

ROLL CALL

Juvenile Justice at a Pivotal Moment

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Thirty-five years ago, this country took a monumental step to improve state and local juvenile justice systems. Enacted with bipartisan support, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act created a partnership between the federal government and the states to prevent and respond to delinquency, increase fairness and set standards for the way youths are treated in the juvenile justice system. While tremendous strides have been made in the states since its passage in 1974, we are now at a pivotal moment: Without resources and a renewed commitment to the JJDP, we are jeopardizing our progress toward an effective justice system that works for youths, families and communities nationwide.



Drawing from a survey of juvenile justice practitioners around the country, a new report by the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 'A Pivotal Moment: Sustaining the Success and Enhancing the Future of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act,' shows that more needs to be done to support states' juvenile justice improvement efforts under the JJDP. Over the past decade, states have experienced an overall 60 percent decrease in federal funding for their state and local delinquency prevention efforts.

This drop in federal funds was coupled with a precipitous drop in dedicated funding for the states' most important federal partner — the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. These cuts hamper the concentrated efforts by states to fulfill their obligations.

The report further reveals that while states are thoroughly committed to resolving racial and ethnic disparities in juvenile justice — a core requirement of the JJDP — many barriers remain. Youths of color comprise a third of our nation's youths, yet make up two-thirds or more of youths who come into contact with juvenile justice systems. Research also consistently has

shown that youths of color receive fewer alternatives to detention and more severe sentences and sanctions than white youths with comparable offense charges and histories. While the JJDPA addresses such disparities, states have limited resources to make meaningful reductions, and there are few alternatives to incarceration. The survey found this to be particularly true in large rural and frontier states and states with Native American youth populations, where federal services and resources are spread too thinly.

In addition, more than half of the states struggle to meet the JJDPA's goal to keep youths who are only charged with status offenses out of locked confinement. Status offenses are behaviors that are illegal solely because of the 'minor status' of the youths, and include offenses such as running away, skipping school, curfew violations and underage tobacco or alcohol use. The JJDPA prohibits states from confining youths charged with status offenses in lockups, calling instead for family-linked, community-based services designed to address underlying causes and needs. Progress toward reducing the number of confined status-offending youths has been jeopardized, however, because of the misuse of legal exceptions in the JJDPA and a lack of community-based alternatives and treatments that were once supported with federal funding. States also find that state and local laws and administrative procedures can conflict with the JJDPA's requirement to keep status offenders out of lockups.

Visionary, compassionate leadership is critical to addressing these challenges. Now is the time for the president and the Department of Justice to move swiftly to name and seek Congressional confirmation of a new head for the OJJDP, one who is committed to working with states to step up cost-effective, research-based practices and to support optimal implementation of the JJDPA. Training and guidance for states and localities seeking to improve and reform their juvenile court systems also needs to be ramped up at the federal level. And dedicated federal appropriations need to be restored to both preserve and advance juvenile justice system reforms and effective delinquency prevention efforts.

While this nation faces many pressing issues, recommitting itself to building fairer, safer and more effective juvenile justice systems must be at the forefront. Americans must take on the challenge and responsibility of reclaiming young lives and working with troubled and vulnerable youths to get them back on track and reconnect them with positive values, activities and accomplishments. Federal leaders can and should help make this happen by reauthorizing the JJDPA and providing the intellectual, creative and financial resources necessary to ensure its success.

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