

Courting Judicial Excellence in Juvenile Justice: A 50-State Study

Executive Summary

Juvenile court judges are the most important public figures in the juvenile justice system—their decisions impact whether hundreds of thousands of youth each year become court involved and for how long, whether they are involuntarily removed from their homes and communities, and the services they receive. Despite the importance of these judges, however, states and locales have generally not assessed whether and how the structure, roles, and operations of their juvenile courts support or hinder public safety and positive youth outcomes.

Yet many communities across the country are experiencing increasing concern and divisiveness on responses to juvenile crime and related juvenile justice reforms. As a result, juvenile court judges are on the front lines of determining how best to balance community safety, public sentiment, media scrutiny, and political pressure with a commitment to research-based approaches and data-driven decision-making.

With support from the State Justice Institute, staff from The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center and National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) conducted an analysis in 2021 of how courts that handle juvenile delinquency cases (“juvenile courts”) are structured and operate in all 50 states. Our report stemming from this analysis is structured around five key recommendations that include rationales, concrete policies and practices for states to adopt, and related state best practices and innovations for jurisdictions to consider. States can use the report to identify gaps in their policies and practices, as well as promising practices and innovations from other states, and to advance a set of policy and practice recommendations for court improvement.

Findings and Recommendations

Our analysis revealed that most states have not established the foundational court infrastructure necessary to position judges statewide to make decisions that are most likely to improve public safety and youth outcomes.

- Most states do not have dedicated family court judges, and only a handful of states have judges exclusively dedicated to delinquency cases outside of large metro areas.
- States often lack the infrastructure needed to guide judges to make informed decisions, including tools such as risk assessments and predispositional reports, family engagement mechanisms, or data on effective programs or services in their community.



- Only a few states have any specific expertise or experience requirements for juvenile court judges, and judges can often take on delinquency cases without ever receiving any orientation or training on case law or best practices.
- Further, in most states, judges who handle delinquency cases are not required by law or court rules to ever receive any training on juvenile justice research or best practices.

Also, most states have not established a statewide support system commensurate with the challenges that judges face or the importance of their role in advancing public safety.

- While some states have established specialized administrative capacity, most states lack family court or administrative supports that are specific to juvenile justice.
- Few states have established a formal system of mental health resources and services, training, or peer mentoring dedicated to helping judges identify and deal with the secondary trauma that can result from juvenile court practice.
- Most states lack committees or cross-system collaboratives at the state or local levels specifically dedicated to juvenile justice court and system improvement.
- Most states lack statewide performance measures for juvenile courts, have inconsistent data collection practices, and have insufficient methods for using data to ensure juvenile court judges are accountable for aligning their decisions with research and best practices.

States can strengthen the juvenile court and achieve better public safety and youth outcomes by adopting the following recommendations:

1. Establish specialized, dedicated juvenile and family court judges responsible for hearing delinquency cases.
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.
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.
4. Establish dedicated forums, initiatives, and supports specifically for strengthening the juvenile court, including a new federal Court Improvement Project appropriation targeting juvenile justice court improvements.
5. Identify statewide performance measures for juvenile court judges and collect and use data to strengthen decision-making and accountability.

Dig Deeper

- Read the [full report](#) to learn more about the 50-state study, findings, and recommendations.
- See the new [juvenile court section](#) of the Juvenile Justice Geography, Policy, and Practice for a state-by-state view of how all 50 states structure and operate their juvenile courts.