

Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice System

TASK FORCE
PROGRESS
BRIEF

2026

A Transparent View of
Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice Data



Pennsylvania
Juvenile Court
Judges' Commission

About the Task Force

In December 2019, Pennsylvania’s executive, legislative, and judicial leaders jointly formed the bipartisan Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force to conduct a thorough, data-driven review of the state’s juvenile justice system and recommend reforms to make it more effective, equitable, and aligned with research on youth development. The group included lawmakers, judges, prosecutors, defenders, advocates, and youth voices, and was supported by technical partners like The Pew Charitable Trusts. Over 16 months, and during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Task Force reviewed data from courts and agencies, gathered input from stakeholders across the state, heard testimony from national juvenile justice experts, and held public hearings to understand how the system was functioning.

The Task Force’s final report, released in June 2021, documented several key findings: many young people in the system had little or no prior delinquency and posed low risk of reoffending, most juvenile cases involved low-level offenses, and Pennsylvania underutilized diversion options, which were overwhelmingly successful when used. The report also highlighted racial and ethnic disparities, as well as geographic disparities, with similarly situated youth experiencing different outcomes depending on where they lived.

Based on these findings, the task force put forth 35 data-driven, research-based recommendations aimed at reshaping policy and practice. These included expanding community-based interventions and diversion for low-risk youth, narrowing the use of pre-adjudication detention, limiting criteria for adult prosecution, eliminating unnecessary fines and court costs, reserving residential placement for those who pose the greatest risk to community safety, and reinvesting savings from reduced out-of-home placement into evidence-based services.

The final report, which was designed to serve as a roadmap for targeted system enhancements, has influenced legislative activity and discussions around juvenile justice reform in Pennsylvania. The following brief highlights changes that have been seen in Pennsylvania since the Task Force concluded its efforts.

About the Brief

Since the release of the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force report, the Commonwealth has continued to make progress toward improving outcomes for youth, families, and communities. Guided by the Task Force’s recommendations, system partners across the state have worked to strengthen policies, practices, and collaboration at every level.

This brief explores key areas highlighted in the Task Force report to show where the system stood at the time of the review, where it is today, and what improvements have been made. By examining these changes, the brief provides a snapshot of the ongoing efforts to build a more effective, equitable, and developmentally appropriate juvenile justice system in Pennsylvania.



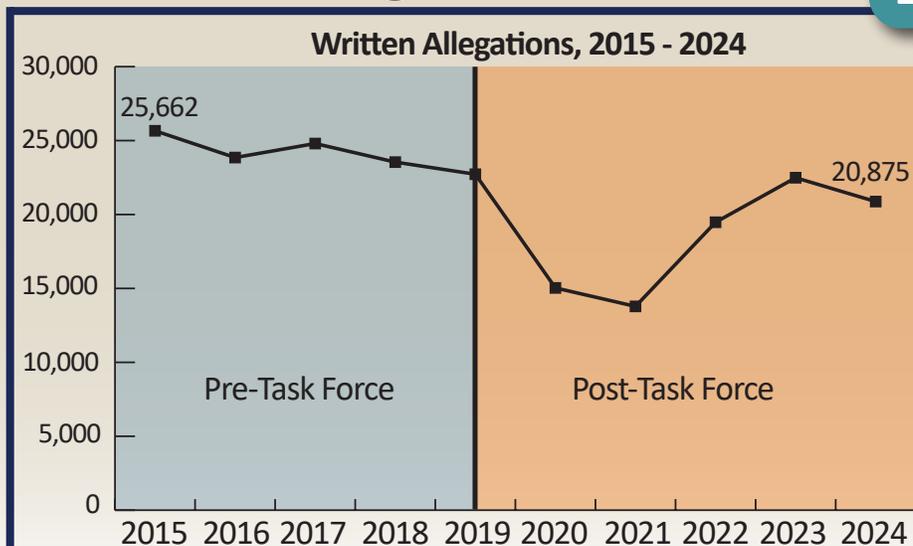
Written Allegations

2024



Key takeaways

- Lower-level crimes remain the most common offenses entering the juvenile justice system.
- Most youth with a written allegation continue to be first-time offenders and are at low risk to reoffend.
- After significantly decreasing during the pandemic, allegations have stabilized to pre-pandemic levels.



Allegations have decreased 18% since 2015.

2018

2024

Task Force

The Task Force reviewed scholarly research indicating that most youth who commit delinquent offenses are not on a pathway to a lifetime of crime. Rather, this behavior reflects normative adolescent development and largely self-corrects.

When reviewing Pennsylvania's data, the Task Force determined that most youth entering the juvenile justice system had committed low-level offenses, were at low risk to re-offend, and had very little prior involvement with the juvenile justice system:

- At least two-thirds of allegations were for non-felony offenses.
- Just under one-third of misdemeanors and fewer than half of felony written allegations were person offenses.
- 60% had no prior written allegations.
- 54% of youth entering the system were assessed as low risk.

The top 5 offenses committed in 2018 were:

1. Failure to Comply with an MDJ Sentence (C) - 18%
2. Simple Assault (M) - 10%
3. Possession of Drugs (M) - 9%
4. Theft-Related Offense (M) - 6%
5. Terroristic Threats (M) - 5%

70% Of allegations are non-felony offenses.

36% Of both felony and misdemeanor allegations are person offenses.

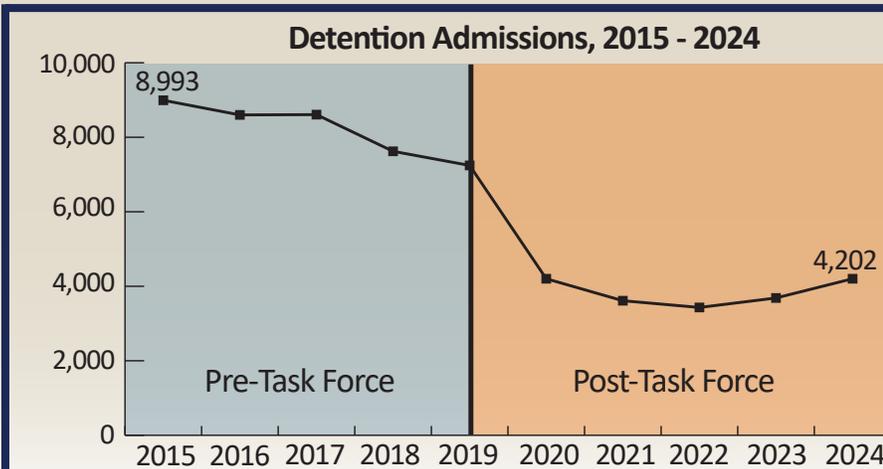
58% Youth entering the system had no prior written allegations.

58% Youth entering the system are assessed as low risk.

5 Top Offenses

- 16%** - Failure to Comply with an MDJ Sentence (C)
- 12%** - Simple assault (M)
- 8%** - Possession of drugs (M)
- 7%** - Theft-related offense (F)
- 5%** - Aggravated assault (F)

Detention



Detention admissions have decreased 53% since 2015.



Key takeaways

2024

- Detention admissions continue to decline across the Commonwealth.
- PaDRAI use has increased.
- The PaDRAI underwent a revalidation study in 2024 to ensure its continued effectiveness and consistent application.

2024

2018

Task Force

The Task Force reviewed data pertaining to the use of secure detention in Pennsylvania. Overall, the Task Force concluded:

- Pre-adjudication detention in Pennsylvania had significantly declined, with only 16% of allegations in 2018 resulting in detention.
- 19% of detention admissions were for misdemeanors.

The Task Force also reviewed Pennsylvania Detention Risk Assessment Instrument (PaDRAI) data and determined that, while the tool was widely available, many jurisdictions were not using it in the detention decision-making process.

Task Force Recommendation

“Focus the use of pre-adjudication detention.”

Historical Context



Pennsylvania’s recent decline in detention use was influenced in part by the statewide detention bed crisis and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in 2020, reduced capacity and temporary facility closures limited available beds, pushing counties to rely more on alternatives such as shelter care and community-based options, including electronic monitoring. These constraints, alongside shifts in local policy and practice, shaped detention trends during this period and are important for interpreting the reductions in admissions. The detention crisis, while not as critical now, continues to impact the state.

12%

Written allegations led to pre-adjudicatory detention admission.

6%

Of detention admissions were for misdemeanors.

43

Counties currently using the PaDRAI.

94%

Of all detention admissions came from counties using the PaDRAI.

15

Counties with no detention admissions.

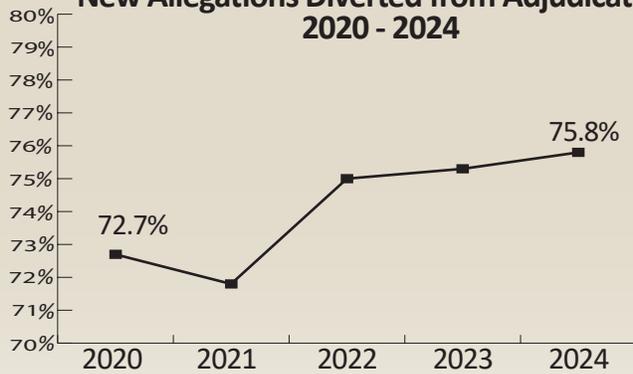
PaDRAI



Beginning in FY27-28, all juvenile probation departments will be required to use the PaDRAI as part of the new Evidence-Based Informed Intake in order to receive Juvenile Probation Service Grant funding.

Diversion

New Allegations Diverted from Adjudication, 2020 - 2024



Pennsylvania Diversion Definition:

Pre-Petition Diversion: This form of diversion addresses alleged offenses before court involvement through community-based services; successful completion means no petition is filed.

Consent Decree: This form of diversion occurs after a petition is filed and typically lasts 6 months (though can be extended) and allows youth to avoid delinquency adjudication and formal court involvement if conditions are met.

Note to the Reader:

The Task Force definition of diversion does not include consent decrees. As a result, comparisons to statewide data may vary.

2018

Task Force

The Task Force spent time reviewing the use of diversion in Pennsylvania. Statute and policy allow for a wide range of options to limit a youth's penetration into the system, and the Task Force determined that local policy varied significantly. This resulted in similarly situated youth experiencing different case outcomes based on jurisdiction.

Overall, the data demonstrated that most written allegations in Pennsylvania did not result in *pre-petition diversion*, even for youth who were low-risk or first-time misdemeanor offenders. When diversion was used, it was largely successful, with the majority of youth completing it without further system involvement.

Task Force Recommendation

"Expand services as alternatives to arrest and court referral."

2024



Key takeaways

- The use of diversion has increased.
- 75% of delinquency allegations are diverted from adjudication.
- Most first-time misdemeanants and youth identified as low risk are diverted from adjudication.

2024

91% First-time misdemeanants are diverted from adjudication.

87% Successful completion rate of youth diverted.

80% Low-risk youth are diverted from adjudication.

60 Counties diverted at least 50% of cases from adjudication.



Looking Ahead

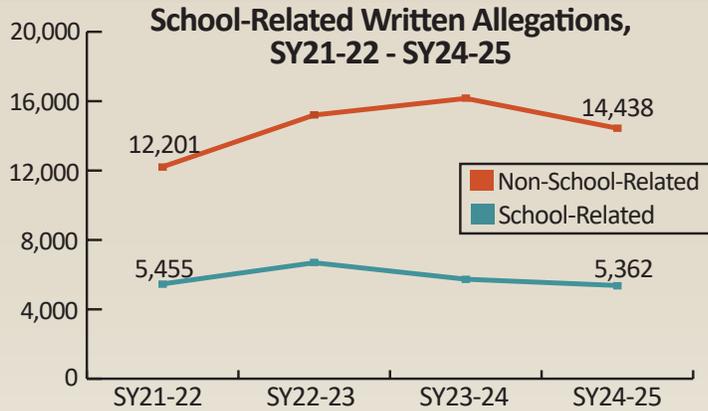
Diversion is expected to keep growing as counties expand community-based options and refine their practices. State and county partners are improving how diversion data is collected and reported, creating a clearer and more consistent picture of activity across Pennsylvania. Efforts are also underway to build a statewide inventory of available services, allowing counties to easily identify supports for youth in their communities. Together, these steps will strengthen decision-making and help ensure diversion remains a reliable and effective response for youth

School-Related Allegations



Key takeaways

2024



School-related allegations decreased 2%, while non-school-related allegations increased 18% since SY21-22.

2018

Task Force

The Task Force examined statute and policy that dictate how school-related misbehavior can be handled. The Task Force determined that wide variation exists in how schools respond to misbehavior in school settings. Some school districts limit or prohibit arrests for certain types of infractions through local codes of conduct, while others require law enforcement notification for the same exact infraction. This resulted in wide variation in practice across Pennsylvania. Overall, the data reviewed by the Task Force indicated:

- School-related incidents involving Black girls were three times more likely than those involving White female youth to incur law enforcement notification.
- Students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) made up one-third of school-related law enforcement notifications.

Note to the Reader:

At the time of the Task Force review, school-related written allegation data was not readily available in PaJCMS. The Task Force ultimately reviewed school discipline data provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Task Force Recommendation

“Expand and standardize school-based diversion.”

Looking Ahead

School-related offending remains an important focus area. The volume of crime that occurs in schools and offense severity offers insight into school climate and the extent to which these incidents contribute to youth involvement in the juvenile justice system. Jurisdictions in Pennsylvania continue to develop and expand school-justice partnerships and other programs to divert youth who have committed low-level offenses from formal system involvement.

- While only 6% of school-based incidents resulted in law enforcement notification, 27% of all written allegations to juvenile probation for such offenses.
- Written allegations to juvenile probation for school-based incidents continue to involve less serious conduct.
- Most written allegations to juvenile probation for school-based incidents result in diversion from adjudication outcomes.

2024

5 Top School-Related Offenses

23% - Possession of drugs (M)

21% - Simple assault (M)

9% - Terroristic threats (M)

8% - Disorderly conduct (M)

6% - Possession of a Weapon on school property (M)

82% Of school-related allegations are diverted from adjudication.



Residential Placement

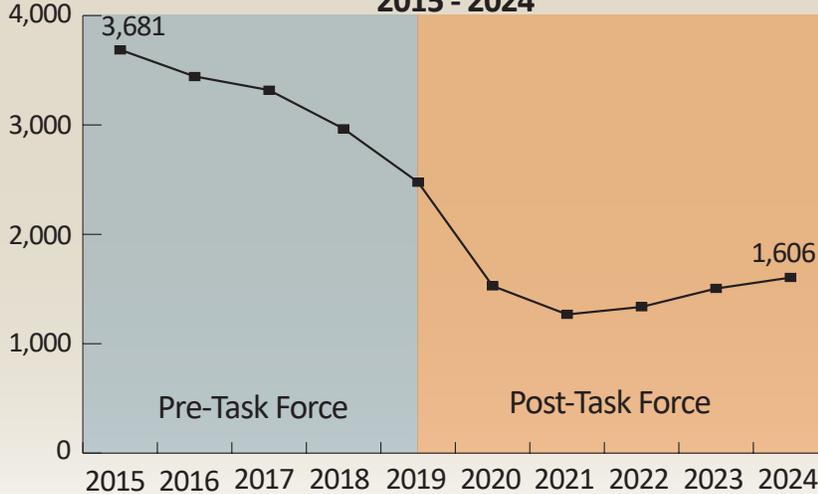


Key takeaways

2024

- The use of residential placement as a disposition remains low.
- Only 2.6% of first-time justice involved youth were disposed to placement in 2024.
- The overwhelming majority of youth disposed to placement score moderate or higher risk to reoffend on the YLS.

Delinquency Placements Including Disposition Reviews, 2015 - 2024



Delinquency placements have decreased 56% since 2015.

2018

Task Force

The Task Force reviewed empirical research that emphasized using residential placements judiciously, reserving such settings for youth who pose the greatest risk to community safety.

Upon reviewing Pennsylvania's data, the Task Force determined that, despite being most appropriate for those youth who pose the greatest threat to community safety, among youth who had been placed in 2018:

- 86% scored as moderate, high, or very high risk to reoffend on the YLS.
- 60% committed a misdemeanor offense.
- 39% committed a person offense.

Task Force Recommendation

"Reserve out-of-home placement for the most serious cases that pose a threat to community safety."

2024

89% Youth in residential placement score as moderate, high, or very high risk.

56% Youth received a placement disposition for a misdemeanor; **45%** of those cases started as a felony offense.

36% Youth adjudicated delinquent and sent to placement committed a person offense.



Looking Ahead

Pennsylvania is continuing to move away from out-of-home residential placements, particularly for lower-risk youth, and toward community-based supports. Investments in diversion and aftercare programs aim to keep youth closer to home while providing structured support. Task Force recommendations include reducing the number of youth in out-of-home care and redirecting savings into community-based services. These changes are intended to create a more therapeutic and supportive system that helps youth succeed in their communities.

Placement Cycle



Key takeaways

2024

- Youth are cycling through fewer placements and spending less time out of home.

2024

3 Facilities

Average number of facilities youth placed in.*

7 Months

Average time youth cumulatively spend out of home.*

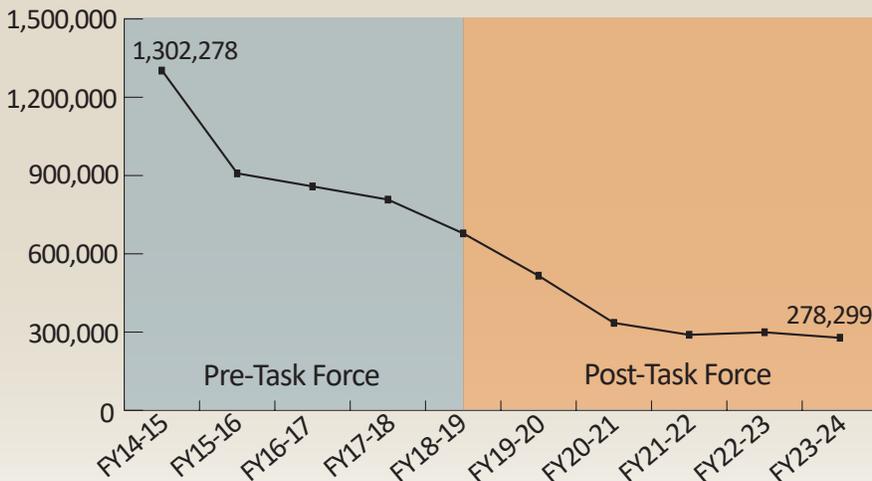
55% Of residential placements stem from dispositional review hearings, **82%** of which resulted from a technical violation of probation.



Act 107 of 2024

Act 107 of 2024, effective April 2025, strengthens judicial oversight for youth in out-of-home placement by requiring disposition review hearings at least every three months instead of every six. At each review, courts must assess youth progress, service needs, risk level, and the continued necessity of placement. This change encourages more targeted use of residential placement, increased attention to placement stability, and reduced unnecessary time out of home, aligning with the Task Force's recommendations.

Delinquency Placement Days of Care, FY14-15 - FY23-24



2018

Delinquency placement days of care have decreased 79% since FY14-15.

Task Force

The Task Force reviewed research on the importance of limiting the number of facilities a youth is placed during their involvement with juvenile justice and the amount of time they spend out of home.

After reviewing the data, the Task Force determined that youth in residential placement often spend extended periods away from home and can move through multiple out-of-home placement facilities.

- Young people sent to placement cycled through six out-of-home placement facilities (including placement, detention, and shelter facilities).
- Youth stayed on average 16 months out of home over the course of their case.
- 53% of residential placements stemmed from disposition review hearings likely the result of a technical violation than a new offense.

Task Force Recommendation

"Keep youth in out-of-home placement no longer than the timeframe supported by research."

Task Force Recommendation

"Curb the number of out-of-home placements youth cycle through over the course of their case."

*Data include secure detention, shelter, and placement stays.

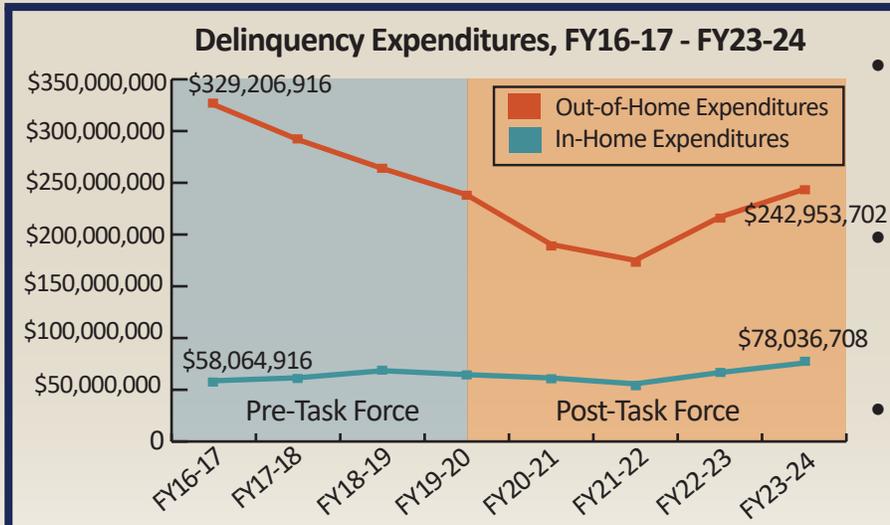
Delinquency Expenditures



Key takeaways

2024

2024



2018

Out-of-Home expenditures have decreased 26% since FY16-17.

Task Force

The Task Force reviewed fiscal data maintained by the Office of Children, Youth, and Families' and collected via the Needs-Based Budget. This review showed that most juvenile justice spending in Pennsylvania went toward out-of-home placement rather than services that allow youth to remain at home. In 2018, about one-fifth of delinquency service funding supported community-based options. The cost of residential placements had also risen over time, with both state-run and privately operated facilities reporting significant increases in per-youth expenses. Fiscal data from FY2018-2019 indicated:

- 20% of Pennsylvania's nearly \$350 million delinquency services were allocated to youth living at home.
- The average cost per youth was \$192,720 per year for state-run residential facilities.
- The average cost per youth in privately-run residential facilities was \$107,468 per year.

Task Force Recommendation

"Reserve out-of-home placement for the most serious cases that pose a threat to community safety."

- Pennsylvania's total delinquency expenditures were approximately 17% lower in FY23-24 compared to FY16-17.
- Pennsylvania has increased the proportion of funding for In-Home services from 15% of all expenditures (in FY16-17) to 24% of all expenditures (in FY23-24).
- The state has spent significantly less on Out-of-Home services in FY23-24 compared to FY16-17, despite the rising costs affiliated with placing youth outside their homes.

24% of \$321 million delinquent services allocated to youth living at home.

\$295,459
Average cost per youth in state-run residential placement.
53%
Increase since FY18-19.

\$142,392
Average cost per youth in privately-run residential facilities.
32%
Increase since FY18-19.



Looking Ahead

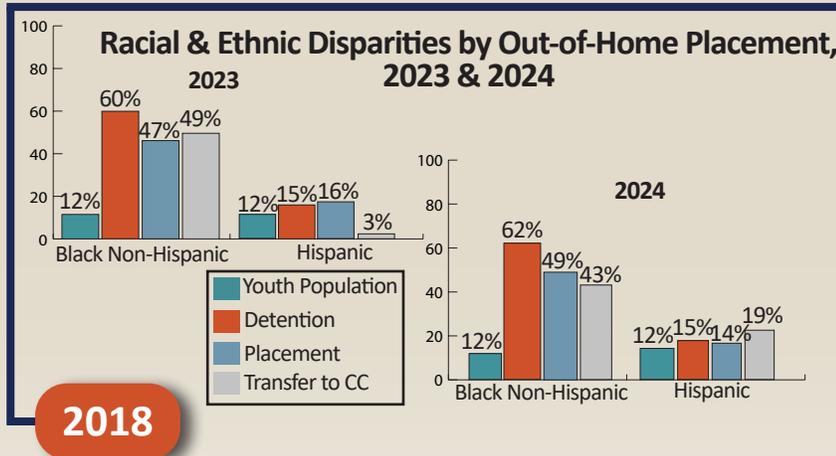
While Pennsylvania has shifted juvenile justice spending toward in-home services, out-of-home placements still drive most costs, with per-youth expenses rising, especially in state facilities. Reducing reliance on residential placement and reserving it for youth with the highest needs, while expanding evidence-based community interventions, diversion, and early intervention, can improve outcomes and contain costs. Reinvesting placement savings into local services and data-driven decisions can better align spending with what works for youth, families, and public safety.

Racial & Ethnic Disparities



Key takeaways

2024



2018

Task Force

The Task Force notes that racial and ethnic disparities exist at multiple points in Pennsylvania’s juvenile justice system. Black youth are overrepresented in pre-adjudication detention, residential placement, and adult prosecution. These disparities are not explained by differences in offending and highlight systemic inequities. Addressing them is essential to ensure fair, developmentally appropriate interventions.

- Black youth make up 14% of the statewide population and 38% of written allegations, yet they represent 62% of pre-adjudication detentions.
- 47% of youth sent to residential placement were Black.
- 62% of statutory adult prosecutions involved Black youth, and 55% of cases transferred to adult court by judicial waiver involved Black youth.
- Black boys comprise 7% of the youth population but 56% of adult prosecution convictions.

Task Force Recommendation

“Require racial impact statements and create a racial equity task force.”

2024

Black Youth

Accounted for:
 12% State population
 38% Allegations
 63% Detention admissions
 49% Placements
 74% Adult prosecutions
 43% Transfer to Criminal Court



Court Consultants

During recent county court visits, JCJC consultants have worked with local teams to identify and reduce racial and ethnic disparities. They review practices and policies and provide county-specific decision-point data to help stakeholders pinpoint disparities and develop targeted strategies to promote fairness and equity.

Looking Ahead

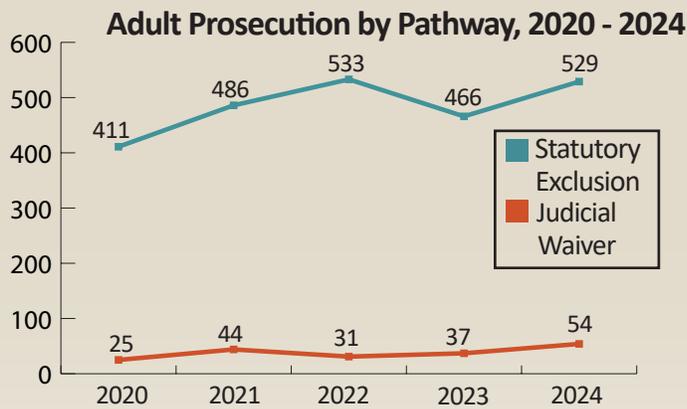
The JCJC will work with counties to reduce racial and ethnic disparities using county-specific data. Court consultants will help local jurisdictions identify decision points where disparities occur and develop targeted strategies. At the state level, the JCJC will provide training, policy guidance, and data-driven practices to make decisions from diversion to placement fairer and more consistent. The JCJC is also developing a fundamental fairness monograph to guide jurisdictions in addressing disparities.

Adult Prosecution



Key takeaways

2024



- The number of youth prosecuted as adults has increased over the last five years.
- The overwhelming majority of youth prosecuted as adults continue to enter the criminal justice system through statutory exclusion, with only a small proportion transferred after the review of the case by a juvenile court judge (i.e., judicial waiver).
- Most youth prosecuted as adults are never convicted in criminal court – rather their cases are dismissed, withdrawn, or decertified to juvenile court.

2018

Adult prosecutions have increased 34% since 2020.

Task Force

The Task Force reviewed research showing that prosecuting youth in the adult criminal justice system is generally ineffective at improving public safety. Adolescent brain development, particularly impulse control, long-term thinking, and the ability to resist peer influence, continues into the mid-twenties, suggesting youth should not be treated as adults. Transferring youth to adult court does not deter crime and is linked to higher reoffending compared with juvenile court. Adult courts emphasize punishment over rehabilitation and often lack age-appropriate services, and this stage of processing shows pronounced racial and ethnic disparities.

In Pennsylvania, youth may be prosecuted as adults through two main pathways: statutory exclusion, which applies to certain serious offenses and sends cases directly to adult court, and judicial waiver, where cases start in juvenile court and a judge may transfer them to adult court based on the circumstances and interests of justice. With this context, the Task Force reviewed Pennsylvania’s data and found the following:

- In 2018, 465 youth were prosecuted as an adult.
- 56% of adult prosecution convictions involved black male youth, who accounted for just 7% of the Pennsylvania youth population.
- Most youth (80%) were charged as adults via statutory exclusion (not judicial review).
- 44% of judicial waivers involved drug possession or theft offenses.
- Nearly 60% of adult court cases were dismissed, withdrawn, or returned to juvenile court.
- 80% of youth convicted in adult court received jail/prison (with an average minimum sentence of 28 months).

Task Force Recommendation

“Narrow the criteria for trying youth as adults.”

2024

583 Total number of youth prosecuted as adults.

65% Of black boys accounted for adult prosecutions vs. 7% of the juvenile population aged 10-17.

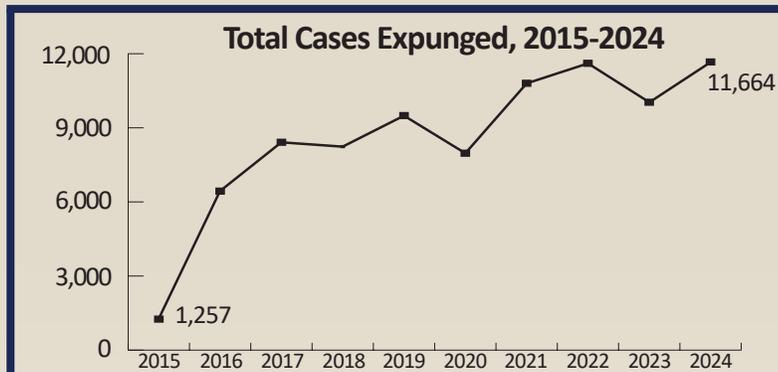
90% Of youth prosecuted as adults via statutory exclusion.

47% Of judicial waivers were for firearm-related offenses and robbery.

60% Proportion of youth prosecuted as adults whose cases are either dismissed, withdrawn, or decertified.

80% Of youth convicted in adult criminal court are sentenced to time in a jail/prison, with an average minimum sentence of 45 months.

Expungement



2018 The number of expunged cases has increased statewide.

Task Force

The Task Force spent a significant amount of time reviewing not only statute related to expungement, but also the collateral consequences of having a juvenile record. The Task Force recognized that expungement is a critical tool for helping youth move past juvenile justice involvement and access opportunities in education, employment, and housing. Upon reviewing available data, the Task Force learned that, while many cases were legally eligible for expungement, the process remained underutilized, leaving a significant portion of eligible cases not formally expunged. The Task Force also learned from stakeholders that the process (e.g., costs and fees associated with filings, who initiated the process) for expungement varied significantly across jurisdictions. The Task Force emphasized the importance of increasing awareness of expungement eligibility, streamlining procedures, and providing support to ensure that eligible youth can clear their records and reduce long-term barriers to success.

- 4,121 adjudication cases were eligible for expungement, but only 4% were expunged.
- 3,374 dismissed or withdrawn cases were eligible, and 42% were expunged.
- 11,852 diversion cases were eligible, and 43% were expunged.
- Overall, 19,347 cases were eligible for expungement, and 35% were expunged.

Task Force Recommendation

“Create a standardized statewide expungement process.”



Key takeaways

2024

- Expungement utilization continues to increase.

2024

828% Increase in expungements from 2015 to 2024

23% Increase in expungements from 2019 to 2024

16% Increase in expungements from 2023 to 2024



Act 108 of 2024

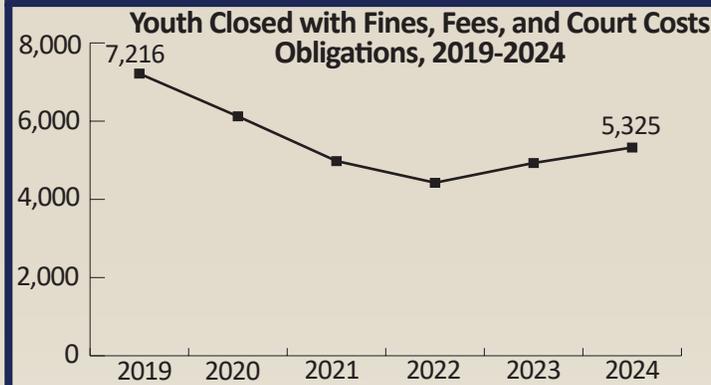
On October 16th, 2024, Governor Shapiro signed Senate Bill 170 into law as Act 108 of 2024. Act 108 of 2024 impacted expungement of juvenile records in two significant ways. First, it changed the time requirement for the expungement of misdemeanor adjudications from 5 years to 2 years, unless the misdemeanor fell under Chapter 61 (relating to firearms and other dangerous articles) or was a misdemeanor under section 3126(a)(2) or (3) (relating to indecent assault). Title 42 Sections 6304, 6323 and 6340 were also amended to require the chief juvenile probation officer to notify the court when a case is eligible for expungement, ensuring the burden of responsibility to initiate expungement does not fall solely on the youth.

Financial Obligations



Key takeaways

2024



2018

Fines, fees, and court cost obligations have decreased 26% since 2019.

Task Force

The Task Force found that financial obligations are among the conditions that can burden youth and keep them under court jurisdiction. After reviewing financial assessment data from AOPC, the Task Force found the following:

- 77% of all financial obligations are costs/fees.
- Youth were assessed roughly \$2 million in costs/fees, averaging \$173 per youth.
- 17 counties did not impose any fines in 2018, but seven averaged more than \$150 per youth.
- The amount of restitution assessed by the courts in 2018 totaled \$2,336,007.
- The average amount of restitution imposed was just under \$1,000 per youth.

Task Force Recommendation

“Eliminate the use of fines and most fees/costs.”



Looking Ahead

As discussions continue across Pennsylvania regarding the financial obligations placed on youth involved in the juvenile justice system, several legislative proposals have been introduced to examine court costs, fines, and fees, though none have advanced significantly to date. These discussions are separate from restitution, which remains an important mechanism for repairing harm to victims. Continued attention to court-related costs and fees may help reduce unnecessary financial strain on youth and remove financial barriers that can impede rehabilitation and long-term stability.

- Costs/fees are the most prevalent type of financial obligation, with approximately \$193 assessed per youth in 2024.
- Restitution continues to account for just under 20% of financial obligations assessed.
- The total amount of restitution assessed by the courts and the average restitution assessed per youth has increased.
- 35% of counties did not impose any fines in 2024, however 11 counties averaged more than \$150 per youth.

2024

70% Of all financial obligations are costs and fees.

24 Counties did not impose any fines in 2024, but 11 averaged more than \$150 per youth.

\$1,759,843.30

Total court cost and fees assessed, averaging \$193 per youth.

\$3,688,177.12

Total amount of restitution assessed by the courts in 2024.

\$1,287.00

Average amount of restitution imposed per youth.

Conclusion

The Task Force's review of Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system highlighted areas for improvement and opportunities to strengthen fairness, consistency, and positive outcomes for youth, families, and communities. The findings underscore that, while progress has been made, continued attention and refinement are necessary to ensure that practices are equitable, effective, and responsive to the diverse needs of those involved in the system. By examining current trends and practices, the Task Force has provided a foundation for understanding the system's strengths and identifying areas where change can have meaningful impact.

The report also emphasizes the importance of ongoing assessment and adaptation. Juvenile justice is a dynamic system influenced by policy, practice, and societal factors, and continuous evaluation is critical to ensuring that reforms are implemented effectively. This approach allows stakeholders to monitor the effects of new strategies, share lessons learned across counties and programs, and make adjustments to improve outcomes for youth and families, while maintaining public safety and accountability.

Finally, this report serves as a benchmark for future evaluation and progress. By capturing a clear snapshot of the system at this point in time, it establishes a reference for periodic reexamination and data-informed decision-making. Regular review will help track improvements, identify emerging challenges, and guide continued efforts to create a juvenile justice system in Pennsylvania that is fair, just, and supportive of all youth, families, and communities it serves.



Pennsylvania
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