

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/an-intriguing-look-at-juvenile-justice-in-dc>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The Urban Institute's District of Columbia Crime Policy Institute recently released [a report](#) highlighting trends in youth placed in the custody of the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS), the District's cabinet-level juvenile justice agency, between 2006 and 2011. The goal of the report was to better understand how and why the number of juveniles committed to the agency as a court disposition or sentence has changed over the past several years. In particular, it explores changes that followed a series of reforms launched by the agency in 2006 to improve the conditions of secure confinement and expand community-based alternatives for youth.

One of the most intriguing findings to emerge from the analysis of data collected by DYRS was a considerable increase in overall commitments (which include those placed in a secure facility and those served by DYRS in the community) between fiscal years 2006 and 2009, driven mainly by responses to youth adjudicated for misdemeanor offenses. Specifically, misdemeanor commitments accounted for 92 percent of the overall increase during this time period. They comprised a larger proportion of overall commitments in 2009 as well as 44 percent of the total compared to 27 percent in 2006.

At the end of the report, the authors suggest a number of possible explanations for the increase in misdemeanor commitments, the two primary ones being an increase in the volume of misdemeanor cases and changing practices on the part of judges, who are responsible for deciding which youth should be committed to DYRS. Unfortunately, because of limited access to data they were unable to explore either explanation in great depth (the only trend data available were for overall arrests, petitions, and filings not misdemeanors specifically).

These findings are interesting given that DYRS represents the deep end of the DC juvenile justice system, designed for youth who pose a risk to public safety and cannot be safely served on probation. Vera's [Center on Youth Justice](#) has worked with DYRS and other DC juvenile justice agencies on a number of reform efforts in recent years including [a process evaluation](#) of DYRS's implementation of secure placement reforms and the development of juvenile justice indicators across agencies.

Based on Vera's prior work in DC and across the country, to gain further insight into the contribution of one or both of the Urban Institute reports' explanations (in addition to other explanations) it would be useful to look more closely at the characteristics of youth who have been committed on misdemeanors and the system practices leading up to their placement with DYRS. While the Urban Institute was only granted access to DYRS data for their study, allowing researchers to combine this information with data from the courts and probation in future studies would help all stakeholders in the District better understand both the factors driving a rise in misdemeanor placements and the implications of this increase for young people and their families.

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