

**EVALUATION OF THE IMPACT OF THE GEORGIA DETENTION
ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT ON INTAKE OPERATIONS**

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ON CRIME AND DELINQUENCY

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Introduction

This report describes the implementation of the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice's (DJJ) Detention Assessment Instrument (DAI) and estimates its impact on detention utilization at juvenile intake. NCCD staff employed data from the department's juvenile tracking systems (JTS) to conduct the analysis presented below. The analysis was preceded by a careful review by NCCD and Children and Youth Coordinating Committee staff of DJJ DAI data collection procedures and an examination of when and how staff are completing the assessment in the field.

The Georgia DAI was initially developed to improve the detention decisions made at juvenile intake. The report briefly reviews how the DAI is currently at intake and provides a preliminary estimate of its impact on bed space utilization in the state's Regional Youth Detention Centers (RYDC).

Background

In 1998, the Georgia DJJ entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the U.S. Department of Justice to reduce crowded conditions in the state's RYDCs. One condition of the MOA was that the DJJ develop, implement and evaluate an objective detention assessment instrument. Structured detention assessment tools are widely used throughout the U.S., and have proven to be an essential strategy for controlling juvenile detention admissions while simultaneously protecting public safety. The Georgia DAI was developed by a DJJ work group that included NCCD consultants, field staff from the Division of Community Corrections and DJJ administrative staff. The DAI was initially implemented in DJJ counties in January of 2000. Independent counties, which serve the state's larger urban areas, adopted the DAI later. A broader discussion of implementation issues appears below.

DAI Objectives

The Georgia DAI was designed to achieve five objectives that are common to detention reform efforts:¹

- # Provide a consistent procedure for assessing youth referred to intake before the decision to detain them is made.
- # Prioritize the use of limited RYDC bed space for youth who pose the greatest threat to public safety.
- # Reduce inappropriate detention by systematically identifying youth at intake who can safely be released with conditions to a community-based detention alternative or unconditionally released to their parents.
- # Help DJJ case expeditors identify youth detained in RYDC facilities who may be appropriate candidates for detention alternatives.
- # Collect DAI data to assist DJJ and local courts monitor detention decisions made at juvenile intake.

DAI Description

Each youth referred to DJJ intake for a detention decision is assessed by scoring the six assessment items that appear on the DAI. Item scores are based on youth's most serious current charge; the seriousness and number of additional pending charges and adjudications; the number and type of previously adjudicated offenses; history of escape, runaway, or failure to appear; and the youth's current legal/supervision status. Each of these measures is scored and the scores are totaled.

The total score is then used to recommend one of three possible intake decisions:

- # Detention: Youth scoring 12 or more points are recommended for placement in an RYDC;

¹ See the Pathways to Juvenile Detention Reform, The Annie E. Casey Foundation series. www.aecf.org

- # Release with Conditions (RWC): Juveniles who score between 8 and 11 points are considered candidates for release with conditions to a community-based alternative to detention (this disposition is subject to judicial approval and the availability of an appropriate alternative); and
- # Unconditional Release (UCR): Youth who score seven or fewer points are presumptively eligible for unconditional release to their parents/guardians.

The intake decision recommended by the DAI score may be “overridden” based on established DJJ policy (e.g., use of a weapon, school threats, out of state holds, etc.), as established by local courts, or the discretionary judgment of intake staff. Specific override reasons are identified on the instrument. Overrides to more or less restrictive options are possible.

DAI Implementation

The DAI was first implemented in January of 2000 by DJJ counties. DJJ staff was trained to use the DAI to assess youth referred to court intake before a custody decision was made. This is how detention assessments are typically employed in other jurisdictions. Immediately prior to the DAI implementation, the court monitor overseeing the MOA required that a DAI be completed to document the offense history of every youth admitted to an RYDC. This ruling immediately expanded use of the DAI to Georgia’s independent courts who began to complete the DAI after youth were detained at intake and after detentions ordered at a court hearing (e.g., adjudication, revocation or detention continuation reviews). This led to disparities in the completion of the DAI. Independent courts, which include the state’s major urban population centers, used the DAI only to document detention decisions they had already made. The majority of the DJJ counties used the DAI as was initially planned, i.e., to assess youth referred to intake prior to making the decision to detain, release or refer to a detention alternative. In addition, all counties began to complete the DAI when youth were detained after court hearings in order to meet the MOA requirements.

During 2001, the DAI was incorporated into DJJ's juvenile tracking system (JTS). This made it possible for field staff to enter the assessment online in both DJJ and independent counties. Incorporating the DAI into JTS made recording more accurate and it provided DJJ staff useful information about county detention practices and the characteristics of youth detained. However, disparities in how individual counties were completing the DAI remained and this confused some previous analyses of these data. For instance, some research efforts assumed that field staff completed a DAI for every youth referred to intake for a detention decision. This led to an expectation that the DAI data would be present for a substantial number of youth who were unconditionally released or placed in alternative programs at intake. While this was true for a small number of DJJ counties, all independent counties and the majority of DJJ counties were entering DAI data only when a youth was detained. Consequently, a conventional analysis of DAI data leads to the conclusion that a very small percentage of youth scoring unconditional release (UCR) are released at intake and an unusually high percentage are detained. The explanation, as NCCD staff have recently discovered, is that the DAI is not routinely completed for youth who are released or placed in alternatives to detention at intake. In fact, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusion about the number or percent of youth released at intake because very few counties enter DAI data for these cases regardless of their DAI score. This same practice causes under-reporting of the use of diversions to detention alternatives and overestimation of DAI overrides.

The failure to enter DAI findings for youth released at intake does not prevent the assessment from influencing intake decisions. Staff may assess the youth with the DAI before making an intake decision and they may score a paper copy of the instrument. They just do not enter the DAI in JTS for released cases.

There appear to be several possible reasons for this practice: 1) the MOA does not require a DAI to be completed for youth not admitted to detention and therefore staff do not enter it; 2)

entering a DAI frequently requires opening a new case on JTS which is a time consuming task;

3) field staff are simply not certain that entering DAI findings for youth released at intake is very important. Regardless of the reason for this practice, an analysis of DAI operations which assumes the DAI is completed for all the youth DJJ assesses at intake will lead to misleading conclusions.

There is a second analytical problem as well. Once the MOA required that a DAI be completed for every youth admitted to an RYDC, DJJ and independent counties began to enter them in JTS for a large number of court hearings. In fact, a youth could have an initial DAI recorded after an intake detention and a second recorded when he was detained after his adjudication hearing. Although the DAI helps expeditors identify youth in the RYDC who may be eligible for release to community programs, the assessment plays a much less essential role in a court hearing than at juvenile intake. In the field, DJJ staff make intake detention decisions immediately after a youth is arrested, often with very limited information. Judges make hearing decisions in court based on better information brought to them by DJJ staff. In addition, the characteristics of cases that appear at intake are quite different from those detained at court hearings. Both the DAI paper form and the online version require staff to note whether they are completing the instrument for a hearing or an intake. The instructions for scoring the DAI at a hearing are also somewhat different than for intake decisions. For instance, there is no reason to record overrides reasons for the judge's decision at a hearing.

The large number of DAI's that documented hearings was not accounted for in previous analyses of the data available in JTS. In effect, hearing DAI's were mistaken for intake cases and this may have confused previous findings. For instance, youth detained after an adjudication hearing may be sent to an RYDC to wait for a placement slot. These youth will typically have much more serious current and prior offense profiles than youth referred to intake and may stay longer in RYDC. Combining hearing cases in an analysis of intake detention operations will overestimate the

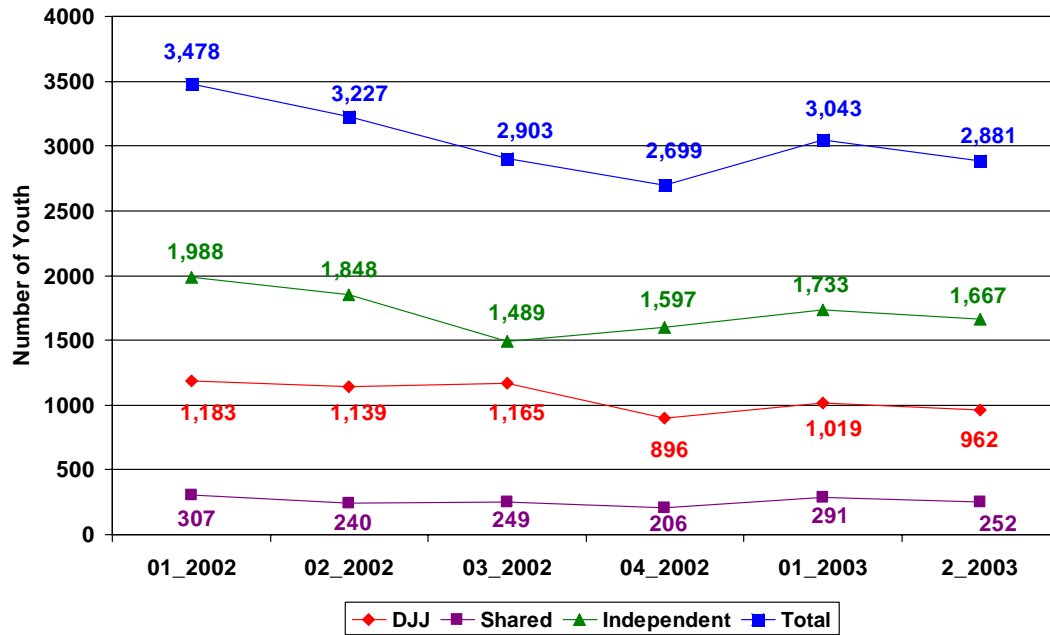
number of youth detained at intake and exaggerate both the offense profile and the average length of an RYDC stay.

Impact of DAI on Intake Operations

The analysis conducted below attempts to provide a more accurate estimate of the DAI's impact on detention at intake than was previously available. It simply asks whether detentions at intake are rising or falling and how many RYDC beds are required to house the youth detained. To avoid problems experienced by previous research efforts, it excludes court hearing DAI data from the analyses. In addition, the fact that a DAI is completed at intake only when a youth is detained is recognized by excluding the relatively small number of intake cases that were released. The analysis also benefits from improved JTS data that became available in January 2002. DJJ staff estimate that during 2002 more than 95% of the youth admitted to an RYDC in DJJ and independent counties had a DAI completed. Although DJJ counties had reliable reporting in 2001, independent counties did not complete the DAI for all detained cases until 2002. Consequently, this analysis examines statewide trends since the beginning of 2002.

The data examined below describe quarterly intake detention trends during 2002 and the first six months of 2003. Figure 1 shows the total number of youth detained at intake and the number detained by each type of court (DJJ, shared and independent courts). As the graph indicates, there has been a steady decrease in the number of youth detained. Total detentions fell by 597 cases between the first quarter 2002 (3,478 detention admits) and the second quarter of 2003 (2,881 admits). This is a substantial decline and the same general trend is apparent in each of the three court types.

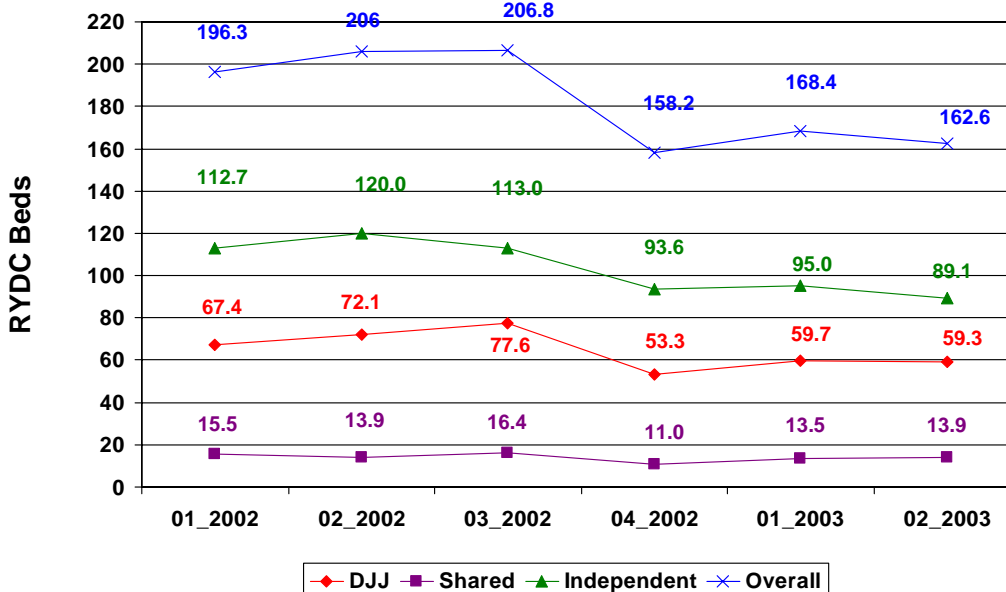
Figure 1
DAI Findings for Georgia DJJ Intake Cases:
Number of Youth Detained by Court Type



Note: Based on DAI item 11a. Overall, number of youth being detained has dropped since 1st quarter of 2002. First quarter 2003 numbers are lower than 1st quarter 2002 across all court types.

The second figure shows a trend line for the number of RYDC beds required to house youth detained at intake each quarter. It projects the average daily population (ADP) of the youth detained. This takes into account both the number of RYDC admissions and their average length of stay (i.e., the average length of stay for intake detention admissions is multiplied by the number of admissions and divided by 365. The resulting number, referred as an ADP estimate, indicates how many beds the entry cohort would occupy over the course of a year). The RYDC bed space used by youth detained at intake has fallen 17%, from 196 beds in the first quarter of 2002 to 162 in the second quarter of 2003. This decline can be observed in both DJJ and independent counties.

Figure 2
DAI Findings for Georgia DJJ Intake Cases:
ADP Trends for All Detained Youth



Note that total ADP rose slightly in the second and third quarter of 2002 before falling in the fourth quarter. There are seasonal variations in detention admissions that cannot be captured in this analysis because data prior to 2002 are not available. It is possible however to compare the first and second quarter of 2002 to the first half of 2003. These comparisons also show a declining trend. This finding is confirmed by a recent DJJ analysis of RYDC admissions and arrest trends. That report found that RYDC admissions fell in between 1999 and 2002. It also found that total juvenile arrests and arrests for Part 1 violent crime increased during the 1999-2002 period. Statewide juvenile court petitions also increased from 2000 through 2002.² This suggests that the decline in detention admissions is not caused by declining juvenile arrests.

² Georgia DJJ – Service Population Forecast CY 2003 through CY 2007, April 2003. pp 17 to 22.

The Impact on UCR Cases

The findings above show the impact on total cases. It is also possible to examine subgroups defined by DAI assessment scores. Youth who score between 0 and 7 points on the DAI are presumptively recommended for an unconditional release (UCR). Intake cases that score 12 points or higher on the DAI are recommended for a detention placement. In other words, detention is expected for cases that score 12 points or higher. Because UCR cases have the lowest risk profile (i.e., charged with less serious current offense, fewer prior adjudications, etc., than youth in the two higher score groups), it is reasonable to expect the detention of these youth to decline more rapidly than the total population. This seems to be the case. Detention admission and ADP trends for UCR cases appear in Figures 3 and 4. Admissions of UCR cases at intake fell from 984 cases in the first quarter of 2002 to 709 cases in the second quarter of 2003. Figure 4 indicates that the claim these cases have on RYDC bed space fell from 33.4 beds to 24.9, a decline of 26%.

Figure 3
DAI Findings for Georgia DJJ Intake Cases:
Number of Detained Youth Scoring Unconditional
Release (UCR)

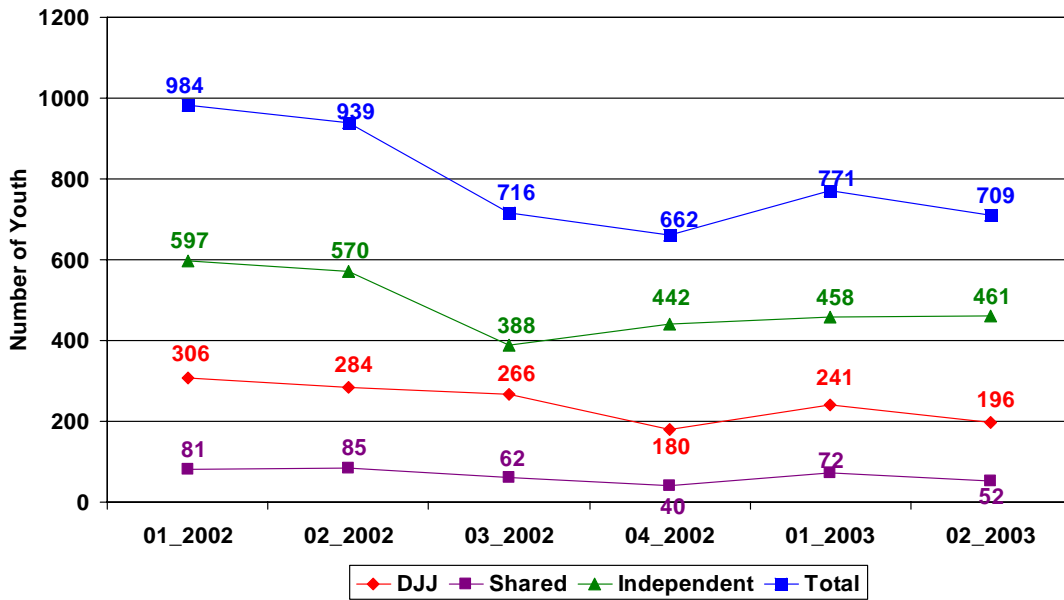
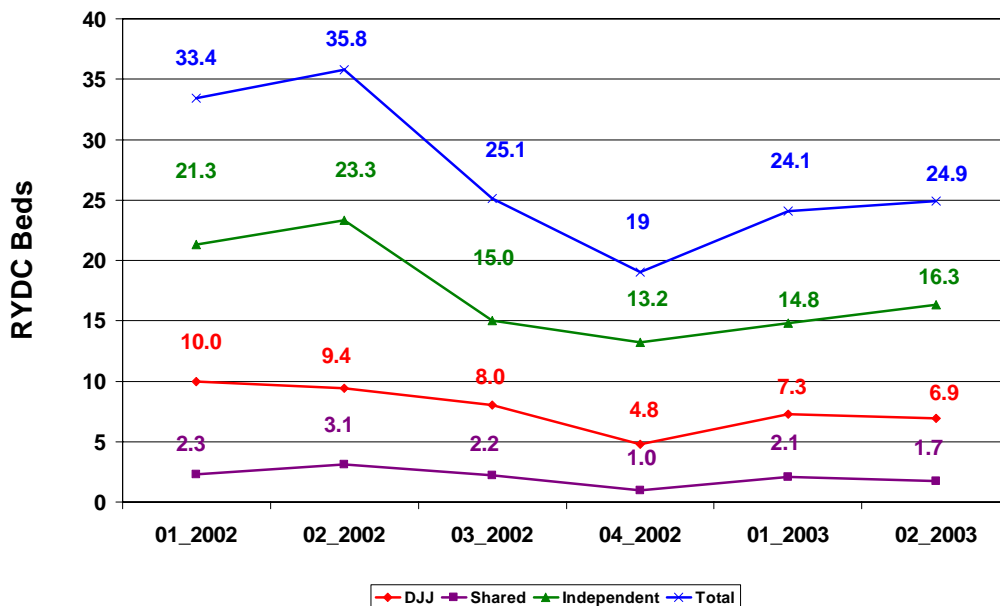


Figure 4
DAI Findings for Georgia DJJ Intake Cases: ADP Trends
for Detained Youth Scoring Unconditional Release (UCR)



Adjusting DAI Findings

The design of the Georgia DAI has a unique feature that complicates comparisons with other jurisdictions. This involves the way in which the assessment court warrants and detention orders are scored. In the 1999 development and field testing of the instrument, DJJ staff and NCCD consultants determined that the DAI had to capture detailed information about the detention practices of both county courts and DJJ field staff. DJJ staff believed that detention practices varied considerably from one jurisdiction to another. There was an expectation that many counties would override the DAI immediately after implementation because there were not many alternative programs available. It was clear that DJJ needed to be able to assess the practices of local courts before they could address them effectively. The use of court warrants and detention orders was one area of that practice. In addition, local courts could establish policies which automatically caused certain youth to be detained at intake (e.g., all felony charges or all probation violators).

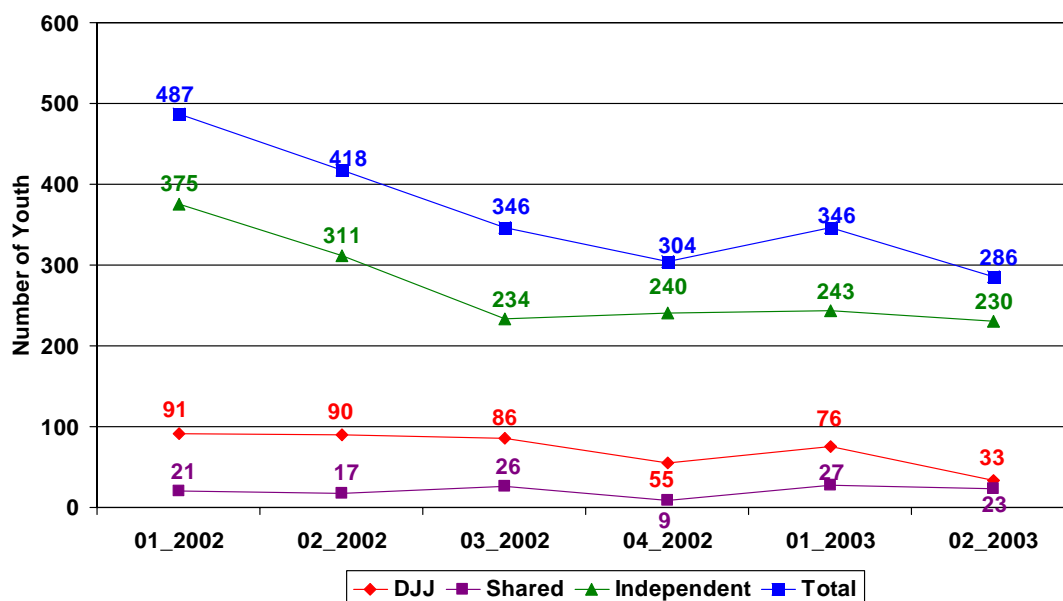
As a result, the assessment did not incorporate an item for scoring court warrants or detention orders. Many other jurisdictions do include an item on their DAI for court warrants or detention orders and score them in a manner that can place the case in the presumptive detention group (i.e., in Georgia they would score at 12 points). This was not done in Georgia because it was not clear how frequently local courts used these orders or whether all the youth that received them needed to be presumptively detained at intake. Staff who designed the DAI also reasoned that an item which scored warrants and court orders as automatic detentions could discourage intake workers from completing the remaining assessment items and make it difficult to determine exactly why youth were detained. Consequently, court detention orders or warrants appear as override reasons on the DAI and are exercised after the DAI score is calculated.

This design feature makes the Georgia DAI more flexible than those used in other jurisdictions. While court warrants or orders are not included in the DAI score, intake staff apply

them as override conditions when detention is required by a local court policy. This operational feature does impact DAI findings. First of all, it increases the size of the UCR and RWC groups which would be smaller if warrants and orders were scored. And since court warrants and orders are recognized by the use of overrides, the rate at which overrides are used is increased. Since many youth have to be detained because of court warrants or detention orders, intake staff may not have a great deal of opportunity to divert them to alternatives. The DAI scores do not necessarily reflect this very accurately.

The analysis below examines adjusted intake detention trends. The adjustment simply removes cases overridden by warrants or court orders from the UCR group. Figure 5 shows the result. Generally, the decline in total admissions for UCR cases is much steeper than the comparable figure shown in Figure 3. In addition, the decline in admissions from independent counties is much more pronounced than in DJJ counties. The other significant finding is that a large percentage (nearly 50%) of UCR cases are being detained by court warrants or orders. (compare Figure 3 to Figure 5.)

Figure 5
Adjusted DAI Findings for Georgia DJJ Intake: Number of Detained Youth Scoring Unconditional Release (UCR)



Changes in the Percentage of Adjusted UCR Cases Detained

Intake operations can also be examined by observing changes in the composition of cases detained at intake. If adjusted UCR numbers shown in Figure 5 are employed, 14% of the intake detentions scored as UCR cases in the first quarter of 2002 versus only 10% in the second quarter of 2003. In effect, a smaller percentage of UCR cases are entering Georgia RYDC facilities in 2003 than in 2002. The DDJ courts show a more pronounced decline in the percentage of these cases detained (8% to 3%) than the independent courts. The shared counties actually increase slightly (7% to 9%) but the small numbers of cases served in these courts make these figures less reliable. Clearly, the percentage of UCR cases entering detention without a court order or warrant is declining.

Summary and Limitations of Findings

The findings presented above attempt to provide a more accurate estimate of DAI impact on intake detention than was previously available. Since DAI data are not consistently entered for youth who are not detained at intake, it is not possible to assess the characteristics of youth who were diverted from detention after a DAI was completed. This means that DJJ cannot examine: 1) the extent to which youth are diverted from detention at intake; 2) the DAI classification of these cases; or 3) the utilization of detention alternatives. This makes it impossible to know, for example, whether the youth being diverted to alternative programs are UCR or RWC cases.

Despite these limitations, the current analysis was able to examine intake detentions trends and provide an estimate of the impact of detention screening on RYDC bed space. The quarterly findings shown in Figures 3 and 4 indicate that intake detentions have substantially declined since the first quarter of 2002 as has the demand intake cases placed on RYDC beds. This decline occurs despite increasing juvenile arrests and petitions filings. The decline in detentions is clearly a positive trend which appears to be related to the use of the DAI by DJJ intake staff and case expeditors. It coincides with the later stages of DJJ efforts to divert cases from detention in both DJJ and independent courts. Another limitation of this analysis, however, is that base line data were not available from JTS to examine detention practices prior to the 2002 calendar year. Consequently, it is not possible at this point to estimate the impact of DJJ's detention reform efforts in 2000 or 2001.

Recommendations

The analysis employed improved data from JTS which was examined in a framework that permitted a more accurate examination of intake operations. These same data are now reliable enough to support the efforts of field staff to make further improvements in detention reform. For instance, it is now possible for county and regional staff to use the DAI intake data to examine in

much more detail the overrides exercised by local courts or by intake staff. The next step is to help intake staff and DJJ case expeditors use this information to improve their diversion efforts.

This analysis makes clear that one area that should be examined further is the use of court warrants and orders to detain UCR cases at intake. The court jurisdictions where this occurs most often can be identified and case expeditors can investigate the circumstance of these kinds of detentions. In addition, efforts should be made to improve the collection of DAI data on youth who are not detained at intake. This would make it possible to examine the role of alternative programs in diverting youth from detention and permit DJJ to manage these resources more effectively.