

## 2023-25 State Budget: Youth Justice

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# Governor's Proposed Budget Provides Wisconsin Children and Families with a Clear Path to a New Model of Youth Justice

March 9, 2023

Systemic racism and ongoing forms of injustice play a crucial role in [youth of color being over-represented at all points of contact within the criminal legal system](#) — from policing to courts to incarceration. The interplay of the historical and systemic harm of racism, implicit bias, and inequitable resources blocks communities of color from opportunity and drives these racial disparities.

### Youth-Centered Reforms

The Governor's proposed 2023-25 biennium budget includes many provisions that are youth-centered, evidence-based, and often more cost-effective. These proposals are important because they could reduce reliance on youth confinement through prevention and community-based services and begin to address the disproportionate impact of the criminal legal system on communities of color. These proposals also build on reforms that have occurred over the past two decades in Wisconsin and align with recent legislation aimed at restructuring the juvenile justice system towards a "[Wisconsin Model of Youth Justice](#)."

### Preventing & Reducing Involvement

Specifically, the proposed budget provides funding to prevent and reduce involvement with the juvenile justice system by including:

- **\$20 million General Purpose Revenue in grants to expand out-of-school youth programs**, which can [improve academic outcomes and help children and youth develop skills that influence healthy and safe behavior](#).
- **\$6.5 million General Purpose Revenue to make driver's education more accessible to all young people**, which will improve road safety and access to jobs. Many high schoolers are blocked from driver's education courses due to program costs, which creates barriers to accessing jobs and participating in activities - particularly for low income and rural families.

- **Expanded school-based mental health services** that will help to address the 40% increase in [reported mental health needs of young people](#). Mental health needs are a primary cause of disruptions in school engagement, such as truancy, which can increase risk of involvement with the criminal legal system.

## Improving Living Situations

The Governor's proposed budget also includes provisions targeting children and youth's living situations, which is critical to their well-being. This includes:

- **Providing \$36 million to fund an intensive preservation service program in three Wisconsin regions.** These programs are for families that are at risk of having a child enter the out-of-home care system, or already have a child in out-of-home care or the juvenile justice system. An intensive service is equipped to provide the support needed to safely prevent crises and keep youth with their families. This is important, because [many young people who have experienced incarceration have also had out-of-home placement](#).
- **Expanding independent living services to youth**, including \$7.6 million over two years for Tribal youth and \$4 million over the biennium so that the Bureau of Youth Services can increase services for runaway and homeless youth. Runaway, homeless, and transition-age youth have a [higher chance of experiencing unnecessary incarceration](#).

## Justice System Changes

Finally, the Governor's proposed budget makes a number of important changes to the juvenile justice system, including:

- **Raising the age at which young people are treated as adults in the criminal justice system from 17 to 18.** Wisconsin is 1 of just 3 states that still treats 17-year-olds as adults in the criminal justice system. The Governor's proposed budget would change that and raise the age in which youth are tried as adults to 18, meaning that all cases involving youth would be in the juvenile justice system. Ensuring youth are placed in the juvenile justice system can [reduce recidivism](#), [lower the risk of physical or sexual abuse](#), and [increase access to age-appropriate treatment and services](#).
- **Modestly increasing Youth Aids funds and allowing for more flexibility in using the funding.** If it can be allocated to responsive community-based alternatives, this could reduce incarceration. This is important for both youth outcomes and cost-effectiveness.

## Credible Messenger Programs

Finally, while the proposed budget includes many upstream, youth-centered, evidence-based, and cost-effective proposals, it overlooks the need to fund important, relational,

evidence-based programs such as [Credible Messenger](#) programs. These programs offer a community-based, intensive support network to prevent youth from entering the justice system and provide intervention for youth involved in the justice system. They are a much safer and cost-effective way to empower neighborhoods to maintain public safety, reduce recidivism, and reduce the overreliance on law enforcement and detention.

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## About Kids Forward

Kids Forward inspires action and promotes access to opportunity for every kid, every family, and every community in Wisconsin, notably children and families of color and those furthest from opportunity. Using a research- and community-informed approach, we advocate for effective, long-lasting solutions that break down barriers to success for children and families. Visit [kidsforward.org](https://kidsforward.org).

An initiative of Kids Forward, the **Wisconsin Budget Project** is working to enact transformative change with the goal of constructing a new, more equitable economy. Visit [wisconsinbudgetproject.org](https://wisconsinbudgetproject.org).

