An aerial photograph of a coastal town and beach. The town is on the left, with a road and various buildings. A wide, sandy beach runs along the coast, and the ocean is on the right with waves breaking. The sky is clear and blue.

November 2023

EVALUATION OF ENTRY INTO THE JUVENILE LEGAL SYSTEM IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY



Georgetown University
McCourt School of Public Policy
Center for Juvenile Justice Reform

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to worsening mental and behavioral health conditions of system-involved youth in St. Lucie County, the Roundtable of St. Lucie County partnered with the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR) at Georgetown University to examine the front end of their juvenile legal system, where there were concerns that inefficient processes were causing youth to languish as they awaited their disposition. CJJR engaged in a multi-phase evaluation that analyzed quantitative data received from Florida's Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) on youth who contacted the juvenile system between July 2019 and June 2022. All four Circuit 19 counties were included in the dataset: St. Lucie (n=1,025), Indian River (n=344), Martin (n=330), and Okeechobee (n=169) for a total of 1,868 youth in the sample. Additionally, CJJR reviewed state statute, local memoranda of understanding, and local law enforcement policy related to civil citation. Lastly, CJJR conducted nine focus groups with representatives from the DJJ Intake, DJJ Probation, Communities Connected for Kids (child welfare), St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office, Port St. Lucie Police Department, school administrators, school resource officers and school resource deputies, the State Attorney's Office and the Office of the Public Defender, and Ignite Youth Alliance.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key issues that arose from the evaluation include:

Use and understanding of civil citation is inconsistent. Stakeholders hold differing views of civil citation depending on the nature of their agency or organization. For instance, some child welfare case managers and supervisors expressed confusion over what civil citation is while others shared that civil citation is not sufficient to deter youth on their caseloads from further criminal behavior. Alternatively, the Sheriff's Office and Port St. Lucie Police Department assert the use of civil citation whenever possible despite that data findings indicate a significant underutilization (55%) which was echoed by perceptions shared among DJJ staff.

Schools are a significant entry point to the legal system. Schools are a large source of referral to law enforcement, particularly for disorderly conduct charges which increase in number when school is in session. The uptick in charges within schools can be attributed in part to the discretion law enforcement possess outside of the school in comparison to the less flexible responses required from administrators and SROs on campus. Additionally, there is a need for more training on trauma exposure and de-escalation skills for teachers, administrators, and SROs. Finally, while schools and SROs have a general understanding of the role SROs fill within the school, there is no formal agreement in place to delineate responsibilities and protocols.

Youth and families are often confused, overwhelmed, and overburdened by systems. Each of the stakeholders included in the focus groups noted that young people and caretakers frequently do not understand the structure, processes, and jargon of the juvenile legal system leading to pleas being mistakenly entered and youth and families not fully understanding the implications of the court process. Additionally, court fees place a burden on families and can prevent youth from being released from their probation despite having completed all other requirements of their sentence.

Crossover youth face additional challenges. Staff from IGNITE Youth Alliance observed that the youth who flee their child welfare placements and cross into the legal system are often struggling with: adjusting to their placement, feeling comfortable with others in the home, and being emotionally vulnerable with peers, counselors, and staff. Alternatively, youth may come into contact with child welfare as a second system when they do not qualify for detention or respite and their parents or guardians refuse to pick them up. Overall, there is a lack of communication between juvenile services and child welfare.

Services and resources are limited and/or not well advertised. There is a misalignment between the needs of the community and the services and resources that are available in St. Lucie County. Focus group participants noted that often areas with the highest rate of arrest and crossover among youth are also those with the fewest resources and activities for young people. In addition, the resources that are present in those areas are either scarce or do not consistently reflect the cultures and needs of those they attempt to serve. Finally, youth and families are frequently unfamiliar with the resources that exist in the community and often only connect to them upon the youth's involvement with the juvenile legal system.

Other identified challenges pertain to pronounced racial and gender disparities, trauma and behavioral health issues, a high number of probation violations among a small group of youth, accumulating court fees, and hindrances to the court process.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To address the challenges identified in St. Lucie County, CJJR proposed a number of **recommendations** among which include:

- Increase the use of civil citation by raising awareness of its benefits and how it differs from other outcomes, expanding understanding of law enforcement policies regarding its use, and increasing accuracy and transparency in data reporting.
- Disrupt schools as entry points to the juvenile legal system by clearly and formally delineating the roles of SROs in schools, providing training on trauma and de-escalation to school staff, and minimizing subjectivity in addressing behavior in classrooms.
- Support youth and families by providing education on how the legal system functions, clarifying the jargon used in courts, eliminating and/or reducing court fees through legislation and DJJ funds, and establishing consistent cross-agency collaboration and communication.
- Address challenges specific to the crossover youth population by developing a coordinated case management process between child welfare and juvenile justice entities and expanding access to services and resources by leveraging agency and community partnerships, and providing cross-agency trainings.
- Broaden service use by raising the community's awareness of available resources, establish partnerships with community-based organizations, and identify funding sources to develop new or expand existing resources.



INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The Roundtable of St. Lucie County, a multi-agency coalition focused on advancing the wellbeing of children and youth in the community, contracted with Georgetown University's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR) to gain a deeper understanding of the front end of the youth legal system*. Prior to engagement with CJJR, leaders of the Roundtable observed the deteriorating mental and behavioral health conditions of young people – including those involved with the Department for Children and Families (DCF) – who were awaiting disposition with the legal system. The Roundtable collaborated with CJJR to conduct a robust evaluation in an effort to pinpoint if and where the juvenile legal system was “bottlenecked,” presumably demonstrated by youth awaiting disposition for long periods while not receiving formal services through the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ).

The terms youth legal system, juvenile legal system, and juvenile justice system are used interchangeably throughout this report.

The guiding purpose of the evaluation was multifaceted and included the following **goals**:

- Determine commonalities among youth who encounter the legal system, particularly as they relate to race, sex, and mental and behavioral health indicators, and if opportunities for diversion and civil citation are offered equitably;
- Identify the most prevalent offenses among youth who touch the juvenile legal system and their rate of reoffending (including violations of probation);
- Identify if civil citation is employed to the greatest extent possible and if not, explore how to increase its utility so as to connect youth to services without formally involving them in the system;
- Determine if the utility of civil citation mirrors state and local statute and if not, identify those discrepancies;
- Understand the use of pre-adjudication detention and whether it is utilized equitably;
- Compare data from St. Lucie County to that of its neighboring 19th Circuit counties to identify differences in process and outcomes related to the juvenile legal system;
- Examine a subset of young people who have “crossed over” between DCF and DJJ to gain insights into pathways traveled between the two systems and other discernable commonalities;
- Gather information from local agency staff and related stakeholders to contextualize data findings related to: arrest, civil citation, probation violations, resource and service availability and access, the role of schools in law enforcement referrals, interagency collaboration, misconceptions between stakeholders, and challenges that may impede the court process.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

To achieve the aforementioned goals, CJJR designed a multi-phase evaluation that entailed analyzing quantitative data on all four Circuit 19 communities, reviewing state statute, local policy, and local memoranda of understanding related to civil citation, and conducting focus groups with agency and organization stakeholders. In addition, CJJR worked with local DCF and DJJ agencies, including the DCF contractor Communities Connected for Kids (CCKids), to identify dually involved youth and related data indicators in order to further understand crossover in St. Lucie County.

Although data and information sources were gathered and analyzed in phases for this evaluation, the analysis of statistics, statute, and interviews collectively provides a detailed depiction of the youth legal system in St. Lucie County. For this reason, the layout of this report is primarily structured by topic as opposed to data source. The flow of the report is as follows:

- Overview of data collection and analyses (including key themes from focus groups)
- Findings across data sources related to:
 - youth offender demographics
 - history of DJJ contact
 - mental and behavioral health indicators
 - common offenses, including felonies and those that are school-related
 - civil citation
 - diversion
 - detention
 - juvenile offender case timelines
 - disposition outcomes
 - violations of probation
 - crossover youth
- Recommendations to respond to identified challenges

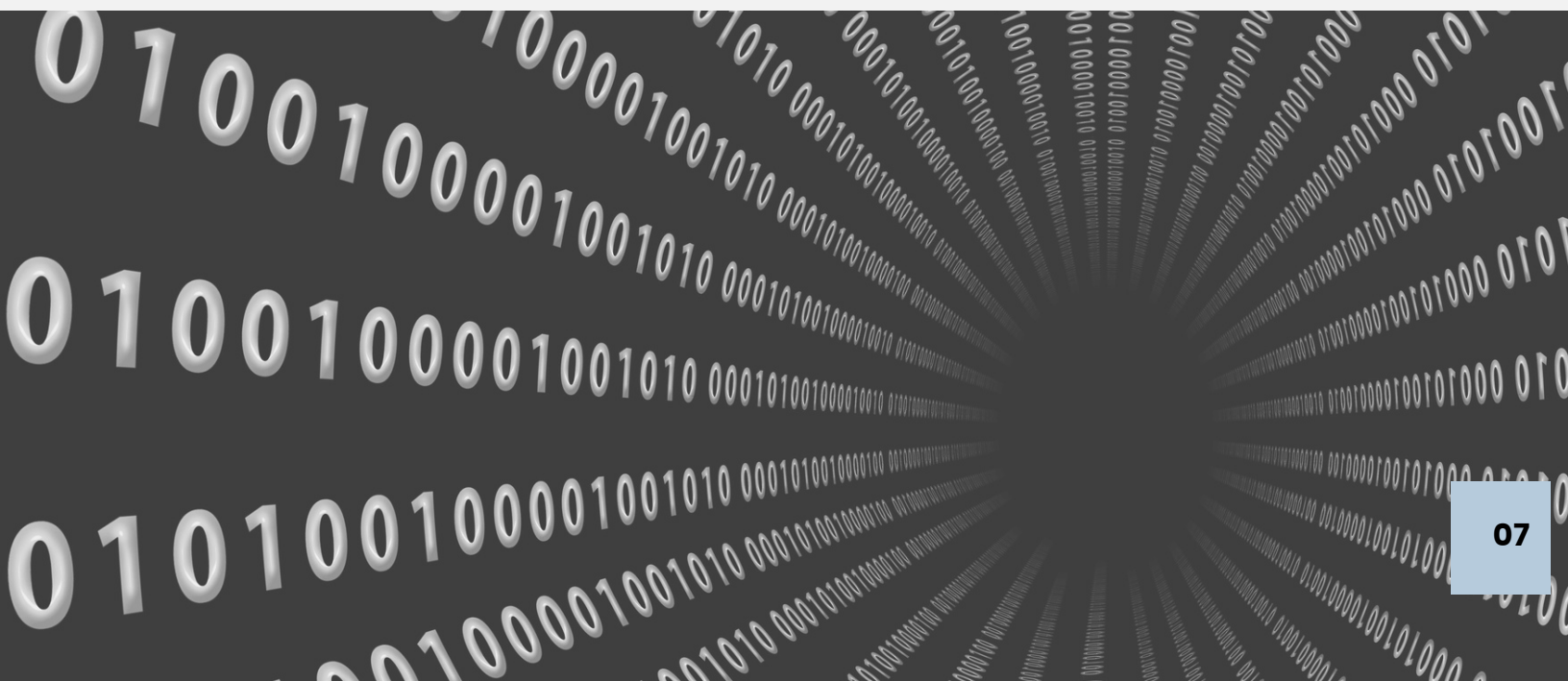
Findings are structured to promote a focus on St. Lucie County followed by a comparison to Okeechobee, Indian River, and Martin Counties for each of the aforementioned subjects with the exception of crossover youth which is focused solely on St. Lucie County. (Note: Focus groups were not held for the remaining Circuit 19 counties so comparative analysis is based on data provided by DJJ). “**Key Takeaways**” are emphasized in each section to facilitate synthesis of the information. Further, additional topics are highlighted throughout the report to call attention to matters tangential to the juvenile legal system and its functioning in St. Lucie County.

PHASE I: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

Data Overview

Data was provided to CJJR by Florida's Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) on youth who contacted the juvenile system between July 2019 and June 2022. Four 19th Circuit counties were included in this dataset: St. Lucie County, Indian River County, Okeechobee County, and Martin County. A total of 1,868 youth were accounted for in the sample with a majority from St. Lucie County (n=1,025) followed by Indian River (n=344), Martin (n=330), and Okeechobee (n=169).

It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic took place during much of the data pull timeframe which has numerous implications. For example, although data analysis demonstrated that schools were a prominent source for referrals to law enforcement, students did not attend school for much of the pandemic. Thus, the role that schools play in juvenile justice system encounters may in fact be larger in the present day than what is depicted in this report. Furthermore, analysis of MAYSI-II scores for this sample indicated a portion of young people struggled with mental health. Again, this may be exacerbated in the present day as a consequence of the pandemic.



PHASE II: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

Data Overview

Based on findings from the DJJ data analysis, CJJR and the St. Lucie Roundtable identified stakeholder groups to conduct listening sessions in order to gather additional information to contextualize the initial findings. In total, nine focus groups were held with each of the following: DJJ Intake, DJJ Probation, Communities Connected for Kids (CCKids; the DCF contracting agency), St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office, Port St. Lucie Police Department, school administrators, school resource officers and school resource deputies (henceforth collectively referred to as SROs), the State Attorney's Office and the Office of the Public Defender, and Ignite Youth Alliance staff. Additional attempts were made to meet with school teachers and CINC Intake staff but were unsuccessful.

Sessions were held over Zoom during July and August 2023 with one facilitator and one notetaker, each from CJJR, and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The number of participants in attendance at each session ranged from 2 to 12 people.

Key Takeaways from the Focus Groups

Excerpts from the focus group transcripts are included throughout the report to color the DJJ data analysis and accompanying recommendations. In addition, the following nine (9) pages show themes and highlights from each of the nine sessions.



PHASE II: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office (6 participants)

- Participants expressed their belief that the DJJ data on civil citation is inaccurate due to discrepancies between how the state department documents and collects data versus the local Sheriff's Office. Ultimately, the Sheriff's Office believes that civil citation is offered to the fullest capacity possible within the confines of policy and the Circuit 19 Civil Citation MOU.
- A new computer system is underway across the county that will require deputies to input a reason for not offering civil citation for qualifying cases. It will no longer be feasible for "other" to be selected as the reason; instead, officers will have to select one of the nine agency policy disqualifiers before an affidavit can be successfully completed.
- Members of the group discussed the practice of allowing guardians a few days to reassess accepting civil citation for their child in the event they qualify for those parents and guardians who are hesitant to accept. Often, parents/guardians misunderstand what civil citation is and are wary that they are setting their child up for later consequence due to the required admission of guilt. However, in allowing the caregiver time to evaluate the option and speak to an attorney, they usually accept the offer.
- The Sheriff's Office explained the efforts they make to avoid arresting youthful offenders as much as possible, including working with schools to keep youth separated and talking to teachers who are victims of a minor crime about why lessening the documented charge may be more beneficial than arrest. Deputies also encourage parents to handle situations in which they feel charging a youth is inappropriate.
- Participants speculated that school-based arrest is currently higher than what is documented in the data used for the present evaluation due to the fact that students were not in school for much of the COVID-19 pandemic.

PHASE II: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

Port St. Lucie Police Department (3 participants)

- The participating officers find that disorderly conduct charges most often stem from physical disruptions at school. One individual indicated that they were not called for a single disorderly conduct charge during the summer months. The group contended that if disorderly conduct takes place in a public setting, like a park, they may knock down the charge to something lesser such as trespassing. However, they do not feel they have this option if they are called to address disorderly conduct in school.
- The officers described that some school administrators are more prone to calling law enforcement because those administrators are reluctant to put themselves in positions to make unfavorable decisions about students that will affect their relationship with the student and their parent/guardian.
- Officers explained that they attempt to use civil citation whenever possible. Notable reasons for not utilizing civil citation include instances of domestic violence (which is one of the nine excluded charges indicated in their agency policy) and if a young person's behavior continues to be unruly. Still, if a young person is arrested who qualifies for civil citation, the court will ultimately divert the case.
- Unlike the Sheriff's Office, participants in this focus group noted that parents and guardians are less apt to accept civil citation because in the heat of the moment, they want their child to face an "immediate consequence" (i.e., arrest) or they are in need of a break from the youth. The Port St. Lucie officers do not feel they are in a position to give the parent or guardian a few days to consider civil citation (contrary to the Sheriff's Office). One reason for this is that they have to defer to the wishes of the victim, and if the victim declines the opportunity to offer civil citation then the officers adhere to that request. Additionally, officers must seek special permissions to delay filing a report and noted that during such a delay, the young person may become unreachable thereby requiring the court to issue a warrant.

PHASE II: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

School Administrators (5 participants)

- The participating administrators described a genuine and necessary partnership with the SROs in their schools. The SROs are primarily stationed at schools for safety, not classroom management, and are viewed as an extension of the non-instructional staff.
- Decisions around how to engage SROs is at the discretion of each school's administrators. Participants were not aware of written or standard expectations for the roles of SROs, noting that conversations between administrators and school safety personnel take place at the start of the school year to establish a common understanding.
- Only school administrators are permitted to task SROs with involvement in situations. School staff are instructed to approach administration if they feel SRO involvement is necessary. However, in emergency rescue situations (e.g., a student having a seizure, a fire on campus), SROs are able to respond independently and coordinate with other emergency personnel.
- Students can face criminal charges in addition to school disciplinary action if the code of conduct was violated. There are certain infractions that administrators are obligated to report to law enforcement (e.g., possession of a weapon).
- The administrators suggested a number of strategies and resources they believe would support students and a safe school environment if they had the opportunity to establish them. Those listed include improving communication between schools when students change schools, ongoing de-escalation training throughout the school year for all staff, and hiring additional personnel like counselors.



PHASE II: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

St. Lucie. County Sheriff's Office SROs (5 participants)

- The participants, whose tenure as SROs ranged from two to 17 years, indicated that there are a number of training opportunities and mandates for the position including: training with New Horizons counselors on mental health and child development at the start of the school year; crisis intervention; monthly training regarding changes to legislation and mandates; a week long basic training that touches upon de-escalation and an optional advanced de-escalation training; and Table Top sessions for new SROs in which they are tasked with walking through various scenarios with supervisors and colleagues.
- The SROs indicated that, while there is a manual from the Sheriff's Office that indicates how SROs should respond to situations in schools, it is largely dependent upon the school's administrators to determine the degree to which they wish an SRO to involve themselves in situations and with the students. SROs encourage administrators to utilize them beyond just officers of the law. When administrators do so, the SROs' activities extend to mentoring, tutoring, and building relationships with students.
- There appears to be a dichotomy in how schools utilize SROs. In some schools, SROs feel supported in discussing incidents with the dean and counselor to make informed decisions regarding how to respond to behaviors. On the other hand, SROs reported instances in which school staff turn a behavioral issue into a law enforcement issue because staff are exhausted by the challenges students present.
- Participants in this focus group noted that high arrest rates and crossover often correlate with areas where there are limited after-school programs and activities. The SROs further discussed that programming, particularly for low-income youth, must respond to their specific needs in order to be successful. However, the SROs' perception is that service providers are often trepidatious about working in those particular communities (e.g., Fort Pierce).



PHASE II: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

IGNITE Youth Alliance Staff (12 participants)

- IGNITE staff reported that all of the young people they work with have been exposed to trauma, which manifests differently from boys to girls. In particular, staff have observed girls getting into more physical altercations recently. This observation was echoed by the Port St. Lucie Police Department in a separate focus group.
- Participants speculated that when youth run away from placement, they are trying to escape a negative situation for which they do not have the skills to cope – be it conflict with a roommate, distrust of others in the home, struggling to connect with staff and counselors, and so on. IGNITE staff explained that young people flee for a reason, and often find themselves gravitating to older individuals who provide them access to drugs and alcohol and, above all else, an escape from their trauma.
- Schools will call IGNITE staff if a youth on their caseload is in a situation in which the school needs help de-escalating. Staff are often able to respond, which offers students an opportunity to avoid formal police contact. However, only a small number of youth are involved with IGNITE and those who do not have an IGNITE mentor usually face different outcomes.
- Multiple participants contended that the root of many negative or acting out behaviors stems from trauma and various basic need insecurities (e.g., housing, food, financial). Without the opportunity to express their stresses and traumas, and without the supports to solve the issue, students can become reactive in school which can lead to police involvement.
- Staff noted that youth programs outside of school, and even those connected to the school, are extremely limited both in program numbers and in the number of youth those that exist are able to serve. Participants also reported a dearth of mental health and trauma-responsive services. Staff further added that youth may feel less connected to those services that do exist because service providers do not reflect the population they serve or provide culturally responsive treatment.
- IGNITE staff discussed a number of barriers to service access even after a referral is made, including: appropriateness of the service itself, transportation, JPO and parent follow up, and guardians' hesitance in allowing service providers into their home.



PHASE II: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

Child Welfare Case Managers and Supervisors (7 participants)

- Child welfare staff are under the impression that DJJ cannot refer a youth to substance use counseling or include conditions related to substance use as a part of their probation plan if the youth's charges do not relate to substance use.
- Participants expressed feeling that youth do not face enough consequences for their behaviors, even when the youth is on probation, and thus the youth have no impetus to change their actions.
- Child welfare workers signaled some confusion over how civil citation is used and what offenses qualify for civil citation. Further, there is a sentiment that civil citation is not a severe enough consequence for some charges.
- Child welfare staff noted that communication with DJJ could be improved across the board, beginning with notification of the intake appointment and extending through collaboration on service referrals and notification of probation violations. Caseworkers would like the opportunity to exchange information with intake/JAC and probation officers in order to inform the engagement of both agencies with youth and families.
- Although a monthly meeting takes place between child welfare and DJJ to discuss crossover cases, child welfare staff observed that there are not clear expectations for how the two agencies should engage when they share a case. Further, child welfare case managers and supervisors would like to learn more about the DJJ system to improve their understanding of operations.
- Caseworkers feel that DJJ often leans on DCF/CCKids to make service referrals because there is a perception that DCF can better sway youth and guardians to attend the service and hold them accountable.
- Some of the child welfare workers observed that flexible (e.g., with hours that enable access for guardians who do not work 9-5 jobs) and engaging programs for parents that are more easily accessible could help with preventing youth from crossing into the delinquency system. Staff also emphasized the importance of educating parents and guardians on what services exist in the community and how to access them.
- Participants of the focus group expressed that girls tend to run away more often, and for different reasons, than boys. Specifically, they feel that boys run when they are bored whereas girls run for emotional reasons, such as to find their mothers or significant others.
- In the event a youth on their caseload is charged in another county, caseworkers expressed frustration over attending hearings that can take hours to drive to. Caseworkers would like to be better supported in this area of their work, such as through the use of virtual hearings.

PHASE II: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

DJJ Intake Officers and JAC Supervisors (5 participants)

- Intake officers explained that they follow up with families to inquire about whether the youth (and family) are participating in the voluntary services to which they were referred and to inform the family of their next court date. If the youth/family has not accessed the service(s), another follow up will be made to encourage their participation.
- Intake officers reported that they take feedback from the family into consideration regarding service referral and participation. If a certain provider is not a good fit, the officer will seek an alternative option.
- During situations in which a family refuses to pick up their child, intake explores opportunities to place the youth in respite care. However, if there are no beds available or the young person does not qualify (e.g., due to their charge) then the youth may be held in temporary detention while officers work with the family to identify alternative options (e.g., grandmother, cousin) for the youth to reside. Participants noted that DCF may also become involved if the family refuses to take back their child but, in those situations, DCF often struggles to find a timely placement and requests that the court retain the youth.
- Officers expressed concern over the lack of quality services available through DJJ, particularly those responsive to youth of color, females, young parents, and transition age youth. Participants noted that homelessness is a challenge for individuals who are 18 years old because they do not qualify for DCF services or juvenile facilities. While there are some shelters for pregnant girls and young mothers, there is no equivalent resource available for young men. Further, the closest transition-based programs are between two and three hours away.
- Participants communicated that the same services are offered throughout the state and regardless of whether a young person is on diversion or formal supervision. Officers stressed the need to treat children as children and to build service and supervision models specifically around the child as opposed to around a standard of time, recognizing that growth and rehabilitation looks different for individual youth.
- Officers expressed the need to advance prevention efforts, particularly around diversion, in ways that treat the root of behaviors as opposed to using a standard form of treatment.
- Officers are under the impression that civil citation is not used to the fullest extent by law enforcement. Further, some feel that schools could be more proactive in responding to parent concerns about bullying and separating students before a fight erupts and law enforcement gets involved.
- Many participants stressed the importance of understanding and serving the whole family as opposed to just the child whose behaviors may be a reflection of challenges faced by the family.

PHASE II: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

DJJ Probation Officers and Supervisors (7 participants)

- Probation officers debated the influence of poverty on situations that bring youth to the attention of law enforcement. A few officers explained that youth may seek unconventional opportunities to make money rather than go to school. Gang presence is also a heavy influence, particularly in Fort Pierce.
- Related to poverty, probation officers explained that many times youth remain on probation simply because they cannot pay court fees. Additional court fees accompany each new violation which sets youth back even further.
- Regarding violations of probation, participants commented that many youth on their caseloads come from single-parent/guardian households which makes guardian supervision of the child hard, particularly if the guardian works. Additionally, “effective response,” in which the terms of probation change as a result of a technical violation (e.g., five more hours of community service is added), cannot be used in the event the youth on probation commits a formal violation (e.g., failing a drug screen, refusing to attend services, or committing a new charge). If the charge itself (e.g., trespassing) qualifies for civil citation but the youth is on probation, the young person is disqualified from civil citation and the charge is filed as a new law violation. Note that under the 19th Circuit’s MOU on Civil Citation, a young person can receive up to three combined civil citations and/or post-arrest diversions; however, they are ineligible if “they have been found to have committed a delinquent act.”
- Probation officers explained that if a youth on probation commits a low-level offense that would otherwise qualify for civil citation, the State’s Attorney’s Office (SAO) might revert the charge back to civil citation – however, this is rare. Similarly, if a youth on diversion picks up another minor charge, the SAO may permit diversion to continue without filing the new charge.
- Probation officers noted that they strive to be understanding when violations occur. For instance, if a young person is not attending counseling the PO will inquire with the parent/guardian and the young person as to whether transportation is a barrier. Officers aim to avoid violating youth excessively and will often delay an “effective response” (i.e., changing the terms of probation) until there have been a handful of violations.
- Participants commented that probation violations increase when school is in session because behaviors, such as horseplay, become battery charges. One officer questioned why more schools do not employ mediation and other tactics before referring the student to law enforcement.
- Probation officers explained that in the event a young person completes their terms of probation successfully, DJJ can request an early completion. However, the state often refuses these requests for youth who have committed felonies, thereby causing them to remain on probation and increase their likelihood of a violation.
- Probation officers observed that the relationship between Juvenile Probation, the court, the Office of the Public Defender, and the SAO is more collaborative in neighboring counties than in St. Lucie County. Those who had worked in other counties compared their experiences and noted being able to sit down with the SAO and public defender, or make an appointment with the judge, whereas that is not the case in St. Lucie County.

PHASE II: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

State Attorney's Office (SAO) and Office of the Public Defender (OPD) (2 participants)

- The SAO representative commented that DJJ intake officers maintain good communication with families; however, the information DJJ intake provides can cause confusion among families regarding the court process, diversion, and trial. The SAO feels that a more standard script of information to relay to families would prevent such confusion and thereby potentially expedite parts of the process. The OPD representative agreed and provided an example in which intake suggests to the family that the youth will get diversion but such does not occur at arraignment (e.g., a plea deal is offered instead). This can result in tension between the public defender and family and can slow the court process.
- Both participants expressed the need for more community resources that could deter calls to police. For instance, in cases involving domestic violence, OPD and SAO representatives wish that there was more utility of the shelter for youth as opposed to automatic arrest.
- The public defender acknowledged that law enforcement agencies must make an arrest when called for a domestic violence situation, per agency policy. However, the State's Attorney contended that the local MOU allows the use of civil citation in domestic violence cases. The disagreement, in combination with information shared by the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office and the Port St. Lucie Police Department, indicates there may be a discrepancy in awareness around local law enforcement civil citation policies extending beyond the MOU.
- The State's Attorney admitted that workload plays a role in how quickly cases are resolved but noted that there is not enough funding from the state to support hiring more attorneys. The public defender echoed sentiments about the workload but explained that a rule of thumb within the OPD is that they will always make time to meet with youth prior to their next court date when requested.
- Participants discussed other factors that may play a role in slowing the court process, including: when a youth pleads to the court and a predisposition report is needed thereby pushing the timeline back 30 days; difficulty in scheduling appointments between the public defender and the youth (often due to conflicts with the parent/guardian's work schedule); if the youth is not compliant (such as meeting with a therapist); and if the parent/guardian is not compliant (e.g., signing documents, getting their child to appointments).
- The participants agreed that parents are key to a youth's success, but can also be a factor in deterring that success. The SAO representative noted that if a parent interferes with a youth's adherence to probation terms, the parent can be held accountable by the court. However, it is the State's Attorney's understanding that DJJ taking such action is discouraged. The public defender explained that attorneys in their office prioritize engagement with parents to facilitate the best possible result.

FINDINGS

The following portion of the report details findings across the DJJ data analysis, focus groups, and statute/policy review. The results are organized by general topics that include: youth offender population demographics, history of contact, mental and behavioral health indicators, offenses, civil citation, diversion, detention, disposition outcomes, case timelines and probation violations, and crossover youth. Many topics include sub-focuses in addition to key takeaways that offer brief summaries of critical findings. Within each topic area, information specific to St. Lucie County is presented first and followed by that which is applicable to the remaining Circuit 19 jurisdictions (i.e., Indian River, Martin, and Okeechobee Counties) in order to facilitate direct comparisons across the communities. Other key themes have been grouped throughout the report to highlight areas relevant and tangential to the juvenile legal system in St. Lucie County (e.g., resources and services, court collaboration, SROs).

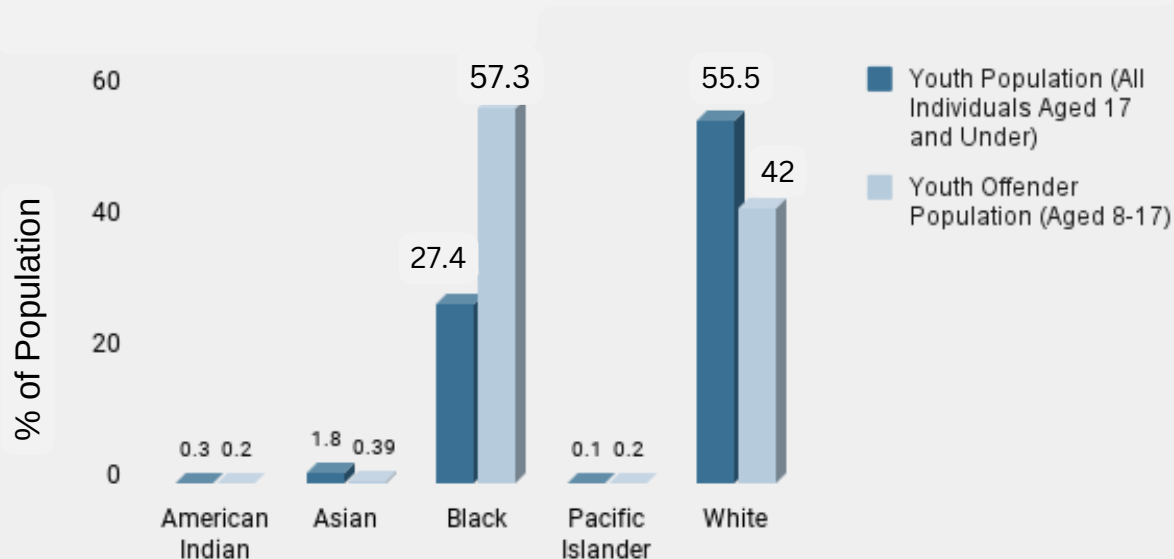


St. Lucie County Youth Offender Demographics Compared to General Population

Race/Ethnicity

Between July 2019 and June 2022, a total of 1,025 individual youth encountered some level of the juvenile legal system in St. Lucie County. Black youth represented the majority of youth offenders in St. Lucie County, accounting for just over **57% of documented offenders**. By contrast, Black or African American youth composed just over 27% of the youth population in St. Lucie County according to the 2021 U.S. Census Data. White youth, on the other hand, represented almost **56% of the youth population** in the county but **only 42% of the county's youth offenders**. A similar pattern follows for Asian youth as they accounted for close to **2% of youth generally** and less than **half of a percent** in the legal system. American Indian and Pacific Islander youth respectively accounted for **less than 1% of St. Lucie County's youth and youthful offenders**.

General and Youth Offender Demographics Across St. Lucie Co.



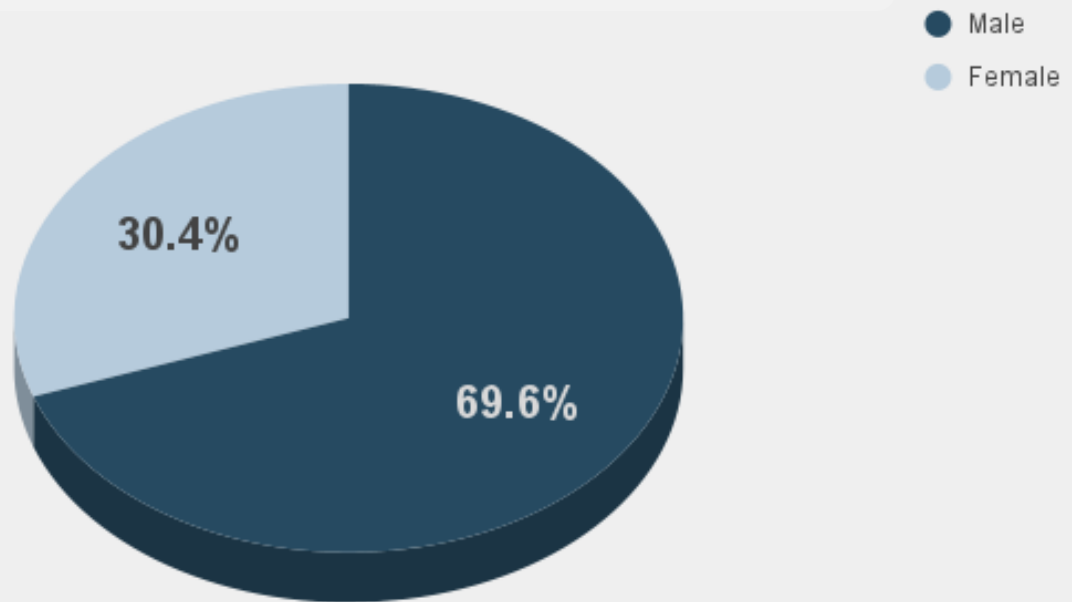
Key Takeaways: Black youth encountered the youth legal system in St. Lucie County at more than twice their rate in the general population. While the rate of disproportionality is lower compared to the other Circuit 19 counties, it remains problematic and should be directly addressed (see next section for information on disproportionality in the remaining counties). White and Asian youth are underrepresented in the juvenile legal system compared to their prevalence in the general population. This on par with Martin and Indian River Counties.

St. Lucie County Youth Offender Demographics Compared to General Population

Sex

Females were responsible for 30% of juvenile offenses, whereas 70% of offenses were attributed to males. More specifically, Black females represented just under 18% of all offenders and White females accounted for 13% of the total sum of offenders. On the other hand, Black males were involved with 39% of youth offenses and White males engaged in slightly under 30%. American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander males accounted for less than 1% of offenses respectively.

Total Offenses by Female Offenders by Demographic (SLC)



St. Lucie County Youth Offender Demographics Compared to General Population

Socioeconomic Status

Although not analyzed using DJJ data, socioeconomic status is another important consideration among youth offender demographics. Multiple stakeholder groups acknowledged the profound impact of poverty on young people in the St. Lucie County community – particularly in Fort Pierce. Participants in various focus groups discussed the role that poverty can play in why and how young people encounter the legal system, such as how youth engage in school, resource availability, and taking part in illicit activities to make money.

- *“When you have a kid struggling with housing, who doesn’t have a place to sleep or a meal to eat, they come to school and they’re already overwhelmed. They don’t have the energy to focus in class... They reach their breaking point and become out of control. So the school calls the police. Now that kid has a charge and is in the juvenile justice system – when they just needed a guidance counselor to say, ‘Hey, what’s going on?’ or to help get this family’s lights on.” – IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member*
- *“The southern end is better off financially than the northern end of the county. The demographics and financial needs change depending on the school and area of the county. There are different social norms. Even though the resources are applied equally, they tend to get more of the referrals up north. They have a higher need. Higher concentrations based on neighborhoods.” – SRO*
- *“If we can provide services and understand the contributing factors to why a kid is repeating offenses, like hunger, then we can actually help them. If you start digging into the family, you can see why those kids are the way they are and are showing certain behaviors.” – DJJ Intake personnel*
- *“There are poverty-ridden areas in Fort Pierce which contributes to kids violating their probation.” – DJJ Probation personnel*
- *“Sometimes both parents are absent, and grandparents are taking care of the kids, with limited finances, and the kids do non-traditional things so they can make money.” – DJJ Probation personnel*

Remaining 19th Circuit County Youth Offender Demographics Compared to General Population

Okeechobee County. A total of **169 young people** touched the juvenile legal system in Okeechobee County between July 2019 and June 2022. American Indian youth accounted for **just over 1% of offenders**, which is comparable to their prevalence in the community; Black youth composed slightly under **20% of youth offenders** despite making up less than **6% of the general youth population**; and White youth represented **79% of youth offenders** which is comparable to their population in the county. Pacific Islander youth totaled **less than 1%**. In Okeechobee County, females contributed to **35% of offenses** while males **accounted for 65%**.

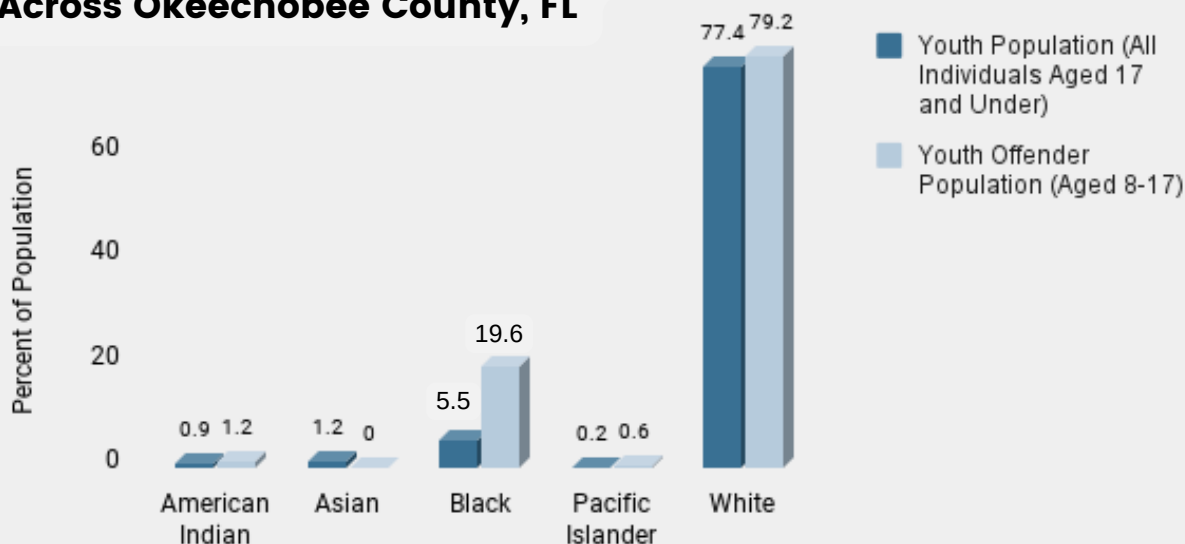
Indian River County. Youth offenders in Indian River totaled **344 individuals** during this timeframe. **Fifty percent** were Black youth, which is almost four times higher than the local Black youth population. On the contrary, **49% of youth offenders** were White despite composing **68% of the local youth population**. Young people identified as Asian composed **1.5% of the youth population** and **less than half a percent** of youth offenders. Pacific Islanders accounted for **less than 1%** which is comparable to their prevalence in the community. Roughly **22% of offenders** in Indian River were female while **78%** were male.

Martin County. Three hundred thirty youth were identified as juvenile offenders in Martin County. Of those, **32% were Black** – a rate **3.8 times higher** than their prevalence in the community, which is **8.5% of the general population**. Roughly **67% of offenders** were White, which is **10% less than** the White youth county population. Asian youth were also underrepresented among offenders at less than half a percent despite composing over **2% of the youth population**. The prevalence of Pacific Islander youth in the legal system is less than half a percent and is comparable to their rate in the community. Close to **36% of youth** were females and **64%** were labeled male.

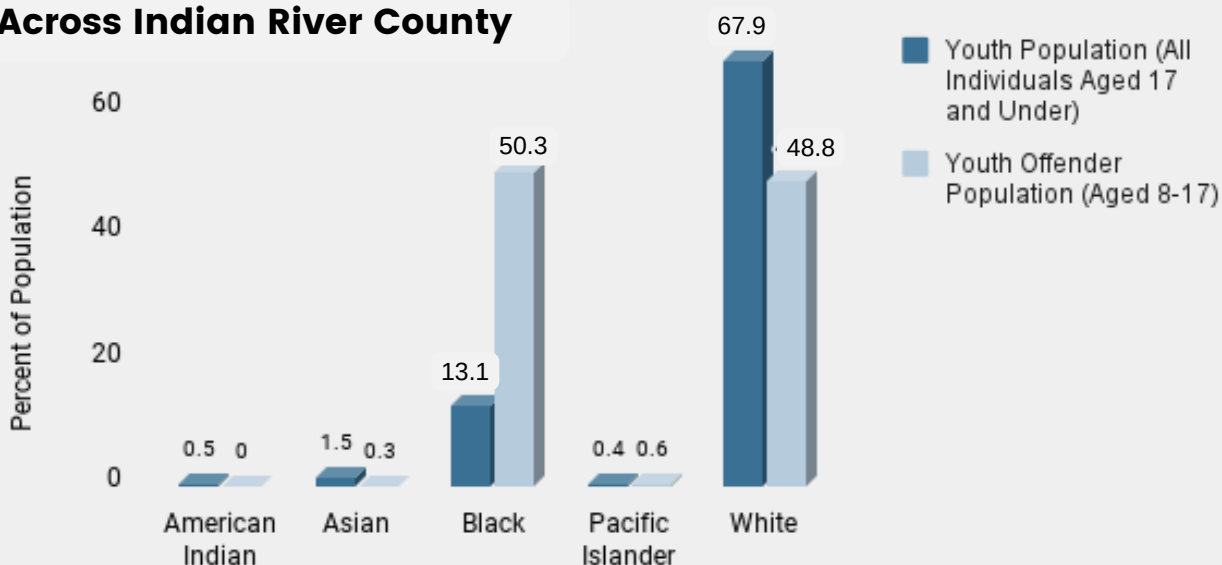
Key Takeaway: Black youth are represented in the youth legal system at nearly four times their rate than in Okeechobee, Indian River, and Martin Counties' general youth population. White and Asian youth, by contrast, are disproportionately underrepresented in the Martin and Indian River County youth legal systems.

Remaining 19th Circuit County Youth Offender Demographics Compared to General Population

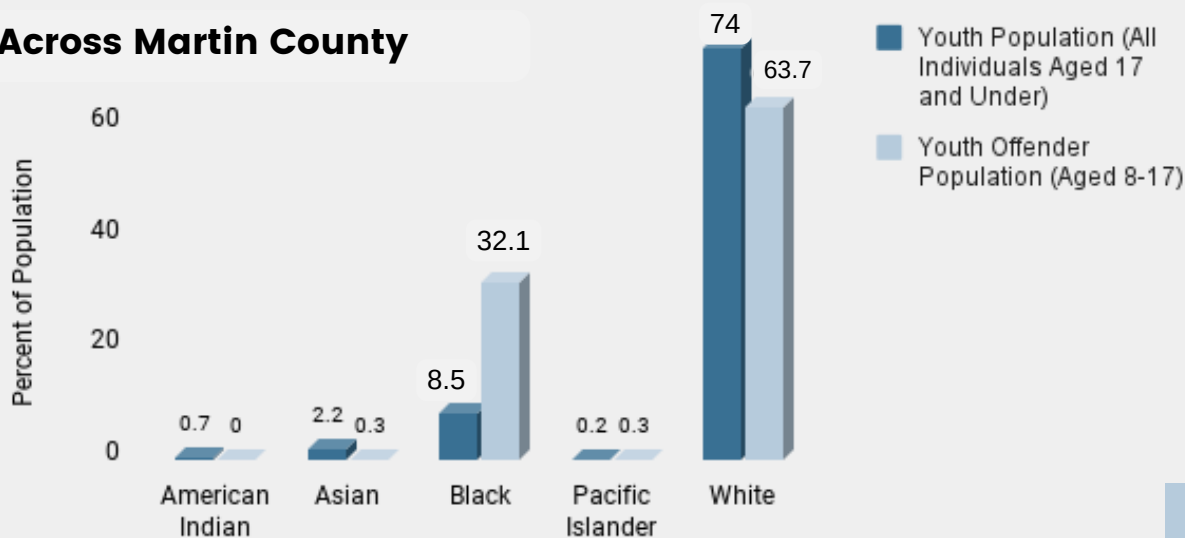
Comparing General and Youth Offender Demographics Across Okeechobee County, FL



Across Indian River County



Across Martin County



History of DJJ Contact among St. Lucie County Youth Offenders

Among the 1,025 individual youth who contacted the juvenile legal system in St. Lucie County, 681 (66%) had history with the system in which they were found guilty of a past offense (herein referred to as contacts, touches, or encounters). Of those 681 young people, 47% had one prior contact; 9% had two prior contacts; 4% had three prior contacts; and 7% had four or more previous encounters with the system.

History of DJJ Contact among Remaining 19th Circuit County Youth Offenders

Okeechobee County. Okeechobee County had the highest rate of repeat offenders in 19th Circuit, though comparable to St. Lucie County, with 70% of its 169 youth having prior experience with the legal system. Of those, 46% had contacted the system once before; 7% had encountered it twice; 5% had three prior contacts; and 12% had four or more past encounters.

Indian River County. Sixty-three percent of justice-involved youth in Indian River had a history of contact with the system. 43% of those individuals had one prior encounter; 9% had two past points of contact; 5% saw three prior contacts; and 6% touched the legal system four or more times.

Martin County. Martin County had the lowest rate of chronic offenders, with 52% of its 330 identified youth having past contact with the legal system. 37% of those individuals had one past offense; 6% touched the system twice before; 2% had three prior contacts; and 6% experienced four or more past encounters.

Key Takeaway: Repeat offenders who have previously been found guilty of at least one offense constituted the majority of youth who contacted the youth legal system across 19th Circuit counties. St. Lucie County had the second highest rate of repeat offending, though the vast majority of repeat offenders had been found guilty of only one prior charge.

MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INDICATORS AMONG ST. LUCIE COUNTY YOUTH OFFENDERS

The Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument (MAYSI-II) is a validated screening tool used to evaluate mental, emotional, and behavioral health among youth entering the juvenile justice system (e.g., at intake). There are a total of eight domains, each with its own “cut-off” score indicating the need for an assessment referral in that service area. For the purposes of this report, the following domains were analyzed: Alcohol/Drug Use, Depressed-Anxious, Suicide Ideation, and Traumatic Experiences.

In St. Lucie County, 936 individual youth were documented as having been administered the MAYSI-II. Five hundred twenty-nine (56%) of those youth were Black, 399 (43%) were White, two individuals were American Indian, four youth were Asian, and two were Pacific Islander (accounting for less than 1% each). Of the youth who were evaluated, 7% demonstrated alcohol and/or drug related concerns. 25% of young people presented as having needs in the Depressed-Anxious domain. Within the Suicide Ideation category, 16% of youth surpassed the cutoff score. Finally, 53% of youth had exposure to trauma.

Key Takeaway: The majority of youth assessed at DJJ Intake had experienced trauma and a quarter of this population struggled with symptoms related to depression and anxiety.

“It goes hand-in-hand. When these kids experience trauma without getting the help they need to cope with it, it plays out in their behavior – at school, while amongst their peers, in the community.” - IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member

MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INDICATORS AMONG ST. LUCIE COUNTY YOUTH OFFENDERS

Although 936 young people underwent a MAYSI-II screening, data for only 913 of those individuals was available for analysis related to service referrals. Specific information regarding the type of service referral made (e.g., substance use counseling, mental health therapy, etc.) was also not available. Among the 913 youth whose information could be analyzed, 729 (80%) were referred to services by DJJ Intake. This includes individuals who scored beyond the cut-off in any domain on the MAYSI-II as well as overrides made by DJJ staff based on observations of youth. Fifty percent of American Indian and Pacific Islander youth who were evaluated were referred for services, respectively. DJJ Intake made referrals for 75% of Asian youth, 78% of Black youth, and 83% of White youth who were screened.

While Intake referred 80% of youth who were screened to related services, those services were entirely voluntary for the youth and family and there is no documentation of whether the resources were accessed. When asked about whether young people and families with whom they work typically receive the services to which they were referred, one IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member who had previously worked at Intake speculated:

- *“The downfall is communicating the recommendations to the parents and then the importance of following up on it – calling the parents or JPO a second time and asking if they received your email or your fax... Everyone wants to participate but the family doesn’t have the resources available to get to their appointment – when resources are first-come-first-serve and very limited, no one is going to go out of their way to connect that child to resources. They will just move on to the kids whose parents do have transportation and do show up.”*

Key Takeaway: DJJ Intake made service referrals for the vast majority of young people who were screened. However, it is unclear based on the data whether those young people accessed those resources and, if they did, how successful treatment was.

MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INDICATORS AMONG ST. LUCIE COUNTY YOUTH OFFENDERS

DJJ intake staff shed light on the service referral process, indicating that following up with parents/guardians and youth is a part of their standard procedure.

- *“We do the assessment, but after, we are required to follow-up with them, like: ‘We recommended these services, are you going?’ Or we will tell them their next court date, stuff like that. But there’s nothing we can do beyond the follow-up, if the kid is not doing what they are supposed to do.” – DJJ Intake personnel*
- *“After the intake appointment, I reach out to families that are of particular concern. There is concern that JPOs will send task referrals, so I will call to give those families encouragement, since it’s all voluntary and they don’t have to participate.” – DJJ Intake personnel*

Despite that intake referred 80% of youth who were assessed with the MAYSI-II to services in the community, some child welfare staff were unaware that referrals could be made through intake. However, those who were aware contended that DJJ is not able to influence or monitor whether youth attend those services.

- *“That’s news to me. I didn’t know they made referrals at the JAC.”
– Child welfare staff member*
- *“They don’t have the teeth to make kids go to services or to track them.” – Child welfare staff member*

Key Takeaway: There is debate among various stakeholders as to the efficacy of referring youth and families to voluntary services at intake. Increased awareness among partners around when individuals are referred and to what resources may help reinforce and facilitate access to those services.

MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INDICATORS AMONG REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTY YOUTH OFFENDERS

The same four MAYSI-II domains (i.e., Alcohol/Drug Use, Depressed-Anxious, Suicide Ideation, and Traumatic Experiences) were analyzed for youth in the remaining 19th Circuit counties.

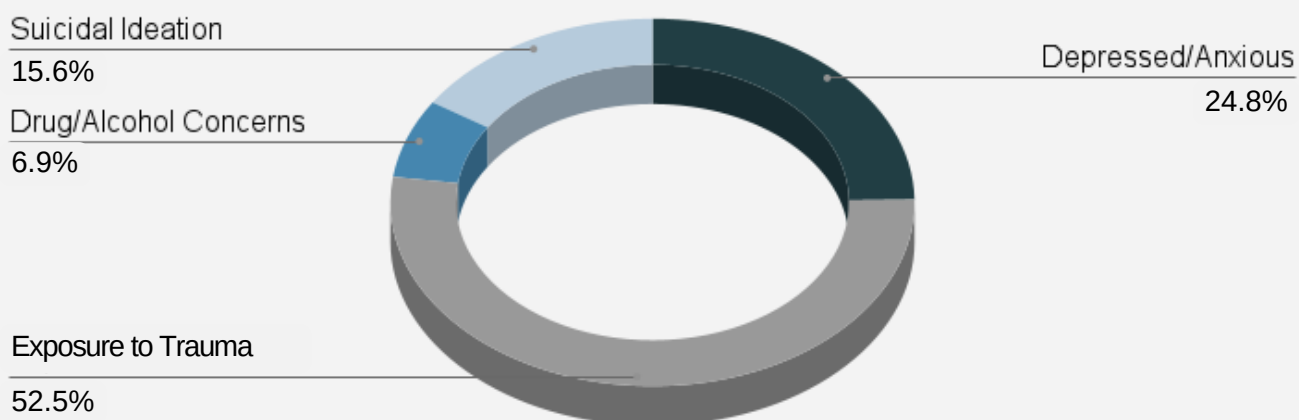
Okeechobee County. In Okeechobee County, 146 youth were screened and results demonstrated that **14%** had alcohol/drug concerns; **25%** presented as depressed/anxious; **15%** experienced suicidal ideation; and **56%** had been exposed to traumatic experiences. Data for 128 of those individuals was available on service referrals, indicating that 90 youth (**70%**) were referred for various services.

Indian River County. In Indian River County, 298 youth were screened at intake. Of those, **9%** demonstrated needs related to alcohol/drugs; **23%** experienced symptoms related to depression/anxiety; **18%** experienced suicidal ideation; and **55%** had been exposed to trauma. Data on referrals was available for 291 youth, of which 235 (**81%**) were referred by DJS Intake for services.

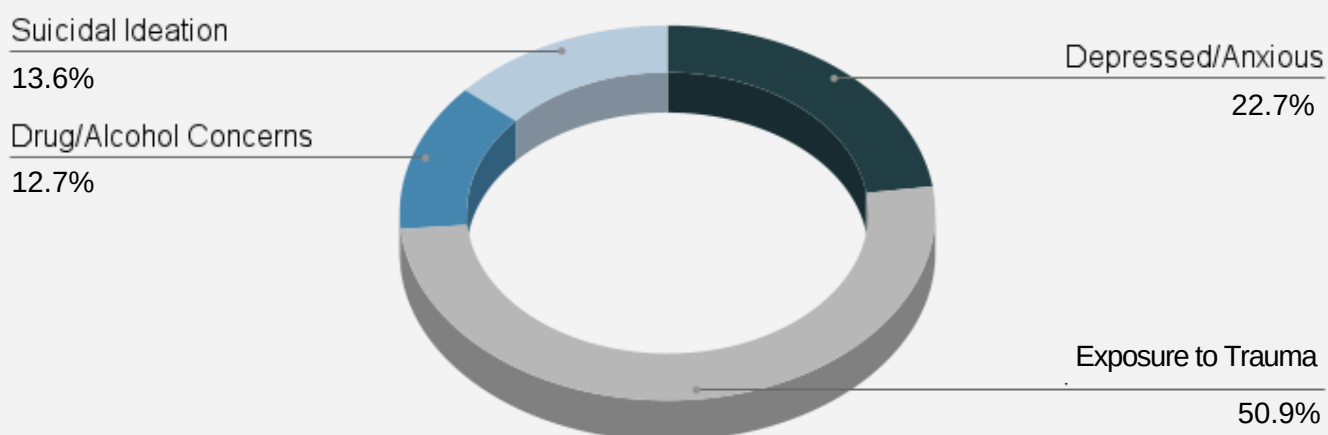
Martin County. Martin County DJS Intake screened 241 young people, of which **14%** demonstrated concerns related to alcohol/drug use; **24%** displayed symptoms of depression/anxiety; **21%** experienced suicidal ideation; and **60%** were exposed to a traumatic event. Referral information was available on 236 of the Martin County youth who underwent the MAYSI-II and 188 (**80%**) were referred by Intake for services.

MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INDICATORS AMONG REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTY YOUTH OFFENDERS

Mental and Behavioral Health Indicators (MAYSI-II Domains) Across Youth Offenders In SLC

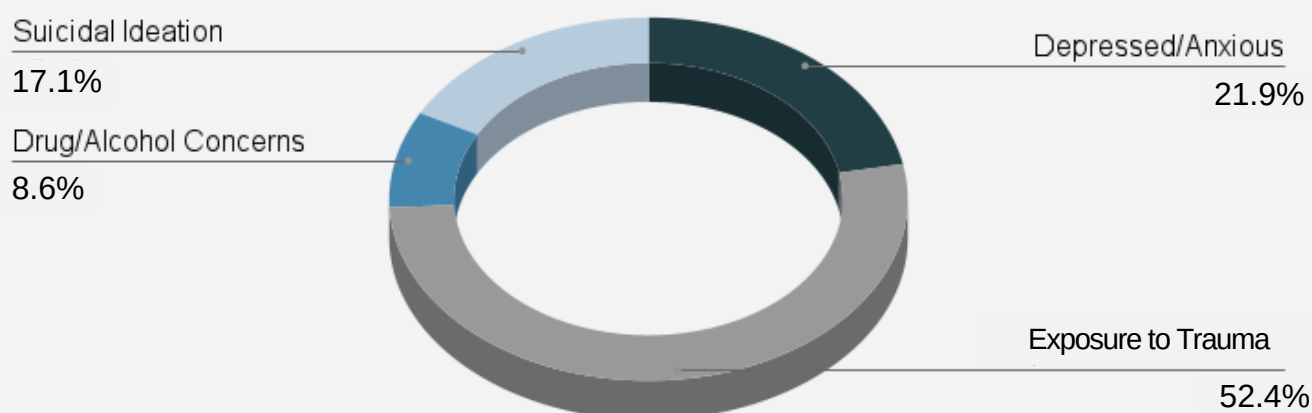


Mental and Behavioral Health Indicators (MAYSI-II Domains) Across Youth Offenders In Okeechobee Co.

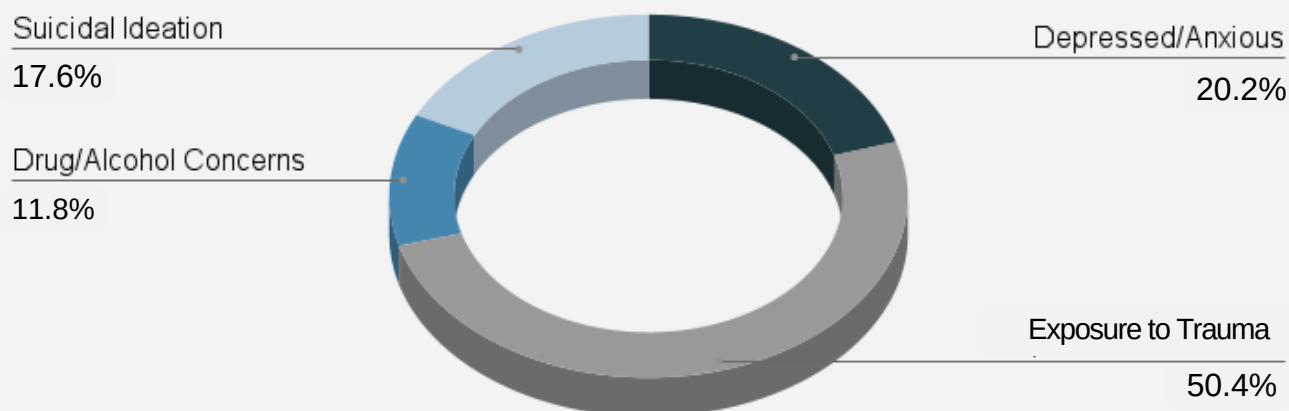


MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INDICATORS AMONG REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTY YOUTH OFFENDERS

Mental and Behavioral Health Indicators (MAYSI-II Domains) Across Youth Offenders In Indian River Co.

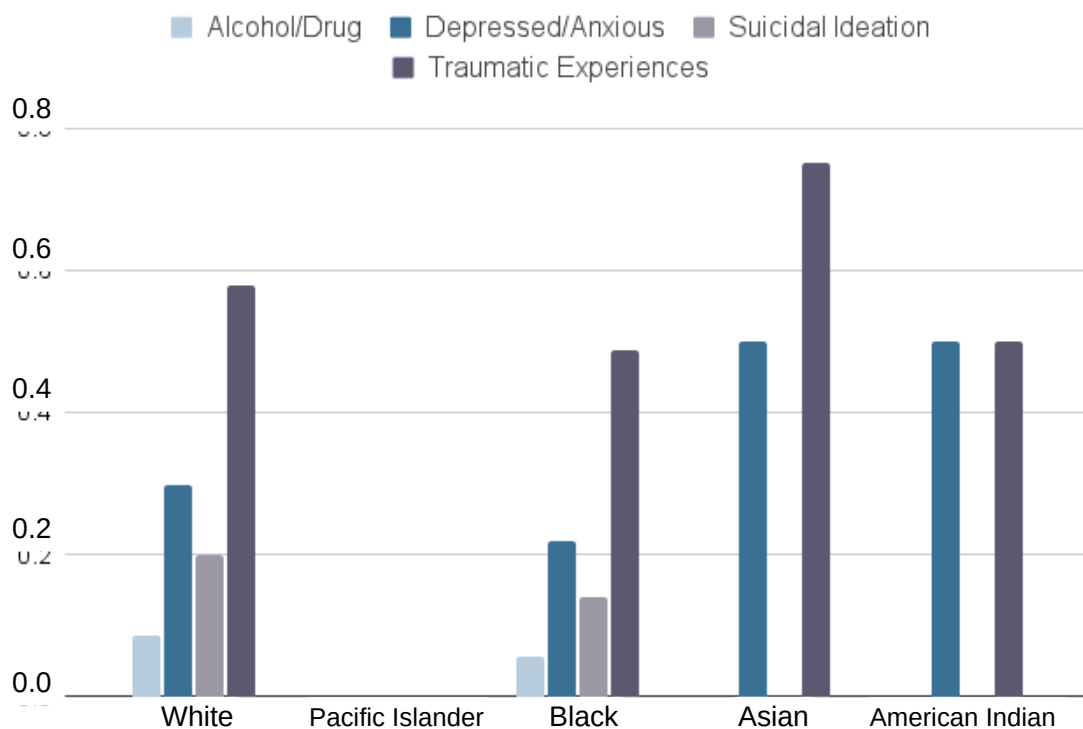


Mental and Behavioral Health Indicators (MAYSI-II Domains) Across Youth Offenders In Martin Co.



MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INDICATORS AMONG REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTY YOUTH OFFENDERS

Most Common Mental and Behavioral Health Needs in SLC



- **Key Takeaway:** Across 19th Circuit counties (including St. Lucie County), roughly **25%** of youth offenders displayed signs of depression and/or anxiety and more than half had undergone trauma exposure. Further, at least **15%** of youth who were screened at intake across all four counties raised concerns about suicidal ideation. DJS Intake referred at least **80%** of youth for services in three of the four counties (Okeechobee County referred only **70%** of youth to services).

YOUTH OFFENSES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

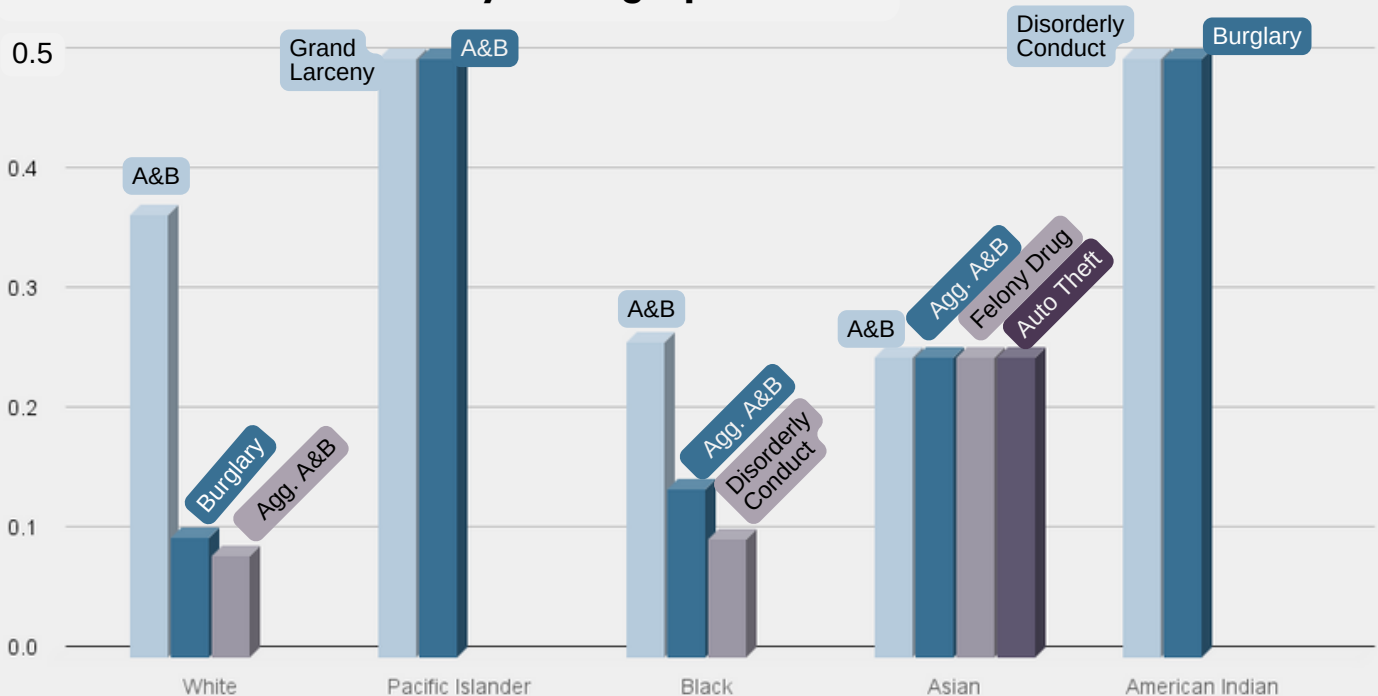
Offenses among youthful offenders across St. Lucie County and 19th Circuit were examined through various lenses, including identification of the most common offenses, the number of violent felonies committed, and the number of offenses that were school-related. Subpopulations were taken into consideration to identify additional trends and patterns regarding how young people encounter the juvenile legal system.

Most Common Offenses

The most common offenses by youth in St. Lucie County were comparable to those in other 19th Circuit counties. Across all four counties in consideration, assault/battery was the top offense. However, the rate of this offense in St. Lucie was between **5% and 11% higher** than in Okeechobee, Martin, and Indian River counties. Over **31% of offenses** in St. Lucie County were of this nature followed by: aggravated assault/battery (12%), burglary (9%), disorderly conduct (7%), and petit larceny (4%).

Offenses that occurred most often among Black youth were: assault/battery (26% of offenses among this group); aggravated assault/battery (14%); and disorderly conduct (10%). Comparatively, White youth most frequently engaged in assault/battery (37% of offenses among this group); burglary (10%), and aggravated assault/battery (8%). See graphic below for additional demographics and corresponding top offenses.

Most Common Offenses by Demographic in SLC

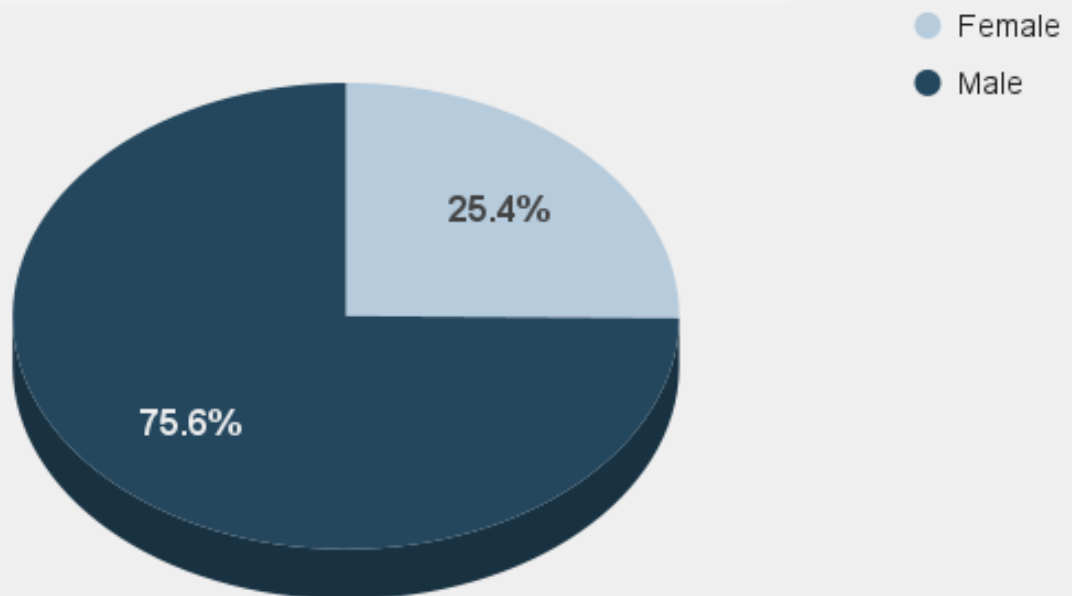


YOUTH OFFENSES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Violent Felonies

Of the 1,025 youth in St. Lucie County included in this analysis, 205 (20%) were charged with violent felonies, which is slightly higher than the other 19th Circuit counties which ranged from 12% to 16%. Females made up 25% of violent felonies in St. Lucie County, with the remaining 75% attributed to males. Black youth accounted for 62% of violent felony charges; White youth represented 38% of those who engaged in violent felonies; and Asian youth composed less than 1% of violent felonies. Among racial demographics, Black females and Black males totaled 29% and 71% of violent felonies among Black youth, respectively. White females contributed to 20% of violent felonies among White youth (the remaining 80% were White males). Last, one Asian male youth accounted for the only violent felony among the Asian youth population.

Violent Felonies by Sex in St. Lucie County, FL



YOUTH OFFENSES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

School-Related Offenses

Data was not available on the specific locations where offenses took place. However, the location type was able to be distinguished when an offense occurred at school. In St. Lucie County, 285 (28%) of the 1,025 youth accounted for engaged in a school-related offense. However, as previously noted, the timespan for the data in consideration included the COVID-19 pandemic in which schools were closed for at least one year.

- *“The numbers for school offenses are way higher now; the 28% was probably low because it included COVID when our schools were completely shut down. So it’s probably accurate for that period but it’s definitely higher when school is in session.” – St. Lucie County Sheriff’s Office personnel*

The three most common offenses that occurred at school included: assault/battery (35% of school offenses), aggravated assault/battery (20%), and disorderly conduct (20%). The majority (64%) of those offenses were attributed to males. When examining racial demographics, 67% of school incidents were among Black students; 33% were committed by White students; and less than 1% of school offenses resulted from American Indian and Asian youth. Of note, White females were responsible for 26% of school-related incidents among White students and Black females accounted for 42% of incidents among Black students.

In light of the fact that disorderly conduct charges accounted for one fifth of school-related offenses and can often be interpreted subjectively, stakeholders were asked to share their perspective on the issue. Law enforcement officers commented that disorderly conduct is rare when school is not in session, and when it does occur officers often resolve the complaint on scene or adjust what is formally documented. However, when the disorderly complaint comes from a school, officers feel they have less flexibility in their response.

- *“I haven’t had a single disorderly conduct over the summer.” – Port St. Lucie Police Department officer*
- *“If you get a disorderly conduct with a juvenile at a park playing basketball, we usually charge them with trespassing or tell them to keep moving. At the school setting, that’s not an option that we have.” – Port St. Lucie Police Department officer*

YOUTH OFFENSES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

School-Related Offenses (Continued)

On the other hand, school administrators explained that referral to law enforcement is a last resort and, when it occurs, there can be negative implications for the student on multiple fronts.

- *“In most situations, we don’t want our students to be arrested or deal with the legal system. If we can deal with it at the school level then we try to work that angle.” – School administrator*
- *“There can be both disciplinary action in school because of the code of conduct as well as potential criminal charges.” – School administrator*

Still, others speculated that disorderly conduct charges stemming from school challenges could be avoided if more restorative, developmentally-appropriate, and collaborative responses were available.

- *“We’re low right now on intake, but when school starts, we will get hit hard with new violations. Horseplay becomes a battery a lot at school. Why don’t we have more leniency and mediation in schools before we arrest a kid?” – DJJ Probation personnel*
- *“In Martin County, we had a better relationship with the schools and the SROs. They would call probation and see how we could intervene instead of filing new charges.” – DJJ Probation personnel*
- *“Parents will make schools aware that their child is bullied and struggling with mental health, for example. They will say, ‘My child needs to get out of this class or away from this other child,’ schools will not act, then students will get into fights. And, when they do, the school will call law enforcement – instead of putting that kid on a HOPE Scholarship to change schools or intervening to get those kids help instead of criminalizing them.” – DJJ Intake personnel*

YOUTH OFFENSES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

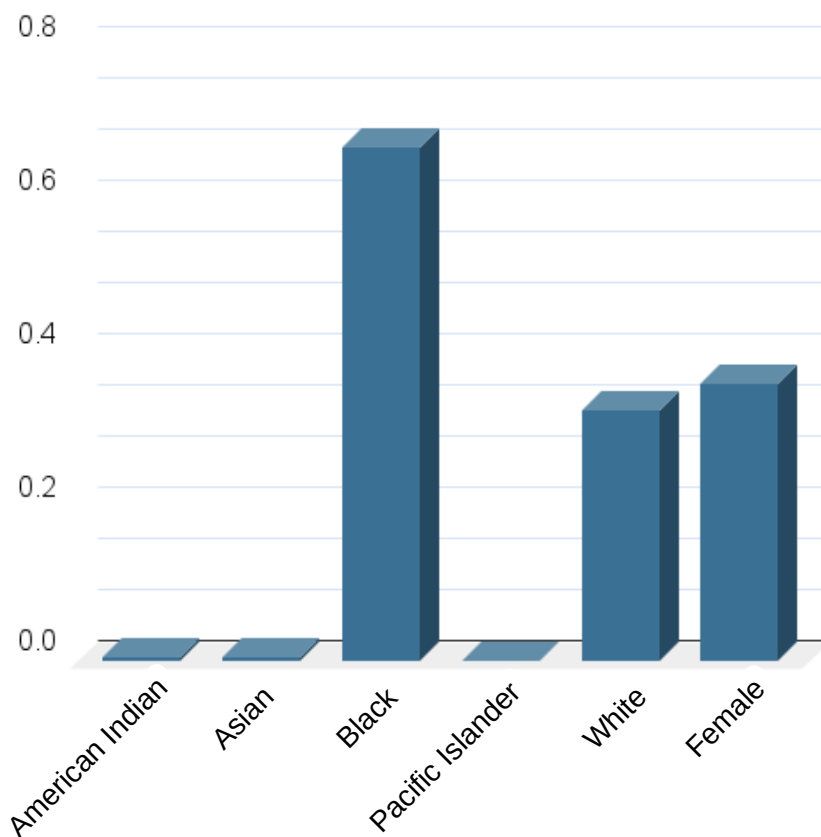
“The schools that we have IGNITE kids in have a lifeline to reach out to us before they call the police. But that’s just a handful of kids. Kids who don’t have a mentor or a connection with IGNITE will not have the same opportunities for grace.” – IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member

Key Takeaway: The location where offenses occur plays a role in whether youth encounter the legal system, particularly for low level behaviors. Namely, offenses that take place at school seem to increase the likelihood that youth will be arrested or receive a referral due to the nature of law enforcement feeling they have less discretion in how to respond.

YOUTH OFFENSES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

School Offenses by Demographic in St. Lucie Co., FL

■ Percent of School-Related Offenses By Race/Sex



YOUTH OFFENSES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Law Enforcement on Campus

School resource officers and school resource deputies (collectively referred to as SROs for the purpose of this report) have a presence on every public school campus in Florida as mandated by law. However, the manner in which SROs are utilized in schools deviates from campus to campus as determined by each school's administration. Regarding how to determine whether to involve an SRO in a situation, stakeholders agreed that it is incumbent upon the administrator – and the administrator alone – to decide in most scenarios.

- *“There is discretion from school to school, and the administrator can elicit your help for anything, but it’s different depending on the school.” – SRO*
- *“Generally, it’s driven by the school administrators or the principal since they are the owner of the campus. They will have contact with the SROs and SRDs if they need involvement. It comes down to the principals.” – School administrator*
- *“A term that’s used often is ‘dean before deputy’ so we would only engage if it’s an incident that the school can’t control.” – St. Lucie County Sheriff’s Office personnel*
- *“Teachers don’t reach out to SROs; that’s done through administration. We decide when the SROs or SRDS are needed. SROs are aware of all the communication that takes place on campus and they try to be proactive, like if they find out there’s a fight in the PE area, then they might respond there to assist if needed. If it’s a regular call to a classroom then they won’t respond unless we [administration] ask them to.” – School administrator*
- *“The officers’ primary role is safety and security. They aren’t used for classroom management. They aren’t actively walking around looking for crimes. We will call upon them when we need them.” – School administrator*

YOUTH OFFENSES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

However, some focus group participants discussed that this level of discretion can be subject to influence beyond safety and security factors. For instance, certain administrators might involve an SRO out of concern for how taking action themselves might affect their relationships with students and guardians. Alternatively, others speculated that school staff may be exhausted by an ongoing challenge which leads to a request for law enforcement involvement.

- *“As far as the schools go, I think the big ticker about why the law enforcement is involved more these days is due to liability. The principal and administration don’t want to put themselves in a position that isn’t popular. They’ll lean on law enforcement to make decisions that aren’t popular. When it comes to incidences at schools, they don’t have a lot of wiggle room.” – Port St. Lucie Police Department officer*
- *“When they would get tired of a behavioral problem, they would sometimes try to turn that into a law enforcement problem. Or they would try to turn it into a mental health problem that they want to farm out [of the school]. We see a lot of times when it is harder to do the right thing for the kid, but the staff get fed up from dealing with the youth over time. It’s identifying and responding to the school staff when they are bringing certain things to you.” – SRO*
- *“I would say that the teachers do not have the understanding — the de-escalation tactics, the trauma-informed care, the compassion. It’s so much easier to say, ‘Forget it,’ instead of figuring out what a kid is going through. A lot of our kids won’t give their teachers a reason to show them compassion, either. Kids don’t want to humble themselves and tell their teacher what was eating them up, and so the teacher will get frustrated, throw up their hands, and say, ‘Just forget it.’” – IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member*

YOUTH OFFENSES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

As noted previously, officers feel they have less flexibility in how they respond to incidents that occur at school versus those that transpire in the community. This may be a factor contributing to the volume of school-based arrests as much as efforts to maintain physical safety. Other factors can likewise play a role in how SROs engage with students at the school where they are stationed. Focus group participants described a spectrum of how students might perceive and interact with SROs.

- *“Our students see [SROs] in a supportive role and, as best we can, we want to keep them in a positive light for our students.” – School administrator*
- *“We are more than security guards. We build relationships with the kids. You get to know their home lives, if they have siblings. Often you can establish relationships that the admin cannot, and they’ll call us in even if it isn’t a law enforcement issue because we have that connection.” – SRO*
- *“Kids also resist law enforcement because they fear law enforcement. Or law enforcement will walk up on a kid who was fighting and hit an officer, now they have a felony when they needed to just be removed from a situation.” – DJJ Intake personnel*
- *“I can’t tell you how many math homeworks I’ve helped with.” - SRO*

YOUTH OFFENSES AMONG REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Mimicking the former section on St. Lucie County, the following explores the most common offenses, violent felonies, and school-based offenses for the other three 19th Circuit communities.

Most Common Offenses

As previously noted, the most common offense among youth across 19th Circuit counties was assault/battery in which Okeechobee saw **20%** of its youth offenses; **26%** in Martin County; and **21%** in Indian River.

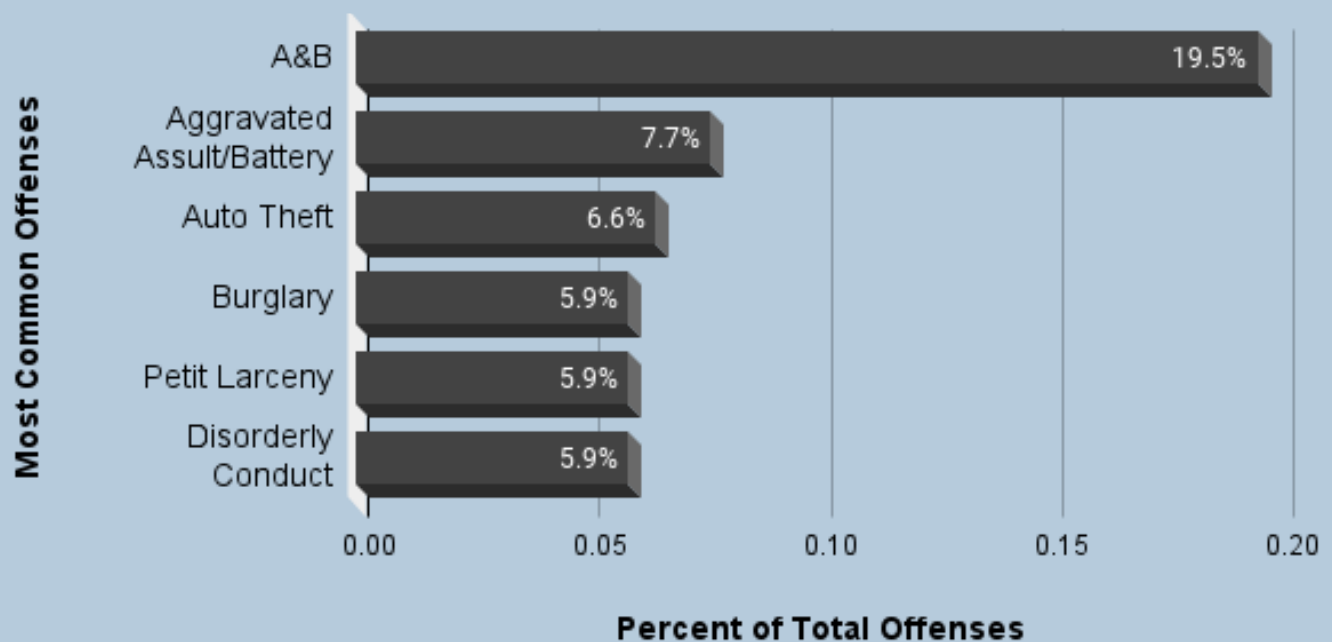
Okeechobee County. The remaining most frequent offenses in Okeechobee included: aggravated assault/battery (**8%**), auto theft (**7%**), and burglary, petit larceny, and disorderly conduct (each composing **6%**).

Martin County. In Martin County, disorderly conduct (**11%**), burglary (**11%**), petit larceny (**9%**), and aggravated assault/battery (**8%**) were the most frequent offense types after assault/battery.

Indian River County. Aside from assault/battery, top offenses in Indian River included: burglary (**12%**), aggravated assault/battery (**8%**), disorderly conduct (**7%**), and auto theft (**6%**).

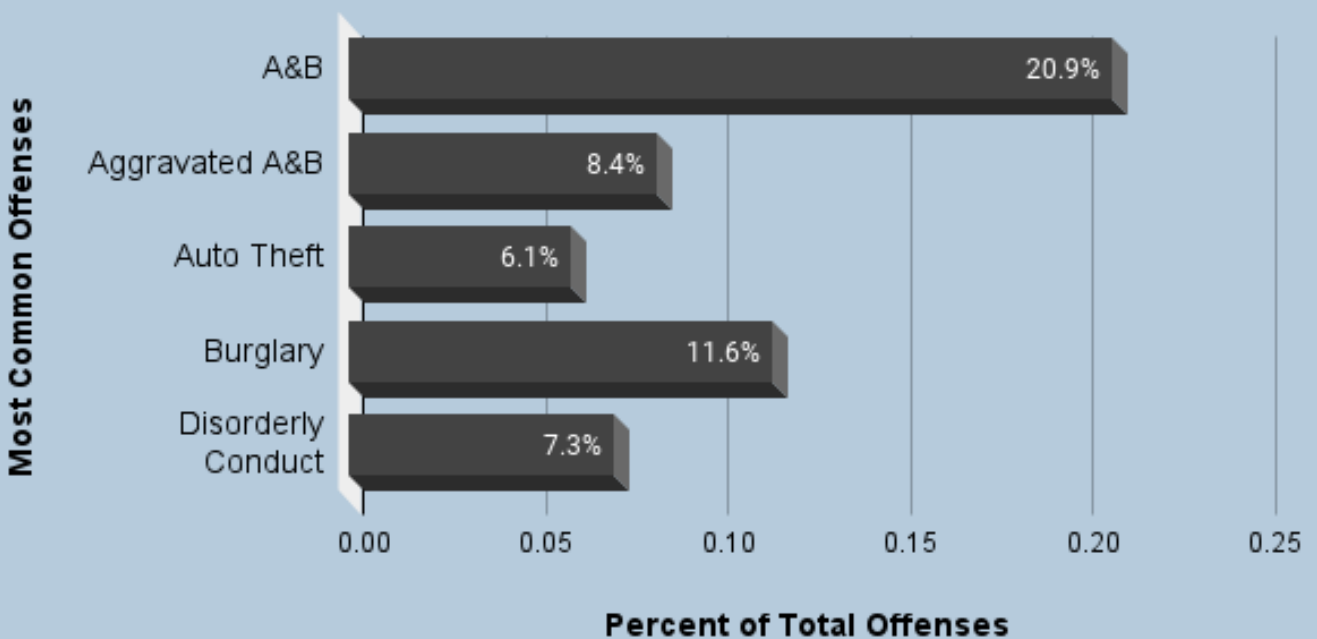
YOUTH OFFENSES AMONG REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Most Common Offenses Among Youth In Okeechobee County, Florida



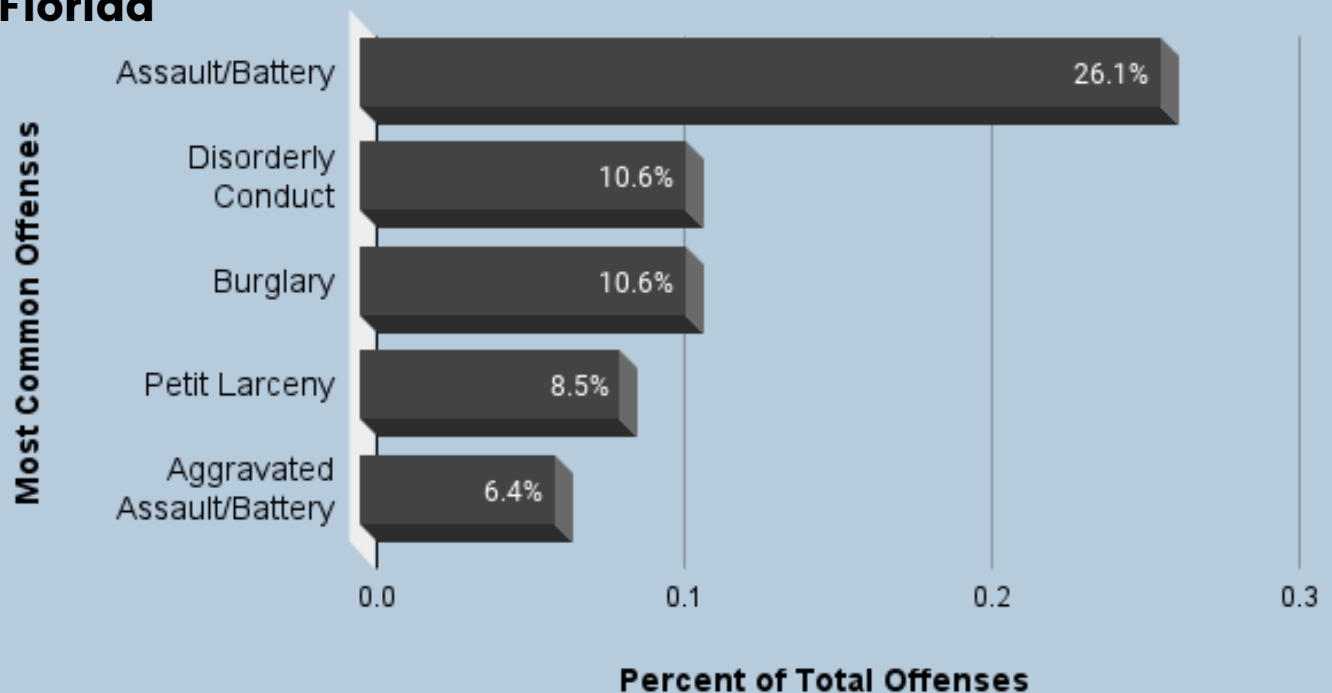
YOUTH OFFENSES AMONG REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Most Common Offenses Among Youth In Indian River County, Florida



YOUTH OFFENSES AMONG REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Most Common Offenses Among Youth In Martin County, Florida

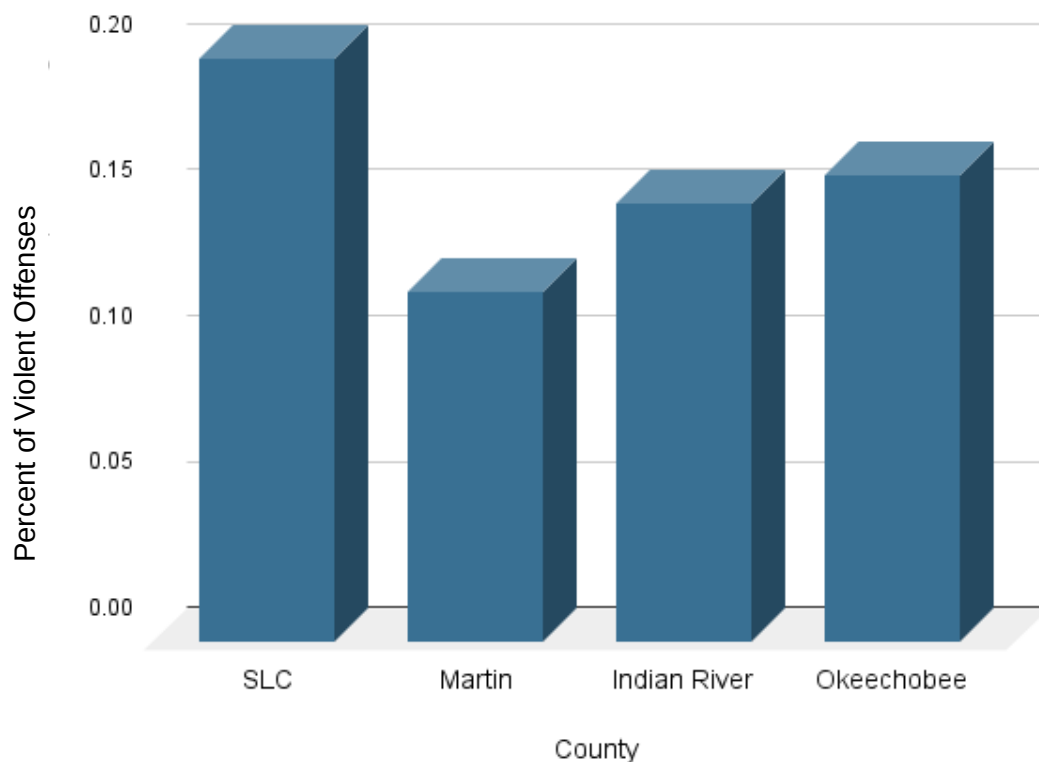


YOUTH OFFENSES AMONG REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Violent Felonies

Violent felonies composed a slightly smaller portion of charges in Okeechobee (16%), Indian River (15%), and Martin Counties (12%) compared to St. Lucie County (20%). In Okeechobee, females contributed to 28% of violent felonies. Females in Indian River represented 20% of violent felonies, and 15% of violent felonies in Martin County were committed by females. Remaining felony charges in each county were accounted for by youth identified as male.

Percent of Violent Offenses that Compose All Charges by County

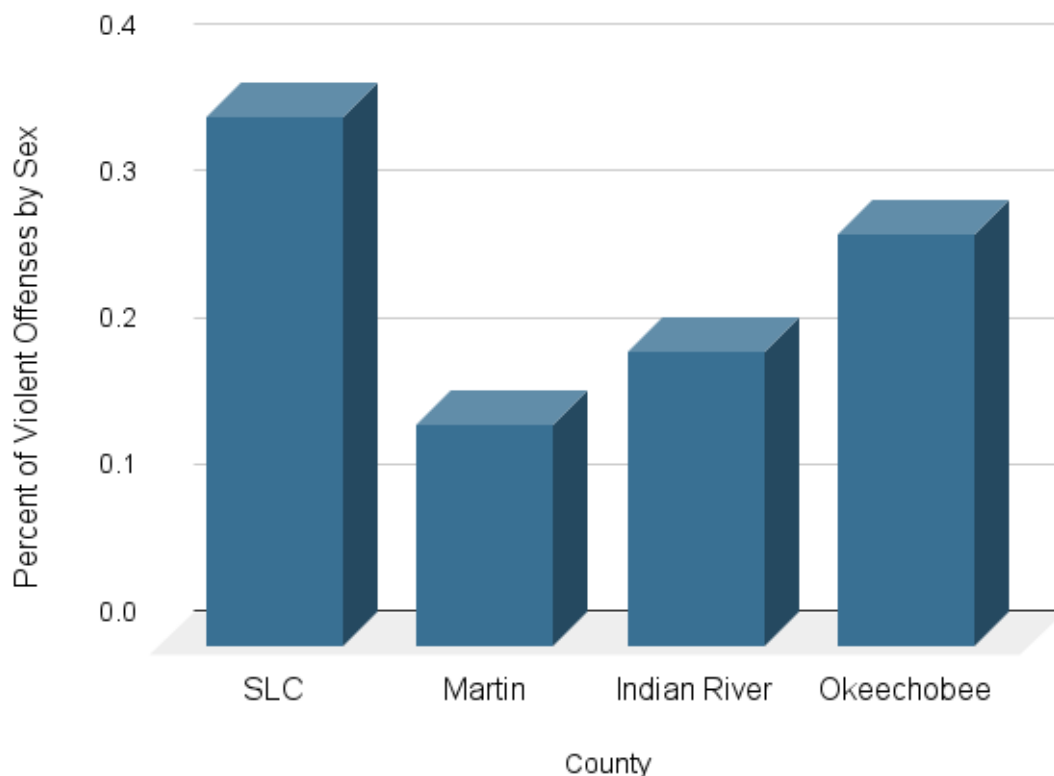


YOUTH OFFENSES AMONG REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Violent Felonies

Violent felonies composed a slightly smaller portion of charges in Okeechobee (16%), Indian River (15%), and Martin Counties (12%) compared to St. Lucie County (20%). In Okeechobee, females contributed to 28% of violent felonies. Females in Indian River represented 20% of violent felonies, and 15% of violent felonies in Martin County were committed by females. Remaining felony charges in each county were accounted for by youth identified as male.

Percent of Female Violent Offenses in District 19, by County



USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Florida requires all judicial circuits to have civil citation (or similar) programs, but does not specify which offenses should be included (beyond that they should generally be misdemeanors), or any other eligibility or program criteria—each jurisdiction is able to determine that for themselves. In Circuit 19, a Memorandum of Understanding among all relevant stakeholders in the four counties lays out many specifics around eligibility and process, and then individual counties or law enforcement units may have additional guidance that they use. For example, St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office General Order 23.01, discussed later in this document, includes a list of disqualifying offenses and other considerations specific to St. Lucie County.

Rate of Civil Citation Utility among Youth who Qualified

A total of 812 young people qualified for. Civil citation in St. Lucie County as identified in the DJJ dataset. Of those, 450 individuals (55%) were offered the opportunity to accept civil citation in lieu of a formal referral. This rate is slightly lower than neighboring Okeechobee and Martin Counties who utilized civil citation for 58% and 63%, respectively, among those who qualified. Indian River County had the lowest usage of civil citation, offering it to 49% of qualifying youth. However, it is important to note that charges deemed as applicable to civil citation in the state's database may in fact deviate locally due to the 19th Circuit MOU. This is further explored later in this section.

Given the prevalence of school-related offenses in St. Lucie County, it is reasonable to expect that civil citation might be utilized frequently on school grounds. While data on the locations of where civil citation was offered was not available, a school administrator offered the following observation on its utility:

"If the student is belligerent, then it's taken to another level and 9 out of 10 times they will get arrested. If the student calms down and listens to authority then they will be given civil citation because of the more limited disruption on campus." – School administrator

USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Demographics and Common Offenses for Youth Not Referred for Civil Citation

Despite that 812 individuals qualified for civil citation in St. Lucie County (as identified in the state DJJ dataset), 362 (45%) were not offered this type of diversion. **Fifty-two percent** of those youth were Black, **47%** were White, and **less than 1%** were Asian or Pacific Islander.

Those most prevalent offenses among youth who qualified (according to state data) but who were not referred for civil citation include: touch or strike (59%), obstruction without violence (8%), affray (5%), other theft (4%), and brawling, fighting, or corrupt public moral decency (4%). These offenses closely mirror those most common in Okeechobee, Indian River, and Martin Counties.

As depicted in the dataset, law enforcement did not provide a reason for declining to offer civil citation to young people who seemingly qualified for civil citation **32% of the time**. While efforts are currently in progress to disallow officers from not identifying a reason when submitting an affidavit, one officer offered the following plausible explanation for reason omission:

“We get a lot of domestic violence situations where civil citation isn’t an option. And so, if it is a domestic violence situation, then we may not include a reason because we can’t use civil citation in that circumstance.”

– Port St. Lucie Police Department officer

The other most common reasons for why civil citation was not pursued include: youth was not eligible based on local policy – offense involved domestic violence (28%); youth not eligible based on local policy – victim requested formal arrest processing (14%); youth was not eligible based on local policy – offense involved resisting arrest (8%); and the parent declined or refused to participate (4%).

Key Takeaway: Although on par with neighboring counties in the 19th Circuit, civil citation appeared to be significantly under-utilized in St. Lucie County as indicated by the state DJJ data. However, law enforcement officials contend that this dataset does not take into consideration local statute which details nine offenses that do not qualify for civil citation in Circuit 19. This discrepancy may contribute to conflicting perceptions of how civil citation is utilized and to what degree.

USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Demographics and Common Offenses for Youth Not Referred for Civil Citation

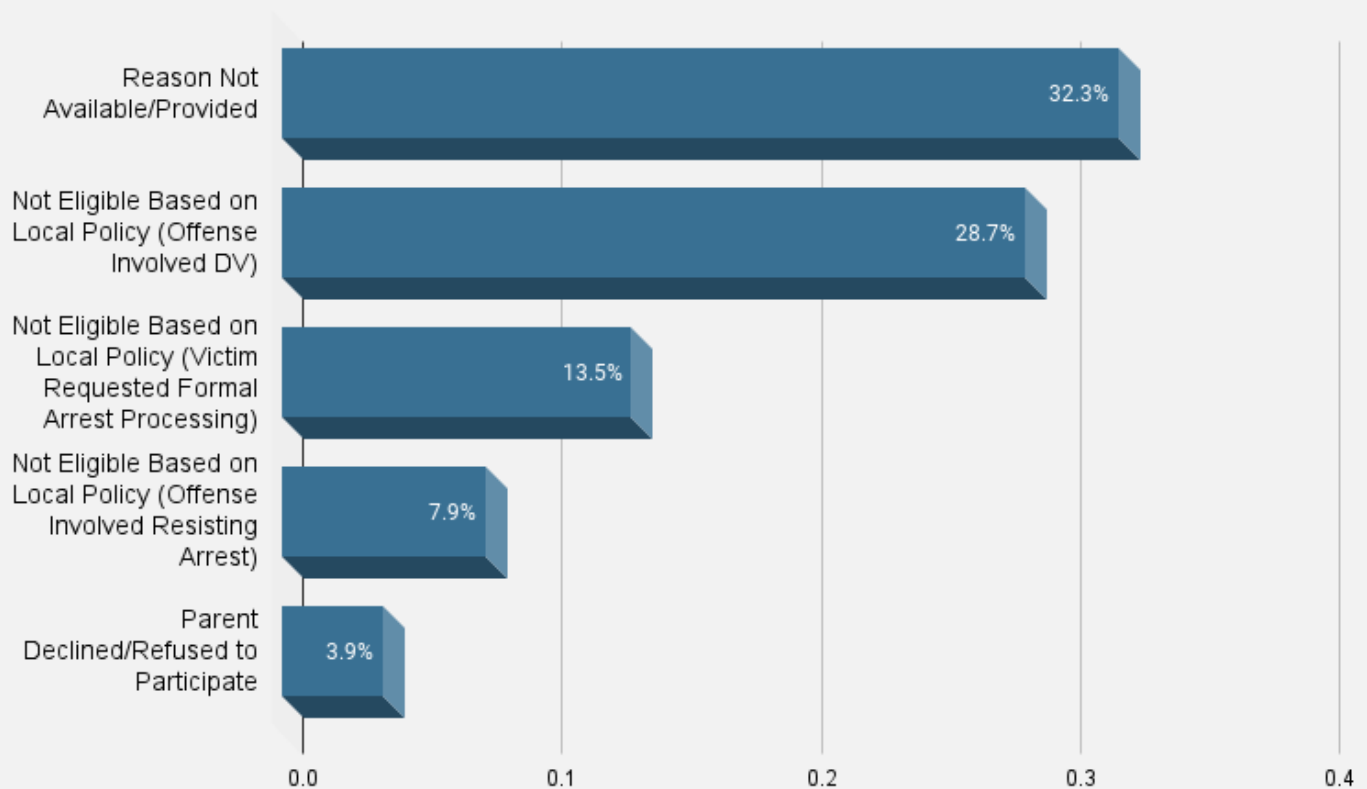
Worth noting is the fact that law enforcement declined to provide a reason for why qualifying youth did not receive civil citation more often for Black youth than for White youth, and those disparities worsened when gender was also examined. The reason for declining to offer civil citation was omitted for **46% of Black females** and **31% of Black males** compared to **30% of White females** and **25% of White males**. However, The Civil Citation Eligibility Desktop Guide, shared with CJJR by DJJ, indicates that a “JPO should read the Juvenile Complaint Affidavit prepared by law enforcement to look for a reason that Civil Citation was not offered and select that reason in the drop-down box. If a reason was not stated in the affidavit, JPO will select, 'Reason not available or provided by LEO'. If the officer is present (JAC), JPO can ask the officer for the reason that would be most appropriate.”

Key Takeaway: Justification for not offering civil citation is omitted more frequently for Black youth – especially Black females – than for White youth.

Key Takeaway: Although JPOs and JAC officers are encouraged to follow up with law enforcement in the event a reason for not offering civil citation is excluded, this practice is not required. The lack of mandates around including and seeking this information may have implications for what is known about why some youth are not given the opportunity for civil citation.

USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Most Common Reasons Why Law Enforcement Did Not Offer Civil Citation in SLC, FL



USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

When asked about the incidents that excluded documentation on why civil citation was not utilized, law enforcement discussed an oversight in the data entry system. However, this response does not address the discrepancies that existed between Black and White males and females. According to focus group participants, a new computer system is underway which will prohibit officers from omitting a reason for not pursuing civil citation. One representative from the Sheriff's Office described the differences between the previous system and the new system as follows:

"We're working on our computer system countywide: if it's a misdemeanor for civil citation, before deputies go into the narrative it's going to force them to put one of the nine reasons why they didn't offer civil citation. It's not going to let them put 'other' anymore. The arrest affidavits for the youth, if it's a qualifying offense, it will require a dropdown response for why they didn't offer civil citation. They won't be able to continue on with the affidavit if they don't select a reason." – St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office personnel

Key Takeaway: Assuming the incoming computer system operates as described by the Sheriff's Office, transparency around why youth are not referred for civil citation will increase. This will also negate the need for JAC officers to follow up with law enforcement in absence of a reason being provided. Until this system is introduced and operational, JPO and JAC officers should adhere to the practice of requesting clarification from law enforcement when a reason is not documented on the affidavit.

USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Reason for Civil Citation Omission: Domestic violence.

Domestic violence automatically disqualifies a youth for civil citation according to local law enforcement policy. To better understand how and why this affects almost a third of cases that would otherwise receive civil citation, various stakeholders weighed in on the topic. Regarding what domestic violence might look like and what can spur an incident, focus group participants made observations about the role of parent's partners, guardian discipline, and misdirected resources:

- *"I see sometimes kids will get in fights with people their mother might have a relationship with. The kids feel a type of way about that due to their father's absence and missing their father." – IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member*
- *"About 95% of domestic violence calls where the youthful offender is involved, they're still acting out when we get there so it's pretty obvious that the parent tried to use parental discipline and they're still acting out when we get there." – St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office personnel*
- *"Sometimes parents' and kids' services are in conflict with what the family needs too, like domestic batteries in the home that puts the kid in the system when the parent needs treatment themselves. If you can't address the issues of the parent too, you're doing nothing to help these kids." – DJJ Intake personnel*

USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Other stakeholders commented that police officers are required to make an arrest in domestic violence situations due to policy mandates and the potential to be held liable should matters escalate more violently. Interestingly, the State's Attorney representative emphasized that there is nothing prohibiting the use of civil citation in domestic violence cases according to the 19th Circuit MOU. However, as previously noted, the MOU permits the establishment of additional criteria by local entities. Specifically, domestic violence offenses are disqualified under the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office General Order 23.01. Other disqualifications under the General Order include: 1) if the offense is a felony; 2) if the youth refuses to admit guilt; 3) if the parent or youth refuses to participate; 4) if the deputy documents gang association; 5) if the offense involved weapons or firearms; 6) if the youth has in excess of three other misdemeanor offenses or charges; 7) subsequent charges are disqualified; and 8) other documented exceptions based on law enforcement discretion.

- *"There are certain law enforcement agencies where they have a policy where if they are called to a scene for any type of domestic violence situation, an arrest has to be made. They can't call the shelter and bring the youth there to chill out and get away for a few days. It's against their company policy and they have to make an arrest." – Public Defender representative*
- *"Our MOU doesn't prohibit civil citation in domestic violence cases." – State's Attorney representative*
- *"If they are calling the police, chances are [parents] can't handle it, we need to remove the child for a little while. For a domestic, we have to initiate that cool off period so there is no liability. These things don't de-escalate. If they are calling the police, there's a reason." – Port St. Lucie Police Department officer*

Key Takeaway: There may be a need for the State's Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office, and local law enforcement agencies to clarify if and how civil law enforcement departments' civil citation policies may deviate from (or expand upon) the 19th Circuit MOU to enable all parties to operate with the same information.

USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Reason for civil citation omission: Victim requests processing. As documented in the DJJ dataset, 14% of youth who were eligible for civil citation were disqualified due to the victim's request for formal arrest or processing. This practice has since been modified within the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office but remains for the Port St. Lucie Police Department.

- *"The victims and how they are affected will be considered but it's not the only consideration. Ultimately, it's the deputies' decision... We take the victim into consideration but it's not their sole discretion if civil citation is given." – St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office personnel*
- *"We have to go with what the victim wants. The victim has a say-so in terms of what happens." – Port St. Lucie Police Department officer*

Reason for civil citation omission: Parent/guardian refusal. Four percent of youth who qualified for civil citation did not receive civil citation because their parent or guardian refused the opportunity. Focus group participants across agencies speculated as to why this might be the case. One common explanation related to guardians' exasperation with their child's behaviors and the need for a break:

- *"The issue isn't that the parents reject the civil citation portion, but at that time they don't want to deal with the kid. They want them to go away. When we explain that if the youth qualifies for civil citation then that has to be the first option, our officers explain it, but when we get a parent against it, they are acting on impulse and not what is behind it. Heat of the moment." – Port St. Lucie Police Department officer*
- *"I had parents before say they won't sign because they are tired of the kids messing up and they want the kid to get consequences. So then it has to go for formal processing." – SRO*
- *"From my experience, a lot of times the parents, if their kids get into trouble, [the parents will] be upset and need a moment. Their kid was shoplifting or something like that, and the parent is upset and wants there to be a consequence and wants their kid to learn a lesson." – Port St. Lucie Police Department officer*

USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Others felt that parents and guardians might be hesitant to accept civil citation for their child because they do not understand what it is and the benefits:

“I think the parents really just don’t understand that civil citation is not an arrest and they never want to say that their kid did anything because they have to admit guilt to get civil citation. Sometimes they just need to talk to an attorney who then usually tells them to definitely go the civil citation route.” – St. Lucie County Sheriff’s Office personnel

In light of the fact that guardians might need a moment to “cool off” or speak with an attorney to better understand the implications of civil citation prior to agreeing or declining, the St. Lucie County Sheriff’s Office provides the parent that space when possible. On the contrary, the Port St. Lucie Police Department is prohibited from engaging in this type of practice. On the following page, representatives from both agencies described the reasons behind their varying approaches and perspectives, which seem to be partially rooted in administrative differences regarding incident documentation and reporting.

USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

“[A]bout two years ago we started implementing some new things. As long as no one is in imminent danger, we will hold the case until the parent cools off. For example, if a parent gets a call from a dean that their son was spray painting a wall, we have a civil citation process and we explain the requirements but immediately the parent thinks you’re setting their kid up. They obviously don’t want their kid to be arrested or anything. They don’t understand that civil citation is not arrest. So sometimes we have to let them cool off and explain that if they don’t do civil citation, they’re going to get an arrest warrant. If there’s no imminent danger, we will hold these cases 2-3 days to let the parent cool off. When parents are upset, they aren’t thinking clearly. We still document the incident; the only difference is that if the parent comes around in a few days and wants to do what’s best for the kid [accept civil citation], we do that.” – St. Lucie County Sheriff’s Office personnel

“Just because they are a juvenile, doesn’t mean we can delay a report so the parents can cool down. And if we follow up and the kid isn’t there later when we try to reach them, then we put a burden on the court to process a warrant and find the kid if we wait to hold the paperwork to see the parents cool off. And if we have days off, and something happens before we have those days off, it might be another three days before the report gets submitted to the system.” – Port St. Lucie Police Department officer

DEBATE OVER DJJ CIVIL CITATION DATA ACCURACY

The data analysis from the DJJ dataset spanning July 2019 to June 2022 depicts a significant under-utilization of civil citation in St. Lucie County. When confronted with this data, representatives from the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office and the Port St. Lucie Police Department shared alternative views.

- *"The numbers that get provided by DJJ are not accurate... Our policies are very clear. We will use civil citation unless one of those nine things [outlined in General Order 23.01] disqualifies them.... The numbers that DJJ provides don't account for the people who are disqualified. The 55% is not really an accurate number because we do have disqualifiers. The more recent number was like 69% but it's actually much higher than that based on our policies. I don't think there's much more we can do outside of our policies. We can't override them. Our biggest one is domestic violence. Our policy is that if there is a primary aggressor identified and probable cause exists, whether it's an adult or juvenile, an arrest has to be made. That goes back to another statute that says that if we don't affect the arrest, we are then civilly liable if something happens after that. A lot of statutes contradict each other." – St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office personnel*
- *"If there is a fight and an injury, if someone got hurt, maybe it's a felony, then we can't use a civil citation. Or maybe the youth isn't being cooperative and I have to take them to the detention center. But most of the time we try with civil citation. No one wants to mark up a kid's record. And we have to indicate a reason why we chose the arrest or civil citation option." – Port St. Lucie Police Department officer*

DEBATE OVER DJJ CIVIL CITATION DATA ACCURACY

Despite what was expressed by the Sheriff's Office and Port St. Lucie Police Department regarding their use of civil citation, other stakeholders feel it is not used enough.

"Civil citations are not being issued by law enforcement. They utilize the juvenile detention system, which overloads us and gets families involved in a system they don't need to be involved in." – DJJ Intake personnel

On the contrary, a number of child welfare staff felt that civil citation is not a strong enough repercussion for the behaviors they have witnessed among youth. Others expressed needing clarity on how civil citation is used.

- *"How do you hold a child accountable with a civil citation? What is that piece of holding them accountable?" – Child welfare staff member*
- *"If they needed the citation for acting out, they don't learn if they get a pat on the back. Depending on the severity of the charge or outcome, that should weigh in on the punishment." – Child welfare staff member*
- *"Civil citation can be handed out for, like, a shoplifting charge, rather than assaulting a law enforcement agent or school official. Who makes that determination?" – Child welfare staff member*

Key Takeaway: There is ample debate between stakeholders as to whether civil citation is used to the fullest extent as permitted under state and local statutes and policies, and whether it is an appropriate response to certain behaviors. In sum, there appears to be a need for education and reliable data on how civil citation is employed in St. Lucie County. Further, as described previously, stakeholders may benefit from understanding how civil citation is enforced based on the 19th Circuit MOU as well as local law enforcement policies which offer nuances to the MOU.

USE OF CIVIL CITATION ACROSS THE REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Rate of Utilization among Youth who Qualified

As aforementioned, Martin and Okeechobee Counties had the highest rates of civil citation use in the 19th Circuit between July 2019 to June 2022 (according to DJJ data), with **63%** and **58%** of youth who qualified being offered this type of diversion. Indian River, on the other hand, utilized civil citation with **49% of young people** who met criteria.

Demographics and Common Offenses for Youth Referred for Civil Citation

Okeechobee County. Thirteen percent of those meeting criteria for civil citation in Okeechobee County were Black, 87% were White, and less than 1% were American Indian. These numbers mirror the rate at which civil citation was offered among racial groups.

Indian River County. In Indian River County, Black youth composed 39% of individuals who qualified for civil citation, 60% were White, and less than 1% were Pacific Islander. Disparities are evident in the numbers depicting who was offered the diversion opportunity, however. Seventy-three percent of youth who received civil citation were White compared to 26% of individuals who were Black (note: Pacific Islander youth represented just over 1%).

Martin County. In Martin County, 23% of individuals who met criteria for civil citation were Black and 77% were White. Nineteen percent of persons offered civil citation were Black and the remaining 81% were White.

Although it was the most common offense in St. Lucie County, non-aggravated assault and/or battery was the second most prevalent charge among youth who received civil citation across Martin, Okeechobee, and Indian River Counties accounting for **18%**, **35%**, and **21%** of incidents respectively. Disorderly conduct was the most frequent offense among youth who received civil citation in Martin (**26%**) and Okeechobee Counties (**45%**), whereas misdemeanor drug offenses topped the ranks in Indian River (**25%**).

USE OF CIVIL CITATION ACROSS THE REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Demographics and Common Offenses for Youth Not Referred for Civil Citation

Okeechobee County. In Okeechobee, Black youth represented 14% of individuals who were not referred for civil citation and White youth accounted for 86% which is equitable when compared to the prevalence of each racial group among those who qualified for civil citation.

Indian River County. Fifty-three percent of youth who met criteria but were not referred for civil citation in Indian River County where Black and the remaining 47% were White. This indicates that Black youth were less likely to be considered for civil citation than their White peers.

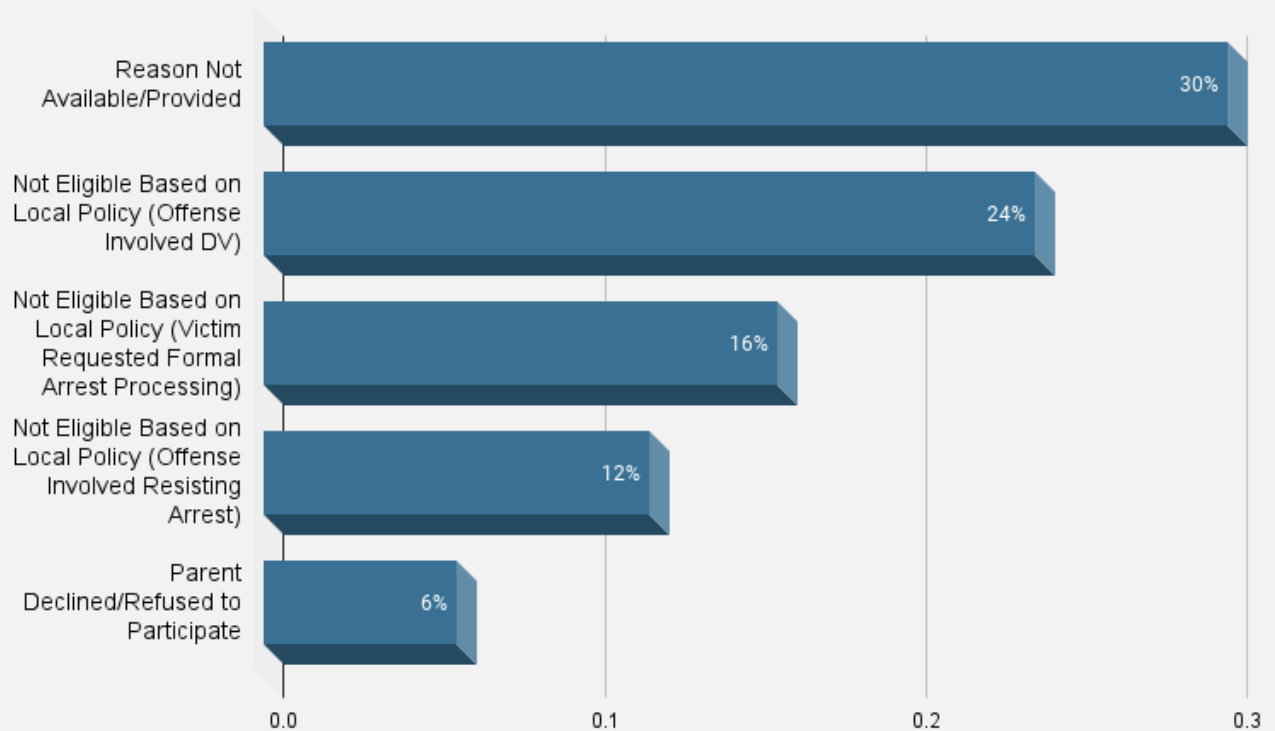
Martin County. Among the 38% of young people who met criteria but were not referred for civil citation in Martin County, 28% were Black and 72% were White demonstrating that Black youth were slightly less likely to receive this form of diversion than White youth.

Touch or strike was the most frequent offense among youth who qualified but did not receive civil citation, accounting for **54%** in Okeechobee, **42%** in Indian River, and **41%** in Martin County. Other common offenses across the counties include other theft, obstruction without violence, and interfering with school administration functions.

Similar to St. Lucie County, the most common reason law enforcement did not refer youth for civil citation in the remaining 19th Circuit counties was not reported, according to the DJJ dataset. Such was the case for **30%, 33%, and 64%** of youth who qualified but were not referred for civil citation in Okeechobee, Indian River, and Martin Counties respectively. Additional reasons provided across the three counties included: youth not eligible based on local policy – offense involved domestic violence; youth not eligible based on local policy – victim requested formal arrest/processing; youth not eligible based on local policy – offense involved resisting arrest; and the parent or youth declined/refused to participate.

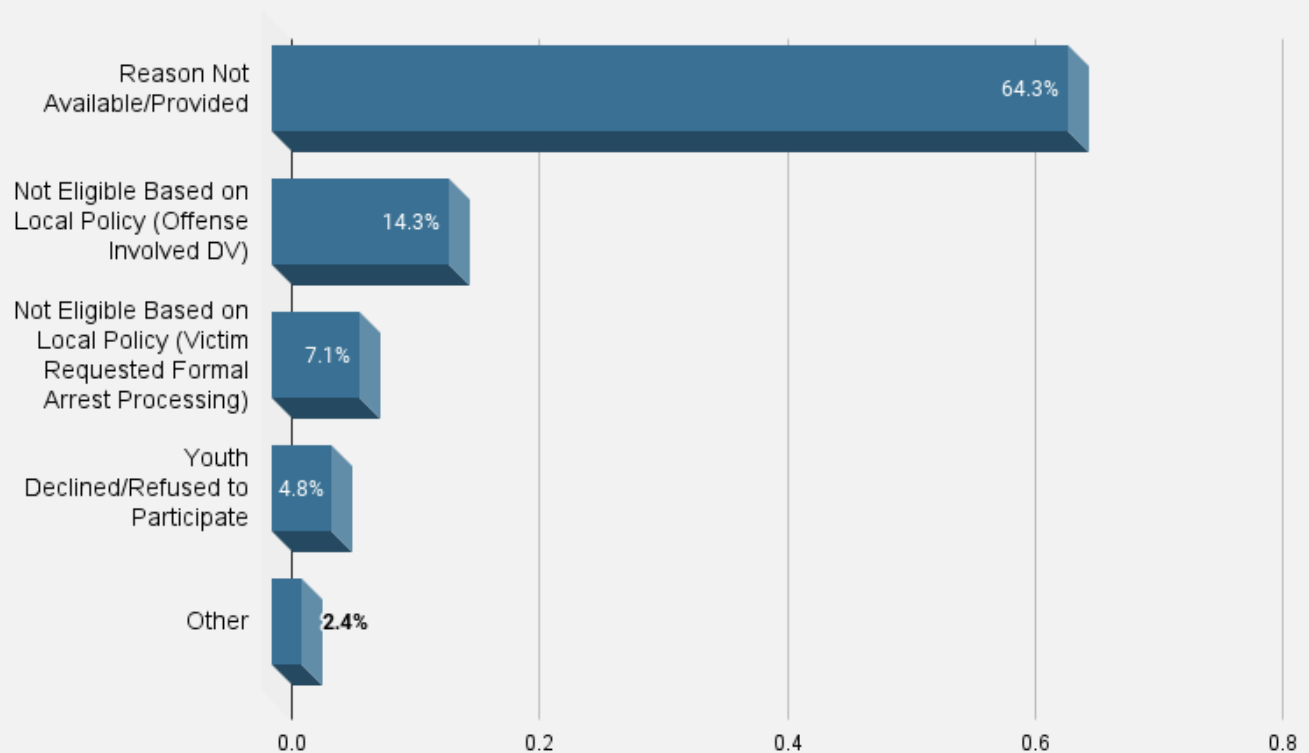
USE OF CIVIL CITATION ACROSS THE REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

**Most Common Reasons Why Law Enforcement Did Not Offer Civil Citation in
Okeechobee Co., FL**



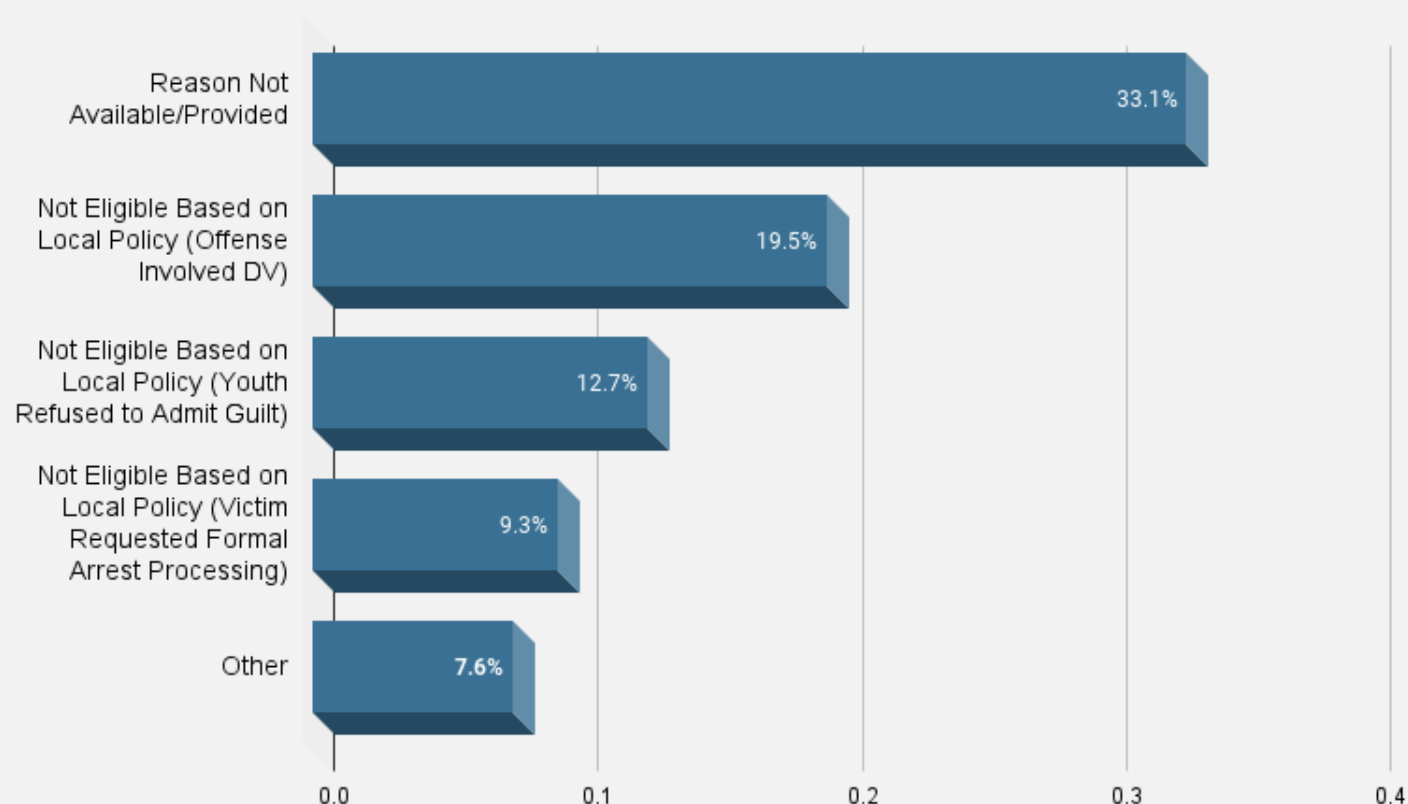
USE OF CIVIL CITATION ACROSS THE REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Most Common Reasons Why Law Enforcement Did Not Offer Civil Citation in Martin Co., FL



USE OF CIVIL CITATION ACROSS THE REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Most Common Reasons Why Law Enforcement Did Not Offer Civil Citation in Indian River Co., FL



Key Takeaway: Black youth in Martin and Indian River Counties are more likely to be overlooked for civil citation than White youth.

USE OF CIVIL CITATION IN DISTRICT 19 BY DEMOGRAPHIC

Reason for declining to offer civil citation was omitted for 46% of Black females

Reason for declining to offer civil citation was omitted for 30% of White females

Reason for declining to offer civil citation was omitted for 24.4% of White males

Reason for declining to offer civil citation was omitted for 30.5% of Black males

Not eligible based on local policy offense involved domestic violence for 19% of Black males

Not eligible based on local policy victim requested formal arrest processing for 12.4% of Black males

Not eligible based on local policy offense involved domestic violence for 33.3% of White males

Not eligible based on local policy victim requested formal arrest processing for 18.9% of White males

DIVERSION USE IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Excluding civil citation, St. Lucie County employed six different forms of diversion as identified in the DJJ dataset: DJJ Intake Diversion, Judicial Consent/Walker Plan, Drug Court (Jud), Drug Court (Non-Jud), Juvenile Detention Alternative Program (JDAP/IDDS), and Other Diversion Program. Across 993 total dispositions, 190 youth (19%) were diverted from the juvenile justice system, which is second only to Okeechobee (20%) in the 19th Circuit. The vast majority (63%) of those cases diverted in St. Lucie County were categorized as “Other Diversion Program.” JDAP/IDDS was the second most prevalent type of diversion at 30%. DJJ Intake Diversion and Drug Court (Jud) respectively contributed to 3% of diversion cases, and Judicial Consent/Walker Plan and Drug Court (Non-Jud) each composed about 1%. Of the 190 young people who were diverted in St. Lucie County, 60% were Black, 40% were White, less than 1% were Asian, and zero American Indian and Pacific Islander youth were diverted. The rate of diversion is considerably equal among racial groups. For instance, 20% of all Black youth were diverted compared to 18% of all White youth (one Asian male was diverted, representing 25% of the Asian juvenile justice involved population). In taking a closer look at racial subgroups, 29% of all Black females were diverted whereas only 16% of all Black males were diverted. Similarly, 22% of White females were diverted compared to 16% of all White males. In total, Black and White males represented 33% and 24% of all diverted youth respectively. Black and White females, on the other hand, composed 27% and 15% of all diverted youth.

Key Takeaway: Females tend to be diverted at higher rates than males. Black females were the most likely to be diverted whereas White males were diverted the least, with Black males closely following. One potential explanation for this difference is that Black females may be overlooked more often for civil citation and informal diversion opportunities that are corrected later with diversion

DIVERSION USE IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

The most common offense among diverted youth in St. Lucie County is battery, touch, or strike which accounted for **42% of diverted cases**. This is also the most common offense among the remaining Circuit 19 counties (ranging from **22%** in Martin County to **40%** in Okeechobee County). Resisting an officer and obstruction without violence was the next most prevalent charge, accounting for just over **5%** of diversion cases. Disorderly conduct affray made up **just under 5%** of offenses, followed by aggravated assault with a deadly weapon without intent to kill (**4%**) and first offense second degree petit larceny theft (**4%**). These charges were similar across the counties among diverted youth.

Key Takeaway: Non-aggravated assault or battery, disorderly conduct, and petit larceny are the top three offenses among youth who received civil citation in St. Lucie County. These are also likened to the top offenses for which youth were later diverted, signaling that there may be opportunities to divert young people earlier through civil citation

DIVERSION USE ACROSS REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

The diversion rate across the other three Circuit 19 counties is fairly consistent with St. Lucie County, with Okeechobee diverting **20%** of youth and Martin County diverting **19%**. Indian River diverted slightly fewer youth with a diversion rate of **17%**.

Okeechobee County. In Okeechobee, 76% of diverted young people were White, 21% were Black, and 3% were Pacific Islander. White females were the most likely to be diverted, with 27% of White females offered diversion in Okeechobee compared to 17% of Black females, 22% of Black males, and 15% of White males (only one Pacific Islander female was identified and diverted). Similar to St. Lucie County, battery, touch, or strike represented the highest offense among diverted youth (40%), followed by disorderly conduct affray (9%), first offense second degree petit larceny theft (9%), resisting an officer and obstruction without violence (9%), and grand theft of a motor vehicle (9%)

Indian River County. Among the 51 diverted youth in Indian River (which accounts for 17% of all juvenile justice cases), 65% were White and 35% were Black. White females and males were the most likely to undergo diversion, with 22% of the respective populations being diverted. On the contrary, Black females experienced a 15% diversion rate and Black males were only diverted 11% of the time. As with its neighboring jurisdictions, the most common offense among diverted youth in Indian River was battery, touch, or strike (28%) followed by resisting an officer and obstruction without violence (9%), possession of a controlled substance without a prescription (8%), larceny – retail theft of \$750 or more (8%), and trespassing structure or conveyance (6%).

Martin County. Across the 19% of youth who were diverted in Martin County, 66% were White and 34% were Black. Unlike in Okeechobee and Indian River, Black females in Martin County had the highest likelihood for diversion with 28% of the population being diverted. White males followed with a 20% diversion rate, and Black males and White females both saw a 15% rate of diversion. Common offenses among youth who were diverted included battery, touch, or strike (22% of diverted cases), first offense second degree petit larceny theft (9%), and first offense liquor possession by a person under 21 years of age (6%).

DIVERSION USE ACROSS REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

	SLC	Okeechobee	Indian River	Martin
% diverted	19%	20%	17%	19%
Top offenses for diverted youth in Circuit 19	Battery, touch, or strike 42%	Battery, touch, or strike 40%	Battery, touch, or strike 28%	Battery, touch, or strike 22%
	Obstruction w/o violence 5%	Obstruction w/o violence 9%	Obstruction w/o violence 9%	2nd deg. Petit Larceny 9%
	Disorderly conduct/ Affray 5%	Disorderly conduct/ Affray 9%	Possession of controlled substance 8%	Liquor possession by person under 21 6%
	Aggravated assault w/ weapon w/o Intent to kill 4%	Grand theft of motor vehicle 9%	Larceny (retail theft \$750+) 8%	*all other offenses contained only 1-2 counts
	2nd deg. Petit Larceny 4%	2nd deg. Petit Larceny 9%	Trespassing 6%	

UTILIZATION OF PRE-ADJUDICATION DETENTION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

A total of 529 young people were placed in pre-adjudication detention in St. Lucie County between July 2019 and June 2022, amounting to a **52% pre-adjudication detention rate**. (The detention rate post-disposition is much lower at **8%**, but is the second highest post-disposition detention rate in the 19th Circuit). St. Lucie County has the highest rate of pre-adjudication detention in Circuit 19, although it is comparable to Okeechobee County (49%) and Indian River County (50%). Martin County had the lowest rate at **30%**.

Demographics Among Youth Held in Detention

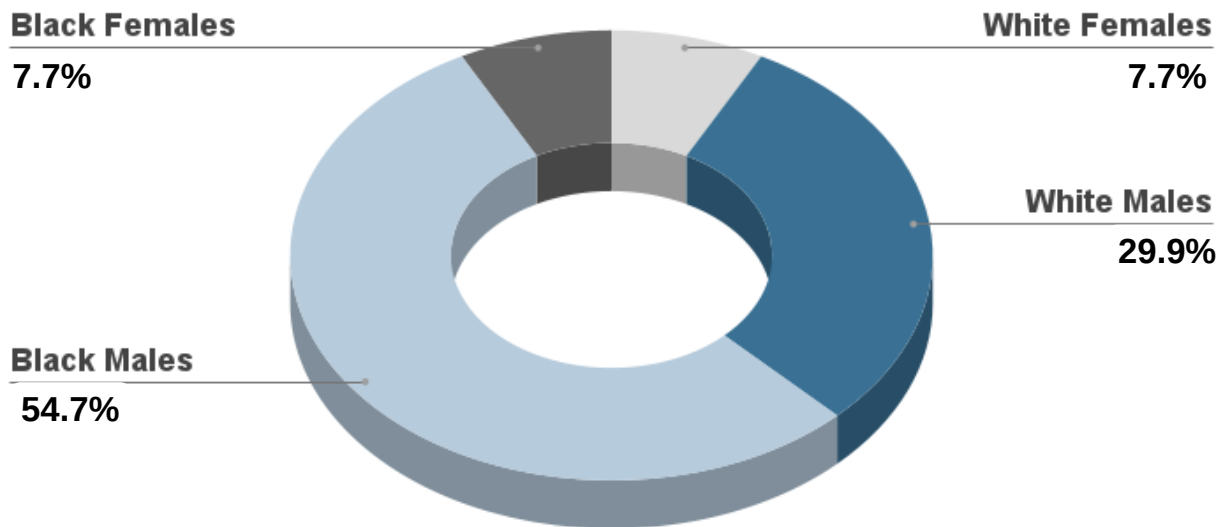
Among those held in pre-adjudication detention in St. Lucie County, 20% were female and the remainder were male. American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander youth represented less than 1% of this group. Black youth, on the other hand, composed 64% whereas White youth accounted for 35%.

A closer look at the intersection of race and gender reveals that Black girls and White girls each represented 7% of all youth held in detention. Black boys, instead, composed 51% of youth detained pre-adjudication whereas White boys amounted to 28% of the group. American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander males represented the remainder (accounting for less than half a percent each).

Key Takeaway: Not only are Black youth twice as prevalent among those who encounter the juvenile legal system than in the general St. Lucie County population, but they are even more disproportionately represented deeper into the system. Black youth are held in pre-adjudication detention at almost 2.5 times their rate than in the general population. By stark contrast, White youth in pre-adjudication detention are underrepresented by 20% compared to their rate in the community. Black boys, in particular, see the brunt of this inequity.

UTILIZATION OF PRE-ADJUDICATION DETENTION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Pre-Adjudication Detention Demographics (SLC)



UTILIZATION OF PRE-ADJUDICATION DETENTION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Common Offenses for Youth Detained Pre-Adjudication

The most prevalent charges among youth held in pre-adjudication detention in St. Lucie County were: pick up order – failure to appear (11%), pick up order – probable cause warrant (8%), battery, touch, or strike (8%), court ordered detention (6%), and pick up order – absconding (5%). These charges closely mirror the top offenses among youth held in pre-adjudication detention across the 19th Circuit.

White and Black females had the same top charges among those held in pre-adjudication detention: pick up order for failure to appear; battery, touch or strike; and a pick up order for absconding. Black males in pre-adjudication detention were most often charged with a pick up order for failure to appear, a pick up order for a probable cause warrant, court ordered detention, and a violation of probation. In contrast, White males were most likely to be picked up for a probable cause warrant, sexual assault or battery of a minor, undergo court ordered detention, and be charged with battery, touch, or strike.

Key Takeaway: Among males, White boys were more likely to be placed in pre-adjudication detention for offenses against other persons whereas Black boys were more likely to be held in violation of the court.

Key Takeaway: Of all girls held in pre-adjudication detention, 11% were picked up by law enforcement for running away and 17% of females were held on the charge of battery, touch, or strike. Females were more likely to be placed in detention for absconding in St. Lucie County than in the other Circuit 19 jurisdictions.

UTILIZATION OF PRE-ADJUDICATION DETENTION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Common Offenses for Youth Detained Pre-Adjudication

Focus group participants who worked directly with youth shared their observations and opinions in light of the fact that females were frequently detained for running away. Many noted that girls are more apt to flee placements than boys, and when they do it is believed to be seeded in the need to escape circumstances and/or to connect with others. (This topic is further explored in a later section on crossover youth).

- “Girls do tend to run away more than boys.” – Child welfare staff member
- “A lot of the runaways get in that situation and gravitate to older people who give them access to things – drugs, alcohol, partying, being free and away from their traumatic experiences.” – IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member
- “[Girls] are running away for emotional reasons. Boys are running away because they are bored. Girls are running away to find their moms or boyfriend.” – Child welfare staff member

Top Offenses for Youth Held in Pre-Adjudication Detention

- Pick up order (failure to appear)
 - 11%
- Pick up order (probable cause warrant)
 - 8%
- Battery, touch, or strike
 - 8%
- Court ordered detention
 - 6%
- Pick up order (absconding)
 - 5%

Top Offenses by Demographic Group

- Black & White Females
 - Pick up order (failure to appear) 50% / 18%
 - Battery, touch, or strike 16% / 18%
 - Pick up order (absconding) 11% / 11%
- Black males
 - Pick up order (failure to appear) 9%
 - Pick up order (probable cause warrant) 8%
 - Court ordered detention 7%
 - Violation of probation 7%
- White males
 - Pick up order (probable cause warrant) 12%
 - Sexual assault or battery of a minor 9%
 - Court ordered detention 7%
 - Battery, touch, or strike 7%

UTILIZATION OF PRE-ADJUDICATION DETENTION ACROSS REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

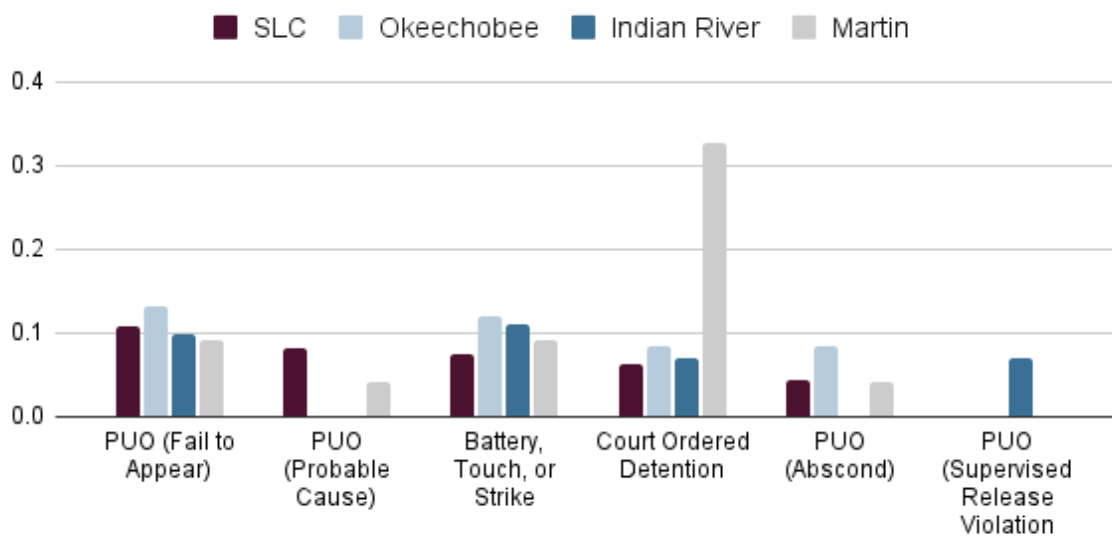
Common Offenses for Youth Detained Pre-Adjudication

Indian River and Okeechobee Counties had similar rates of pre-adjudication detention as St. Lucie County at **50% and 49%, respectively**. Martin County's pre-adjudication detention rate was roughly 20% lower than its neighboring jurisdictions with a 30% detainment rate. Post-disposition rates of detention for Okeechobee, Indian River, and Martin Counties were **12%, 4%, and 6%** accordingly. Okeechobee County had the highest post-disposition detention rate, ranging from .25 to 3 times as high as the other counties. Offenses among youth who were detained pre-adjudication are the same as those in St. Lucie County, with the exception of Okeechobee which saw a higher rate of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon.

% of Youth Detained:

- St. Lucie: 52%
- Okeechobee: 49%
- Indian River: 50%
- Martin: 30%

Top Offenses for Youth Held in Detention in District 19



UTILIZATION OF PRE-ADJUDICATION DETENTION ACROSS REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Demographics and Common Offenses for Youth Held in Detention

Okeechobee County. In Okeechobee County, 75% of youth held in pre-adjudication detention were identified as male (the remainder were female). Females were most likely to be placed in detention on a battery, touch, or strike charge whereas males were likely to have a pick up order for failure to appear. Four percent of youth in pre-adjudication detention were American Indian, 16% were Black, and 81% were White.

Indian River County. Eighty-three percent of youth held in pre-adjudication detention in Indian River were male and 17% were female. Fifty-three percent of youth placed in detention were Black, 47% were White, and under 1% was Pacific Islander. Offense patterns are not as clear among males and females as with other counties. Regarding the most common offenses: 11% of Black males were held for a probable cause warrant; 33% of Black females were placed in detention for battery, touch, or strike; 9% of White males were held for a) battery, touch, or strike and b) a pick up order for failure to appear; 25% of White females were placed in detention for a) a violation of supervised release and b) failure to appear. One Pacific Islander male was held for aggravated battery and use of a deadly weapon.

Martin County. Among youth held in pre-adjudication detention in Martin County, 79% were male and 21% were female. White youth represented 61%, Black youth composed 38%, and Asian youth accounted for 1% of those detained. Court ordered detention was the most common reason for placement across groups, accounting for 31% of Black males, 75% of Black females (note: only eight Black females were detained in total), 28% of White males, and 31% of White females. Pick up orders for failure to appear were also common offenses among Black males and females and White males. White males and females were more likely to be held for battery, touch, or strike charges. One Asian male was held in detention for arson.

JUVENILE OFFENDER CASE TIMELINES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Between July 2019 and June 2022, St. Lucie County processed 993 dispositions in juvenile court (according to data provided by DJJ). The average number of days between case referral and disposition during this time was 118.86 days. This was slightly higher, though comparable, to the average across all Circuit 19 counties which was 117.41 days. The State's Attorney representative described the structure and influences on the timing of court hearings as follows:



We have detention hearings, then three to four weeks later there is the arraignment which is the formal charging time period. From arrest to arraignment, it's typically a month, maybe a little bit more. . .

. . . Then after that proceeding, we have juvenile court once a month.

And at the arraignment, they can be meeting their attorney for the first time because they don't all have detention hearings. Depending on when the arraignment falls, it could be three to five weeks on average. Sometimes youth don't meet with attorneys after arraignment. Sometimes they set up appointments, sometimes not. Sometimes I send a plea to offer, sometimes I don't. Often, the lawyer will have to ask for another court appointment so they can talk with their youth meaningfully. The process is arraignment, first docket call, then possibly second docket call. . .

. . . Three to four months for this process I would say is average. When you start adding complications from things like multiple arrests, that can change the timeline.



JUVENILE OFFENDER CASE TIMELINES IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Females in St. Lucie County tended to have about a week longer between referral and disposition compared to males, with the average number of days amounting to 123.20 days and 117.54 days respectively. The average time between referral and disposition among Black youth was 119.76 days, which is slightly longer than White youth at 116.63 days. Black females, in particular, had the greatest number of days between both time points (among Black and White youth) at 131.91 days. White females, by contrast, waited only 109.09 days. Black and White males had similar timelines, averaging 116.38 days and 119.38 days respectively. American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander youth accounted for less than a percent of all dispositions. The timeline for each group is 65.83 days, 160.25 days, and 233.00 days respectively.

Key Takeaway: Black females tended to have longer periods of time between referral and disposition compared to their Black and White male and female peers.

Most noteworthy is the fact that the timeline for White females is three and a half weeks shorter than for Black females.

INFLUENCES ON THE COURT PROCESS

A driving component of the present analysis was to understand ways in which the court might be alleviated of extraneous cases (e.g., by identifying opportunities to expand civil citation), and how to expedite the court process for youth who are referred in St. Lucie County. Tangential to this aim is understanding what might be improved or strengthened in this element of the juvenile legal system. Stakeholders offered a range of perspectives on the topic, including improved education around court processes among youth, families, and non-court affiliated staff.

Staff from IGNITE Youth Alliance reflected that youth become overwhelmed by legal jargon that is not adequately described or defined for them, resulting in youth accepting offers blindly. Further, young people held in pre-adjudication detention may not realize that their case has yet to be disposed.

- “They don’t understand the phrases ‘no contest’ or ‘disposition.’ You can ask what happened and the kid can’t tell you. Then you get to the first court date and the kid doesn’t know what’s going on. They don’t understand they’re going to disposition. There’s a lack of education. And then they feel pressured to sign anything without knowing what the implications are of it.” – IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member
- If they commit a charge and they have to stay in detention for 21 days, once they hit the 21 days, the kids feel like their charge is over with and they completed their sentence. The kids aren’t educated on the system and how it goes, and the parents aren’t educated either... when a kid is charged and they don’t go through disposition for four to eight months later, that kid can pick up three more charges and so when they go to the dispo[sition] for the first charge they don’t realize they have to go back for other charges later.” – IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member

INFLUENCES ON THE COURT PROCESS

The State's Attorney offered a parallel observation of parents and guardians experiencing the court process who are otherwise unfamiliar with its operations:

- “If there was any way we could get people to help parents and families to understand the court process, that would be really helpful. Lawyers look at things legally. But I find that a lot of people, especially victims, are completely unaware of the court processes. They walk out of an hour in court and ask what just happened. I think if there was a little bit more frontend hand holding, there would be an easier transition.” – State's Attorney representative

Attorneys with the Office of the Public Defender and the State's Attorney's Office similarly reflected on common confusions around the court process, noting experiences in which young people and guardians were provided well-intended guidance by Intake which was inaccurate.

- “Sometimes the juvenile gets arrested and they meet with DJJ during intake, and sometimes DJJ officers do say that the youth will get diversion – I'm not sure if they actually [explicitly] say that – but when I come into the picture at arraignment and [the State's Attorney] offers a plea deal and it's not diversion, that causes tension between the parents and me. The parents were told they would get diversion, and they're not being offered it. Then I have to call [the State's Attorney] and figure it out. So that does cause bottlenecking.” – Public Defender representative
- “I'm working on a script for DJJ so they are providing standard information to help the families be more clear on their options and expectations so we could potentially get things signed sooner, there's less confusion, and the process isn't elongated.” – State Attorney's Office representative

INFLUENCES ON THE COURT PROCESS

Further, the Public Defender and State's Attorney acknowledged other factors that can influence the speed by which a case is heard, including establishing a relationship with the youth's guardian, meeting with young clients, and balancing cases that require more attention against the sheer volume of cases overall.

- *"You can get things moving along much faster if we have that trust. We try to wrap our arms around the parents as much as we can. We want them to be together on this journey with us so we can get the kid the best result." – Public Defender representative*
- *"There are some cases that are complex and take longer, but I just need to meet with the kid most of the time. And there can be challenges in meeting with the kids. Parents who work all day and can't get their kid to their appointments. I tell my secretary that we can do the appointments over the phone. Sometimes it's a challenge to meet with the kids, but that can also cause a delay with the case." – Public Defender representative*
- *"It comes down to my workload. I was just in trial for a day and a half. If it was a docket call week, I could have resolved 30-50 cases. But this week I could only resolve one case. I'm a bottleneck, I'll concede." – State's Attorney representative*
- *"Bottlenecking could occur when it is a plea to the court where things get pushed back 30 days. The predisposition report takes time to prepare, and it provides recommendations to the judge." – State's Attorney representative*

Finally, reducing the number of cases seen by the court would of course be instrumental in expediting the court process. The State's Attorney speculated that one way to do this is through prevention, such as to offer respite opportunities or other resources to reduce parents and guardians phoning police (e.g., in domestic violence situations).

- *"If there was an alternative to arrest or a place where parents know they could take their kid in lieu of calling police, that would alleviate cases." – State's Attorney representative*

JUVENILE OFFENDER CASE TIMELINES IN REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Okeechobee County. Okeechobee County, which disposed 165 juvenile cases between July 2019 and June 2022, had the longest average length of time between referral and disposition among the 19th Circuit counties at **124.77 days**. This is over a week longer than the Circuit average and is almost six days longer than the average in St. Lucie County. Females in Okeechobee averaged almost two weeks less time than males (103.63 days compared to 117.54 days). White youth experienced the longest length of time at 128.24 days and Black youth the least number of days at 108.27. (Note: The time for Pacific Islander youth was **104.33 days**; however, the group had substantially fewer cases than other demographics).

Indian River County. Indian River County, which saw 301 dispositions, demonstrated the shortest average length of time between referral and disposition with **110.54 days**. This is just under a week less than the average across the 19th Circuit and is roughly eight and a half days shorter than St. Lucie County's average timeline. The average difference between females and males in Indian River was close to 15 days, with females averaging 122.68 days from referral to disposition and males 107.80 days. This deviates from the other counties where the overall female average is shorter than males. Similar to St. Lucie County, Black females underwent the longest period of time averaging 126.34 days. The mean number of days for White females is 118.84, which is slightly over a week shorter than Black females. Black males also had a longer time difference between referral and disposition compared to their White counterparts, averaging about a week more (111.06 days versus 104.12 days). Asian and Pacific Islander males accounted for very few dispositions; their respective timelines were 7.00 days and 81.86 days.

Martin County. The average amount of time between referral and disposition among Martin County's 329 cases was **115.63 days**, which is a little over three days shorter than St. Lucie County. Martin County females averaged roughly 31 days less than their male counterparts (103.63 days versus 134.53 days). Black and White females had similar timelines with 93.80 days and 94.85 days, respectively. Black and White males differed slightly more, with the average number of days for Black males being 116.88 compared to 127.17 for White males. Timelines for Asian and Pacific Islander youth were 40.00 days and 9.00 days, respectively (note: only one youth was present in each of these groups).

JUVENILE OFFENDER CASE TIMELINES IN REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Key Takeaway: St. Lucie County had the second longest average length of time between case referral and disposition in the 19th Circuit. The greatest difference was between Indian River County for which St. Lucie County averaged a little over eight days longer. However, St. Lucie County processed between **three and four times the number** of juvenile court cases as its neighboring counties.

DISPOSITION OUTCOMES FOR YOUTHFUL OFFENDERS IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

DJJ data on 993 youth dispositions was available for analysis. Overall, the most common disposition types included: non-file (31%), probation under DJJ supervision (23%), nolle prosequi (16%), other diversion program (12%), and JDAP/IDDS (6%).

Of those disposed, **69% were male and 31% were female**. Black youth composed 57% of the population and White youth accounted for 42%. American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander youth represented less than 1% each.

Disposition by Demographic Groups

The most frequent disposition outcome among Black and White males and females is non-file, accounting for 26% of dispositions among Black females; 30% among Black males; 41% among White females; and 32% among White males. Nolle prosequi was also a common disposition, accounting for 17% among White females (the second most common disposition across this group); 18% among White males (the third most common disposition across this group); 15% among Black females (the fourth most common across this group); and 14% among Black males (the third most common across this group).

Black females had the highest rate of the other diversion program disposition outcome (20%), which was also equal to their likelihood of being placed on DJJ supervised probation (20%). Black and White males were roughly equal in their placement on DJJ supervised probation (25% and 26%, respectively). White females were the least likely to be placed on DJJ supervised probation (14%).

DISPOSITION OUTCOMES FOR YOUTHFUL OFFENDERS IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Black Females	White Females	Black Males	White Males
26% non-file	41% non-file	30% non-file	32% non-file
20% DJJ supervised probation	17% nolle prosequi	25% DJJ supervised probation	26% DJJ supervised probation
20% other diversion program	14% DJJ supervised probation	14% nolle prosequi	18% nolle prosequi

Key Takeaway: Although it is the most common disposition across Black and White youth, non-file is employed less often for Black females than for their peers. Of particular note, Black females were 15% less likely to receive a non-file disposition than White females.

COLLABORATIVE COURT PRACTICES

In discussing their experiences with the court in St. Lucie County, many Juvenile Probation representatives expressed discontent with the lack of collaboration and flexibility afforded by court-affiliated personnel. For instance, two individuals compared their experiences in Martin County to that of St. Lucie County, noting that there is a spirit of cooperation across stakeholders in Martin County that is unseen locally:

“The State’s Attorney in St. Lucie County has been here for a long time, and you cannot go to the table, sit down, and come to a consensus the way you could in Martin County, for example... If the State’s Attorney says something, that is what goes.” – DJJ Probation personnel

“In Martin County, we do a recommendation for diversion directly to the State’s Attorney, not to court; it’s more of a team relationship than in St. Lucie County. It could be that St. Lucie County has a heavier workload, but Juvenile Probation is more hands-on in other counties than in St. Lucie County.” – DJJ Probation personnel

Another participant summarized sentiments echoed by multiple colleagues regarding the perceived punitive nature of the juvenile court in St. Lucie County as compared to other communities in Florida, and its long-term impacts on young people:

“I have recently seen in Jacksonville that if a kid is on probation for a felony, if they have successfully completed all Juvenile Probation sanctions, when they go to court, the State’s Attorney will then reduce that felony to a misdemeanor. So that child does not have a felony on their record, which could then harm that child for the rest of their lives. I really like that practice because it takes care of the kids and sets them up for success instead of failure, marked forever as a felon. In Martin County, they do that too. In St. Lucie County, we cannot do these kinds of terminations.” – DJJ Probation personnel

The lack of opportunity to reduce charges against youth who have completed the terms of their probation seems to place young people in St. Lucie County at a distinct disadvantage compared to their peers in communities where such practices are employed.

DISPOSITION OUTCOMES AND DEMOGRAPHICS FOR YOUTHFUL OFFENDERS ACROSS REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Okeechobee County. The disposition outcome most common to Okeechobee County, for which 165 youth dispositions were analyzed, was nolle prosequi (27%). Non-file was the second most frequent (21%) followed by DJJ supervised probation (18%), DJJ intake diversion (9%), and Judicial Consent/Walker Plan (6%). While nolle prosequi was more common in Okeechobee, non-file was employed more often in St. Lucie County. Okeechobee County also utilized DJJ supervised probation less and DJJ intake diversion more than St. Lucie.

Males represented 66% of disposed cases in Okeechobee compared to females at 34%. White youth composed 78% of the group, Black youth represented 20%, and American Indian and Pacific Islander youth respectively accounted for less than 1% each. The most likely disposition outcome for Black females and White males was nolle prosequi, accounting for 50% and 32% of their respective dispositions. (Note: There were only six Black females in this particular analysis). The most prevalent outcome for Black males was non-file (19%), and White females were most likely to be placed on DJJ supervised probation (29%), which distinctly varies from patterns noted in the other counties.

DISPOSITION OUTCOMES AND DEMOGRAPHICS FOR YOUTHFUL OFFENDERS ACROSS REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

Indian River County. In Indian River County, 301 disposition outcomes were analyzed yielding notable deviations from the other three counties. The top disposition outcome was DJJ supervised probation (28%), which is 13% higher than Martin County, 10% higher than Okeechobee, and 5% higher than St. Lucie County. Nolle prosequi was the second highest outcome and accounted for 24% of dispositions followed by non-file (18%), other diversion program (10%), and JDAP/IDDS (5%). Indian River opted not to file and utilized diversion less often than St. Lucie County, but employed nolle prosequi at a higher rate.

Eighty percent of dispositions were for male youth and the remaining 20% were for females in Indian River County. White youth composed 50% of the group, closely followed by Black youth who accounted for 49%. Asian and Pacific Islander individuals made up less than 1% each. Nolle prosequi was the most common disposition outcome for Black females (9%), Black males (28%), and White females (26%). On the other hand, White males were more likely to be placed on DJJ supervised probation (28%).

Martin County. Similar to St. Lucie County, the most prevalent disposition in Martin County (which had 329 youth dispositions) is non-file totaling 33% of disposition outcomes. Nolle prosequi followed with 23%, DJJ supervised probation accounted for 15%, other diversion program was 11% of dispositions, and JDAP/IDDS diversion totaled 4% in Martin County. By comparison, youth in Martin County were more likely to receive non-file or nolle prosequi dispositions than in St. Lucie County and those in St. Lucie were more likely to be placed on DJJ supervised probation.

Sixty-four percent of dispositions in Martin County were for males and 36% were for females. White youth composed 67% of the population that was disposed, Black youth represented 32%, and Asian and Pacific Islander youth accounted for less than 1%. Non-file was the most common outcome for Black males (29%) and White females (37%), nolle prosequi was the top outcome for Black females (28%), and a charge reduction was the most frequent among White males (35%).

DISPOSITION OUTCOMES AND DEMOGRAPHICS FOR YOUTHFUL OFFENDERS ACROSS REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

	St. Lucie County	Okeechobee	Indian River	Martin
Avg. Days to Disposition	118.86 days	124.77 days	110.54 days	115.63 days
Top disposition outcomes	Non-file 31%	Nolle prosequi 27%	DJJ supervised probation 28%	Non-file 33%
	DJJ supervised probation 23%	Non-file 21%	Nolle prosequi 24%	Nolle prosequi 23%
	Nolle prosequi 16%	DJJ supervised probation 18%	Non-file 18%	Other diversion program 11%
	Other diversion program 12%	DJJ intake diversion 9%	Other diversion program 10%	Other diversion program 11%
	JDAP/IDDS 6%	Judicial consent/ Walker plan 3%	JDAP/IDDS 5%	JDAP/IDDS 4%

VIOLATIONS OF PROBATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Data was analyzed in two different ways to better understand the rate of probation violations among youth in St. Lucie County between July 2019 and June 2022. First, data was examined at the individual level. In this case, of the total 1,025 youth who were identified as touching the legal system, just over 2% had violations of probation. However, when examined across the total number of charges (N=3,807), analysis demonstrated that **over 10% of charges were attributable to probation violations**. The volume of probation violations is three times higher in St. Lucie County than in Martin County, where probation violations were lowest in Circuit 19.

Key Takeaways: Although a small proportion of youth violate probation in St. Lucie County, the frequency at which they do so is considerably high. Ten percent of charges can be attributed to slightly over two percent of youth in the sample.

The proportion of youth who violate probation in St. Lucie County is on par with the other Circuit 19 counties. However, the number of times those youth violate probation is substantially higher in St. Lucie than in two of the other 19th Circuit jurisdictions.

VIOLATIONS OF PROBATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Focus group participants across multiple stakeholders were asked to speculate on what factors predominantly influence a youth to violate probation and why violations are more common in St. Lucie County than its neighboring communities. One theme that arose throughout discussions was that of the ability and/or willingness of parents and guardians to encourage or supervise adherence to their child's probation terms.

- ***“There are a lot of single parents working to make ends meet and providing for the family – mothers with one or several kids in the home without a father figure – can allow kids to violate more because mom is outside of the home, so there is no supervision, and then kids get influenced by other peers in the neighborhood to get into gangs, drugs, guns.” – DJJ Probation personnel***

In the event a probation officer recognizes that a parent or guardian's actions or inactions are the root of a youth's violations, the probation officer will make attempts to work with the family to address these barriers. However, the consequences often relay back to the child if the circumstances go unchanged. This extends to conditions out of the family's control, such as the inability to pay court fees.

- ***“If we just look at the court order, we could probably violate a kid every day for something, but we try not to do that. We ask, ‘What is the barrier that's keeping you from getting this done?’ We also talk to the parent about barriers. We will do that up until that first effective response, which is when they have violated but we want to get them into compliance without going to court. We want services to fit within a kid's life.” – DJJ Probation personnel***
- ***“One of the things we have – though I have not used it a lot because, last time I tried, the court did not work with me on it – there is a show-cause order to file on the parent due to lack of participation, but it usually falls back on the kid. Like, the court will not allow the kid to terminate without fees being paid. If a kid cannot afford to pay, it falls back on the youth. The disposition orders allow us to violate a kid for anything, like being late to class even, and it falls back on the kids a lot of time even when they had nothing to do with why they violated, and it was really on the parent.” – DJJ Probation personnel***
- ***“If a kid violates, they get new sanctions, but they also get new court fees too, so they get into a bigger hole.” – DJJ Probation personnel***

VIOLATIONS OF PROBATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Stakeholders reported opportunities to hold parents and guardians accountable in the role they play in the success of their child's probation. However, there is disagreement on if and how those opportunities come into fruition. Case and point, the previous quote from a probation officer details their experience in trying to hold a parent accountable but was met with resistance from the court. On the contrary, the State's Attorney remarked that this form of action appears to be discouraged.

- *“There are rules that if you are on probation and the parent interferes with the child's ability to do something, action can be taken against the parent. However, rarely is action ever taken against the parent. My understanding is that they are discouraged from holding the parents accountable.” – State's Attorney representative*

Key Takeaways: There is incongruity regarding the expectations parents and guardians can or should be held to regarding their youth's participation in probation. However, stakeholders agree that the level of guardian involvement influences whether a young person violates probation.

The inability to pay court fees can cause youth to remain on probation for longer periods of time, thereby increasing their likelihood of a violation. This can become cyclical as young people rack up violations and, in turn, additional fees.

VIOLATIONS OF PROBATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

In line with issues related to an inability to pay court fees, some DJJ personnel observed young people intentionally committing new offenses in order to be placed in detention where their basic needs are met.

- ***“I have seen instances where the kids are scared to come into detention, but when they realize that they have three meals and a shower every day, they can’t wait to come back. They’ll go to the store and pick up a candy [to steal] in order to come back to the comforts of detention.” – DJJ Intake personnel***

Additionally, intake and probation officers offered insights into how services and timelines can influence violations as well. Many agreed on the importance of treating the child as opposed to the crime, noting that some youth on probation could be better served through diversion.

- ***“Diversion services, for kids who don’t need to go into the deep end of the system, works because they get treatment, get released, and go home to their families. We need more focus on these services, focusing on why the crime is committed, so we can keep good kids out of the deep end and focus our remaining resources to really deal with repeat offenders. We need to focus on the why instead of on the felony, and provide treatment and services to the why. The only reason a person goes on probation is because they have a felony, but not every kid who commits an offense is a bad kid. We need to understand why they acted out to help them.” – DJJ Intake personnel***
- ***“We need something more. To continue to have diversion services that are not separate to the system, but are using the same processes, will not get different outcomes. We need a new strategy to treat children as children, not as criminals.” – DJJ Intake personnel***

VIOLATIONS OF PROBATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Others commented on the role of arbitrary timelines in preventing youth from exiting probation even when they have met all of the agreed upon terms.

- *“Timeframes have nothing to do with rehabilitation. Rehabilitation is what makes you a better person in society. We have kids who are on supervision – finish in 6 months after getting an extra job to pay off their fees, their school grades are good – but we still keep them in our system because we have to stay on this timeframe.” – DJJ Probation personnel*
- *“We can ask for early completion, and we try to do that, but the state won’t let us if a kid has a felony. I get quite a few of those kids. It’s not just about what a kid does at DJJ. If a kid completes at 7 months, and the state says they won’t complete the kid until month 9, within those next 2 months, that kid will do something to keep them on longer. But if the state doesn’t give us a timeline, it will vary, and it’ll be up to us.” – DJJ Probation personnel*

VIOLATIONS OF PROBATION IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

Similarly, probation and intake officers commented on the fact that civil citation cannot be used with youth on probation, regardless of whether it is a minor offense. (As noted above, under the 19th Circuit's MOU on civil citation, a young person can receive up to three combined civil citations and/or post-arrest diversions; however, they are ineligible if "they have been found to have committed a delinquent act."). While some have witnessed the State's Attorney declining to petition new charges that would otherwise qualify for civil citation, stakeholders felt this was not done as often as it could be.

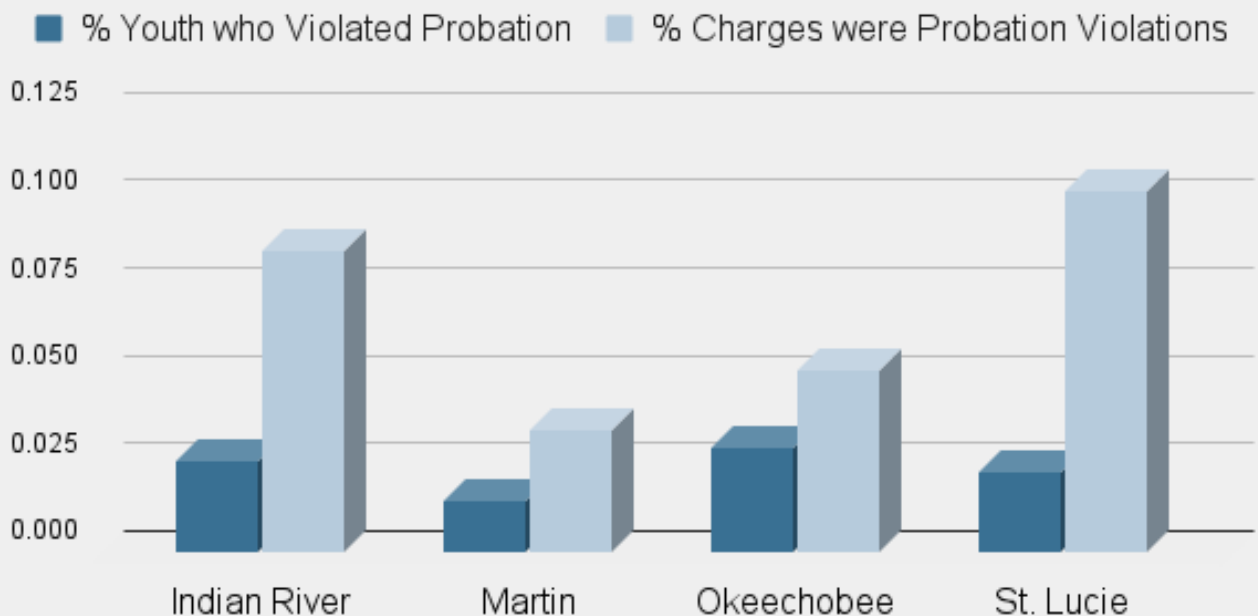
- *"If a kid commits a minor offense, that kid can get a civil citation only if they have never been in the system before -- at the initial stage of the juvenile justice system. But we do not revert back to civil citation once a kid is under Juvenile Probation supervision. It would be filed as a new law violation, if they are on probation." – DJJ Intake personnel*
- *"The State's Attorney's Office can also come back and tell Juvenile Probation that we can revert back to civil citations, but I have only seen them do that a couple times." – DJJ Intake personnel*
- *"If a kid is issued a civil citation, that is also a new charge, so that will be an automatic violation. If the kid comes across a law enforcement officer, the officer calls the JAC and sees if the kid is on probation. If they are, they cannot give a civil citation. If the kid trespassed in the park, that's a second-degree misdemeanor, and we would still file that as an automatic offense because it is a new charge." – DJJ Probation personnel*

Key Takeaway: Opportunities to exercise greater discretion in probation timelines and offering civil citation may lead to fewer probation violations, lower caseloads for probation officers, and fewer cases heard by the juvenile court.

VIOLATIONS OF PROBATION ACROSS REMAINING 19TH CIRCUIT COUNTIES

As with St. Lucie County, probation violations were examined in two different ways across the remaining counties. When examining individual youth, between 1.5% (Martin County) and 3% (Okeechobee and Indian River Counties) of youth violated probation, which is similar to St. Lucie County for which 2% of youth violated probation. However, the sum of probation violation charges tells a slightly different story. Four percent of total charges were attributed to the 2% of youth who violated probation in Martin County. In Okeechobee, the 3% of youth who violated probation were accountable for 5% of charges in the county. Finally, 9% of charges overall in Indian River County involved the 3% of youth who violated probation.

% of Youth who Violated Probation and % of Total Charges that were Probation Violations



CROSSOVER YOUTH

A subset of young people who encountered the youth legal system are those who also had concurrent or historical contact with DCF. This population is commonly referred to as “crossover” or dually-involved youth. The local St. Lucie County DJJ and DCF/CCKids agencies collaborated to identify 25 individuals who had involvement with both agencies between 2019 and 2022. (Note: this was not an exhaustive list due to the time intensive nature of collecting detailed data on this group). The goal of this additional analysis was to better understand the demographics, experiences, and pathways crossover youth undergo in St. Lucie County. Additional context was provided from professionals who work directly with these young people.

Demographics

Of the 25 youth identified as crossover, 16 (64%) were Black, seven (28%) were White, one (4%) was biracial, and one (4%) was mixed race. The vast majority (96%) were identified as non-Hispanic with only one individual (4%) documented as Hispanic Latino. Fourteen youth (56%) were labeled female and the remainder were male.

A state report released in May 2023 on 60 dually served youth in Florida indicated that 42% of crossover cases were female with the remaining 58% identified as males. The state also found that 52% of the sample were White, 45% were Black, and 3% were mixed race or unknown. By comparison, dually involved youth in St. Lucie County are more likely to be female and Black. However, it is important to note that it is unclear if the 60 cases reviewed by the state was exhaustive and, further, the sample identified in St. Lucie County was also not exhaustive. This has implications for whether the cases examined were in fact representative of the larger group.

CROSSOVER YOUTH

- **Key Takeaways:** Compared to the youth offender population in St. Lucie County, crossover youth were more likely to be Black (57% of DJJ-involved youth compared to 64% of crossover youth) and less likely to be White (42% of DJJ youth compared to 28% of crossover youth).
- Black youth were almost two and a half times more likely to be identified as crossover youth compared to their prevalence in the general population.
- Only 30% of juvenile justice involved youth were females whereas over 50% of the crossover sample were females.

CROSSOVER YOUTH

Mental and Behavioral Health Indicators

Eight-eight percent (n=22) of dually served youth were documented as having an identified mental or behavioral diagnoses. (Note: St. Lucie County crossover data is based on professional diagnoses whereas the DJJ mental and behavioral health indicators are based on MAYSI-II scores). This is slightly higher than what the state reported on dually served youth in Florida for which 82% of youth had a mental health diagnosis. There was a total of 54 diagnoses across the 25 young people, with ADHD affecting 28% (n=10) of youth followed by DMDD with 6% and ODD and adjustment disorder affecting 5% of crossover youth each. Youth ranged from having zero to four diagnoses with an average of two.

DJJ Intake referred 88% (n=22) of crossover youth to mental or behavioral health services and found that 59% (n=13) accessed the service. When child welfare staff were asked about service referrals made through intake, many noted that they were unaware such could take place. Others commented on the lack of communication across the two entities that could otherwise help promote service access.

- *“They told me one of my kids was referred to therapy but wouldn’t tell me with who or with anything else. When I talk with the JPO they don’t give information about service referrals.” – Child welfare staff member*

- **Key Takeaways:** DJJ intake is slightly more likely to refer crossover youth to services compared to the overall DJJ population.
- Despite the high rate of referral, just over half of youth accessed the services to which they were referred by DJJ intake. Improved coordination with DCF/CCKids may help facilitate service access for shared cases.
- The vast majority of crossover youth have mental and/or behavioral health concerns, with many having co-occurring disorders.

CROSSOVER YOUTH

	Frequency	Percent
ADHD	10	10%
DMDD	6	6%
ODD	5	5%
Adjustment disorder	5	5%
Major depressive disorder	4	4%
PTSD	3	3%
Anxiety	3	3%
Substance abuse disorder	2	2%
Mood disorder	2	2%
Conduct disorder	2	2%

CROSSOVER YOUTH

	Frequency	Percent
Cannabis use disorder	2	2%
BPD	1	1%
Trichotillomania	1	1%
Unspecified mood disorder	1	1%
Schizoaffective disorder (bipolar type)	1	1%
Traumatic brain injury	1	1%
Unspecified trauma disorder	1	1%
Unspecified disruptive disorder	1	1%
N/A	3	3%
Total	54 diagnoses (25 youth)	100%

CROSSOVER YOUTH

Pathways to Dual Involvement

The majority (80%) of the 25 young people identified as crossover in St. Lucie County had been involved with CPS at some point prior to their encounter with DJJ. Twenty-eight percent (n=7) of youth were actively involved with CPS at the time of their arrest or law enforcement referral. The most common reason for this involvement was abuse (n=4), followed by abandonment, abandonment/abuse, and inadequate supervision each with one case respectively. Three of the active CPS cases were in foster care, two were under investigation, one was under investigation/in-home, and one was under investigation/permanent guardianship. Despite that some youth had open CPS cases, child welfare staff expressed missed opportunities for DJJ Intake to meaningfully partner across agencies:

- *“I did not interact with DJJ Intake. I was not included at all in the intake process. Just when I was picking up the youth. Intake operates more like a need-to-know basis.” – Child welfare staff member*

Alternatively, 20% (n=5) of dually involved youth were referred to CPS by DJJ. Of those individuals who became involved with CPS as a result of a DJJ referral, three were due to abandonment and two were due to abuse disclosure. To this end, DJJ staff expressed discontent with having few options for youth whose guardians refuse to pick them up:

- *“Detention is not for kids who are displaced. It is for kids who commit serious offenses and their screening shows they need detention... That is supposed to be for when a kid is required to be there for 21 days [per their screening], not when the parents are not willing to accept that kid... DCF should be the next option if that’s the case, not lock-up.” – DJJ Intake personnel*

Key Takeaways: The most dominant pathway for crossover in St. Lucie County (based on the data provided) entails a young person with historical CPS involvement who is later arrested or referred to DJJ.

More than half of the cases referred to CPS by DJJ were due to a lack of placement at the time of release from secure detention or Wave Crest shelter.

CROSSOVER YOUTH

Placement

Due to their involvement in more than one system of care, it is not uncommon for dually involved youth to undergo various placements throughout their young lives. However, the number and type of placements young people are exposed to can vary greatly – as can their experiences in those settings.

Number of CPS placements. At the time of their arrest or referral to DJJ, seven of the 25 identified crossover youth had experienced at least one CPS placement during their life. The number of placements undergone by these youth ranged from one to five placements. The minimum number of days spent in placement was 213 and the maximum was 5,752 days.

Out of home placement at time of arrest. Five individuals were in out of home placement through CPS at the time of their arrest or referral to DJJ. The majority (n=3) were in congregate care and the remaining two were placed in kinship care. Three youth were placed out of home due to abuse and the remaining two were due to abandonment and neglect, respectively.

History of absconding. CPS indicated that five youth (20% of the sample) placed in out of home care had a history of going AWOL. The number of times each youth absconded ranged from four to 44 instances. The mean number of running events across the five youth was 18.4. When asked why youth might flee placement, IGNITE Youth Alliance staff observed that there is always a reason and it often relates to how comfortable or safe young people feel in the place they are residing.

- *“In my experience with kids running away and getting arrested, a lot of times when they get to the detention center, they complain about new peers, new roommates, new therapists – new people to not trust. People who do not look like them. They don’t want to open up in a new environment, and [opening up is] required to do well in those placements.” – IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member*
- *“Residential placements usually will have something going on that a kid is trying to run away from... No one would run if something wasn’t going on.” – IGNITE Youth Alliance staff member*

CROSSOVER YOUTH

Placement

Pre-adjudication detention. Ten (40%) of the 25 crossover youth in this sample were held in pre-adjudication secure detention. This is lower than the overall pre-adjudication detention rate, which was 52%. Three dually served youth were held for one day; six individuals were in pre-adjudication detention for 21 days; and one youth remained in pre-adjudication detention for 52 days. The most common reason for holding youth in pre-adjudication detention was due to domestic violence (n=4) followed by their DRAI score (n=2). Remaining reasons included respite shelter, domestic offense, sex offense, and warrant for which one individual was held in detention, respectively.

A number of DJJ staff commented on the appropriateness of detention for many of the young people they encounter, echoing previously noted sentiments on the minimal options for housing youth who are abandoned.

- *“If we are past getting someone to pick the kid up, we will put them in respite until someone is able to pick up the youth. If respite is not available – because of aggressive charges, maybe, the respite will not hold the kid – then we do lock-up until we can have a conference with the family. We maybe try to find a grandma or cousin or somebody, because at our first conversation with the family, they are upset and not thinking clearly, and families can usually think in more depth later on to find someone to take the child and give the parents a break.” – DJJ Intake personnel*

CROSSOVER YOUTH

Interagency Collaboration

Child welfare staff described their relationship with probation as one of imbalance. Many expressed confusion about the protocols DJJ adheres to – particularly when it comes to probation violations, the services DJJ has access to, and an understanding between both agencies (and contractors) as to what their relationship should entail when a case is shared.

- *“When we told DJJ [about the violation], they told us to deal with it. What can we do? All we can do is keep changing her placement. DJJ needs to violate her. She was doing drugs, she wasn’t going to school. These were all court-ordered and she wasn’t doing anything.” – Child welfare staff member*
- *“When kids are on probation, they may be ordered to do mental health counseling, but [DJJ] are relying on us to make those referrals to providers.” – Child welfare staff member*
- *“[DJJ] expects us to get the kids engaged. If the dilemma is transportation, they rely on the case manager to speak to the parent, etc.” – Child welfare staff member*
- *“If a child is having a problem at home, DJJ looks to us. I’m sure they also have supports to help strengthen what is happening at home.” – Child welfare staff member*

CROSSOVER YOUTH

Key Takeaway: In the absence of clear expectations and an understanding of one another's agencies, child welfare and DJJ staff miss opportunities to not only support young people but also each other.

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CROSSOVER YOUTH

Key Takeaway: In the absence of clear expectations and an understanding of one another's agencies, child welfare and DJJ staff miss opportunities to not only support young people but also each other.

Interagency Collaboration

Child welfare caseworkers and supervisors alike noted that it would be helpful to establish expectations for how crossover cases are managed. Although regular meetings take place with DJJ to review shared cases, there remains ambiguity about their partners' operations and guidelines for how caseworkers and probation officers should interact. As one individual noted, intentional cross-training could prove beneficial in understanding what decisions are made and how, what services are available, and who is responsible for certain aspects of case management.

- *“I think it would be helpful to implement some sort of training with our case managers on how to navigate the DJJ system. We have meetings once a month with DJJ on crossover kids. I think it would also be helpful to integrate training with DJJ to lay out the expectations when we have crossover youth.” – Child welfare staff member*

CROSSOVER YOUTH

Navigating Cross-County Cases

Prior to concluding their focus group, child welfare workers requested the opportunity to discuss one issue that was not identified in the data but that affects them and the dually involved youth with whom they work. Specifically, staff described the hardships they face when a child on their caseload is charged in another county.

- *“When we have youth who are crossover youth and they are offending in different circuits, there needs to be a better way to get them to their hearing rather than having a case manager drive all over the state to get the youth to their hearing. How can we better support the case managers as they are attending across the state?” – Child welfare staff member*

The issue itself is time consuming and detracts from caseworkers’ capacity to serve children and families on their caseloads. Child welfare staff offered solutions they have attempted but expressed frustration over the resistance they have been met with, particularly from the court:

- *“I asked a judge if we could do the hearing over Zoom and he shot me down so fast. I even asked if they could be scheduled closer together, and he just shot it down.” – Child welfare staff member*
- *“We do have family support workers, but it is so challenging for us to travel to some places, which can be up to a 6-hour trek, and then the judge says you need to be back again in a month.” – Child welfare staff member*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section details specific issues identified within the present evaluation. Each issue is coupled with at least one recommendation to aid its potential resolve in St. Lucie County. Information gathered from stakeholder focus groups is peppered throughout to add further context to the challenges and solutions indicated. Many of the recommendations derive directly from stakeholder remarks. Additional resources (inclusive of hyperlinks) are also highlighted.



No. 01 – **CIVIL CITATION**



No. 02 – **SCHOOL**



No. 03 – **DJJ INTAKE/JAC**



No. 04 – **PROBATION**



No. 05 – **COURT**



No. 06 – **CROSSOVER**



No. 07 – **SERVICES AND RESOURCES**



No. 01 – CIVIL CITATION

Identified issue: Four percent of parents/guardians in St. Lucie County declined the option for civil citation for their child. When asked why this might be, the Sheriff’s Office and Port St. Lucie Police Department offered different speculations but the underlying theme of both related to a lack of understanding of civil citation – and the alternatives – in the moment it is presented to them.

Recommendations:

- Improve public awareness of civil citation, including its benefits and how it is similar and different from other potential outcomes. For instance, civil citation is a more immediate consequence than being court-ordered to probation or another diversion program but the same services and resources are accessible through it.
- Consider contracting with a trusted “boots on the ground” community-based agency that can meet with parents to talk about a youth’s options. This may help to eliminate the families’ lack of trust in law enforcement and make them more receptive to hearing the information.

Identified issue: The Sheriff’s Office and the Port St. Lucie Police Department appear to have variances in policy around allowing parents/guardians time to decide whether to accept the offer of civil citation. While the Sheriff’s Office will allow two to three days for a parent to “cool off” in cases where there is no imminent danger, the Port St. Lucie Police Department requires special permissions to do the same.

Recommendations:

- Determine if and how a “cool off” period can be offered by the Port St. Lucie Police Department to parents and guardians who are hesitant to accept civil citation. Collaborate with the Sheriff’s Office to gain insights into their guidelines around the issue to inform whether similar guidance could be applied within the Port St. Lucie Police Department.

Identified issue: There are alleged discrepancies between DJJ state level data on the use of civil citation and how it is actually employed locally.

Recommendations:

- Work with the state agency to revise the local data reporting system so it is reflective of the 19th Circuit Civil Citation MOU and related law enforcement agency policies (e.g., General Order 23.01 which describes the nine specific criteria that disqualify a youth from civil citation). Alternatively, establish a local data collection mechanism within and between the Port St. Lucie Police Department and the St. Lucie County Sheriff’s Office.
- Encourage regular reporting among law enforcement agencies to DJJ, DCF, schools, and community stakeholders on the use of civil citation to increase transparency and further inform awareness of its use.



No. 02 – SCHOOL

Identified issue: Violations of probation increase when school is in session, which has implications for the length of time a young person is on probation and court-related operations.

Recommendations:

- In lieu of immediately referring a student to law enforcement, when a student on probation is involved in an incident at school that does not rise to a felony level, the school administrator should convene a meeting with the JPO, student, parent/guardian, and other relevant supports to identify the root cause of the issue and sufficient means to address it. Consider inclusion of a service navigator or community support person that can identify resources and make referrals to providers to address the identified issues. This person should also be culturally competent and have strong community connections (formal and informal).

Identified issue: Negative behaviors exhibited by students in school may relate to trauma exposure and mental health challenges but are not always met with this understanding due to a lack of awareness among professionals working with the child.

Recommendations:

- Adopt a system or model (e.g., Handle with Care) in which professionals working with students are made aware that the student may have experienced a trauma which might influence changes in their behavior. School staff should be trained to respond appropriately, such as by allowing the child room to decompress or remove themselves from a situation.

“If we bring in a kid and ask them who their “go to” person is a school and they say they don’t have one, then we’ve failed them. We need to provide extensive wraparound services and mental health services but we’re often strapped for resources. Sometimes kids just need a few minutes out of class to decompress. Students just need one person they can talk to or identify with.” – School administrator

“It could be something happening at home too that is causing issues. With one kid we didn’t find out until a month or two later that one of their parents passed away. We noticed the behavior change in the youth, but couldn’t figure it out right away.” – SRO



No. 02 — SCHOOL

Identified issue: While school administrators and SROs acknowledged having positive relationships and sharing a common understanding for how SROs are to be utilized in schools, there is not a documented agreement or set of expectations for this partnership locally. This can result in discretion across schools regarding the role of SROs and how administrators use them, translating to the level and frequency of contact students have with the legal system. Further, discrepancies in how SROs are used by administrators can disadvantage (e.g., increase their likelihood of arrest) students depending on which school they attend.

Recommendations:

- Develop a model MOU for schools to adopt with local law enforcement agencies that clearly delineates the roles of the SROs in schools, including under what circumstances they are to act, what the chain of command is on campus regarding who can request action on behalf of an SRO, and what their level of engagement should be with students.

“I’ve never seen anything written in stone about [SROs’] expectations and our expectations. It’s really just conversations. We let them know what we expect and they let us know what they expect at the start of the school year and we go from there.” – School administrator

Identified issue: Disorderly conduct offenses increase when school is in session. Although schools engage in training at the start of the school year, multiple stakeholder groups advocated for educators and other school staff to be better equipped with de-escalation skills so as to avoid excessive law enforcement referrals.

Recommendations:

- Establish regular and ongoing de-escalation and behavior management training for all school staff and personnel throughout the school year. This may entail pooling resources across schools to minimize costs and increase engagement of school staff across districts.

“An ongoing series of de-escalation training for staff would be great. We all get frustrated and sometimes, you’re having a bad day and a kid is having a bad day and it’s just a difficult combination. If we could just remember some of those trainings and how to use our tone, our voice, our body language to deescalate situations. De-escalation tactics and strategies would be helpful in a lot of situations. Let’s pool our resources and get our teachers together [across schools] to keep learning de-escalation techniques and reminders.” – School administrator



No. 02 – SCHOOL

Identified issue: Sixty-six percent of school-based offenses were attributed to Black students, who make up 27% of the general youth population. On the other hand, White youth compose 56% of the population but only 33% of school offenses were credited to White students, thereby indicating that Black students were referred to law enforcement exponentially more often than White students.

Recommendations:

- Examine the code of conduct within schools demonstrating higher rates of school-based arrest and law enforcement referrals. Determine if infractions most often ending in arrest are objectively or subjectively defined and enforced.
- Survey students about their school's code of conduct and how it is implemented. Inquire with students about how the code of conduct could be made fairer and more equitable while maintaining a safe and supportive atmosphere.
- Talk with students and staff (e.g., teachers, teaching assistants, custodians) to get their perspective on inequities they see and/or have experienced.

Identified issue: School administrators stressed the importance of communication when a student is entering a new school or matriculating between grades, but noted that it is not consistent or thorough which can have implications for if and how students are supported and how their behaviors are interpreted.

Recommendations:

- Improve 'hand-offs' between schools when students are changing or entering a new school so that educators and staff are able to prepare in advance of the students' arrival. This may include developing face sheets with tips and pointers that build on students' strengths, orchestrating time for teachers to meet with one another to share information about students on their rosters, and facilitating orientations and 'meet-and-greets' for new students and incoming classes.

"We can always do better regarding communication when students matriculate from one grade to another or one school to another. When we get new students to our school campuses it takes time to get to know them. If we had better communication from middle to high school or elementary to middle school, that would give us a leg up to be prepared and put resources in place earlier." – School administrator



No. 03 – DJJ INTAKE/JAC

Identified issue: DJJ and DCF/CCKids staff, attorneys, and mentors all noted that young people and their caretakers are often confused by the legal system. For example, if a youth is held in detention for 21 days, they may be under the belief that they ‘served their time’ and the process has ended only to be surprised by having to attend a disposition hearing and facing further consequences.

Recommendations:

- Because DJJ Intake is the first formal step in the juvenile legal system process, it is an opportunity to inform youth and guardians about the youth legal system. Distributing a pamphlet at intake that defines the following steps and potential outcomes may help young people and families know what to expect as they engage with the system. Ensure the pamphlet accounts for various literacy levels and languages.
- Create a short video that outlines the juvenile legal system process to be shown at the start of the intake appointment (following introductions). The link for this video can be sent immediately to the youth and family via email and text along with providing them the aforementioned pamphlet.



No. 04 – PROBATION

Identified issue: There is a dearth of programming related to reentry and transition to adulthood, leaving some older adolescents unhoused and without resources upon exiting DJJ.

Recommendations:

- Develop a transition and reentry focus of the YES Plan that deliberately targets housing, independent living skills, and employment. For example, youth should be supported in developing resumes, cover letters, and in completing job applications prior to DJJ case closure. Identification of viable placements should be addressed and revisited with youth throughout their time on probation or in secure confinement.
- Work with youth to identify a “go-to person.” The youth, in conjunction with their DJJ worker, should meet with this person to confirm their willingness to be accessible and supportive of the youth as they transition in emotional and psychological ways. This person may be someone they call to help them prepare for a job interview, ask questions about navigating relationships with their peers, or just be a listening ear as they navigate life. Everyone needs someone to connect with who will always be present, and this “go-to person” can serve in that role for these youth.



No. 05 – COURT

Identified issue: Although there appears to be a level of collaboration between the State’s Attorney’s Office and the Office of the Public Defender, there is limited communication with DJJ when the case in question is that of a youth on probation.

Recommendations:

- Convene pre-court conferences between the SAO, OPD, and JPO to share relevant information and recommendations for the hearing. Include the child welfare caseworker and/or supervisor if the young person is involved with DCF. Alternatively, host monthly meetings in which the aforementioned parties discuss cases, common trends and challenges, and afford opportunities for cross-education to facilitate strengthened relationships and collaboration.

Identified issue: Parents/guardians and youth appear confused and overwhelmed with the court process which can lend itself to miscommunication and non-compliance.

Recommendations:

- Initiate or expand the use of family support partners and parent navigator programs to help guide families through the court process.
- See DJJ Intake/JAC recommendations regarding development of a pamphlet and video.

Identified issue: Staff who regularly work with young people and families noted that unexplained legal jargon can result in youth accepting pleas or continuing through the court process without understanding the implications.

Recommendations:

- Create a handout that lists and defines common legal terms (e.g., “no contest,” “disposition”) in layman’s terms. Ensure the handout is translated in languages commonly spoken in the community and distribute at the earliest point possible in a youth’s engagement with the legal system. Pair the handout with a video that describes this information to accommodate for various comprehension levels.
- In advance of every hearing, legal defense should meet with youth and their caregivers to explain the purpose of the hearing and the possible outcomes, giving youth and guardians time to process and ask questions.

“[In Martin County] we could also be on all calls before the court proceedings, meetings between the Public Defender and State’s Attorney and us, and we could give our advice and feedback before court. In St. Lucie County, we go to court and do not know what we are walking into.” – DJJ Probation personnel



No. 06 — CROSSOVER

Identified issue: Youth who do not qualify for detention or respite and whose parents/guardians refuse to pick them up are held in the detention facility until DCF or DJJ are able to identify an alternative place for the child to go.

Recommendations:

- Establish a family find request form or person of contact within DCF specific to DJJ. In the event a young person's family refuses to pick them up, DCF can assist in identifying another family member, kin, or supportive adult who can temporarily house the child while the parent/guardian has a break.
- Expand opportunities for respite and educate families on respite options through multiple outlets such as schools, churches, and other community programs.
- Develop a process for immediate information exchange between DJJ and DCF to support collaborative case management.

Identified issue: Child welfare caseworkers are not informed of when a youth is arrested or brought to JAC and are thus not available to provide information that might be helpful to the intake process. Caseworkers are only notified when a child needs to be picked up.

Recommendations:

- Implement a process in which DJJ Intake workers are able to make timely inquiry about a youth's child welfare status with DCF and/or CCKids. In the event they are in the custody of DCF, DCF and/or CCKids should provide the contact information of the child welfare caseworker and supervisor to notify them of the intake appointment.



No. 06 — CROSSOVER

Identified issue: Expectations for communication and information sharing between DCF/CCKids and DJJ are unclear which can result in frustration and confusion among staff, particularly regarding service referral and probation violations.

Recommendations:

- Review state and local statute to determine what information can legally be shared between DJJ and DCF/CCKids. If needed, develop an MOU delineating these capabilities and permissions.
- Establish a set of standard expectations (i.e., a collaborative case management process) for how and when DJJ and DCF/CCKids should communicate, meet, attend hearings, and share information in order to inform case plans, service referrals, and related supports for dually involved youth.

Identified issue: There is uncertainty among child welfare caseworkers and supervisors regarding the juvenile legal process, DJJ operations, and what informs DJJ decision-making.

Recommendations:

- Conduct cross-training between DJJ and DCF/CCKids to a) instruct each partner on the standard operations of the agency and b) encourage interaction between frontline staff and supervisors.
- Create DCF/CCKids and DJJ supervisory unit pairings to do monthly case reviews, trainings, and open worker discussions to foster relationship development between frontline workers across agencies.



No. 07 – SERVICES AND RESOURCES

Identified issue: Multiple stakeholders reported that often youth (and families) are unfamiliar with what resources exist and often only connect to them upon the youth's involvement with DJJ.

Recommendations:

- Expand communication efforts to inform the community about what resources are available that do not require system-involvement. This may include outreach to and through schools, DCF, law enforcement, churches, community centers, housing authority, and other community-based entities.
- Host a gathering with community-based organizations (e.g., recreation leagues, faith-based organizations, garden clubs, etc.) to strategize and mobilize expansion of those efforts to engage more young people – particularly those in low-income areas such as Fort Pierce.

Identified issue: Opportunities to connect young people to mental health counselors are limited but in high demand.

Recommendations:

- Identify federal or private grant streams, or earmark funds within youth- and family-serving entities, to support placing additional counselors and social workers in schools and other areas that are easily accessible to young people (e.g., the Boys and Girls Club).
- Work with the local school board to educate them on the need and strategize on identification of funding options to either reallocate or create new fundings for in-school supports that attend to students' well-being.

Identified issue: Instances of domestic violence result in an automatic arrest and disqualification from civil citation (as indicated by local law enforcement policy).

Recommendations:

- Promote awareness of respite care among the community so families are aware and can utilize the opportunity before situations rise to the level of domestic violence.



No. 07 – SERVICES AND RESOURCES

Identified issue: In discussing hot spot analyses completed by the Sheriff's Office, participants noted that often areas with the highest rate of arrest and crossover among youth are also those with fewer resources and activities that engage young people. The resources that are present in those areas do not consistently reflect the culture, needs, and values of those they attempt to serve.

Recommendations:

- Form genuine partnerships with youth in hotspot areas to identify and/or develop programming that young people are genuinely interested in and that assist with meeting basic needs that might otherwise go unmet. For example, a reporting center can be more than a place for youth on probation to check in. It can also be a hub for tutoring, helping youth with homework, providing music lessons, to play games, and a safe place to hang out.
- Establish a Credible Messenger mentoring program and/or Youth Advocate Program (YAP) in the areas demonstrating the highest need.

“They’ll take the pizza and be there for five minutes then they’re back off doing whatever. It needs to be life-changing for them to want to be involved in these programs. We have some historical areas that are generational poverty versus these new and up and coming neighborhoods. The programming doesn’t solve their quality-of-life issues or overall goals.” - SRO

EVALUATION OF ENTRY INTO THE JUVENILE LEGAL SYSTEM IN ST. LUCIE COUNTY

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