

# RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITY IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM: A RESEARCH BRIEF



ILLINOIS CRIMINAL JUSTICE INFORMATION AUTHORITY  
CENTER FOR JUSTICE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

SHARYN ADAMS, RESEARCH ANALYST  
JESSICA REICHERT, SENIOR RESEARCH SCIENTIST

---

*This research brief examines racial and ethnic disparities in the Illinois juvenile justice system across five critical decision points: arrest, diversion, detention, secure confinement, and transfer to adult court. Using 2022 data from various state agencies to create a disproportionality index, we found overrepresentation of Black youth at all decision points and Latinx youth at three points. We used disparity ratios to compare the involvement rates of different racial and ethnic groups relative to those of White youth. These findings highlight the need for further research and interventions to address systemic factors, including discretionary decision-making and broader societal inequities.*

## **Introduction**

Racial and ethnic disparities continue to exist within the Illinois juvenile justice system, impacting youth of color as they interact with law enforcement, navigate court processes, experience detention, and face transfers to adult court.<sup>1</sup> Although overall youth arrests and incarceration rates have decreased in recent years, Black and Latinx youth are still disproportionately affected at various decision points.<sup>2</sup> Systemic factors, including discretionary decision-making, policy-driven practices, and broader societal inequities, can impact these disparities.<sup>3</sup> Further, juvenile justice system involvement can have lifelong negative consequences on a youth's health and well-being.<sup>4</sup>

This research brief examined racial and ethnic disparities among youth in Illinois by analyzing data across five critical decision points: arrest, diversion, detention, secure confinement, and transfer to adult court. The findings highlight where disproportionality occurs and emphasize the need for further research and policy interventions. This brief provides data to inform and guide efforts to advance equity in juvenile justice policies and practices. These findings can inform future reform efforts to ensure more equitable outcomes for all young people.<sup>5</sup>

## **Methodology**

### **Data Sources**

We obtained juvenile arrest data for 2022 from the Illinois State Police (ISP) Criminal History Record Information (CHRI) system. The ISP CHRI data system records information on juvenile and adult arrests. A youth arrest is defined as an arrest of someone under 18 years old by law enforcement for a criminal offense (705 ILCS 405/5-120). The Criminal Identification Act (20 ILCS 2630/5) requires law enforcement to submit arrest fingerprint cards for all minors over the age of 10 who are arrested for a felony or driving under the influence offense. Fingerprint card submission is optional on youth arrested for a Class A or B misdemeanor.

Due to data restrictions on youth diversion, this brief provides the available data on informal probation. Diversion is broadly defined as referrals for legal processing that are handled without filing any formal charges. Informal probation is a form of diversion that allows individuals to avoid formal court intervention without requiring them to report to a probation officer. The 2022 informal probation data were obtained from the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts.<sup>6</sup>

Information on juvenile temporary detentions and transfers to adult court was derived from 2022 data through the Juvenile Monitoring Information System (JMIS).<sup>7</sup> Detention data reflect the number of youth held in a detention facility before adjudication. Transfers to adult court refer to youths transferred to criminal court due to a judicial finding in juvenile court. We also acquired 2022 secure confinement data from the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice. This refers to cases in which, following a court disposition, youth are placed in secure residential or correctional facilities for delinquent offenders.

We used 2020 juvenile population data from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) Easy Access to Juvenile Populations database (EZAPop) to calculate disparity measures.<sup>8</sup>

## **Data Analyses**

To examine disparities, we used the disproportionality index. This index compares the percentage of a racial or ethnic group represented in a justice system decision point to the percentage of the same racial or ethnic group in the general residential population. For our purposes, the disproportionality index was calculated as the percentage of a racial or ethnic group at a specific decision point in the state's juvenile justice system, divided by the percentage of the same racial or ethnic group in the state's population.

We then arrived at a disparity ratio, which compares the disproportionality index of one race group entering a juvenile justice decision point to the disproportionality index of another race group at the same decision point. In the data reported here, we used White youth as the comparison group for all decision points, for example, by taking the ratio of the disproportionality index for arrested Black youth to that of arrested White youth. That is, we calculated disparity by dividing the disproportionality index of one race group at each juvenile justice decision point by the disproportionality index of the comparison race group at the same decision point. The disparity ratio (DR) indicates whether youth are overrepresented at juvenile justice decision points compared to White youth. A disparity ratio value of 1 indicates no disparity. For example, the DR for Black youth arrests was 9.31, indicating that Black youth were 9.31 times more likely to be arrested than White youth. A disparity ratio (DR) value below 1 indicates that a racial or ethnic group is less likely to be involved in that event.

We analyzed disparities between White youth and, respectively, Black youth, Latinx youth, and youth of other races for five juvenile justice points. It is acknowledged that inequalities are complex and nuanced and influenced by socioeconomic status, urbanity, and social determinants of health.<sup>9</sup> Despite their limitations, these data are important for local jurisdictions to examine further and explore the extent and causes of disparities. Therefore, our findings provide a baseline for further research on juvenile justice disparities.

## **Data Limitations**

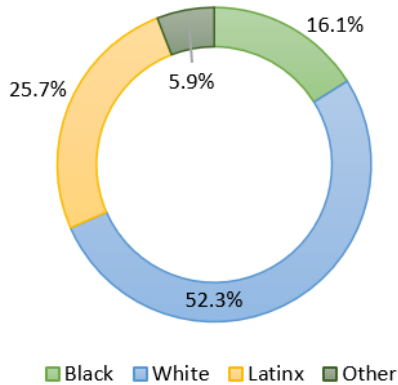
CHRI arrest data do not reflect youth who were arrested as juveniles and later had their records expunged and permanently removed from the system. Additionally, we were limited to diversion data for informal probation, which prevented us from including other diversion options. Another limitation is that the data on transfers to adult court do not include Cook County, hindering a comprehensive assessment of disparities across Illinois. Future studies should prioritize obtaining these data to ensure a more complete analysis. Finally, our data show that disparities exist, but not the reasons behind these disparities.

## Data Summary

The 2020 state juvenile population was 1,287,946. Most youth were White, followed by Latinx youth, Black youth, and Others (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Illinois Juvenile Population by Race and Ethnicity, 2020*



*Note.* Data were collected from the OJJDP’s EZAPop. The “Other” category includes youth from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander youth. Due to data limitations, these groups were not analyzed separately, which may have obscured specific disparities that affected them.

Table 1 and Figure 2 display data for each decision point in the juvenile justice system.

**Table 1**

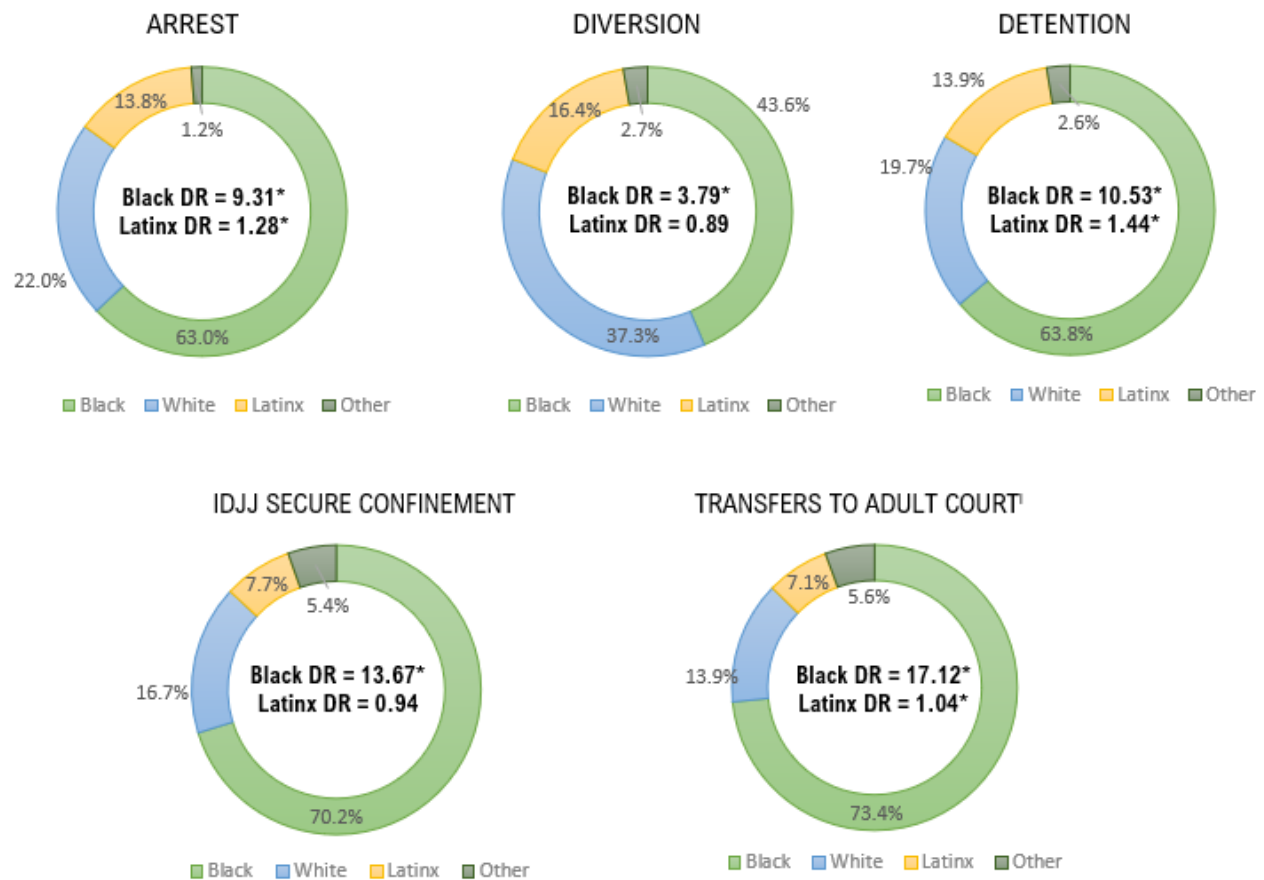
*Illinois Juvenile Justice Decision Points by Youth Race and Ethnicity, 2022*

Race and ethnicity	Total population	Arrest	Informal probation (diversion)	Detention	Secure confinement	Transfers to adult court
Black	207,305	4,392	789	3,589	237	60
White	673,965	1,537	676	1,092	45	13
Latinx	331,082	961	297	781	23	6
Other	75,594	86	49	166	18	9

*Note.* Transfers to Cook County Adult Court were not provided due to lack of data availability. The “Other” category includes youth from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander youth. Due to data limitations, these groups were not analyzed separately, which may have obscured specific disparities that affected them.

**Figure 2**

*Illinois Juvenile Justice Decision Points by Youth Race and Ethnicity, 2022*



*Note.* These data were sourced from the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice. Transfers to Cook County Adult Court were not available. The “Other” category includes youth from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander youth. Due to data limitations, these groups were not analyzed separately, which may have obscured specific disparities that affected them. \*The disparity ratio (DR) indicates whether youth are overrepresented at juvenile justice decision points compared to White youth.

## Conclusion

We measured racial and ethnic disparities in the Illinois juvenile justice system. We found that Black youth were overrepresented at all five decision points examined—arrest, diversion, detention, secure confinement, and transfer to adult court. Latinx youth were overrepresented at three decision points: arrest, detention, and transfer to adult court. The exclusion of Cook County adult transfer data may impact statewide disparity trends and should be considered when interpreting the findings. OJJDP noted that racial and ethnic disparity measures are “valuable for recognizing and monitoring disproportionality.”<sup>10</sup> However, these measures do not investigate the root causes of the disparities. Research has shown that several factors, such as practitioner discretion, policies, racial biases, and lack of access to diversion and other alternatives, may contribute to disparities in the juvenile justice system.<sup>11</sup> Future research should investigate these

disparities and explore policy solutions that promote equitable outcomes for all youth. This includes expanding diversion programs, reducing the reliance on youth detention, and addressing systemic biases in decision-making. Future analyses should also focus on separating data for Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander youth to better identify and address disparities unique to each population.

### **FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The data analysis was supported by an intergovernmental agreement from the Illinois Department of Human Services to the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Authority or the Illinois Department of Human Services.

### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

Adams, S., & Reichert, J. (2025). *Racial and ethnic disparity in the Illinois juvenile justice system: A research brief*. Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.

The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of ICJIA staff Karl Gruschow, Amanda Klonsky, Timothy Lavery, and Barbara Mirel, as well as Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission staff.

---

<sup>1</sup> Puzzanchera, C. (2021). *Juvenile arrests, 2019*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/publications/juvenile-arrests-2019.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Hockenberry, S., & Puzzanchera, C. (2020). *Juvenile court statistics 2018*. National Center for Juvenile Justice. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/media/document/juvenile-court-statistics-2018.pdf>; Sickmund, M., Sladky, A., & Kang, W. (2021). *Easy access to juvenile court statistics: 1985–2019*. National Center for Juvenile Justice. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezajcs/>

<sup>3</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2022). *Model programs guide literature review: Racial and ethnic disparity in juvenile justice processing*. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/racial-and-ethnic-disparity>

<sup>4</sup> Barnert, E. S., Abrams, L. S., Tesema, L., Dudovitz, R., Nelson, B. B., Coker, T., Bath, E., Biely, C., Li, N., & Chung, P. J. (2018). Child incarceration and long-term adult health outcomes: a longitudinal study. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 14(1), 26–33. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPH-09-2016-0052>; Cauffman, E., Gillespie, M. L., Beardslee, J., Davis, F., Hernandez, M., & Williams, T. (2024). Adolescent contact, lasting impact? Lessons learned from two longitudinal studies spanning 20 years of developmental science research with justice-system-involved youths. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 24(3), 133–161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15291006231205173>

<sup>5</sup> The Sentencing Project. (2024). *Diversion: The next frontier in reforming youth justice*. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/diversion-the-next-frontier-in-reforming-youth-justice/>

<sup>6</sup> Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts. (n.d.). *Illinois probation data: Monthly aggregate stats*. <https://sites.google.com/probation.illinoiscourts.gov/aggregatedata/data-home>

<sup>7</sup> The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Center for Prevention Research and Development, oversees the JMIS database and can be contacted for questions regarding data and access. For more information, please visit their website at <https://cprd.illinois.edu/>.

<sup>8</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2021). *Easy access to juvenile populations 1990–2020*. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezapop/>

- 
- <sup>9</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2022). *The Impact of juvenile justice system involvement on the health and well-Being of youth, families, and communities of color: Proceedings of a workshop*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26623>; Rodriguez, N. (2013). Concentrated disadvantage and the incarceration of youth: Examining how context affects juvenile justice. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 50(2), 189-215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427811425538>
- <sup>10</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2022). *Model programs guide literature review: Racial and ethnic disparity in juvenile justice processing*. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/racial-and-ethnic-disparity>
- <sup>11</sup> Onifade, E., Barnes, A., Campbell, C., & Mandalari, A. (2019). Risk assessment as a mechanism for reducing differential treatment of minorities by a juvenile justice system. *Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice*, 17(3), 203–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377938.2019.1619647>; Piquero, A.R. (2008). Disproportionate Minority Contact. *The Future of Children* 18(2), 59-79. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0013>