

THE VALID COURT ORDER (VCO) EXCEPTION

BAD FOR OUR COMMUNITIES, BAD FOR OUR KIDS



In 1974, Congress enacted the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP). This legislation was meant to address inconsistencies that existed among the 56 different juvenile justice systems that exist across the United States, and its territories. It was further intended to improve youth outcomes, and help address community safety.

The legislation set out four key protections for court-involved youth. These protections included a prohibition on courts incarcerating youth for status offense behaviors. Status offenses are acts that violate the law solely because the person who engaged in them was younger than the age of majority. These behaviors vary by state, but often include skipping school, running away from home, violating curfew, failing to obey a parent's rules, and/or possessing alcohol or tobacco products.

Subsequent reauthorization of the JJDP in 1980, resulted in an amendment to this protection. As a result, states could detain youth for non-delinquent behaviors through the valid court order (VCO) exception. This exception enabled states to incarcerate children in need of services if their conduct was in violation of a valid court order, such as requiring a child to attend school regularly.



The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) aims to bring an end to the incarceration of non-delinquent youth. However, youth across the country continue to be detained in thousands of cases each year.



Status Offenses:

Laws governing status offense behaviors vary widely by state. Common examples of these behaviors include:

- Skipping school (truancy);
- Running away from home;
- Failure to abide by a municipal curfew;
- Failure to abide by a parent's rules; and
- Possession or consumption of alcohol or tobacco products.

In 2018, Congress reauthorized the JJDPa for the first time in 16 years.

The reauthorization amended key components of the JJDPa, including the VCO provision. Now, courts detaining young people under the VCO exception must issue a written order that identifies: the order that has been violated; a factual basis for determining there is reasonable cause to believe the order was violated; a finding of fact to support the determination that there are no less restrictive placement alternatives available; and the length of time of the detention, not to exceed seven days. These orders can only be used to detain a young person once. They cannot be renewed or extended.

While this is a step in the right direction, more must be done to phase out the use of the VCO.

Changing Perspectives

Better Outcomes for Youth. Phasing out the VCO would result in better outcomes for youth. Young people who are placed in detention centers are more likely to come back into contact with the court system, a probability that increases the more times they are detained.¹ Often, detained youth are held in overcrowded, understaffed facilities -- environments that can breed violence and complicate a child's unmet needs for counseling and other services. In addition, nearly 20% of youth who are detained for status offense behaviors and other non-delinquent conduct are placed in living units with young people who have killed someone.²

Research reveals that locked confinement is not an evidence-based practice for court-involved youth, especially youth who engage in non-delinquent offenses. Institutionalization's many harms begin with removing youth from their families and communities, which prohibits youth from developing the strong social network and support system necessary to transition successfully from adolescence to adulthood.³

Better Financial Outcomes for Communities. Incarcerating youth is a costly undertaking. Confining someone in a detention facility can cost up to \$407.58 per day, per youth.⁴ This equates to roughly \$149,000 a year for each child who is incarcerated. Youth who engage in non-delinquent behaviors often do so, however, because they need community and family-based supports. Research has shown that providing youth with these types of programs, instead of placing them in detention facilities, makes them less likely to have future contact with the juvenile justice system and has a higher return on investment.⁵

1. Development Services Group, Inc. 2017. "Juvenile Reentry." Literature review. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/Aftercare.pdf>

2. Nancy Gannon Hornberger. (2010). Improving Outcomes for Status Offenders in the JJDPa Reauthorization. Juvenile and Family Justice Today citing Sedlak, A. J., & McPherson, K. S. (May 2010). Conditions of confinement: Findings from the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement. Washington, DC: Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.

3. Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. (2019). Collaborating for Successful Reentry A Practical Guide to Support Justice-Involved Young People Returning to the Community. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

4. Justice Policy Institute. (December 2014). Sticker Shock: Calculating the Full Price for Youth Incarceration.

5. Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. (2019). Collaborating for Successful Reentry A Practical Guide to Support Justice-Involved Young People Returning to the Community. Annie E. Casey Foundation.



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