



Primer: County Innovation in Youth Justice

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Counties are central to youth well-being as purveyors of health, social services, education and local juvenile and criminal legal systems. The “County Innovation in Youth Justice” series will offer strategies and practices to enhance services, improve outcomes and strengthen communities.

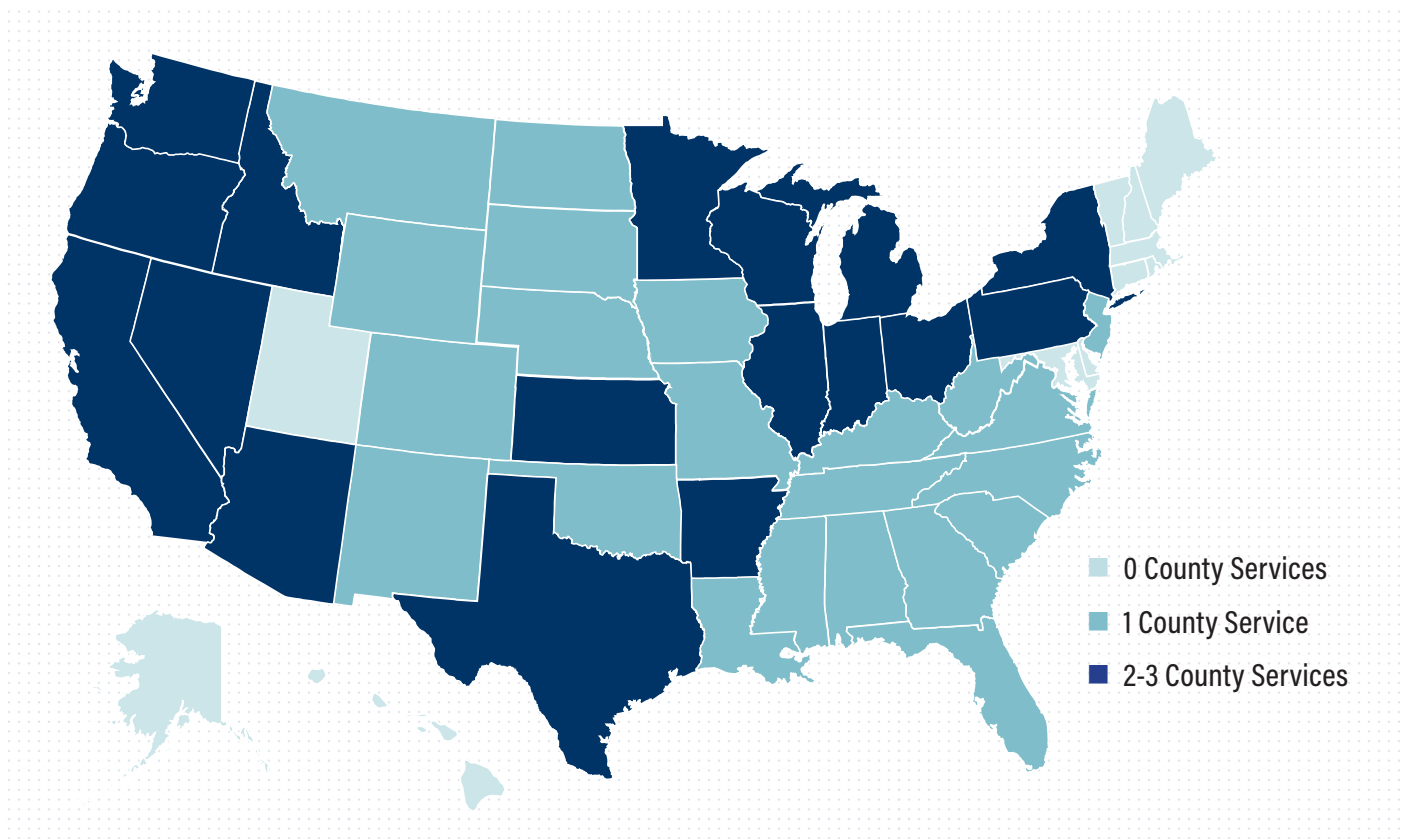
County Role in the Youth Justice System

The [Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention \(JJDP\) Act](#) serves as the primary federal law on youth justice, providing core protections for youth in the juvenile justice system. However, state and local statutes shape juvenile justice systems, leading to distinct structures and policies across states and counties. As a result, the role of counties varies by jurisdiction but often includes oversight in one or both of these key areas:

- **Juvenile courts:** Appointing judges, setting judicial qualifications, overseeing court staff, managing specialty courts (e.g., drug or mental health courts) and running diversion programs.
- **Youth justice services:** Providing probation, detention, reentry programs and specialized interventions such as rehabilitation, deflection initiatives and community-based programming.

County-Level Youth Justice Services

Youth justice services fall into three basic functions: detention, probation and reentry. This map highlights the county role in administering these services.



Source: National Center for Juvenile Justice. (2022). *Juvenile Justice Geography, Policy, Practice & Statistics*. Retrieved from <http://www.jjgps.org/juvenile-justice-services#basic-services?filter=overall>.

County Promising Practices




County leaders are leveraging their role and authority to build partnerships, foster collaboration and strengthen their [community's continuum of care](#). The following practices showcase key county approaches across youth justice service areas that are improving opportunities and outcomes for young people. Adopting any of these approaches can help county leaders meet their communities' unique needs and support positive youth development.

- **Investing in alternatives to detention and confinement:** By limiting the use of detention or confinement to cases where youth pose a serious risk to public safety, counties can redirect resources to less invasive interventions that have fewer collateral consequences.
- **Strengthening preventive and low-level interventions:** Bolstering early interventions, such as community violence intervention programs, to protect and support youth who are at risk of becoming involved in the youth justice or child welfare systems reduces the need for costly, higher-level interventions.
- **Supporting positive youth development:** Implementing strength-based programs like restorative justice or mentorship initiatives reduces risk and builds protective factors. By prioritizing these interventions, counties can foster strong relationships, enhance connectedness and cultivate critical skills that improve youth outcomes and strengthen community ties.
- **Valuing youth experiences:** Engaging system-involved youth as partners with expertise through Youth Advisory Councils or Youth Action Boards allows for county services to be responsive to local needs while cultivating leadership skills and promoting civic engagement.
- **Centralizing access points:** Creating a single point of contact for preventive and rehabilitative services, such as drop-in centers or youth [assessment centers](#), simplifies service navigation for youth, families and providers, enhancing the overall awareness and utilization of county services and resources.
- **Fostering collaboration:** Convening stakeholders from juvenile justice, child welfare, education, behavioral health and community organizations allows counties to enhance resource optimization, address service gaps and meet the needs of communities more effectively.
- **Standardizing data collection:** Establishing consistent [demographic classifications](#) and data collection protocols across service systems enhances monitoring, evaluation and data-driven decision making.
- **Enhancing data sharing:** Creating data-sharing agreements among systems and service providers improves coordination, enhances service delivery, saves county staff time and informs decision making.
- **Cultivating community-based partnerships:** Building these partnerships enhances service delivery by leveraging relationships, community presence and specialized expertise to address operational barriers and county capacity constraints and improve access to critical interventions.
- **Supporting the workforce:** Establishing feedback channels with youth-serving staff, partners and the community helps counties respond to evolving needs. Investing in professional development, such as trauma-informed care and de-escalation techniques, ensures that these staff are well-prepared to serve effectively.
- **Utilizing technology:** Developing tools such as data dashboards or phone applications can streamline information sharing and transparency, helping counties improve efficiency, enhance decision making and foster greater trust with communities.



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