



GROWING
KINGS

ADVOCACY & POLICY AGENDA



GROWING **KINGS**

ABOUT US

Growing Kings is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, founded in 2009, in direct response to the alarming number of adolescent males failing in various aspects of their lives. Growing Kings operates with a mission to encourage and facilitate the critical thinking and positive attitudes of underserved male youth through systemic and targeted enrichment, research, and advocacy.

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ADVOCACY & POLICY AGENDA OVERVIEW

The 2017 U.S. Census reported that 12.3% of all U.S. citizens live in poverty—nearly 39.7 million people. However, PolicyLink, a national research and action institute, notes that the number of Americans facing economic insecurity is around 100 million people, or nearly one third of the U.S population, and that people of color are disproportionately affected. Close to 27% of children living in Jefferson County, Alabama grow up under conditions of poverty, with percentages increasing to 40% for Black youth, according to 2018 County Data Profiles by VOICES for Alabama’s Children. The youth of Alabama are arguably the most vulnerable to this environment, as they have less control over the nature of their communities and the actions of its adult citizens. This has resulted in many negative educational, vocational, and societal outcomes that often have generational effects.

Research from The Family-Informed Trauma Treatment Center shows that families exposed to urban poverty face a disproportionate risk of exposure to trauma. Factors associated with urban poverty such as low neighborhood safety or low access to resources increase the risk that trauma will impact family functioning. Additionally, children with repeated exposure to trauma carry long-term developmental risks which negatively impact academic learning and social competence. Students experiencing economic insecurity and exposure to trauma are more susceptible to negative behaviors and ongoing functional impairments. Our youth deserve intentional investment in equitable policy solutions and support structures that actively address academic and social disparities resulting from systemic issues—laws, policies, and practices—which negatively impact their educational opportunities and socioeconomic advancement.

Growing Kings advocates for a policy agenda aiming to improve the lives of boys and young men who are most harmed by disparities across academic, social, and economic systems. Our work serves as a call-to-action for much needed reform to institutional laws, policies, and practices that have negatively impacted the lives of underserved male youth. We build awareness, foster community support, and inform policymakers of the issues plaguing this populace within the city and across the state. We focus on building positive change across three core Areas of Interest:

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE & ATTENDANCE POLICIES: By promoting alternative policies around discipline, truancy, and school attendance, Growing Kings advocates for the reduction of punitive measures that perpetuate the school pushout phenomenon.

WORKFORCE HIRING & DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES: Growing Kings advocates for fair-hiring practices that reduce barriers to employment for those with a criminal history and increases awareness and public partnerships around career and technical training opportunities available to unemployed youth.

JUVENILE JUSTICE & POLICING REFORM: Growing Kings promotes mentoring and diversion programs as a strategy for reducing youth detention and incarceration and advocates for critically examining the role and function of law enforcement in schools.

Our advocacy efforts will expand the strength of coalition-based advocacy in the state of Alabama. There is currently no statewide alliance specifically focused on uplifting boys and young men of color and building power among communities directly impacted. Our advocacy will meet this need and strengthen a network of members advocating for systems change.

JUVENILE JUSTICE & POLICING REFORM

REDUCING YOUTH DETENTION & INCARCERATION

According to a report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation entitled, “No Place for Kids,” low-level youthful offenders are being placed into residential programs due to a widespread failure in most jurisdictions to invest in high-quality community-based programming for delinquent youth. One of the most telling traits of juvenile incarceration, one of the characteristics that distinguishes it most clearly as an obsolete response to adolescent lawbreaking, is cost. Confining juvenile offenders in correctional institutions and other residential settings is far more expensive than standard probation or conventional community supervision and treatment programs.

Despite a 27% decrease in the number of complaints filed against juveniles since 2012, admission to detention centers has not slowed at the same pace. In fact, the number of youth in detention centers has remained steady, according to the Alabama Juvenile Justice Taskforce. Many youth are removed from their homes and placed in detention facilities since there is no statewide funding stream for pre-adjudication detention alternatives that allow youth to remain at home. Around 85% of youth committed to the Department of Youth Services (DYS) had not received the opportunity for diversion from out-of-home placement prior to their first commitment, despite most cases in the juvenile justice system involving lower-level offenses.

According to research collected by the Alabama Juvenile Task Force, “racial disparities exist throughout [Alabama’s] juvenile justice system, including all types of out-of-home placement, and are largest for DYS commitment and transfer to the adult system.” Although they make up just 31% of Alabama’s youth population, Black/African-American youth made up 57% of 1,280 youth taken into DYS custody and 84% of 1,087 youth directly filed as adults. This happens in a state where the law allows any juvenile over the age of 14 years old to be transferred to adult court for any offense.

Growing Kings addresses the challenges of Alabama’s juvenile justice system and the criminalization of Black male youth through “The King in Me”, an alternative-to-detention diversion program designed to reduce the number of low-level juvenile cases filed in Jefferson County’s juvenile justice system and reduce the overall number of male youth who become involved in the juvenile court system. The program engages 14-17 year old male youth who have been arrested, are actively involved in the juvenile justice system, pose a risk to public safety, and/or are likely to fail to appear in court. The King in Me employs a non-punitive approach in the filing of juvenile cases by diverting youth into an evidence-based treatment program, as opposed to pursuing post-adjudication consequences, which often result in a juvenile record and juvenile detention.

WE EMPLOY THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES:

- 👑 Publish research briefs focused on bringing awareness to the criminalization and detention of Black/African-American youth in the state of Alabama;
- 👑 Promote high-quality mentoring as a solution to reducing juvenile delinquency and the concerning number of juvenile system-involved youth; and
- 👑 Design effective alternatives to the juvenile court system, including diversion programs focused on rehabilitation and mentorship.

JUVENILE JUSTICE & POLICING REFORM

THE ROLE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT IN SCHOOLS

A growing presence of law enforcement officers in schools raises concerns about increasing opportunities to criminalize student behavior, thereby propelling youth into the justice system rather than handling discipline issues within the school. According to the *Journal of Criminal Justice*, the number of law enforcement officers assigned to patrol schools full time, often referred to as school resource officers (SROs), has swelled since the late 1990s. This increase comes in response to incidents of gun violence that put pressure on schools to revisit security measures. Yet, when evaluating safety concerns in schools, it is critical to examine the role and benefits of the presence of law enforcement compared to, or in addition to, counselors and social support services.

Although prompted by an urgent need to address school violence, employing uniformed officers remains a highly contested practice. When discretion on discipline matters extends beyond the domain of teachers and staff, a 2011 study published in the *Justice Quarterly*, entitled, “Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending Behaviors,” found that the presence of police officers redefines “disciplinary situations as criminal justice problems rather than social, psychological, or academic problems, and accordingly increases the likelihood that students are arrested at school.” This tendency to rely on the formal processing of youth to ensure safety calls into question SROs ability to accomplish their stated goal (i.e., “to actively provide a safe school environment that is conducive to learning”) without relying on exclusionary discipline tactics that lead to school pushout.

Exclusionary discipline practices employed by uniformed officers might foster an environment of fear and mistrust. Youth and Society published a 2008 study entitled “School Discipline and Security: Fairness for all Students?” that evaluated perceptions of school discipline and security and found that students report a greater sense of fairness when non-police security guards are employed rather than uniformed police officers. Importantly, this perception of fairness plays a key role in students’ tenure in school, meaning the way students understand and interpret the fair application of school rules and punishments correlates with their graduation. *Growing Kings* addresses school safety by advocating for safety and security policies that prioritize prevention, intervention, and relationships of trust rather than reactive discipline that fails to understand root causes and may lead to student involvement with the criminal justice system. This involves an investment in school psychologists, counselors, and social workers.

WE EMPLOY THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES:

- 👑 Publish research briefs examining the impact of the increasing presence of law enforcement in schools;
- 👑 Advocate for high-quality training, clearly defined and restricted roles, and soft uniforms for school resource officers;
- 👑 Promote prevention and intervention strategies that divert youth from the criminal justice system into culturally relevant youth programming; and
- 👑 Advocate for the prioritization of investments in communities of support that employ school psychologists, counselors, and social workers.

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE & ATTENDANCE POLICIES





REMOVAL OF EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE & SCHOOL PUSHOUT POLICIES

Many schools today employ exclusionary punishments which take the form of in-school-suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and even referrals to the criminal justice system. The rise of exclusionary discipline practices in schools correlates with the use of zero-tolerance policies. Zero-tolerance policies involve “the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context”. While suspension and expulsion are defended as necessary to maintain order and safety in schools, recent research by the American Psychological Association has questioned the effectiveness and fairness of these zero-tolerance policies. Although suspension is meant to deter future misbehavior, several studies show that suspension correlates with an increase in future misbehavior and repeated suspension. In fact, suspension has been found to be a moderate-to-strong predictor of eventual dropout.

Exclusionary punishment policies resulted in 59,129 students receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions in the state of Alabama during the 2013-2014 school year. This kind of punishment is a huge disservice to student learning, and these practices have the most negative impact on students of color. According to Civil Rights Data Collection, Black students were overrepresented in every school discipline metric in Alabama during the 2013-2014 school year. Close to 64% of the students in Alabama who received one or more out-of-school suspensions were Black; this only exacerbates academic achievement gaps as well as disparities in dropout rates. When students are subjected to exclusionary discipline, the teacher/student relationship is strained, leading students to see their teachers as enforcers rather than educators. By breaking down the trust that is needed in these relationships, exclusionary discipline creates a school environment fueled by punishment and control rather than one focused on learning, understanding, and growth.

The negative impact of exclusionary discipline practices which remove students from the classroom warrants an ongoing and continued investment into prevention and intervention strategies that employ alternative disciplinary tactics. Strategies such as Restorative Justice, Conscious Discipline, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and Collaborative Problem Solving aim to keep students in the classroom unlike more punitive practices. Growing Kings addresses school pushout by providing research data and by advocating for systemic change that promotes the use of non-exclusionary discipline measures that take into account the circumstances and root causes of student misbehavior. By trying to understand and correct behavior in a productive way, schools can use student disruption as a learning opportunity rather than as an opportunity to prevent learning.

WE EMPLOY THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES:

-  Publish research briefs focused on bringing awareness to current statewide and local school system exclusionary practices and zero-tolerance policies;
-  Work to create a barrier between school-based discipline and the juvenile justice system;
-  Design effective system alternatives to suspension, expulsion, and other exclusionary punishments; and
-  Advocate for the child’s right to due process in disciplinary hearings, especially those that may lead to formal involvement in the criminal justice system.



SCHOOL DISCIPLINE & ATTENDANCE POLICIES

REVISION OF SCHOOL ATTENDANCE & TRUANCY POLICIES




One of the foundational criteria for student academic achievement is school attendance. Each day of absence results in students missing key instructional time and reduces their likelihood to graduate. Nearly 92,000 students in Alabama's public schools missed 15 or more days of school during the 2013-2014 school year, according to data released by the U.S. Department of Education. In Birmingham City Schools, 19.5% of Black/African-American students were chronically absent during the 2015-2016 school year.

Under Alabama law, children between the ages of 6 and 17 years old must be enrolled in a school. Children enrolled in an Alabama public schools who fail to explain in writing the cause of any absence within three days following their return to school are considered truant. A child who accrues seven unexcused absences within a school year shall be considered truant for the purpose of filing a petition in court and may be placed in a juvenile facility or long-term residential care. Additionally, an adult who has custody of the child may be prosecuted and face a year of jail time and/or a fine of up to \$500. Though chronic absenteeism and truancy are different, they both carry significant consequences for a child's educational and personal development and a custodial adult's economic security.

Attendance monitoring initiatives should focus on providing the supports and resources children and families need rather than employing punitive measures that remove children from their homes and take adults away from work by placing them in jail. While accountability for school attendance primarily resides with students and their parents or guardians, there are several extenuating circumstances that lead to a child missing school. A review of truancy literature shows that this issue is most prevalent among students from neighborhoods marked by higher levels of violence, child maltreatment, crime, drug abuse, and unemployment.

Growing Kings addresses school attendance and truancy challenges by providing research data on attendance disparities and by advocating for the use of more discretion coupled with trauma-informed care practices when enforcing attendance and truancy policies. Growing Kings works to promote the understanding that economically disadvantaged individuals are more likely to miss school time and that the cause of such absences are often due to extenuating circumstances, such as a lack of transportation or healthcare, rather than intentional disregard. In doing so, Growing Kings hopes to shift the way in which attendance enforcement is carried out so that students, families, and schools are lifted up with supports to improve attendance rather than penalized for circumstances beyond their control.

WE EMPLOY THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES:

-  Publish research briefs focused on bringing awareness to statewide and local school system attendance data and truancy laws, practices and policies;
-  Design effective system alternatives to attendance and truancy punishments that incentivize attendance through sustainable community partnerships; and
-  Promote and connect families to needs-based wrap-around services that help to reduce the likelihood of chronic absenteeism and truancy.

WORKFORCE HIRING & DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES





FAIR-HIRING PRACTICES IN THE PUBLIC & PRIVATE SECTOR

As part of its policy agenda, Growing Kings advocates for state and citywide adoption and implementation of Ban the Box (BTB) policies for all private and public sector companies, organizations, and entities. The BTB initiative is a policy of removing the conviction history check-box from job applications for those seeking new employment. Juveniles and adults who have criminal records face significant barriers to workforce opportunities. In 2016, there were approximately 856,130 juvenile arrests in the United States. According to the National Institute of Justice, close to one-third of adults in the U.S. have been arrested before age 23. In Jefferson County, Alabama, approximately 2,000 people return home from prison each year. These individuals face several hurdles to earning a living wage through gainful employment, which produce and reproduce economic insecurity. The broad effects of such barriers merit swift and effective policy solutions for this population.

Ban the Box laws help to reduce employer biases by delaying the point at which employers learn about an applicant's criminal record, thus, allowing employers to assess an applicant based on relevant skills and qualifications first, rather than dismissing an application based on criminal history alone. Research shows that many employers are hesitant to consider an applicant with a criminal history or preclude an applicant with a record from applying at all. The stigma associated with an arrest or conviction history is further perpetuated when hiring practices hinder individuals from obtaining employment and leave them in even more precarious circumstances. The negative economic impact on Alabama and the entire country will reach a fever pitch with the continued federal and statewide criminal justice reform efforts to rightly reduce the number of incarcerated non-violent offenders, if the adoption of Ban the Box policies are ignored.

Fair-chance hiring practices and other policies that eliminate employment barriers have demonstrated positive outcomes for individuals, communities, and institutions. Providing individuals who have a criminal record with the opportunity to work increases the likelihood of achieving financial security for themselves and their families. Ban the Box and other fair-chance policies provide initial entry into the hiring process, which would ideally expand workforce opportunities and economic security for ex-offenders. Growing Kings addresses fair-hiring challenges by advocating for policies that reduce and hopefully eliminate discrimination and by partnering with local corporations to increase work opportunities for young adults and youth with criminal records.

WE EMPLOY THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES:

-  Publish research briefs promoting the positive impact of the adoption of federal, state, and local Ban the Box policies;
-  Advocate for the immediate implementation of Ban the Box policies within all local and statewide governmental agencies;
-  Develop and promote local and statewide fair-hiring initiatives for corporate and small business to adopt; and
-  Increase community awareness of employment opportunities through marketing campaigns, job fairs, and events.

WORKFORCE HIRING & DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

TRAINING & JOB PLACEMENT FOR TECHNICAL/TRADE-SKILLED LABOR

Youth unemployment is a growing issue that leaves young people without opportunities for advancement. Nationally, Black and Latinx youth are significantly more likely than their White peers to be disconnected from engagement opportunities; PolicyLink reports that 22 percent of Black and 18 percent of Latino youth are neither working nor in school, compared with 11 percent of White youth. In Jefferson County, Alabama, 2,723 teens between 16 and 19 years of age were not in school and not working during the years 2012 through 2016, a figure that is on par with the rest of the state, according to VOICES for Alabama's Children.




A report by Opportunity Nation: The Forum for Youth Investment entitled, "Youth Unemployment," states, "Despite the current unemployment crisis, there are millions of U.S. jobs available right now that employers need to fill, but applicants lack the required degree, certificate and skills.

Shifts in Alabama's population will continue to influence workforce opportunities. A report by The University of Alabama's Center for Business and Economic Research projects key demographic changes in Alabama's population through 2025 due to shifts in age distribution and racial composition. An increase in the population of persons over the age of 65 creates an aging and retiring workforce. In order to fill these gaps, lawmakers in the state of Alabama must ensure that our growing and diverse youth population receives adequate foundational support, competitive educational opportunities, and proper workforce training to move Alabama forward.

Investments into youth workforce development should focus on providing comprehensive support services, creating effective career pipelines, and prioritizing the hiring and retention of boys and young men for high quality jobs and careers. Of special focus is investing in strategic partnerships and building an infrastructure that creates career paths through technical/trade-skill academies, apprenticeships, workforce training programs, and internships.

Growing Kings addresses youth workforce development and training by advocating for the removal of barriers and expanding employment opportunities for boys and young men to aid in creating increased pathways to careers and training in technical/trade-skills. Additionally, it is essential that culturally relevant marketing efforts are utilized when promoting workforce opportunities to communities of color.

WE EMPLOY THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES:

-  Publish research briefs focused on changes to federal, state, and local policies that increase work opportunities for unemployed or formerly incarcerated youth;
-  Promote statewide and local investment into technical/trade-skill academies, apprenticeships, workforce training programs, and internships for youth; and
-  Increase community awareness of job opportunities through marketing campaigns and events.

PLAN OF ACTION

Over the course of the year, Growing Kings will host 16 events and support the organizing of 3 rallies that engage local, state, and national partners in order to create system-level change that improves juvenile justice, educational, and workforce outcomes for boys and young men of color. Additionally, we inform stakeholders on policy developments using various channels such as letter writing campaigns, email newsletters, social media, as well as print and news media. Our goal is to create targeted awareness that builds a community of support challenging systemic inequities that adversely impact male youth of color in the state of Alabama.

Monthly Partner Meetings

A major aspect of our advocacy agenda, and work through the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, involves hosting monthly network meetings structured as fireside chats. These meetings take place in one of our major partner cities (Birmingham, Huntsville, Mobile, and Montgomery) every three months on a rotating basis and focus on different priority areas with each installment. The chats will be hosted by a network partner in the applicable city and will feature an issue expert to provide knowledgeable commentary and produce an action-oriented discussion focused on sustainable systemic change.

Policy Briefs and Policy Grinds

In order to communicate research findings, empirical data, and advances in our local and statewide advocacy efforts, we issue policy briefs related to each of our priority areas. Each policy brief is designed to share relevant and thoughtful content that promotes an asset-based narrative around solutions that improve life outcomes for boys and men of color. Additionally, with the release of each brief, a morning convening called a “Policy Grind” is held at a local coffee shop to showcase, review, and discuss the report with network partners, policy makers, and general stakeholders.

Yearly Knights of the Round Table Event

Each year, we invite national partners engaged in policy, advocacy, and practice to participate in an afternoon of presentations and panel discussion around issues facing boys and young men of color. The convening gathers statewide funders, policy makers, and practitioners to encourage greater alignment of local efforts. By broadening our lens and looking at the national landscape, we are not only able to evaluate and think critically about opportunities for improvement in our state, but also learn from successful initiatives across the country.

Media Engagement: Twitter Chats and Opinion Pieces

In order to keep our stakeholders informed on policy developments within each of our issue areas, we host “twitter chats” with policy experts and practitioners, allowing community members to engage with, respond to, and ask questions of experts in real-time on social media. Additionally, by publishing opinion pieces in print media around the state, we inform stakeholders who may not connect through social media.

Issue Rallies

In order to build greater community and bring more voices in support of our advocacy efforts, three (3) city-wide rallies will be held for each issue area. In partnership with local community organizations and networks, these rallies will provide young people a platform to voice their thoughts and concerns on how these issues impact their lives. The rallies also serve as a launching pad for letter writing campaigns to policy makers.

A SPECIAL THANKS TO

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PolicyLink



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