

JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM IN CONNECTICUT:

**How Collaboration And Commitment
Have Improved Public Safety
And Outcomes For Youth**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, Connecticut made national headlines when it passed a law ending its status as one of just three states that automatically tried and punished all 16 and 17 year-olds as adults. Yet this historic “Raise the Age” legislation is just one of many reforms enacted by Connecticut’s juvenile justice system in recent years. Propelled by a determined coalition of advocates and public sector innovators, Connecticut has forged a new consensus for progressive change in juvenile justice, and it has transformed a previously wasteful, punitive, ineffective, and often abusive juvenile justice system into a national model – at no additional cost to taxpayers. Perhaps more than any other state, Connecticut has absorbed the growing body of knowledge about youth development and delinquency, adopted its lessons, and used the information to fundamentally re-invent its approach to juvenile justice. As a result, Connecticut’s system today is far and away more successful, more humane, and more cost-effective than it was 10 or 20 years ago.

This report will describe, dissect, and draw lessons from Connecticut’s striking success in juvenile justice reform for other states and communities seeking similar progress. The first section of the report details the dimensions of change in Connecticut’s juvenile justice system over the past two decades. The report’s second section looks under the hood of Connecticut’s reform efforts and explores the critical factors underlying these accomplishments. The report’s final section explores what other states or local jurisdictions can learn from Connecticut’s experience. The most important lesson, it finds, is that a new and vastly improved juvenile justice system is within reach for any jurisdiction that summons the energy and commitment, the creativity and cooperative spirit to do what’s best for children, families, and communities.

To view a copy of the full report, click here: <http://www.justicepolicy.org/research/4969>



JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM IN CONNECTICUT: SUMMARY OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

1. REDUCED OVERRELIANCE ON CONFINEMENT

Over the past decade, Connecticut has dramatically reduced the number of youth who were removed from home by delinquency courts and placed into pre-trial detention centers, correctional training schools, and/or other residential facilities. Specifically, the state has reduced residential commitments from 680 in 2000 to 216 in 2011 (nearly 70 percent), even though most 16 year-olds, who were previously treated as adults, are now handled in the juvenile system. The average daily population in Connecticut’s pretrial detention centers fell from 132 in 2006 to 94 in 2011, the year after 16-year-olds entered the juvenile system, allowing the state to close one of its three state-operated detention centers. Meanwhile, the under 18 population in Connecticut’s adult prisons fell from 403 in January 2007 to 151 in July 2012.

2. BUILT A CONTINUUM OF TARGETED, HIGH-QUALITY NON-RESIDENTIAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR YOUTH

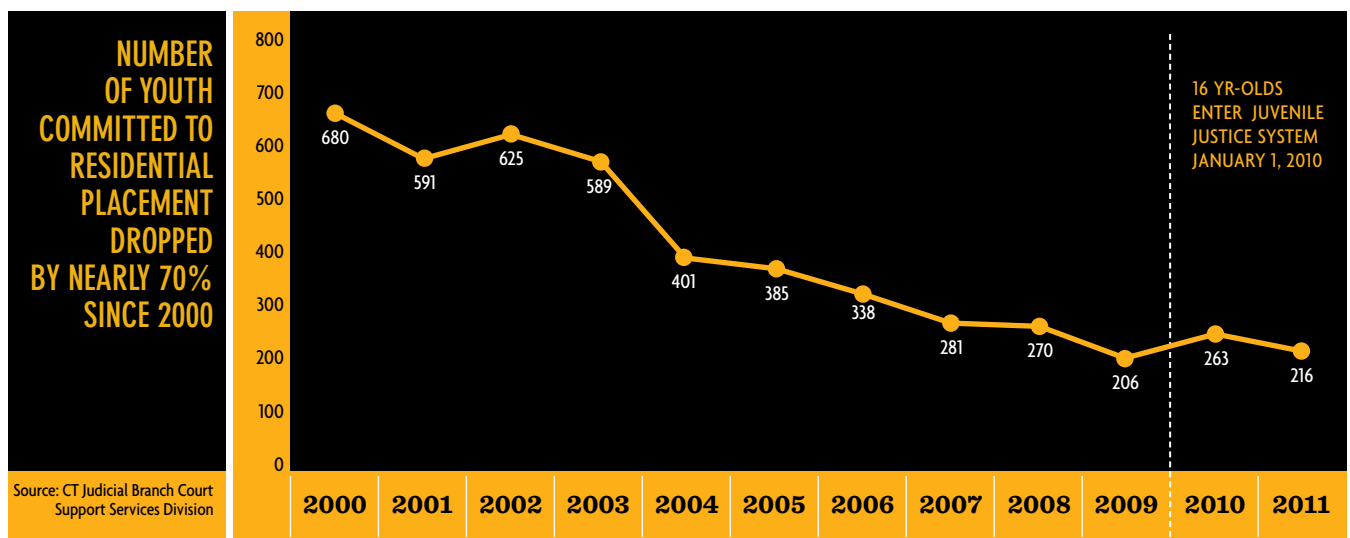
Over the past 15 years, Connecticut has developed a vast array of new community-based supervision and treatment programs for delinquent and behaviorally troubled youth. Specifically, the state has expanded its investment in evidence-based, family-focused adolescent treatment programs with proven success in reducing problem behaviors from \$300,000 in 2000 to \$39 million in 2009. In Fiscal Year 2012, 955 youths on probation supervision participated in intensive evidence-based family therapy programs and 652 in evidence-based cognitive behavioral therapy. Evidence-based treatment was also provided to thousands of other Connecticut youths, including delinquent young people committed to state custody, status offenders diverted from juvenile court, and behaviorally troubled youth served in the child welfare and children’s mental health systems.

3. IMPROVED CONDITIONS IN JUVENILE FACILITIES

Connecticut has undertaken sweeping reforms in recent years to ensure humane care for confined youth. After being sued in the early 1990s for overcrowding and problematic treatment of youth in its pre-trial detention facilities, Connecticut vastly improved detention programming, education and mental health services, and physical conditions in detention. After a series of investigations revealed severe deficiencies in the new \$57 million Connecticut Juvenile Training School from 2001-2004, Connecticut permanently closed a high-security unit where violent incidents had been commonplace, temporarily suspended new admissions, provided intensive retraining of staff on behavior management, reformed disciplinary practices, and vastly improved programming and treatment throughout the facility.

4. DIVERTED STATUS OFFENDING YOUTH AWAY FROM THE COURT SYSTEM AND OUT OF LOCKED DETENTION CENTERS

Until just a few years ago, Connecticut routinely sent youth to court and even detained them for minor misdeeds (truancy, running away, alcohol possession) that would not be illegal if committed by an adult – despite evidence that such harsh treatment for these “status offenses” is costly, ineffective, and harmful to youth. Since 2005, Connecticut has eliminated admission of youth to detention centers for status offenses and opened Family Support Centers statewide that offer community-based treatment and other services for status-offending youth and their families, rather than probation supervision. The state reduced judicial processing (formal petition) of status offender referrals from 50 percent of those filed in 2006-07 to just 4.5 percent in 2010 and 2011. Since 2006, the number of youth with a status offense who were rearrested or convicted of crimes fell by more than 70 percent.



5. KEPT YOUTH OUT OF THE ADULT JUSTICE SYSTEM

For decades, Connecticut was one of only three states that prosecuted and punished all 16- and 17-year-olds as adults. In 2007, the state enacted historic legislation to raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction from 16 to 18, effective January 1, 2010 for 16 year-olds and July 1, 2012 for 17 year-olds. Even before 17 year-olds became eligible for juvenile court on July 1, 2012, the new law had enabled 8,325 16 year-olds to avoid prosecution and punishment in the adult criminal justice system. Extending juvenile jurisdiction to 16 year-olds has increased juvenile caseloads far less than expected (22 percent actual versus 40 percent projected); as a result, the state spent nearly \$12 million less in fiscal years 2010 and 2011 than it had budgeted. Meanwhile, 16 year-olds served by the juvenile system have had higher success rates in alternative programs and lower rearrest rates than youth 15 and younger, disproving concerns that they should be in the adult system.

6. ADDRESSED RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM'S TREATMENT OF YOUTH

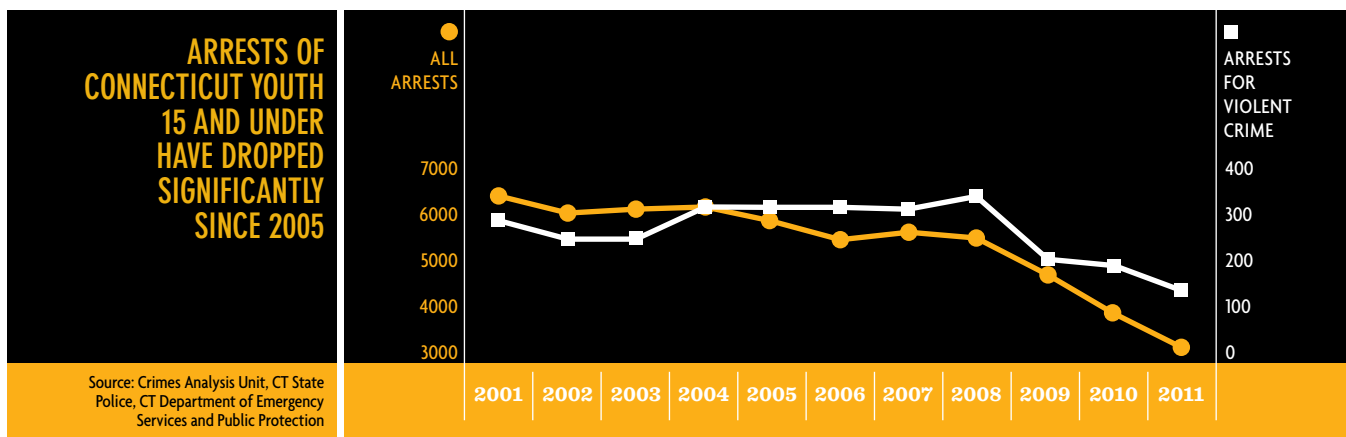
While Connecticut cannot claim significant statewide progress toward reducing racial and ethnic disparities in its juvenile justice system, the state has intensified its focus in recent years and launched promising new initiatives to address this pervasive and troubling problem. Connecticut's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (JJAC), the state advisory group, commissioned three in-depth studies analyzing racial disparities at 18 decision points in the state's law enforcement and juvenile court processes. The JJAC has also trained nearly 1,400 police officers on Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) since 2007. Pilot projects in Bridgeport and Hartford have reduced juvenile court referrals of Black and Hispanic students for misconduct at school by 40 percent (Bridgeport) and 78 percent (Hartford), and reduced the overall number of Black and Hispanic youth referred to juvenile court in both sites. In 2011, the state legislature enacted a new law requiring state juvenile justice agencies to prepare biennial reports on their DMC goals and accomplishments.

7. REDUCED ARRESTS OF YOUTH AT SCHOOL FOR ROUTINE AND NON-SERIOUS MISBEHAVIOR

Though Connecticut has not yet demonstrated significant statewide progress, it is making important strides. Nine Connecticut school districts have signed agreements with police limiting the circumstances under which students can be arrested at school. In one pilot district (Manchester), by the spring of 2012, arrests and expulsions both fell by more than 60 percent compared to the prior school year. The School-Based Diversion Initiative (SBDI) also is working in nine sites to promote mental health treatment rather than disciplinary or justice responses to misbehavior by emotionally disturbed students. An independent evaluation found that SBDI decreased the number of students arrested and/or suspended, and reduced subsequent misbehavior. In 2011, juvenile courts began rejecting referrals involving youth arrested for minor misbehavior. Of the first 221 cases the courts refused to prosecute, more than half involved school arrests. Connecticut schools have also sharply reduced out-of-school suspensions in the past five years.

THE BOTTOM LINE: COST SAVINGS AND IMPROVED PUBLIC SAFETY

Perhaps Connecticut's most impressive achievements are that its overall spending on juvenile justice (after adjusting for inflation) has not increased despite the implementation of many new programs and services, and the state's juvenile crime rate has dropped considerably even as confinement rates plummeted. Among youth 15 and under (the state's traditional juvenile population), total arrests fell 48 percent from 2002 to 2011 and serious violent crime arrests fell 51 percent. Among 16 year-olds, total arrests and serious violent crime arrests fell 35 percent and 26 percent respectively from 2009 to 2011, the first two years after Connecticut 16 year-olds became eligible for juvenile court. Meanwhile, after adjusting for inflation, the two agencies that administer Connecticut's juvenile justice system -- the Department of Children and Families and the Judicial Branch's Court Support Services Division -- spent \$2 million less on juvenile programs and facilities in the 2011-12 fiscal year than they had ten years earlier.



CONNECTICUT'S KEYS TO SUCCESS IN JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM

While many important developments and pivotal players have contributed to Connecticut's reform story, it is impossible to imagine the dramatic changes occurring in Connecticut without the following five elements:

1. FORMATION OF THE CONNECTICUT JUVENILE JUSTICE ALLIANCE AND THE COALESCING OF ADVOCATES STATEWIDE

Founded in 2001, the Alliance created a unified forum for advocates and concerned leaders, and it brought a new organizational capacity to Connecticut's juvenile justice reform movement. As the Alliance added dedicated staff, it built capacity to recruit and organize volunteers; engage the media; provide support for public events; and conduct policy research, data analysis, and strategic planning for system reform efforts. By 2006, the Alliance had solidified its standing as a powerful player in Connecticut and emerged as the driving force behind the state's historic "Raise the Age" legislation.

2. COMMITMENT BY THE STATE TO USING EVIDENCE-BASED TREATMENT MODELS AND OTHER PROMISING PRACTICES VALIDATED BY RESEARCH

Both of the key agencies in the Connecticut's juvenile justice system – the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch, which oversees detention, probation, and non-residential treatment services for adjudicated youth, and the Department of Children and Families, which operates the state's correctional training school and other treatment facilities for juveniles, as well as Connecticut's child welfare and behavioral health systems – have made major investments in evidence-based treatment models in recent years. By 2009, the two agencies' combined spending for family-focused, research-driven adolescent treatment programs reached \$39 million.

3. A COMPREHENSIVE STATEWIDE JUVENILE JUSTICE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Facilitated by experts from the Child Welfare League of America with funding support from the state legislature, the process involved well over one hundred leaders representing state agencies, the courts, community and family groups, philanthropy, and academic experts. The effort started with community listening sessions where more than 450 children and families shared their experiences with the juvenile

justice system, followed by extensive deliberations by three committees (each with several active subcommittees). The resulting strategic plan, published in August 2006, embodied a progressive new consensus for the state in favor of working with children and their families within their homes and communities, identifying their risks and addressing their needs – while removing youth from their homes only as a last resort. This new consensus was shared by advocates, public agency leaders, and even the law enforcement community, and it helped pave the way for the rapid adoption of major reforms that ensued from 2007 to the present day.

4. PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT

Since the late 1990s, The Tow Foundation, based in New Canaan, has provided more than 300 grants totaling \$12 million to support juvenile justice reform efforts statewide, including direct services, research and advocacy. Other foundations, both within and outside Connecticut, have also provided invaluable assistance. The total value of philanthropic contributions to juvenile justice reform from Tow and other foundations remain modest – vastly overshadowed by the state's annual spending for juvenile justice facilities, programs, and services, which exceeds \$137 million per year. Yet the steady and consistent availability of even this limited funding has been critical, reinforcing and rewarding the efforts of advocates and youth-serving agencies to test new approaches and push for change.

5. EFFECTIVE LITIGATION

Though lawsuits have often been used successfully to address abuses and improve conditions inside juvenile facilities, litigation has seldom been effective as a fulcrum for deep and sustained policy reforms. In Connecticut, however, litigation has proved a powerful lever for fundamental change. Much of the credit for the deep and sustained impact of litigation in Connecticut can be traced to the state's chief litigator on juvenile rights issues, Martha Stone, who has created a constant drumbeat for continued reforms over 20 years, in many ways acting as Connecticut's conscience. Connecticut's policymakers and juvenile justice system leaders – the targets of the lawsuits – also deserve credit. These officials recognized that the system had to change, and the threat of legal sanctions helped them muster the political support to pass needed policy reforms and increase funding for effective alternatives to confinement.

Today, more than **5,000** Connecticut youths per year are served in non-residential evidence-based programs

LESSONS FROM CONNECTICUT FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM IN OTHER STATES

Every state is different when it comes to juvenile justice: different challenges, different economic circumstances, different system architecture, different leaders, different political cultures. As a result, it's impossible to draw a straight line from Connecticut's experience to reform efforts in any other state. Nonetheless, Connecticut's success in re-engineering its juvenile justice system offers useful insights to leaders in other states seeking to accomplish ambitious top-to-bottom juvenile justice reforms. Connecticut's seven key lessons are:

1. SEIZE THE MOMENT

It's an unfortunate adage, but nonetheless true: never let a crisis go to waste. Time and again in Connecticut, advocates and reformers have seized on alarming events to mobilize and press for far-reaching reforms.

2. LAY THE GROUNDWORK

For Connecticut's two most sweeping and important juvenile justice reform laws – raising the age and removing status offenders from juvenile courts and detention centers – state leaders employed a two-stage process. First, the legislature established a high-level advisory group or task force to carefully examine the challenges, alternative solutions, and associated costs. Then, after key stakeholders and data analysts agreed upon detailed proposals, the legislature debated the measures and enacted legislation.

3. MAKE IT REAL

One of the biggest challenges in building support for reforms in juvenile justice is getting affluent, successful, mostly White policymakers to feel and understand the importance of changing a system that primarily involves poor minority youth and families. To meet this challenge, legislators, members of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, and other advocates have been creative in their efforts to “make it real” in their advocacy efforts. Facts and figures are important. Policy studies and cost/benefit analyses are essential to validate any reform campaign. But ultimately, Connecticut reformers have learned that the human factor is critical – touching policymakers' hearts and showing them what reform means in the lives of real children and families.

4. ADVOCATE, BUT DON'T ALIENATE

The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance and other members of the state's advocacy community have fought hard for their goals, displaying dogged persistence, but they have been careful not to employ antagonistic tactics. Rather, advocates have sought to build relationships with those in power and win them over whenever possible, rather than beating system officials over the head and trying to make them look bad.

5. FOLLOW THE EVIDENCE

Another key to success in Connecticut has been the willingness of system leaders to track and heed the evidence, even if it requires dramatic changes. Connecticut has fundamentally re-oriented its juvenile programs and services over the past decade to align its efforts with new research about what works and to carefully track results and adjust its approaches based on outcome data.

6. ENGAGE NATIONAL EXPERTS... AND LOCAL ONES, TOO

Even with the impressive expertise and resources available within the state, Connecticut leaders have not hesitated to reach out for help from national experts and resources. For instance, Connecticut's Raise the Age effort relied heavily on the support of the Campaign for Youth Justice. The National Juvenile Justice Network in Washington, D.C., a coalition of state-based advocacy groups like the Alliance, also provided valuable support. At the same time, state officials in Connecticut are increasingly partnering with community leaders who can provide on-the-ground feedback on how well state programs are working (or not working) at the local level. In Bridgeport, the Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership (RYASAP) has played a valuable role since 2000 by bringing local leaders together and focusing attention on gaps and problems that may not be well understood at the state level.

7. COMMIT FOR THE LONG HAUL

Connecticut has learned that the challenges to reform never end. Creating and maintaining a first-rate juvenile justice system requires a continuing thirst for improvement and innovation. Even with all that Connecticut's juvenile justice reformers have accomplished in recent years, their efforts are not slowing down. If anything, they're accelerating, with ambitious new initiatives to address racial disparities and school arrests, and with new projects to improve services for older youth and those who are dually involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Available data leave no doubt that public safety has improved as a result of Connecticut's juvenile justice reforms