

# YOUTH MUST BE SERVED

*The Post-Pandemic State of  
Youth Justice in Milwaukee County*



WISCONSIN  
**POLICY FORUM**

## ABOUT THE WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

The Wisconsin Policy Forum was created on January 1, 2018, by the merger of the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum and the Madison-based Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Throughout their long histories, both organizations engaged in nonpartisan, independent research and civic education on fiscal and policy issues affecting state and local governments and school districts in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Policy Forum is committed to those same activities and to that spirit of nonpartisanship.

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was undertaken to inform policymakers and the public about the current state of the youth justice system in Milwaukee County, with a particular focus on how the system was impacted by the pandemic and how it has changed over time. We hope the findings and policy insights from this report will be used by leaders in Milwaukee County to inform public safety policymaking.

Report authors would like to thank officials from the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services and, in particular, its Children, Youth, and Family Services (CYFS) division, for providing much of the data used for this report and for patiently answering our questions. We also thank other stakeholders from the youth justice system for meeting with us and providing data and insights.

Finally, we wish to thank the Greater Milwaukee Committee and its Public Safety Committee for sponsoring this research and financially supporting it, as well as the Milwaukee-based Argosy Foundation for its generous support of this research.



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Milwaukee County*

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# INTRODUCTION

In our August 2023 report, [Under Pressure](#), the Wisconsin Policy Forum explored how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted the justice system in Milwaukee County and whether the system had recovered to its pre-pandemic functioning. The report found a number of key impacts, including a sharp decrease in arrests in the city of Milwaukee, a drop in district attorney charge rates, a rise in case dismissals, and a growing felony backlog in the courts.

While *Under Pressure* touched briefly on a sharp increase in motor vehicle thefts in the city of Milwaukee, many of which were thought to be committed by youth, its primary focus was the adult justice system. The report did not explore the impacts of the pandemic and the car theft spike on the youth justice system nor whether any negative impacts to the functioning of that system remain and need to be addressed.

In this report, we turn our focus to youth justice in Milwaukee County. This topic has received considerable attention since the pandemic, not only in light of the increase in auto thefts by youth, but also the substantial overcrowding challenges at the county's youth detention facility that surfaced as the impacts of the pandemic were subsiding.

While receiving less public attention, there has also been a remarkable transformation in how the youth justice system is addressing youth who have been deemed by judges to need secure detention. The average daily population of Milwaukee County youth housed at state-run juvenile corrections institutions has shrunk over the past decade from a budgeted 146 in 2014 to 28 in 2024. Meanwhile, the county has placed increased emphasis on supporting community-based programs for youth who come into contact with the system. We attempt here to explore the outcomes related to this transformation, which has saved the county millions of dollars in annual corrections payments to the state.

Specifically, this report seeks to address the following questions:

- How was the youth justice system impacted by the pandemic and the 2021 spike in motor vehicle thefts in Milwaukee, and has it recovered?
- Were the number of youths referred to the justice system impacted by the pandemic, and how do 2024 referrals and other activity levels within the youth justice system compare to pre-pandemic totals?
- How has the huge drop in the number of Milwaukee County youths sentenced to state-run corrections facilities impacted participation in other related services offered by the county, and what do we know about recidivism rates and other outcomes associated with such services?

## Data and Methodology

The main data sources for this report were obtained directly from Milwaukee County Children, Youth, and Family Services (CYFS) or from publicly available information posted by the division and various state government agencies. We also conducted several interviews with officials from CYFS and the county's Department of Health and Human Services, the Milwaukee County Children's Court, and other youth justice system stakeholders. Unless otherwise noted, data presented in this report were provided by CYFS.

The research for this project was largely undertaken in 2024. Consequently, the last full year for which data were available for several of the tables and figures in this report was 2023. There are some instances in which 2024 data became available as we neared publication, and we incorporated such data where possible.



- Overall, what do we know about trends in rates of youth crimes in Milwaukee over time and in dispositions related to those crimes?

In the pages that follow, we provide data and analysis that help to resolve some of these questions. Unfortunately, we find that for others, information does not exist to provide satisfactory answers. We hope, therefore, that this report is used by policymakers not only to reflect on how the youth justice system is currently functioning and has changed over time, but also to consider where data gaps should be filled to guide policymaking and ensure effective oversight in the future.

# OVERVIEW OF THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM

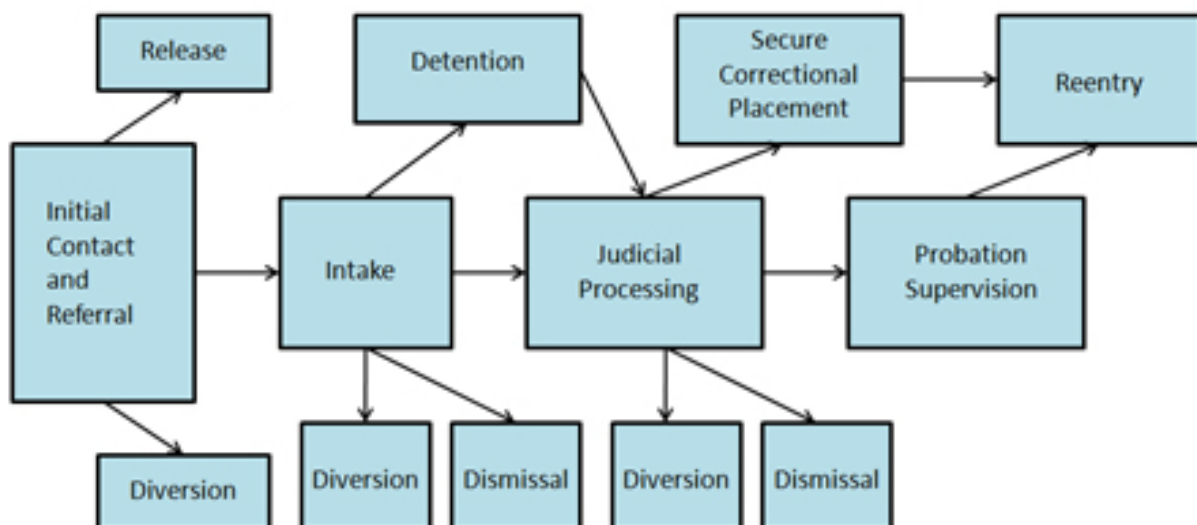
The youth justice system in Milwaukee County contains several components that mirror those of the adult system. The county's Children's Court hears cases involving youth younger than age 17 who are accused of an offense except for certain offenses which can either originate in or be waived into adult court. Juvenile detention centers at the county and state level house youth for temporary or extended periods who are deemed to be in need of secure detention, while the state, county, and community-based agencies team up to ensure the provision of probation and rehabilitative services, including behavioral health treatment and reentry services.

One important distinction between the youth and adult justice systems, however, is the youth system's much stronger emphasis on rehabilitation, as opposed to punishment. In fact, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, while "community safety is a shared goal" of adult and youth systems nationwide, the youth justice system's "stated goal" per the U.S. Supreme Court "is to help young people avoid future delinquency and mature into law-abiding adults."<sup>1</sup>

Closer to home, Milwaukee County's website emphasizes that the "goal of Children's Court is rehabilitation and to strengthen the child...not punishment." Another key distinction of the youth justice system tied to that goal is the involvement of a county-employed human services caseworker to support both the youth and family through the judicial process.

**Figure 1** shows the Milwaukee County youth justice system process, including intervention points that may result in a case being dismissed or diverted outside of the judicial system to a community-based treatment or supervisory program.

**Figure 1: Milwaukee County youth justice system process and intervention points**



Source: youth.gov

<sup>1</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2024, April 8). What is Juvenile Justice? Casey Connects. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-is-juvenile-justice>.

**Initial contact and referral** to the youth justice system occurs when a youth is referred to the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services' Children, Youth, and Family Services (CYFS) division, most commonly by law enforcement. If they are deemed to be in need of detention by law enforcement, then they are brought to the county's Vel Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center on the Milwaukee County Grounds in Wauwatosa. Otherwise, they may be "ordered in" to the youth justice system via a referral but remain at home. The term "referral" speaks to the onset of proceedings with CYFS. A referral also can occur when police are contacted by a third party, including a parent or guardian.

**Intake** can occur in one of two ways. For youth who are not held in custody, a human service worker employed by CYFS receives a referral from law enforcement and conducts an intake assessment. This includes meeting with the youth and family and making a recommendation as to whether a petition alleging that the youth is delinquent should be filed, a deferred prosecution agreement should be entered, or the matter should be closed. The district attorney's office makes the decision to file a petition.

For youth who are brought to the detention center by law enforcement, the human service worker determines whether to hold or release that youth based upon a variety of criteria. If the decision is made to hold the youth until they can be seen by a court official, the human service worker, to the extent possible, meets with the youth and family to gather information. Once the matter is before the Court, the district attorney's office must present sufficient information for the Court to decide whether there is probable cause to believe the youth has committed a crime. At this hearing, the human service worker makes a recommendation as to whether the youth should continue to be held in custody (either secure or non-secure), with the Court making the final decision.

Throughout this process, CYFS may refer youth to community-based treatment or supervisory services. CYFS maintains a vast network of community providers who offer services that include substance use disorder and mental health treatment, mentoring, skill building, and intensive monitoring.

The next potential step is **judicial processing**, which involves a hearing before a judge, consideration of evidence, and the judge's determination of delinquency. As with earlier junctures, a judge may dismiss a case or send the offender to a diversion program. For those who are ultimately found delinquent – the equivalent of a "guilty" charge in adult court – two options remain. One is secure correctional placement and the other is to be placed on probation supervision.

**Probation supervision** is the most common disposition for youths who have committed offenses. When a youth is placed on probation supervision, they must comply with the terms and conditions imposed by the court such as community service, restitution, or participation in community treatment services. Probation supervision can occur for youth who are allowed to return to their own homes or for youth who are ordered to out-of-home placements at group homes or residential treatment or similar facilities. Another out-of-home placement option is CYFS' Milwaukee County Accountability Program (MCAP), which typically entails six months of secure placement at the Vel Phillips facility and six months of community-based supervision and programming.

**Secure correctional placement** takes place at a state corrections facility upon sentencing by a judge. Milwaukee County reimburses the state for costs associated with youth sentenced to state juvenile corrections institutions (JCI) with the exception of those designated by judges as serious juvenile offenders or those whose cases have been transferred to the adult justice system due to their



severity (these individuals may still be housed at a JCI as they are too young to be housed at an adult prison). In those cases, the youth are under the supervision of the state Department of Corrections and their detention costs remain with the state.

**Reentry** is the final stage of the youth justice process, during which individuals who served time in a secure facility are transitioned back into their communities. That process is tailored to the unique needs of each individual and often includes programming designed to support mental and physical well-being. The goal of reentry programs is to reduce recidivism and help a young person successfully reintegrate into their community while ensuring public safety.

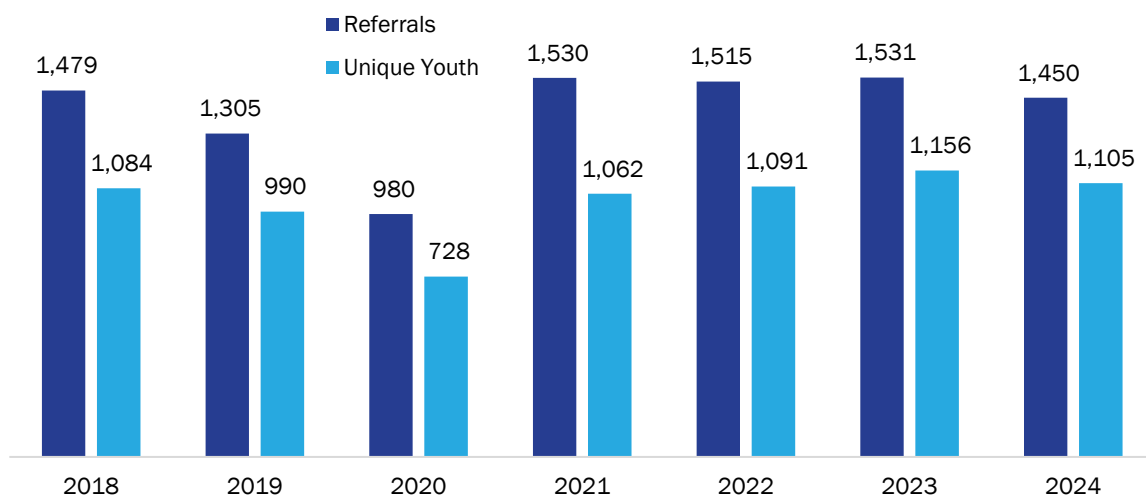
# TRENDS IN YOUTH CRIME

One of our key research questions is whether the incidence of youth crime in Milwaukee County was impacted by the pandemic and whether it is now comparable to pre-pandemic levels. The best data source to address that question is the number of referrals to CYFS. We acknowledge that this is an imperfect barometer, as it only reflects the number of alleged youth crimes that are observed or reported to police and also deemed suitable by police for involvement by the judicial system. Nevertheless, referrals are an important data source to gauge both the incidence of crime and activity levels within the youth justice system.

## Referrals dropped during the height of the pandemic and have rebounded since

From 2018 to 2024, 7,216 youths were referred to CYFS for a total number of 9,790 referrals (some youth had more than one referral).<sup>2</sup> As shown in **Chart 1**, annual referrals plummeted in 2020 in the pandemic's first year, which was understandable given the extent to which youth were confined to their homes and personal interactions and law enforcement activity were limited. In 2021, however, the number of referrals jumped to above pre-pandemic levels while the number of unique youths came close to the 2018 total and grew for the next two years. In 2024, growth in referrals and numbers of unique youths subsided, but the totals still remained above 2019 levels.

**Chart 1: Annual referrals to Milwaukee County Children, Youth, and Family Services, 2018-24**



Source: Milwaukee County Child, Youth, and Family Services Division

Later sections of this report speak to changes in the types of referrals sent to CYFS over time. For now, it should be noted that referral types fell across almost every category in 2020 at the onset of the pandemic. However, by 2024, referrals for certain felony offenses grew by 50% or more over 2018 totals. These included armed robbery (156%, 84 referrals), terrorist threats (138%, 36

<sup>2</sup> It is common for a single youth to be brought to the youth detention center with multiple referrals, and a youth can also be referred to CYFS more than once over the course of a year.



referrals), taking and driving a vehicle without consent (67%, 34 referrals), and first degree recklessly endangering safety with a firearm (56%, 9 referrals). Also, while the number of referrals for first degree intentional homicide was comparably small, they increased from one in 2018 to 15 in 2024.

It should also be noted that from 2018 to 2023, a little under half of referrals (about 4,100 of 8,300) were for first-time offenses while a little more than half (about 4,200) were for subsequent offenses (2023 is the last full year for which data were available for this breakdown). This was consistent each year, with first-time referrals representing between 47% and 52% of total referrals during the period studied.

In other words, **about half of referrals to the youth justice system involve repeat offenders**. As we will discuss in subsequent sections, CYFS' data collection efforts provide some additional context on re-offenses, but enhanced efforts are needed to paint a more complete picture of how various sentencing decisions, CYFS interventions, and other justice system activities are impacting recidivism and other outcomes for youth.

## Four fifths of referrals from 2018 to 2023 involve black youth and youth with behavioral health issues

Demographic information provided by CYFS offers additional context about youth referred to CYFS. From 2018 to 2024, the majority of youth referred were ages 15 and 16 (61%). Fourteen-year-olds comprised 19% of referrals, 13-year-olds accounted for 13%, and youth ages 10 to 12 were 8% of referrals. From 2018 to 2023, 80% (6,650) of referrals were for boys and 20% (1,680) were for girls (breakdowns by gender were not available for 2024).

Relative to the makeup of the county's youth population overall, Black youth are overrepresented among those referred to the youth justice system. As shown in **Table 1**, Black youth comprised 80% of referrals from 2018 to 2024 while accounting for just 33% of the county's youth population per the 2020 U.S. Census. Conversely, Hispanic youth accounted for 10% of referrals, while 24% of the population identified as Hispanic or Latino. The distinction is somewhat larger for white youth, who comprised 30% of Milwaukee County's youth population but accounted for 7% of total youth referrals over that time period. We also show city of Milwaukee youth population demographics in the table for further context.

**Table 1: Referrals to CYFS by race compared with Milwaukee County's youth population, 2018-24**

	Referrals to CYFS	Milwaukee County Population Ages 17 and Younger (2020)*	City of Milwaukee Population Ages 17 and Younger (2020)*
Black	80%	33%	46%
Hispanic	11%	24%	28%
White	7%	30%	13%
Asian	1%	6%	7%
Native American, Native Hawaiian, Alaska Native	1%	0.4%	6%

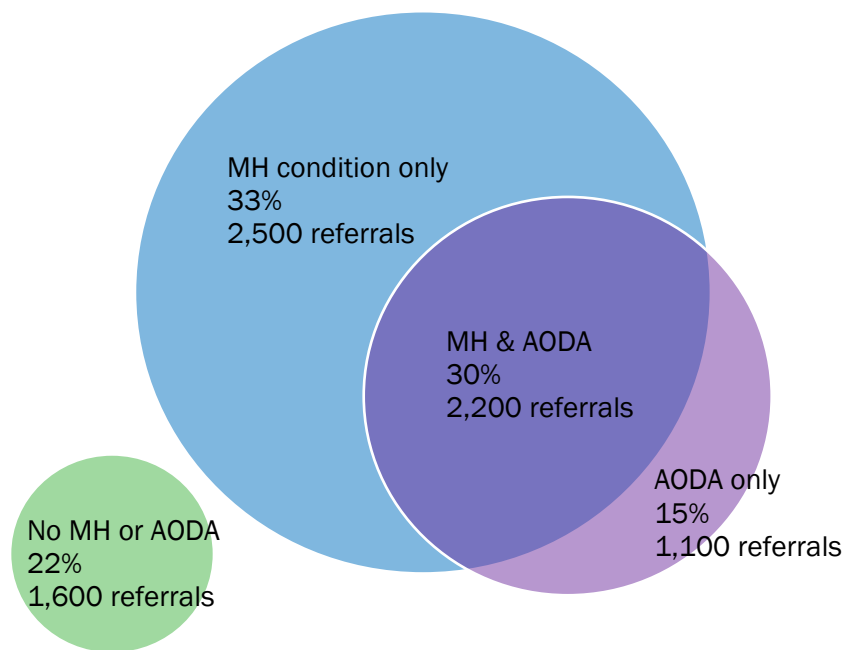
Sources: Milwaukee County CYFS and U.S. Census Bureau

\*U.S. Census Bureau totals in the population columns do not add up to 100%, as they exclude the Two or More Races (6%) or Some Other Race Alone (1%) categories because those do not align with CYFS demographic reporting. The most recent Census Bureau data available to identify racial demographics by age is from 2020.



It should also be noted that a significant portion of youth referred to CYFS had a mental health condition, an alcohol or other drug abuse condition (AODA), or both, as shown in **Figure 2**. These conditions are identified during the intake process through a youth assessment screening instrument (YASI) which assesses a range of factors to identify a youth's likelihood of causing or engaging in criminal behaviors or reoffending. After removing instances where a full YASI assessment was *not* completed (which is often due to a youth being diverted and the case dropped), we find that 78% of referrals from 2018 to 2023 (5,800 out of 7,400) involved a youth with a mental health condition, an AODA condition, or both.

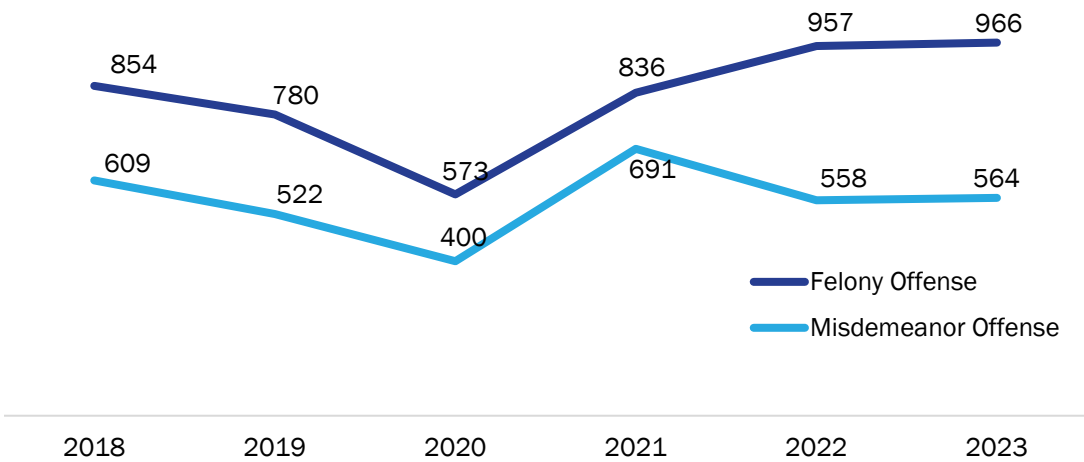
**Figure 2: Total instances of mental health (MH) and alcohol or other drug addictions (AODA) identified during referral intake screening assessments, 2018-2023**



## Referral types increase in severity

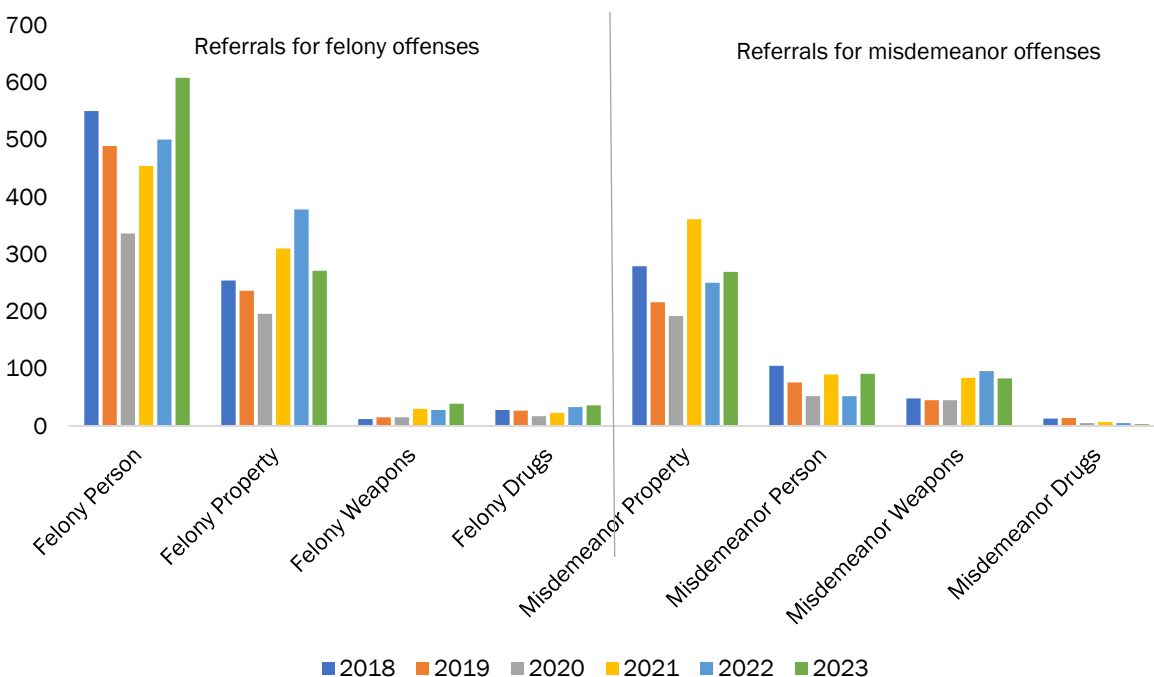
Using data provided by CYFS, we find that of the 8,300 referrals from 2018 to 2023, nearly 5,000 (60%) were for felony offenses and 3,300 (40%) for misdemeanor offenses. **Chart 2** shows that by 2023, referrals for felony offenses had increased 13% (112 referrals) while misdemeanors decreased 7% (49 referrals).

**Chart 2: Changes in referrals for misdemeanor and felony offenses, 2018-2023**



**Chart 3** shows referrals for felony and misdemeanor offenses across four categories: person, property, weapons, and drug offenses. All felony offense types saw increases in referrals when comparing 2023 to 2018. The most common felony offense type – felony person – saw an increase of 58 referrals (11%). Also of note, felony weapons offenses more than tripled, growing from 12 to 39 (225%). Meanwhile, misdemeanor offense types declined. However, misdemeanor weapons offenses grew by 35 referrals (73%). Felony weapons offenses can involve a range of activities such as selling a gun illegally or the use of a gun in the commission of a crime, while misdemeanor weapons offenses typically involve violations of firearm laws, such as possession of a firearm or other deadly weapon by a person under the age of 18.

**Chart 3: Referrals to CYFS for felony and misdemeanor offenses by type, 2018-2023**



**Chart 4** provides an even more granular look, showing changes in referrals from 2018 to 2024 for felony and misdemeanor offenses that were the most common *and* saw growth over that time period. We define “common” as those referral types that saw at least 100 referrals over the six-year span. There were 21 out of nearly 300 offense types that met that criterion, accounting for 73% (7,200) of all referrals. Of those, one misdemeanor and nine felony referral types increased, as shown in **Chart 4**. We also included first degree homicide in the chart given the severity of the crime and its substantial increase over time, as well as passengers of a vehicle operating without the consent of owner because referrals for that offense held a sizeable share of all referrals from 2018 to 2024, at 12% (1,200).

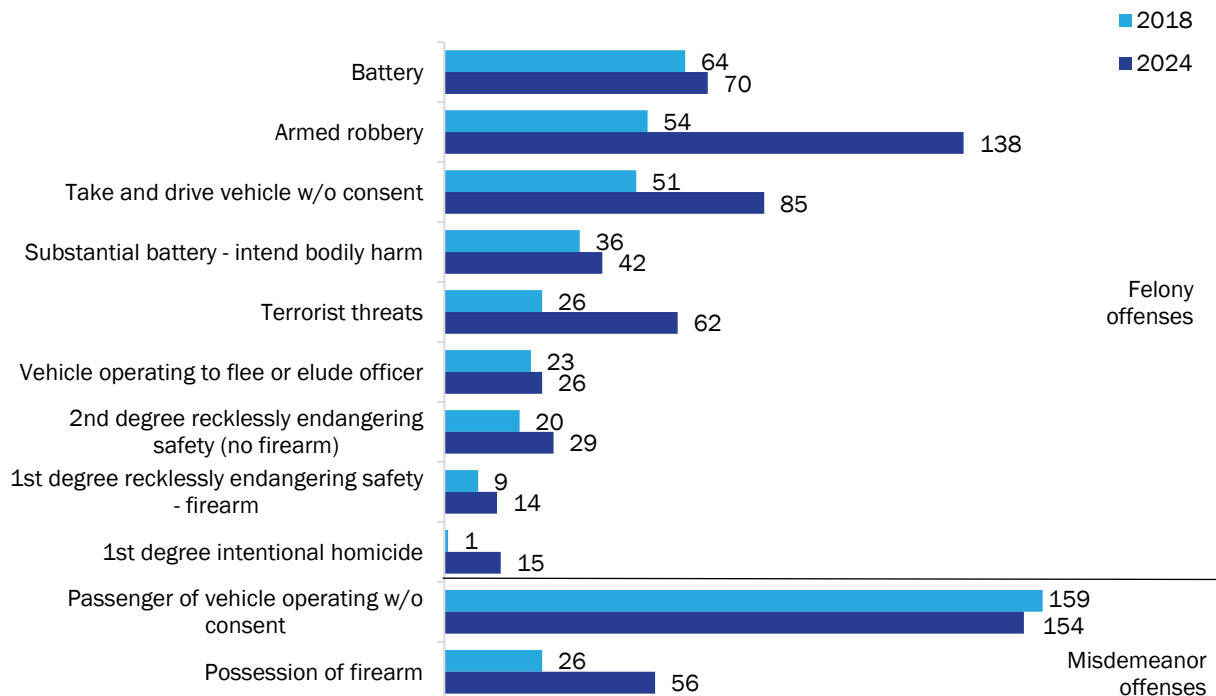
Particularly notable was the growth in felony offenses involving armed robbery (156% or 84 referrals), terrorist threats (138% or 36 referrals), and taking and driving a vehicle without consent (67% or 34 referrals). The number of referrals for first-degree homicides also grew from 1 to 15. The misdemeanor offense with notable growth was possession of a firearm, which rose 115% (30 referrals). Referrals for passengers of a vehicle operating without the consent of the owner fell by 3% (-5 referrals) from 2018 to 2024.

#### Limitations in referral data

As noted earlier, this section uses referral data available from CYFS to assess crime trends. We acknowledge the limitations of this data source as a gauge of actual crime, as it is based on suspected crimes, as opposed to crimes committed as determined by court rulings, and therefore may overstate crime rates. Conversely, referral data may also understate the incidence of crime given that unreported offenses and suspects who have not been apprehended by law enforcement are not included in this data source.

Even so, referral data – similar to offense data for the adult system – is the best metric the justice system can provide to track the incidence of crime. We analyze it here as a proxy for assessing general crime trends.

**Chart 4: Growth in common offense types, 2018-2024\***



\*We define “common” as those referral types that saw at least 100 referrals total from 2018-2024. Homicides are also included due to the severity of the offense.

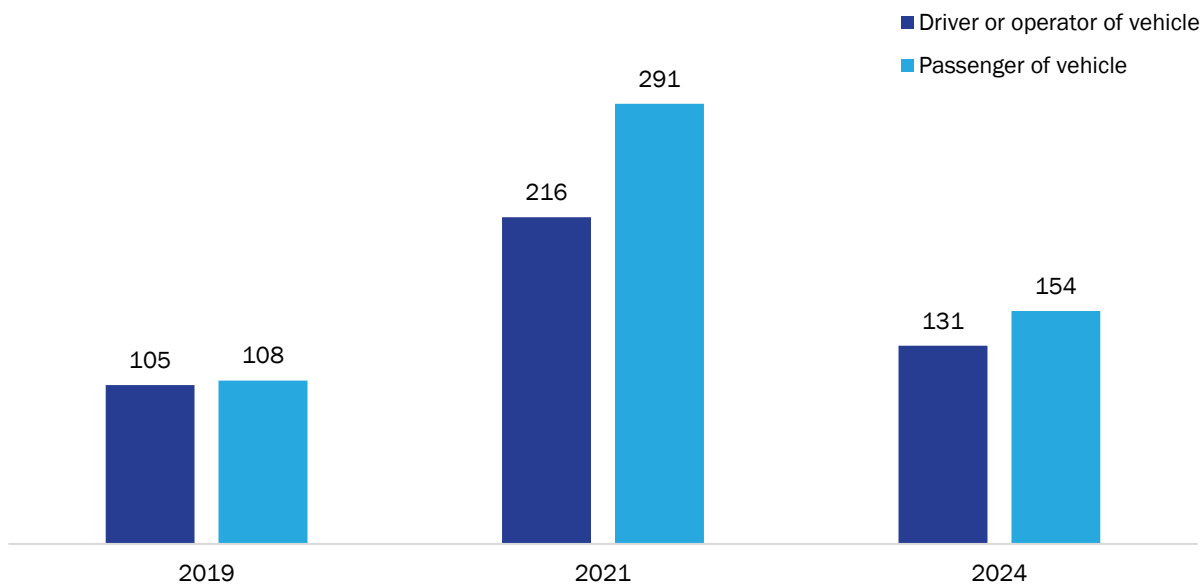


Across all referrals for the common offenses shown in Chart 4, there was net growth of 222 referrals (5%). Further, it should be noted that across common offense types involving a direct threat to or injury of a person, there was net growth of 160 referrals (9%).

While these findings point to a modest increase in violent crimes committed by youth from 2018 to 2024, an indicator of more recent progress emerges from victim and suspect data for fatal and nonfatal shootings in the city of Milwaukee that were provided by CYFS. Data from the Milwaukee Police Department and Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission show there was a 25% decrease in homicide and nonfatal shooting victims up to age 17 from 2023 to 2024 (from 152 victims to 114). There was also a 51% decrease in youth ages 17 and under suspected of homicide or nonfatal shooting (from 77 suspects to 38).

We also analyzed data pertaining to auto thefts given that such thefts – many involving youth – have been a source of significant concern for county officials and residents. As shown in **Chart 5**, the number of referrals involving youth who drove or operated a vehicle without consent or who rode as a passenger in one of these vehicles more than doubled from 2019 to 2021, growing by a combined 290 referrals (138%). By 2024, they had dropped but remained somewhat elevated compared to pre-pandemic levels.

**Chart 5: Referrals for driving or riding in vehicles without consent, 2018-2024**



## Intake recommendations consistent with referral trends

As noted above, when a young person is referred to CYFS for an offense, they are immediately assigned a human services worker who completes their review during the intake process and determines whether to recommend court intervention. That review typically includes thorough screening and assessment of the youth, which covers a range of factors (including mental health and trauma) to identify a youth's likelihood of causing or engaging in criminal behaviors or reoffending.

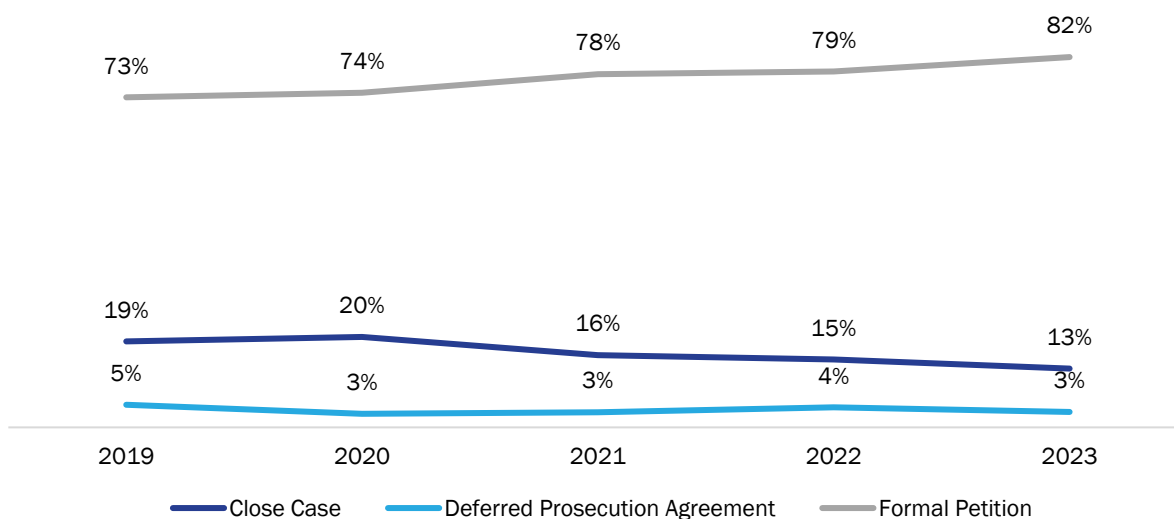
Data submitted by the county to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) shows that from 2019 to 2023, 17% of cases on average were closed at the point of intake, which means



that no further judicial action was taken. Another 4% were moved to deferred prosecution, which generally allows the youth to avoid charges and further involvement with the justice system provided that they participate in certain rehabilitative services and do not reoffend over a nine- to 12-month period.

The majority of referrals (77%) resulted in a formal petition for adjudication. When examined on an annual basis (**Chart 6**), we see that recommendations for formal petition grew by nine percentage points, case closures fell by seven percentage points, and deferred prosecution agreements fell by two percentage points. The growth in formal petition recommendations and decline in closed cases and deferred prosecution agreements is consistent with our finding that the severity of offenses associated with youth referrals has grown in recent years.

**Chart 6: Milwaukee County changes in intake recommendations, 2019-2023**



Source: Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

## Summary

This section has covered a wide range of information related to referrals to CYFS. Key takeaways include:

- Referrals declined by 2% from 2018 to 2024. Despite a sharp downturn at the height of the pandemic, they have remained relatively consistent when comparing pre-pandemic to post-pandemic totals.
- While total referrals did not change substantially between 2018 and 2023, referrals for felony offenses increased 13% (112 referrals), while those for misdemeanors decreased by 7% (45 referrals).
- Certain common felony offenses that threaten personal safety rose during that period. Notable examples are armed robbery, auto thefts, and terrorist threats. Misdemeanor weapons offenses also have risen.
- Referrals for driving or riding in a vehicle without consent have dropped after a huge spike in 2021 but remain elevated compared to pre-pandemic levels.



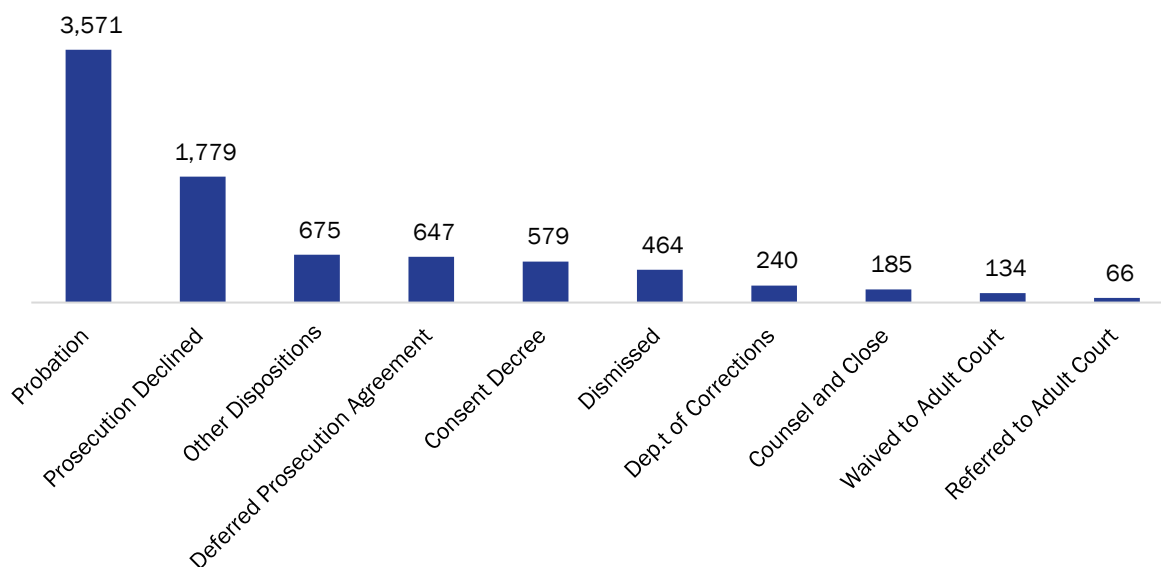


# TRENDS IN CHILDREN'S COURT DISPOSITIONS

The Milwaukee County Children's Court presides over a range of cases including juvenile delinquency, children and juveniles in need of protection and services, termination of parental rights, minor adoptions, guardianship of minors, and injunctions and ordinance violations involving minors.

The legal term for an action considered the final result of a committed offense is "disposition." As shown in **Chart 7**,<sup>3</sup> from 2018 to 2023, the 8,430 referrals to CYFS had a wide range of disposition types. The most common disposition was probation (3,600 dispositions, or 43%), while prosecution was not pursued in 1,780 cases (21%). A probation disposition may allow the youth to remain at home under the supervision of a county Human Services Worker, often with requirements that the youth participate in certain treatment programs or adhere to certain conditions; or it may involve an out-of-home placement order that requires the youth to reside in a group home or residential treatment facility. The most severe dispositions – sentencing to a secure detention facility at the Wisconsin Department of Corrections and waiver or referral to adult court – accounted for 3%, 2%, and 1% of dispositions, respectively.

**Chart 7: Total dispositions, 2018-2023**



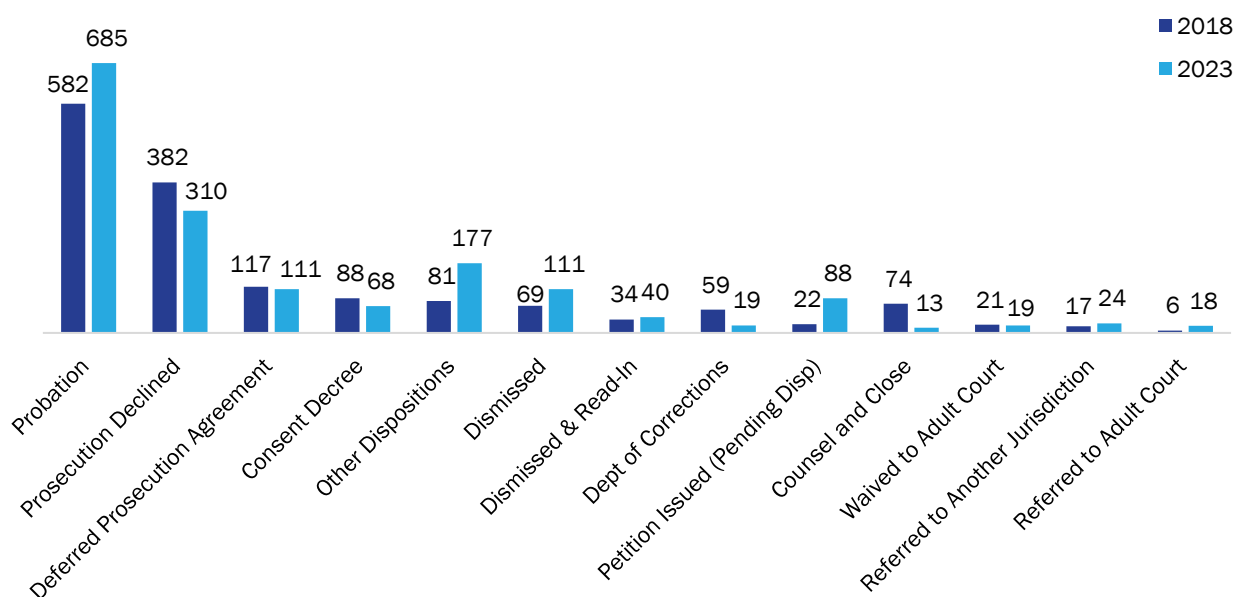
<sup>3</sup> **Chart 7** includes several legal terms that may be confusing to readers. In Wisconsin, *referral* to adult court means that a crime was severe enough that the youth is automatically placed in the adult court system. A *waiver* to adult court means that a Children's Court judge chose to relinquish jurisdiction over the case. A *consent decree*, according to the Wisconsin Court System, is a written agreement between parties requiring certain actions or activities in exchange for suspending formal court proceedings. *Counsel and close* is a type of disposition in which, after a youth has received legal counsel, a judge determines there is no delinquency or need of protection services and closes the case. Finally, *Other Dispositions* encompasses several relatively infrequent disposition types, the most prominent of which involves cases where a petition has been filed but a disposition has not yet been reached.



Over the 2018 to 2023 period considered for this report, a number of disposition types grew while others declined (**Chart 8**).<sup>4</sup> Notably, probation dispositions grew by 18% (103 dispositions), while dispositions where prosecution was declined fell by 19% (72). These trends are consistent with referral data from the previous section that indicate that the cases coming before the courts are more serious in nature. The decline in sentencing to secure detention under the purview of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) likely has more to do with the ongoing challenges at state juvenile corrections facilities than a decline in the severity of crimes, as we will discuss in detail later in this report.

It should also be mentioned that a deferred prosecution agreement (DPA) – which is a written agreement that allows a youth to avoid a delinquency ruling or court involvement by following certain conditions for a period of time - can come in two forms. The DPA column in **Chart 8** shows DPAs that included involvement and consent by the district attorney’s office. A Children’s Court judge may also issue a DPA, which is then categorized as a dismissal rather than a DPA disposition. For these dismissals, the court defers to CYFS to determine the youth’s rehabilitation and/or restitution plan, and the district attorney’s office plays no role in monitoring and determining whether the conditions of the DPA have been met by the youth.

**Chart 8: Changes in Children’s Court dispositions, 2018-2023**

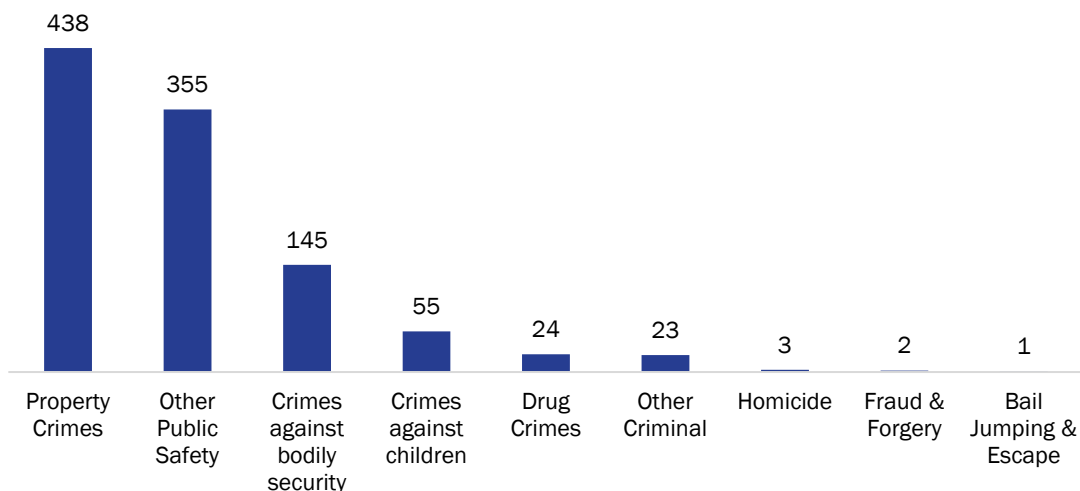


In 2023, the Children’s Court saw 1,153 juvenile delinquency cases. Data from the Wisconsin Courts indicate that 1,046 cases were processed to the point of adjudication that year. **Chart 9** shows the breakdown of those dispositions by offense type. Property crimes were the most common infraction, representing 42% (440) of total delinquent dispositions. This was followed by other public safety violations at 24% (360), and crimes against bodily security at 14% (150).

<sup>4</sup> As with **Chart 7**, **Chart 8** shows an “Other Dispositions” category that includes several disposition types that have limited use. The increase in this category from 2018 to 2023 largely reflects an increase in pending cases that are counted here because a petition has been filed but for which no formal disposition has yet been reached.



**Chart 9: Milwaukee County Children's Court dispositions by crime type, 2023**



Source: Wisconsin Courts

Property crimes have been a significant source of concern in the county over the past several years. These types of crimes include operating a vehicle without consent, robbery/theft, criminal damage/arson, receiving stolen property, entering a locked vehicle, and criminal trespassing. Given the earlier discussion of the prevalence of referrals related to motor vehicle thefts, it is worth noting that nearly half of the property crime dispositions in 2023 were for operating a vehicle without consent (217 out of 438).

The “Other Public Safety” category seen in **Chart 9** includes charges for weapons and explosives, resisting an officer, disorderly conduct, and other public safety crimes. Resisting an officer was the most common occurrence, representing 136 of 355 (38%) other public safety dispositions.

The third most common disposition type – crimes against bodily security – includes substantial or aggravated battery, battery, sexual assault, sex crimes, kidnapping/holding hostage or false imprisonment, intimidating a witness or victim, and stalking. Battery was the most common occurrence, at 60%, or 87 out of 145 dispositions for this category. It should be noted that sex crimes are also included in the “crimes against children” column in Chart 9 and represented 69% of crimes against children in 2023 (38 of 55).

## Summary

Probation, the most common disposition type, represented 43% of all dispositions from 2018 to 2023 and grew by nearly 20%. Meanwhile, prosecution was not pursued for just over a fifth of all referrals over that period, and the overall number of declined prosecutions fell by 19%. There were also fewer youth placed at state juvenile correctional institutions (a drop of 40 dispositions, or 68%) while at the same time more youth were referred to adult court. The growth in probation and referrals to adult court along with a fall in declined prosecution may be linked to the growth in the proportion of CYFS referrals for more serious offenses in recent years, as discussed in the previous section.

# TRENDS IN YOUTH DETENTION

## Milwaukee County Youth Detention Facility

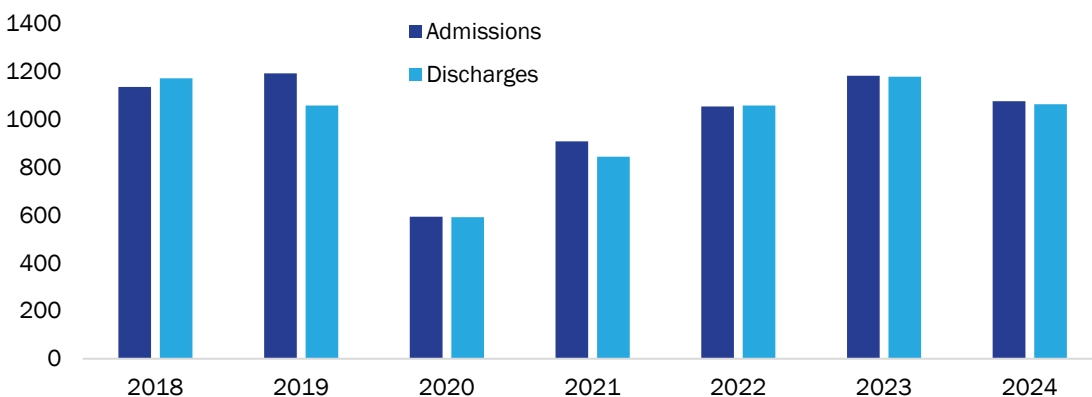
The county-owned Vel Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center includes a secure, short-term detention facility that serves youth pending disposition of their case when such detention is deemed necessary and appropriate by the various parties involved. Typical reasons for secure detention include the severity of the alleged offense, when there is a determination of sufficient risk of harm to others if the youth is released, or when there is a determination that there is a reasonable likelihood that the youth will not appear for their court hearing.

Detention at the county facility can be temporary (up to 24 hours during the initial intake process) but can also extend through the court process until a disposition is reached. The decision on whether to detain initially can be made by a CYFS human service worker. In many cases, youth are allowed to stay at home while their case proceeds through the system or are placed temporarily in a group home or a residential, shelter, or foster care setting.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, the county detention center has seen an expanded role via the designation of 24 of its beds for longer-term, post-disposition secure placement for youth adjudicated as delinquent. This program – the Milwaukee County Accountability Program – was designed in response to problems that surfaced regarding the treatment of youth at the state-run juvenile corrections institutions (Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake) as well as a desire to have a secure detention option that keeps Milwaukee County youth closer to home and provides them with more robust services.

**Chart 10** shows annual detention admissions and discharges from the Vel Phillips detention center. These include pre- and post-disposition youth who may be there for a variety of reasons. For example, a youth could be in detention on a warrant, on a sanction, or post-disposition on one judicial order but pending new charges on another order. Annual admissions and discharges fell by roughly 50% in 2020 during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic but then climbed back to pre-pandemic levels over the next three years. In 2024, admissions and discharges fell slightly below totals seen in 2018, with 1,075 youth admitted and 1,062 discharged.

**Chart 10: Annual admissions and discharges to Vel Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center**

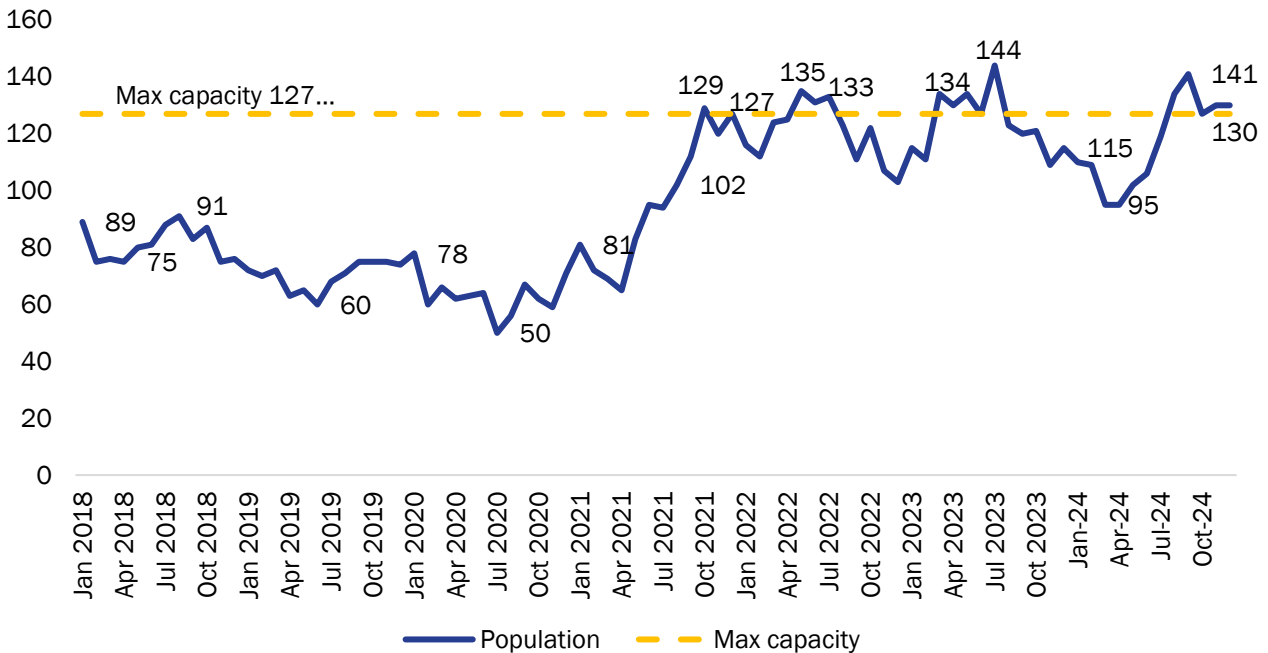


<sup>5</sup> Wisconsin State Statutes [938.208](#) lists criteria for holding a juvenile in a detention facility and [938.21](#) describes criteria for holding hearings for a juvenile in custody.



**Chart 11** shows the average daily population at the facility on a monthly basis from 2018 to 2024 and reveals that despite the significant decrease in admissions in 2020 and a rebound that still only equaled pre-pandemic levels the following two years, the county facility faced significant capacity challenges for a two-year period beginning in late 2021. In fact, the population exceeded the maximum capacity of 127 beds for days that totaled about eight months between October 2021 and July 2023. Capacity issues eased after that point but picked up roughly one year later as overcrowding occurred for four out of five months from August to December 2024 (the average daily population was 133 in both November and December 2024).

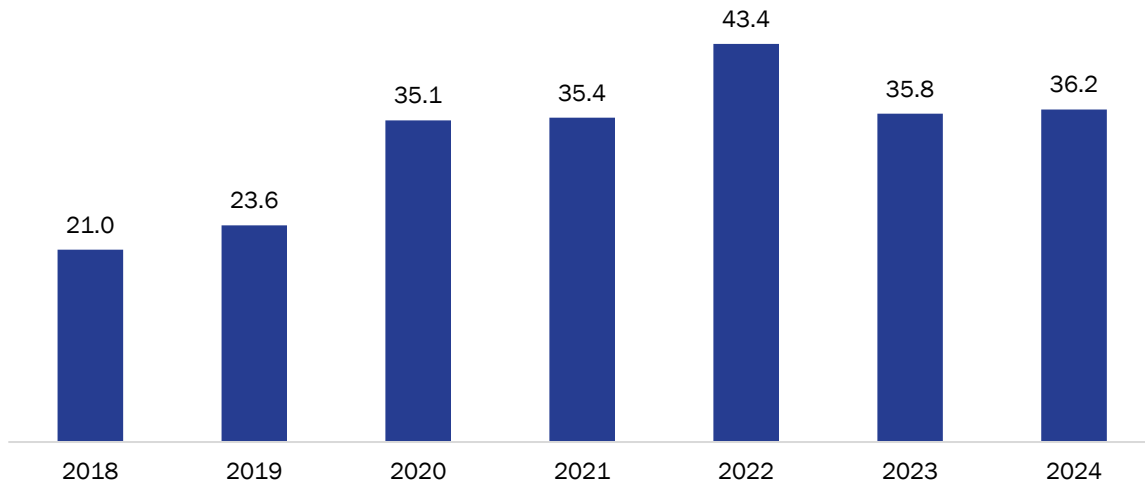
**Chart 11: Average monthly population at the Vel Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center**



County officials shared that in most instances when all beds were filled, alternatives were used such as sleep pods in other rooms or receiving cells. In those situations, extra youth development officers were added to maintain safety and security. In the summer of 2022 and May 2023, capacity challenges were so great that CYFS temporarily sent a small number of youths being held as adults to Racine County's youth detention center.

**Chart 12** on the following page shows that substantial increases in average lengths of stay – likely linked at least in part to the increased severity of crimes associated with CYFS referrals as detailed in previous sections as well as the shift away from Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake – were perhaps the foremost contributor to the capacity challenge. The average length of stay increased by more than 14 days from 2018 to 2020 and peaked in 2022 at 43.4 days, which was an all-time high since at least 2013.

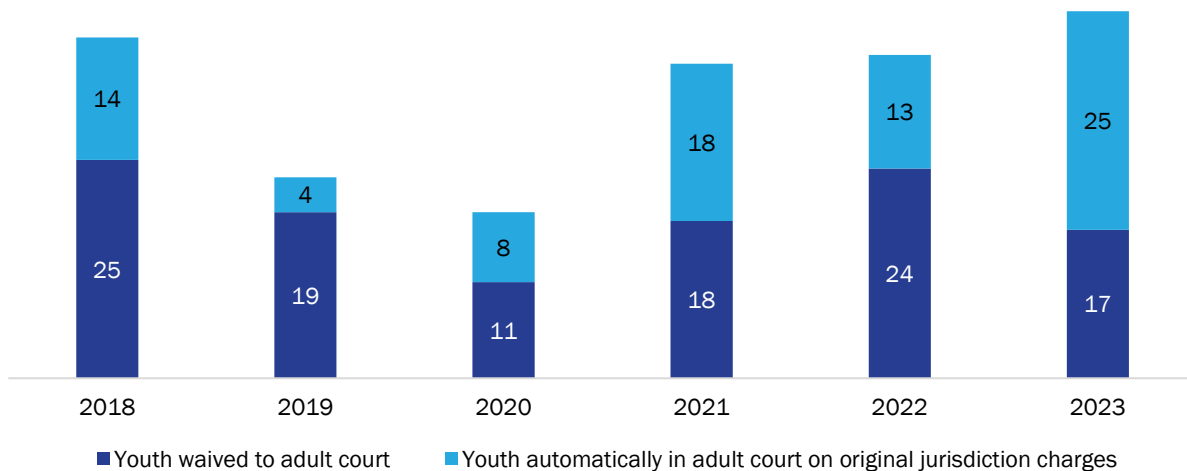
**Chart 12: Average length of stay at the Vel Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center, 2018-2024**



Recent years also have seen an uptick in the number of youths held at the Vel Phillips facility while being processed through the adult system. In Wisconsin, youth ages 16 or younger charged with felony crimes can be waived to the adult system at the discretion of the court. There are also certain felony crimes for which a youth is automatically entered into the adult system under original jurisdiction charges, regardless of age and without a waiver.

**Chart 13** shows annual totals of youth housed at the Vel Phillips facility while in the adult system from 2018 to 2023. The number of youths on original jurisdiction charges was decreasing prior to 2020 but by 2023 had grown substantially. The number of youths waived to the adult system has shown greater consistency when comparing pre- and post-pandemic numbers.

**Chart 13: Youth in the adult court through judicial waiver or original jurisdiction charges, 2018-2023**



Prior to 2024, CYFS did not track the average length of stay at the Vel Phillips facility for youth in the adult system. However, data tracked from January to October 2024 shows that such youth discharged or still at the facility had average stays of 7.7 months and 9.4 months, respectively. The maximum amount of time a youth in the adult system may be at the Vel Phillips facility is three years (1,123 days) and the minimum is 15 days.

## Milwaukee County Accountability Program

The Milwaukee County Accountability Program (MCAP) was launched in 2012. As noted above, one of the rationales was the desire to limit the number of youths sent to state facilities and instead keep them close to home and their families. An added benefit was the ability to provide local community-based resources that were not available at the state-run juvenile correctional institutions (JCI) in Irma.

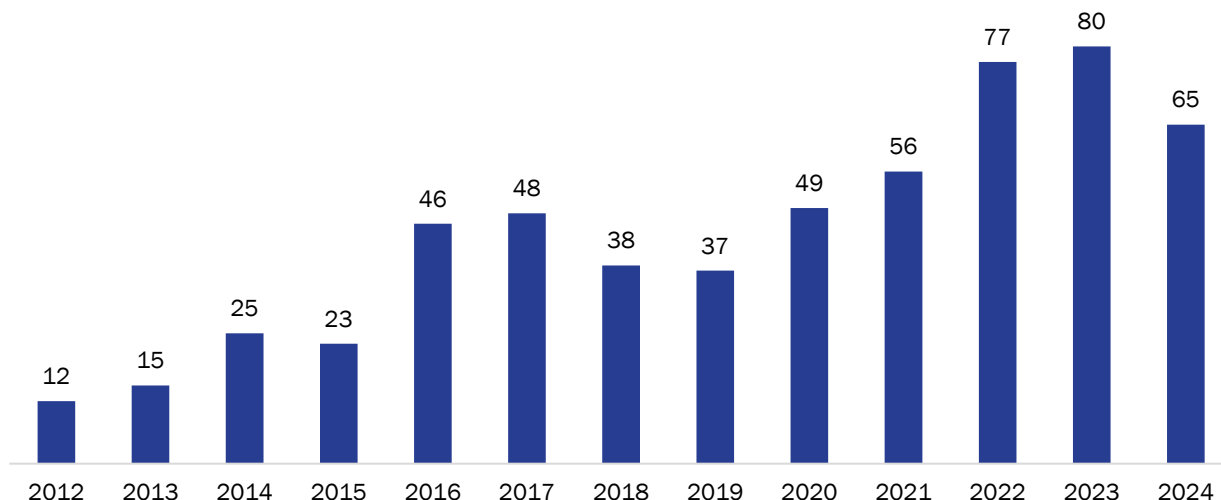
The creation of the program was also motivated by allegations of abuse and mistreatment at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake that began circulating in 2011 and escalated in 2015, creating reluctance on the part of judges to place youth there. These allegations ultimately led to state and federal investigations as well as high profile news stories and lawsuits brought by the youth, their families, and civil rights organizations. The creation and expansion of MCAP has allowed the county to send consistently fewer youth to Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake over time, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

To be eligible for MCAP, a youth must be considered at a high risk for reoffending and also not be designated by a judge at sentencing as a serious juvenile offender, which would require placement at a state-run detention facility. MCAP youth receive intensive supervision, structure, support, and skill building for up to 180 days in the secure care phase of the program, after which they transition to the community for at-home supervision, case management, and behavioral intervention for up to 180 more days. The program had served 571 youth by the end of 2024. Over that time, 89% of the youth in the program were Black and 8% were Hispanic. Boys are the primary program participants, though 16 girls have been admitted since 2021.

**Chart 14** on the following page shows how the MCAP program has grown over time. Twelve youth were enrolled at its inception in 2012. By 2023, annual enrollment had increased to 80 youth, though that number fell to 65 in 2024. In addition to devoting 24 of the 127 beds at the Vel Phillips for MCAP, CYFS maintains an additional 21 program slots that are used for youth who complete their time in the detention center and are finishing the program while living at home or at another residential placement in the community.

There is not always program space for a youth to enter MCAP right away after a judge's order given that there are only 24 beds available for MCAP youth. Consequently, some wait six to 12 weeks in detention before they can begin. The average wait time in 2024 was 31 days. Given that youth may only be held in detention at the county for a maximum of 180 days after receiving a disposition, time spent on the MCAP waitlist may cause their actual participation in the program to be shorter than the maximum time possible.

**Chart 14: Milwaukee County Accountability Program annual enrollment, 2012-2024**



Major changes are ahead for the secure care of youth in Milwaukee County, as work has begun on a new 32-bed secure detention expansion at Vel Phillips. Completion of the new Secure Residential Care Center for Children and Youth facility – to be called the Milwaukee County Center for Youth – is anticipated in 2026.

The 32-bed facility essentially will replace the 24 beds at the Vel Phillips center that are currently used for MCAP (the space in which those beds are currently located will be renovated) and add eight more, including four beds for girls. It will serve as a local secure care sentencing substitute for Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake. The MCAP program will be eliminated, but the approach used by the Milwaukee County Center for Youth to serve the youth in its custody is expected to be quite similar to that used for the secure detention component of MCAP.

CYFS is planning a pronounced emphasis on individualized education and treatment services at the new facility, and its location in Milwaukee County will offer greater opportunity for the youth detained there to interact with their family members. The county hopes the Milwaukee County Center for Youth will fully replace the use of state detention facilities over the long term, providing better care and treatment and also saving it money when compared to the price it must pay to the state for the rising cost of placing youth at Lincoln Hills or Copper Lake. Youth who are adjudicated as serious juvenile offenders or who are charged as adults but are too young to be placed in an adult facility will continue to reside in a state secure detention facility operated by the DOC.

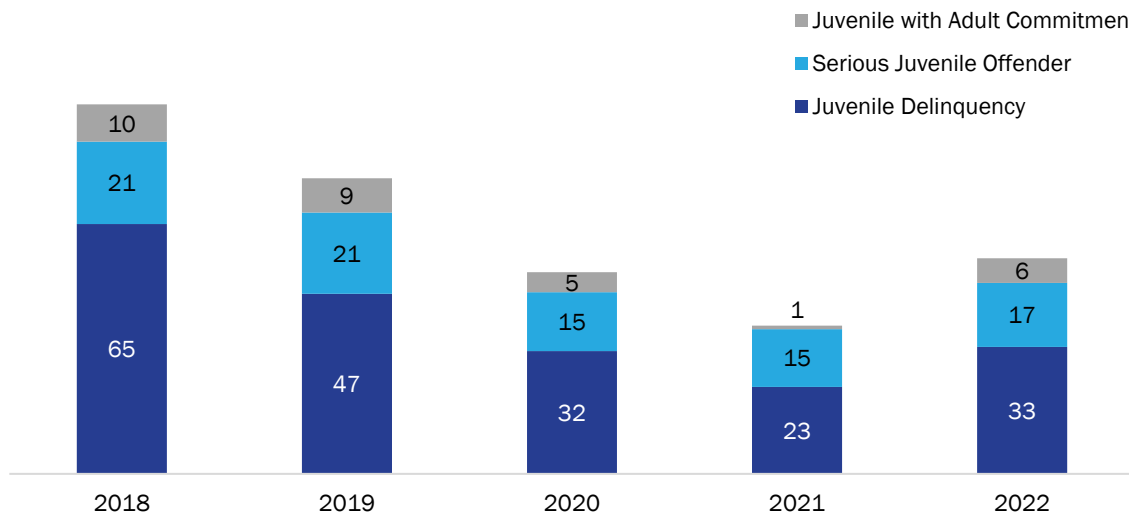
## State Juvenile Corrections Facilities

The Division of Juvenile Corrections within the Wisconsin Department of Corrections operates the two secure detention facilities discussed above – the Lincoln Hills School for Boys and the Copper Lake Girls School. The state Department of Health Services also runs the Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center, which is a secure mental health treatment facility located in Madison.



**Chart 15** shows that the average daily population of Milwaukee County youth at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake decreased dramatically from 2018 to 2021 before rebounding somewhat in 2022 (this is the last year for which we have DOC data). As can be seen, the population includes youth who are adjudicated delinquent, adjudicated delinquent under serious juvenile offender charges, and minors charged in the adult system. Milwaukee County is responsible for paying a daily rate to the state for youth serving time at either of the facilities if the youth was a Milwaukee County resident at the time the offense occurred. However, no county payments are required for those youth adjudicated as serious juvenile offenders or who were tried as adults.

**Chart 15: Average daily population of Milwaukee County youth at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake\***



\*ADP data for the three population types in this chart is not available from the DOC for 2023. However, total youth admitted by type that year were 49 juvenile delinquents, 33 serious juvenile offenders, and 27 youth with adult commitments.

The decline since 2018 continues a much longer trend of declining populations of Milwaukee County youth at the state facilities. According to a [report](#) on youth justice in Milwaukee County that we published in 2012, there were 153 commitments of Milwaukee County youth to state JCIs in 2010, which itself was a vast improvement from the early 2000s, when annual commitments often totaled 200 or more. Also, while we do not have updated DOC data, the 2025 Milwaukee County budget projects that an average of only 22 Milwaukee County youth per day will be held at the state facilities this year, thus continuing both the long-term and more recent downward trajectory.

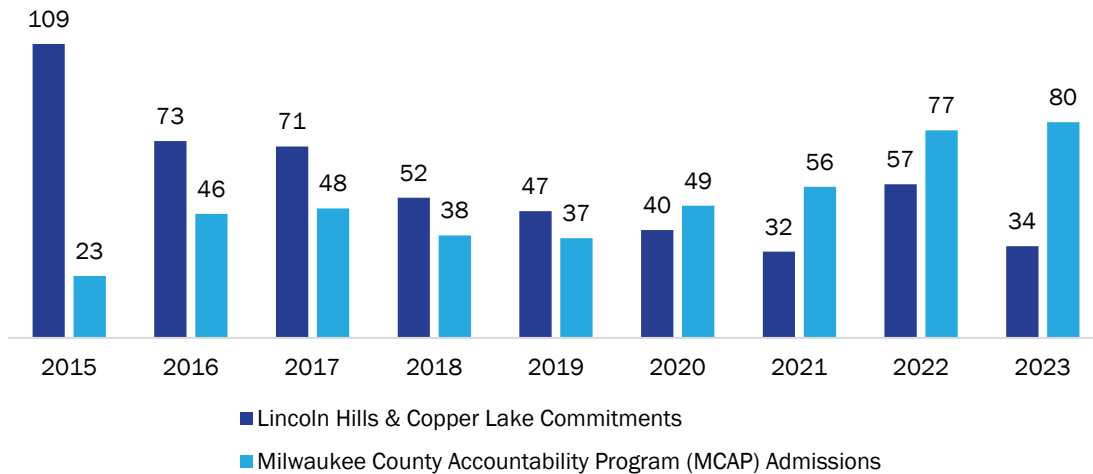
A key contributor to the dwindling number of placements at the state facilities undoubtedly has been a lack of confidence in recent years by Children's Court judges in those facilities given ongoing allegations of mistreatment and abuse and state and federal investigations.

Another important contributor also likely was the creation and expansion of MCAP, which gave those judges another secure detention option. Additionally, 2017 Wisconsin Act 185, which took effect in July 2021, removed the court's ability to directly place youth at Copper Lake or Lincoln Hills unless the youth is a serious juvenile offender or through a change of placement hearing. Since that time, judges seeking a placement at a JCI have first placed a youth in MCAP and from there filed for a change of placement hearing with the district attorney's office.



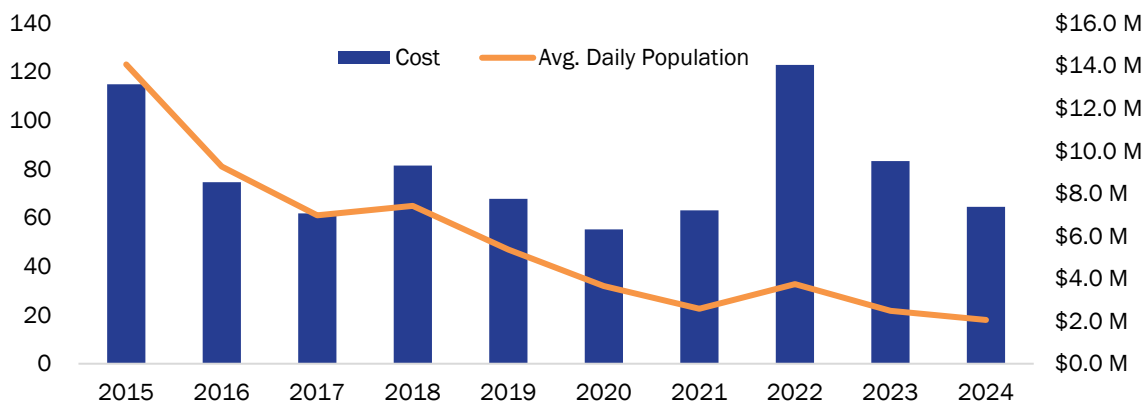
**Chart 16** juxtaposes declining annual commitments to Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake with growth in annual admissions to the MCAP program from 2015 to 2023. By 2023, the last year for which we have complete data on DOC commitments, the county was sending nearly 70% (75) fewer youth to state JCI's when compared to 2015. County leaders argue that this has produced better outcomes for those youth, as we will discuss later in this report.<sup>6</sup>

**Chart 16: Annual commitments to Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake versus MCAP admissions**



These changes also have had far-reaching financial impacts for the county. **Chart 17** shows average daily populations at the JCI's and costs incurred by the county from 2015 to 2024. The county has seen substantial annual savings from the vastly reduced JCI population over time, although more recent years have been marked by a reversal. In particular, 2022 was a one-year anomaly in which the number of JCI commitments increased sharply to a level not seen since 2017. Costs to the county had also recently escalated as the daily rate rose from \$615 per youth to \$1,178 beginning in July 2021 (the rate is \$1,268 currently). In 2023 and 2024, commitments resumed their decline, but sizable increases in state rates caused the county's charges to still exceed pre-pandemic levels.

**Chart 17: Average daily population and annual actual cost for Milwaukee County youth at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake, 2015-2024**



<sup>6</sup> As this report neared publication, data released by DOC showed that the Lincoln Hills population had escalated in recent months, growing from 39 in October 2024 to 74 in March 2025. An [April 2025 report](#) from CYFS aligns with this finding. Although the report did not distinguish between boys and girls, it showed that 18 youth from Milwaukee County were admitted to a state JCI between January and March 2025, which was double the number in the first three months of 2024.



As the average daily population fell from 123 in 2015 to 32 in 2020, the county was able to spend between \$3.8 million and \$6.8 million less each year compared with the \$13.1 million spent in 2015. By 2024, with the budgeted average daily population of youth falling to 18, the county's estimated expenses stood at \$7.4 million – about \$5.7 million less than what was actually spent in 2015.

Development of the Milwaukee County Center for Youth will produce further significant financial impacts for CYFS. The transition requires the addition of 32 new positions at CYFS at a cost of \$2.3 million. Historically, the county has not budgeted FTEs specifically for MCAP, making this a new and ongoing cost.

While the Milwaukee County Center for Youth is expected to further decrease the number of youths that are sent to state facilities, it is anticipated significant costs for state placements will remain. The state Department of Corrections' proposed daily rate that would begin on July 1, 2025 (if approved in the state budget) for youth placed at Lincoln Hills or Copper Lake is \$2,305, making the cost of a one-year placement roughly \$841,300. This would be an increase of 82% from the 2024 rate of \$1,268 per day, and represents a more than eightfold increase from the [2015-16 annual rate of \\$103,700](#).

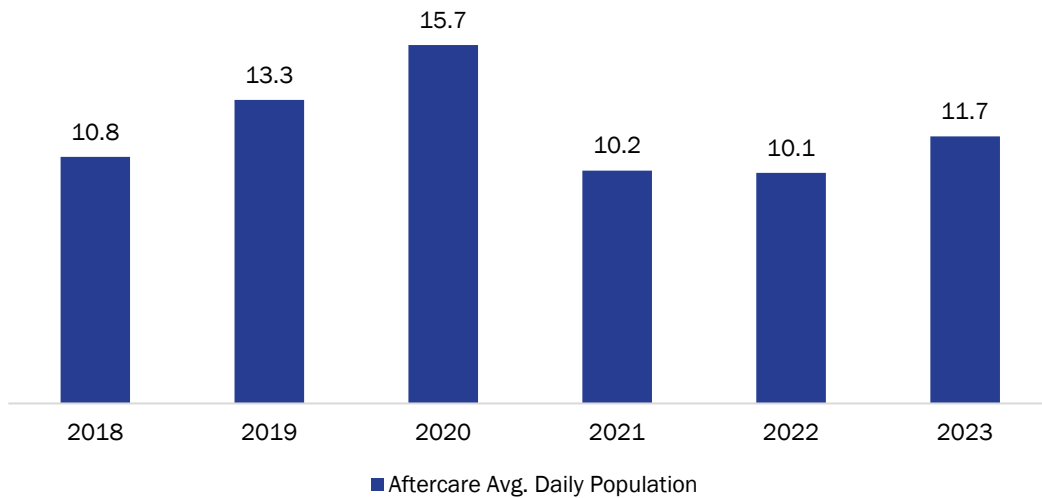
These skyrocketing state rate increases reflect the fact that state officials rely on county payments to finance the operations of Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake and have raised the rates repeatedly to recoup losses caused by the diminishing number of inmates. While the county may be able to offset the rate increases somewhat through the reduced placements made possible by the Milwaukee County Center for Youth, it still may experience a sizable annual cost increase if the number does not shrink dramatically.

The state legislation that provided for the creation of the Milwaukee County Center for Youth also mandated that the Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake facilities be closed and new state secure detention facilities be constructed to replace them. Though both remain in operation, construction has begun in Milwaukee for a facility to house teenage boys in the adult system or who are deemed serious juvenile offenders. There is no new location planned for Milwaukee girls in need of such a facility at this time, though state officials indicate that very few girls from Milwaukee are typically placed at Copper Lake. The precise timeline for completion and opening of the Type 1 facility for boys – and for closure of Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake – is unknown.

## Aftercare

All youth returning to Milwaukee County after being discharged from Lincoln Hills or Copper Lake are automatically referred to a program called Intensive Monitoring Program-Aftercare. It includes a minimum of 30 days of GPS monitoring and also offers structured programming and accountability in community settings. The program is run by the Running Rebels Community Organization and has capacity for 15 youth at a time. As shown in **Chart 18** on the following page, between 2018 and 2023, the average daily population for this program was between 11 and 16 youth.

**Chart 18: Average daily population for youth in Intensive Monitoring Program-Aftercare, 2018-2023**



## Summary

Milwaukee County has faced escalating capacity challenges at the Vel Phillips facility beginning in 2020 that culminated in several instances of severe overcrowding. The growth may have been influenced at times by an increasing proportion of serious offenses among the referrals to CYFS as well as growth in the population housed there who were in the adult court system, though more research is needed to pinpoint exact causes each year. The overcrowding challenges appeared to have subsided by July 2023, yet by August 2024 the challenges returned.

Another important storyline surrounding the Vel Phillips facility is the shift away from state DOC facilities and growth in the MCAP program, which has served as an important alternative sentencing option for youth for whom secure care is deemed necessary and who are not classified as serious juvenile offenders or processed in the adult system. While this may have contributed to capacity challenges in light of the set-aside of 24 beds for MCAP, it also has contributed to the reduction in youth sentenced to state juvenile corrections facilities, which has produced largely positive financial consequences for the county over time.

# COUNTY-ADMINISTERED ALTERNATIVES TO DETENTION AND OTHER SUPPORTS

In this section, we consider a sample of community-based programs and services that serve either as a detention alternative or that provide specialized support to youth in or at-risk of being involved with the justice system. These include court-ordered alternative programs and services, services that a youth and/or their family may be referred to and join either voluntarily or through court order, and more recent initiatives to prevent youth from entering the justice system in the first place. Most of these services are provided by community-based agencies under county-administered contracts or fee-for-service arrangements.

Efforts to broaden community-based services may have been aided somewhat by the savings realized from reduced placements in state JCLs, but we cannot definitively determine the extent to which that has been the case as those savings also have been utilized to address the broader severe budget challenges that Milwaukee County has faced over the past two decades. More recently, federal grants and pandemic relief aid have been used to expand community-based prevention services.

The following briefly summarizes some of the primary community-based services and programs administered by Milwaukee County for which admissions data are tracked:

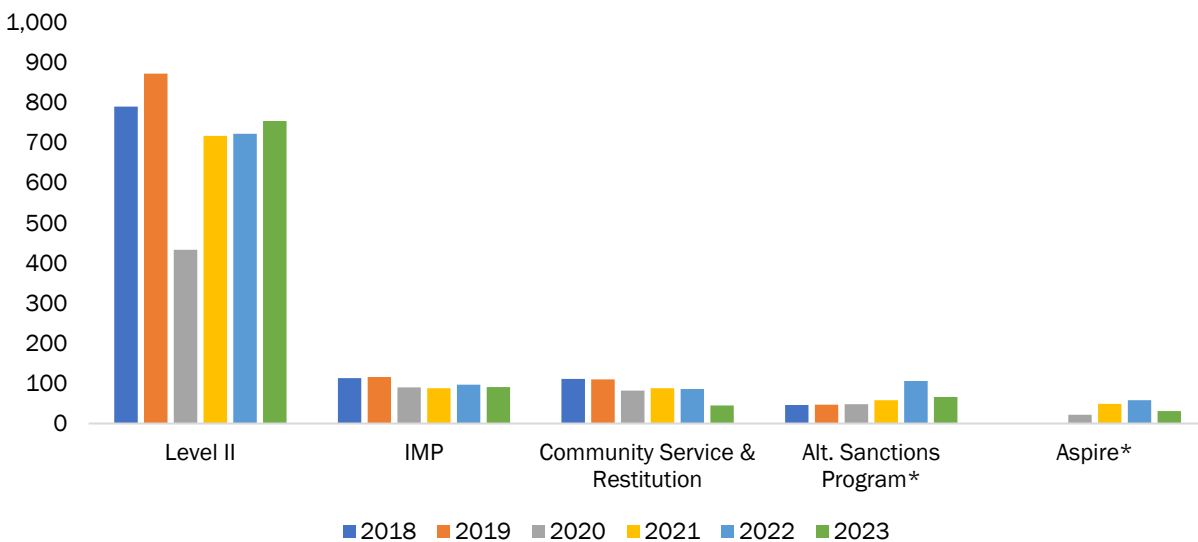
- **Aspire Program** – designed for youth ages 12 to 17 who have a moderate to high risk of youth justice system involvement and who need additional educational and vocational support, which can include support in their school. Youth can be court-ordered or referred to the program, which is run by Wisconsin Community Services (WCS). Up to 20 youth may be enrolled at a time.
- **Alternative Sanctions** – supports youth in life skill development programming. Youth can be referred or court-ordered for up to 80 hours in the program, which is run by St. Charles Youth and Family Services. Those in the program may be awaiting disposition or may be post-disposition on an order of supervision. Up to 25 youth may be enrolled at a time.
- **Community Service & Restitution** – supports youth in completing community service that is court-ordered or referred by providing transportation between school, home, and a site of community service, case management, and parenting and other forms of education when needed. These supports also create the opportunity to pay back court-ordered restitution. The program is run by WCS and can support up to 20 youth at a time.
- **Intensive Monitoring** – designed for youth at moderate or high risk of justice system involvement. Placement is via court order. The program provides intensive monitoring, advocacy, structured programming, and accountability in community settings. Programming includes recreational activities, group activities, and vocational support. The program is run by St. Charles and can serve up to 76 youth at a time.
- **Level II** – Provides home and school monitoring as an alternative to detention for youth waiting for a court disposition or who are post-disposition and have been ordered into this supervision program by the court. Supervision may or may not include GPS monitoring. The program includes activities like individual or family therapy, educational or life skill groups,



and mentoring. It is run by St. Charles and supports up to 100 pre-disposition and 45 post-disposition youth at a time.

**Chart 19** shows changes in admissions for these programs from 2018 to 2023. Level II is the only program available to the courts as an alternative to detention and generally sees enrollment of between 700 and 900 youth per year. Notably, the programs with the highest enrollment in 2018 and 2019 saw a decline by 2023, and all saw a dip in 2020 during the onset of the pandemic before most rebounded at least somewhat. Overall, combined admissions in these five programs decreased by 7% during the period, from 1,060 in 2018 to 987 in 2023.<sup>7</sup> This decrease would appear consistent with our earlier finding that a lower proportion of referrals in recent years are linked to less-serious offenses, which are often suitable for sentencing to these programs.

**Chart 19: A sample of court-ordered and voluntary detention alternative and community program admissions, 2018-2023\***



\*The Alternative Sanctions and Aspire programs can be entered voluntarily or through a court order (Aspire was created in 2020). Level II, IMP, and Community Service & Restitution are all provided through court orders.

CYFS' network of services also includes several general types of supportive services for which enrollment data are not available. They can generally be described within four groupings:

- **Clinical services** include children's mental health services as well as the CYFS Services Network. The network is provided by contracted and fee-for-service providers for pre- and post-dispositional youth. Support areas include alcohol and other drug abuse assessments, individual and family counseling, sexual assault counseling, anger management, anger regression trainings, parent advocacy, competency restoration, psychiatric evaluations, tutors and academic supports, arts therapy, restorative justice, and yoga.
- **Educational services** through the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) Milwaukee Recreation Department, which offers the MPS Drive program and Fueling Your Fire Music Academy. Students enrolled in MPS may join the driver's education program to receive their driver's

<sup>7</sup> Aspire was initiated in 2020, so only four years of data are available. The decrease across the other four programs for the full 2018 to 2023 period was 10% (from 1,060 to 956).



licenses or get assistance in restoring driving privileges. The Fueling Your Fire Music Academy teaches students to express themselves through music and music business fundamentals.

- **Community-centered services** include healthy relationships, restorative justice, coping and skill building, and youth employment initiative programs. Healthy relationships services teach the building blocks

of a healthy relationship through a minimum eight-week time commitment. The restorative justice program teaches youth how to facilitate circles that create community and heal relationships, which includes skills in working through emotional trauma. Coping and skill building includes various mentoring opportunities that promote social competence, life skills, and job skill development. The Youth Employment Initiative provides vocational readiness skill development and paid employment opportunities through various community partners including Employ Milwaukee, Youth Advocate Program, and Bloom Integrated Art Therapies.

- **Parent and family services** include Parent Advocates, family therapy, and housing services. Parent Advocates helps parents of youth in the justice system develop insights into their child's behavior and their parenting styles, and to learn parenting skills (this group may also include youth in the justice system who are parents themselves). Family therapy includes diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental and emotional disorders using recovery-oriented, trauma-informed, culturally competent services.

In addition, CYFS administers several services in the community to youth who have been court-ordered into out-of-home care as an alternative to detention. Those include temporary shelter, group homes, and residential care centers. Some admissions data are available for these programs, but the full time period covered by this report was not made available to us for each. For context, in 2023, there was an average daily population of 9.4 boys and 4.1 girls in temporary shelter. That same year, 329 youth were placed in group homes or residential treatment centers, for an average daily population of 21.2 youth.

County officials say these programs have contributed significantly to the creation of a higher quality of care for youth through their interactions with CYFS and the justice system. They say that many of these services were created and expanded over the past decade and that today, judges have a far more extensive range of alternatives outside of detention that they can use to address the individual needs of the youth they encounter. This includes 60 contracted services now available for youth in the justice system, whereas only 20 contracted services were available in 2014. County officials also note that each young person referred to CYFS now has a human services worker who works with him or her to implement a case plan and/or court order designed to meet his or her unique needs.

### Wraparound Milwaukee

For more than 30 years, Wraparound Milwaukee-Children's Community Mental Health Services has been providing programming and services for youth between the ages of five and 23 who are in need of support with behavioral or mental health challenges. In 2024, the county-administered program restructured its funding model to ensure fiscal sustainability by transitioning away from a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) to a blended funding model. This change had a minimal impact on families, as it was administrative. According to CYFS, intentional and collaborative work has taken place with system partners to ensure a seamless transition for youth and families into Wraparound Milwaukee's REACH-Crisis Care Coordination and Youth Comprehensive Community Services (CCS) programs.





Some key informants we interviewed raised concerns, however, that the caseloads for HSWs employed by the county or contract agencies are at extremely high levels given staff recruitment and retention challenges. They say these high caseloads, in turn, may be limiting the effectiveness of CYFS' efforts to monitor the youth assigned to them and ensure that case plans are effective. According to CYFS officials, vacancy rates for the approximately 62 HSW's employed by the division to implement and monitor case plans have generally ranged between 15% and 45% since 2022 and stood at 16% as of early April 2025. They say that caseloads – which ideally would be in the range of 10 to 12 for each HSW – average about 25 and sometimes reach as high as 45 to 50, although such very high caseloads typically involve youth who are on deferred prosecution agreements and who pose lower risk and have less acute needs.

Unfortunately, CYFS officials were unable to provide data to show whether outcomes for youth have improved as a result of this transformed system or even – for some of its primary service areas – how participation has grown. We acknowledge that collecting such data is a formidable task that likely would require considerable investment in additional staff or consultant resources, but the lack of such data is a shortcoming that county officials may wish to address, as we will discuss in a later section.

## Youth Justice System Prevention

In recent years, thanks in part to the availability of federal pandemic relief aid through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), CYFS has placed a new emphasis on programs designed to prevent youth from becoming involved in the youth justice system altogether. Below, we describe two programs implemented by county leaders.

### *Credible Messenger Program*

Launched in 2021, the Credible Messenger program serves as a prevention influence for youth at risk of becoming involved or further involved in the justice system. The county contracts with six community-based agencies to run the program, using mentors to work directly with youth. Those mentors also respond to instances of community-level trauma as needed. The mentors are considered to be credible in their communities and may have some previous justice system involvement themselves. Individuals ages 12 to 22 can participate in the program. The majority are enrolled for at least 26 weeks.

Prevention activities include monitoring social media platforms, making visits to Milwaukee Public Schools, building trust with community youth and young adults, and neighborhood outreach. On the intervention side, a team assesses community safety concerns and coordinates an immediate response whereby team members go to a community location to mediate or de-escalate a situation and provide resources to the young people present.

The program's \$1.4 million budget in 2024 was funded by a grant from the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention as well as ARPA funding. As this report went to press, CYFS officials were planning how to sustain the program once ARPA funds expire.

Overall, the program has shown notable success so far in creating positive outcomes for enrolled youth. In 2023, 130 youth were served in the Credible Messenger program, and 101 (78%) had no referral to CYFS or re-offense. The success rate was 87% for those who had been referred by community partners (47 of 54) and 71% for those already involved in the justice system (54 of 76).





### *Advance Peace Fellowship*

The Advance Peace Fellowship is a program that pairs young people identified as high risk for causing or being a victim of gun violence with a range of supports directed at their development, health, and well-being. The program is designed by the nonprofit Advance Peace, whose mission is to end cyclical and retaliatory gun violence in urban neighborhoods by investing in those at the center of the crisis. It began in Richmond, California in 2009 with a goal of reducing violence by working with the less than 30 men who were responsible for 70% of the city's gun crimes. Over time, other cities have implemented the Advance Peace Fellowship Model and, according to information provided by the county, have achieved success.

Funding for the Advance Peace Fellowship Model comes from a \$2 million federal Community Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative grant. The grant is supporting two 18-month cohorts over the course of three years, beginning in late 2024. Twenty people between the ages of 14 and 24 who have been identified as high risk for gun violence will be in each 18-month cohort. Program fellows will have three daily check-ins with a mentor who had been previously incarcerated, participate in an elders' circle, pursue internship opportunities, create a life management action plan, have social services navigation support, experience transformative travel, and receive a monthly stipend after a period of consistent participation. The Milwaukee Christian Center operates the program.

## Summary

CYFS takes great pride in the comprehensive array of services it can offer to youth who are referred to the youth justice system and their ability – which has been fortified in recent years – to develop and monitor individualized case management plans with youth and their families. More recently, the county has launched or is getting ready to launch expanded programs to prevent youth involvement in the justice system, including the Credible Messengers program, which has shown notable results thus far. The newly launched Advance Peace Fellowship program similarly holds potential to prevent violent gun crime, reducing the cost of those crimes to taxpayers, and preventing trauma caused by gun violence.

Unfortunately, for many of the supportive services offered that do not involve court orders, CYFS was unable to provide data showing the extent of youth participation and whether usage has grown. Participation data does exist for five specific programs that involve court orders. The largest program tracked – a detention alternative program called Level II which enrolled over 750 youth in 2023 – saw slightly lower admissions in 2023 than in 2018.



# PROGRAM COMPLETION AND RECIDIVISM

In previous sections, we have detailed some notable changes that have taken place in Milwaukee County's youth justice system over the past several years. Most notably, while the number of referrals has returned to a pre-pandemic "normal," far fewer youth today are being sentenced to state secure detention facilities and far more to MCAP. Also, county officials point to a broader range of community-based detention alternative, treatment, and preventive services that they believe have greatly improved the system as a whole.

A key question, however, is whether the system's transformation is indeed producing better outcomes – both for the youth themselves and for public safety. Two metrics that can shed light on the performance of the youth justice system are program completion rates and rates of recidivism, a term that is generally defined as the occurrence of an offense by an individual already known to have committed a previous offense. A reduction in the number of youths who recidivate, or reoffend, can be a compelling indicator that the services and programs identified as part of their delinquency determination are achieving success. Similarly, completing a program is better than being discharged for failing to show up or engage or being referred to a more intensive level of service.

Determining how to define and measure recidivism and how to effectively conduct such measurements are easier said than done, however. In fact, back in 2012, we were commissioned by CYFS's predecessor division to help division leaders develop a sound definition and measurement approach (see accompanying textbox). We acknowledge that our report simply provided options and that implementing any of the options would have involved substantial investment in a new data collection system and additional personnel. Still, it is clear that 13 years later, CYFS has yet to develop a framework for comprehensively tracking recidivism as a means of assessing the success of the youth justice system's various programs, services, and disposition options.

## Challenges in Defining Recidivism

Recidivism is a term that generally speaks to criminal re-offenses, but it can be defined and measured in several different ways.

Consequently, CYFS officials have expressed hesitancy in use of the term or in choosing a definition (or several) and tracking accordingly.

In a [2012 report](#) commissioned by Milwaukee County, we addressed the county's struggles to define and track recidivism for youth who come into contact with the justice system. At that time, we expressed the challenge of defining recidivism as follows:

*There are many ways to define a recidivistic event...with the most common being re-arrest (re-referral), subsequent petition to court, re-adjudication, or re-incarceration.*

*By defining a recidivistic event using "front-end" occurrences, such as arrest or referral, officials can track the history of all youth who come into contact with the system, including those not found to have committed a delinquent act or those who are not prosecuted because of insufficient evidence. "Back-end" events, such as re-adjudication or re-incarceration, are preferred by some experts, however, as these are more likely indicators of guilt. Also, the amount of time allowed to elapse after the initial offense under particular recidivism definitions can differ, from as short as a few months to as long as a lifetime.*

*Even within Milwaukee County, there is not a consensus definition, with various programs using different recidivism metrics. Additional consideration is merited to determine the recidivism definition that would be most useful to (the county) in assessing and demonstrating system performance.*

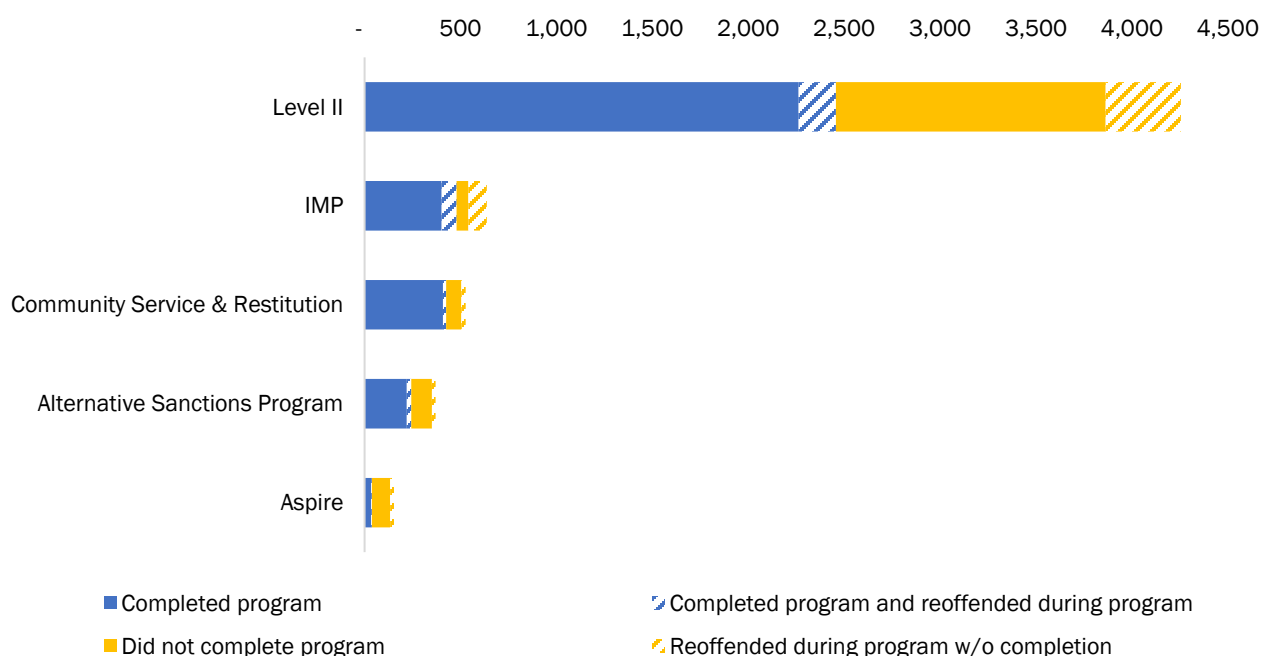


Program completion and recidivism are tracked in some cases, but across only some forms of detention and alternative programs, and within narrow parameters. For the MCAP and Aftercare programs, CYFS tracks program completion and recidivism while youth are enrolled in the programs and the agency also monitors MCAP enrollees for recidivism for a year after being discharged. According to CYFS officials, the division defines recidivism as “a subsequent youth referral or adult offense that resulted in a new petition or a deferred prosecution agreement following the start date (i.e. the date of first supervision order or first program enrollment date).” Officials also note that while they have the ability to track recidivism when a subsequent referral occurs in the youth justice system, they would have to conduct a manual process to track youth who are later referred to the adult system, as the two data systems do not interface.

Detention alternative programs for which a limited amount of completion and recidivism data are collected by CYFS include Level II, IMP, community service and restitution, alternative sanctions, and Aspire. Program completion and recidivism while in the program are tracked, but recidivism is not regularly reported on for any length of time after discharge. For a few other programs and services, available databases allow CYFS to run reports to explore participants’ recidivism, but again, there is not regular reporting of recidivism data. CYFS does not follow any of its program participants’ journeys and whether they recidivate after they reach the age of 17, largely because the adult and juvenile justice administrative systems do not interface. Tracking the recidivism of individuals as they age into adult system eligibility would be a manual, labor-intensive process.

**Chart 20** shows the completion rates for the select detention alternative and community programs for which data are available from 2018 to 2023. Across all programs shown, 61% (3,600) of individuals enrolled completed the program, including 5% (300) who completed but recidivated while in the program. Of the 39% (2,300) who did not complete the program, 550 (9%) recidivated during the time they were to be engaged with the program.

**Chart 20: Detention alternative and community program completion and re-offense rates while enrolled in a program, 2018-2023**



There are a range of reasons that may explain why a youth did not complete their court-ordered (or in some cases voluntary) programs. Sometimes they are referred to a higher level of service, move out of the county, are sent to a DOC facility, or are withdrawn by a human services worker. There are other times when a youth simply fails to engage with the program or comply with referred programming or required services.

It is notable that 42% (1,800) of the court-ordered population did not complete the Level II program – which is the most widely used detention alternative (though primarily pre-disposition) – from 2018 to 2023. Those include 18% (775) who were discharged for being absent without leave and 21% (900) who were discharged because they returned to detention for program violations or new charges. Youth who are discharged for being absent without leave are either put back into Level II once located, referred to other services, or may be placed in another program or facility, such as shelter or detention. The extensive use of this program suggests that the county should consider devoting greater resources to tracking participants' recidivism after program completion in order to improve its ability to assess whether the program is having its intended impact on community safety.

Program discharges and recidivism are also tracked for the MCAP program, though across different metrics than those used for the programs presented above. Since its inception in 2012, just over half (55%, or 284) of the 515 youth who were discharged from MCAP completed it successfully. Common discharge reasons included being moved to the Department of Corrections (18% of discharges, or 91 youth), and failing to comply with referred programming or required services (12%, or 61 youth).

**Table 2** shows annual recidivism rates for youth referred to MCAP both during their participation in the program (i.e. specifically during the portion that does not involve secure detention) and within a year of discharge.<sup>8</sup> Recidivism is defined by CYFS as a re-offense that resulted in the youth being referred back to the youth justice system and the filing of a petition or deferred prosecution agreement, but without final adjudication. Twenty-five percent of MCAP enrollees re-offended per this definition while in the program from 2018 to 2024, while 16% re-offended within a year of discharge (individuals may show up in both categories).

**Table 2: Referrals attached to youth who reoffended during or within a year of MCAP program discharge, 2018-2024**

Discharge Year	Total Discharges	# Re-offended During Program	% Recidivism	# Referred within One Year after Discharge	% Recidivism
2018	44	10	23%	4	9%
2019	34	9	26%	6	18%
2020	40	9	23%	13	33%
2021	51	9	18%	6	12%
2022	61	22	36%	10	16%
2023	74	18	24%	11	15%
2024	79	19	24%	10	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>383</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>16%</b>

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that it is possible for a youth enrolled in MCAP to receive a referral for an offense that occurred before they started in the program. In those cases, the referral is not technically a re-offense, but the table shows it as such. CYFS was unable to provide data that would allow us to determine the prevalence of such cases, so the re-offense data cited in the table may show a higher number of re-offenses than what occurred only during or after a youth was enrolled in MCAP.



It is difficult to assess how these completion and recidivism rates speak to the success of MCAP. Ideally, CYFS and the state DOC would track recidivism the same way, which would allow judges and policymakers at least to determine if the program produces better recidivism outcomes than sentences to DOC juvenile detention facilities. This would be particularly valuable as CYFS transitions from MCAP to the Milwaukee County Center for Youth, which will have a similar service model.

Unfortunately, the only DOC data we could identify tracks recidivism for Lincoln Hills, Copper Lake, and Mendota for three years after discharge, as opposed to the one year used by CYFS. Also, the DOC definition of recidivism is different in that it defines a re-offense as a case where the youth has been returned to a juvenile facility, prison, or probation supervision for a new offense.

For what it is worth, the latest DOC data for all youth released from Lincoln Hills in 2020 show a recidivism rate of 69% within three years, which is considerably higher than the 16% average MCAP recidivism rate for 2018 to 2024 after one year of discharge. On the other hand, it must be noted that, by design, the 25% recidivism rate for MCAP during program enrollment almost certainly would be higher than the recidivism rate for youth sentenced to secure detention at Lincoln Hills. That is because program enrollment at Lincoln Hills does not include a community-based component, which means enrolled youth cannot commit re-offenses outside of the detention facility.

Finally, county officials point out that the youth in the MCAP program come from the most challenging situations and have the greatest distance to overcome in changing behaviors. Consequently, consideration of MCAP recidivism data – particularly if compared to completion and recidivism rates for non-secure detention alternatives – must be viewed through that lens.

## Summary

Milwaukee County and CYFS have commendably broadened the array of available services to support youth who enter the justice system and keep them closer to home. Unfortunately, they have not been able to accompany those efforts with a system of data collection and distillation that would allow them to demonstrate that their efforts are making a difference in reducing youth crime and violence, improving the future prospects of the youth who interact with the system, and enhancing overall public safety in the community.

Referrals to the system stayed roughly the same from 2018 to 2024, while the severity of the alleged offenses associated with those referrals has grown slightly. Given the negative societal impacts associated with the pandemic – including an increase in behavioral health challenges faced by youth – it is possible that the changes to the system helped hold down the incidence of youth crime, and that as time passes more tangible positive results will emerge. However, the referral data might also suggest that the transformed system is working no better than the previous one.

The bottom line is that without better data collection and tracking, we cannot determine whether the youth justice system today is functioning better and producing better outcomes than before its transformation. That issue is one for Milwaukee County leaders to consider moving forward.



# CONCLUSION

On a macro level, a review of key data points presented in this report might suggest that the youth justice system in Milwaukee County is operating generally at the same capacity and in the same manner as it did pre-pandemic. Given that our 2023 report on the adult justice system found it had not yet recovered from the pandemic on several key indicators, this might be considered welcome news.

For example, the number of unique youths referred to CYFS in 2024 was about the same as the number referred in 2018 (1,105 versus 1,084), suggesting that youth crime levels are now roughly the same after a decline at the height of the pandemic followed by a sharp uptick in its immediate aftermath. Similarly, annual admissions to the Vel Phillips detention center fell only modestly (-5%) when comparing 2024 totals to 2018. Meanwhile, admissions to our sample of detention alternative programs decreased modestly (-7%) when comparing 2023 totals to 2018.

As we have shown, however, the relative comparability between pre- and post-pandemic activity levels masks some much more significant changes in Milwaukee County's youth justice system. One is that the types of referrals have become more serious. We find, for example, that referrals for felony offenses grew by 13% from 2018 to 2023, with even more significant growth in certain violent felonies like armed robbery and homicide. Meanwhile, after a one-year reversal in 2022, the number of youths sentenced to secure detention facilities run by the state of Wisconsin has resumed its sharp downward trend, while admissions to MCAP, the county's own local secure detention alternative, have taken an opposite track, more than doubling since 2018.

Another significant change at the county level has been the introduction of crime prevention programs targeting youth, including one – the Credible Messenger program – that shows early promising results. County officials also point to a broader range of programming today as compared to five years ago and more intensive efforts to ensure the provision of effective case management to youth who enter the system.

While we can document some of these changes and point to their potential benefits, the jury is still out with regard to their collective effectiveness in reducing recidivism and otherwise promoting more positive outcomes for youth. On the one hand, it can be argued that it still is too early to gauge the success of some of these changes. On the other hand, leaders from CYFS and across the entire justice system (county and state) have not implemented the types of data and outcomes collection and tracking strategies that will be needed to do so.

Indeed, a major takeaway of this report is that county leaders – while justifiably proud of their efforts to create alternatives to state-run secure detention facilities – now need to take an important next step to demonstrate that these alternatives are enhancing public safety and producing better results for the young people they are serving. While doing so may require the commitment of greater resources to performance measurement rather than devoting every available dollar to needed services, officials should consider whether that investment may ultimately pay for itself by encouraging judges to make even greater use of options that do not involve costly secure detention.

Overall, we hope this report provides useful knowledge to justice system leaders and the public as they consider the incidence of youth crime in Milwaukee County and how to both prevent it in the first place and keep it from reoccurring.

