



THREE FLIGHTS

Promoting Justice For Youth In Louisiana

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Executive Summary

Children and families in Louisiana are in crisis. One in every four children in the state lives in poverty, and one in five grows up in a high-poverty area. Key resources - particularly mental health and special education services - are very limited and vary significantly by geography. Poverty, service gaps, and associated challenges further marginalize Black and brown youth and families, disproportionately funneled into the prison system because of unmet needs. In short, youth and families are not getting the services and support they need to thrive.

The Current State of Youth Justice in Louisiana

Though the number of youth incarcerated in Louisiana has decreased over the past decade (as it has across the country), the state's youth prisons continue to be unsafe, ineffective, and costly. At the end of 2021, more than 700 youth were committed to the state and housed in secure and non-secure settings, including one of four large youth prisons. And that doesn't even account for the hundreds of young people detained in one of more than a dozen of the state's local detention centers, which have consistently faced reports of abuse, safety concerns, and inconsistent education services. More than 7 out of 10 youth incarcerated in Louisiana were Black, and about 30 of them were held on a Families in Need of Services (FINS) charge meaning they had committed no crime; they just had no safe place to go. Young people – even those placed out of home simply because they need services - spend about eight months in youth prisons, detention centers, or residential placements in Louisiana – almost an entire school year - at an exorbitant cost of more than \$150,000 per youth per year. In addition, more than a third of young people released from youth prisons return within three years.

A Brief History of Justice Reform

In the early 2000s, Act 1225 and accompanying legislation provided a framework for youth justice transformation in Louisiana that has failed to be realized. Some of these policy and practice changes were implemented; however, many were not. The infrastructure developed by the 2003 legislation has been neglected and has deteriorated over time. While the infamous Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth was closed, savings did not get invested in community-based alternatives and justice priorities. Though most parishes created Children and Youth Planning Boards, only a handful exist today, and they lack mechanisms to hold systems accountable to collaborative action.

Policy Priorities for Promoting Justice for Youth in Louisiana

Louisiana is at a pivotal moment. Though the state faces unique and serious challenges, it can improve public safety and youth and family outcomes through a set of policy and practice changes and investments. Drawing on best practices, insight from interviews with state and local stakeholders, and knowledge of state-level justice reforms across the country, this report highlights three priority recommendations:

- ◇ **Close facilities and significantly decrease youth incarceration to address violent and dangerous practices in facilities and be more cost-effective.** This could include reducing the amount of time youth stay in facilities, investing in front-end assessment centers to divert youth away from system involvement, funding credible messenger mentors and other mentoring programs, and implementing improved supervision strategies to decrease the flow of young people from probation to placement.
- ◇ **Reinvest savings and additional investment in building a comprehensive continuum of care in the community for kids and families.** Louisiana could look to a range of successful examples to fund community-based services, including capturing and redirecting savings from reduced incarceration and facility closure, maximizing existing state and federal funding opportunities, applying for additional federal and/or foundation resources, and building relationships across agencies to improve coordination of existing services. A comprehensive continuum would include community-based alternative programs, restorative practices, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in schools, among other services and supports.
- ◇ **Increase transparency, accountability, and oversight.** Louisiana can strengthen its existing infrastructure including the Governor’s Children’s Cabinet and the newly relaunched Juvenile Justice Reform Act Implementation Commission (JJRAIC). They can leverage these entities to require and fund regular data collection and reporting; regular fact-finding with directly impacted youth and families; support local, cross-disciplinary convenings; and incentivize local collaboratives to regularly meet, share information, and improve coordination of services for youth and families.

Promoting Justice for Youth in Louisiana

Background: Youth Justice in Louisiana

In 2003, Louisiana passed comprehensive youth justice reform legislation through Act 1225, the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2003.¹ The act mandated the closure of the Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth, called for savings to be redirected to community alternatives, and outlined a plan for transformative change. Yet, nearly 20 years later, Louisiana's youth justice system still has not fully implemented the transformation intended by the legislation. The state is at a pivotal time, and stakeholders must renew efforts to ensure the law is fully implemented as intended while leveraging innovations and best practices identified over the past two decades.

In 2021, Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) commissioned Three Flights, LLC to conduct an independent study of youth justice policy and practice changes since Act 1225, current challenges for justice-involved youth and families, and priorities for advocates and stakeholders involved in reform efforts. The Three Flights team reviewed public documents on Act 1225, including media reports, legislation, state agency reports, research briefs, and reports from academics and philanthropies. In addition, the team reviewed relevant national research on youth justice, covering topics such as evidenced-based practices, probation best practices, and developing community services for youth and families. Lastly, Three Flights conducted a series of qualitative interviews with youth justice system stakeholders in Louisiana, including those in positions of leadership at the state and parish levels, advocates, community service providers, and a researcher.

Drawing on best practices, insights from interviewees, and knowledge of state-level justice reforms across the country, this report summarizes key findings and recommendations for minimizing harm, keeping communities safe, and meeting the needs of justice-involved youth and families outside Louisiana of the justice system. The report is organized in four parts: the first section summarizes the crisis facing youth and families living in poverty in Louisiana; the second provides an overview of the current state of youth justice; the third outlines a brief history of youth justice reform over the past two decades; and the fourth details a set of three policy

Box 1: Understanding Act 1225

For more information about the steps leading up to the passage of Act 1225, the act itself, and some of the associated actions since its passage please see resources such as: [a map of Act 1225, Sustaining Juvenile Justice System Reform, A Report to the Louisiana Juvenile Justice Implementation Commission](#), and the [legislation itself](#).

Children and Youth in Louisiana Are in Crisis

Youth and families in Louisiana are not getting the services and support they need to thrive. Louisiana is consistently ranked as one of the worst states in the country in promoting child wellbeing across several metrics. For example, the 2021 Annie E. Casey Kids Count national data report ranked Louisiana 48th out of 50 states in overall child wellbeing, noting that one in four children in Louisiana is living in poverty, one in five is living in a high poverty area, and one in three live with parents who lack secure employment.² A 2020 report by Save the Children ranked Louisiana 50th – worst in the nation – on efforts to prioritize and protect children.³ That assessment based its ranking on child malnutrition, education, teen pregnancy rates, and early child deaths due to ill health, accident, murder, or suicide. Simply stated, Louisiana has a significant proportion of young people living in poverty.

Youth resources are limited in Louisiana – particularly mental health and special education services – and vary dramatically by region. In 2019, the Southern Poverty Law Center filed a lawsuit against the Louisiana Department of Health for failing to provide children on Medicaid with mental health care federally required by law.⁴ The lawsuit noted that the state failed to offer services, relying instead on psychiatric institution and the youth justice system to stabilize and support young people in crisis. SPLC also highlighted that more than one in four youth in Louisiana (27 percent) were diagnosed with a behavioral, emotional, or developmental disability, equating to 265,274 children.

Consistent with the child wellbeing assessments noted above, Louisiana also consistently ranks at the bottom of the list for educational outcomes and came in at 48th on Education Week's 2021 Quality Counts report.⁵ One of the most significant education challenges is in New Orleans, where the system was decentralized following Hurricane Katrina in favor of a network of independent, nonprofit charter schools. This move eliminated a crucial hub for community building and service provisions in neighborhood schools, many of which have struggled to meet students' special education needs, and stymied school-level reporting, transparency, and accountability which created dangerous gaps for children that went unnoticed.⁶ Increased suspensions and expulsions also followed, a key driver in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Justice System Involvement Disproportionately Impacts Youth of Color

Poverty, service gaps, and associated challenges further marginalize Black and brown youth and families in Louisiana, many of whom are funneled to the justice system due to unmet needs. Black residents in Louisiana are twice as likely to be in poverty as white residents,⁷ and while Black people make up 32 percent of the total population, they account for more than two-thirds of the state prison population.⁸ A staggering one in seven children in Louisiana (94,000 total) has an incarcerated parent, which, given racial disparities in the justice system, is a challenge disproportionately borne by children of color.⁹ The school-to-prison pipeline is also a persistent problem in the state that further perpetuates racial disparities.¹⁰ Black children are more than twice as likely to be suspended or expelled than to be in advanced placement courses in Louisiana.¹¹



Finally, even though numbers have declined in recent years, youth are incarcerated in the youth justice system simply because they need support, having committed no crime. Before the pandemic, there were around 50 kids in out of home placements on a on a FINS charge, having committed no criminal act.¹² The most recent data from the fourth quarter of 2021 showed that there were still more than 30 kids incarcerated on such charges during the COVID-19 health crisis, more than half of whom were Black.¹³ In short, the youth justice system in Louisiana has become a catchall for young people and their families whom other systems have failed. Justice involvement serves to further traumatize and isolate them rather than prioritizing connecting them with community-based services and supports to address unmet survival needs.

The Current State of Youth Justice in Louisiana

Though the number of youth incarcerated in Louisiana has decreased over the past decade as it has across the country, the state continues to invest in youth prisons which have proven to be unsafe, ineffective, and costly.

Louisiana Operates 5 State Youth Prisons and Contracts Additional Out of Home Placements As of February 2022, Louisiana operated five secure care facilities for boys:¹⁴

- ◇ Acadiana Center for Youth
- ◇ Acadiana Center for Youth at St. Martinville
- ◇ Bridge City Center for Youth (Jefferson Parish)
- ◇ Swanson Center for Youth in Monroe
- ◇ Swanson Center for Youth at Columbia

In addition, the Office of Juvenile Justice (OJJ) contracts with several nonprofit agencies that provide nonsecure, residential placement options, including group homes, shelter care, and transitional living programs.¹⁵ Girls placed in secure care are incarcerated in the Ware Youth Center in Coushatta, which a contracted provider runs¹⁶. Local agencies run several youth detention facilities, including:

- ◇ Bossier Parish Juvenile Center
- ◇ Caddo Parish Juvenile Detention Home
- ◇ Calcasieu Parish Juvenile Detention Center
- ◇ Epps Detention Center
- ◇ Florida Parishes Juvenile Detention Center
- ◇ Green Oaks Detention Center
- ◇ Jefferson Parish Juvenile Detention Center
- ◇ Lafayette Juvenile Detention Home
- ◇ Juvenile Justice Intervention Center
- ◇ Rivarde Juvenile Detention Home
- ◇ Sabine Parish Juvenile Detention Center
- ◇ Terrebonne Parish Juvenile Center

Conditions in Louisiana's youth corrections facilities are violent and dangerous and pose serious safety and education concerns. Safety issues are illustrated by youth suicide and frequent escapes. At least three youth died by suicide at the Ware Youth Center between 2017 and 2020¹⁷ and there have been several escapes from various facilities over the past four years.¹⁸ For example, 32 young people escaped over a two-year period from the facility in Monroe.¹⁹ In August 2021, 36 preadjudicated youth held at the New Orleans Juvenile Justice Intervention Center were relocated to an adult prison in advance of Hurricane Ida and held there for five days.²⁰ In October 2021, Loyola University's Law Clinic filed a lawsuit against the City of New Orleans on the grounds that the move violated the state's constitution and a state law protecting children from being held in an adult facility.²¹

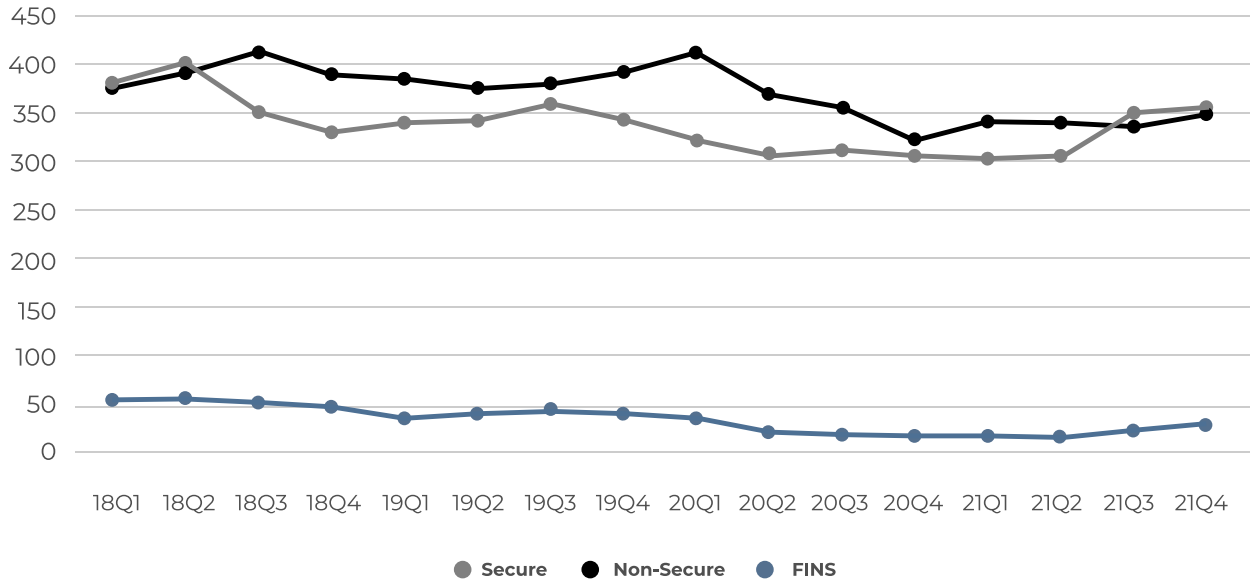


More recently, journalists ran a damning story in March 2022 illuminating abuses in a new, relatively unknown facility – the Acadiana Center for Youth at St. Martinville – which was opened in 2021 to temporarily house incarcerated young people who were acting out in other facilities.²² Youth incarcerated in St. Martinville were in solitary confinement for days and shackled with leg irons. At least two young men injured themselves severely enough to require medical attention, and there were no educational services in place when the youth moved in. But St. Martinville is not an outlier in that regard - the state also has a well-documented history of poor education services in youth prisons. Educational outcomes for incarcerated youth are consistently poor, with one report in 2014 documenting that only 8 percent of incarcerated young people in the state earned high school credit.²³

Hundreds of Young People Are Incarcerated in Louisiana

Between 2018 and 2021, the state of Louisiana held between 653 and 854 youth in custody (see Figure 1 below). That figure includes adjudicated youth held in both secure and non-secure state facilities and residential placements. Still, it does not include the hundreds of young people in custody in local detention centers. While numbers declined early in the COVID-19 pandemic, they have begun to creep back up. By the end of 2021, the number of youth in secure care was back up to pre-COVID levels.

Figure 1. Number of Youth Held in Secure and Non-Secure State Placements and Those Incarcerated on FINS Charges Only



Source: OJJ Quarterly Indicators, 2018-2021

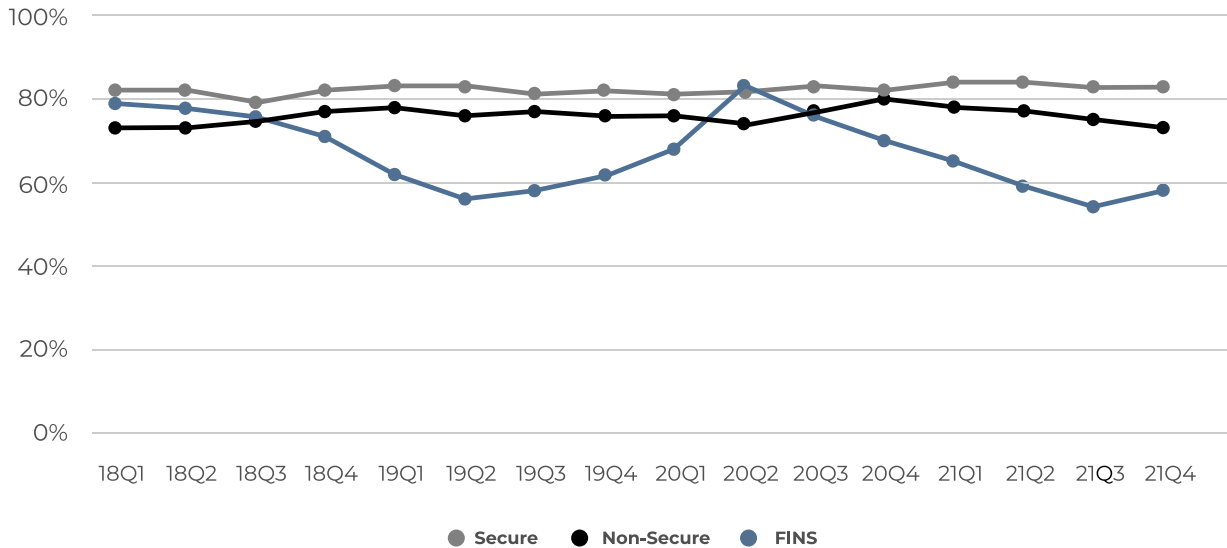
Note: FINS kids are tracked separately. They are housed in both secure and non-secure settings.

Data from OJJ also showed significant geographic disparities. For example, in the last quarter of 2021, two thirds of youth in secure care came from just 9 of the state’s 64 parishes (Caddo, Calcasieu, East Baton Rouge, Jefferson, Lafayette, Orleans, Ouachita, St. Landry, and St. Tammany).²⁴ The rate at which young people are committed to secure placement varied dramatically from 0 in some parishes to 2.3 per 1,000 youth ages 10-17 in others.

Significant Racial Disparities in Youth Incarceration Persist

Louisiana’s youth justice system disproportionately impacts youth of color, particularly Black youth. Though Black youth make up only about 40 percent of the state’s population, they comprise more than half of youth incarcerated on a FINS charge, more than 70 percent of youth in nonsecure care, and more than 80 percent of youth in secure care (see Figure 2). Between 2018 and 2021, Black children were consistently more than twice as likely as white youth to be incarcerated in secure care.²⁵

Figure 2. Proportion of Youth in Custody Who Were Black



Source: OJJ Quarterly Indicators, 2018-2021

Note: FINS kids are tracked separately. They are housed in both secure and non-secure settings.

Youth Are Incarcerated For Long Periods of Time for Non-Offenses

As noted in Figure 1 above, over the past four years, between 20 and 50 young people were incarcerated on a FINS charge, having committed no criminal offense. Also, though more recent data is not publicly available, data from a 2017 report showed that young people were incarcerated for long periods and length of stay increased between 2015 and 2017 in secure care (see Table 1).²⁶ Shockingly, youth incarcerated on FINS charges were held for an average of eight months, roughly the same as youth adjudicated delinquent and committed to non-secure placements. Data from 2017 also showed that 16 percent of young people held in secure custody during that year – 109 youth - were incarcerated on a drug, property, or other nonviolent offense.²⁷

Table 1. Average Length of Stay for Youth Released Between 2015 – 2017 in Days.

Fiscal Year	Secure	Non-Secure	FINS
2015	322.5	245.8	248.5
2016	366.8	258	276.6
2017	387.9	251.5	243.9

Source: Act 499 OJJ Fiscal Year 2017 Annual Report of Youth Served, p.19

Facility Placements are Expensive, and Outcomes Are Poor

Despite population declines, Louisiana still spends millions of dollars on operating youth prisons, and the facilities are ineffective in rehabilitating youth. The Governor’s recommended budget for 2023 includes \$159.6 million for the Office of Juvenile Justice, a 6 percent increase from the prior year and a 13 percent increase from the fiscal year 2021 despite significant declines in youth incarceration and crime.²⁸ The most recent data breaking down facility costs are from the fiscal year 2017.²⁹ That year, the state spent about \$45 million on secure care with an average cost of \$429 per bed per day. In other words, in 2017, it cost an astonishing \$156,570 to incarcerate one young person for one year. To put that in perspective, the estimated yearly cost of attendance at Louisiana State University – including tuition and fees, housing, and a meal plan – was \$24,768 this academic year.³⁰

As with most states, outcomes of youth incarceration in Louisiana remain poor.³¹ Though metrics have improved in recent years, the most recent recidivism data showed that more than a third of youth released from secure and non-secure placements return to OJJ or the DOC within three years (see Table 2).³²

Table 2. Recidivism for Youth Released Between 2013 and 2016

	Secure			NonSecure		
	1 Year Rate	2 Year Rate	3 Year Rate	1 Year Rate	2 Year Rate	3 Year Rate
FY 2017	18%	29%	36%	21%	34%	41%
FY 2018	17%	29%	n/a	16%	29%	n/a
FY 2019	15%	n/a	n/a	22%	n/a	n/a

Source: Louisiana OJJ 2020 Recidivism Report

A Brief History of Youth Justice Reform in Louisiana

In 2003, Louisiana legislators unanimously passed Act 1225, a landmark set of policy changes for youth justice. Act 1225 was accompanied by other legislation³³ in subsequent years, and together, these contained several important changes and recommendations.³⁴ Major components included the creation of the Juvenile Justice Reform Act Implementation Commission (JJRAIC) and a requirement that this body provides oversight and regular information sharing and reporting about the youth justice system. The legislation also required the closure of the Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth. It directed policymakers to invest savings from the facility's closure to services for kids and communities. Among the efforts to improve services and service coordination was creating the Children and Youth Planning Boards (CYPB). These were intended to operate at a local level and “assess, align, coordinate, and monitor ‘all available services and programs that address the needs of children and youth.’”³⁵ Other efforts included calling for requirements for data collection and coordination among youth-serving agencies within state government.

While some of these policy changes were fully implemented, many were not. The needs of children, families, and communities identified through the process of developing Act 1225 are still present over twenty years later. However, the infrastructure developed by the legislation from 2003 has been neglected and has deteriorated over time.³⁶ Some reasons for this include shifting leadership and associated priorities, the magnitude of needs and crises in the state competing for attention, and the lack of investment and requirements for action in the original legislation.



For example, the facility in Tallulah was closed, and the executive branch of the state government did reorganize and better coordinate youth services. Still, savings from the closure were not directed toward youth justice priorities. Additionally, the JJRAIC was created and met, and some of the CYPBs were created and operated for a short amount of time across the state. However, by 2018, the JJRAIC had stopped meeting, and only a handful of CYPBs still met. The lack of traction among some local CYBPs was due to a range of factors.

They were not funded, did not have dedicated support staff, and did not have clear requirements or accountability to any higher, state-level entity. While these bodies convened in many parishes and provided a forum to network and report agency accomplishments and priorities, the structure did not include incentives or mechanisms to hold people accountable for tasks or activities. Of note, the JJRAIC was reconstituted under new legislation passed and signed in the fall of 2020. The body must meet four times a year and produce an annual report. New positions were also allowed, including naming FFLIC as a permanent vice-chair.⁴³

Recommendations: Policy Priorities for Promoting Justice For Youth in Louisiana

Though the state faces severe and unique challenges, Louisiana can improve public safety and youth and family outcomes through policy and practice changes and investments in youth justice. Priority action areas include decreasing youth incarceration to address the harmful practices in facilities and be more cost-effective, building a continuum of care for youth and families, and increasing transparency, accountability, and oversight. Drawing on best practices, insight from interviewees, and knowledge of state-level justice reforms across the country, three priority recommendations emerged.

Close facilities and significantly decrease youth incarceration to address violent, dangerous practices in facilities and be more cost-effective:

Youth incarceration has many negative outcomes for youth and communities and poses significant costs to taxpayers. In addition, Louisiana has well-documented history of violence and harm occurring in youth incarceration facilities. The tens of thousands of dollars it costs to incarcerate just one youth in Louisiana could be alternatively invested in approaches and interventions that are more likely to reduce recidivism and promote other important positive outcomes for youth (e.g., obtaining jobs, completing education, supporting families). By decreasing the number of incarcerated youth, Louisiana would free up resources to invest in more cost-effective interventions and protect youth from harmful practices.

Potential ways to do this include:

- ◆ **Reducing the number of youth in secure and non-secure care.** First and foremost, Louisiana should leverage all opportunities to shrink the state's out-of-home care population by reducing the number of young people entering detention and prison and shortening the amount of time they spend there when they are admitted.
- ◆ **Reduce length of stay in facilities.** Though slightly dated, recent data showed that length of stay was trending upward for youth adjudicated delinquent in secure and non-secure facilities. Given trends in other states, we would expect this upward trajectory might even have increased in Louisiana during the COVID era.³⁷ Stakeholders would be smart to work with courts and OJJ to examine lengths of stay and reduce them as there is no evidence to suggest that longer lengths of stay are associated with crime reductions for many youth.³⁸ The Office of Juvenile Justice could also continue to consider alternative placements to allow for independent living for youth when appropriate.
- ◆ **Investing in front-end assessment centers.** Another way that jurisdictions, including some in Louisiana, have diverted young people from the youth justice system and linked them to needed services is through "one stop" assessment centers. Assessment centers seek to keep youth out of the system through "a single point of contact which identifies underlying issues contributing to concerning behavior and partners with youth and families to access individualized services and/or resources."³⁹ Louisiana could build on the success of assessment centers in the state, including in Calcasieu and East Baton Rouge, by finding additional funding for additional locations. Stakeholders must ensure that assessment center investment provides needed services to youth and families.⁴⁰
- ◆ **Funding credible messenger mentoring programs.** Other jurisdictions have also successfully implemented credible messenger programs to support young people in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This approach works by matching justice-involved young people likely to re-offend with adults who have pertinent life experiences and are trained to utilize this knowledge as effective mentors. The programs show increased engagement with services and more compliance with courts and reduction in negative behaviors.⁴¹ Stakeholders could develop new funding opportunities as well as seek existing federal funding for mentorship and/or credible messenger programs for youth and families whom the system has impacted.
- ◆ **Implement improved probation strategies to increase the number of youth who successfully complete probation and limit pathways to custody through violations and/or future contact with law enforcement.** This could include shortening supervision lengths; investing in relationship building, assessment, and planning with the youth on the caseloads; connecting youth with long-term community supports; and closing cases as quickly as possible while prioritizing continued collaborative relationships with community services.⁴²



Reinvest savings and additional investment in building a comprehensive continuum of care in the community for kids and families:

As youth arrests and incarceration have declined over the past two decades, many jurisdictions have recognized the efficacy of community-based strategies to prevent, intervene and respond to harmful youth behavior. However, building a “continuum of care and opportunity for youth and families in their home communities to prevent and address the root causes of illegal behavior requires substantial investment.”⁴⁴ Many jurisdictions have found creative ways to begin to build this continuum. Some examples that Louisiana should explore include:

- ◆ **Capture and redirect savings from reduced youth incarceration and facility closure.** Track reductions in incarceration and supervision and pass and implement budgets that transfer funds that previously were used to house and supervise youth into community-based services. Explore building on the RFP process from the 2017 justice reinvestment legislation.
- ◆ **Maximize existing state and federal funding opportunities.** This includes creating improved access to services through Medicaid, particularly for older adolescents. Expand programs that include job readiness and employment options.
- ◆ **Encourage JJRAIC or other stakeholders to outreach and respond to requests for proposals** to foundations and the federal government for funding to support best practices for youth justice in the state.
- ◆ **Build relationships and partnerships across agencies** to support improved coordination of services and collaborative strategies to improve efficiency and expand reach.

Explore building on the RFP process from the [2017 justice reinvestment legislation](#).

For additional details, examples, and concrete strategies, see Urban Institute’s [Promoting a New Direction for Youth Justice: Strategies to Fund a Community-Based Continuum of Care and Opportunity](#).

Increase transparency, accountability, and oversight:

It is critical to share an understanding of the problems and successes of youth justice in Louisiana across stakeholders, including elected officials, agency administrators, law enforcement, judges, public defenders, advocates, community members, youth, and families. To evaluate what is working and why and for whom, stakeholders need to understand trends in key metrics and indicators of success, information about the experiences of youth and staff involved in the system, and the latest research and successful approaches from across the country.

Key recommended steps include:

- ◆ **Require and fund regular data collection and reporting.** Louisiana could consider several strategies for improving transparency and information sharing. The Children’s Cabinet is the state governing body charged with “coordinating funding and programmatic services at the state and local level related to children and families”.⁴⁵ It is therefore best positioned to leverage that role to hold state and local partners accountable. As a first step, preserving funding for the cabinet in the 2023 budget is critical—the Governor’s proposed FY 2023 budget cut funding by 80 percent. The cabinet would also need to elevate youth justice concerns for consideration in the coming year and coordinate with the JJRAIC, which is focused on youth justice issues and an important partner in setting priorities and proposing solutions.

To improve data collection and reporting, the Children’s Cabinet could require:

- ◆ Local CYPBs to report annually on their organizational members, meetings, and topics covered

- ◆ OJJ to report annually on youth in care and on supervision, including admissions, releases, and length of stay

- ◆ Schools to report referrals to the justice system annually

- ◆ **Regularly conduct data collection and fact-finding with youth and families directly impacted by the youth justice system** through mechanisms such as community forums, surveys, small roundtables, or interviews.
- ◆ **Support local and statewide convenings to gather stakeholders together to learn about the latest in youth justice research and trends.** One idea suggested during interviews was to hold a statewide convening where youth justice and education stakeholders can learn what diversion and service programs and approaches are working and where more innovation is needed. Each group currently has its independent meeting at the state level each year, but we are not aware of any events that bring together practitioners from both systems to discuss overlapping issues.

- ◆ **Incentivize people at the local level to regularly meet, share information, and implement improved approaches to youth justice.** As we noted above, CYPBs have failed to gain traction in many parishes because of competing priorities and limited accountability. But they still exist in many communities and provide a framework on which to build. One idea for strengthening the model would be to have the group co-chaired by a stakeholder from the local education agency, local government, and local juvenile justice system (see the [Louisiana Children & Youth Planning Board Toolkit](#) for additional ideas on creating and strengthening local boards).



Box 2. Principles of Best Practice in Youth Justice

Over the past couple of decades, we have learned a great deal about what works to promote better outcomes for justice-involved youth and prevent future harm. Many states have engaged in reform efforts to take a hard look at policies and practices within their youth justice systems and align them with best practices.

Many efforts draw on core principles that also guide the recommendations in this report:

- ◆ **Significantly reduce youth incarceration, close and repurpose youth corrections facilities, and invest in more effective community-based alternatives to detention and prison.** Incarceration disconnects young people from critical family and social supports, disrupts important developmental processes, and generally does poorly in preventing future offending behavior.⁴⁶ It also costs states millions of dollars annually that could be better spent on more effective, community-based strategies.⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, in part due to this growing knowledge, states and localities increasingly shifted away from incarceration in the past couple of decades, resulting in hundreds of youth corrections facility closures.⁴⁸ While savings are often usurped to support other state funding priorities, some states and localities have successfully redirected savings from facility closures into community-based programming for youth and families.⁴⁹
- ◆ **Invest in a robust continuum of community-based supports and services for vulnerable youth and families.** The priority for any savings from reduced incarceration and facility closure should be investing in a full community-based continuum of care and supports for young people and their families. Yet, though it is an important first step, a significantly larger investment is required to build a true continuum of care and opportunity for youth and families to prevent and address harm.⁵⁰ As Harvell et al. outlined in their 2019 report, a well-resourced and full continuum would include a comprehensive range of supports and services that promote healthy development, meet basic needs, and strengthen neighborhoods. In addition to crime prevention, intervention, and treatment services, a full continuum would also include supports to promote family healing and recovery, prosocial recreational activities and civic engagement opportunities, and community development in the form of affordable housing, economic development, and infrastructure. In short, investing in strategies to address the root causes of crime and wrap vulnerable youth and families with all the services and support they need is the key to preventing justice involvement in the first place. Resourcing those communities and equipping them with the tools they need to redirect and support young people who do veer off course is a much more promising approach to accountability, restoration, and healing than incarceration.
- ◆ **Implement developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed practices throughout youth justice to improve outcomes and prevent future harm.** In 2013, the National Academy of Sciences published a seminal report, [Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach](#), which synthesized decades of research on adolescent development and effective policy and practices into recommendations for the field.⁵¹ The report made a compelling justification for shifting away from incarceration and opting instead for restorative approaches that help youth take responsibility for their actions, repair the harm they have caused, and engage more proactively with their home communities. In the decade since its publication, many subsequent publications have helped operationalize how to implement developmentally informed practices throughout the youth justice system.⁵² This includes a wide range of practices, including limiting system involvement, using effective strategies to promote behavior change, brokering community connections to provide long-term support at home, and providing youth opportunities to take responsibility for their actions.

Conclusion

Children and families in Louisiana experience high poverty rates and extremely limited services and resources, including mental health and special education. These unmet needs can funnel people into the justice system, where data shows that children, families, and communities of color are disproportionately impacted. Youth incarcerated in Louisiana experience a system that continues to be unsafe, ineffective, and costly. In 2003, Louisiana passed Act 1225, which provided a blueprint for making needed improvements to support better outcomes for youth justice in Louisiana. Unfortunately, while some reforms were implemented, many were not, and the infrastructure developed to support change has largely faded away. To address the current challenges today, Louisiana should draw on best practices and insights from people in Louisiana to consider three areas of policy change: decreasing youth incarceration, building a comprehensive continuum of care in the community for youth and families, and increasing transparency, accountability, and oversight.

Notes

- 1 Louisiana House Bill 2018, 2003 Regular Session. <https://www.legis.la.gov/legis/BillInfo.aspx?s=03RS&b=ACT1225&sb=y>
- 2 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2021). 2021 Kids Count Data Book. Baltimore, MD. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/2021-kids-count-data-book>.
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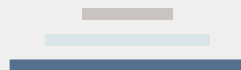
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About Three Flights

Three Flights is a woman-owned small business. Our justice practice focuses on identifying, studying, and scaling up research-informed strategies to reduce correctional control and improve safety. We help organizations effectively implement new justice initiatives, policies, or best practices, conduct needs assessments to determine priorities for justice systems or other community safety improvements, and support the development of new and innovative strategies to invest in community-led safety priorities.



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