



History and Impact of Juvenile Legal System

History of Juvenile Legal System

The juvenile legal system is a justice system for youth who “come into contact with law enforcement and are accused of breaking the law” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). The juvenile legal system is not the same as the criminal justice system for adults.

After youth interact with police in the community or with School Resource Officers in schools, juvenile courts will decide if the youth broke the law or not. The youth has to do what the juvenile court decides (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024).

The juvenile legal system started in the late 1800s and early 1900s. During this time, it was normal for the judge to just have a conversation with the youth, who didn’t have a lawyer (Juvenile Law Center).

Over time, the juvenile legal process gave youth more rights (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention). For example, the youth was told what crime they were accused of and had a lawyer (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention).

In the 1980s and 1990s, an increase in crime among youth resulted in “tough on crime” laws. This took away protections youth had under the juvenile legal system (Juvenile Law Center).

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Even though youth crime decreased since the 1990s, severe punishments still exist because of state laws (Juvenile Law Center).

Today, the juvenile legal system’s goal is to help youth stop breaking the law, make better decisions, and stay out of trouble (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). However, parts of the system do more harm than good.

The juvenile legal system confines the majority of youth for low-level offenses (Nam-Sonenstein & Sawyer, 2025).

This means the majority of youth are “locked up for not reporting to their probation officers...for truancy, running away, violating curfew, or being...‘ungovernable’” (Nam-Sonenstein & Sawyer, 2025).

Once in the juvenile legal system, youth experience prison conditions. A majority (96%) of youth “in juvenile out-of-home placement are in locked facilities” that use “handcuffs, leg cuffs, restraining chairs, [and] strait jackets” (Nam-Sonenstein & Sawyer, 2025).

Changes are needed to focus more on helping children instead of punishing them.

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Impact of Juvenile Legal System

The increase of School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools has resulted in more student arrests (Advancement Project, 2010, p. 4). These arrests can lead to detention, missing school to go to court, fines, probation, and suspension or expulsion from school (p. 17).

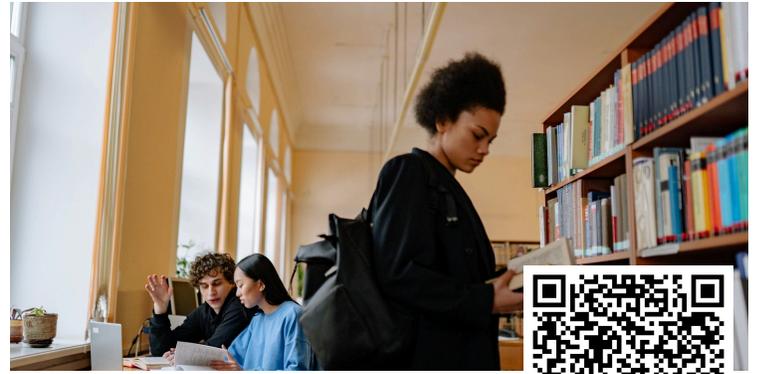
Sadly, a student's juvenile criminal record ruins their future "when they apply to college, apply for financial aid or a government grant, try to enlist in the military, or attempt to find a job" (p. 17).

Referral is the first time youth interact with the juvenile legal system, usually with SROs in schools or police in the community. From 2006 to 2014, African American youth were "twice as likely to be referred [to the juvenile legal system] as White youth" (Gonzales, 2018, p. 10).

During the same time, 50 out of 152 reporting counties in Georgia consistently referred African American youth more than other youth (Gonzales, 2018, p. 10). A high referral rate is important, because contact with the juvenile legal system increases chances of entering the system.

After referral, youth can go through different stages of the juvenile legal system. In these stages (detainment, confinement etc.), the number of African American youth increased and the number of White youth decreased from 2006 - 2014 (Gonzales, 2018, p. 8). This means African American youth are more likely to stay in the system than White youth.

Unfortunately, 78% of confined youth in the U.S. "are held in the most restrictive facilities — in youth [or adult] jails and prisons" (Nam-Sonenstein & Sawyer, 2025). These places do not provide age-appropriate services for children and teens. Youth placed in adult facilities are "five times more likely to commit suicide than those in juvenile facilities" (Nam-Sonenstein & Sawyer, 2025).



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Sadly, Georgia's juvenile legal system is similar to the national picture, despite the high cost of incarceration.

As of fiscal year 2023, "Georgia spends \$217,517 to incarcerate a child [for] a year...[which is] over eight times the cost of incarcerating an adult in state prisons (\$26,933)...[or] more than triple the cost of a full year attending the University of Georgia (\$28,142), Georgia Tech (\$28,584), and educating a child in Georgia's K-12 public schools (\$14,660) combined" (Davis, 2024, p. 18).

Georgia's Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) is the state agency that runs detention centers for youth and offers educational and behavioral health programs (Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice).

Although DJJ should educate youth to get their high school diploma or GED, a very small number of students (4.8%) tested as "proficient" or better on their 2022-23 end-of-grade assessments" (Davis, 2024, p. 15). In the same year, students in DJJ had a 29.9% dropout rate (Davis, 2024, p. 15).

Since a majority of students (78%) in DJJ have a disability, these poor education results show students are not receiving the support they need to improve their lives (Davis, 2024, p. 15).