



Headlines: Juvenile Justice Transcript

Live from the Levin Center's State Oversight Academy at Wayne State Law School, this is Headline News. Today, a special report on juvenile justice issues in the 2023 – 2024 legislative session.

Juvenile justice issues have dominated state news this legislative session, with three major, intertwined issues taking center stage: staffing crises, overcrowding, and solitary confinement. In fact, we found these problems in headlines from 43 states and the District of Columbia. Here are just a few examples from West Virginia, Kentucky, New Mexico, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Illinois, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, Nebraska, and Louisiana in the last two years. These issues have led to detention center closures, public safety crises, children forced to sleep on floors, unsafe and unsanitary conditions, gang violence, prolonged solitary confinement, use of leg irons, and lack of education services.

Legislators in some states have responded to the crises. In Kentucky, the Legislative Oversight and Investigations Committee conducted a nine-month investigation on the problems in state juvenile detention centers, where short staffing and overcrowding led to riots, fires, sexual assaults, and increased use of isolation. The committee released a report in July outlining 30 recommendations that would increase oversight, staff training, and more. Since then, the Oversight Committee and the legislature's Juvenile Justice Oversight Council have held a series of hearings on the conditions of the detention centers and status of reforms. The Pennsylvania legislature is considering reforms developed from recommendations made by the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force. These changes would eliminate court fees, prohibit solitary confinement for juvenile offenders, prioritize diversion programs, end direct filing to adult court, and require consultation with a lawyer before juveniles are able to waive their rights.

In 2022, the Michigan Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform released a report with 32 recommendations to improve the state's system. In 2023, Wayne County's juvenile detention facility saw numerous scandals and, following an assault on a 12-year-old boy there in March, the state's Senate Appropriations Health and Human Services Subcommittee held a hearing to discuss the overcrowding and safety issues. In December, the legislature passed a bipartisan package of juvenile justice reform laws based on the task force's recommendations.

Almost every state is encountering challenges within their juvenile justice system. Based on media coverage and legislative action including hearings, workgroups, and reports, the topic seems to be increasing in awareness. Bipartisan oversight investigations by state legislatures can help find facts about the causes of crises and determine what reforms are necessary to provide a safe, supportive environment for juvenile offenders and staff members. Problems within juvenile justice are widespread and consistent across the country. As a result, legislatures can observe the investigations and reforms from other states and learn lessons applicable for their own communities.

You can find links to all these articles in the accompanying document for this video. For more information on juvenile justice oversight, visit stateoversight.org! Until next time, here's the Levin Center, signing off!