**Fiscal Facts: The Post-Pandemic State of Youth Justice in Milwaukee County**

The youth justice system in Milwaukee County now operates at roughly its pre-pandemic capacity, but it is seeing more severe offenses committed by youth in Wisconsin’s largest county.

From 2018 to 2023, felony offense referrals to Milwaukee County Children, Youth, and Family Services increased 13%. Even more significant growth occurred for certain violent felonies such as armed robbery or homicide.

County officials point to a range of programming that has been broadened in recent years, including new alternatives to placing juveniles in state-administered secure detention facilities and more intensive efforts to provide services to youth in community-based settings. But the jury is still out on the effectiveness of such programs in achieving better outcomes and reducing recidivism, a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report finds.

Our report’s analysis relies in part on referral data from Milwaukee County Children, Youth, and Family Services (CYFS). Such referrals typically mark the onset of proceedings with CYFS, often after a youth has had an interaction with law enforcement.

These data show that from 2018 to 2024, 7,216 youth were referred to CYFS (in some cases more than once) for a total of 9,790 referrals. Referrals declined from 2018 to 2020 before increasing sharply in 2021, plateauing for the next two years, and declining slightly in 2024. However, 2024 referrals (1,450) were on par with 2018 levels (1,479).

From 2018 to 2023, referrals for felony offenses increased 13%, while referrals for misdemeanor offenses decreased 7%. Among felony offenses, notable growth occurred in referrals for first-degree homicide, armed robbery, terrorist threats, and taking and driving a vehicle without consent.

For those who enter the criminal justice system, the final outcome is called a “disposition.” From 2018 to 2023, probation dispositions grew by 18%, while dispositions in which prosecution was declined fell by 19% (72). This is consistent with referral data showing that court cases have become more serious in nature.

In recent years, the county’s Vel Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center has seen an expanded role in post-disposition secure care via the designation of 24 beds for the Milwaukee County Accountability Program (MCAP). This program was designed in part to respond to concern with the treatment of youth at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake, as well as a desire to keep Milwaukee County youth closer to home and provide them more services. At its 2012 inception, 12 youth were enrolled in MCAP; by 2024, the program had 65 admissions. Meanwhile, commitments of Milwaukee County youth to Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake have decreased sharply.

The creation of MCAP has been accompanied by implementation of a broader range of community-based clinical, educational, and family-oriented services by CYFS, more intensive efforts to ensure the provision of effective case management, and the introduction of crime and violence prevention programs targeted at youths.

The report concludes, however, that a key unanswered question is whether recent youth justice changes in Milwaukee County are producing better outcomes, both for the youth themselves and for public safety. Two relevant metrics are program completion and recidivism rates, but these are tracked only across some programs, and often within narrow parameters.

The report suggests that standardizing methods by which the county and state track recidivism could help determine if MCAP and non-secure care alternatives produce better outcomes compared to sentences to state juvenile facilities. This would be particularly valuable as the county transitions to a new youth correctional facility in Wauwatosa, set to open in 2026.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*