



Justice Center

THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS



COURTING JUDICIAL EXCELLENCE IN JUVENILE JUSTICE: A 50 STATE STUDY AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE INITIATIVE

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The Council of State Governments Justice Center

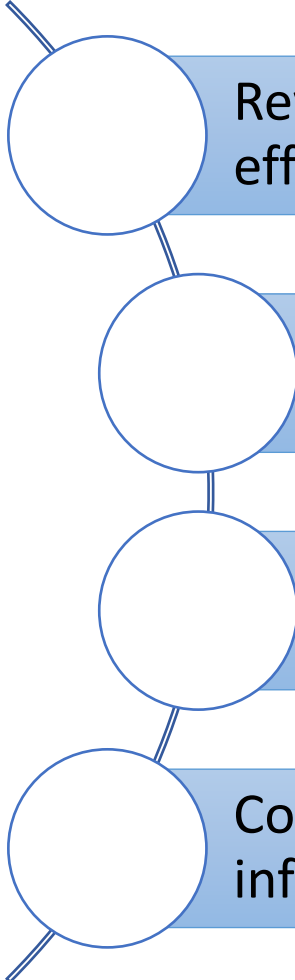
We are a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that combines the power of a membership association, serving state officials in all three branches of government, with policy and research expertise to develop strategies that increase public safety and strengthen communities.

Purpose of the Study

Conducted an analysis in 2021 of how courts that handle juvenile delinquency cases are structured and operate in all 50 states in order to:

1. **Uplift the critical role that juvenile court judges play** in determining youth, system, and community outcomes and the need to treat the juvenile court as a specialty of practice.
2. Establish an unprecedented **understanding of whether and how all 50 states are positioning and supporting juvenile court judges** to make decisions and assess whether those decisions improve public safety and youth outcomes.
3. **Motivate and inform state and national efforts to strengthen the juvenile court** by identifying common gaps and challenges, highlighting promising state practices and innovations, and advancing a set of policy and practice recommendations for court improvement.

Study Methodology



Reviewed the literature on juvenile court standards, best practices, and judicial effectiveness.

Administered a national survey of juvenile court judges with over 450 respondents.

Interviewed administrative staff and/or judges in every state, and reviewed statute/court rules as needed, to understand juvenile court structure and policies/practices.

Conducted focus groups with juvenile court judges and national expert organizations to inform our recommendations.

Study Key Findings

Structural

- Fewer than one-third of states have mostly dedicated family court let alone juvenile justice judges while 90% of survey respondents expressed that it was somewhat or very important for judges to specialize.
- Case assignments and rotation lengths are frequently determined solely at the discretion of local presiding or senior judges.

Decision Making

- Pre-dispositional risk and needs assessments are only required by state or court rules in approximately half of states, and less than 20% of states provide annual training to judges.
- Less than half of states have tools, guides, or bench cards for judges specifically on juvenile justice.
- Almost 70 percent of surveyed judges believe no or only some judges regularly engage youth and families in the dispositional process.

Study Key Findings

Training

- Most states lack orientation and training requirements specific to juvenile justice case law, research, or best practices for new judges.
- Fewer than a third of states require judges who handle delinquency cases to obtain a minimum number of hours of juvenile justice training annually.

Supports

- Most states lack family court, let alone juvenile justice–specific, administrative supports.
- Surveyed judges cited the emotional nature of juvenile cases and burn-out rate as the number one barrier preventing judges from committing to specializing in juvenile court practice.
- Most states lack formal forums at the state or local level dedicated to juvenile improvement.

Study Key Findings

Data

- Most states report that they have not established performance criteria and/or metrics for their juvenile courts other than case processing time or caseloads or regularly analyze how such metrics differ across locales/courts/judges.
- Few states regularly provide judges with data on recidivism rates, program success, disparities, and other system and youth outcomes to inform their decisions and help them understand how they compare to other courts across the state.
- Most states lack a meaningful system of checks and balances to assess and hold juvenile court judges accountable for their performance.

Recommendation #1:

Establish specialized, dedicated juvenile and family court judges responsible for hearing delinquency cases.

Recommendation #2:

Ensure that judges statewide have the information, tools, and data needed to make decisions based on research to improve public safety and youth outcomes.

Recommendation #3:

Require all judges who hear delinquency cases to receive training on adolescent development and juvenile justice research prior to taking the bench and annually thereafter.

Recommendation #4:

Establish dedicated forums, initiatives, and supports specifically for strengthening the juvenile court, including a new federal Court Improvement Project targeting juvenile justice court improvements.

Recommendation #5:

Identify statewide performance measures for juvenile court judges and collect and use data to strengthen decision-making transparency, research alignment, and accountability.

Improving Juvenile Court Outcomes in Oregon: Statewide Improvement Initiative

- Goal: support Oregon and the JDIP to develop an action plan to strengthen juvenile court (delinquency) policies and practices statewide in order to better protect public safety, reduce system disparities, and improve youth outcomes.
- Technical Assistance Methods (approximately 12 months):
 - Qualitative assessment in areas related to 50-state study (policy review and focus groups)
 - Case level data analysis (court referrals through disposition)
 - Synthesis and presentation of key findings to JDIP and other stakeholders
 - Consensus building with JDIP on recommendations for policy, practice, and funding changes informed by research/best practices
 - Action plan development with detailed deliverables, timelines, and implementation and oversight processes
- This Summit provides an important first opportunity to ensure goals and methods of this work are informed by perspectives and insights of system stakeholders statewide.