

Youth Justice By The Numbers

Youth arrests and incarceration increased in the closing decades of the 20th century but have fallen sharply since that time. Public opinion often lags behind these realities, wrongly assuming both that crime is perpetually increasing and that youth offending is routinely violent. In fact, youth offending is predominantly low-level, and the 21st century has seen significant declines in youth arrests and incarceration. Between 2000 and 2020, the number of youth held in juvenile justice facilities fell from 109,000 to 25,000—a 77% decline.

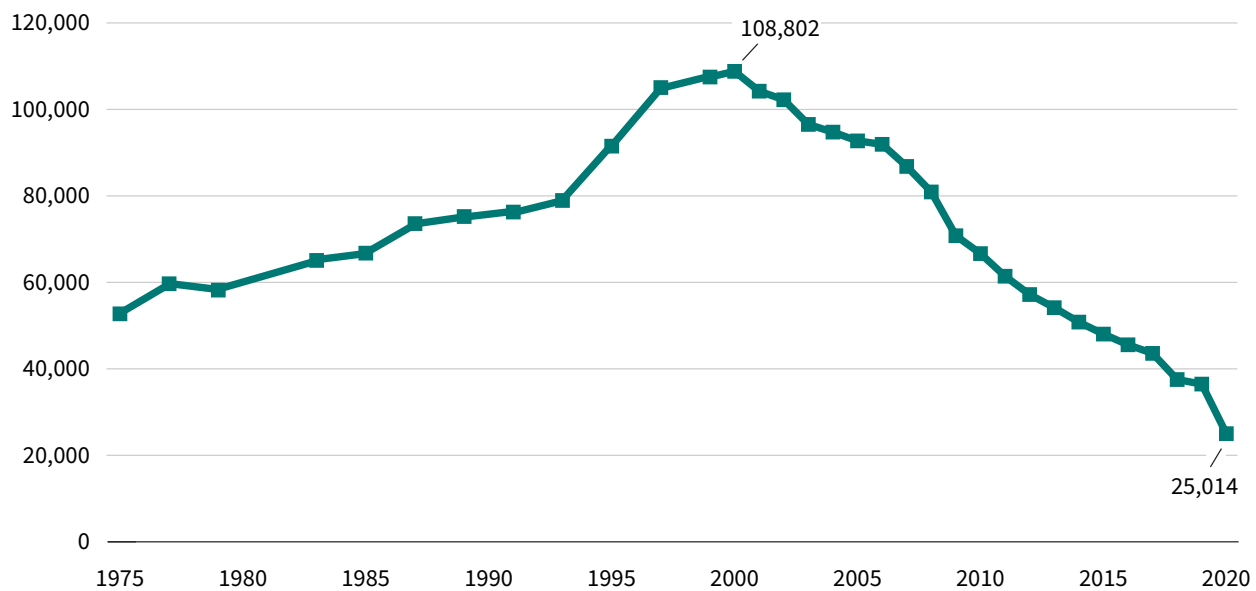
As The Sentencing Project marks 50 years since the era of mass incarceration began, states working to end this overly punitive era can learn important lessons from both the rise and then the sustained fall in youth arrests and placements.

One-Day Count of Youth Incarceration

Between 2000 (the peak year) and 2020, the number of youth held in juvenile justice facilities on a typical day fell from 108,800 to 25,000, a 77% decline. The one-day count for 2020, taken in late October, represents a drop of more than 30% versus 2019, likely reflecting both declines in youth offending and arrests during the pandemic and reduced use of incarceration for arrested youth to reduce the spread of COVID in facilities.

This one-day count combines detained youth held in detention facilities (those awaiting their court dates or pending placement to a longer-term facility after being found delinquent in court) with committed youth held

One-Day Count of Youth Held in Juvenile Justice Facilities, 1975-2020



Sources: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2022). *Highlights from the 2020 juvenile residential facility census*. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/highlights-2020-juvenile-residential-facility-census>; Puzzanchera, C., Hockenberry, S., Sladky, T.J., & Kang, W. (2020). *Juvenile residential facility census databook (JRFCDB)*. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; Sickmund, M. (2023). *Residential placement trends 1975-2019*. [Unpublished data.] National Center for Juvenile Justice; Sickmund, M., Sladky, T.J., Puzzanchera, C., & Kang, W. (2022). *Easy access to the census of juveniles in residential placement*. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

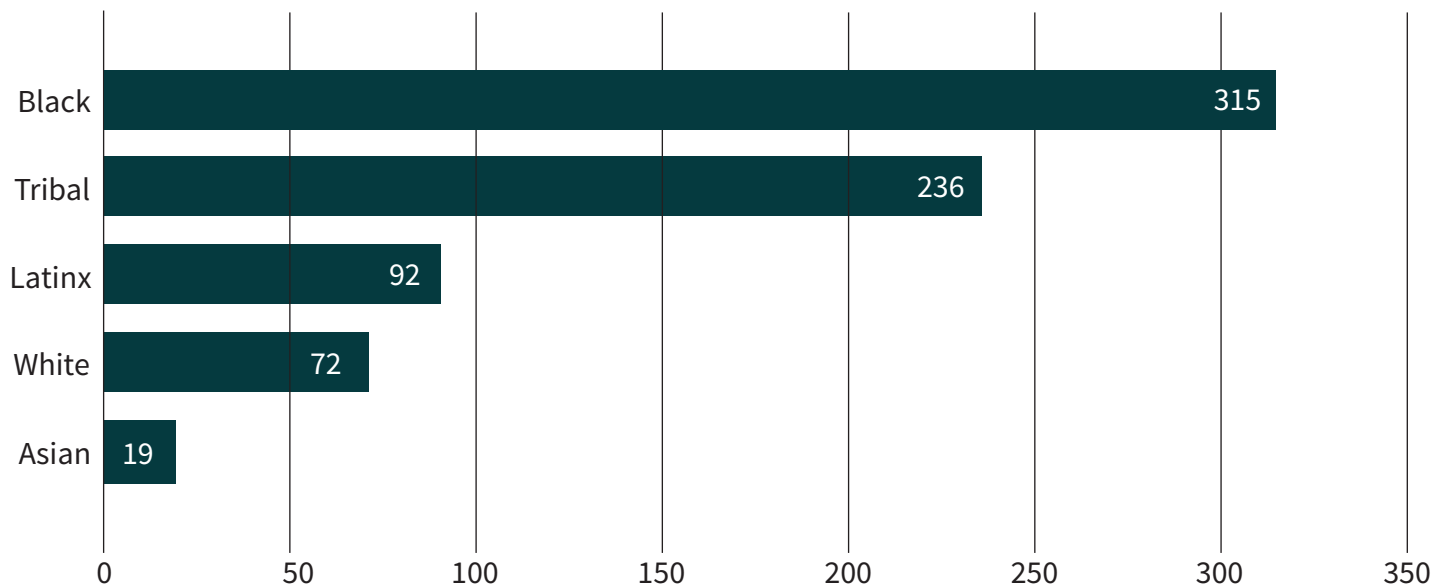
in youth prisons, residential treatment centers, group homes, or other placement facilities as a court-ordered consequence after being adjudicated delinquent in juvenile court. In 2019, roughly 40% of youth in the one-day count were in detention and 60% were in commitment. These counts do not include people under 18 held in adult prisons and jails.

Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Youth Incarceration

Youth of color are much more likely than white youth to be held in juvenile facilities. In 2019, the white placement rate in juvenile facilities was 72 per 100,000 youth under age 18. By comparison, Black youth were 4.4 times as likely to be incarcerated (315 per 100,000); Tribal youth were 3.2 times as likely (236 per 100,000); and Latinx youth were 27% more likely (92 per 100,000). Asian youth were the least likely to be held in juvenile facilities (19 per 100,000).

Racial and ethnic disparities in arrests and incarceration have persisted even as youth arrests and incarceration have fallen.

Youth Placement Rates by Race and Ethnicity, 2019
Rate per 100,000 Youth



Source: Sickmund, M., Sladky, T.J., Puzanchera, C., & Kang, W. (2022). *Easy access to the census of juveniles in residential placement*. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

How Youth Disparities Emerge and Grow

	White Youth	Black Youth	Disparity
Arrests per 100,000 youth (2020)	1,080 arrests	2,487 arrests	Despite modest differences in self-reported behaviors, Black youth are 2.3 times as likely to be arrested as are white youth.
Diversions per 100 juvenile court cases (2020)	50 cases diverted from formal processing	39 cases diverted from formal processing	Among those youth referred to juvenile court for delinquency offenses, white youth are 29% more likely to have their cases diverted.
Detentions per 100 juvenile court cases (2020)	19 detentions	29 detentions	Among those youth referred to juvenile court, Black youth are 50% more likely to be detained.
Commitments per 100 youth adjudicated delinquent (2020)	5.3 commitments	8.4 commitments	Among those youth adjudicated delinquent (the juvenile system's conviction), Black youth are 58% more likely to be committed than white youth. White youth are more likely to receive probation or other other non-carceral sanctions.

Sources: OJJDP (2022). *Juvenile arrest rate trends*. https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/JAR_Display.asp?ID=qa05200&selOffenses=1; Sickmund, M., Sladky, A., & Kang, W. (2021). *Easy access to juvenile court statistics: 1985-2020*. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezajcs/>

Sources of Black-White Incarceration Disparities for Youth

Disparities in youth incarceration stem both from differences in offending and from differential treatment at multiple points of contact with the justice system. The table above focuses on Black and white youth and shows that Black youth are more likely to be arrested than their white peers, more likely to be detained upon their arrest, and are continually treated more harshly as they move through the system.

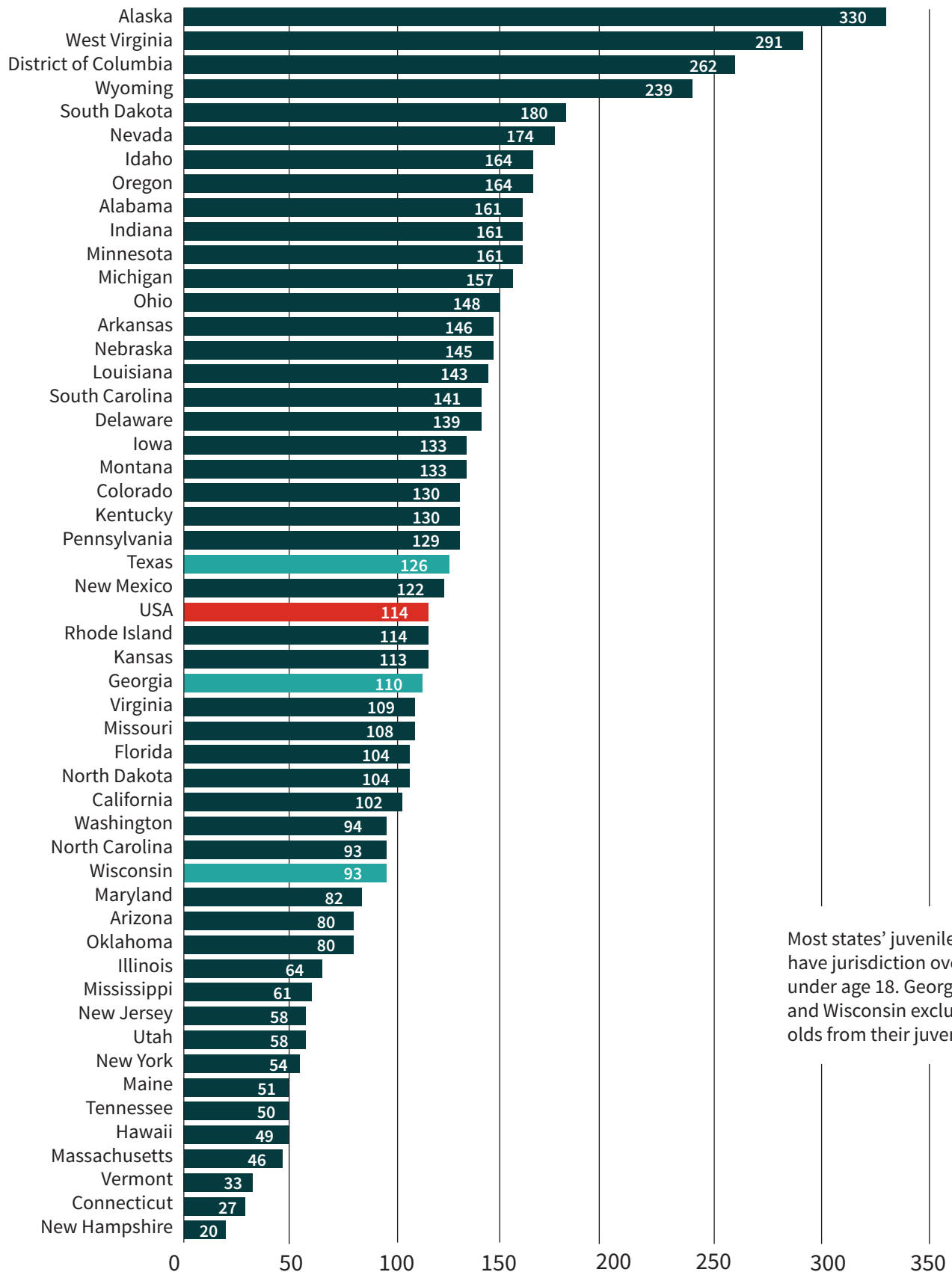
Upon arrest, white youth are more likely to be diverted from formal system involvement. When found delinquent (i.e., a juvenile conviction), white youth are more likely to receive probation or informal sanctions, whereas Black youth are more likely to be incarcerated.

Combined Detention and Commitment Rates by State

On a typical day, 114 out of 100,000 youth nationwide are held in juvenile facilities, pre- and post-adjudication, with rates varying widely among states. The highest placement rate is in Alaska, where 330 out of 100,000 youth are in placement; the lowest rate is in New Hampshire, where 20 out of 100,000 youth are held.

Youth Placement Rate By State (2019)

Placement rate per 100,000 juveniles



Most states' juvenile courts have jurisdiction over people under age 18. Georgia, Texas, and Wisconsin exclude 17-year olds from their juvenile courts.

Source: Sickmund, M., Sladky, T.J., Puzanchera, C., & Kang, W. (2022). *Easy access to the census of juveniles in residential placement*. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Annual Admissions to Juvenile Detention New Delinquency Offenses Only, 2005-2020



Source: Sickmund, M., Sladky, A., and Kang, W. (2021). *Easy access to juvenile court statistics: 1985-2020*. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezajcs/>

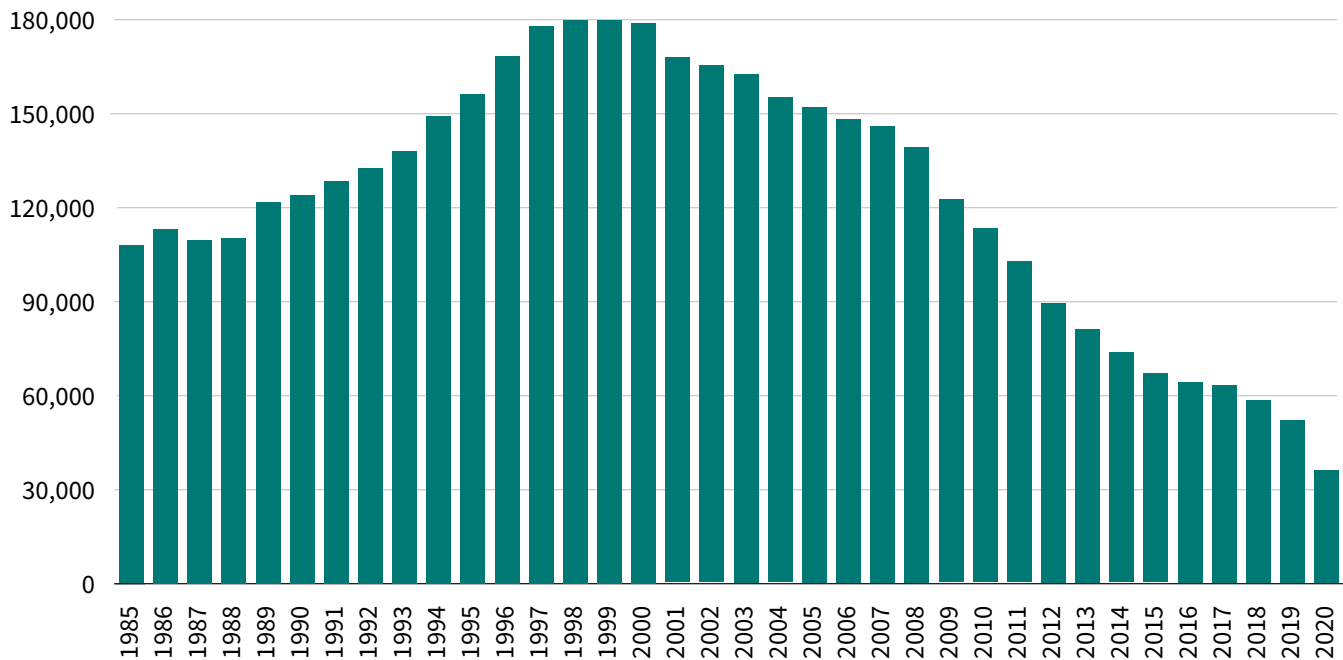
Annual Count of Detained Youth

Youth charged with or suspected of delinquency offenses (the juvenile justice system’s equivalent of criminal acts) may be confined in juvenile detention centers upon their arrest. In 2020, roughly one in four (26%) youths referred to juvenile court upon their arrest were initially detained, a rate consistent with recent prior years. Throughout 2020, there were 128,000 detention admissions of youth on delinquency charges, a 68% decline since 2005.

This count does not include youth detained for status offenses,¹ violations of probation, or held in adult jails.

¹A status offense is a noncriminal act that violated the law because of a young person’s status as a minor. Status offenses include truancy, incorrigibility, running away from home, and curfew violations.

Annual Admissions to Juvenile Placement New Delinquency Offenses Only, 1985-2020



Source: Sickmund, M., Sladky, A., and Kang, W. (2021). *Easy access to juvenile court statistics: 1985-2020*.

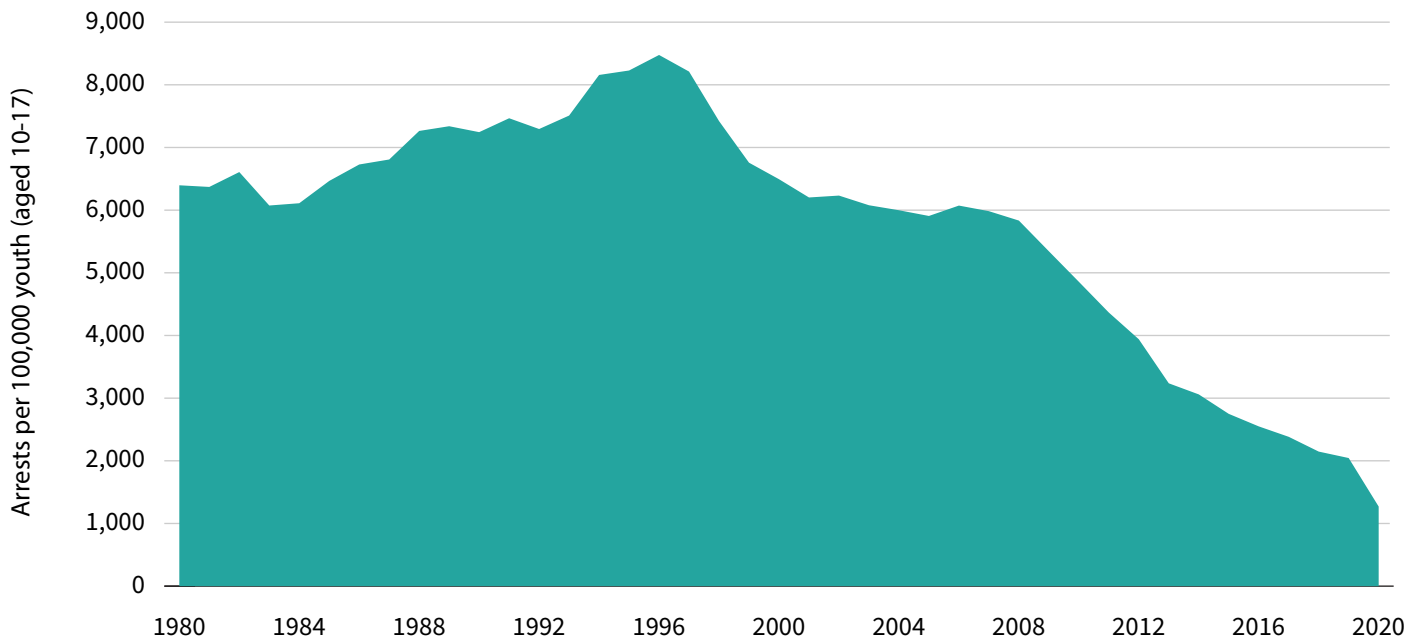
Annual Count of Committed Youth

Youth who are adjudicated as delinquent (the system’s equivalent of guilty) may be placed in facilities such as youth prisons, residential treatment facilities, group homes, or juvenile detention centers. In 2020, roughly one in 14 youth (7.1%) referred to juvenile court were committed to a placement facility, the juvenile system’s equivalent of imprisonment

In 2020, youth were committed 35,900 times for delinquency offenses, an 80% decline since 1999, the peak year. This count does not include youth admitted to these facilities for status offenses, violations of probation, or those in adult prisons.²

²Data on youth held in adult prison are reported below. Annual commitments in the juvenile system for status offenses and for violations of probation are not available.

Youth Arrest Rates, 1980-2020



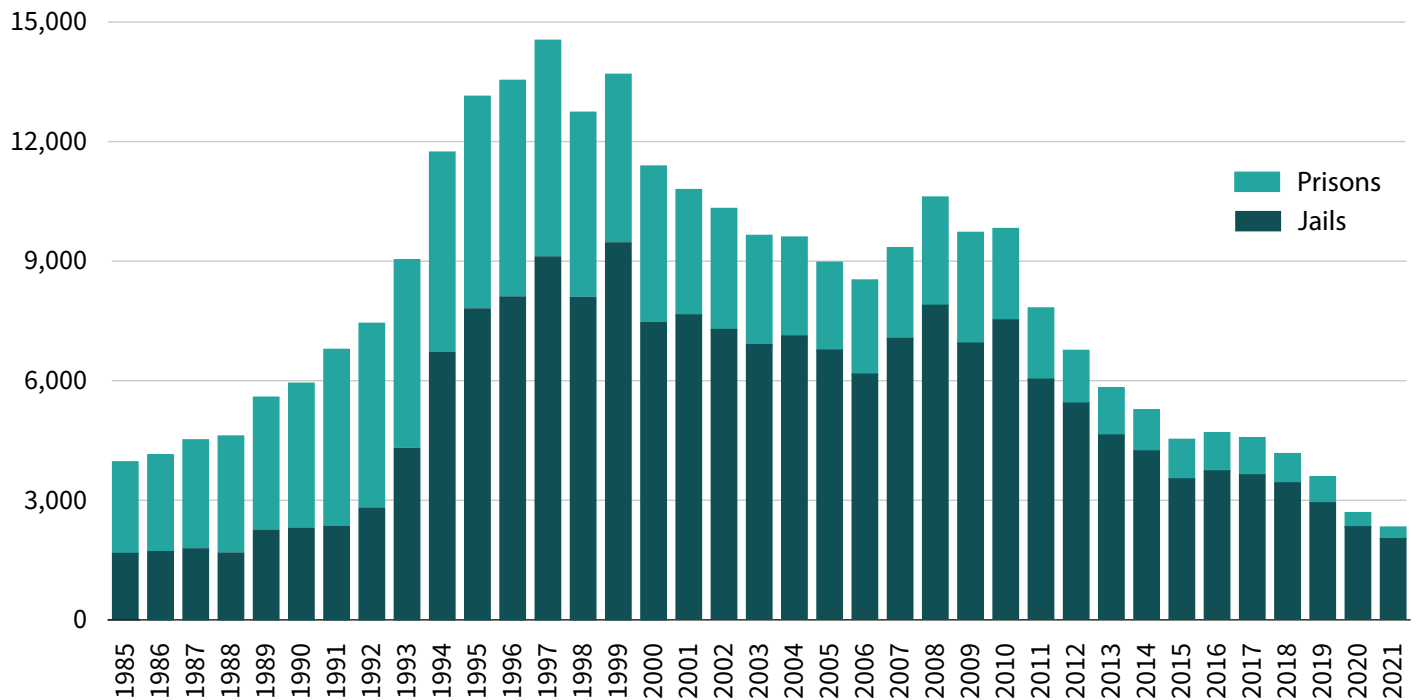
Youth Arrest Rates

The arrest rate for people under 18 years old peaked in 1996 and has declined by more than 80% since then. The arrest rate is often termed the crime rate, even though many crimes are never reported (or result in an arrest) and many people are arrested without having committed an offense.

In most years, roughly 6% of youth arrests are for offenses categorized by the FBI as violent crimes (murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault), though that proportion increased to 8% in 2020.

Since 1996, there has been an 80% drop in the arrest rate for people under 18.

Youth in Adult Jails and Prisons (One-Day Count) 1985-2021



Sources: Austin, J., Johnson, K., & Gregoriou, M. (2000.) *Juveniles in Adult Prisons and Jails: A National Assessment*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance; Carson, E.A. (2022). *Prisoners in 2021*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Plus prior editions; OJJDP. *Juveniles in adult jails and prisons*. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/corrections/qa08700.asp?qaDate=2021>; OJJDP. *Juveniles in adult jails and prisons*. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/corrections/qa08701.asp?qaDate=2021>; Zeng, Z. (2022). *Jail Inmates in 2021*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Plus prior editions.

Youth in Adult Prisons and Jails

On a single day in 2021, 2,000 people under 18 were held in an adult jail and 292 were held in an adult prison, representing a decline of 84% from 1997, when a peak total of 14,500 youth were held in adult facilities. In 2021, twenty-seven states had no people under 18 in their adult prisons.³

Decades of Progress, But Disparities Remain

The sharp declines in youth arrests and incarceration demonstrate the possibilities for similar success for the adult population, as well. However, the persistent racial and ethnic disparities in the youth justice system highlight the need to address the sources of those disparities wherever they emerge.

³ Alabama, Alaska, California, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

Glossary

- **Adjudication** refers to the juvenile court’s process that determines guilt.
- **Detention** refers to youth confined upon arrest and before their court disposition. Some youth in detention are awaiting placement. Such youth are generally held in facilities called juvenile detention centers. Youth in detention are suspected of delinquent acts or status offenses (such as incorrigibility, truancy or running away) or are awaiting the result of their court hearings.
- **Commitment** refers to youth confined in residential facilities after their adjudication. These facilities often have opaque names such as training schools, residential treatment centers, or academies.
- This is also called “placement,” a confusing term because “placement” can also refer to all youth held in juvenile facilities, including detained youth. The largest of these commitment facilities, typically state-run, are sometimes informally called “youth prisons.”
- Youth can also be committed to non-carceral facilities, such as group homes, wilderness camps or treatment centers.
- **Referral** to juvenile court equates to arrest. Juvenile court cases begin with a referral.



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This briefing paper was written by Josh Rovner, Director of Youth Justice. It is part of our campaign, 50 Years and a Wake Up: Ending The Mass Incarceration Crisis In America. The campaign raises awareness about the dire state of the criminal legal system in the country, the devastating impact of incarceration on communities and families, and proposes more effective crime prevention strategies for our country.

The Sentencing Project advocates for effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization of youth and adults by promoting racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice.

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