



Independent research and advocacy to improve the lives of Connecticut's children

Protecting Kids, Preventing Crime: Creating a Fair and Effective Juvenile Justice System

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Connecticut has made great improvements in recent years in its treatment of young people who have committed crimes. Going forward, Connecticut needs to continue to invest in research-based, developmentally appropriate services that keep children and communities safe.



Keeping children in school -- by improving school climate, reducing exclusionary discipline practices, preventing truancy and dropout, improving alternative education options, and minimizing school-based arrests -- is the first step to reducing involvement in the juvenile justice system. Research and experience shows that the most effective way to keep children and youth out of trouble is to keep them engaged in school. Safe, caring, well-structured school environments based on positive relationships between students, faculty, school resource officers and administrators are essential to keeping children and youth

in school, where they belong. In recent years, schools in Connecticut have made significant strides in improving school climate and reducing unnecessary suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests. However, much more remains to be done in reducing truancy and dropout, eliminating racial inequities in school discipline and school based arrests, and in improving the array and quality of alternative education options available to student at risk of academic failure and juvenile justice involvement.

Addressing academic, mental health, and behavioral health needs as early as possible is also critical to keeping children in school and out of the juvenile justice system. Extensive research shows that many disciplinary and behavioral problems result from unmet academic and health care needs. Overall, Connecticut is a wealthy state with good laws and a strong network of social services. Unfortunately, however, in many schools and communities, public policies designed to provide children and youth with the educational and health care services they need to focus on school and stay out of trouble are not sufficiently enforced.

Connecticut's landmark 2007 reforms to its juvenile justice laws marked a pivotal moment in Connecticut's treatment of its at-risk youth, moving Connecticut

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towards a system that is more developmentally appropriate, cost-effective, and likely to prevent future delinquent behavior. “Raising the age” of juvenile court jurisdiction to permit most offenses involving 16 and 17 year olds to be adjudicated in juvenile court rather than adult criminal court represented a watershed for children’s rights in Connecticut. These reforms expanded diversion services and court options for youth engaged in “status” offenses, such as truancy, running away, and out-of-control behavior. Since these reforms began in 2007, delinquency in Connecticut has dropped. Going forward, it is essential that Connecticut continue to implement and monitor these reforms in a comprehensive, thoughtful, and cost-effective manner.

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Connecticut must continue to research, develop, and invest in cutting edge best practices designed to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for children and youth at risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system. Fortunately, a number of exciting pilot projects designed to reduce juvenile justice involvement and improve school climate have been developed in communities across the state. These pilot projects are monitoring their effectiveness through extensive data collection and analysis. By sharing and disseminating data and best practices, communities can learn from each other about what works and what does not.

Connecticut must continue to work hard to ensure that policies and programs designed to keep children safe do not inadvertently

contribute to racial and income-based inequities. In Connecticut and across the country, a wealth of academic and professional data analysis has revealed some startling inequities in the manner in which racially neutral laws and policies are enforced. To ensure that all of Connecticut’s children – regardless of race, income status, or town of residence – have equal opportunities to grow up safe, healthy, and successful, it is vital that the state, communities, and schools track, monitor, and work to eliminate these disparities.

In summary, to keep children and communities safe, Connecticut should:

- Invest in best practice based programs designed to keep children in school.
- Address academic, mental health and behavioral health needs as early as possible
- Retain a commitment to the landmark “Raise the Age” reforms.
- Research, develop, and invest in cutting edge practices designed to improve outcomes for children who do become involved in the juvenile justice system.
- Ensure that policies and programs designed to keep communities safe do not inadvertently contribute to racial and income-based inequalities.