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School Choice Program Found to Reduce Crime and its Related Social Cost Among High-Risk Youth

High-risk middle- and high-school students who transfer to their preferred school are less likely to be arrested and spend less time incarcerated, pointing to impact of school choice

CAMBRIDGE, MA – A new study of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina (CMS) school choice program finds that high-risk male youth who are admitted by lottery to their preferred schools commit fewer crimes and remain in school longer than their peers who seek admittance but do not gain seats in the lottery process. Lottery-winning middle school students also are 18 percentage points more likely than those who lose the lottery to still be enrolled in school in 10th grade.

In general, high-risk students commit about 50 percent less crime as a result of winning a school choice lottery. Among male high school students at high risk of criminal activity, winning admission to a first-choice school reduced felony arrests from 77 to 43 per 100 students over the study period (2002-2009). The attendant social cost of crimes committed decreased by more than 35 percent. Among high-risk middle school students, admittance by lottery to a preferred school reduced the average social cost of crimes committed by 63 percent (due chiefly to a reduction in violent crime), and reduced the total expected sentence of crimes committed by 31 months (64 percent).

David J. Deming, assistant professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, conducted the study and authored an article that will appear in the Spring, 2012 issue of Education Next. The article, “Does School Choice Reduce Crime? Evidence from North Carolina,” is available online at www.educationnext.org. Considering the impact of gaining admission to a first-choice school on high-risk youth, Deming writes, “The findings suggest that schools may be an opportune setting for the prevention of future crime.”

The study examines the impact of winning a school choice lottery on dropout rates and crime for groups of students with different propensities to commit crimes, using an index of crime risk that includes test scores, demographics, behavior, and neighborhood characteristics to identify the highest-risk group. The final sample (males only, as they are overwhelmingly at higher risk of criminal activity) included 1,014 high school students and 1,081 middle school students. The study finds that the overall reductions in criminal activity are concentrated among the top 20 percent of high-risk students, who are disproportionately African American, eligible for free lunch, with more days of absence and suspensions than the average student.
All of the students in the study selected schools to attend that they preferred over the default option, which was their assigned neighborhood school. High school lottery winners in the high-risk group and all middle school lottery winners transferred to schools featuring modest increases in standard measures of school quality, such as average test scores and higher proportions of teachers with more than 3 years of experience. For youth in the highest risk group (top 20%), the gain in school quality indicators is “roughly equivalent to moving from one of the lowest-ranked schools to one around the district average.”

After a thirty-year period of court-mandated busing to desegregate schools ended in 2001, CMS implemented a policy of district-wide open enrollment, launched in the 2002-03 school year. Children who lived in each neighborhood zone were guaranteed access to their neighborhood school. In cases where schools were oversubscribed, the CMS lottery system gave preferences to low-income students who applied to schools with a low fraction of low-income students. The author estimates that this policy choice lowered the social cost of crime by about 12 percent, relative to a simple charter-style lottery with no preferential treatment. If slots in oversubscribed schools were systematically allocated to not only low-income students, but also to students at highest risk of criminal activity, he states, “the social cost of crime would fall by an additional 27 percent” relative to the actual CMS assignment mechanism.

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