

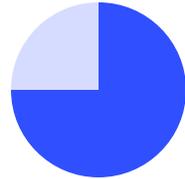


Protect Children, Reform the Juvenile Justice System

America’s pediatricians know that the needs of children and teens are seldom met in our nation’s juvenile justice system.

In fact, contact with the system can often be harmful.

Most children shouldn’t be brought into the system in the first place: **three-quarters of confined youth didn’t even commit a violent offense.**



- **Many children in the justice system** have unaddressed complex medical, mental health and legal needs.
- **LGBTQ youth in the justice system** experience increased rates of emotional abuse, physical abuse, and time in isolation.

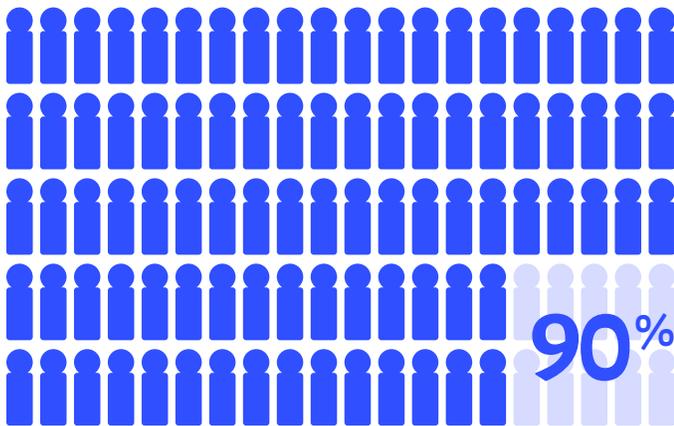
- **Youth of color are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system** because of society’s failure to address social and environmental determinants of health like systemic racism that drive disparities in child well-being. Over-representation in the juvenile justice system only widens racial inequities.

Compounding Trauma

For many youth, childhood adversity and circumstances beyond their control lead them into the juvenile justice system.

The majority of youth in the justice system have experienced . . .

At least one form of childhood trauma



Traumatic loss or bereavement



Domestic violence



- **Yet, the system often inflicts further trauma.** Isolation and solitary confinement are too often used to control or punish.

An Urgent Need for Reform

Pediatricians understand that traumatic childhood experiences can have long-term negative impacts on a child's health and development. Many youth who enter the juvenile justice system have already experienced trauma. We must reform our juvenile justice system to better serve these children and improve, not worsen, their health.

Pediatricians support:



Use of incarceration for adolescents as a last resort and increased diversion to appropriate community-based programs whenever possible.



Advancing policies and community action to address the root causes of juvenile justice involvement.



Abolishing excessively punitive and developmentally inappropriate practices such as the use of life without parole for adolescents in the rare cases where youth are tried as adults.



Abandoning correctional practices that traumatize children, such as solitary confinement, and instead support those that meet their unique developmental needs.



State and federal laws that set the minimum age of criminal responsibility at no younger than 12 years.



Improved clinical care for youth in detention, while ensuring that the need for clinical care is never a reason to detain youth.

➤ **Ideally, contact with the justice system should be an opportunity to improve the health and development of our youth.** Systems should work with children and adolescents to pinpoint how they came in contact with the justice system and what they need to lead healthy, productive lives.

Read the Policy Statement

AAP experts on adolescent health and juvenile justice developed an evidence-based policy statement outlining recommendations to reform the juvenile justice system and protect youth.

Mikah C. Owen, Stephenie B. Wallace, and the Committee on Adolescence, "Advocacy and Collaborative Health Care for Justice-Involved Youth," *Pediatrics*, July 2020. For more information, visit aap.org/juvenilejustice.

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