

Youth in the Justice System

DEFINITION

Youth in the justice system is the number of youth ages 21 or under who were on probation and the number of youth ages 18 and under who were at the Rhode Island Training School at any time during the calendar year.

SIGNIFICANCE

The youth justice system is responsible for ensuring community safety by promoting positive youth development, recognizing that the needs of children and adolescents in the justice system are different than adults. During adolescence, the part of the brain that controls reasoning, weighs consequences, and helps youth consider the implications of their behavior is still developing, and it can be delayed when alcohol or drug use are present. This ongoing brain development means that adolescents make decisions and solve problems differently than adults. Adolescents are more likely to be impulsive, misread social and emotional situations, get into accidents and fights, and engage in risk-taking behaviors. With guidance and support from parents and caring adults, most adolescents will grow out of these behaviors as their brain develops.^{1,2,3,4}

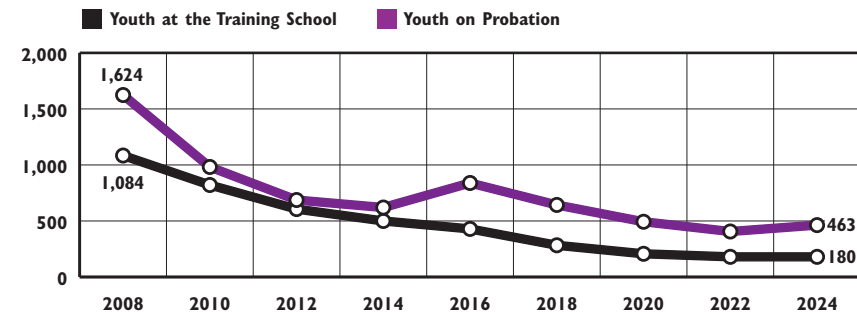
Youth justice systems have a range of options for monitoring and rehabilitating youth, including restorative justice programs, evidence-

based treatment programs, probation, and incarceration. Alternatives to incarceration have been shown to be more developmentally appropriate, more effective in preventing recidivism, and more cost effective than incarceration. The most successful programs involve family in treatment and promote healthy development at the individual, family, school, and peer levels.^{5,6,7,8}

The Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) Division of Youth Development (formerly Division of Juvenile Corrections) implements a continuum of programs to promote positive development for youth in its care and custody and to reduce recidivism. As part of this continuum, DCYF operates the Rhode Island Training School, the state's secure facility for adjudicated youth and youth in secure detention awaiting trial.⁹ On December 31, 2024, 69 youth were in the care or custody of the Training School, 41 of whom were physically at the Training School.¹⁰ The Office of Juvenile Probation provides supervision and supports to maintain youth safely in the community, including youth living at home, in foster care, and in residential treatment programs (temporary community placements).¹¹ On January 2, 2025, there were 307 youth on probation, up 5% from 293 youth on January 2, 2024.¹²



Youth in the Justice System, Calendar Years 2008-2024



Source: Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, RICHIST, 2008-2024. Some youth may have spent time at the Training School and on probation during any calendar year.

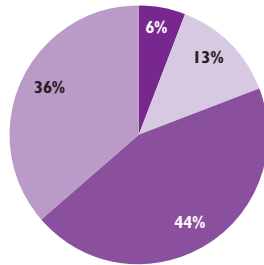
- ◆ Between 2008 and 2024, the annual total number of youth at the Training School at any point during the year declined by 83% from 1,084 to 180. The decline of youth at the Training School began after a cap of 148 boys and 12 girls on any given day was placed on the Training School population in July 2008.^{13,14}
- ◆ During 2024, a total of 180 youth were at the Training School at any point during the year, up 25% from 144 during 2021.¹⁵
- ◆ From 2008 to 2024, the annual total number of youth on probation at any point during the year declined by 71% from 1,624 to 463. A total of 463 youth were on probation during 2024, an increase of 14% from 2022 (406). Of the 463 youth on probation, 89% were on probation at home, and 11% were on probation in out-of-home placements.¹⁶
- ◆ The average age of youth at the Training School in 2024 was 16 years, however, 6% (12) of youth who passed through the Training School at any point in 2024 were under the age of 14.¹⁷ Internationally, the United Nations has advised countries to establish a minimum age of criminal responsibility of at least 14.¹⁸ Unlike peer nations, the United States has not set a national age of criminal responsibility, detention, or confinement. In recent years, many states have taken measures to reassess both upper and lower age limits in their youth justice systems to align with advances in adolescent brain development research.^{19,20}

Youth in the Justice System

Youth in the Justice System by Age

Youth at the Training School by Age, 2024

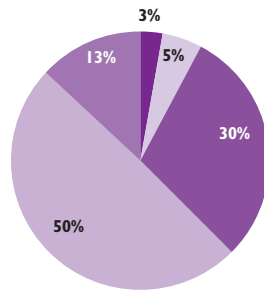
6% (12) Under Age 14
13% (24) Age 14
44% (83) Ages 15 to 16
36% (68) Ages 17 to 18



$n = 187$

Youth on Probation by Age, 2024

3% (12) Under Age 14
5% (24) Age 14
30% (137) Ages 15 to 16
50% (230) Ages 17 to 18
13% (60) Ages 19 to 20



$n = 463$

Source: Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, RICHIST, 2024. Total number of youth at the Training School by age (187) is larger than the total number of youth at the Training School (180) due to some youth having birthdays while at the Training School and therefore being counted twice. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Youth in the Justice System by Gender

◆ During 2024, 19% of the 180 youth at the Training School were girls and 81% were boys. Similarly, 14% of the 463 youth on probation were girls and 85% were boys.²¹

◆ From 2021 to 2024, the number of girls who passed through the Training School almost doubled from 19 in 2021 to 35 in 2024. Nationally, girls have represented a growing share of youth involved in the justice system. Girls enter the system with different personal and offense histories and needs than boys. Girls are often detained for non-violent offenses, meaning that they may not pose a public safety threat. Girls involved in youth justice are more likely to have histories of trauma, including physical and sexual abuse, than their peers. In 2024, 3% of girls who spent time at the Training School had a history of neglect or abuse prior to entering. Effective programs for girls use a developmental approach that considers trauma history, gender, and culture.^{22,23}

Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the Justice System

◆ Youth of Color continue to be disproportionately represented at every stage of the system. Nationally, Black youth are five times as likely and American Indian and Alaska Native youth are three times as likely to be incarcerated as their white peers.²⁴

Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Rhode Island

	% OF TOTAL CHILD POPULATION, 2020	% OF YOUTH AT THE TRTS, 2024	% OF YOUTH ON PROBATION, 2024
American Indian and Alaska Native	<1%	1%	1%
Asian	3%	1%	<1%
Black	6%	27%	25%
Hispanic	27%	37%	35%
Multiracial	8%	12%	11%
Pacific Islander	<1%	1%	<1%
White	53%	19%	26%
Unknown	NA	2%	1%
TOTAL	209,785	180	463

Sources: Rhode Island Child Population data by race are from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census. Youth at the Training School and on probation data are from the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, RICHIST, 2024. Hispanic children may be of any of the race categories. Race categories are non-Hispanic. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

◆ During 2024, non-Hispanic Black youth made up 27% of youth at the Training School and 25% of youth on probation, while making up only 6% of the total child population. Hispanic youth made up 37% of youth at the Training School and 35% of youth on probation, while making up 27% of the total child population.^{25,26}

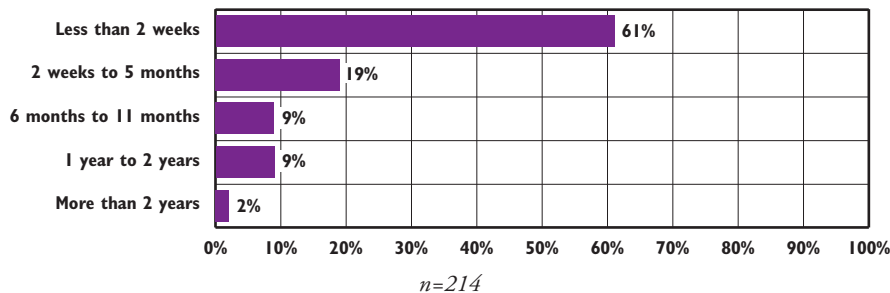
Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI)

◆ The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) works in jurisdictions across the U.S. to promote policies and practices that reduce inappropriate and unnecessary secure detention, reduce racial and ethnic disparities, and maintain public safety. JDAI focuses on creating opportunities for positive youth development through proven, family-focused interventions. For most youth in the justice system, JDAI recommends using high-quality community-based programs that provide supervision, accountability, and therapeutic services. Since 2009, Rhode Island youth justice stakeholders have contributed to a statewide JDAI effort that has created a coordinated reform effort to decrease the number and racial disproportionality of youth at the Training School and to increase the use of community-based alternatives to detention.²⁷

Youth in the Justice System



Discharges From the Rhode Island Training School, by Length of Time in Custody, 2024



Source: Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, RICHIST, 2024. Total number of discharges (214) is larger than the total number of youth who passed through the Training School (180) due to some youth being discharged from the Training School more than once in 2024. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.



Promoting Rehabilitation and Preventing Recidivism

◆ The Division of Youth Development is a resource for rehabilitating youth who have committed serious offenses. Youth who are considered to pose a danger to the community can be confined in the Training School, but a growing body of national research suggests that youth incarceration may increase criminal behavior and recidivism among youth with less serious offenses.^{28,29,30} Of the 180 youth at the Training School during 2024, 79% (143) were admitted once, 16% (29) were admitted twice, and 4% (8) were admitted three or more times.³¹

◆ Objective admissions screening tools help limit the use of secure detention to serious offenders and reduce bias in decision making for which youth are sent to secure detention. The Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law in 2008 that mandates the use of a screening tool called the Risk Assessment Instrument (RAI) for youth being considered for secure detention. The RAI has been piloted but has not yet been fully implemented in Rhode Island and needs reevaluation before widespread use in the field.^{32,33,34}



Supporting Youth Development at the Training School

History of Child Neglect and Abuse:

◆ Children who experience child neglect or abuse are at increased risk for developing behavior problems and becoming involved in the youth justice system.³⁵ In 2024, 8% (15) of the 180 youth at the Training School had at some point in their childhood been victims of documented child neglect or abuse.³⁶

Behavioral Health Services:

◆ In 2024, more than half (63%) of the 180 youth at the Training School received mental health services at the Training School for psychiatric diagnoses other than conduct and adjustment disorders, including 37% (13) of female youth and 70% (101) of male youth. During 2024, 58% (105) of the 180 youth at the Training School received substance use treatment services, including 37% (13) of female youth and 63% (92) of male youth. Of these, 50 youth received residential substance abuse treatment.³⁷

Educational Services:

◆ While the average age of youth at the Training School in 2024 was 16 years, students' math and reading skills were on average at a fifth-grade level at entry to the Training School. Average grade levels for math and reading increased by about one year at the time of departure.^{38,39}

Special Educational Services:

◆ Of the 114 youth ages 13 to 18 who received educational services at the Training School during the 2023-2024 academic year, 40% (46) received special education services based on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).⁴⁰

Educational Achievements:

◆ During 2023-2024, seven youth completed their High School Diplomas, and nine youth received their GED. Youth also completed learning/skills development opportunities including driver's education (10), culinary (61), barbering (30), landscape design (30), CPR and First Aid (25), CCAP (8), ServSafe Food handling certifications (13) and peer mediation and conflict resolution (25). Youth may participate in more than one development opportunity.⁴¹

Youth in the Justice System



Youth in Detention in Rhode Island

◆ In Rhode Island, the term “detention” is used to describe the temporary custody of a youth, who is accused of a wayward or delinquent offense, at the Training School pending a hearing in Family Court. The only two legal reasons for pre-trial detention include cases where a youth poses a threat to public safety or is at risk of not attending his or her next court hearing.^{42,43}

◆ Some youth are detained for short periods of time and released at their first court appearance (usually the following business day). Of the 214 discharges from the Training School during 2024, 28% had stays of two days or less, 33% had stays of three days to two weeks, and 39% had stays of more than two weeks.⁴⁴

Table 24.

Youth in the Justice System, Rhode Island, 2024

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL POPULATION AGES 13-18 2020	# YOUTH ON PROBATION	# OF PRE- ADJUDICATED YOUTH AT THE RITS	# OF ADJUDICATED YOUTH AT THE RITS	TOTAL # OF YOUTH AT THE RITS
Barrington	1,869	<6	<6	0	<6
Bristol	1,735	<6	0	0	0
Burrillville	1,283	12	<6	<6	<6
Central Falls	2,211	12	<6	<6	9
Charlestown	489	<6	0	0	0
Coventry	2,544	11	<6	<6	<6
Cranston	5,813	13	<6	<6	<6
Cumberland	2,757	6	<6	0	<6
East Greenwich	1,482	0	0	0	0
East Providence	2,723	8	<6	<6	<6
Exeter	450	0	0	0	0
Foster	320	0	0	0	0
Glocester	756	<6	<6	<6	<6
Hopkinton	584	<6	<6	<6	<6
Jamestown	367	<6	<6	0	<6
Johnston	1,886	9	<6	<6	<6
Lincoln	1,700	<6	<6	0	<6
Little Compton	259	0	0	0	0
Middletown	1,199	6	<6	<6	<6
Narragansett	785	6	<6	0	<6
New Shoreham	78	0	0	0	0
Newport	1,637	7	<6	<6	6
North Kingstown	2,183	<6	<6	<6	<6
North Providence	2,151	<6	<6	0	<6
North Smithfield	870	<6	0	0	0
Pawtucket	5,549	77	18	15	25
Portsmouth	1,478	<6	0	0	0
Providence	16,873	121	47	28	58
Richmond	602	0	0	0	0
Scituate	783	<6	<6	0	<6
Smithfield	1,347	<6	0	0	0
South Kingstown	3,100	8	<6	0	<6
Tiverton	1,009	0	<6	0	<6
Warren	694	<6	<6	<6	<6
Warwick	4,902	8	<6	<6	7
West Greenwich	496	<6	0	0	0
West Warwick	1,889	10	<6	<6	<6
Westerly	1,512	<6	<6	<6	<6
Woonsocket	3,108	50	13	13	17
Out-of-State	NA	31	12	<6	14
Four Core Cities	27,741	260	83	59	109
Remainder of State	53,732	150	46	23	58
Rhode Island	81,473	410	129	82	167

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, Rhode Island Children's Information System (RICHIST), 2024; and the U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2020.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

Total number of youth includes adjudicated and pre-adjudicated youth who were at the Rhode Island Training School during calendar year 2024 (including youth from out of state, those with unknown addresses, and those in temporary community placements). Youth with out-of-state addresses are not included in the Rhode Island, four core cities, or remainder of state totals. The total number of youth at the Training School may not equal the sum of adjudicated and pre-adjudicated youth because some youth may have spent time at the Training School both before and after sentencing.

In Rhode Island, there is no statutory minimum age limit for sentencing, however adjudicated children under age 13 typically do not serve sentences at the Training School.

An “out-of-state” designation is given to youth whose parent(s) have an address on file that is outside of Rhode Island or to youth who live in other states but have committed crimes in Rhode Island and have been sentenced to a term of probation or to serve time at the Training School. They are not included in the Rhode Island total.

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