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How can Prince George's County better serve children and families who are involved in, or affected by, the criminal legal system?

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Children and families who come into contact with the criminal legal system (CLS) rarely touch only one system. A young person arrested in Prince George's County (PGC) may already be known to the child protection system and live in a household that relies on SNAP; a child whose parent is detained or incarcerated may move in with a grandparent, change schools, or enter foster care.



The former are ***justice-involved youth***, young people with their own CLS contact, and the latter are ***justice-affected youth***, those whose parents, caregivers, or siblings have CLS contact.

Justice-involved youth

Young people with their own CLS contact

Justice-affected youth

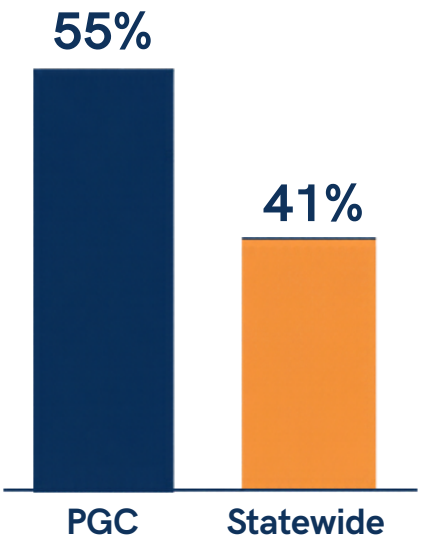
Young people whose parents, caregivers, or siblings have CLS contact.

Both groups are disproportionately exposed to poverty and other adversities, and both depend on services delivered by agencies that rarely share data or coordinate case plans.

Prince George's County is a distinctive and understudied context for examinations of multi-system involvement related to justice-involved youth and justice-impacted children.

- **Diverse by race, ethnicity, and nativity.** Of the county's roughly 970,000 residents, 61% are Black, 25% are Hispanic or Latino, and one in four was born outside the United States.[1]
- **Diverse by wealth.** The median household income is about $102,000, yet roughly 1 in 10 residents lives in poverty.[1] In FY2026, more than 99,000 residents received SNAP, 43% of them children.[2] PGC is also home to 29 of the nation's 49 high-income, majority-Black census tracts.[3]
- **Youth CLS contact is concentrated among youth of color.** Youth of color accounted for 97% of juvenile complaints in FY2021, roughly mirroring their share of county youth. Furthermore, 55% of PGC complaints were forwarded to court, compared with 41% statewide.[4]

A greater share of juvenile complaints are forwarded to court in Prince George's County compared to the state average.



A shifting policy landscape

A 2024 Maryland law (HB 814) extended the Department of Juvenile Services' reach to children as young as 10 through Child in Need of Supervision petitions, which also make families eligible for services.[5] **More young children and their families will be referred for services in coming years, raising the stakes for cross-system coordination.**

Few studies examine justice-affected youth who are also involved in other systems, such as child welfare, in a setting like Prince George's County (i.e., a majority-Black, socioeconomically diverse, suburban county).

Available studies highlight four themes that are still relevant to Prince George's County when exploring levers of support for crossover youth:

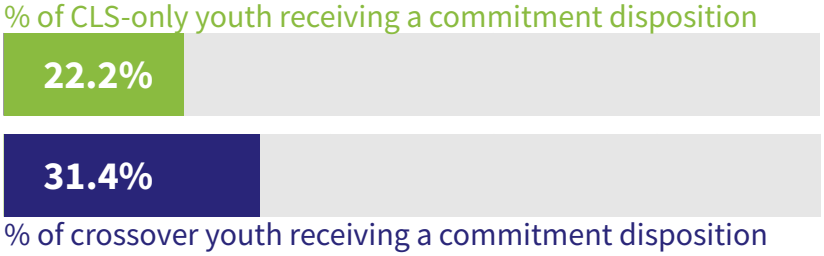
1 CLS and child protection systems overlap substantially.

- Among youth with a first delinquency petition, 45% (Cook County, IL), 69% (Cuyahoga County, OH), and 70% (New York City) had prior or current child welfare contact. Most of that contact was historical, meaning many of these youth are not identified as "crossover" youth when they enter the juvenile justice system.[6]
- In Milwaukee County, 34% of children in out-of-home care, and 40% of Black children with a screened-in maltreatment report, had a parent in jail or prison within a year of child protection system involvement.[7]

2 Youth who cross systems are treated more restrictively and fare worse.

- Dual-system youth were more likely than justice-only youth to be detained before adjudication and to reoffend within a year.[6]
- In a Maryland study of five jurisdictions, including PGC, crossover youth were found delinquent and committed to the Department of Juvenile services at **1.4 times** the rate of youth only involved in CLS, even though they were no more likely to face weapons or violent felony charges. The authors point to a lack of pre-adjudication options for youth already in state care.[8]
- Confinement itself carries lasting costs. In Chicago, juvenile incarceration lowered high school completion by 13 percentage points and increased adult incarceration by 23 percentage points.[9] In other words, among 100 otherwise similar youth, about 13 fewer high school graduates and 23 more adults behind bars.

Crossover youth in Maryland were 1.4 times as likely to receive a commitment disposition



3 The consequences of a parent's CLS involvement are complex and vary across families.

- A meta-analysis of 40 studies found that parental incarceration was associated with roughly a **10% higher risk** of children's antisocial behavior, but was not reliably connected with mental health, drug use, or educational outcomes.[10]
- **Parental incarceration is not always harmful for children.** For example, one study found that parental incarceration reduced children's own likelihood of incarceration and improved the neighborhoods they lived in as adults.[11] When a parent's presence involves violence, substance use, or neglect, parent removal can change the home in ways that are more beneficial.
- Adverse consequences appear largest among children at low risk of experiencing parental incarceration,[12,13] or for whom a parent's incarceration may arrive as a sudden and unanticipated shock, with little time for families to prepare for lost income or caregiving. In contrast, children at high risk, often experience incarceration as one layer within a “package” of pre-existing risks.[14] In PGC, many justice-affected children likely live in lower-risk, higher-income contexts.
- **Earlier stages of CLS contact matter.** Pretrial detention increases the probability of conviction and reduces later formal employment, with consequences for household income.[15]

4 Service delivery poses distinct challenges in suburban counties.

- Suburban poverty grew more than twice as fast as urban poverty in the 2000s, while suburban safety-net providers remained thin.[16]
- In a county as large and economically diverse as PGC, services may be unevenly distributed, and families just above income thresholds who experience a CLS shock may not qualify for means-tested supports.

Implications and recommendations for Prince George's County

Coordinate across systems at the point of entry.

Georgetown University's Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM) uses joint assessment, shared case planning, and information-sharing between child welfare and juvenile justice agencies. In a quasi-experimental evaluation, CYPM youth were less likely to reoffend than matched youth receiving services as usual.[17] PGC's "one judge, one family" model was under development in 2014;[8] documenting how cases are coordinated today is a useful first step.

Use evidence-based, family-centered services the state can already fund.

Maryland's Title IV-E prevention plan includes Functional Family Therapy, Multisystemic Therapy, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, Healthy Families America, and Nurse-Family Partnership,[18] all of which are rated "well-supported" by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse.[19] The plan names youth with current Department of Juvenile Services involvement as eligible but does not explicitly name children of incarcerated parents. Provider capacity and travel time across the county will shape whether families can use these services.

Divert youth from confinement and evaluate diversion.

The Circuit Court's New Direction Youth Diversion Program offers a 90-day, community-based alternative for youth ages 12 to 18 without a violent offense history, with school-based supervision, tutoring, mentoring, and treatment as needed.[20] No outcome data are publicly available, making it a natural candidate for evaluation.

Treat a parent's CLS involvement as a family event and tailor responses.

Identifying dependent children at arrest or booking, and connecting kinship caregivers to navigation, financial support, and legal permanency options, are practical starting points. Families with fewer prior system contacts, who may be least prepared for a parent's sudden absence, should not be overlooked simply because they fall outside traditional high-risk targeting.

Build the data to answer the "for whom" question.

Linking records across Department of Juvenile Services, Social Services, Prince George's County Public Schools, the courts, Corrections, and Health would show how many families touch two or more systems, in what order, which services they receive, and how this varies by neighborhood income, race and ethnicity, and nativity. These questions could anchor a prospective study within Prince George's County.

Trusted, non-partisan resources:

- Georgetown Center for Juvenile Justice Reform
- Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse
- National Institute of Justice CrimeSolutions Clearinghouse
- Annie E. Casey Foundation Report: A Shared Sentence (2016)
- Youth.gov: Children of Incarcerated Parents
- Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy

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Methods

Findings presented in this brief come from a literature review of academic peer-reviewed studies, as well as reports from non-partisan think tanks, foundations, and county and state program websites. Given the rapid nature of this search, other relevant studies may exist. In addition, please note that we did not use formal statistical methods for summarizing results and exploring reasons for differences in findings across studies.

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