

Three Key Steps Policymakers Can Take to Improve Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System

POLICYMAKERS IN NEARLY EVERY STATE have undertaken efforts to reduce the number of youth who are incarcerated. For these policymakers, recent trends are cause for encouragement: juvenile incarceration rates have declined nationwide by almost 50 percent since 1997, and arrest rates have dropped to their lowest level in more than 30 years. While such changes have produced substantial savings at no cost to public safety, for many states and counties, investments in community-based services have not resulted in reduced rates of recidivism or improvements in other key youth outcomes, such as education or behavioral health. In order to maximize the results of system improvement efforts, state and local policymakers must now focus on what additional strategies are needed to reduce high rearrest and reincarceration rates and improve supervision and services for all youth in contact with the juvenile justice system.

Three key steps policymakers can take to increase public safety, improve youth outcomes, and maximize the efficient use of resources are:¹

- 1. Prioritize reducing recidivism and improving other outcomes for youth in contact with the juvenile justice system** and establish key performance indicators for improvement.
- 2. Develop a system-wide plan to reduce recidivism and improve other outcomes for youth in contact with the juvenile justice system**, with input from across branches of government and youth/family service agencies.
 - **Require that all youth receive a risk assessment prior to disposition** to identify their risk of reoffending and key service needs, and ensure that the results are used to make disposition, service, and length-of-stay decisions.
 - **Establish guidelines that promote the diversion of low-risk youth** from court involvement or formal system supervision.
 - **Reserve the use of incarceration** for only those youth who are assessed as being at a high risk of reoffending and/or who have committed violent offenses.
 - **Require that funding for juvenile justice services is allocated only to programs and services shown to reduce recidivism**; establish performance expectations for programs and services; and tie continued funding to ongoing evaluations of whether these expectations are being met.
 - **Ensure that incarcerated youth receive education and vocational training** that adheres to state curricular, testing, and accreditation/certification requirements.
 - **Establish a graduated response system for technical violations of supervision**, and minimize the use of detention and incarceration as punishment for noncompliance with conditions of supervision.
- 3. Track progress on recidivism and other youth outcomes by requiring annual progress reports**, and tie agency funding to demonstrated improvements.

1. For more information on these key steps, please visit [Core Principles for Reducing Recidivism and Improving Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System](#).