

# Beyond the Headlines: What We Know and Don't Know About Baltimore Youth Crime and Justice

By Robin Campbell

## Introduction

In 2018 an Abell Foundation report titled “Fact Check: A Survey of Available Data on Juvenile Crime in Baltimore City” opened with the following passage:

**There is a perception that juvenile crime is on the rise in Baltimore. Recent headlines such as “Juvenile crime in Baltimore ‘out of control;’ leaders want action” (Baltimore Sun, 11/6/17) and “Heading off rise in juvenile crime is top issue for Baltimore” (WBAL, 2/27/18) are indicative of news stories that capture — and fuel — the perception that juvenile crime is up.**

The authors of that report found a situation more complex than the headlines suggested. For example, while overall arrests of young people—a widely accepted, if imperfect, measure of youth crime—had decreased by 46% from 2012 through 2017, complaints for crimes of violence by youths had risen.

Today, as the city celebrates historic reductions in gun violence, local, state and even national media continue to broadcast headlines warning of crime by city youths ages 17 and younger,<sup>1</sup> local leaders host high-profile events about youth crime,<sup>2</sup> and state lawmakers propose tightening statutes pertaining to young people accused of breaking the law.<sup>3</sup>

In this report, the Abell Foundation is once again posing the following questions:

1. Is crime by children and youth up in Baltimore City?
2. How are youth who are charged with crime handled by the criminal and juvenile justice systems?
3. What happens in cases where young people are charged in adult court?
4. What happens in cases where children are charged with violent crimes and transferred back into the youth justice system?

Picking up where the previous report left off, it analyzes data available from key entities engaged with crimes charged to young people—the Baltimore Police Department (BPD), the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS), the Governor’s Office of Crime Prevention and Policy (GOCPP), and, because many youths are charged in the adult criminal justice system and placed in adult facilities, the state’s Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS). It covers the period from July 2018 through June 2025, the equivalent of seven fiscal years.<sup>4</sup>

## Key Findings

**Information about youth offending in Baltimore and systemic responses remain deeply siloed.** The state’s Department of Juvenile Services has for many years reported a uniform set of data enabling consistent evaluation of the information it tracks. But it is unique in that respect among the network of city and state agencies that manage this information. These other entities likely have useful pieces of the puzzle, but because they do not routinely present data in a manner that is useful for public scrutiny, the ability to draw reliable conclusions about the information they do release is limited. Moreover, the data that is available can be frustratingly incongruent: one agency counts arrests, the next counts complaints, another counts cases; some follow a calendar year, others use a fiscal year, and so on. This cacophony makes it challenging—if not impossible—to track and compare trends across the system.

**Data from the Baltimore Police Department and the Department of Juvenile Services indicate that crime by Baltimore young people has continued the decades-long overall decline.** This drop was temporarily deepened by the impact of COVID-19, with most numbers dropping to levels that were both exceptional and unsustainable. Consequently, youth crime rates that use FY 2020, FY 2021, or FY 2022 as a baseline are likely starting from an anomalously low point that would exaggerate the scale of any subsequent increase. To avoid such distortions, any analysis of youth crime trends in Baltimore should date back to at least FY 2019 or include a comparison to pre-pandemic levels.

**The fiscal years following the implementation of the Juvenile Justice Reform Act in 2022 have seen a smaller percentage of complaints from Baltimore City forwarded to the State's Attorney's Office compared to the fiscal years prior to the law's implementation.** Still, many of the complaints that are referred do not result in a determination of delinquency. Given well documented evidence that unnecessary contact with the system can increase recidivism and lead to poorer outcomes for affected youth, policymakers should ensure the system is not drawing in more youths than is appropriate.

**A large and growing number of young people are being charged in the adult criminal justice system—many only to be redirected into the youth system once a judge has reviewed their cases.** Because exposure to the adult system produces poor

results for young people and increases the risk of future offending,<sup>5</sup> state legislators should continue to consider how to safely reduce these numbers.

**Gun possession charges are the leading reason youth in Baltimore, and statewide, are charged in adult criminal court.** They are also the most common charge for which youths receive a transfer placing them back into the juvenile justice system. This widespread pattern should motivate lawmakers to consider whether mandatory prosecution in adult court for gun possession charges is an efficient use of resources. Also, given evidence showing many youths carry guns out of fear rather than malice, continued attention should be paid to developing alternative strategies, such as the city's Gun Violence Reduction Strategy and DJS's Thrive Academy, to dissuade youths from carrying weapons.

## Context: Seven Years of Change

The circumstances in which youth crime occurs in Baltimore have undergone dramatic changes over the past seven years. In March 2020, the shuttering of schools and businesses due to COVID-19 and widespread fear of the disease disrupted nearly every aspect of life in the city. The official state of emergency invoked that spring remained in effect for more than a year, and the disease continued to wreak havoc statewide well into 2022.<sup>6</sup>

During this time, there were also important elections. In November 2020, Baltimore elected a new mayor, who campaigned on a promise to reduce crime and violence using a holistic approach that included addressing its root causes. Two years later, voters chose a new governor and a new state's attorney for Baltimore. Both took office in January 2023, and within two months new leadership was in place

at the state's Department of Juvenile Services. Later that year, following the retirement of the incumbent, the city got a new police commissioner as well.

The period under study also witnessed important legal changes. State lawmakers seeking to align Maryland with nationally recognized best practices passed and began implementing the Juvenile Justice Reform Act (JJRA) in early 2022. Among other things, the JJRA raised the minimum age for juvenile court jurisdiction to 13 (with some exceptions for serious violent offenses), prohibited the use of secure detention for most misdemeanor offenses and technical violations of probation, and removed barriers to diverting youth to alternative responses outside the legal system. Responsibility for implementing many of these changes fell to DJS.<sup>7</sup>

In 2024, reacting to complaints that the new policies were too lax, lawmakers rescinded portions of the JJRA to give prosecutors and courts a greater role in decision-making.<sup>8</sup> Most of these changes went into effect in November 2024. The legislation also authorized the creation of the Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform & Emerging & Best Practices, which is charged with reviewing and reporting on the state's juvenile services, facilities, and programs.

In another important event, in April 2021, Maryland's highest court clarified the criteria used to determine whether a young person charged as an adult should be transferred into the youth justice system.<sup>9</sup> Prior to this decision, the severity of an alleged offense could be

sufficient to see a young person remain in the adult system. After the court's ruling, it became necessary to show that a youth could not be better served by gaining access to programs provided only through DJS.

Finally, since June 2025, the final weeks of this study period, DJS has been operating under a new secretary.

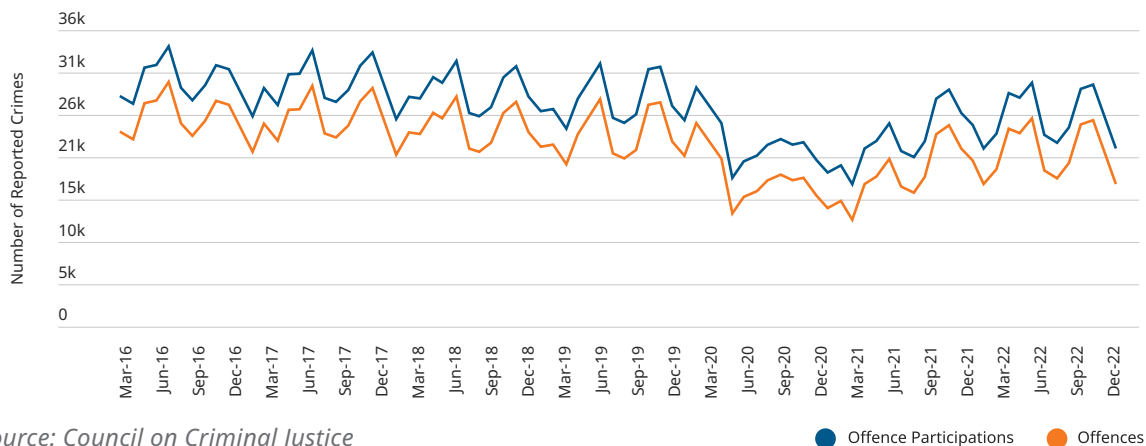
It is beyond the scope of this report to determine whether or how any of these developments influenced the data presented here. However, readers are encouraged to consider this possibility as they interpret the findings.

## Arrests of Baltimore Children and Youth

In a September 2024 report on the most recent national data on youth crime (from 2016 through 2022), the Council on Criminal Justice (CCJ), a respected national membership organization of justice professionals, found "a complex picture of juvenile offending."<sup>10</sup> **Figure 1**, from that report, shows a steady decrease in the frequency of juvenile offending and offense

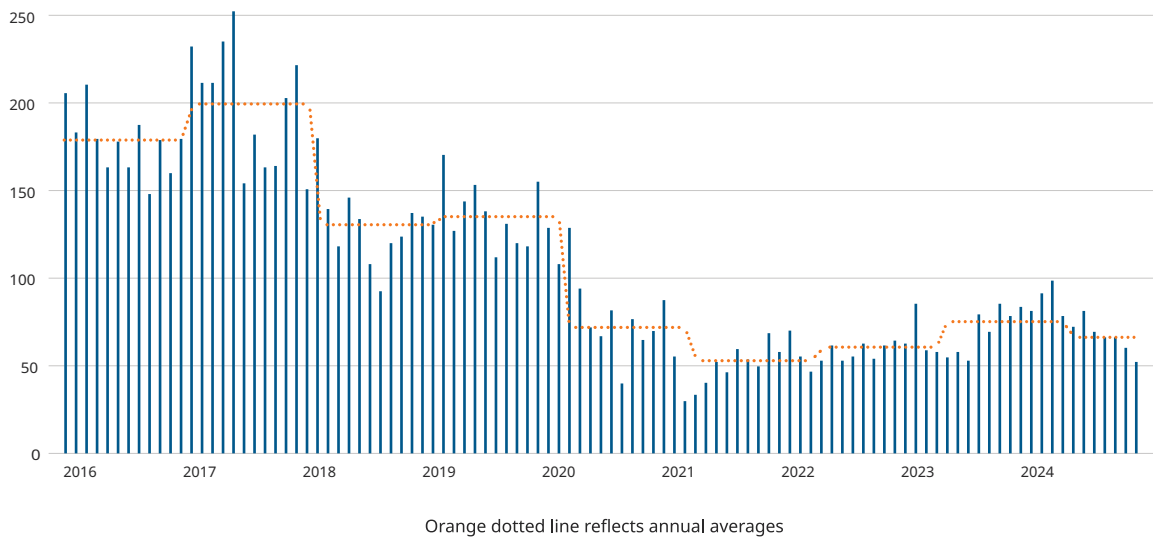
participation across the nation (with some seasonal variation) through 2019, followed, beginning in 2020, by significant drops during the COVID-19 pandemic in the number of offenses (down 14%) and the number of youth who engaged in crime (down 18%). An important exception to these general declines was a 21% increase in firearm involvement.

**Figure 1. Frequency of Juvenile Offending and Offense Participations, 2016 - 2022**



Source: Council on Criminal Justice

**Figure 2. Youth Arrests by Month, City of Baltimore (January 2016 - July 2024)**



*Source: Baltimore's Youth Justice by the Numbers, The Sentencing Project, October 1, 2024.*

The same month CCJ released its report, The Sentencing Project (TSP), a national nonprofit organization located in Washington, D.C., published an analysis of arrest data that had been regularly issued by the Baltimore Police Department (BPD).<sup>11</sup> TSP's findings, reprinted from that report in [Figure 2](#), echo CCJ's national findings. They show "a significant decline" following a peak in 2017, with the lowest point corresponding to the advent of COVID-19 and the emergency measures implemented in early 2020.

By both accounts, if crime by young people, nationally or in Baltimore, was "out of control," it wasn't apparent in the arrest data.

Following the publication of the TSP report, BPD discontinued sharing its Juvenile Arrest Monthly Report. A BPD spokesperson explained that the department wanted to revamp the

content by, among other things, including information about "paper filings," written records of police contacts with youths that do not result in an immediate arrest.

BPD has now been tracking this revised data internally since January 2025. It shared year-to-date numbers showing 753 bookings of people ages 17 or younger, including paper filings, through the first eight months of calendar year 2025—an average of 94 per month. As [Figure 3](#), taken from the TSP report, shows, this average, while understandably higher than those recorded since 2020 because it is more comprehensive, is still below the monthly averages recorded during the years prior to COVID-19. This comparison is, admittedly, imperfect. More congruent monthly year-over-year comparisons of the revised data will become possible in early 2026.

**Figure 3. City of Baltimore, Average Monthly Arrests by Year (2016 - 2024)**

Year	Average Monthly Arrests
2016	178
2017	198
2018	131
2019	134
2020	71
2021	52
2022	59
2023	75
2024	65

*Source: Baltimore's Youth Justice by the Numbers, The Sentencing Project, October 1, 2024.*

What is apparent from both reports and the year-to-date 2025 arrest data is that any tracking of youth crime rates that sets its baseline during the pandemic (FY 2020, FY 2021, or FY 2022) is starting from an anomalous, likely low point that would

exaggerate the scale of any subsequent increase—even if it remained below pre-pandemic levels. To avoid such distortions, any analysis of youth crime trends in Baltimore should date back to at least FY 2019 or include a comparison to pre-pandemic levels.

## Changes in Crime?

Despite the statistical evidence suggesting that youth offending in Baltimore City has not increased compared to pre-pandemic levels—and that reported youth crime may be low compared to historic norms—there is a persistent public perception that crime

involving young people is increasing. One possible explanation that would appear in the data would be a change in the kind of crimes that are being committed—more violent crimes, for example, and fewer low-level misdemeanors.

The Maryland Department of Juvenile Services is charged with managing, supervising, and treating young people involved in the state's juvenile justice system. It participates in nearly every stage of the youth justice process, from intake through release, and publishes state- and local-level data that it collects on youth in its care in an annual report called the Data Resource Guide (DRG).

Drawing upon DRG data, **Figure 4** tracks the distribution of complaints\* in Baltimore City according to offense category, as well as total complaints numbers, dating back to FY 2017. Two salient features stand out. First,

since FY 2021, when the count dropped to an astonishing pandemic-induced low of just 582 complaints, the quantity of complaints has been increasing steadily. However, even at the post-pandemic high (1,768 in FY 2025), complaint levels are comparable to, or well below, those recorded prior to FY 2019. The second salient feature is that in recent years crimes of violence do not appear to be significantly increasing as a proportion of all complaints. After a troubling jump in FY 2024, they settled back to 28% of all complaints in FY 2025, which is consistent with or below past years' percentages.

**Figure 4. Percent of complaints by offense category, Baltimore City.**

Offense Category	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	FY 2025
Crime of Violence	31%	30%	30%	37%	40%	34%	20%	35%	28%
Non-Violent Felony	29%	30%	27%	25%	33%	21%	27%	26%	24%
Misdemeanor	39%	39%	42%	37%	26%	45%	50%	35%	42%
Ordinance, Status, Traffic, Other	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	4%	5%	6%
<b>Total Intake Complaints</b>	2,217	1,783	1,387	1,012	582	744	1,139	1,649	1,768

Source: Maryland Department of Juvenile Services Data Resource Guide, FY 2017, FY 2018, FY 2019, FY 2020, FY 2021, FY 2022, FY 2023, FY 2024 Provisional FY 2025 data provided by DJS. (Sum of rounded figures may exceed 100%.)

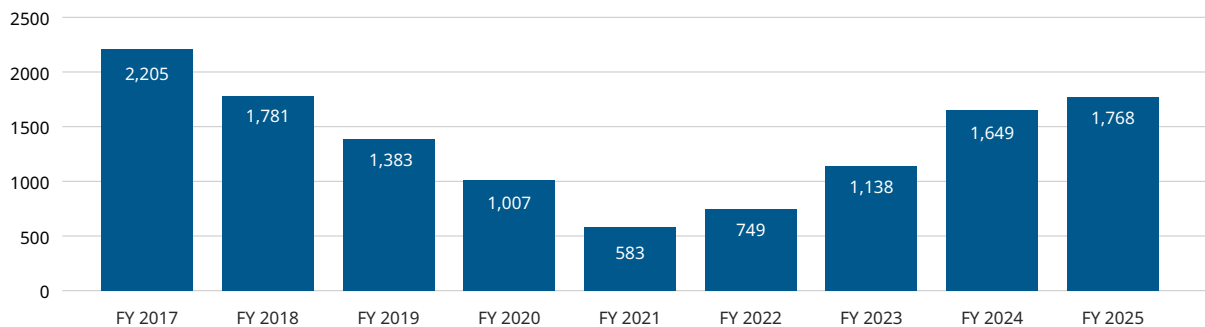
\* "Complaint" refers to any incident that brings a youth into contact with the Department of Juvenile Services. It is a broader net of incidents than "arrests." Most complaints emerge from contact with police. However, when a child on probation is found to have violated the terms of release, or a child in the adult system is transferred from the adult court system, these also qualify as complaints.

## How are Youth Charged with Crime Handled by the Criminal and Juvenile Justice Systems?

Using DJS data, [Figure 5](#) shows the number of complaints from Baltimore City from FY 2017 through FY 2025. Similar to the arrest pattern presented earlier, the number of complaints dropped when COVID-19 appeared in the second half of FY 2020 and fell even further

in FY 2021. The numbers did not rebound to pre-pandemic levels until FY 2023, and the most recent complaint data, from FY 2025, is comparable to that of FY 2018.

**Figure 5. Baltimore City intake complaints.**



*Source: Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. Data from FY 2017 - FY 2024 may show modest updates from original Data Resource Guide counts; FY 2025 data is provisional.*

**Figure 6** tracks what becomes of Baltimore City complaints received by DJS—whether the department resolves the complaint (the categories labelled "Resolved/No Jurisdiction" or "Informaled") or sends it to the Baltimore State's Attorney's Office (SAO) for possible prosecution ("Authorized Formal Petition"). As the number of complaints began rebounding in FY 2022, a smaller percentage resulted in an Authorized Formal Petition.

Prior to FY 2021, an average of 78% of complaints were formalized each year. From FY 2022 onward, just 62% of complaints were formalized each year, on average.

For context, the JJRA, which gave DJS greater discretion over case trajectories, went into effect on June 1, 2022, and both DJS and the Baltimore SAO came under new leadership in early 2023.

**Figure 6. Case forwarding - Baltimore City.**

	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	FY 2025
<b>Resolved / No Jurisdiction</b>	11%	16%	18%	13%	9%	25%	38%	28%	27%
<b>Informaled</b>	7%	6%	8%	6%	7%	10%	12%	8%	3%
<b>Authorized Formal Petition</b>	82%	78%	74%	81%	84%	65%	50%	64%	68%
<b>Total Complaints</b>	2,212	1,782	1,387	1,012	582	744	1,139	1,649	1,768

Source: DJS Data Resource Guides, FY 2017 - FY 2024; Provisional FY 2025 data provided by DJS. (Sum of rounded figures may exceed 100%.)

**Figure 7** shows the outcomes of complaints referred to the Baltimore SAO at the end of each fiscal year. The categories labeled “Petition Withdrawn, Denied by SAO, non Est” and “Dismissed, Closed, Nolle Pros” represent formalized cases that were not pursued, or that were withdrawn, closed, or dismissed.<sup>12</sup> Astonishingly, during the two fiscal years prior to this study period, nearly half or more of all formalized cases were not pursued by the

end of the fiscal year (51% in FY 2017 and 45% in FY 2018). Most recently, in FY 2023 and FY 2024, only about one-third of formalized cases were not being pursued. The lower percentage may be a consequence of the JJRA legislation, which empowered DJS to screen out cases, including those that may be unlikely to be successful under prosecution, as well as changed SAO practices under new leadership.

**Figure 7. Formalized case outcomes.**

	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
<b>Petition Withdrawn, Denied by SAO, non Est</b>	17%	13%	10%	5%	11%	6%	10%	15%
<b>Dismissed, Closed, Nolle Pros</b>	34%	32%	36%	40%	34%	36%	20%	18%
<b>Pending Disposition at year end*</b>	18%	18%	26%	28%	27%	22%	22%	37%
<b>Probation</b>	18%	18%	16%	14%	18%	22%	30%	16%
<b>Committed to DJS</b>	12%	13%	11%	10%	11%	14%	16%	12%

Source: Data Resource Guides FY 2017–FY 2024. FY 2025 data was unavailable as insufficient time had passed to report on court dispositions.

\* End-of-FY-year case outcomes are not final and may reflect variations in court processing times and case worker data entry.

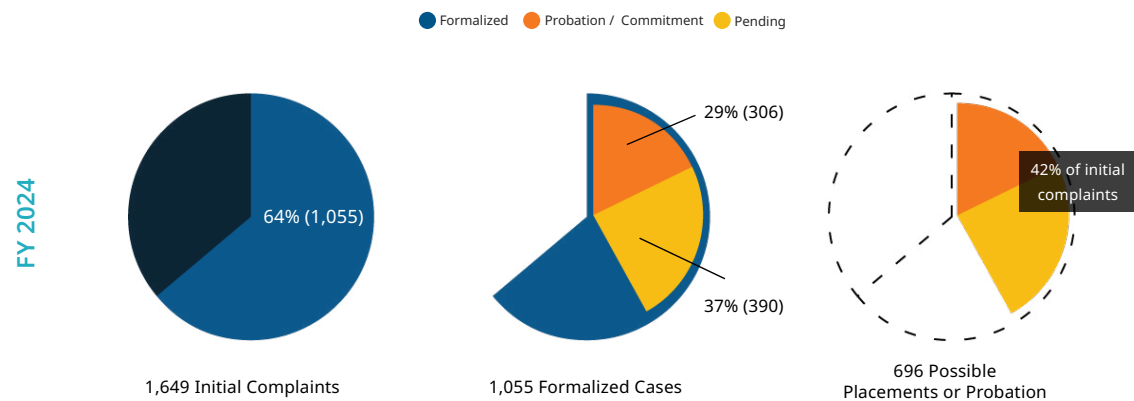
## System Efficiency

Significant attrition at every step of this process—beginning with complaints delivered to DJS, continuing to cases forwarded to prosecutors, and ultimately those resulting in a court disposition (to probation or a commitment)—invites a question: Is the system responding appropriately?

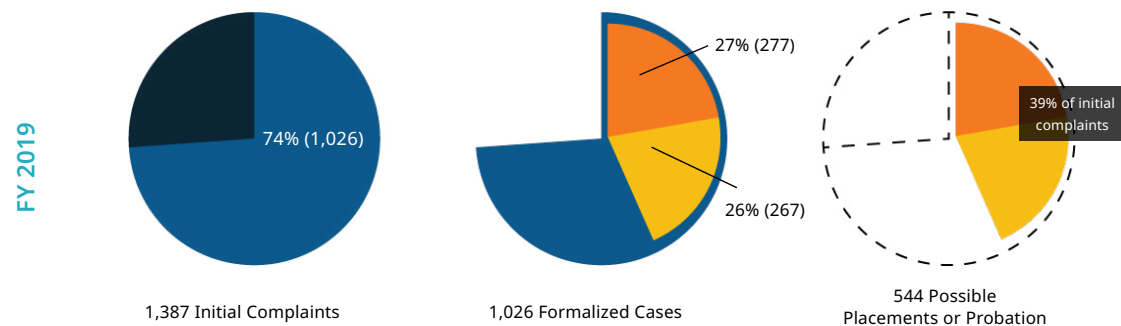
FY 2024, for example, recorded a total of 1,649 complaints in Baltimore City involving youth ages 17 or younger (Figure 5). DJS sent nearly two-thirds of these complaints (64%) to the Baltimore SAO for further action (Figure 6).

Of these formalized complaints, just 29%<sup>13</sup> resulted in probation or a commitment in the juvenile system by the end of the fiscal year (Figure 7). The number of probation and commitment outcomes are sure to increase as more cases are resolved. However, even if every pending case resulted in placement or probation, this would comprise less than half (42%) of all initial complaints. As Figure 8 illustrates, the rate of attrition was even more pronounced at the outset of the study period in FY 2019.

Figure 8. Rate of Attrition



**In FY 2024:** Of 1,649 initial complaints, 64% (approx. 1,055) were formalized. By the end of the fiscal year, 29% (approximately 306) of these formalized complaints resulted in either a placement commitment or probation; another 37% (approximately 390) were still pending. Even if all pending formalized complaints resulted in placement or probation, the total (approximately 696) would represent less than half (42%) of all initial complaints.



**In FY 2019:** Of 1,387 initial complaints, 74% (approx. 1,026) were formalized. By the end of the fiscal year, 27% (approximately 277) of these formalized complaints resulted in either a placement commitment or probation; another 26% (approximately 267) were still pending. Even if all pending formalized complaints resulted in placement or probation, the total (approx. 544) would represent less than half of all initial complaints (39%).

This consistent winnowing from the initial number of complaints to the number of youths who are eventually adjudicated delinquent suggests two possibilities: Either the system is too lenient—declining to charge, prosecute, or judge delinquent youths who merited such treatment—or that it is casting too wide a net—too many youths are being caught up in the system in the first place. There is reason to suspect that it is the latter. All of the policy, legal, and leadership changes affecting what

happens to youth after an initial encounter with law enforcement during this period had remarkably little effect on this phenomenon: In FY 2019, at least 61% of initial complaints would not lead to a finding of delinquency, and in FY 2024, the figure was 58%. Given research evidence showing that unnecessary contact with the legal system can be harmful to young people and increase their risk of future crime, it is a possibility we should take seriously.

## What happens in cases where young people are charged in adult court?

Maryland's youth justice system reflects a century-old, nationwide consensus that children are different from adults; when accused of breaking the law, they should be recognized as needing assistance focused on rehabilitation rather than punishment.<sup>14</sup> As early as the 1850s, Maryland began developing specialized facilities in the city of Baltimore to separate "juvenile delinquents" from "adult criminals" and to provide them with basic supports, like housing, education, and job training—which even today are scarcely available in most adult systems.<sup>15</sup> Yet, despite significant evidence showing that trying children as if they were adults harms them, does not facilitate rehabilitation, and should be reserved only for extraordinary cases,<sup>16</sup> current Maryland law includes

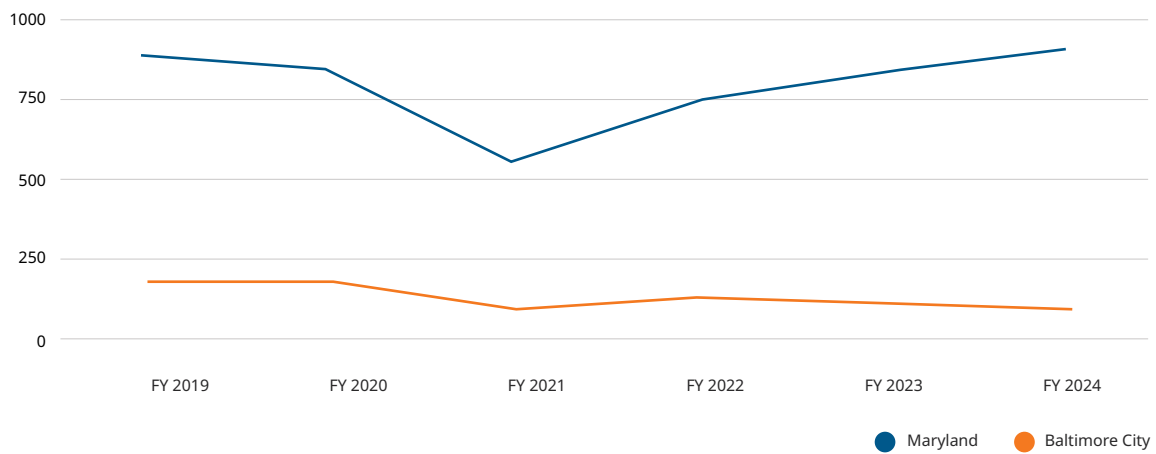
more than 30 "exclusionary offenses" that automatically direct youths aged 17 or younger into the adult criminal justice system.<sup>17</sup> Only one other state, Alabama, is more likely to treat young people accused of breaking the law as if they were adults.<sup>18</sup>

The Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy (GOCPP), a coordinating office that advises Maryland's governor on criminal justice strategies,<sup>19</sup> maintains an online dashboard with data drawn from the state's Department of Public Safety & Correctional Services (DPSCS) titled "[Juveniles Charged as Adults](#)." GOCPP also publishes, by law, a semi-annual report on the data, which it has titled "[Juveniles Charged as Adults in Maryland](#)."

**Figure 9** tracks the annual number of youth-charged-as-adult offenses, statewide and in Baltimore City, from FY 2019 through FY 2024 (the most recent year for which complete annual data is available).<sup>20</sup> The blue line, taken from the dashboard, shows a significant dip in statewide

youth-charged-as-adult charges during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>21</sup> The Baltimore City numbers, provided by GOCPP upon request, appear less volatile, declining from a high of 222 in FY 2020 to a low of 141 in FY 2024.

**Figure 9. Youth-charged-as-adult offenses, statewide and in Baltimore City**

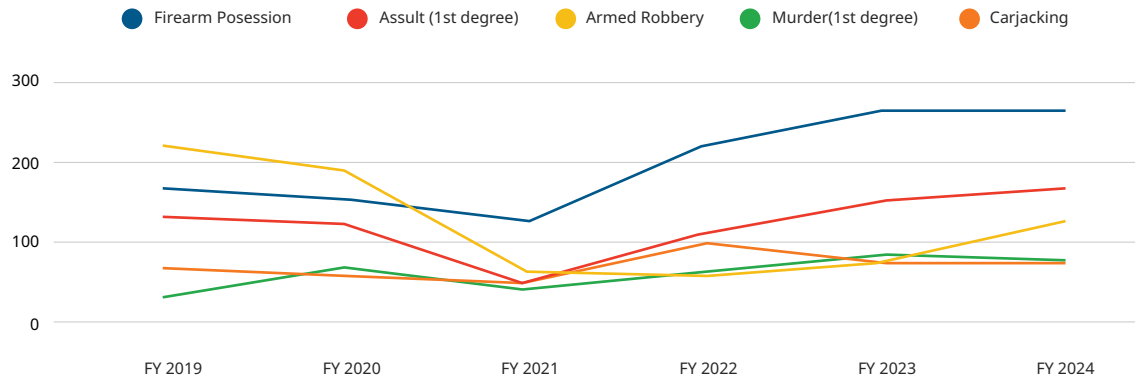


Source: Statewide data from *Juveniles Charged as Adults Dashboard*, GOCPP, accessed 11/4/24. Baltimore City data provided by GOCPP.

**Figure 10a** tracks the five most frequent youth-charged-as-adult charges, statewide, through FY 2024. All five—Firearm Possession, Assault 1st Degree, Armed Robbery, Murder 1st Degree, and Carjacking—declined with

COVID-19. Firearm Possession charges experienced the most robust rebound following the pandemic, becoming the most frequent youth-charged-as-adult offense, statewide.

**Figure 10a. Top charges in youth-charged-as-adults offenses, statewide**



Source: *Juveniles Charged as Adults Dashboard, Governor's Office of Crime Control & Prevention.*

**Figure 10b**, tracking total and top youth-charged-as-adults charges in Baltimore City, shows that Firearm Possession offenses were already the most frequent youth-charged-as-adult offense in the city prior to the pandemic,

and they remained number one into FY 2024. During three years (FY 2021, FY 2023, and FY 2024), they accounted for more than 40% of such offenses in the city.

**Figure 10b. Total and most frequent youth-charged-as adults offenses — Baltimore City**

	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Total youth-charged-as-adult offenses	211	222	140	162	154	141
Firearm Possession (most frequent youth-charged-as-adult offense)	80 (38%)	65 (29%)	60 (43%)	59 (36%)	76 (49%)	63 (45%)

Source: *Governor's Office of Crime Control & Prevention.*

It bears noting that gun possession, while a disturbing and urgent concern, does not necessarily indicate that an individual has committed, or intends to commit, an act of violence. Research suggests that most youths who carry guns do so out of fear for their own safety or the safety of their family; only a portion arm themselves with the intention of threatening or harming others.<sup>22</sup>

**Youth who are ineligible to be tried as children.** According to Maryland law, 16- and 17-year-olds accused of 1st degree murder are ineligible to have their case transferred into the juvenile system. The same is true for any young people who had been found guilty as an adult in a previous case. Consequently, none of these individuals, cases, or offenses appear

in the data published by DJS. They are, instead, the responsibility of the DPSCS, which does not appear to routinely publish data on this population and did not respond to repeated inquiries soliciting this data.

Upon request, however, GOCPP was able to provide a portion of this information. Their records, drawing upon data supplied by DPSCS, showed a total of 89 cases of Baltimore City 16- and 17-year-olds charged with 1st degree murder from FY 2012 through FY 2024 (See [Figure 11](#)). Data regarding the number of Baltimore City youths facing exclusionary charges who were ineligible to be transferred to the youth system because they had previously been found guilty as an adult was unavailable.

**Figure 11. 1st degree murder offenses for 16- and 17-year-olds originating in Baltimore City.**

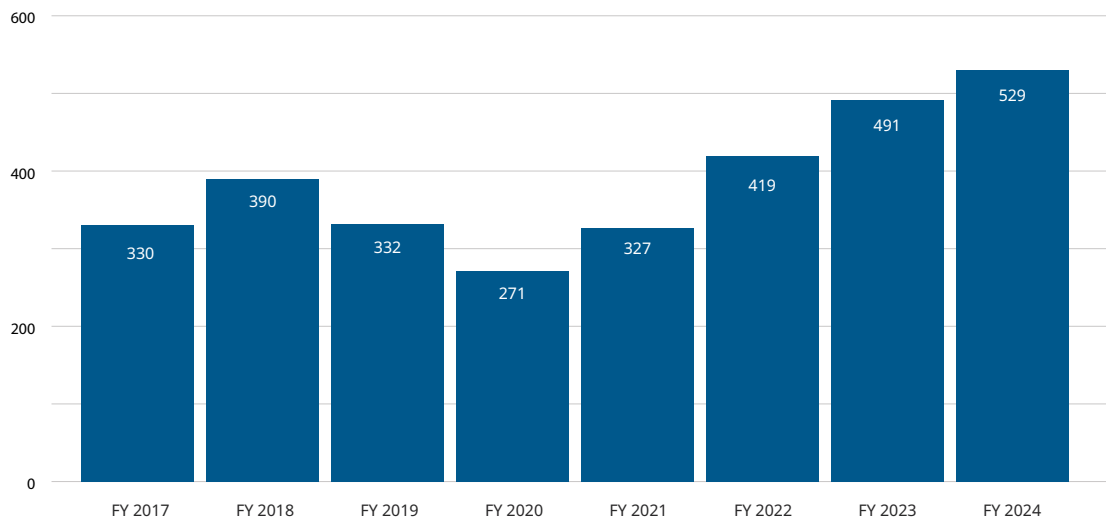
FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
10	25	7	29	9	9

## Outcomes of Youth-Charged-as-Adult Charges

**Figure 12** shows the annual number of complaints statewide that have been transferred from the adult court into the youth justice system. Especially in recent years,

judges have been redirecting an increasing number of exclusionary complaints out of the adult system and into the youth system—including compared to the pre-pandemic levels.

**Figure 12: Complaints transferred from adult court, statewide, FY 2019 – FY 2024.**



Source: Maryland Department of Juvenile Services Data Resource Guide, FY 2024.

**Figure 13** shows the number of Baltimore City transfers to the youth system, as well as the disposition of those cases at the end of the fiscal year. In FY 2019, more than four out of every 10 cases transferred to the youth system were

dismissed. In contrast, in FY 2024, fewer than two out of 10 Baltimore City transfers resulted in a dismissal; at least six in 10, far more than in any previous year, resulted in a commitment.

**Figure 13. Baltimore transfers to the youth courts and outcomes.**

	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Transfers	114	68	101	142	137	118
Committed	33%	41%	28%	35%	44%	61%
Probation	24%	37%	40%	36%	42%	22%
Dismissed	43%	22%	33%	30%	14%	17%

Source: Data Resource Guides for FY 2019 through FY 2024.

**Figure 14** tracks the most common top charges statewide that were subsequently transferred from the adult system into the youth justice system. Additional data supplied by DJS show that in Baltimore City handgun/

firearm charges (a basket of charges that includes Handgun Violation) were consistently the most commonly transferred charges throughout the study period, from FY 2019 through FY 2025.

**Figure 14. Most common top charges among transferred cases (statewide).**

	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24
Most Common	1st Deg. Assault Fel. (30%)	Robbery (26%)	Handgun Violation (23%)	Handgun Violation (26%)	Handgun Violation (33%)	Handgun Violation (29%)
Second	Handgun Violation (22%)	1st Deg. Assault Fel. (22%)	1st Deg. Assault Fel. (22%)	1st Deg. Assault Fel. (20%)	1st Deg. Assault Fel. (21%)	1st Deg. Assault Fel. (20%)
Third	Robbery (21%)	Handgun Violation (21%)	Carjacking (14%)	Carjacking (12%)	Carjacking (14%)	Carjacking (14%)

Source: DJS Data Resource Guides for FY 2019 through FY 2024.

## Discussion and Findings

The past several years have been an extraordinary time of change for youth justice in Baltimore. Shutdowns associated with COVID-19 brought already decreasing rates of youth offending to even lower levels that were clearly unsustainable. When the inevitable rebound occurred—mostly to levels still near or below pre-pandemic levels—it was accompanied by influential new laws, court rulings, and leadership changes, prompting renewed debate about the balance between treating youth accused of breaking the law as children in need of rehabilitation and seeing them as potential dangers to public safety who ought to be removed from the community. While there may be no perfect resolution of that debate, this review of available evidence points to a few conclusions.

**We need better data.** Some agencies provide little to no data on youth while others print

volumes. The data that is collected is often frustratingly incongruent: One agency counts arrests, another monitors complaints, and yet another focuses on offenses. Changes over time in any of these categories can reveal clues about how the system is functioning. But more coordinated, complementary, and complete data—and including data from before the COVID pandemic—would provide deeper insight into how well government is using youth justice resources and give policymakers valuable understanding as they seek to advance youth justice goals.

The new Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform & Emerging & Best Practices, established during the 2024 legislative session, offers an opportunity to bridge these divides—in Baltimore as well as statewide. Legislators should ensure this commission has sufficient resources, stature, and staffing to be effective.

**Questions of efficiency.** Despite its limited scope, this analysis twice encountered evidence suggesting the system may be operating inefficiently—at a cost to Baltimore youths.

The first of these was the breadth of the net that brings so many Baltimore City youth into contact with the justice system with only a portion resulting in a commitment or probation. Since the implementation of the JJRA, a smaller percentage of complaints overall are being forwarded to the Baltimore SAO. Still, a noteworthy percentage of these do not result in an adjudication of delinquency. Given the research consensus that unnecessary contact with the legal system can harm young people and increases the risk of recidivism, attention should be paid to ensuring that we are not drawing more children deeper into the system than is appropriate.

The second area of concern regards the growing numbers of youth who are being charged in the adult criminal justice system only

to be redirected into the youth system once a judge has reviewed their case. Once again, evidence shows that exposure to the adult system is bad both for kids and for community safety. It is appropriate that state legislators are currently considering whether and how to reduce the number of youth whose cases start in adult court.

**Guns.** Research shows that most young people who carry guns do so out of fear, not malice. It is also true that the presence of a gun can raise the stakes of a conflict, regardless of the bearer's intention—and that is particularly true for youth, who are more likely than adults to act impulsively. In addition to reconsidering whether gun possession by young people should be treated as an exclusionary offense, city and state leaders should continue to develop efforts to persuade young people that they can be safe without carrying a gun, such as the Thrive Academy operated by DJS and the city of Baltimore's Group Violence Reduction Strategy.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

During the past two decades the overall trend across the United States has been toward less crime by young people as measured by arrests, and less incarceration. The findings uncovered in this review of available data about Baltimore are consistent with this trend: But for the increases that followed unprecedented and unsustainable low levels of reported youth crime during the COVID-19 pandemic, most youthful offending remains at or near historically low levels—with a few significant exceptions, such as gun possession. This is not to imply that crime being committed by

young people in the city is not a concern. It is, however, above all else, a clear call for more coordinated data collection, and sharing, and cooperation among the various agencies and entities that constitute the city's youth justice system. Absent those changes, analysis of youthful offending will continue to be contentious and disputable, and youth crime policy—in the city as well as across the state—will continue to be buffeted and shaped by media headlines rather than clear thinking and strategic planning based upon well-documented, broadly accepted facts.

### About the Author

Robin Campbell has been working at the intersection of criminal justice and public information for more than two decades, in government, think tanks, and nonprofit agencies, and is currently principal at the strategic communications firm, Catalyze LLC.

## References

- 1 “Juvenile crime torments Dem-run city where kids charged in playground arson, Trump threatens federal cleanup”, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/juvenile-crime-torments-dem-run-city-where-kids-charged-playground-arson-trump-threatens-federal-cleanup>, (accessed 9/13/25.)
- 2 “Baltimore leaders discuss strategies to reduce youth crime during a town hall”, WJZ News, May 29, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/baltimore/news/ivan-bates-community-town-hall-youth-violence/> (accessed Sept. 13, 2025)
- 3 Maryland’s juvenile justice system must embrace accountability | GUEST COMMENTARY, Maryland Matters, June 19, 2025, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/2025/06/19/marylands-juvenile-justice-system-must-embrace-accountability-guest-commentary/> (accessed 9/13/25)
- 4 Governments, businesses, and other entities operate on a fiscal year calendar for financial purposes. One consequence of this is that any annual data they present often covers the fiscal year, rather than the more familiar calendar year (running from January through December). The state of Maryland’s fiscal year begins on July 1 and ends on June 30—which means Fiscal Year 2024 (FY 2024), for example, begins on July 1, 2023, and ends on June 30, 2024.
- 5 Prosecuting Young People as Adults Can Undermine Rehabilitation and Fuel Mass Incarceration, by Sarah Aukamp, Urban Institute, December 18, 2024. (<https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/prosecuting-young-people-adults-can-undermine-rehabilitation-and-fuel-mass-incarceration>)
- 6 <https://coronavirus.baltimorecity.gov/covid-data-baltimore-city>
- 7 For more information, see this description by the Annie E. Casey Foundation: MARYLAND ENACTS SWEEPING YOUTH JUSTICE REFORMS (<https://www.aecf.org/blog/maryland-enacts-sweeping-youth-justice-reforms>)
- 8 Moore signs bills to tighten juvenile justice, expand gun safety measures, by William Ford, Maryland Matters, May 16, 2024 (<https://marylandmatters.org/2024/05/16/moore-signs-bills-to-tighten-juvenile-justice-expand-gun-safety-measures/>)
- 9 See Davis v. State, Justia US Law, and Davis v. State, Juvenile Law Center: <https://jlc.org/cases/davis-v-state>
- 10 Trends in Juvenile Offending: What You Need to Know, Brendan Lantz, Ph.D. and Kyle G. Knapp, M.S., The Council on Criminal Justice, September 2024. <https://counciloncj.org/trends-in-juvenile-offending-what-you-need-to-know/>
- 11 Baltimore’s Youth Justice by the Numbers, Joshua Rovner, The Sentencing Project, October 1, 2024. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/baltimores-youth-justice-by-the-numbers/>
- 12 “Non est” refers to cases in which the accused individual cannot be located; “Nolle Pros” refers to a decision not to pursue a case.
- 13 The Probation and Commitment percentages cited in Figure 7 are rounded to the nearest full number. When combined, they round up to 29%.
- 14 <https://www.illinoiscourts.gov/news/388/illinois-supreme-court-history-juvenile-courts/news-detail/>
- 15 <https://djs.maryland.gov/Pages/about-us/History.aspx>
- 16 Prosecuting Young People as Adults Can Undermine Rehabilitation and Fuel Mass Incarceration, by Sarah Aukamp, Urban Institute, December 18, 2024. (<https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/prosecuting-young-people-adults-can-undermine-rehabilitation-and-fuel-mass-incarceration>)
- 17 [https://ojdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/pubs/tryingjuvasadult/states/md.html#:~:text=Generally%2C%20a%20court%20with%20criminal,1\)%20has%20previously%20been%20convicted](https://ojdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/pubs/tryingjuvasadult/states/md.html#:~:text=Generally%2C%20a%20court%20with%20criminal,1)%20has%20previously%20been%20convicted)
- 18 Human Rights for Kids, <https://humanrightsforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/Human-Rights-For-Kids-Crimes-Against-Humanity-The-Mass-Incarceration-of-Children-in-the-US.pdf>, p. 46
- 19 <https://gocpp.maryland.gov/about/>
- 20 This information is, technically, an aggregation of charges, rather than of individuals. Thus, while FY 2024 saw 932 instances of “Juveniles Charged as Adult Offenses” statewide, this does not necessarily translate into the involvement of 932 individual youths.
- 21 Visitors to the dashboard will now see a larger number of youth-charged-as-adult charges statewide for FY2021. According to a GOCPP spokesperson, this reflects a refinement in DPSCS data for that year—instead of using birth year to determine youths’ age, the agency was able to recalculate the age based upon precise dates of birth. Because this same refinement was not applied to other years, for consistent year-over-year comparison this report uses the original, year-of-birth number.
- 22 Two Battlefields”: Opps, Cops, and NYC Youth Gun Culture, Center for Justice Innovation, July 2023.
- 23 Through initiatives run, for example, by the newly formed Center for Firearm Violence Prevention and Intervention, operating out of the Maryland Department of Health. (<https://governor.maryland.gov/priorities/agenda/Pages/make-maryland-safer.aspx>)

**The Abell Foundation**  
Suite 2300  
111 S. Calvert Street  
Baltimore, MD 21202-6174

.....  
A B E L L  
.....  
F O U N D A T I O N  
.....

As a private foundation focused exclusively on Baltimore City, we provide grants to nonprofit community partners, fund research to better inform civic conversation, and make catalytic investments in new businesses that offer significant social and economic benefits to the city. We believe that a community of creative problem-solvers, faced with complicated, seemingly intractable challenges is well-served by thought-provoking, research-based information, and analysis. To that end, the Foundation publishes background studies of selected issues on the public agenda for the benefit of government officials; leaders in business, industry and academia; and the general public.

For a complete collection of Abell publications, please visit our website at [abell.org/what-we-are-learning/](http://abell.org/what-we-are-learning/)