

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/status-offense-reform-gaining-momentum-as-both-sides-of-the-aisle-see-need-for-change>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When friends and family who work in different fields ask me to describe Veras work in youth justice, they are inevitably perplexed when I first mention our status offense reform efforts. Status offenses? Never heard of them. But if I go on to describe what falls under that heading, the conversation gets interesting. People are shocked to learn how frequently children are locked in secure detention facilities for skipping school, running away, or violating curfew. Most recent data indicate that 137,000 cases like these are entering the juvenile justice system annually and that in more than 10,000 of them, youth are removed from their homes and families and incarcerated alongside other young people who have been charged with, in some situations, serious crimes.

Of the many projects I have been involved in at Vera during the last 11 years, our work to help more than 30 jurisdictions design and implement ways to better respond to these kids outside of the justice system and certainly outside of jail-like facilities has been among the most rewarding. Do children whose behaviors are concerning, sometimes deeply so, need attention and support to get back on track? Certainly. But does the juvenile justice system offer the right kind of attention? Certainly not.

Luckily, there is a growing drumbeat across the country, shedding light on why the punitive approach to these young people and their families is problematic and unacceptable. Those who are calling for reform are diverse, from advocates and families to law enforcement and judges. And support for system change is coming from both sides of the aisle. Just last month, the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF), the organization that launched and houses the conservative Right on Crime initiative, released a report entitled [*Kids Doing Time for Whats Not a Crime*](#) that calls for a decreased use of detention for these kids.

As this issue gets more and more attention (and we hope it will), the question arises: What is the end goal? Our answer is unequivocal: The elimination of detention or incarceration for any behavior that is non-criminal in nature and the removal of these cases and these kids from the court and juvenile justice system entirely. Without this, we fear that any ongoing attempts at more comprehensive juvenile justice reform (including for those who do commit crimes) will falter.

Thankfully, there is a way to realize this goal. In our previously released white paper, [*From Courts to Communities: The Right Response to Truancy, Running Away, and Other Status Offenses*](#), we describe how more and more places in the country are offering timely, community-based, and developmentally appropriate responses to youth and families. In so doing, they are proving that they can effectively stanch the flow of youth into the juvenile justice system and provide more meaningful outcomes for communities. Our recently launched [Status Offense Reform Center](#) (SORC) also provides practitioners and policymakers with virtual technical assistance based on Veras 13 years of experience working on this issue. This hands-on help has been translated into an online toolkit and other resources to help communities plan, implement, and sustain a comprehensive system change process. In addition to the online toolkit, the website features case studies from jurisdictions across the country; hosts webinars, podcasts, and a blog exploring the latest research and lessons learned from the field; and fields requests for additional information.

We hope that the center will help leaders (at the county, state, and federal levels) come together around *why* young people who have not committed a crime shouldnt be treated as if they have, and *how* to make that a reality.

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