



# In Perspective

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## An Overview of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act

### What Is the JJDPA?

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) of 1974 is landmark federal legislation that established national standards for the custody and care of youth in the juvenile justice system. Signed into law by President Gerald Ford on September 7, 1974, the Act's purpose was to protect children and young people in the justice system, address delinquent behavior, and improve community safety. The JJDPA:

- Established core requirements to protect youth in the juvenile justice system, specifically:
  - Deinstitutionalizing youth found guilty of status offenses—noncriminal acts that are considered violations of law only because they were committed by youth.
  - Separating youth from adults in secure facilities—the “sight and sound separation” requirement.
- Created the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) within the Justice Department’s Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (now the Office of Justice Programs), charging OJJDP with providing national leadership, funding, and resources to help state, local, and Tribal communities prevent delinquency and improve their juvenile justice systems.

- Established the Title II Formula Grants program, which awards funding directly to states and territories to help them develop services and programs for youth and improve their juvenile justice systems.
- Created the Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, an interagency body that coordinates federal programs related to delinquency prevention and missing and exploited children.

### How Does It Work?

For 50 years, the JJDPA has authorized a federal framework for youth justice and provided critical federal funding to states to prevent delinquency and support compliance with the core requirements, which now include protecting children and young people from placement in adult jails and lockups, keeping those charged with status offenses out of detention facilities, and reducing racial and ethnic disparities in the justice system.

OJJDP plays a critical role in implementing the JJDPA by establishing standards and requirements for states, administering federal grants, offering training and technical assistance, identifying and promoting best practices, and disseminating information and resources. OJJDP works to ensure that the JJDPA's goals are met by promoting a fair, effective, and developmentally appropriate juvenile justice system.

## Juvenile Justice in 1974: A Historical Perspective

In 1974, the annual report of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (predecessor to OJJDP) highlighted a goal of reducing youth involvement in the justice system. “There is a growing belief among professionals within and outside the criminal justice system that the cause of justice will be advanced and rates of crime reduced when methods can be devised to decrease significantly the number of criminal justice system juvenile clients,” (39) the report states. “Clearly an alternative to criminal justice processing is needed, not only for the nonoffenders who are currently processed and detained but also for youthful first offenders who have not yet established a form pattern of criminality” (40).

## Why Do We Need It?

Passage of the JJDPA marked a pivotal shift in how states and territories approached youth justice. The Act was ground breaking, providing—for the first time—federal guidance and standards to ensure a minimum level of safety and equitable treatment for young people impacted by the juvenile justice system. As President Ford said in 1974, the law reflected a national commitment to reduce delinquency, keep youth “from entering the treadmill of the criminal process,” and guarantee “procedural and Constitutional protection” for them. It consolidated the direction of policies and the coordination of federal programs to help states and localities prevent and respond to delinquency.

The JJDPA has been reauthorized numerous times since 1974 to expand protections for youth. Reauthorizations in 1977, 1980, 1984, and 1988 refined the Act to address issues of the time. Amendments in the 1992 reauthorization added a new core requirement: addressing “disproportionate minority confinement” in the justice system; it was expanded in the 2002 reauthorization to include disproportionate minority contact with the system. The requirement was further strengthened and renamed in

2018, when the Juvenile Justice Reform Act reauthorized and amended the JJDPA. The “Reducing Racial and Ethnic Disparities” core requirement emphasizes the need for concrete actions and adds an expanded jail removal requirement for youth who are charged as adults. Today, the JJDPA remains the foundation of efforts to improve the juvenile justice system.

## What Is Its Impact?

The JJDPA’s passage fundamentally reshaped the juvenile justice system in the United States by holding young people accountable for delinquent behavior while also recognizing their potential for change. The Act’s principles and framework provide the platform for OJJDP’s efforts, as exemplified in the Office’s three priorities:

- Treat children as children.
- Serve youth at home, with their families, in their communities.
- Open up opportunities for young people who come into contact with the justice system.

In keeping with the JJDPA’s dictates, OJJDP has adopted a Continuum of Care framework that emphasizes evidence-based and promising programs and practices, so that young people can access resources and services where they live and at every point in the juvenile justice system. OJJDP’s Continuum of Care reflects the science of adolescent development and takes a holistic approach, spanning prevention, intervention, treatment, and reentry strategies. It centers on youth, families, and communities, and reflects the dynamic, evolving nature of their needs, beginning with protecting and supporting children who are risk for becoming involved in delinquency or for being victimized. The Continuum of Care focuses on delivering effective community-based services to keep young people from entering or moving deeper into the juvenile justice system.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Learn more about the 50th anniversary of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act at [ojjdp.ojp.gov/about/jjdp-act-50/jjdp-50th-anniversary](https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/about/jjdp-act-50/jjdp-50th-anniversary).