

CAMPAIGNING FOR YOUTH JUSTICE IN COLORADO



ABOUT US

The National Center for Youth Law's **Youth Justice Colorado Campaign** is a powerful, multi-faceted initiative that includes state and local advocacy to build an equitable, trauma-informed youth- and family-centered justice system that values community and prioritizes young people's well-being. **This transformative campaign is driven by the voices and needs of young people directly impacted by the justice system.** It includes grassroots organizing, leadership development, and a range of strategies all aimed at:

- Eliminating the prosecution and incarceration of youth in the adult criminal system
- Reducing reliance on youth incarceration and formal juvenile justice system involvement
- Ending the overrepresentation of youth of color in the juvenile justice system
- Developing and resourcing alternatives to system involvement for youth
- Building community capacity for culturally and developmentally appropriate services to support positive youth development and community health

SURVEYING THE SCENE

NCYL's Youth Justice team conducted a landscape analysis of Colorado's youth justice system from 2020-2021. This included significant data collection and interviews with dozens

of system and community stakeholders, including youth, families, service providers, system administrators, and elected officials. The analysis revealed troubling findings. Among them: racial and ethnic disparities, including an overrepresentation of Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth, within the state's juvenile justice system. Black youth in Colorado, for example, were four times more likely than white youth to be arrested, and were only half as likely to be offered programs for diversion.

ADDRESSING CRITICAL NEEDS

To tackle these issues, we identified critical needs:



Leadership by lived-experience experts

To create lasting change, it's essential to prioritize authentic youth engagement and partnership. Colorado stakeholders acknowledged the absence of a framework or culture that allows the communities and individuals most impacted by the juvenile justice system to reach and educate system administrators and policymakers and to engage and serve youth involved in or at-risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system.



Community-based services and placements for youth

There is a pressing need for developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant services youth can access in their communities. Stakeholders and administrators repeatedly cited a lack of appropriate services as justification for incarcerating youth.

CREATING CHANGE

NCYL founded the Colorado Youth Justice Collaborative in 2021, which has since grown to include more than 120 members. This diverse membership includes child advocates, grassroots organizations, service providers, and medical experts.

The collaborative has adopted four shared priorities:

- Reduce the overrepresentation of Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth and youth with disabilities in the juvenile justice system
- Expand community-based diversion and alternatives to detention
- Stop the school-to-prison pipeline
- End the “adultification” of youth

IMPACT

- **Research and data collection:** We conduct research and collect data to expose and combat racial disparities among youth in the juvenile justice system. Our expanded [Colorado Resource Library](#) empowers communities by providing vital information on racial disparities, not only in the youth justice system, but also in social determinants of health and in the public systems that feed into juvenile systems, such as child welfare, education, and immigration.
- **Community capacity building and public education:** We build capacity in community-based organizations and educate the public about the harms of system involvement. In 2023, the campaign delivered capacity-building trainings that include: Youth Justice Advocacy in CO, Know Your Rights, Data & Messaging, Civic Engagement 101, Power-Mapping, and Tips for Talking with Media. We also presented to more than 500 youth in juvenile justice forums and trainings that addressed the harms of current practices on communities of color. Many events highlighted alternatives shown to improve youth outcomes and community health.
- **Develop the next generation of community leaders and youth advocates:** Our annual Lived Experience Advocacy Fellowship (LEAF) program offers a paid leadership development and policy advocacy

development and policy advocacy curriculum for youth directly impacted by Colorado’s juvenile systems. Twenty young people, ages 17-26, have engaged in this groundbreaking program, developing their own youth justice policy initiatives. Visit [here](#) to view the 2023-24 syllabus.

- **Educational partnerships:** Through grant funding from Denver Families for Public Schools, we partnered with the Academy of Urban Learning (AUL) in Denver to incorporate youth justice policy into its social studies and civics curriculum. One of our youth Fellows spent one day each week at AUL and our team helped deliver trainings and arrange policy “field trips” to the state capitol and to community forums on youth justice policy.
- **Building capacity in organizations dedicated to youth justice:** We provide resources, training, technical assistance to community organizations serving and advocating for youth across the state in order to increase their respective capacities to promote positive youth development. For example, with funding from The Craig-Scheckman Family Foundation, we sub-granted \$40,000 to Fully Liberated Youth (FLY) enabling them to hire a full-time Director of Community & Policy Advocacy. This allowed FLY — which supports young people who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated or at high risk of incarceration — to increase its capacity to meaningfully engage in policy education and advocacy as a service provider with deep expertise in the youth justice system.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

While we're proud of our progress and the community network we've built in Colorado to reform the state's juvenile justice system, there is still much work to be done. We have several projects planned to continue improving justice for Colorado's youth, but additional funding and support is needed to launch these potentially life-altering initiatives. Some of our planned activities include:

- **Expand community-based diversion programs and resources to prevent youth arrests.** Drawing from local model programs, we intend to launch campaigns to increase resources and stakeholder buy-in for community-based diversion programs for youth across the state.
- **Create alternatives to detention for young children.** Building on recent Colorado legislative moves that bolster protections for youth 12 and younger, we'll work with state and local systems leaders and service providers to promote public health approaches that meet the needs of very young children outside the juvenile justice system.

- **Prevent prosecution of minors in criminal court.** We'll continue to partner with juvenile defense attorneys, policy advocates, and the Colorado Youth Justice Collaborative members to address the disproportionate number of Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth sent to the adult court system. We'll conduct juvenile defense training to share data, research, and best practices to bolster defense efforts that keep youth out of the adult criminal justice system.
- **Increase youth leadership development programs.** We will continue partnering with community-based organizations serving Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth to expand youth leadership programs and opportunities that cultivate leadership in youth justice advocacy and implementation among young people with lived experience.

LEARN MORE

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BUDGET

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- Annie E Casey Foundation
- Craig-Scheckman Family Foundation
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