



EXPANDING DIVERSION THROUGH ASSESSMENT CENTERS

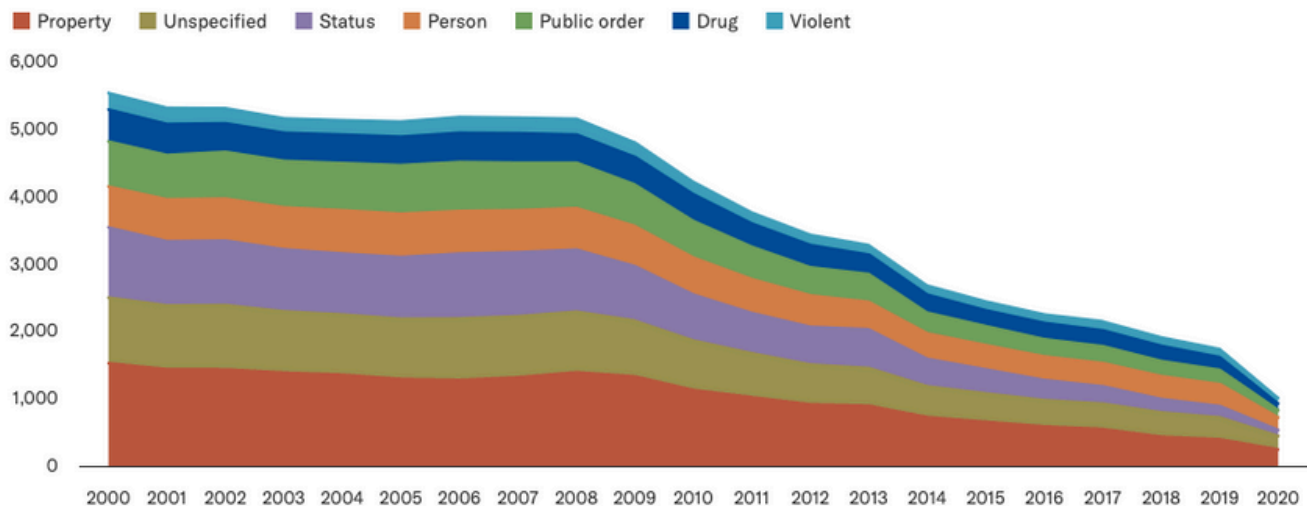
In response to recently released data on youth crime and the complexity of behavioral health needs among young people, the role of Assessment Centers in juvenile justice reform is more important than ever. This publication explores current data and trends and how Assessment Centers can offer an alternative approach by providing early intervention and a streamlined pathway to community-based services.

Youth Crime Trends

In June 2024, The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center released "Navigating Concerns on Youth Crime, Violence, and Behavioral Health: What Does the Data Say?" This report analyzed the most recent juvenile justice and arrest data, highlighting key findings that reflect the experiences of many Assessment Center communities. The report provided an overview of national trends in youth arrests including the fact that, despite some narratives, youth crime is actually at historic lows compared to the past 20 years. Youth arrests have steadily decreased across all offense categories, including violent crimes, over the past 20 years. In 2022, data from 31 states shows that arrest rates remained historically low across all categories. (The Council of State Governments Justice Center. "Youth Mental Health and Victimization: National Data Overview.")

Youth arrests by offense type

Rate per 100k



FBI UCR Summary Reporting System

The Council of State Governments Justice Center (2024, July 29). Navigating Concerns on Youth Crime, Violence, and Behavioral Health: What Does the Data Say? [Webinar]. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/events/navigating-concerns-on-youth-crime-violence-and-behavioral-health-what-does-the-data-say/>



Despite this overall decline, some communities are experiencing increases in violent crime among youth, specifically homicides and weapons offenses. Homicide arrests among youth have risen, with over 1,200 youth arrested in 2022—a 54% increase since 2019. Additionally, weapons-related arrests have increased by 44% compared to 2019. (The Council of State Governments Justice Center. "Youth Mental Health and Victimization: National Data Overview.")

Even with this uptick in violent offenses, about 70% of youth arrests in 2020 were for non-person offenses. These offenses, such as curfew violations, disorderly conduct, vandalism, and running away from home, resulted in more arrests than all violent crimes, weapons offenses, motor vehicle thefts, arson, and burglaries combined. According to CSG Justice Center data, only 5% of youth arrests were for violent offenses, 20% for other person offenses, and 75% for offenses that don't directly involve physical harm.

Court data reflect similar patterns. In 2021, there were 437,300 court referrals for delinquent offenses, a 73% decrease from 2005. Despite this decline, throughout the decision-making process, from arrest to placement, the majority of youth are accused of committing non-person, non-violent delinquent offenses (see chart below). The CSG Justice Center recommends that policymakers "refocus the juvenile justice system on youth who commit serious and violent offenses" recognizing that youth are "better served through community diversion programs, allowing juvenile court resources to focus on those who pose a greater risk to community safety."

Most youth involved at every point in the juvenile justice system have committed non-person offenses as their most serious offense.

Proportion of All Youth at Each Decision Point Whose Most Serious Offense was a Non-Person Delinquent Offense in 2021/2022						
Arrest 70%	Court Referrals 63%	Court Petitions 62%	Adjudication 63%	Probation 62%	Detention 56%	Placement 62%

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Why an Alternative to Courts?

One action step recommended by the CSG Justice Center is for juvenile justice systems to focus their “limited resources on the small number of youth who pose a public safety risk, and develop a broader violence prevention and intervention plan.” The National Assessment Center Association supports this recommendation recognizing several limitations of courts when serving youth:

1. Lengthy Case Processing

In many communities, the time between an alleged offense and when support is offered to a youth and their family can be weeks to months. The typical process is:

- A youth commits an alleged offense.
- Police file an allegation with the local court.
- The court (prosecutors or district attorney) reviews the case and decides whether it will proceed.
- If the case moves forward, it is sent to juvenile court for intake and judicial processing.

While some communities may have opportunities for intervention at various points in this process, youth and families are often not offered support and services until the case reaches juvenile court.

2. Limited to monitoring and restricted interventions

Court supervision is oftentimes limited to monitoring where probation staff oversee the whereabouts of youth, administer drug tests, and ensure the youth appears at court or probation appointments. While some jurisdictions around the country have undergone probation transformation efforts, the majority of court probation departments remain focused on monitoring.

Even for those courts that do prioritize linking youth and families with community-based interventions, those interventions and services can be limited. Many courts have a process in which they contract with specific service providers to serve youth on probation. This limits the services and supports offered to youth and families to those on an approved list of contractors. This also means youth and families have few to no alternatives if they are uncomfortable or face challenges with the recommended providers.

3. Interventions “Locked Down”

In some jurisdictions, high-level, intensive services, such as wrap-around programs, are only available once a youth is on probation. This restricts other stakeholders from referring youth to the most effective providers. As Shawne Johnson, Director of the Douglas County, Nebraska Juvenile Assessment Center notes, “Our issue is that some of the services we need most, the ones that are best fit to the underlying needs of our high risk youth, are only accessible through the Courts and Probation due to funding. We do not have adequate funding available for services such as intensive family support, Multi-System Therapy (MST), intensive outpatient treatment (IOP), gang intervention and other parent/ family engagement services. This is a huge barrier for us to be able to successfully divert youth from formal Court processes.”



The Opportunity Through Assessment Centers

What is an Assessment Center? Assessment Centers throughout the United States are known by many names such as resource, intervention, diversion, access, or connection centers. They offer a valuable resource to youth, families, and communities by facilitating prevention, diversion, and early intervention. Assessment Centers serve as hubs within communities that work to understand underlying needs of youth and their families and serve as connectors to community-based services and supports. Those making referrals to Assessment Centers are often schools, law enforcement, courts, or self-referrals from youth, their caregivers, or other family members. The intervention point of an Assessment Center varies from community to community, but most frequently youth are “off-ramped” from the juvenile justice system to an Assessment Center by law enforcement, prosecutors, and courts.

Douglas County Juvenile Assessment Center

The County Attorney's office in Douglas County, Nebraska refers all youth, including those with felonies and weapon charges, to the Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC) unless they are being detained or have an existing case in judicial processing. The JAC assesses and develops plans for these youth who often have high and complex risks and needs. Over the past two years, an average of 10 youth per month or 120 youth per year have been afforded this opportunity as an alternative to a direct court filing."

Youth-Centered Collaboration and Coordination

Assessment Centers serve as a stakeholder convener. They bring together law enforcement, prosecutors, defenders, judges, probation, schools, and community providers. Each one of these stakeholders, especially those involved in the legal system, are often focused on the “case” or reaching a resolution on the delinquent act that occurred. In contrast, the focus of the Assessment Center is on the underlying needs of the youth and their family. With this focus, Assessment Centers advocate for youth needs and strengths to be considered when other stakeholders are making critical decisions on a youth's case. This influence can occur for those youth who are being diverted from the juvenile justice system, but can also help with youth who will continue along the traditional juvenile justice system pathway. With an Assessment Center serving as the single point of contact for youth with concerning behavior in a community, the Assessment Center has the ability to link youth and families to services and supports early on even if they enter the justice system. This can eliminate the lengthy wait for support services that are often faced by youth in the system.

Philadelphia Juvenile Assessment Center

In Philadelphia, seven (7) young people were referred to the Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC) after a fight at the school. All youth involved were facing aggravated assault charges. After staff at the JAC spoke with the victim (and family), school officials, and parents of the arrested youth, a decision was made to divert the youth. The decision to divert allowed all youth to avoid a formal arrest record and charges as well as extended hours in custody. Youth were referred to community-based resources and programs that allowed them to receive academic support, conflict resolution, mentorship, and afterschool engagement.



Support for Victims

While the Assessment Center’s process is often in response to a concerning behavior or delinquent act, this does not circumvent or ignore the victim of such act. Assessment Centers can play an important role in facilitating access to victim support services as well as supporting healing through a restorative justice process.

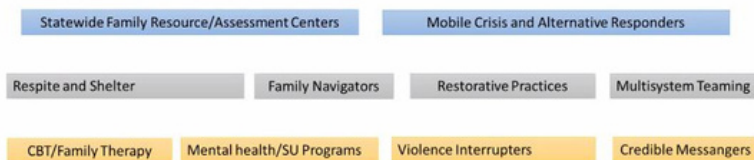
Community Assessment and Referral Center (C.A.R.C.)

C.A.R.C., an Assessment Center in San Francisco, California, implements Aims to Foster Transformation & Ensure Restitution (AFTER). Young people who owe restitution often cannot pay it, which results in them and their families going into debt. People harmed through a crime often need restitution to be made whole, but since people cannot afford to pay it, they rarely receive it. AFTER aims to set the young person who did the harm and the harmed person on a stronger, more economically secure path through restorative justice processes. Youth work with a case manager to receive services or service recommendations, participate in restorative justice conferences and workshops, perform community service, or be connected to job opportunities. If they complete the program, the restitution that they owe will be paid. The program has been so successful that it was used when writing legislation (AB-1186) to reform California reform restitution practices.

Diversion and Prevention

In a webinar aimed at reviewing the released report and policy recommendations, the CSG Justice Center highlighted Assessment Centers as a strategy for statewide implementation that addresses the systemic reasons for youth’s behaviors and ensures that they receive the services and supports they need.

What might a statewide adolescent prevention services strategy look like in practice?



The Council of State Governments Justice Center(2024, July 29). Navigating Concerns on Youth Crime, Violence, and Behavioral Health: What Does the Data Say? [Webinar]. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/events/navigating-concerns-on-youth-crime-violence-and-behavioral-health-what-does-the-data-say/>

Carrying out The CSG Justice Center recommendations requires communities to develop diversion pathways that provide services in lieu of arrest for youth who commit low-level offenses, recognizing that early intervention and support can be more effective in addressing the underlying causes of behavior.

Diverting youth away from the formal justice system can reduce the long-term negative impacts associated with court and system involvement, such as stigmatization, disruption of education, and increased risk of reoffending. Diversion through Assessment Centers can connect youth with tailored services, including mental health support, substance abuse treatment, educational



assistance, and family counseling, addressing the root issues that contribute to delinquent behavior. These pathways promote a more equitable justice system by reducing the disproportionate impact of arrests and court involvement on marginalized communities.

Given that 70% of youth entering the juvenile court system have non-person, non-violent offenses, there is an opportunity to divert these youth to Assessment Centers at various decision points, such as arrest, prosecutorial review, or probation intake. This would allow the Assessment Center to serve those youth with status offenses, misdemeanors, and non-violent, non-person felonies by matching youth and families with meaningful, community-based services and support. Redirecting these youth to Assessment Centers enables local courts to focus on higher-risk youth who pose a significant safety risk.

A Call to Action

In order for communities to identify the opportunities for increased diversion through Assessment Centers and ensure sustainability, we make the following recommendations:

1. Review and Respond to Local Juvenile Justice Data

Local jurisdictions are encouraged to convene a team to review local data from key stakeholders such as school, law enforcement, and courts in order to identify opportunities for diversion through an Assessment Center. This team should include those most impacted (youth and families) as well as representatives from law enforcement, courts (prosecutors, probation, judges, etc.), education, mental health, and community organizations. Analyzing data and mapping the pathway for youth currently entering the justice system will help jurisdictions pinpoint specific areas where Assessment Centers can be most effective in prevention and diversion.

By prioritizing diversion for non-violent offenses, local jurisdictions can reduce the burden on the court system, improve outcomes for youth, and enhance public safety. This process also sets the stage for broader justice reform efforts, paving the way for a more equitable youth justice system.

2. Make Prevention a Priority

Identifying pathways to refer youth to Assessment Centers earlier, when challenging behavior is first identified either at home or in school, will require less intensive services and support in the long run. Prevention addresses root causes early on and is more cost effective. In prevention saves significant amounts of money in law enforcement, judicial processes, and detention costs. Prioritizing prevention will also help address disparities in the justice system by offering equitable access to resources and services that keep youth out of the system in the first place.



Juvenile Assessment Center

A 17-year-old served by the 18th Judicial Juvenile Assessment Center in Colorado was detained on charges of Attempted 1st Degree Murder of a Police Officer after allegedly firing a gun at a law enforcement officer, narrowly missing. The youth had no previous delinquency history. During the screening and assessment process, the youth's mother confirmed his clean legal history and denied any gang involvement. She noted that he had dropped out of a school in the previous year but had recently enrolled in a new school. He had plans to try out for the football team and a career goal to work in HVAC. The youth admitted to marijuana and occasional alcohol use, along with some struggles with school.

However, when gathering collateral information from the Child Welfare Database, it revealed a history of 11 referrals related to truancy, housing instability, and possible substance use by the mother; however, there had been no responses from child welfare. The youth now faces a potentially lengthy detention sentence that could extend into adulthood. This case highlights several missed opportunities where early referrals from the school or child welfare system to an Assessment Center might have connected the youth to community resources, potentially preventing his involvement in such a serious offense.

3. Adequately fund Assessment Centers

With the call for Assessment Centers to serve more youth currently being seen by the courts, Assessment Centers require adequate funding in order to increase capacity. Assessment Centers rely on skilled, compassionate staff to deliver services effectively. Proper funding allows centers to attract and retain qualified professionals by offering competitive salaries and ongoing training. This investment in staff is crucial for maintaining high standards of care and ensuring that youth and families receive the best possible support.

Adequate funding also ensures Assessment Center staff have the ability to devote the appropriate time and energy to each individual youth. It is crucial for the staff to be able to develop rapport and build a trusting relationship in order to understand the unique needs, challenges, and strengths of each young person. Ultimately, this leads to interventions and recommendations for support that are tailored to the specific circumstances of the youth, which leads to more meaningful outcomes.

4. Expand Access to Higher Levels of Service.

Expanding access to higher levels of service currently restricted to probation and making them available through Assessment Centers would allow for earlier, more proactive intervention for youth in need. By enabling Assessment Centers to refer youth to these intensive services before they enter the justice system, communities can address issues more effectively and reduce the likelihood of deeper justice system involvement. This approach allows for earlier identification of at-risk youth and provides them with access to critical services at a stage when these interventions can have the most significant impact. This not only supports the well-being and development of the individual youth but also contributes to broader public safety and reduces the long-term costs associated with more intensive court and probation services.



5. Allow Financial Support to Follow Youth and Families to the Most Suitable Service Provider(s).

Diversion opportunities must be complemented by accessible services and support for youth and their families to ensure long-term success and prevent future justice system involvement. Assessment Centers play a critical role in this process by evaluating the unique needs of each youth and connecting them with appropriate resources. To maximize their effectiveness, Assessment Centers should be adequately funded and equipped with the necessary resources to ensure that financial support can follow the youth and their family to the providers that are best suited to meet their specific needs. By investing in Assessment Centers and ensuring that funding is both sufficient and adaptable, communities can create connections that are individualized, culturally responsive, and equitable.

6. Build Service Provider Capacity.

A major disruption to the delivery of essential services is strained provider capacity and challenges with hiring and retaining a skilled workforce, which has worsened post-pandemic. Communities should adopt strategies that increase service provider rates and staff pay, considers nontraditional benefits, improves training, and expands recruiting strategies. Without the provider community equipped with the capacity and workforce, Assessment Centers will struggle to make meaningful connections to high-quality community-based services and supports.

To learn more about the National Assessment Center Association (NAC) or Assessment Centers, please visit our website at www.nacassociation.org