

## Executive Summary

***Better Tomorrows: A Landscape Analysis of Oklahoma's Youth Justice System and Suggested Reforms*** reviews the historical context for Oklahoma's youth justice system, examines contemporary processes and actors within the system, and recommends a series of reforms that can help achieve better outcomes for justice-involved children and their families.

State disinvestment in public services and programs have forced Oklahoma families to shoulder disproportionately large economic, social, and emotional burdens. This lack of public support for core programs that foster family and child well-being — including education, food security, economic opportunity, and mental health services — has led too many Oklahoma children to become involved in a youth justice system that is historically punitive and under-resourced. Protections for children within the system have largely been forced by litigation, and efforts to bring about reform have frequently been hamstrung by Oklahoma's structural budget deficit.

Oklahoma's youth justice system aims to be rehabilitative instead of punitive, but it resembles the adult justice system in some key ways. Mirroring the adult justice system, children of color are overrepresented in every part of the youth justice system. The state's over-reliance on fines and fees for core justice system operations strip essential dollars from households, strain family relationships, and increase criminal behavior — just as in the adult justice system.

A wide array of Oklahoma organizations are responsible for ensuring the health and well-being for justice-involved children, and the shortcomings of Oklahoma's youth justice system do not rest with any organization

## Proposed Reforms

### FOCUS ON YOUTH-SERVING SYSTEMS

- Eliminate youth court fines and fees to help Oklahoma's children and their families get back on track.
- Ensure quality legal counsel for justice-involved children.
- Establish a minimum age of criminal responsibility in Oklahoma.
- Increase transparency and accountability by requiring regular reporting and clearly defined systems to measure success.
- Encourage authentic family engagement by youth-serving agencies, as strong families are a key component in positive youth outcomes.
- Establish a youth justice policy advocacy coalition to build power for sustained change.

### INVEST IN OKLAHOMA FAMILIES

- Invest in youth and families through tax and budget changes and policies that offer resources to families with children.
- Invest in education.
- Extend and expand support services, particularly in rural areas.
- Fully fund core services and agencies in the youth justice sector.



or individual. The report recognizes that the state's youth-serving agencies are staffed by passionate, hardworking people committed to the well-being of the children in their care. However, every actor in the youth justice system must grapple with the state's present circumstances, while also recognizing the decisions made by their predecessors in response to their contemporary circumstances.

**Better Tomorrows** is available for download at [okpolicy.org/BetterTomorrows](http://okpolicy.org/BetterTomorrows), or you can use your phone's camera to access it via this QR code.



This report was developed from information gathered during listening sessions and informal interviews with more than 60 people, including justice-involved children, their families, and representatives from youth-serving organizations throughout the state; analysis of state and federal data; and review of youth-serving agencies and both historical and current laws.

## Chapter 1: Oklahoma's Unique & Tumultuous History

To address issues in the present day, Oklahomans must recognize the tumultuous history that shaped the state and led to the formation of its adult and youth justice systems. Oklahoma's history includes a number of generational traumas that include the Indian Removal Act, the Osage Reign of Terror, and the Tulsa Race Massacre, among many others. During the last century, Oklahoma has tended toward punishment over rehabilitation and often only made key reforms when required by federal law. These historical structures echo in our youth justice system today.

## Chapter 2: Oklahoma's Youth Justice System

Oklahoma's youth justice system is designed for the support and rehabilitation of youth, but some procedures and protections within the adult criminal justice system were left out of the youth system. Simultaneously, racial disparities and the fees and fines assessed on youthful offenders and their families bear unfortunate resemblance to the adult criminal justice system. While Oklahoma continues to make gradual progress on youth justice issues in recent years, the current youth justice system and its involved agencies still have room for growth to better serve our children and families.

## Chapter 3: Recommendations

Meaningful, sustained investments Oklahoma's children are needed to ensure their success into adolescence and adulthood. Further, focused work is needed to better protect children in the youth justice system, from eliminating youth fees and fines to ensuring quality counsel for youth. More broadly, policymakers must invest in Oklahoma families and communities to better allow our children to thrive.

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This report was funded by a grant from **Public Welfare Foundation**, committed to advancing a transformative approach to justice that is community-led, restorative, and racially just.