

Nine years of Harris County data reveal need for targeted, early intervention to prevent youths' repeated interaction with system, address racial disparities

Summary

Full interactive report available [here](#)¹

Between 2010 and 2019, more than 42,000 youths became involved with the Harris County juvenile justice system. However, by the time they “aged out” at 17, their experiences with the juvenile justice system showed striking differences. This report provides a detailed representation of the multiple ways in which youths interact with the Harris County Juvenile Justice System. It examines the overall level of involvement of youths with the system, as measured by the number of contacts or referrals accumulated throughout their lives. It also investigates how those contacts, and the ways in which the system reacted to them, changed as some youths became repeatedly involved with the system. Furthermore, it explores the extent to which information available at the time of a youth's first contact with the system may or may not help identify youths who could benefit from preventative and rehabilitative programs.

Our analysis takes a historical view of the Harris County Juvenile Justice System. Instead of focusing on the youths in the system right now, we use data for youths who were involved at some point in their adolescence but have already “aged out” of the system. Specifically, we analyze the histories of all youths who were born between 2000 and 2002 and had their first contact when they were between 12 and 16 years old.² Thus, the analysis in this report reflects the system as it was experienced by youths who are no longer under its jurisdiction. This implies that any recent changes to the juvenile justice system will not be captured by this report, or will only be captured to the extent they were experienced by some of the youths who aged out very recently.

The historical data demonstrate that most justice-involved youths have only one contact with the system, while a small number of youths account for a disproportionately high share of referrals. At the same time, consequences become increasingly severe as these same youths become repeatedly involved with the system. To the extent that youths of color, particularly Black youths, are more likely to be detained and to receive relatively more severe dispositions than white youths during their initial contacts, these patterns have a disproportionate effect on them. Overall, these findings point to a need for targeted, early interventions and further, rigorous research to understand how we can better identify youths at risk of entering this cycle. Such interventions could potentially contribute to the reduction of racial disparities in the way the system treats and affects different groups of youths.

¹ <https://tplreports.rice.edu/shiny/H CJPD-longitudinal-analysis>

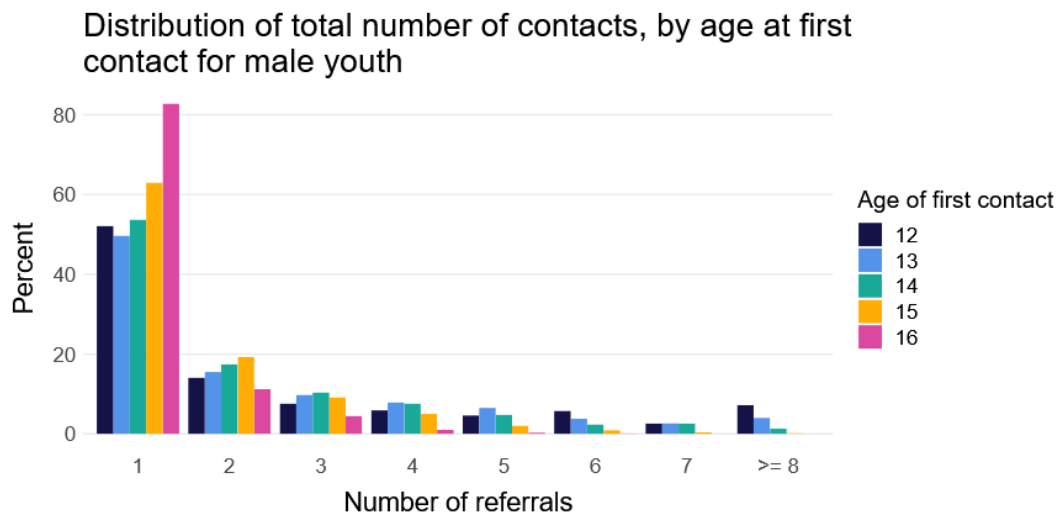
² These youths “aged out” between 2017 and 2019.

Key Findings

Overall, three broad conclusions arise from our descriptive analysis

1. While the majority of youths had one single contact with the system, a small group of justice-involved youths accounted for a disproportionately high share of referrals.

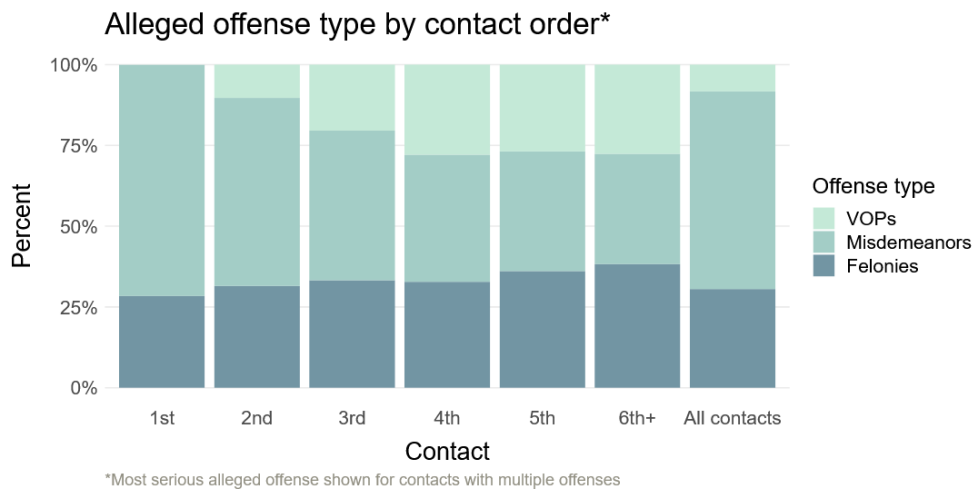
Even among youths whose first contact occurred at very early ages (see example graph for boys below), the majority of youths in this analysis had only one contact with the system.



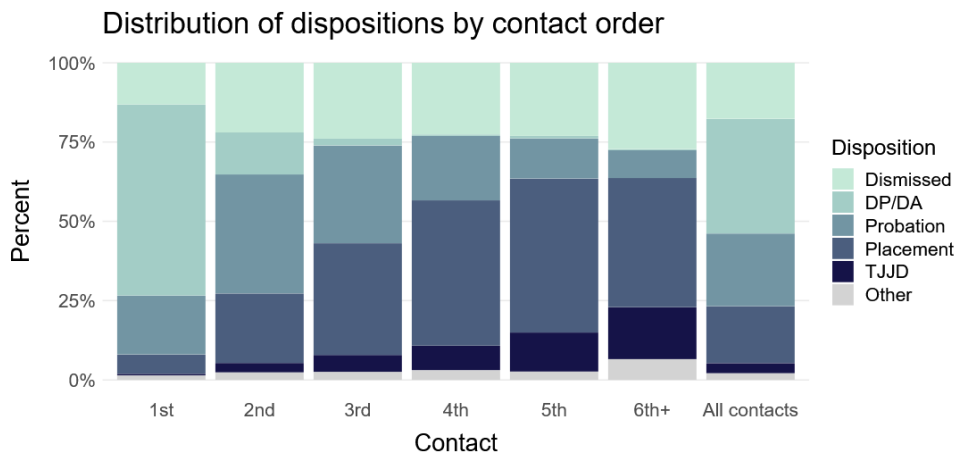
However, a disproportionately high share of referrals was concentrated among a relatively small group of youths. These facts highlight the importance of accurately identifying youths' needs early on to prevent future involvement with the system. Furthermore, if these needs can be accurately anticipated, preventative programs could target a relatively small share of youths.

2. The percentage of felonies increased only moderately with the number of contacts. However, the consequences for those who became repeatedly involved with the system grew substantially more severe.

For example, among boys (graphs below), roughly one out of every three contacts includes a felony, regardless of whether it is the youth's first, second, or fourth contact.



At the same time, the system’s treatment of youths who became repeatedly involved increased in severity. The total time spent in pre-adjudicated detention, for instance, increased substantially with the number of contacts. Similarly, dispositions (graph below) stiffened from Deferred Adjudication and Deferred Prosecution to Probation and Placements as youths became repeatedly involved with the system.



Thus, the data show a system that punished offense repetition beyond the severity of the offenses. Therefore, youths who became repeatedly involved with the system were increasingly more likely to be pushed towards more punitive and restrictive parts of the system. Furthermore, youths of color were generally more likely to be detained and to receive relatively more severe dispositions. Thus, these patterns disproportionately affected them and may have further exacerbated racial disparities in the system.

3. A felony in the first contact, often used to measure risk of future involvement, is not associated with repeated interaction for boys and only moderately for girls.

The first two findings highlight the importance and potential benefit of early identification of youths who are at a higher risk of becoming repeatedly involved with the system. Thus, we studied whether characteristics at the time of initial contact correlate with future involvement, as measured by the total number of contacts. The data show youths who had more contacts with the system were more likely to have had an earlier initial contact with the system. However, the data also suggest boys who had more contacts with the system were not more likely to have a felony offense as part of their initial contact, a common measure used to assess risk (see example table for boys below). Among girls, those with more involvement were only moderately more likely to have a felony as part of their initial contact.

Characteristics of first contact	Number of total lifetime contacts			
	1	2	3-4	5+
Felony	27%	29%	32%	28%
Serious felony	9%	9%	9%	6%
Multiple referrals	6%	9%	17%	25%
Behind in school	16%	16%	18%	14%
Referral Source				
School	43%	39%	37%	34%
Law enforcement	52%	56%	59%	62%
Probation	4%	4%	3%	4%
Age				
12	6%	7%	8%	20%
13	11%	15%	20%	34%
14	17%	23%	28%	30%
15	27%	34%	30%	13%
16	39%	22%	13%	2%

Nevertheless, youths with more overall contacts were significantly more likely to spend any time in detention in their first contact, and less likely to receive a disposition of Deferred Prosecution or Deferred Adjudication during their first contact. This last observation, however, cannot be interpreted as evidence that these detention and disposition decisions led to the higher subsequent involvement of youths with the system. It could be the opposite, where the initial detention screening is actually successful in identifying youth who are more likely to return to the system. Further and rigorous research is needed to evaluate whether this is true.