

## Youth Behind Bars: A Data-Driven Case Study on Juvenile Incarceration in California

**Hieu Phan**

Ph.D., Morningside University, United States  
phanj@morningside.edu

**DeJante Eaton**

DBA, University of the Incarnate Word, United States  
eatondejante@yahoo.com

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**ABSTRACT:** This data-driven case study described factors contributing to juvenile incarceration rates in California. Juvenile offenders' incarceration varies depending on their race/ethnicity, age, education level, and offense severity. The study aims to investigate racial and ethnic disparities in juvenile incarceration and provides findings from an analysis and systematic review of juvenile incarceration statistics. This case study examines the archival data on youth incarceration between 2019 and 2023. The data were collected from the California Department of Justice, the California Juvenile Court and Probation Statistical System (JCPSS), the California Justice Data & Investigative Bureau, and the California Criminal Justice Statistics Center. The investigators attempt to identify the impact factors, how the courts and lawmakers can minimize the criminalization of adolescence, and effective responses to keep younger people away from the formal juvenile justice system and support those youth who do enter the system with opportunities and connections related to their personal growth, positive behavior change and long-term success. The study recommends a framework for the juvenile justice system to significantly and safely reduce the number of young people sent to confinement. California should implement and expand upon juvenile justice reforms to reduce incarceration rates and improve the overall system, replace youth prisons with more effective approaches, and reinvest savings from closing some of its facilities.

**KEYWORDS:** juvenile incarceration, juvenile offender, juvenile detention, youth incarceration, juvenile justice system, juvenile corrections, juvenile detention centers, youth correctional facilities, juvenile delinquency, juvenile court rehabilitation vs. punishment, juvenile sentencing, zero tolerance policies, school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice, juvenile offenders, youth incarceration, juvenile housing, status juvenile, detention facilities, youth correctional, corrections system

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## Introduction

Throughout the 80s and 90s, states passed laws to encourage more placements, built cruel boot camps, and sent more youth into adult courts, jails, and prisons. Reports of increased crime, whether backed by evidence or merely anecdotal, ought to lead anyone who cares about youth justice to worry. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, increases in youth offending and policy changes led to vastly more teenagers being sent to adult prisons and jails as well as juvenile facilities.

According to Thompson (2019), teenagers make bad choices because they are teenagers. They are immature. They are impulsive. Their peers unduly influence them, but what excuses do adults have when they, too, prove themselves swayed by media narratives and cherry-picked anecdotes? With the benefits of hindsight, we can see the predicted carnage did not arrive; instead, youth offending began a long decline. Drops in youth arrests then coincided with drops in youth incarceration. Over the 21st century, locking up fewer kids has not resulted in more crime; it has been followed by less crime. Analyzing youth imprisonment and the high rates of incarceration deflected attention from the fact that juvenile detention and incarceration have increased because juvenile court judges and correctional authorities, as well as lawmakers, were getting tough by incarcerating more kids for more extended periods in juvenile facilities. Through an examination of juvenile sentencing typologies, sentencing decision-making, and empirical archival data on the incarceration of at-risk and system-involved youth, this case study aims to fill this gap and expand current lines of debate, discourse, and advocacy.

## Literature Review

### *Considering the Effects of Juvenile Incarcerations*

Juvenile incarceration in the United States has been shown to have significant long-term adverse effects on young individuals. Incarcerated juveniles often face interrupted education, exposure to violence, and inadequate mental health support, which can hinder their personal growth and rehabilitation. According to Fagan et al. (2011), youth who are detained are more likely to reoffend and struggle with reintegration into society due to stigma and limited access to opportunities. Rather than reducing crime, juvenile incarceration frequently reinforces cycles of poverty and criminal behavior, raising concerns about the effectiveness and fairness of the juvenile justice system nationwide. The system often fails to provide adequate rehabilitation, leading to a cycle of incarceration rather than reintegration into society.

One hint of this effect comes from recent work comparing the impact of juvenile versus adult punishment on recidivism. Fagan et al. (2007) found that although the transfer to the adult justice system was positively related to future crime, especially violence, the effects were attributable to court jurisdiction, not incarceration. That is, whether a juvenile was incarcerated did not predict

recidivism. This empirical fact hints at the possibility that conditions of confinement are comparable in both settings and equally protective or corrosive for kids. Add to this another empirical fact- lengthened sentences for juvenile offenders, whether in juvenile or adult corrections placements, are of no apparent consequence to public safety. According to Gonzalez (2017), punishment generally predicts subjective experiences and developmental outcomes rather than the institutional auspice where such punishment occurs. In that case, we are obligated to broaden the inquiry in ways that challenge the fundamental jurisprudential rationale(s) for juvenile court intervention and rethink the metrics by which we decide who is subject to incarceration and for how long, regardless of court auspice. This process would cause us to question whether rehabilitation is a possibility and whether we should forego the euphemisms and honestly call juvenile corrections punishment as we do its adult counterpart. In other words, if punishment has risks that offset its political purposes and instrumental goals, then a more responsive regulatory regime is needed.

### ***The Relationship Between Childhood Trauma, Criminality, and Incarceration***

Research and practice indicate that many youth involved with the justice system have a history of significant trauma. The relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behavior in juvenile prisoners is a significant area of study within criminology, psychology, and sociology. Many studies have explored how early adverse experiences such as physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and exposure to violence can contribute to the development of criminal behavior, particularly in incarcerated individuals. There are many connections between childhood trauma and crime among male prisoners, with an emphasis on the types of traumas, psychological effects, and the criminal behaviors that manifest as a result. For example, “emotional abuse is the most prevalent form of childhood trauma, such as verbal harassment against children, deprivation of love and care, mockery, humiliation, shouting, intimidation, and reprimand” (Canturk et al., 2021).

The evaluation of childhood trauma about criminal behavior, dissociative experiences, adverse family experiences, and psychiatric backgrounds among prison inmates provides critical insight into the underlying causes of criminality and the mental health challenges faced by incarcerated individuals. Childhood trauma, especially when compounded by negative family dynamics, mental health issues, and dissociative experiences, can significantly influence the development of criminal behavior. Understanding the relationships between these factors helps create more effective rehabilitation strategies and improves outcomes for individuals incarcerated for criminal activities. For example, “prison inmates revealed a high prevalence of adverse family experiences during childhood overall, a preponderance of individual and family histories for psychiatric diseases in females and higher rates of previous conviction and younger age at first offense in males” (Altintas & Bilici, 2018).

### *Labeling and the Identity Beyond Stigma*

The subjectivity of the classification and labeling process must be considered in the analysis of race/ethnic group data. As commonly used, race refers to large populations that share certain physical characteristics, such as skin color. Because these physical characteristics can vary greatly within groups, as well as between groups, determination of race is frequently, by necessity, subjective. Ethnicity refers to cultural heritage and can cross racial lines. For example, the ethnic designation "Hispanic" includes persons of any race. Most commonly, self-identification of race/ethnicity is used in the classification and labeling process.

Research conducted by Bushman et al. (2016) revealed that long-term outcomes are significantly impacted by social reactions to juvenile behavior, which go beyond the effect of peers and family. According to the labeling hypothesis, when a juvenile is labeled as a criminal or delinquent, they begin to internalize, which makes them more likely to continue acting out deviant behaviors. The social stigmas that are brought about by these labels can result in exclusions from work or school that reinforce the cycle of criminality, thus leading them further into the criminal justice system. In their analysis of the effects of a juvenile's first arrest, Liberman, Kirk, and Kim (2014) discovered in their longitudinal analysis that early interaction with the criminal justice system dramatically increases the likelihood of reoffending, rearresting, and incarceration. Crucially, their work highlights that further criminalization may result from the arrest rather than the delinquent behavior. The research behind labeling and stigma promotes a change in policy from punitive, rehabilitative measures rather than focusing on deterrence through punishment and arrest. Effective strategies should minimize labeling and stigma and emphasize reintegration and support, thus reducing the long-term effects of early criminal justice system involvement.

### *The Diversion Alternative*

Juvenile diversion programs have been an important part of the juvenile justice system, attempting to lead adolescents away from formal adjudication and toward rehabilitative alternatives. National studies have evaluated the effectiveness of these programs, with many emphasizing their ability to reduce recidivism while addressing underlying risk factors (Mears et al., 2016). Mears et al. investigated numerous diversion methods in the United States, identifying both the benefits and unintended repercussions of these approaches (Mears et al., 2016). In a comparable manner, Stewart investigated diversion programs for non-serious and status offenders, emphasizing the importance of early interventions in preventing additional system involvement (Sheppard, 2008).

Research shows that diverting youth from juvenile court involvement should be a central focus in efforts to reduce racial and ethnic disparities and improve outcomes in our nation's youth justice systems. The lack of diversion opportunities

for youth of color is pivotal because a greater likelihood of formal processing in court means that youth of color accumulate longer court histories, leading to harsher consequences for any subsequent arrest, thus leading to incarceration. Clear evidence shows that getting arrested in adolescence or having a delinquency case filed in juvenile court damages young people's futures and increases their subsequent involvement in the justice system. Compared with diverted youth, those arrested and formally petitioned in court have a far higher likelihood of subsequent arrests and school failure. Pre-arrest and pre-court diversion can avert these bad outcomes (Kretschmar et al., 2016).

### ***Rehabilitation: Road to Redemption***

Rehabilitation is essential for juvenile offenders because it helps them learn from their mistakes and supports their emotional, psychological, and social development. Since young people are still growing and their decision-making abilities are not fully mature, they are more capable of positive change than adults. According to Batiuk, Moke, and Roundtree (1997), rehabilitation programs focus on addressing the underlying causes of criminal behavior, like trauma or substance abuse, while also teaching valuable life skills. By promoting accountability and offering support rather than punishment, rehabilitation reduces the likelihood of reoffending and helps youth build brighter futures within their communities. Unlike adult offenders, juveniles are still in critical stages of emotional, psychological, and social development. Their brains, especially the areas responsible for impulse control and decision-making, are still maturing. This means they are more capable of change than adults.

According to Steinberg (2009), juvenile rehabilitation offers numerous benefits both for the individual and society as a whole. It focuses on addressing the root causes of delinquent behavior—such as trauma, lack of education, and family instability—through counseling, education, and skill-building programs. This approach helps youth develop healthier coping mechanisms, improve decision-making, and reintegrate successfully into their communities. Studies show that rehabilitative programs reduce recidivism rates more effectively than punitive measures, leading to safer communities. Additionally, investing in rehabilitation is often more cost-effective than incarceration and supports long-term positive outcomes, such as stable employment and educational achievement.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Sampling/Demographic***

Researchers investigated datasets provided by county-level demographic data (sex, adjudication, age, race/ethnicity, and education level) for youth sentenced to custody of the State of California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation between 2019 and 2023. Data were counted using a youth's first admission between

2019 and 2023. Incarceration data were aggregated based on the responsible (court) county. Discharge data were aggregated based on the county of residence.

### *Presentation of Statistics*

This statistical analysis forms the basis for examining youth population data in California's regional and county population data by race/ethnicity and sex for youth aged 15 to 17. These data are presented to provide context for the race/ethnicity, sex, education, and age of youth involved in the youth justice system. The Juvenile Demographics and Statistics report provides an overall picture of how detention is used across the State. This report includes data on five key detention indicators—race/ethnicity, age grouping, sex, and dispositions—broken out by arrest types. The Justice Data & Investigative Bureau and the California Criminal Justice Statistics Center provide detailed detention utilization data at several levels of aggregation, including statewide, regional (i.e., Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, and the rest of the State), and county. The information presented in this report represents the data received from 57 counties. These reports were designed to address questions concerning how much, how long, and for whom detention is utilized. The following tables reflect data extracted from the Monthly Arrest and Citation Register (MACR), the Juvenile Court and Probation Statistical System (JCPSS), and a file containing dispositions of adult-level felony arrests.

Table 1. Level of offense and criminal justice disposition

Category	Total	Gender		Age Group			Race/ethnic group			
		Male	Female	Under 12	12 to 14	15 to 17	White	Hispanic	Black	Other
				Number						
<b>Total</b>	32047	23809	8238	218	9082	22747	5445	17829	6722	2051
<b>Felony</b>	16045	13091	2954	81	4101	11863	2266	8558	4206	1015
<b>Misdemeanor</b>	15371	10355	5016	132	4801	10438	3060	8852	2455	1004
<b>Status offenses</b>	631	363	268	5	180	446	119	419	61	32
<b>Law enforcement disposition</b>	32047	23809	8238	218	9082	22747	5445	17829	6722	2051
<b>Referred to probation</b>	16033	12050	3983	105	4405	11523	2711	8782	3405	1135
<b>Counseled and released</b>	6998	5001	1997	72	2221	4705	1219	3948	1476	355
<b>Turned over to another agency</b>	9016	6758	2258	41	2456	6519	1515	5099	1841	561

Source: California Juvenile Arrests (Gender, Age Group, and Race/Ethnic Group by Level of Offense and Criminal Justice Disposition; 2019-2023)

Table 2. California Juvenile Arrests by Race/Ethnic Group

Race/Ethnic Group				
White	Hispanic	Black	Other	Total
13628	38679	14540	4218	71065

Source: California Juvenile Arrests by Race/Ethnic Group from 2019-2023

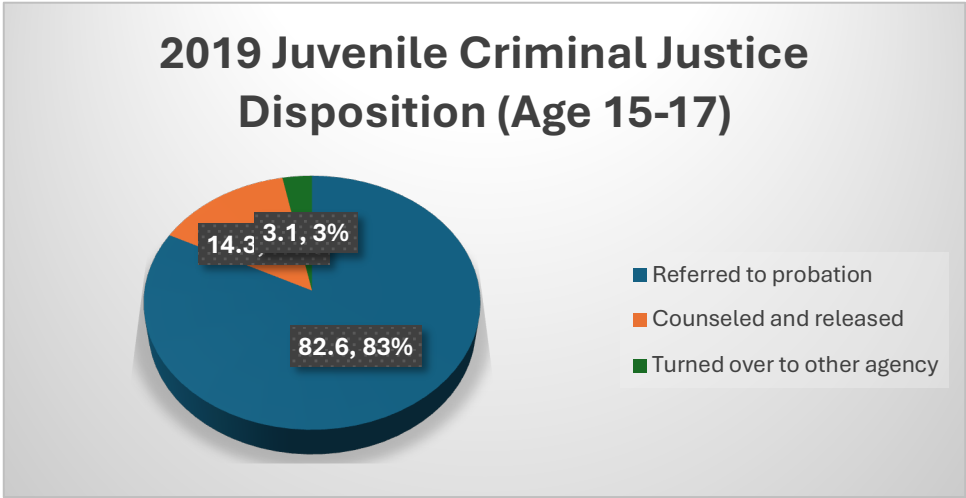


Figure 1. Juvenile Criminal Justice Disposition (Age 15-17)  
Source: 2019 California Juvenile Criminal Justice Disposition (Age 15-17)

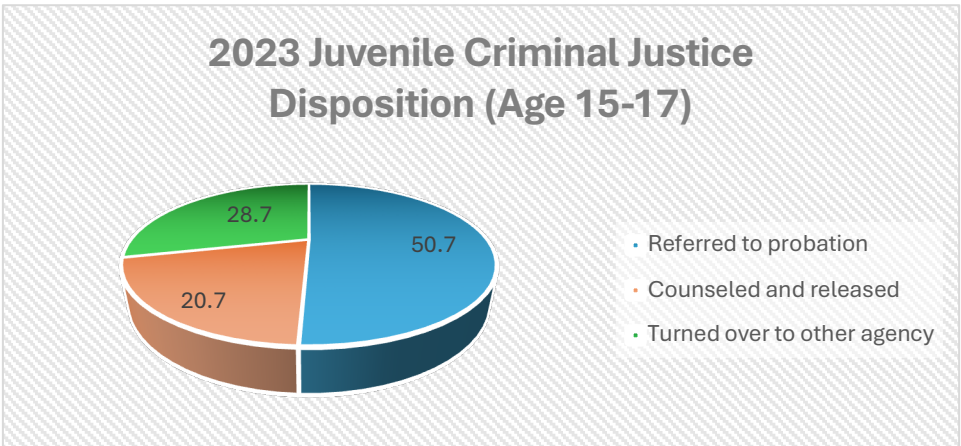


Figure 2. Criminal Justice Disposition (Age 15-17)  
Source: 2023 California Juvenile Criminal Justice Disposition (Age 15-17)

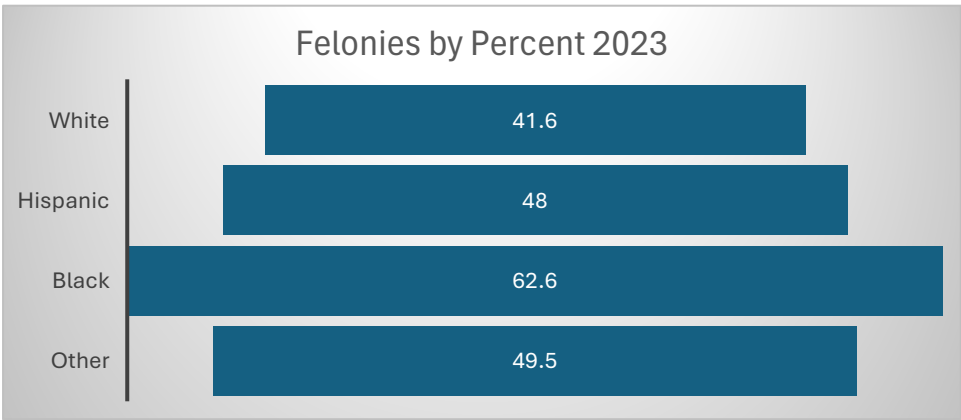


Figure 3. Felonies by Percent 2023  
Source: California Juvenile Criminal Justice Felony Percent of Offense Status by Race/Ethnic Group (2023)

## Methodology/Results

This case study utilizes a quantitative statistical case study approach to analyze juvenile incarcerations in California from 2019 to 2023. This case study examines how juvenile demographic characteristics, type of arrests, and institutional dispositions influence incarceration. The investigators utilized official and publicly available data sources, including the California Justice Information Service Division, Justice Data & Investigative Bureau, California Criminal Justice Statistics Center. The collected datasets contain aggregated and comprehensive details on youth incarceration, including their race/ethnicity, age, offense types, and dispositions. The case study maintains statistical analysis integrity and credibility by using government-verified reports, which are vital for research in an area plagued by public distrust and debate. The study methodology uses descriptive statistics to visually represent incarceration data through tables and bar graphs for annual confinements, racial and ethnic demographics, sex, and age. The visual aids reveal trends and make the data more accessible to academics, policymakers and community stakeholders. The investigators used inferential statistical tools, including odds ratio analysis, to evaluate how juvenile incarceration demographics impact their emotional, psychological, and social development. The case study compares juvenile incarceration rates across various demographic groups, revealing significant disparities influenced by race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Data show that minority youth, particularly African American and Hispanic males, are disproportionately represented in juvenile detention facilities compared to their white counterparts.

The results of the study revealed apparent demographic disparities in juvenile incarceration rates across the state. African American youth accounted for 37% of all juvenile detentions, despite representing only 21.8% of the overall youth population in California. Hispanic youth made up 59.3% of incarcerations, while white youth accounted for 7.7%, aligning more closely with their population proportion. Additionally, males represented 81.6% of all juvenile detainees, with the highest concentration among those aged 15 to 17. The data also showed that youth from low-income neighborhoods were nearly twice as likely to be incarcerated as those from higher-income areas. These findings suggest that race, gender, and socioeconomic status are significant predictors of juvenile detention outcomes across California.

The case study recognizes multiple limitations despite working with substantial datasets. Not all counties provide consistent reporting on youth incarceration, leading to incomplete data across youth demographics, which restricts the analysis of racial disparities. These disparities highlight the need for ongoing examination and reform of policies and practices within the juvenile justice system to ensure equitable treatment for all youth. The sample size within California is comprehensive but requires attention to individual counties' sharing methods and sociopolitical contexts to apply more thorough and transparent data



to the public. Nonetheless, this research establishes an evidence-based framework that supports public discussions, reform, and policy adjustments while enhancing intervention, prevention, and rehabilitation efforts to give minority youths an opportunity for a prosperous and crime-free future.

### **Discussion/Recommendations**

In the future, research needs to identify at-risk youth early and provide them with the necessary support. To do this, a fostered collaboration between the juvenile courts, schools, social services, mental health providers, law enforcement agencies, and the criminal justice system. There must be more effective and successful reform of the juvenile justice system in general, and length of incarceration in particular, requires that we incorporate discussion of the relationship between length of imprisonment and subsequent rehabilitation outcomes into the policy debate. We also must grapple with understanding how current sentencing practices exacerbate this connection and the associated negative social and mental health outcomes and undermine the driving goal of youth rehabilitation and community reintegration. This approach is essential for crafting juvenile justice policy to better address the needs of youth, communities, and society as a whole instead of arrests and presumptive incarceration.

There must be further discussion on the length of juvenile incarceration, which is a critical issue that demands attention. Excessive lengths of incarceration undermine the foundational goals of the juvenile justice system by magnifying long-term negative psychological and emotional outcomes and increasing the risk of recidivism. They also compound existing disparities for at-risk and system-involved youth, marginalized urban youth, and youth of color in particular. Despite reductions in the percentage of youth in secure confinement from recent reforms, for many youths, the likelihood that their length of incarceration will exceed evidence-based timelines, as well as the state's guidelines and criteria, is highly likely. This reality occurs despite a large and growing body of empirical research that documents the mental health status of system-involved youth and the association between arrest and incarceration during adolescence and the range of subsequent health and mental health outcomes in adulthood. Counties are encouraged to examine their individual stat sheets with an eye toward local and national concerns.

Currently, length of stay reform has rested on two primary arguments: recidivism and confinement costs. The goal of rehabilitation has been lacking from the larger discourse within the juvenile justice reform movement, specifically within the context of this empirically recognized relationship between length of stay and subsequent psychological, emotional, and mental health outcomes. Yet more than half of the jurisdictions across the country utilize indeterminate sentencing systems, which explicitly emphasize rehabilitation as a driving goal and, in theory, operationalize it into release decisions. Indeed, it is this very aspect of indeterminate sentences that provides a key foothold and mechanism for emphasizing the

psychological, emotional, and mental health aspects of length of incarceration, adding a new dimension to the reform debate with significant potential for success. There must be a more effective juvenile justice system that emphasizes flexibility in its treatment to protect society from violent juvenile criminals while remaining a humane and rational institution.

### **Conclusion and Future Scope**

This data-driven case study reveals that the majority of these juveniles are the products of an impoverished and troubled environment. Despite its shortcomings, the juvenile court system inconsistently offers these youths the last opportunity for positive rehabilitation. A comprehensive statistical investigation into California's youth arrests and incarceration from 2019 to 2023 reveals a complicated and distressing depiction of today's juvenile incarceration practices. California has a valid state interest in protecting its citizens. However, a great injustice would result if the legislature, in its zeal, utilizes the juvenile justice system for the primary purpose of incarcerating juvenile offenders and would lose sight of the fact that the system deals primarily with poor and troubled minority youths.

The prior research on juvenile correctional facilities concludes that juvenile facilities are damaging to the mental growth and potential future success of incarcerated youths. Yet these studies are limited in making conclusions of kind rather than degree. Through our analyses, we found that the harm caused by juvenile facilities may overlook juveniles incarcerated in California. By analyzing data from the Juvenile Demographics and Statistics Sheets, we find that contrary to expectations based on prior research, significant problems are troubling the juvenile justice system and its facilities. The juvenile system is understaffed; correctional staff routinely struggle with covering shifts to enable them to provide supervision to incarcerated juveniles.

The case study demonstrates robust evidence that, given current disparities in sentencing practices across jurisdictions, especially for indeterminate sentences, the goal of punishment and rehabilitation is undermined by a variety of factors that lead youth to be incarcerated longer than necessary. Notable among them is that release decisions are rarely made based on objective, evidence-based criteria relevant to rehabilitation. Instead, resource constraints, such as population management and the number of beds in secure confinement facilities compared to alternative juvenile justice facilities, drive decisions in states like California. As part of California's longstanding commitment to monitoring the health and safety of youth in its youth correctional system, the state has compiled a trove of otherwise unavailable reports. Since the spring of 2019, the state has not made these data public — a decision that has severely hindered efforts to monitor juvenile incarceration at a critical juncture. The end goal is to focus on helping young people learn from their mistakes, develop healthier behaviors, and reintegrate successfully into society.

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