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## **REPORT SHOWS LESSONS LEARNED FROM COVID-19 MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO SAFELY REDUCE YOUTH INCARCERATION**

[“COVID-19 and Youth Justice in Wisconsin: What Are We Learning?”](#)<sup>1</sup> shows how the youth justice system may be changing for the better and the worse. Based on a survey of county and state juvenile justice stakeholders and an analysis of statewide data points, this report presents the second phase of study within the Youth Justice Wisconsin COVID-19 Impact Project.<sup>2</sup> The publication, and upcoming [webinar](#), elevate quantitative and qualitative data indicating what can be learned and gained as a result of the extreme circumstances experienced during the pandemic.

On the positive side, a decrease in youth arrests and referrals to youth justice intake correlates with greater use of 24-hour and mobile crisis support rather than detaining youth in secure custody.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the pre-existing and pervasive racial disparity rates amongst youth experiencing arrest and referral have not changed with new pandemic safety protocols.

*“For some counties, this mandated restriction on the use of secure custody reflects what they think is better for youth and, that, with more appropriate investments, they can meet this objective more consistently and equitably across the state. Using data and stakeholder collaboration, this type of shift can be the new standard and we should in no way turn away from what we now know can be changed and improved.”* says Erica Nelson, Kids Forward Advocacy Director.

The survey responses point to specific examples where the criminal justice system is still the default “service option” when it comes to youth with complex needs due to service gaps. Examples of this include domestic conflicts involving older youth, youth without a mental health diagnosis, and youth

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youthjusticewi.org/reports>

<sup>2</sup> [https://kidsforward.org/assets/Impact\\_of\\_COVID-19\\_on\\_YJ\\_in\\_WI\\_.pdf](https://kidsforward.org/assets/Impact_of_COVID-19_on_YJ_in_WI_.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://madison.com/ct/news/local/govt-and-politics/report-covid-19-protocols-reduced-number-of-wisconsin-youth-in-detention/article\\_4133b9db-fc54-5979-ba06-fef1a781d344.html](https://madison.com/ct/news/local/govt-and-politics/report-covid-19-protocols-reduced-number-of-wisconsin-youth-in-detention/article_4133b9db-fc54-5979-ba06-fef1a781d344.html)

involved with the justice system who need intensive mental health treatment. One survey respondent shared a concern that the number of youth being sent to out-of-state facilities may be increasing based on the current set of circumstances in Wisconsin.

The prolonged nature of the pandemic and its destabilizing effects for communities across Wisconsin have police, caseworkers, community service providers and educators confronting an intensifying set of unmet needs, racial disparities, service gaps, and resource constraints. Consequently, this stressed system is being forced to rely on calls to law enforcement, especially after hours and on weekends, instead of on what is considered best practice. The report argues that with more investment and support, families are more likely to stabilize. Utilizing prevention measures such as mobile crisis units, 24-hour crisis lines, and increased outreach related to the recent uptick in drug use can reduce the use of detention and incarceration for Wisconsin's youth.

*Sharlen Moore, Director of Urban Underground and Youth Justice Milwaukee urges leaders to act: "The amount of trauma that children and families are dealing with today is over the top. They need support and resources before a crisis occurs and that is usually at night and on the weekends. As parents, we know this is true. Let's make it happen for all young people so they have a better chance of succeeding rather than experiencing or causing harm."*

The report recommends action that will result in working across silos to mobilize a robust, trauma informed, culturally competent community system of care for all youth, in all communities.

*"Stakeholders across the state know where the needs are and what to do. Let's make sure every community has what it needs to address the current crisis and prevent a future one that is even more costly. This is a serious situation that we can't arrest, expel, and detain our way out of," states Ann McCullough, Youth Justice Wisconsin Project Manager.*

A public webinar will be held Friday, February 18, 2022 at noon. It will include a presentation of findings followed by an inter-disciplinary panel discussion. For more information visit: [www.youthjusticewi.org/convening](http://www.youthjusticewi.org/convening).