



October 2023

Systems in Crisis: Revamping the Juvenile Justice Workforce and Core Strategies for Improving Public Safety and Youth Outcomes

Juvenile justice systems are in crisis. Juvenile corrections and probation agencies have long struggled to recruit and retain front-line staff.¹ But since the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges have reached unprecedented levels. As a result, public agencies are struggling to provide youth with even basic supervision and services and to safeguard the well-being of their staff and the youth they serve. Staffing shortages extend to public defenders and prosecutors, forcing youth to go without counsel and causing court delays.² And service providers can't maintain adequate staffing—with some even going out of business—which results in overcrowding, waiting lists, or leaving youth and families without viable options to get their critical needs met.³

Historically, jurisdictions have adopted short-term, reactive measures to address staff turnover such as hiring bonuses or providing overtime pay.⁴ However, this Band-Aid approach is not sufficient to mitigate the current crisis, nor will it prevent its recurrence. This brief details findings from a national survey conducted in 2023 by The Council of State Governments Justice Center, Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy, and University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute, as well as listening sessions with juvenile justice agencies across the country, which reveal the scope and consequences of this crisis. (See the Appendix for methodology details.) In response, we call for states and locales to use these staffing challenges as an opportunity to engage in a fundamental rethinking of their juvenile justice workforce, as well as where and how youth are best served, to protect public safety and improve youth outcomes more effectively. Recognizing that jurisdictions face immediate staffing pressures, we complement this brief with [fact sheets](#) that detail shorter-term [hiring](#) and [retention](#) best practices.

Scope, Causes, and Consequences of the Staff Hiring and Retention Crisis

Frequent staff turnover has always been a substantial barrier to juvenile justice systems implementing evidence-based practices with fidelity and sustaining reforms. But the majority of survey respondents—from over 200 individual agencies representing 33 state-level juvenile justice agencies and a multitude of local probation, corrections, and detention agencies—reported that they are now facing greater difficulties hiring and retaining staff than at any time in the past 5 to 10 years. Key findings from the survey and listening sessions reveal the dimensions of this crisis.

1. Front-line staff hiring and retention challenges are severe and multifaceted nationwide.

- Almost 90 percent of all corrections agencies reported moderate or severe challenges with hiring and retaining front-line facility staff, with staff vacancy rates as high as 30 to 40 percent in some locales.
- Over 70 percent of state corrections and probation agencies cited moderate or severe challenges with hiring and retaining field (community supervision) staff.
- Local probation agencies face fewer struggles, but over 60 percent still cited moderate or severe challenges with hiring field staff, and over 45 percent reported moderate to severe retention challenges.
- Approximately 85 percent of all agencies reported that their service providers are facing moderate or severe staff hiring and retention challenges.

2. The causes for this staffing crisis are also multifaceted and don't allow for easy or quick fixes.

These causes include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Emotional nature of cases and staff burnout** (top reason cited by survey participants): Staff are overwhelmed by the complexity of youth's needs, including the increased prevalence of mental illness and substance use disorders that staff often lack the expertise to handle.
- **Low starting salaries and inadequate salary increases** (other top reason cited in the survey): The lack of competitive salaries has become especially pronounced given high inflation rates. Many agencies reported losing staff to fast food establishments or “big box” stores due to both the easier work and higher pay. Survey results revealed that average facility line staff starting pay is approximately \$35,000, with some agencies reporting salaries in the twenties or high teens. Field line staff earn slightly higher starting salaries with an average of approximately \$40,000, and salaries range significantly higher and lower across locales.
- **Insufficient training and wellness supports:** Staff feel inadequately prepared for the difficulties of the job and experience secondary trauma, which often goes unaddressed.

- **Working conditions and the changing nature of work:** Facility line staff, in particular, reported feeling “like they are incarcerated” along with youth, given poor working conditions, stress of the job, fears for their safety, rigid working hours, and the isolated location of many facilities. As remote work accelerated during the pandemic in other fields, this lack of flexibility has become even more pronounced and detrimental to staff retention.
- **Generational divides:** Agency managers reported that they struggle to attract a younger cohort of workers, address their need for expedient promotional pathways, and get them invested in juvenile justice as a long-term career as opposed to short-term employment.
- **Mission confusion and skill mismatches:** Many agencies struggle to articulate a clear mission and vision, vacillating between seeing their staff as extensions of law enforcement or probation “officers” vs. social workers and case managers. This identity crisis muddles agencies’ marketing pitches, leads new hires to misunderstand and be unprepared for the true nature of the work, and undermines buy-in from existing staff. Rising concerns about youth violence, negative media attention, and the increasing politicization of juvenile justice reforms have further undermined employees’ commitment and job satisfaction.
- **Bureaucratic barriers:** Barriers include inflexibility regarding the credentials and experience of prospective candidates; outdated and inaccurate job descriptions; slow and cumbersome hiring processes; rigid shift schedules and work-from-home policies; overly bureaucratic promotional, incentive, and bonus processes; and disincentives for innovation and creativity, such as hiring people with lived experience.

3. The consequences of the staffing crisis are far reaching, impacting all aspects of juvenile justice operations, supervision, and service delivery.

- More than half, and as many as three-quarters, of all survey respondents reported that their staff hiring and retention challenges have had a moderate or severe negative impact on the following, ranked in order of severity:
 1. Staff morale
 2. Service availability
 3. Consistency and quality of supervision
 4. Adherence to research and best practice
 5. Adherence to agency policy
 6. Youth and family engagement
 7. Staff and youth safety
 8. Reform implementation and sustainability
 9. Conditions of confinement

- Further, agencies reported that staff turnover and persistent vacancies are causing a cascading set of harmful consequences, demonstrating the fragility of foundational juvenile justice structures and processes in many locales. These consequences include the following:
 - **Detention and residential bed crisis:** The staffing crisis has produced a residential crisis. Long-term facilities have had to reduce the number of youth they serve to maintain legally required staffing ratios. Youth are increasingly stuck in short-term detention facilities for months, which are ill-equipped to meet their treatment needs, contributing to overcrowding, incidents, and abuses. To relieve this pressure, youth are being placed in whichever long-term facility has an available bed, even if the facility is hundreds of miles from their home, out of state, or doesn't provide the necessary services to meet their individual needs. Unfortunately, select policymakers and other stakeholders viewing these challenges from a distance have responded by calling for increased spending on new or larger facilities, misunderstanding that the root issue is a lack of staff, not a lack of beds.
 - **Service delivery crisis:** Staffing challenges have also forced many community-based service providers to restrict the number of youth they serve or to permanently close. The result is long waiting lists or a complete absence of critical services in many locales. Many public agencies also report failing to receive any responses to service procurements, and share that they are unable to expend appropriated resources or are forced to contract with providers that don't have sufficient juvenile justice expertise. These challenges may inadvertently result in increased stays for youth on probation or more youth placed out of home, not because they are a public safety risk, but because they have unmet needs.
 - **Fracturing of relationships and trust:** This is occurring at multiple levels and includes increased friction between line staff and administrators, as well as between private providers and the public agencies that fund and oversee them. This tension centers on the rigors of the job, insufficient compensation, and lack of institutional support, especially when facility incidents occur and become public. At the systems level, state leaders report a rise in finger-pointing among the juvenile justice and other youth and family service systems about which entity is responsible for meeting youth's needs. Agencies are also competing for an overlapping, limited pool of prospective employees as well as community service slots and residential beds.

Finally, but perhaps most critically, juvenile justice systems may face a further fraying of their credibility. At the individual level, frequent staff turnover causes youth and families to navigate multiple different probation officers and case managers, stalling treatment progress and undermining the relationships that are critical to guiding youth behavioral change. On a broader level, systems' reduced capacity to protect young people's safety, dispense justice in a timely way, and deliver basic services may have a long-term impact on whether youth, families, and communities—particularly those of color who are disproportionately represented—trust or buy into interventions or policies that system actors purport are in the best interest of community safety and youth outcomes.

Revamping the Juvenile Justice Workforce and Core System Strategies

Perhaps the most striking finding from the survey is that over 60 percent of respondents reported that their state leaders are aware of the severity of their staffing challenges; *however, less than 10 percent believe that their state has a clear strategy to address this crisis.* The survey results and listening sessions affirm that most jurisdictions are adopting a variety of strategies to address their staffing challenges. Yet these efforts are largely short-term fixes without a broader vision and plan to address the root causes of the crisis or to strengthen the fragile supervision and service foundation it has revealed.

To this end, we call on policymakers and system leaders nationwide to wrestle with three critical questions that sit at the heart of ongoing staffing instability and that will shape the future of public safety and youth outcomes for years to come. For each question, we detail a set of key considerations in the hope that state and local leaders will identify, plan, and implement their own systemic solutions and innovations grounded in research and lessons learned on “what works” from the past two decades.⁵

1. Who are the individuals who should be responsible for protecting community safety and working with the most vulnerable adolescents in your state or community?

Over the last two decades, jurisdictions have generally focused their juvenile justice reforms on policy and practice improvements while giving little attention to the quality and stability of the workforce. Indeed, as state and local leaders express increased concerns about youth crime and violence, few states have rethought how best to strengthen and support people on the front lines working with high-risk youth daily. State and local leaders should seek to transform their juvenile justice workforce by meaningfully considering the following issues:

- **Staff qualifications:** Determine what level and type of education, experience, and expertise is needed to motivate and guide behavior change for the population of youth who likely have the most intensive, complex risks and needs in a given locale. As a key consideration, many current juvenile justice professionals see youth’s families as part of the problem, not part of the solution, despite research showing that family engagement is critical to recidivism reduction and youth’s long-term success.⁶ Prospective staff’s willingness and ability to partner effectively with youth and families might be their most important qualification. Job descriptions and interview questions should reflect the importance of this family-based approach, and hiring managers should regularly ask system-involved youth and families what they value most in staff as well as have them serve on hiring interview panels.
- **Salary levels:** Align initial staff compensation and ongoing pay raises with the qualifications necessary to do the work effectively, the rigors of the job, and the goal of retaining staff and having them view juvenile justice as a viable career path.
- **Training and supports:** Invest in robust orientation and training programs for new and existing staff as well as wellness supports to help staff cope with secondary trauma and reduce the emotional toll of the job.

- **Professionalization and pipelines:** Establish a credentialing system for the human services industry, including, but not limited to, juvenile justice, similar to how jurisdictions have established dedicated education and credentialing pipelines for teachers.
- **Cross-systems coordination:** Establish shared approaches across youth and family service systems to staff qualifications, salaries, promotional pathways, professional development, expedited and streamlined hiring processes, and workforce pipeline partnerships, including with the university and community college and workforce development communities. Such efforts will promote efficiencies and reduce intersystem competition for limited resources.
- **Meaning and value:** Just as teachers, police officers, and social workers are rightly lauded for their heroic efforts, jurisdictions should consider how to ensure that juvenile justice professionals are similarly valued and can find meaning in their challenging work. Too often, agency staff are vilified by policymakers and the media when cases go poorly, but their daily accomplishments and long-term success stories go unnoticed and unpublicized. A key part of an effective, sustainable juvenile justice staff hiring and retention strategy may also involve a more intentional approach to communications and public relations.

2. What treatment environments best support improved public safety and outcomes not only for youth but for the professionals who are responsible for their safety, supervision, and rehabilitation?

Juvenile incarceration rates have declined over 70 percent in the last two decades.⁷ Yet, even today, the majority of youth who are detained or incarcerated have committed nonviolent offenses.⁸ And, in response to concerns about youth violence, policymakers in several states have recently enacted policies to make it even easier to detain and incarcerate more young people. Instead, a wealth of research and the staffing crisis should compel state and local leaders to seek more effective community-based alternatives for the following key reasons:

- **Public safety and cost benefit:** Research has consistently shown that incarcerated youth are more likely to recidivate, and commit more serious offenses when they reoffend, than similar youth served in the community.⁹ Additionally, given that it costs over \$200,000 per year for a youth's secure confinement,¹⁰ better public safety outcomes are produced in the community at a fraction of the expense.
- **Recruiting and retaining high-quality staff:** Survey responses reveal that facilities are experiencing more severe staffing challenges than community supervision agencies and are also coping with more detrimental impacts. These results are unsurprising given that facilities have inherent staffing disadvantages, including remote locations, challenging working conditions, and inflexible schedules and protocols. As such, facilities may always struggle to retain a stable workforce let alone attract the quality of personnel required to work effectively with a high-risk adolescent population. Beyond the impact of high turnover on facility functioning, research is also beginning to show that staffing instability and absences are associated with increased recidivism rates.¹¹ At a minimum, then, jurisdictions should not only invest in and scale more effective, easier-to-staff, community-based alternatives to incarceration, but also consider replacing prison-like facilities with smaller, therapeutic, residential treatment environments where both youth and staff can thrive.

- **Staff and youth safety:** Facilities have a track record of being unsafe places for kids, with more than half of state juvenile correctional systems having a documented record of systemic abuses over the last 20 years.¹² In our listening sessions, juvenile correctional leaders shared that persistent staff turnover has forced many agencies to charge new and inexperienced staff with managing high-risk youth, which has made both youth and staff feel less safe. At the same time, research has shown that staff who feel unsafe in facilities are more likely to burn out and quit, and that youth who feel unsafe are less likely to benefit from treatment and more likely to recidivate.¹³ Thus, jurisdictions may find themselves in a self-perpetuating cycle whereby staff vacancies foment conditions that are ripe for abuses and incidents, which, in turn, leads to increased staff turnover and absences, further abuses, and poor youth outcomes. To avoid this dangerous spiral, state and local leaders should consider in a holistic way the types of service environments worth investing in, as well as associated workforce, ombudsman functions, and quality assurance and accountability protocols needed to not simply protect public safety but to safeguard the basic human rights and well-being of young people and the staff who care for them.

3. What interventions matter when it comes to reducing recidivism and supporting youth to transition to a crime-free, productive adulthood?

The staffing crisis has exposed the fragile, neglected nature of the community-based service system in many locales. Research has shown that supervision by itself has little to no impact on recidivism. Instead, what matters is providing youth with services that address their underlying needs.¹⁴ Yet most policymakers and system managers have little knowledge of how much money is spent on community-based services for youth in the juvenile justice system, for what, if these services align with their population's risks and needs, and whether taxpayer dollars are used efficiently for programs that work.

As service providers struggle to operate at full capacity and even stay in business at all, these knowledge gaps have become pressing and acute. Further, the need for a robust community-based service system is only likely to rise, with the last few years seeing a marked increase in adolescents having persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation and experiencing physical and emotional abuse.¹⁵ In light of these challenges, policymakers will need to invest in revitalizing and building up the capacity of community-based providers and their staff. Such efforts should consider the following key components:

- **Behavioral health and other therapeutic services:** Listening session participants consistently pointed to the lack of community-based mental health and substance use services as their most significant challenge to improving outcomes for youth in the juvenile justice system, especially in rural communities. In fact, in many states, there is no child or adolescent behavioral health system. Instead, the juvenile justice system inappropriately serves as the default system for meeting the behavioral health needs of even low-risk adolescents. Yet there are too few behavioral health providers in most communities in general, let alone those willing and able to work effectively with juvenile justice populations. The staffing crisis has exacerbated the dearth of clinicians to near emergency levels. These challenges will not get rectified overnight, and money alone may be insufficient to attract new providers or staff. Instead, jurisdictions will need to consider how to partner with the provider community to significantly scale their capacity, staffing, expertise, and reach,

especially in rural areas. Likewise, a full force effort is required to partner with the university and workforce development communities to establish training, credentialing, and incentive programs that can produce a sustainable pipeline of professionals committed to this work.

- **Prosocial supports and grassroots interventions:** Based on our collective work with dozens of jurisdictions across the country, grassroots programs and prosocial supports have generally been given short shrift to the extent that states and counties have built up their array of juvenile justice services. Since these programs typically have less intensive staffing needs, jurisdictions should consider how to strengthen and expand them as well as how to better identify and leverage those resources that already exist through improved communication and partnerships with local and faith-based community leaders. Likewise, states and locales can consider piloting mentoring, credible messenger, life coaching, violence interrupter, and other similar peer-based initiatives. These interventions benefit from drawing on the experience, expertise, and commitment of a large network of people with lived experience in the justice system who want to give back and help guide a younger generation. Jurisdictions should find ways to better support and expand these interventions, including by examining and strengthening provider outreach, procurement, and contracting processes to ensure that these vehicles support and even incentivize participation from grassroots and culturally specific or minority-run organizations.
- **Cross-systems coordination:** Cross-systems collaboration is critical to not only creating a robust workforce pipeline but to establishing a stable, cost-effective service infrastructure. Policymakers should consider how best to convene and require youth and family service agencies to develop an integrated set of community-based service delivery and capacity building strategies, such as through a systems of care model.¹⁶ This effort should include plans for how to expand the local network of community-based providers, strengthen their hiring and retention practices, and establish funding rates commensurate with the goal of employing highly qualified professionals. Jurisdictions should also seek to better leverage federal funding streams, like Medicaid and Family First,¹⁷ that can support the same service models needed within multiple systems, and establish shared approaches to training, quality assurance, and data collection/evaluation that reduce providers' administrative and staffing burden and support data-driven decisions regarding which programs merit ongoing funding.

Conclusion

The staffing crisis in juvenile justice is not a standalone event caused by unusual circumstances. It is the apex of systemic, ongoing staff hiring and retention challenges, and few of the agency managers that we spoke to expect it to dissipate anytime soon. Both the crisis's root causes, and its ramifications, indicate the need for foundational system improvements. Policymakers and system leaders can use this crisis as an opportunity to fundamentally rethink, restructure, and expand the juvenile justice workforce. Strengthening the qualifications, experience, and stability of the workforce might be one of the most cost-effective strategies that state and local leaders can employ to improve public safety and youth outcomes. Likewise, the staffing crisis should compel jurisdictions to more strategically plan and invest in the service settings, providers, and programs that can promote not just better outcomes for youth but also for the professionals who do the challenging, heroic work of supervising and serving them.

Appendix: Brief Methodology

The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center partnered with the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy and the University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute to better understand the causes, effects, and potential solutions for the staff hiring and retention crisis in juvenile justice systems. This project was supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) through funding from the Juvenile Justice System Reform and Reinvestment Initiative.

We conducted the following research, survey, and qualitative assessment activities in 2022 and 2023 that informed the findings and best practices detailed in the brief and accompanying fact sheets:

- **Literature Review:** We conducted an extensive review of empirical research and best practice studies on staff hiring and retention in juvenile justice and related youth and family service systems and agencies. This included a review of over 55 separate studies to identify themes in the causes and effects of staff hiring and retention challenges as well as effective practices for reducing these challenges and improving staff wellness and job satisfaction.
- **National Survey:** We administered a national survey to state and local juvenile correctional and detention agencies as well as state and local juvenile probation agencies on staff hiring and retention. The Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators (CJJA) and American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) assisted with dissemination to their membership. We received 219 responses to the survey—approximately 20 percent from state corrections and probation agencies, 73 percent from local probation agencies, and 7 percent from local corrections agencies. Survey responses also represented 33 state-level juvenile justice agencies and 37 states in total as well as responses from Guam and the District of Columbia. We analyzed the responses overall as well as by agency type to identify key findings.
- **Qualitative Assessment:** We conducted more than 15 separate listening sessions with juvenile justice agencies and other system stakeholders to learn more about their specific hiring and retention challenges, strategies they have implemented to address these challenges, and broader implications of the staffing crisis for juvenile justice reform and improved youth outcomes. We hosted listening sessions at national and regional CJJA and APPA conferences, with OJJDP grantees, and with other states and counties across the country. Participants included leadership, management, and front-line staff as well as listening sessions with attorneys, judges, service providers, other youth and family service agencies, and youth and families with lived experience in the juvenile justice system.

Endnotes

1. Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators, *Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators Toolkit: Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Qualified Staff* (Braintree, MA: Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators, 2019), <https://www.cjja.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/CJJA-Staff-Retention-Toolkit.pdf>.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Elizabeth Seigle, Nastassia Walsh, and Josh Weber, *Core Principles for Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System* (New York: The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2014).
6. Richard J. Bonnie et al., eds., *Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach* (Washington DC: National Academies Press, 2013).
7. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement* (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2016).
8. Richard Mendel, “Why Youth Incarceration Fails: An Updated Review of the Evidence,” The Sentencing Project, March 1, 2023, accessed August 18, 2023, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/why-youth-incarceration-fails-an-updated-review-of-the-evidence/>.
9. Mendel, “Why Youth Incarceration Fails: An Updated Review of the Evidence”; Tony Fabelo et al., *Closer to Home: An Analysis of the State and Local Impact of the Texas Juvenile Justice Reforms* (New York: The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015).
10. “Sticker Shock 2020: The Cost of Youth Incarceration” (Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2020), <https://justicepolicy.org/research/policy-brief-2020-sticker-shock-the-cost-of-youth-incarceration/>.
11. Kevin Wolff, Katherine Limoncelli, and Michael Baglivio, “The Effect of Program Staffing Difficulties on Changes in Dynamic Risk and Reoffending among Juvenile Offenders in Residential Placement,” *Justice Quarterly* (2020): 1–28. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1481&context=jj_pubs.
12. Richard Mendel, “Maltreatment of Youth in U.S. Juvenile Corrections Facilities,” (Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015).
13. Wolff, Limoncelli, and Baglivio, “The Effect of Program Staffing Difficulties on Changes in Dynamic Risk and Reoffending among Juvenile Offenders in Residential Placement,” 1–28.
14. Seigle, Walsh, and Weber, *Core Principles for Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System*.
15. *Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary and Trends Report 2011–2021* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).
16. “System of Care,” National Training and Technical Assistance Center, accessed August 18, 2023, <https://nttamentalhealth.org/grantee-corner/system-of-care/>.
17. “FamilyFirstAct.org,” FamilyFirstAct.org, accessed August 18, 2023, <https://familyfirstact.org/>.



This brief was prepared by The Council of State Governments Justice Center with support from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs’ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention through grant number 15PJDP-21-GK-03216-JRIX. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice.