



Youth Justice in Wisconsin: A Clear Perspective

Wisconsin's youth justice system is in desperate need of improvement in order to properly serve and rehabilitate the young people in its care. The Lutheran Office for Public Policy supports these policy changes as part of our mission to pursue peace, justice, and care for all of God's creation.

Who are the Children in our Juvenile Justice System?

In 2019 there were over 10,000 youth referred to the youth justice system across the state. Who are these young people and what led them to the justice system?

- Most have a history of trauma.
- Nearly all struggle with mental health challenges.
- Many struggle with poverty.
- They are disproportionately youth of color.

Fixing our Youth Justice System

Wisconsin needs to start making significant changes into how we treat and rehabilitate justice-involved youth. LOPPW supports the following steps to improve outcomes for both justice-involved youth and for our state.

Prevention Efforts

Wisconsin can take these steps to reduce the number of children moved to the justice system:

1. Stop the criminalization of low-level misbehavior among children and teens.
2. Limit and strictly define the role of School Resource Officers (SROs).
3. Better address the needs of students in the classroom.
4. Improve state mental health services for children and youth.
5. Adopt BadgerCare expansion.

In Dire Need of Repair

Unfortunately, Wisconsin's current youth justice model:

1 Is Ineffective.

An astounding 63% of youth released from our juvenile justice system recidivate within three years.

2 Hurts Our Kids

Widespread abuse in youth correctional facilities, the use of solitary confinement, and the lack of available programming in Wisconsin's current system compounds trauma and abuse among justice-involved youth. The large, prison-like facilities located far from family further isolates and damages youth.

3 Is Expensive

Our current system is very expensive; it costs Wisconsin taxpayers \$144,905 per year to hold one child in confinement.

Community Over Confinement

Many of the problems with our current youth justice system, particularly in how we try to rehabilitate young people, revolves around the archaic confinement model. Wisconsin must move away from centralized corrections facilities that isolate and traumatized our kids and towards a community-based model that brings youth closer to home.

Individualized Care that Addresses the Underlying Causes of Incarceration.

1. Assessments and programming catered to the needs of each child.
2. Offering more treatment programs for youth across the state.
3. Equipping youth for future success.

Ban the Use of Solitary Confinement for Juveniles

The use of solitary confinement in youth “constitute[s] cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment” that is counterproductive to proper youth rehabilitation. Wisconsin must immediately cease any and all use of punitive solitary confinement.

Raise the Age of Juvenile Court Jurisdiction

Raise the Age refers to raising the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to bring 17-year-olds back to their rightful place in the juvenile justice system. Simply put, for every 17-year-old that we move from the adult justice system to the juvenile justice system, Wisconsin becomes a safer, more empathetic, and more fiscally-responsible state. For these reasons, LOPPW has formed Raise the Age - Wisconsin, a statewide coalition of advocacy partners dedicated to raising the age of juvenile court jurisdiction. For more information on Raise the Age - Wisconsin or to get involved in Raise the Age advocacy, go to www.raisetheagewi.org.

A First Step for Youth Justice

This fact sheet does not cover the entire scope of needed changes and improvements to Wisconsin’s youth justice system. However, by working to prevent youth incarceration, focusing on the individual needs of justice-involved youth, limiting the use of confinement, and raising the age of juvenile court jurisdiction, Wisconsin can make significant strides towards a more effective justice system. The Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin supports these important reform efforts, and stands in solidarity with the youth justice advocacy organizations, faith-based organizations, and directly impacted people who advocate for improved outcomes for justice-involved youth in Wisconsin.

Find LOPPW's entire Youth Justice Policy Report at loppw.org on the Juvenile Justice page.

The Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin engages people of faith in the ministry of advocacy for policies that support peace, justice and care for all of God’s creation. For more information about our work, visit loppw.org or find us on Facebook!