

ALABAMA JUVENILE JUSTICE TASK FORCE FINAL REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TASK FORCE OVERVIEW

Established in April 2017 by Senate Joint Resolution 78 at the request of Governor Kay Ivey, Chief Justice Lyn Stuart, Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh, House Speaker Mac McCutcheon and other state leaders, the Alabama Juvenile Justice Task Force (Task Force) conducted a comprehensive data-driven, research-based assessment of Alabama’s juvenile justice system. The Task Force reviewed Alabama law and policies, examined national research about what works to reduce reoffending, and gathered input through a questionnaire provided to juvenile probation officers (JPOs) statewide and 28 roundtables across the state involving more than 400 participants.

The inter-branch, bipartisan Task Force, which consisted of 20 members representing stakeholders from across the juvenile justice system, developed and reached consensus on 48 policy recommendations, which, if adopted, would:

- Promote public safety and hold juvenile offenders accountable;
- Control taxpayer costs; and
- Improve outcomes for youth, families, and communities in Alabama.

TASK FORCE KEY FINDINGS

1. **The number of juvenile complaints has shrunk, but use of out-of-home placement has not followed suit:**
 - While juvenile complaints have declined 27 percent since 2012, DYS-funded out-of-home placement population increased six percent, and the number of youth in detention on a given day has remained steady during the same period.
2. **Most judges and JPOs lack access to evidence-based alternatives to out-of-home placement, especially in rural areas:**
 - More than two-thirds of JPO questionnaire respondents reported that there are not enough services to meet the needs of youth on their caseloads.
3. **Low-level youth frequently receive the most severe system responses, even though over-involvement can make them worse:**
 - Children in Need of Supervision (CHINS) and youth charged with misdemeanors, many of whom have no prior history, make up the majority of youth in the juvenile justice system.
 - Two-thirds of youth in DYS custody are committed for non-felonies.
4. **Youth on probation are often supervised for years—regardless of offense—and supervision length has increased dramatically:**
 - The length of probation supervision has more than doubled since 2009, driven in part by extensions of supervision for technical violations of court conditions, including failure to meet financial obligations.
 - Nearly 1/3 of youth on probation spend more than three years on probation.
5. **Out-of-home beds consume vastly more taxpayer resources per youth than probation, despite research showing poor public safety returns:**
 - DYS out-of-home placement for committed youth costs the state up to \$161,694 per youth per year—as much as 91 times more than probation—despite research showing out-of-home placements fail to reduce reoffending for most youth.

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TASK FORCE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Keep lower-level youth from unnecessary involvement in the juvenile justice system through early interventions and swift, consistent responses

Expand effective pre-court responses to prevent deeper juvenile justice system involvement

- Expand early interventions to address the needs of low-level youth prior to court involvement
- Establish consistent criteria for informal adjustments to hold low-level youth accountable effectively

Focus the use of costly pre-adjudication detention on higher-risk youth while expanding alternatives

- Develop a statewide detention risk assessment tool to inform pre-adjudication detention decisions
- Reinvest in community-based alternatives to give JPOs and judges more options and keep lower-level youth from placement in detention facilities alongside more serious youth

Alleviate burdensome costs for county sheriffs

- Reinvest state funds to reimburse county sheriffs for a portion of transportation costs

Focus system resources in order to protect public safety and more effectively allocate taxpayer dollars

Focus use of out-of-home beds on youth who pose the greatest threat to public safety

- Tailor eligibility criteria for removal from the home to focus on the most serious youth

Strengthen probation by reinvesting in evidence-based programs and practices in every county

- Expand judge and JPO access to evidence-based options in the community statewide
- Implement statewide risk and needs assessment to provide courts with clear, consistent information
- Establish proportionate supervision lengths that align with research and incentivize compliance

Prioritize restitution by minimizing excessive fines and fees against youth

- Limit restitution to “material loss” and remove fines, fees, and court costs for low-level youth

Increase judicial review in transferring youth to the adult system and focus transfer on the most serious cases

Establish and sustain better public safety outcomes through increased system accountability and reinvestment into evidence-based programs in local communities

Increase training and improve system accountability and oversight

- Support juvenile justice professionals on the front lines by expanding training
- Enhance data collection, collaboration, and reporting across juvenile justice system entities
- Establish a bipartisan, inter-branch oversight council to oversee implementation and develop performance measures to report to state leadership

IMPACT OF TASK FORCE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force’s recommendations are projected to reduce the state’s out-of-home population 45 percent from projected levels by 2023, freeing more than \$34 million in funds for reinvestment over five years. The Task Force recommends that these averted costs be reinvested into evidence-based programs in the community that help put youth on the path to law-abiding citizenship.