

## Executive Summary

The report ***Reimagining Youth Justice in Oklahoma*** provides an overview of Oklahoma's youth justice system by detailing the environment that youth in Oklahoma face, synthesizing data and reporting findings on the state of the youth justice system today, and offering recommendations for reform to create impactful and transformative change for youth.

Oklahomans are forced to shoulder the additional economic, social and emotional burdens that come from years of the state's chronic disinvestment in public services. This lack of investment in core services, like financial support for schools, transportation, as well as health and mental health systems, has meant worsening child well-being outcomes. This, in addition to Oklahoma's tendency toward punishment and over-incarceration in the criminal legal system, removes support for children and families. This environment makes it more difficult for youth facing legal challenges to receive prevention and intervention services that meet all of theirs and their caregivers' needs. Additionally, noting that the youth justice system is historically punitive, and involvement in it can be harmful to youth development, Oklahoma ought to enshrine more protections for youth experiencing legal system involvement.

Hispanic, Latino, and American Indian youth have seen a decrease in the relative rate of legal system involvement, however, Black youth are disproportionately likely to face additional challenges as they move through the legal system process. While the amount of referrals appears to be returning to pre-pandemic levels, worsening disparities for Black youth point to inherent systemic bias at many decision points in the youth justice system, from referral to post-adjudication custody. This creates more challenges for Black youth, who were nearly three times as likely to be referred to youth justice system involvement as white youth, and almost seven times as likely to be placed under OJA custody in 2023. These disparities underscore the need to formalize rules around when pre-arrest and court diversion is utilized for youth, and to create more opportunities and options in services that meet young people's needs. The report points to numerous existing studies that show even minor involvement in the justice system as a youth can have lifelong consequences, often damaging one's health, negatively impacting one's success in education and employment, and access to affordables, safe housing.

***Reimagining Youth Justice in Oklahoma*** is available for download at [okpolicy.org/ReimaginingYouthJustice](https://okpolicy.org/ReimaginingYouthJustice), or use your phone's camera to access it via this QR code.





To tackle the overrepresentation of Black youth in formal court processing and custody, likely resulting from systemic and structural racism, Oklahoma also needs to create guidelines of when youth are diverted from the youth justice system, while also strengthening investments in preventative and pre-adjudication services that keep youth out of the court system, and at home in their communities. Oklahoma also needs to create investment opportunities to embrace new strategies and practices, like restorative justice and community violence intervention, to truly transform the legal system for youth who experience harm from it. Aggregate data should also be made more readily available to the public to better inform advocacy and research on the youth justice system in Oklahoma.

Meanwhile, stakeholders and advocates can take action by creating opportunities for youth to have a seat at the table in shaping policy that affects them and their peers. The Justice for Oklahoma Youth (JOY) Coalition has taken steps to put this effort into action by holding listening circles to hear about youth's needs, but needs to be a continuous and ongoing conversation to truly create meaningful and long-lasting change for youth, such as establishing a minimum age for legal responsibility, eliminating fines and fees, and removing the possibility of life without parole for youth.

## Recommendations

- **Fund and implement** new approaches to diversion, while strengthening existing supports.
- **Create guidelines** for when diversion should be used
- **Remove** developmentally inappropriate aspects of the adult criminal justice system from the youth justice system, including establishing a minimum age of criminal responsibility, banning the use of juvenile life without parole, and eliminate youth fines and fees
- **Strengthen advocacy** efforts by uplifting lived experienced leadership of youth
- **Increase transparency** and accountability
- **Strengthen investments** and supports for Oklahoma youth and families



**To join the Justice for Oklahoma Youth (JOY) coalition, please scan the QR code with your phone's camera.**

