Leveraging Arrest Data for Youth Deflection

CENTER FOR HEALTH & JUSTICE AT TASC

A study of 7,304 children over 35 years found that system involvement often worsens outcomes, rather than bettering public safety or rehabilitation.

- R Street Policy Study No. 263, Sep. 2022

Even a single arrest can derail a young person's life—reducing social ties, delaying education, and increasing the risk of adult criminal convictions. **Youth deflection initiatives** are innovative strategies that provide early, upstream support to young people who may be at risk of justice involvement. These programs aim to keep youth connected to school, family, and community while offering guidance, mentorship, and life skills to support personal accountability and long-term well-being. Studies show lower recidivism, positive academic outcomes, and increased trust in law enforcement for youth provided alternatives to formal proceedings and charges for minor offenses. Deflection also avoids labeling and stigma that can have lasting negative impacts on youth. This resource uses data from the *Juvenile Arrest Rates by Offense, Sex, and Race (1980–2020)* dataset from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), with a focus on 2018–2020 data, to explore patterns in youth arrest rates that highlight opportunities for early deflection.

Insight: Youth defiance and disorderly conduct may indicate stressors at home or in school environments.

Opportunity: These moments are prime for deflection to connect youth with behavioral health, mentorship, trauma-informed care or crisis intervention to prevent deeper system involvement.

Insight: Arrest rates for drug-related offenses are substantial, particularly for males, who were arrested at nearly three times the rate of females in 2020.

Opportunity: Deflection for substance use can integrate school referrals, peer support, and youth-specific services that focus on common behavioral patterns.

Insight: Arrests for low-level offenses like curfew violations, loitering, and underage drinking remain common, despite major overall declines.

Opportunity: Deflection through after-school programs and community outreach provide healthy arrest alternatives to address common teen behaviors, unmet social needs, or lack of support.

Insight: Youth arrests for property offenses remain higher for males, while historical data show higher arrest rates for females running away from home.

Opportunity: Early intervention can address distinct needs and may include restorative accountability and skills-building, safe housing, and family stabilization.

*The COVID-19 pandemic likely affected 2020 youth arrest numbers.

WHY THIS MATTERS

This data helps highlight opportunities for alternatives to justice involvement for common youth behaviors and low-level offenses. Studies show that youth can benefit from supportive approaches to accountability. Deflection partnerships create alternatives for handling youth struggles related to substance use, mental health, family conflict, and unstable environments—helping shift the burden of these non-police matters away from law enforcement. This allows officers to focus on core public safety concerns while supporting healthier outcomes for youth, families, and communities.

Actionable Steps

Identify common low-level offenses among youth and community support services.

Train officers, school staff, and community members to refer youth to services.

Partner with local youth and health services to increase crisis supports.

Review local police data to refine and expand deflection strategies.

For more information contact:

Mark Elliott, Director, National Deflection TA Center
TASC's Center for Health and Justice| melliott@tasc.org | (312) 785-6938

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. *Expanding the Use of Deflection to Youth: A Toolkit for Police and Community Leaders*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2022. Retrieved from: https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/expanding-use-deflection-youth-toolkit-police-and-community-leaders.

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. *Frequently Asked Questions: UCR Table 2—Arrest Estimates by Age*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2024. https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/statistical-briefing-book/crime/faqs/ucr_table_2.

Seacrest, Logan. "Juvenile Deflection." R Street Institute, July 14, 2025. Retrieved from: https://www.rstreet.org/research/juvenile-deflection/.