

# Juvenile crime plummets in Oklahoma, but racial and local disparities remain

September 2019



## Executive Summary

Oklahoma has experienced a massive decline in criminal arrests of youth under age 18 over the last 25 years, with a particularly large drop among the youngest ages. Juvenile crime rates now stand at their lowest level in the five decades of state reports. Commensurate with plummeting arrest numbers and rates, the state Office of Juvenile Affairs reports large decreases in incarcerations of youth. The decline in youth coming in to the justice system has been followed by declines in arrests among young adults and suggests there will be decreased crime and imprisonment among older adults as well in coming years.

### Oklahoma's youth crime rates have fallen for all ages and races.

Since 1990, violent felonies fell by 70 percent and property felonies by 86 percent among Oklahoma youth of all races. Drug and other offenses also declined substantially. Arrest rates of children under age 13 fell by 92 percent.

### Crime declined as Oklahoma youth became more racially diverse.

The declines in crime, violence, and incarceration among youth coincided with the growth of immigrant and Native American populations. In 1990, 25 percent of Oklahoma's youth age 10-17 were of color (Hispanic, Black, Asian, or Native American). Today, in a youth population that is 70,000 larger, the nonwhite share has risen to 43 percent.

### Declining crime occurred as incarcerations and control measures aimed at youth diminished.

State incarcerations of youth fell from 757 in 1999 to 270 in 2018. Arrests for curfews, truancy, running away, drinking, incorrigibility, and other age-based "status" offenses aimed at controlling youth declined by 70 percent over the period.

### Reduced youth incarceration continues to yield substantial cost savings.

The 64 percent decline in state-level incarcerations of youth over the last two decades has resulted in approximately \$435 million in cumulated state budget savings since 2001 for youth detention costs alone, which continue to accrue at \$45 million per year (in inflation-adjusted 2019 dollars). Total cost savings to state and local justice systems, though difficult to calculate directly, will be considerably higher.



## Despite reductions in crime by youth, substantial disparities remain.

Racial and local disparities in juvenile justice outcomes remain stubbornly high. Black youth are three times as likely to be arrested than White youth, and Native youth are two and a half times more likely to be incarcerated when arrested than are White youth. These disparities, as well as local disparities in arrest, are largely unexplained by differences in crime.

## Conclusions.

The large decline in juvenile crime, which accompanies similarly encouraging decreases in gun killings, school dropout, and other measures across the state and nation, requires further analysis to pinpoint causal factors. Potential factors appear to be generational in nature and include greater commitments to education among today's young people, youths assuming greater family responsibilities, decreased environmental neurotoxins like lead, unexpected positive effects of online cultures, and certain early intervention policies.

## Recommendations.

The fact that many fewer youth are entering the justice system in the first place indicates sharply reduced future needs for youth and adult prisons and affords historic opportunities to build on recent criminal justice reforms. Reducing racial and local arrest and incarceration disparities not founded in real crime trends remain important challenges. Designing policies to tailor justice processes and outcomes to individual characteristics and circumstances appear likely to contribute to more favorable outcomes. Proactive measures to reduce youth poverty, enhance education opportunity and access to services, address generational trauma and mental health difficulties, and replace outmoded misinterpretations regarding adolescent development with modern analyses.