

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/reducing-youth-confinement-key-to-proposed-jjdp-reauthorization>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Considered the single most important piece of federal legislation regarding youth in the juvenile justice system since it was enacted in 1974, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) plays a crucial role in addressing the needs of system-involved youth. It also ensures that the judicial process focuses on rehabilitation and stabilization and does not levy unjust punishments that impede a youth's ability to become a productive member of society. Last reauthorized in 2002, Senators Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and Chuck Grassley (R-IA) introduced the JJDP for reauthorization in December to improve responses to youth with mental health and substance use issues, reduce racial and ethnic disparities among incarcerated youth, and improve conditions of confinement, among other provisions. It also includes a three-year phase-out of JJDPs Valid Court Order (VCO) exception, a loophole in the law that allows judges to lock up status offenders for disobeying court orders. By calling for the VCOs elimination, the bill recognizes that young people charged with acts like truancy or breaking curfew should not be confined and treated with the same interventions, or even with the same system, as those who commit crimes. Since it was first enacted more than 40 years ago, the JJDP has created state advisory groups to provide federal guidelines for juvenile justice policies and practices, distributed federal funding for delinquency prevention and improvements in state and local juvenile justice programs, and created the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, which provides vital national leadership, along with coordination and resources to help prevent and respond to juvenile delinquency. The JJDP has four core requirements:

To provide practitioners and policymakers with resources to help communities transform their response to status offenses from a juvenile justice orientation to one that is community based, Vera's Center on Youth Justice (CYJ) launched the [Status Offense Reform Center](#) (SORC) in 2013. SORC provides [details of reforms](#) that have already been enacted in states like Connecticut, New York, and Florida. These states have demonstrated that immediately referring status offense cases to services in their communities instead of court can reduce court caseloads, lower system costs, and provide more meaningful and lasting support to children and families. More than half of states, however, [continue to use the VCO exception](#), confining youth for non-criminal behavior. In 2010, the VCO exception was used more than 8,000 times. This reauthorization of the JJDP, if signed into law, would put an end to this practice and help tip the scale nationwide towards the adoption of non-court-based responses to the status offense population

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