (UA). This partnership demonstrates how academia and juvenile justice agencies can collaboratively address youth recidivism through evidence-based and innovative practices.

Designing a Collaborative Approach Between the Alabama DYS, AOC, and UA

This section presents a proposed conceptual approach to improving facility culture and climate through ongoing collaboration between DYS, AOC, and UA. This partnership was initiated in 2018 to provide data-driven evidence on youth recidivism in Alabama. The UA research team members include interdisciplinary faculty and staff from the School of Social Work (SSW) and the Youth Services Institute (YSI), with expertise in juvenile justice, social work, and quantitative methods. Team members representing UA have led and contributed to multiple state- and federally funded projects aimed at reducing youth recidivism and advancing multidisciplinary services for justice-involved youth. In addition, UA team members have decades of experience developing, delivering, and evaluating interventions for youth involved in the juvenile justice system. This background positions the team to collaborate effectively with state partners and to guide research-informed improvements in juvenile justice practices. DYS and AOC team members represent leadership within their agencies, providing feedback and direction for analyses based on agency needs. Including leadership from partner agencies allows for efficient decision-making and adjustments to data-collection methods to support increasingly robust datasets. DYS and AOC team members' backgrounds include direct service delivery, mental health, policy development and implementation, organizational leadership, data collection and management, and technology services. DYS uses electronic records to track administrative data for students committed to their custody, while AOC uses electronic records to track interactions of adults and youth with the adult and juvenile legal system in Alabama. Each agency is responsible for querying its systems and providing data for analysis. Partners meet monthly to discuss progress, address challenges, and plan related activities. UA researchers clean and analyze the data, sharing results with the team during monthly meetings. Partners provide feedback and direction for additional analysis. This process also helps identify data gaps, which the team works to address collectively.

Over the past several years, the partnership has yielded key lessons: The importance of establishing shared data protocols early, scheduling consistent cross-agency meetings, and building trust across institutional boundaries. As the partnership is ongoing, the ideas discussed here have not yet been fully implemented or empirically evaluated. Rather than describing a retrospective case study, this section offers a forward-looking framework

grounded in the current scope of collaboration, emerging practices, and shared institutional goals.

Academia plays a crucial role in these partnerships by contributing research expertise, training resources, and evaluation capacity. Mutually beneficial collaborations between academia and juvenile justice agencies have the potential to enhance service delivery, strengthen rehabilitative environments, and inform data-driven policy, while also providing valuable experiential learning opportunities for students and faculty (Markaki et al., 2021). Because this section outlines a proposed conceptual model based on ongoing collaboration and not original data collection, review by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was not required.

The following components of the proposed collaboration reflect the best practices identified in the literature review, including the implementation of evidence-based practices, investments in staff training and education, and the development of evaluation and data infrastructure to build organizational capacity.

3.1. Evidence-Based Practices

Consistent with prior literature highlighting the importance of implementing evidence-based interventions in juvenile justice settings (Davidson et al., 2010; Kapp et al., 2013), academic institutions can help juvenile justice agencies implement evidence-based practices by conducting rigorous research and evaluation. This ensures that the interventions and programs that agencies invest in are effective and grounded in scientific evidence (Davidson et al., 2010). In Alabama, DYS has statutory responsibility for all youth adjudicated delinquent and committed to state custody. Youth in DYS custody may participate in DYS-administered programs or be placed into programs run by contract providers. DYS invests in community-based diversion programs to minimize the number of youth committed to their custody by using funds that are saved through reduced commitments to provide diversion grants. It is crucial that DYS collect data that allows for the evaluation of programming to ensure Alabama is getting a return on investment through positive youth outcomes. DYS partnered with the AOC and UA to evaluate programs using administrative data. Critically, valid and reliable data regarding outcomes is required. Recidivism data is heavily relied upon to measure outcomes; however, drivers of recidivism must also be identified. Thus far, the collaboration has been focused on gathering available data and analyzing the data to identify patterns and gain an understanding of potential drivers.

In addition to evaluating interventions or programming provided to youth served by DYS, research findings can be used to inform improvements in facility culture and climate, which in turn may enhance youth outcomes. Employees providing direct services to youth are often unaware of positive outcomes, rather they are exposed primarily to youth who return to services, which may lead to negative perceptions about the effectiveness of programming, systems, and even their own work. Ensuring direct service staff have access to valid, reliable outcome data is likely to improve facility culture and climate by counteracting potentially erroneous perceptions. Minor et al. (2004) conducted a study of group-home employees in the juvenile justice system with regard to perceptions related to their work and job satisfaction. They found that positive interactions within the social climate of juvenile facilities play a role in job satisfaction and overall facility culture; the results suggest that community-based, family-style settings may support more positive perceptions, particularly for staff working in group homes located in more rural areas (Minor et al., 2004). This finding allows us to propose a potential hypothesis that rural facility settings may naturally promote greater staff awareness of long-term youth outcomes, possibly due to closer community ties or sustained informal contact. Further research is needed to explore this hypothesis, and the current collaboration in Alabama is well-positioned to make a meaningful contribution.

Research products of the collaboration assist in the development of policies that are informed by data and research findings, which can lead to more effective and fair policies that better serve youth in the juvenile justice system (Leukefeld et al., 2017). Incorporating evidence-based services to meet the identified needs of youth is the most effective strategy for achieving positive outcomes and reducing recidivism (Underwood & Washington, 2016). The research conducted through the DYS–AOC–UA collaboration provides DYS with concrete data to inform decision-makers when proposing legislation that impacts the juvenile justice system. Dissemination is a core strategy of the DYS–AOC–UA collaboration, ensuring that research findings are accessible, actionable, and relevant to a variety of stakeholders. Efforts are focused on producing simple, easy-to-understand products—such as policy briefs, infographics, and one-page summaries—that translate key findings

into clear messages. These materials can be used as standalone tools or expanded upon in meetings, presentations, and trainings. For example, UA researchers prepare briefs summarizing key analytic results, which are shared directly with agency partners. These products are also used in presentations and at information tables during annual conferences for juvenile justice professionals, increasing visibility and facilitating dialogue across the field.

3.2. Training and Education

Universities can provide training and educational opportunities for juvenile justice professionals, keeping them updated with current research-based practices (Davidson et al., 2010). While the current DYS–AOC–UA collaboration has not substantially implemented concrete efforts in this area, the results of data analysis are available to program staff. According to a study by Li et al. (2021) focused on cultural intelligence, knowledge-sharing played a "mediating role in the positive relationship between employees' cultural intelligence" and innovation (p. 14). As the project continues, this will be a key aspect of dissemination, as sharing reasoning and research for administrative decisions can improve facility culture and climate by increasing employee satisfaction. While DYS and AOC conduct both internal and external training, academic resources are used to enhance offerings by expanding professional development options, making experts easier to access, and co-developing content.

Research supports that continuing professional development—such as trauma-informed care and evidence-based practice training—can improve staff retention, competence, and job satisfaction, all of which contribute to a more positive facility culture and climate (Shiri et al., 2023; Fixsen et al., 2005). A workforce that feels supported and prepared is more likely to model constructive behavior, engage meaningfully with youth, and implement interventions with greater fidelity.

In addition to enhancing individual competencies, education can serve as a foundation for more inclusive collaboration and shared decision-making. Educational partnerships also create expanded opportunities for collaborative engagement and increased representation in decision-making and research. Research supports that including a diverse array of voices in evaluation efforts improves interventions and helps ensure that substantial funding supports strategies that are culturally relevant and responsive to community needs (Balazs & Morello-Frosch, 2013). Academic partnerships often involve community engagement, which can improve understanding of local context and needs, ensuring that research and interventions are culturally sensitive and relevant (Davidson et al., 2010). Undertaking academic research in the juvenile justice field may miss the mark without collaboration. DYS and AOC partners provide crucial information about the changing climate in direct services and within or between agencies and systems. As the collaboration continues to evolve, the process and partnerships must be continually evaluated to ensure that the perspectives of key groups—particularly direct service staff, the youth served, and their families—are meaningfully represented (Seekamp et al., 2023), and that action is taken to maintain cultural relevance and responsiveness at all levels. As education efforts continue, they can also serve as a mechanism for identifying and equipping key individuals—such as youth, families, and frontline staff—for meaningful inclusion in collaborative evaluation and policy development. According to Liz Ryan, former administrator at the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention within the U.S. Department of Justice:

> To be legitimate, youth justice work must be informed by youth and their families. We owe it to our young people to partner authentically with them and their families, and to develop and change policies and programs based on what they say about their lives and their experiences in the juvenile justice system. (Ryan, 2025)

Extending this principle to include frontline staff who implement services further enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of juvenile justice interventions. When education is coupled with intentional engagement, it becomes a tool for broadening stakeholder involvement and improving long-term system outcomes.

3.3. Capacity Building

Although past collaborations between juvenile justice agencies and academia have been hindered by the lack of both formal research protocols and informal working relationships (Kapp et al., 2013), the current partnership demonstrates how these barriers can be addressed. Ultimately, collaborations between academia and juvenile justice agencies can lead to the sharing of resources—such as data, funding, and expertise—enhancing the capacity

of all partners to conduct meaningful research and implement effective programs (Leukefeld et al., 2017). A product of the current collaboration has been a protocol to guide all partners in data collection, analysis, and dissemination to support consistent methodology as additional datasets are accumulated for the project. As the project evolves and team members are added, the protocol can be adapted and expanded.

Universities can provide resources that are often not within the budget of juvenile justice agencies, such as grant writing and management, software for data analysis, and experts in data analysis and evaluation (Leukefeld et al., 2017). Even when juvenile justice agencies have the capacity to conduct rigorous analysis, there may be distrust of disseminated results from the general public. The DYS–AOC–UA collaboration makes use of resources from all partners to meet goals. DYS and AOC primarily provide rich data but in disparate datasets that require substantial resources for effective evaluation and research that UA provides. DYS and AOC partners also contribute institutional knowledge in addition to insights on data collection procedures.

As the collaboration evolves, it can become a launching pad for innovative approaches and new perspectives for the juvenile justice system, supporting a healthy culture and climate, and improving long-term outcomes. The partnership can provide avenues for practices such as embedding academic researchers within facilities to provide real-time support and creating opportunities for justice professionals to pursue advanced education.

Discussion and Implications

4.1. Practice and Policy Implications for Improving Facility Culture and Climate Through Collaboration

Collaboration between juvenile justice agencies and academia holds substantial potential to advance practice and drive policy reforms aimed at improving facility culture and climate (La Vigne, 2024; Leukefeld et al., 2017). By pooling resources such as data, research expertise, and institutional knowledge, as discussed in the Capacity Building section, these partnerships expand the ability of agencies to generate actionable insights, conduct robust evaluations, and implement effective reforms. Collaborative initiatives foster shared learning environments that strengthen system-wide capacity for change (Casey Family Programs, 2022). Moreover, these partnerships support the adoption of evidence-based practices, as previously outlined, by translating research into actionable policy strategies that address systemic challenges, enhance staff well-being, and promote youth rehabilitation (Alderwick et al., 2021). Embedding academic partners within facility operations, as piloted in the Alabama collaboration, enables real-time feedback, training, and evaluation. These mechanisms are essential for implementing evidence-based and trauma-informed practices with fidelity (Goldstein et al., 2024). Policymakers and practitioners must prioritize these types of collaborative efforts, recognizing their pivotal role in fostering environments that support positive outcomes for both staff and youth within juvenile justice facilities.

The products of this collaboration in Alabama could be operationalized as a framework for future legislation, legislative reform, and the development and implementation of interventions. Policy is a powerful lever that shapes facility climate and culture, yet such policies are rarely co-developed with the individuals most affected by them (Fixsen et al., 2005; Scales & Lepore, 2020). While it is crucial to examine the underlying causes of youth reoffending, recidivism rates remain a vital metric for capturing the attention of decision-makers (The Council of State Governments Justice Center [CSGJC], 2014). These statistics highlight the urgency of addressing the issue and can drive policy changes and resource allocation to support effective interventions. Understanding the nuances behind recidivism is essential for developing comprehensive solutions, but the stark numbers are necessary to underscore the importance and prompt action from those in positions of influence (CSGJC, 2014). The current collaboration is able to provide concrete evidence of declining rates of recidivism (e.g., from approximately 55% in 2014 to 45% in 2018) in Alabama (Lee et al., 2023), as well as key intervention timeframes, such as the first six months following release from DYS custody (Lee et al., 2025). Data-collection efforts have been adapted to collect additional variables that will allow for more rigorous analysis as we seek to understand the drivers of recidivism for Alabama's youth so that we can more effectively intervene.

Although there has been growing emphasis on incorporating youth and family voices into the policy development process, further progress is needed to ensure meaningful and equitable inclusion. Similarly, the voices of direct care staff who implement policy through daily procedures

must be centered in the design of the evaluation of those policies (Hande et al., 2024; Scales & Lepore, 2020). As with youth voice, the inclusion of staff voice is crucial to ensuring that policies are translated into logical and reasonable procedures that enhance working conditions and contribute to a more positive facility culture (Blakeslee & Walker, 2018). These inclusive practices, grounded in both capacity-building efforts and evidence-based implementation strategies, are essential for improving long-term outcomes for youth and staff alike. While the current project does not yet address the inclusion of these important voices, as the project continues to evolve beyond these initial phases, it is a natural progression of the collaboration.

4.2. Limitations

This conceptual paper highlights the benefits of academic-agency collaboration in improving facility culture and climate; however, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations and implementation challenges. These include institutional barriers such as data-sharing restrictions, resource constraints, differences in organizational priorities, and the time-intensive nature of sustained partnership building (Kapp et al., 2013). Additionally, some facilities may lack the infrastructure or leadership support needed to engage meaningfully in collaborative reform efforts. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that such partnerships are equitable, sustainable, and capable of producing meaningful change. Future research and practice should also explore alternative or complementary approaches to improving facility environments, including staff-led initiatives, peer mentoring models, or community-based accountability processes (Horowitz & Lawlor, 2008) .

In addition, although this conceptual exploration underscores the potential of the Alabama collaboration to inform facility culture and climate reform, it is necessary to acknowledge its methodological and practical limitations. As a developing initiative, the proposed partnership focusing on organizational culture and climate does not yet employ a formalized implementation science framework, nor has it utilized experimental or quasi-experimental designs to evaluate causal impacts. Much of the work to date has focused on relationship-building, data infrastructure, and exploratory analyses—which are critical, yet pre-empirical, steps. Furthermore, the collaboration has encountered challenges common to academic-agency partnerships, including data-sharing constraints, differing institutional priorities, and the need for sustained leadership buy-in (Jain-Aghi et al., 2018). These limitations highlight the importance of ongoing investment in cross-sector infrastructure and evaluation capacity to move from conceptual alignment to measurable outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper conceptually explores how collaboration between the juvenile justice system and academia can inform local and state-level policies to improve facility culture and climate, contributing to reduced youth recidivism. Enhancing these organizational social contexts is crucial, as research shows that supportive environments improve not only staff morale and retention but also youth behavioral outcomes and long-term success. Academic-practice partnerships offer a unique opportunity to integrate research expertise with on-the-ground knowledge, allowing for the co-development of responsive, equity-driven interventions that address facility-level challenges. For example, joint efforts can lead to the implementation of trauma-informed care, staff training aligned with adolescent development, and policies that are co-designed with youth and families. The Alabama collaboration exemplifies this approach. The initiative brings together DYS, AOC, and UA to create a shared infrastructure for systems improvement. Specifically, the project has established cross-agency data-sharing processes to identify gaps in youth outcomes, convened youth and caregiver advisory forums to inform staff development, and launched pilot trainings on restorative discipline practices. These strategies are designed to improve organizational climate by strengthening staff-youth relationships, embedding trauma-informed frameworks, and integrating youth voice into decision-making. As Blakeslee and Walker (2018) argue, centering authentic youth and family involvement in policy and practice is foundational to creating systems that are both effective and just. Meaningful change, therefore, requires not only conceptual alignment but also sustained implementation of collaborative strategies that are informed by both data and lived experience. The Alabama model demonstrates how academic-practice partnerships can operationalize these principles to support facility culture change and reduce recidivism. Prioritizing such collaborative efforts advances the juvenile justice system's rehabilitative mission, ultimately creating

safer and more supportive environments where youth can thrive.

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