PENNSYLVANIA JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM RECIDIVISM REPORT 2025

Pennsylvania
Juvenile Court
Judges' Commission

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2010 - 2011

NEED FOR RECIDIVISM TRACKING

- Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy (JJSES) was taking shape.
- Stakeholders agreed a benchmark recidivism rate needed to be established to determine the ultimate effectiveness of the JJSES.

2011 - 2012

DEFINITION & METHODOLOGY DEVELOPED

- Collaboration between the JCJC, Temple University's Dr. Phil Harris, and Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers representatives.
- Agreed on recidivism definition.
- Partnered with the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC) to access criminal court data.
- Selected a two-year tracking period to best reflect the impact of juvenile court services.

2012 - 2014

BASELINE BENCHMARK ESTABLISHED

- First studies use cases closed in 2007–2010 to set pre-JJSES recidivism benchmark.

BACKGROUND

The Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Judges' Commission (JCJC) provides leadership, advice, training, and support to enable Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system to achieve its balanced and restorative justice mission. The JCJC is legislatively empowered to advise juvenile court judges in all matters pertaining to the proper care and maintenance of delinquent and dependent children, employing evidence-based practices whenever possible, and to compile and publish such statistical data as needed for efficient administration of the juvenile courts.

In November 2010, the JCJC unanimously endorsed a comprehensive strategy, known as the Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy (JJSES), to enhance the capacity of Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system to achieve its mission of balanced and restorative justice. At the same time, stakeholders determined that a recidivism benchmark needed to be established to ultimately determine the effectiveness of the JJSES. For more information regarding the JJSES, please refer to Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy Monograph.

DEFINITION

RECIDIVISM:

A subsequent delinquency adjudication in juvenile court or conviction in criminal court for either a misdemeanor or felony offense within two years of case closure.

2021

- First report to integrate YLS risk levels and scores: Juveniles with Cases Closed in 2007–2016.
- Allows analysis by a youth's risk category for recidivism.

2022

- Reports for juveniles closed in 2007–2018 and 2007–2019 deepen risk-level findings.

2024

- Current study continues tracking, incorporating risk level analysis into recidivism trends statewide.

KEY FINDINGS

Recidivism rates substantially declined since the benchmark years of 2007-2010. In total, recidivism rates are down 47.7%, from an average of 21.6% during the benchmark years to 11.3% in 2022.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct the study, the JCJC first used the Pennsylvania Juvenile Case Management System (PaJCMS) to identify youth whose juvenile probation involvement ended in the cohort year and who had at least one case with a valid disposition prior to closure. This group served as the base sample for that year's cohort.

The JCJC then partnered with the AOPC to determine if any youth in the cohort had a subsequent criminal conviction for a felony or misdemeanor offense within two years of the youth's closure date. Matches were verified using a State Identification Number or a combination of name, date of birth, and Social Security number.

The JCJC also examined whether youth in the sample had subsequent adjudications of delinquency in juvenile court using PaJCMS. Data on both adjudications and convictions were merged to determine whether youth experienced a recidivating event within two years of case closure, with the first such event selected for further analysis.

PaJCMS was additionally used to capture demographic information, case characteristics, out-of-home service variables, and data on serious, violent, and/or chronic offenders, as well as Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory™ (YLS) scores.

DEFINITIONS

Adjudication of Delinquency: The juvenile court's determination that a youth has committed a delinquent act and is also in need of treatment, supervision, or rehabilitation. This is similar to the finding of guilt in criminal court.

Disposition: The action or decision implemented, or treatment plan decided upon, by a juvenile court in response to a written allegation of delinquency. This is similar to the sentence imposed in criminal court.

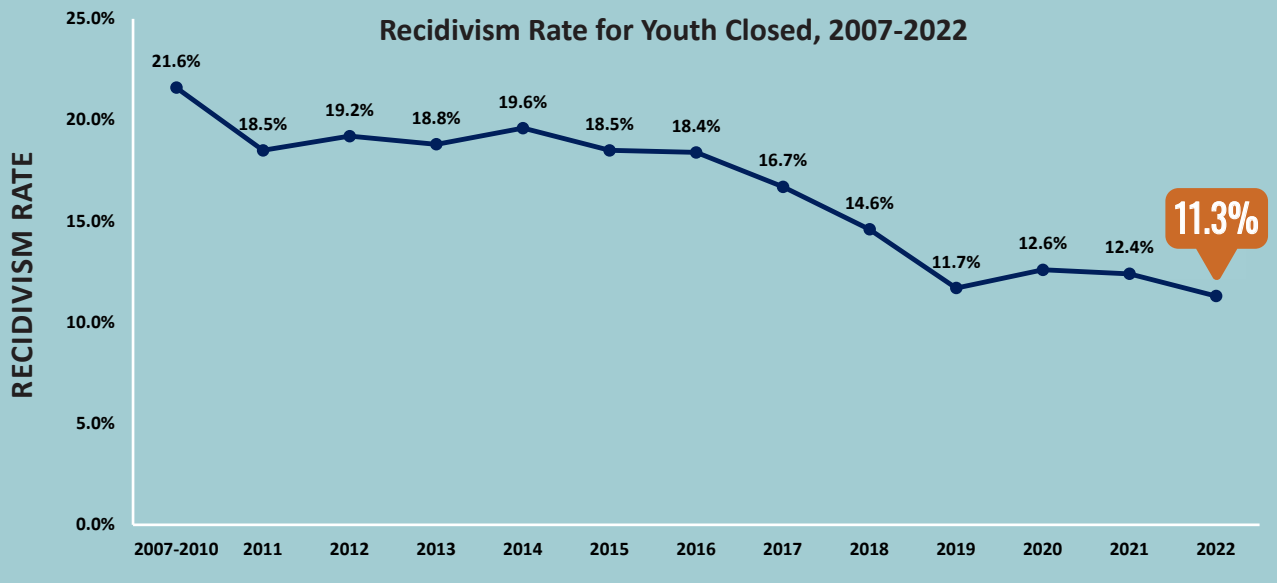
Diversion: A juvenile court disposition that avoids an adjudication of delinquency and redirects youth away from formal processing in the juvenile justice system.

Expungement: The sealing of a juvenile court record, making it permanently unavailable to the public, but where some information may be retained only by a juvenile justice agency for limited purposes.

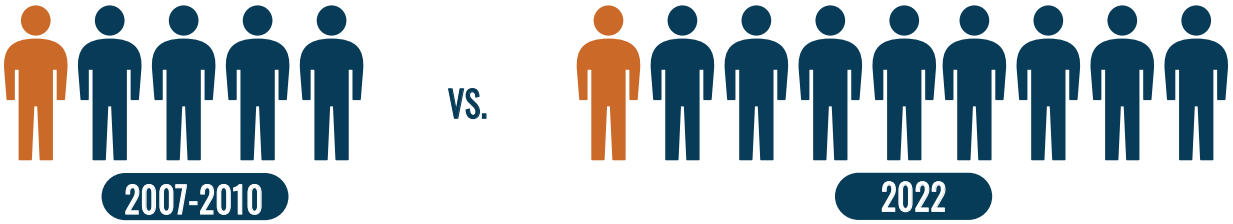
Index Case: The case that first brought the youth into the justice system and qualified them for inclusion in the study cohort. It serves as the starting point for measuring future reoffending. The index offense is defined as the most serious offense of that case.

Youth Closed: Youth terminated from juvenile court supervision. A youth could be on supervision for multiple individual cases at the time of closure.

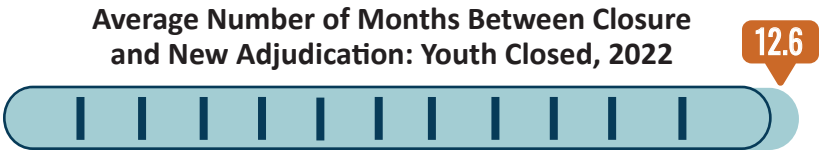
TRENDS



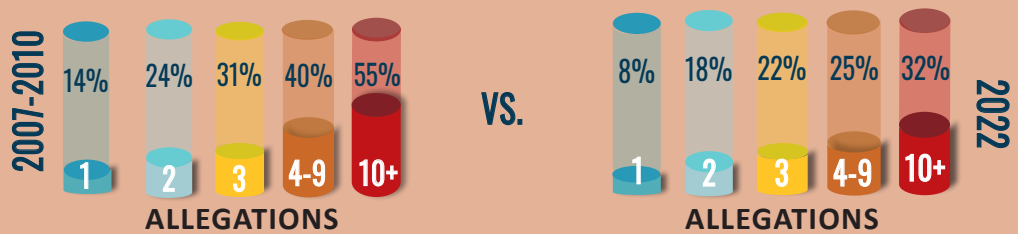
Since the benchmark years of 2007-2010, recidivism rates have been steadily declining. From 2007-2010, just over 21% of youth closed from supervision had a new adjudication or conviction within two years, which is about 1 in every 5 youth. Over the next decade and a half, that number decreased. By 2022, it had reached 11.3%, which is about 1 in every 9 youth, the lowest point since tracking began.



The timing to reoffense has been fairly consistent since 2007. Most youth who reoffend do so within a year. This trend mirrors national trends, in that if a youth is going to reoffend, it is most likely to happen soon after discharge from supervision.

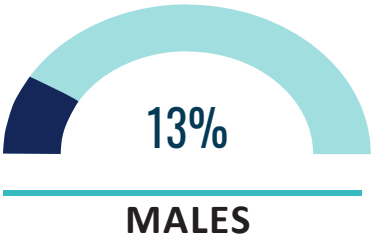


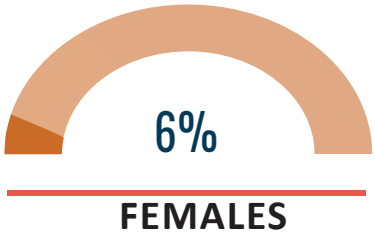
One of the most universal findings in recidivism research is that past behavior is one of the strongest predictors of future behavior. Since recidivism has been tracked in Pennsylvania, the data has consistently shown that the more previous allegations a youth has (a proxy for past delinquent behavior), the more likely they are to recidivate. Youth with only one allegation had recidivism rates under 10% in recent years, while those with 10 or more allegations historically had rates exceeding 50%. Even in 2022, when rates were at their lowest, youth with 10+ allegations still reoffended nearly one third of the time (32%).



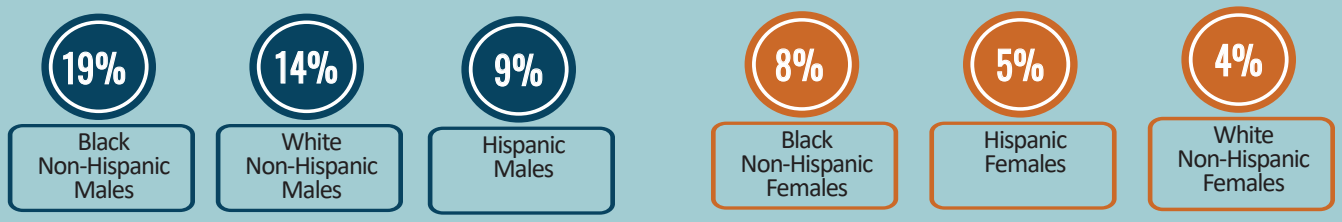
DEMOGRAPHICS

In general, males account for about 75% of the juvenile justice population, while females account for just 25%. Males tend to have higher recidivism rates than females as well. In 2022, males had a recidivism rate of 13% compared to 6% for females. Since the JCJC began tracking recidivism, males have consistently reoffended at a rate twice as high as females.



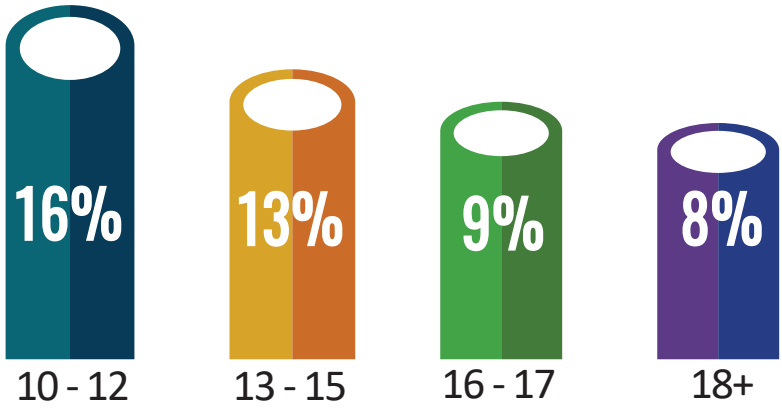


In 2022, recidivism rates differed across race, ethnicity, and gender, revealing distinct patterns. Overall, regardless of race and ethnicity, males were more likely to recidivate than females. Black Non-Hispanic males had the highest recidivism rate at 19%, followed by White Non-Hispanic males (14%) and Hispanic males (9%).



Youth who first entered the system at younger ages were more likely to reoffend than those who entered the system at an older age. Those youth who were between 10 and 12 at the time of their first written allegation had the highest recidivism rate. Conversely, those who were 16 or older at the time of their first written allegation had the lowest recidivism rate.

Recidivism Rate by Age at First Written Allegation, 2022



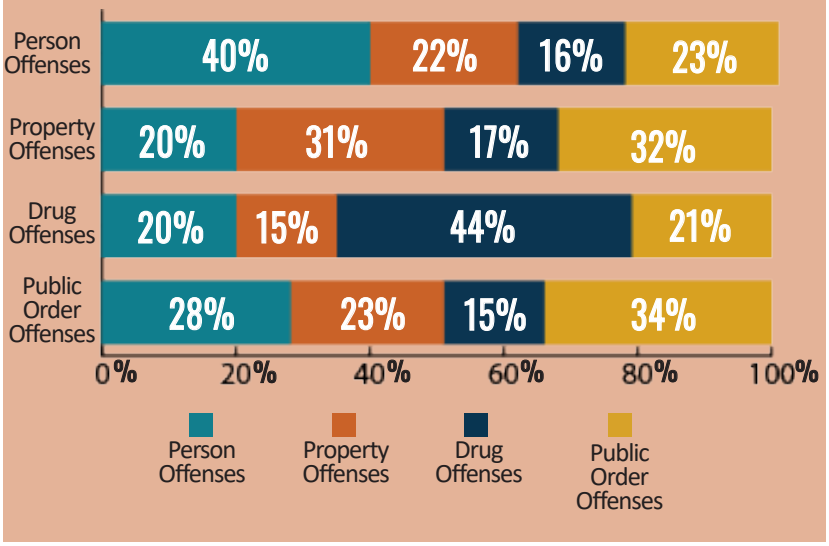
OFFENSE-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

In 2022, youth whose index cases involved property crimes reoffended more often than any other group, with 15% returning to the system within two years. Those originally adjudicated for person offenses followed closely at 12%. Drug-related offenses had the lowest rate at 8%, while public order offenses were at 10%.

Recidivism Rates by Offense Type, 2022

Data show that many youth who reoffend often commit the same type of crime as their index offense, a pattern called offense type specialization. In 2022, 40% of youth with an index person offense reoffended with another person offense, while 31% of those with a property offense reoffended with another property offense. Youth with drug offenses were the most specialized, with 44% recidivating with another drug offense. Public order offenses showed a more mixed pattern, with 34% reoffending in the same category but relatively even distributions across other types.

Offense Type Specialization of Recidivists, 2022



In 2022, recidivism rates varied based on the grading of the most serious index offense. Youth with a prior felony had the highest rate of recidivism at 16%, suggesting that more serious offenses are linked to a greater likelihood of reoffending. Those whose prior offenses were misdemeanors had a recidivism rate of 10%, while youth with ungraded offenses, typically less severe, had the lowest recidivism rate at 7%.

Recidivism Rates by Select Offenses, 2022

Firearm-Related Offense	23%
Robbery	21%
Theft-Related Offense	19%
Aggravated Assault	16%
Burglary	11%
Simple Assault	11%
Terroristic Threats	10%
Disorderly Conduct	7%
Sex-Related Offense	6%
Possession of Drugs	6%

Recidivism rates varied by offense type. Among select offenses, firearm-related offenses had the highest recidivism rate at 23%, followed by robbery at 21% and theft-related offenses at 19%. Aggravated assault was also relatively high at 16%. Lower rates were seen for sex-related offenses and possession of drugs (both 6%) and disorderly conduct (7%). Burglary and simple assault each stood at 11%, while the rate of terroristic threats was 10%. Overall, firearm-related, robbery, and theft-related offenses were most strongly linked with reoffending.

SERIOUS, VIOLENT, AND CHRONIC OFFENDERS

DEFINITIONS

Chronic Offender
A youth who has four or more previous written allegations for separate incidents that occurred prior to the date of the 2007-2022 closure.

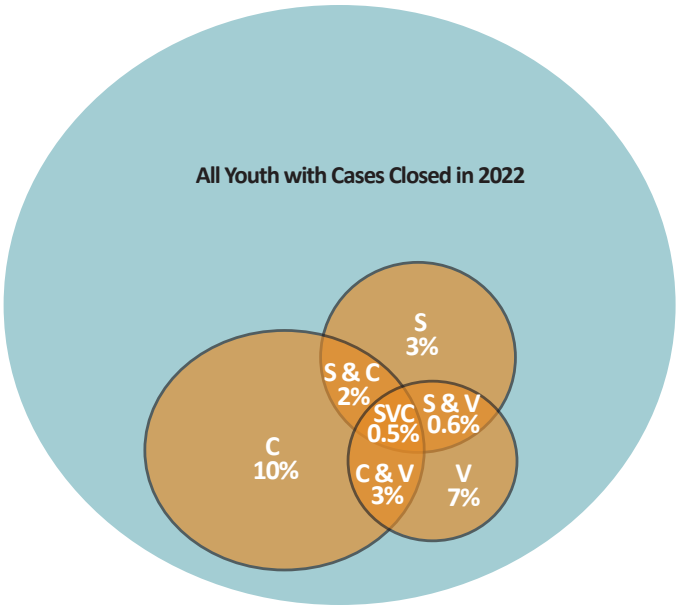
Serious Offender
A youth who has been adjudicated delinquent in juvenile court at any point in the youth's offending history for one of the following offenses: burglary, theft (felonies only), arson, drug trafficking (manufacture/deliver/possession with intent to deliver), and extortion (theft by extortion).

Violent Offender
A youth who has been adjudicated delinquent in juvenile court at any point in the youth's offending history for one of the following offenses: homicide or non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, kidnapping, and select firearm/weapon offenses.

Serious, Violent, or Chronic Offender: A youth who meets the definition of at least one of the following: serious offender, violent offender, or chronic offender.

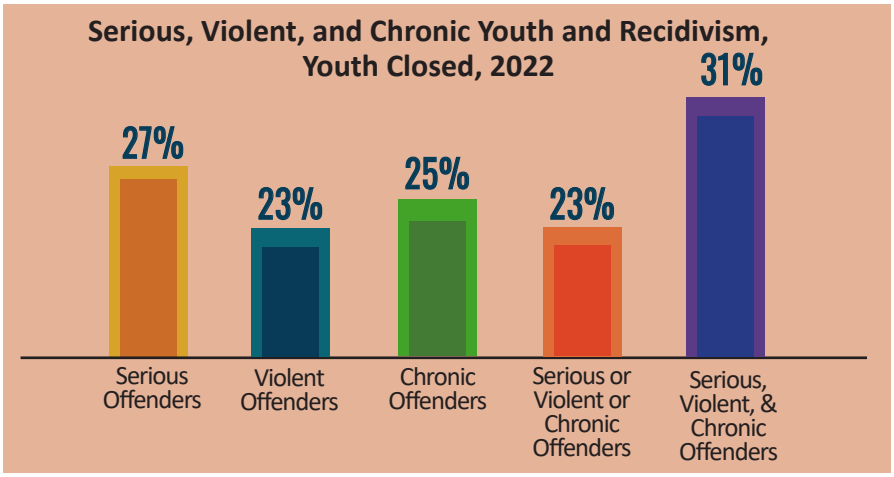
Serious, Violent, and Chronic Offender (SVC): A youth who meets the definition of a serious offender, a violent offender, and a chronic offender.

In response to rising violent juvenile crime in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention created the Comprehensive Strategy to target the small group of youth responsible for much of the offending. Longitudinal studies identified three patterns: violent offenders who escalate from minor aggression to serious violence, serious offenders who progress from petty theft to major property crimes, and chronic offenders who repeatedly offend over time—often predicting future criminal behavior.



In 2022, a relatively small portion of youth with cases closed in Pennsylvania were identified as serious, violent, or chronic offenders. Among all youth closed, 10% were classified as chronic offenders, 7 % as violent offenders, and 3% as serious offenders. Some youth fell into more than one category, including 3% who were both violent and chronic, 2% who were serious and chronic, and less than 1% who were both serious and violent. A small group, accounting for 0.5% of all closed cases, met the criteria for serious, violent, and chronic combined.

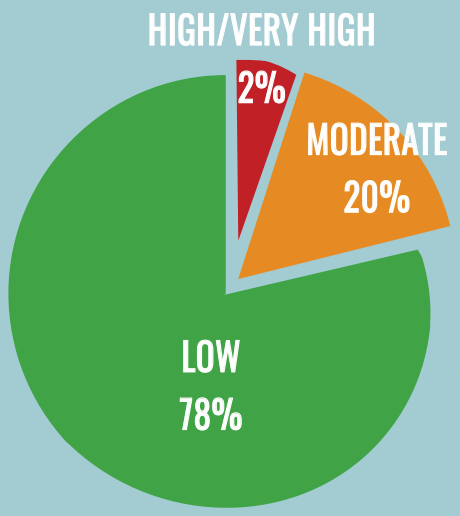
In 2022, recidivism was higher among youth with serious, violent, or chronic offense histories. Among juveniles closed in 2022, 27% of those with serious offenses, 23% of those with violent offenses, and 25% of those with chronic offending histories reoffended within two years. Youth who met at least one of these criteria had a 23% recidivism rate, while those meeting all three had the highest rate at 31%.



YOUTH LEVEL OF SERVICE

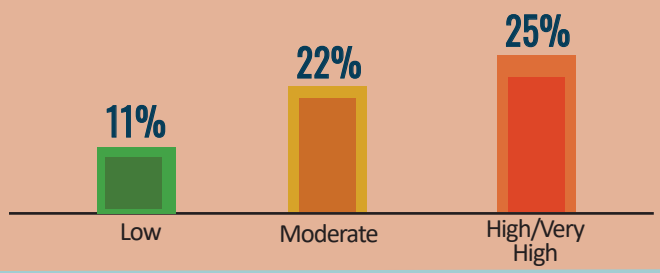
A key part of reducing recidivism is using a research-based tool to measure a youth's risks and needs. This guides supervision levels, case goals, and resource allocation. Pennsylvania uses the Youth Level of Service/ Case Management Inventory™ (YLS) assessment. The YLS evaluates 42 risk factors across eight domains linked to reoffending, assigning an overall risk level from low to very high. Juvenile probation officers use these results to target needs through treatment, services, and supervision. Youth are assessed when they enter the system, reassessed during their case, and given a final assessment at case closure. Analyses in this report focus on the final YLS score because it is the most predictive of a youth's behavior after court supervision ends, while also examining changes from first to final assessment and their link to recidivism.

Risk Level at Case Closure, 2022



At the time of case closure in 2022, most youth were assessed at a low risk of reoffending (78%). Another 20% were in the moderate range, while only 2% were high or very high risk. Recidivism rates followed the expected pattern: 11% for low-risk youth, 22% for moderate-risk youth, and 25% for those at high or very high risk.

Recidivism Rate by Risk Level at Case Closure, 2022

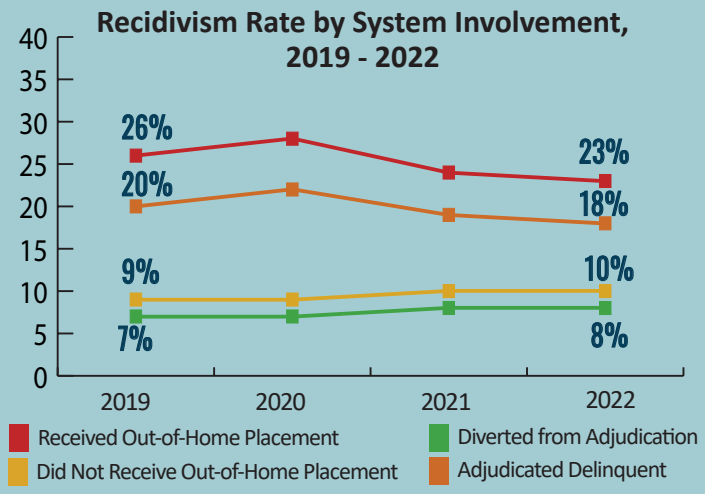


Change in YLS Risk Level by Risk Score of First YLS Assessment, Juvenile Closed, 2021-2022

	2021			2022		
	Low	Moderate	High/Very High	Low	Moderate	High/Very High
Lower Risk Score at Closing	63%	87%	95%	65%	84%	94%
No Change in Risk Score at Closing	19%	4%	2%	20%	5%	1%
Higher Risk Score at Closing	17%	10%	3%	16%	12%	5%

Analysis of cases closed between 2021 and 2022 shows that most youth lowered their risk by case closure, with the greatest improvements among those who began at high or very high risk. Ninety-five percent of youth initially assessed as high or very high risk had a lower final risk level, and 94% had a lower risk score. Moderate-risk youth improved at rates of 87% in 2021 and 84% in 2022, while low-risk youth improved at 63% and 65%, respectively. Only a small share showed no change or an increase, with increases most common among youth who started at low risk.

SYSTEM PENETRATION



Analysis of cases closed from 2019 to 2022 shows stability and modest improvement across key measures of system penetration. The proportion of youth who did not receive out-of-home placement increased slightly, from 9% in 2019 to 10% in 2022. Similarly, the share of youth diverted from adjudication grew from 7% to 8%, indicating sustained use of diversion practices. During the same period, the percentage of youth adjudicated delinquent declined from 20% to 18%, while those who received out-of-home placement decreased from 26% to 23%. These shifts suggest continued progress toward keeping youth in their communities and reducing deeper system involvement.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The findings in this report should be interpreted with caution, as many factors influencing recidivism are outside the juvenile justice system's control. Demographics, socioeconomic conditions, family functioning, criminal opportunities, and gang involvement all contribute to reoffending. County-level rates are also shaped by differences in the "case mix" of youth served, so comparisons between counties or across years without adjusting for these differences can be misleading.

The YLS assessment helps examine whether recidivism trends reflect system improvements or changes in youth characteristics. Section 4 shows declines in recidivism among youth with similar risk levels, especially those assessed as high or very high risk. While this suggests improved system performance, the conclusions require further validation. Only 57 percent of youth closed in 2020 had a final YLS within six months of case closure, and missing data may bias results.

The YLS cannot capture all relevant factors, so unmeasured changes in case characteristics or court practices may also explain recent declines. Before 2015, expunged cases limited the analysis, but a rule change now allows retention of identifying data for research.

The data in this report are descriptive and do not establish causation. Surveillance levels, arrest practices, and judicial perceptions influence recidivism but are not routinely measured. Finally, the analysis only captures reoffending events recorded in Pennsylvania's case management systems, so offenses in other states are not included, which is a common limitation in similar studies.