

Transition Truths: Juvenile Justice

The juvenile justice system works to rehabilitate youth who engage in or are at risk of engaging in criminal behavior. These supports aim to intervene and ultimately prevent adolescents from engaging in criminal behavior as adults.

How this System Works

This system consists of the people, places, policies, and programs that work together to prevent juvenile delinquency, minimize youth exposure to violence, reduce gang participation, and provide mentoring for youth who are involved in or are at risk of becoming involved in the Juvenile Justice system.

People and Places

The people in this system include youth, corrections officers, probation officers, judges, attorneys, case workers, counselors, mediators, and policymakers who make decisions about sentencing, re-entry, and prevention. The work of this system happens in family and juvenile courts, prisons, jails, halfway houses, alternative schools, and correctional facilities. At the federal level, the [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention \(OJJDP\)](#) in the U.S. Department of Justice supports states and local areas in developing and putting into place effective Juvenile Justice programs.

Policies and Programs

The [Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 2002 \(JJDP\)](#) is based on a broad agreement that children, youth, and families involved with the juvenile and criminal courts should be guarded by federal standards for care and custody. At the same time, it also upholds the interests of community safety. The JJDP is the main piece of legislation influencing the Juvenile Justice system. It creates a juvenile justice planning and advisory system spanning all states, territories, and the District of Columbia. It also provides federal funding for delinquency prevention and improvements in state and local juvenile justice programs and practices. This Act also funds the OJJDP, which is dedicated to training, technical assistance, model programs, and research and evaluation, to support state and local efforts.

The [Prison Litigation Reform Act of 1996](#) aims to deter unnecessary lawsuits by people who are incarcerated and limit court involvement in prison conditions. It applies to juveniles held on delinquency matters, which limits the ability of young people to report staff abuse.

Eligibility

To be eligible to enter the juvenile justice system, a young person must be considered a “juvenile” under state law. In most states, this maximum age is 18, but some states set this number at other points between 16 and 19. Most states consider children under the age of 7 to be incapable of determining the difference between right and wrong, so they are usually excused from responsibility for any wrongdoing they might commit. The majority of youth in the juvenile justice system are 14 and older.

Youth enter the juvenile justice system by being accused of one or more of three different offenses:

1. Juvenile delinquency offenses are those that would be tried in regular criminal court if they had been committed by an adult;
2. Juvenile dependency cases involve minors who are abused or neglected by their parents or guardians; or
3. Status offenses only apply to minors and include things like skipping school, curfew violations, running away, and underage drinking.

Many of the programs that are funded by the juvenile justice system are aimed at preventing youth from becoming involved in the system. To be eligible, youth must be identified as being “at risk,” or being highly likely that they will become a juvenile delinquent. Definitions of being at risk differ by state and region.

Other programs are focused on the successful reentry or diversion of youth from formal processing in the juvenile justice system. Diversion, which prevents youth from being stigmatized as juvenile delinquents, may include drug and mental health treatment programs; drug, mental health, and teen courts; truancy and curfew intervention programs; mentoring programs; parent training; and underage drinking prevention programs.