

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Police frequently encounter youth running away from home, violating curfew, skipping school, and chronically disobeying adult misbehaviors that can often stem from family conflict and that do not require justice involvement. When alternatives are not available, however, these behaviors can lead to arrests or detention. Families dealing with difficult youth behavior often unwittingly send their youth into the justice system by calling the police because they feel they have nowhere to turn for help. For police, encountering these kinds of situations can be frustrating because they feel limited to suboptimal choices: either ignoring the problem behavior or criminalizing it.

This brief explores the creative, collaborative, and community-focused work being done in Nevada, Connecticut, Nebraska, Michigan, Illinois, and Oregon to find productive responses to youth acting out. The juvenile assessment resource centers, crisis response centers, and crisis intervention teams in these jurisdictions address the needs of youth and connect families to resources and services without the need for juvenile justice involvement.

Being involved in the justice system can have detrimental consequences on young people. For police and families encountering youth engaging in low-level, troubling behavior, diversion alternatives are available and should be leveraged to address the needs of youth without pushing them into the juvenile justice system.

Traditional responses like arrest and detention perpetuate racial disparities in our justice system, because youth of color are more likely to be apprehended than white youth for similar offenses.

Police often have limited discretion when it comes to dealing with youth, particularly in domestic disturbances. Training police to find alternative strategies can improve outcomes.

Once diversion systems are in place, consistent evaluation and evolution of these strategies will be key to future success.

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