

Context Matters

A changing juvenile justice landscape fuels changing characteristics of Harris County youth in residential programs

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The Texas Policy Lab (TPL) is a research institute within the School of Social Sciences at Rice University. Founded in 2018, TPL partners with policymakers to pursue data-driven scientific inquiry in decisions that affect millions of Texans. We are an interdisciplinary, closely knit collection of faculty, professionals, researchers, and data scientists, focusing primarily on early childhood development and youth justice. We strive to build government capacity to innovate and implement new programs while putting science at the center of policy decisions.

PREFACE

In recent years, the juvenile justice system in Harris County has experienced a vast number of changes. These include transitions in key decision-makers, such as juvenile judges; changes in practices among stakeholders; and fluctuations in the delinquency rate among Harris County youth. As a result, the composition of the population of youth in different parts of the system has also undergone substantial transformations.

The youths in residential facilities described in this report are not necessarily comparable to the youths before them. Among the key differences we unpack in this report:

- **INCREASED:** the share of placed youths who have been victims of physical abuse
- **INCREASED:** the share of youths with a history of trauma
- **INCREASED:** the share of placed youths with a felony in their current referral
- **DOUBLED:** the average number of referrals each youth has accumulated

This report uses detailed data to characterize youth going into residential placement and describes how these characteristics have changed over time. The vital information in this report can enable key decision-makers to better serve youths in residential facilities. We expect the information contained in this report to be actionable for two different audiences: those who directly engage with youth in these facilities and high-level stakeholders. For those who work directly with youth, this report provides a comprehensive and systematic resource. Although the information contained here may not necessarily surprise them, it provides rigorous and objective data that will validate their observations and deepen their knowledge. Furthermore, the report offers a more fine-grained portrait of the youth they serve, enhancing their ability to address the specific needs of this population. For high-level stakeholders, the identification of key patterns from our detailed analysis elucidates how policy and practice decisions shape the way in which the system serves these youth. Thus, our hope is that this report will inform decisions at multiple levels, from day-to-day management of youth in facilities to big-picture policy decisions, all of which have immense consequences for this group of youth.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 CHANGING CONTEXT

A decrease in referrals for lower-level offenses

Section 1 of this report provides background information on the recent changes observed in the Harris County juvenile justice system. We show how the number of referrals constantly decreased over the past few years, up to 2021. For the first time since 2015, the number of referrals increased again in 2022. However, this decrease in the number of referrals was concentrated among lower level offenses. Thus, the percentage of felony referrals has increased substantially. Furthermore, even as the fraction of felonies increased, changes in practices surrounding dispositions have led to a decrease in the use of local placement and a decrease in the use of Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) commitments for the most serious cases. Taken together, all of these changes mean that residential programs are now tasked with serving youths with relatively more serious histories.

2 YOUTH SNAPSHOT

Defining characteristics: Repeat serious offenses, mental health issues, exposure to violence

Against the backdrop of these changes, Section 2 describes the characteristics of youth who have been placed under the custody of HCJPD since 2019, a group we refer to as recently placed youth. The data show that youths in this group, most of whom are male, are also primarily youths of color. They tend to be placed at a relatively older age, even if their first contact with the system occurs at a relatively young age. Many of them come from households without two parents present. By the beginning of their placement, they have accumulated a high number of referrals on average, with most of these involving a felony offense. Substance use and mental health issues, including depression and a history of trauma, are prevalent among these youth, and a significant portion of them has experienced abuse, neglect, or has witnessed violence. Additionally, one in five youths in this group have a history of suicidal tendencies.

3 MAJOR SHIFTS

Substantial increase in youths with felonies and youths who are victims of physical abuse

Finally, in Section 3 we explore which of these characteristics have changed with respect to previous years. Our analysis shows that many characteristics of placed youth have remained relatively stable or seen only minor changes over the years. However, two key sets of changes stand out. First, although many of the mental health indicators we analyze did not change much over the period we reviewed, the share of placed youths who have been victims of physical abuse increased substantially. This increase is accompanied by a small, yet relevant increase, in the share of youths with a history of trauma. Second, the most dramatic changes we observe come from youths' offenses and histories of prior involvement with the system. For example, the share of placed youths with a felony in their current referral went from around 35% in 2015 to 82% in 2021. Similarly, in this same period, the average number of referrals each youth has accumulated — many of which are for felony offenses — nearly doubled. In 2015, each youth going into placement had accumulated three referrals on average. By 2021, this number had increased to 5.4 referrals per youth.

CONTEXTUAL CHANGES	CHANGES IN RECENTLY PLACED YOUTHS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Substantial reduction in delinquency referrals preceded by school closures• Continued decrease in referrals, especially those involving lower-level offenses• Decreased reliance on TJJD commitments for youths with the most serious cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Proportion of youths with felony increased from 35% in 2015 to 82% in 2021• Average number of referrals nearly doubled from 3 in 2015 to 5.4 in 2021• More than 70% witnessed violence; 1 out of 3 victims of physical abuse

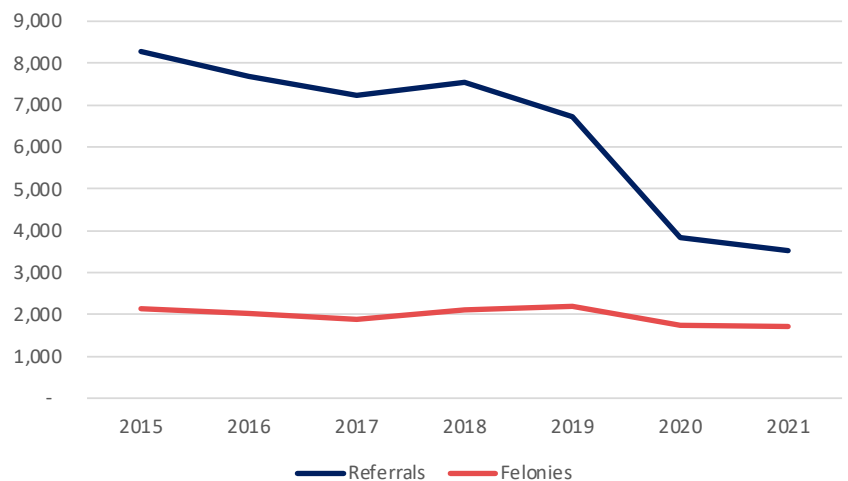
1 CHANGING CONTEXT LEADS TO FEWER BUT MORE SERIOUS CASES IN RESIDENTIAL FACILITIES

In recent years, the juvenile justice system in Harris County has experienced multiple changes. This, in turn, may shape the composition of youths in residential placements. The figures below illustrate some of the key trends driving these changes in the composition of youths in residential facilities.

We begin with Figure 1, which shows the secular and substantial decrease in the number of referrals between 2015 and 2021. This trend is not unique to Harris County and follows a pattern that has been noticed across all of the US. As the figure shows, while there were over 8,000 referrals in 2015, there were fewer than 4,000 referrals in 2020 and in 2021. A large part of this decrease is likely due to COVID-19, when the closure of schools contributed to a substantial reduction in delinquency referrals. Yet, even in 2019, the number of referrals was almost 10% lower than in 2015.

Figure 1: Referrals and felony referrals

Total number of referrals between 2015 and 2021



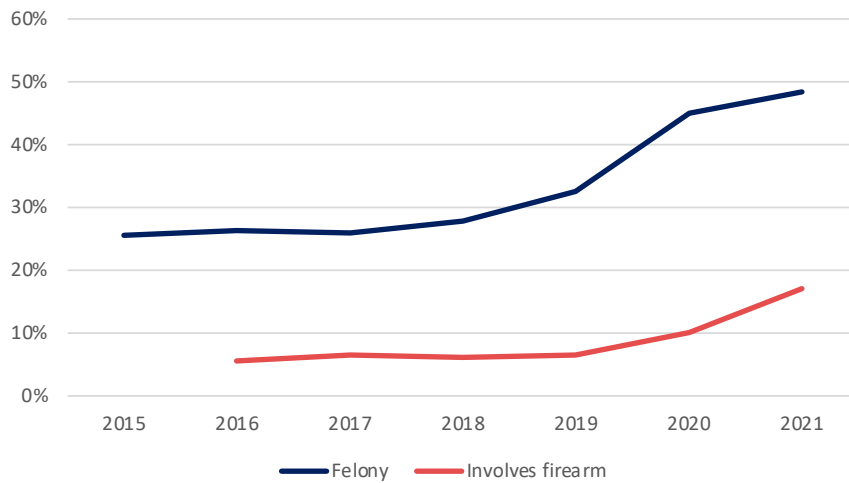
*Total referral counts for 2022 are not available yet

[1] In the US as a whole, youths delinquency cases fell from nearly 1.2 million in 1985 to 722,600 in 2019 (Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, and Sickmund, 2022).

Referrals more likely to involve felonies and firearms

Figure 2: Felony offenses and offenses involving firearms

Share of all referrals between 2015 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

This decrease in referrals was concentrated among lower-level offenses. Thus, although the **number** of felony referrals slightly decreased over this period (Figure 1), the **percentage** of felony referrals increased substantially.

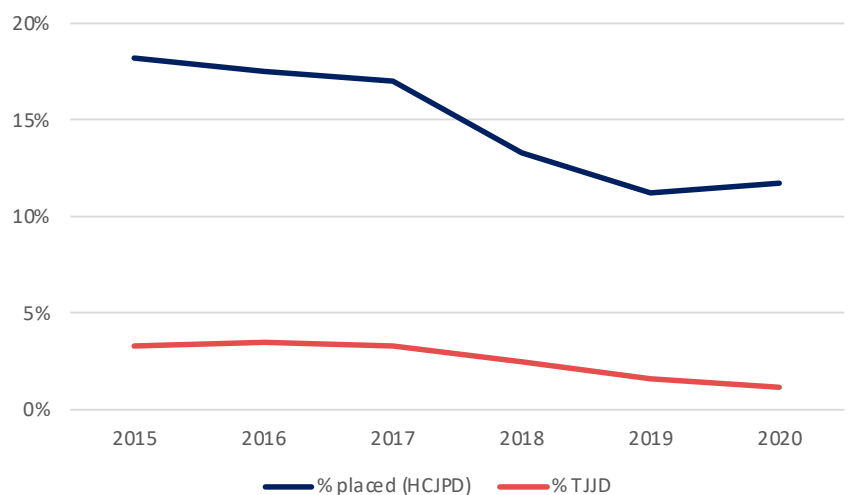
As shown in Figure 2, whereas one out of every four referrals was for a felony offense in 2015, almost half of referrals were felonies in 2021. Figure 2 also shows how the fraction of referrals involving firearms increased during this period. Thus, as compared to just a few years prior, the juvenile justice system now handles fewer but more serious cases.

Fewer youths placed with HCJPD, TJJD

At the same time, deliberate changes in practices among key stakeholders, such as the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department, judges in Juvenile Courts, and the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, have resulted in changes in the way in which cases are handled and disposed. As Figure 3 shows, even as the fraction of felonies increased, the percentage of cases where the youth was placed under the custody of HCJPD decreased from around 17% to 11%. At the same time, the percentage of TJJD commitments fell from 3.3% in 2015 to 2.3% in 2021, with a low of 1.2% in 2020. Thus, two simultaneous changes substantially increased the seriousness of the offenses of the typical youth in residential facilities. On the one hand, efforts to exhaust other alternatives before arriving to placement dispositions have led to fewer, yet more complicated, cases being disposed this way. On the other hand, a decreased reliance on TJJD commitments for youths with

Figure 3: Selected dispositions for referrals

Share of HCJPD placements and TJJD commitments, 2015-2020*



*Year corresponds to the date of referral. Disposition shares for 2021 referrals calculated only from Jan-June referrals of that year

the most serious cases has led to the local handling and treatment of young people who would have otherwise been committed to state facilities.

2 YOUTH SNAPSHOT SHOWS PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES, INCLUDING DEPRESSION AND HISTORY OF TRAUMA

Against the backdrop of these trends, we develop a detailed characterization of the group of youth who have recently been placed under the custody of HCJPD (recently placed youths, henceforth). Specifically, we analyze data for all youths whose placements began between January 1, 2019, and June 30, 2022. We include both youths in HCJPD facilities, as well as those in private placements.² In total, we describe the characteristics of youths in 1,049 separate placements. As we have mentioned before, the goal of this exercise is to provide vital information for those in charge of making decisions and executing plans that affect this group of youths.

2.1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Vast majority of placed youths are male

Of the 1,049 placements we analyze, the vast majority of them (916) involve male youths. This is similar to the composition of all referrals, where there is also an overrepresentation of male youths. However, the share of boys is larger among youths in placement (87%) than the share among all referrals for this period (78%).

[2] Youths with multiple placements in these years are treated as separate observations, as each of those placements represents a different instance when the youth required services and supervision. However, whenever a youth has two overlapping placements, or whenever the time between placements is very short, we treat the multiple placements as a single observation.

Those placed almost exclusively youths of color

As it has been widely documented, Black and Latino(a) youths are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. This pattern is exacerbated as we move into the deeper parts of the system. Figure 4 shows how residential facilities are composed almost exclusively of youths of color. Half of all recently placed youths are Black and 46% of them are Latino(a), while only 3% are white. For reference, over the same period, 47% of referrals involved a Black youth, while 42% involved a Latino(a) youth.

Figure 4: Racial composition of youths in residential placement

Placements starting between 2019 and 2022*

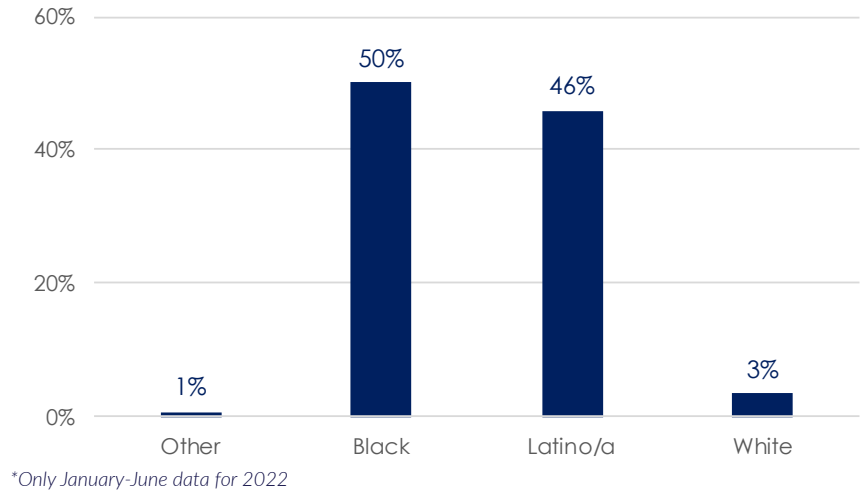
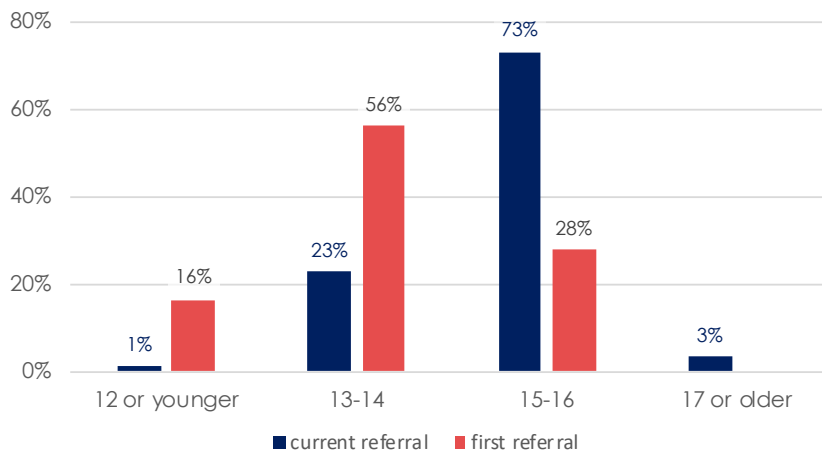


Figure 5: Age of youths in residential placement

Age at time of referral and age at time of first referral
Placements starting between 2019 and 2022*

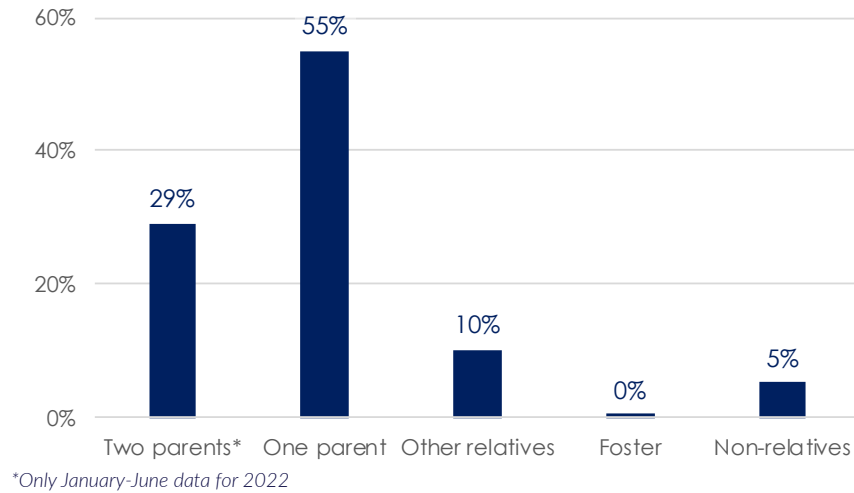


Placed youths generally older with prior system involvement

Most youths coming into residential placement are relatively older, with more than three-fourths of them already 15 years or older at the time of referral (Figure 5). The majority of placed youths, however, had their first referral before age 15. This includes 16% of them who had their first referral when they were 12 years old or younger.

Figure 6: Family composition of youths in residential placement

Placements starting between 2019 and 2022*



Most placed youths live with one parent, relative

The data also allow us to coarsely characterize some of the youths' family structure through information on the person or people with whom the youth lives (Figure 6). Roughly, one-third of placed youths live with two parents (this includes those who live with one stepparent). On the other hand, more than half live with one parent. Almost 15% do not live with either of their parents, the majority of which live with other relatives.

2.2 OFFENSE CHARACTERISTICS AND PRIOR JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

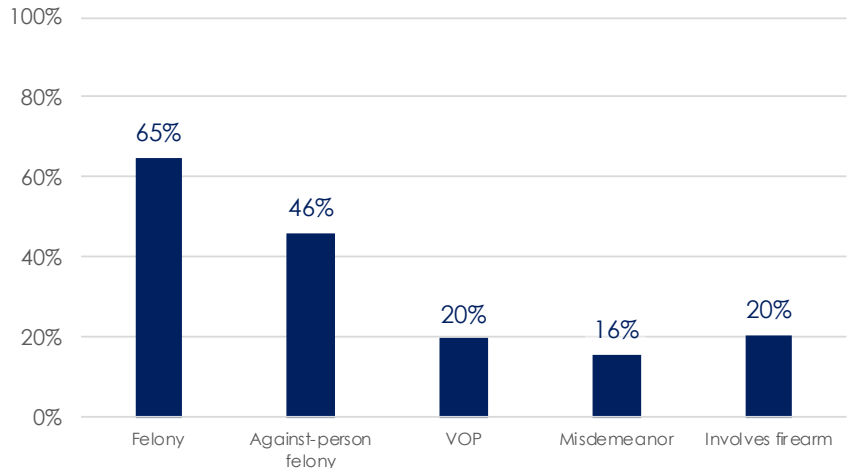
Typically, dispositions of residential placement are reserved for youth who have engaged in serious and/or repeated delinquent conduct. However, the exact criteria used by key stakeholders may vary, both across individual decision-makers and over time. Thus, although it is expected that, relative to other youth, youth in residential placements have more serious histories of involvement with the system, it is unclear just how much more complicated their histories are. We document the histories of involvement of recently placed youths below. Overall, Figures 7, 8, and Table 1 illustrate how the typical youth in residential placement has a history of engaging in relatively serious offenses, as well as a documented history of multiple prior instances of involvement with the system, including multiple felony charges. Furthermore, as we will describe in Section 3 of this report, the characteristics of youths along this dimension have gone through dramatic changes over the past several years.

Two-thirds involve felony referral, with most against-person felonies

Figure 7 shows the characteristics of the offenses for which youths received a placement disposition. Roughly, two-thirds of placed youths have a felony charge as part of their current offense, while nearly 20% of them were referred for technical Violations of Probation (VOPs), that is, VOPs that did not include a new offense. As Figure 7 also shows, most of these felony charges are for against-person felonies. In one out of every five cases, the referral includes an offense where a firearm was involved. Moreover, as Figure 8 shows, a sizable share of placed youths had multiple charges as part of the contact associated with their placement, with nearly 15% having multiple felony charges.

Figure 7: Selected offense characteristics of youths in residential placement

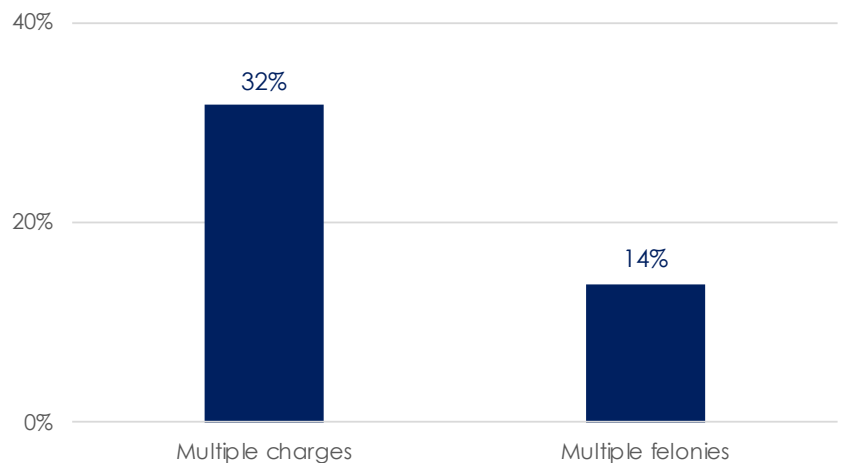
Placements starting between 2019 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

Figure 8: Contacts with multiple charges among youth in residential placement

Placements starting between 2019 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

TABLE 1: HISTORICAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT – SUMMARY MEASURES

Placements starting between 2019 and 2022*

HISTORICAL INVOLVEMENT

Average number of contacts	4.0
Average number of referrals	4.7
Any prior FTA (Failure to Appear)	35%
Any prior escape	4%

AVERAGE NUMBER OF REFERRALS WITH**:

Felony offense	2.1
Against-person felony offense	1.0
VOP	0.7
Misdemeanor offense	1.9
Offense that involves firearm	0.5

*Only January-June data for 2022

** Includes current and prior referrals

Youth generally with prior system involvement

Figures 7 and 8, however, only show a limited view of the history of involvement of placed youths, as they focus on the current referral or contact. Table 1 shows similar measures of offense characteristics, aggregated over all of the youths' history of involvement with the system (the current as well as previous referrals). As the table shows, each placed youth has, on average, four separate contacts (unique incidents with one or multiple charges), up to and including the current one. Because, both in previous and current contacts, some youth may have multiple charges (referrals), the average number of total referrals is 4.7. Of these, 2.1 are for felony offenses.

At 20%, referrals involving firearm on an upward trend

Although the data in Figure 7 showed that 20% of current referrals involved a firearm, the prevalence of guns in prior referrals is not as high. Thus, as Table 1 shows, the average number of prior and current referrals including firearms is relatively low (0.5 referrals, on average). This is consistent with gun use to be more likely among youth who have already had multiple instances of involvement with the system.

2.3 MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE

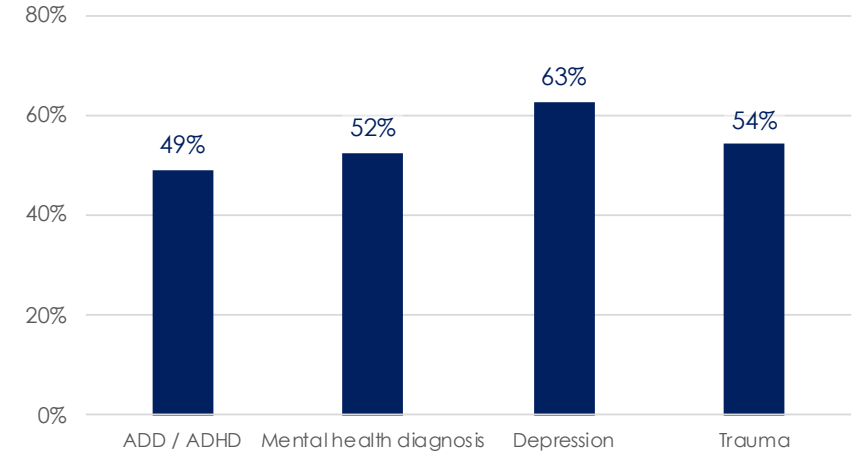
Half of placed youths have ADHD, history of trauma

DIAGNOSED MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES ARE COMMON AMONG PLACED YOUTHS

Figure 9 shows the extent to which mental health issues are widespread among youths in residential placements.³ For instance, nearly half of placed youths (49%) have a diagnosis of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders (ADHD). Furthermore, more than half (52%) have an additional diagnosis of mental health issues. Nearly two-thirds (63%) have a history of depression and more than half (54%) deal with trauma. Thus, mental health needs are extensive among placed youths, which underscores the importance for services, programming, and approaches that address these needs, as well as the challenges faced by youths and their caregivers in residential facilities.

Figure 9: History of mental health issues and diagnoses among youth in residential placement

Placements starting between 2019 and 2022*

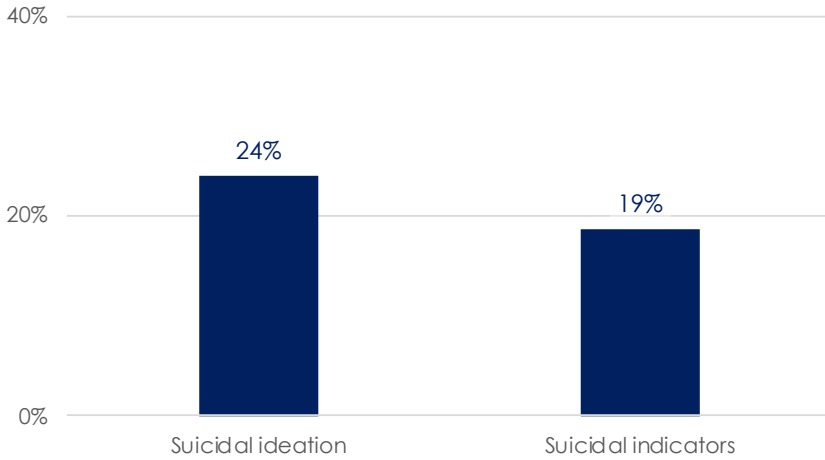


*Only January-June data for 2022

[3] The data for mental health, substance use, and other background characteristics comes from PACT (Positive Achievement Change Tool) Assessment data. The Harris County Juvenile Probation Department uses the PACT to inform multiple decisions and programming throughout the juvenile justice system. It captures information on the youths along a rich set of dimensions. It must be noted, however, that some of the information captured in the PACT relies on reports by the youths themselves, or others around them.

Figure 10: History of suicidal tendencies among youths in residential placement

Placements starting between 2019 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

More than 1 in 5 placed youths have history of suicidal tendencies

The pervasive mental health issues extend to the risk of self-harm among placed youths.

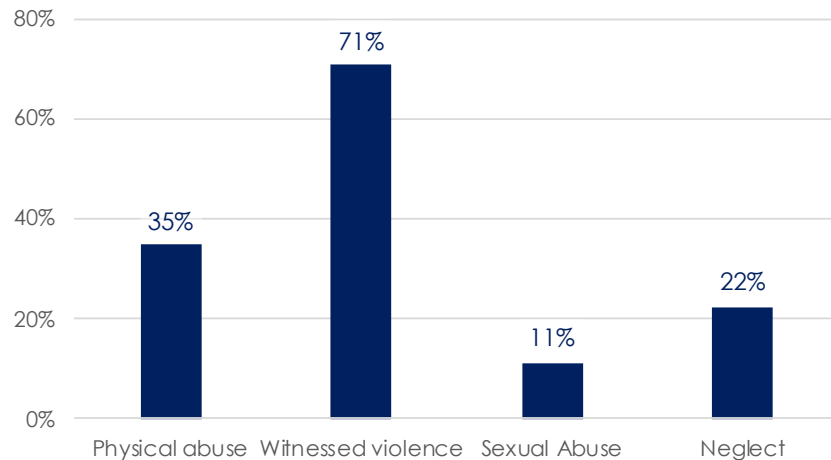
Figure 10 explores two different measures of suicidal tendencies. One out of four placed youths (24%) have a history of suicidal ideation – that is, having thoughts about suicide – while one out of five (19%) have a history of suicidal indicators – a series of criteria associated with suicide, such as self-mutilating behavior or being close to someone who committed suicide.

1 in 3 placed youths have been victims of physical abuse

The available data also allow us to explore experiences in the youths' life related to victimization and abuse. Although it is not possible to establish a causal link between these specific experiences and the mental health issues described above, these conditions may have contributed to or exacerbated those conditions. Figure 11 shows that more than 70% of youths have witnessed violence and more than one out of three have been victims of physical abuse themselves. Roughly, 10% have been victims of sexual abuse and 22% have been victims of neglect. Thus, as the data show, even though youths are placed as a result of actions they have done against others, they are simultaneously and commonly victims themselves of violence or other types of abuse.

Figure 11: History of victimization and abuse against youths in residential placement

Placements starting between 2019 and 2022*



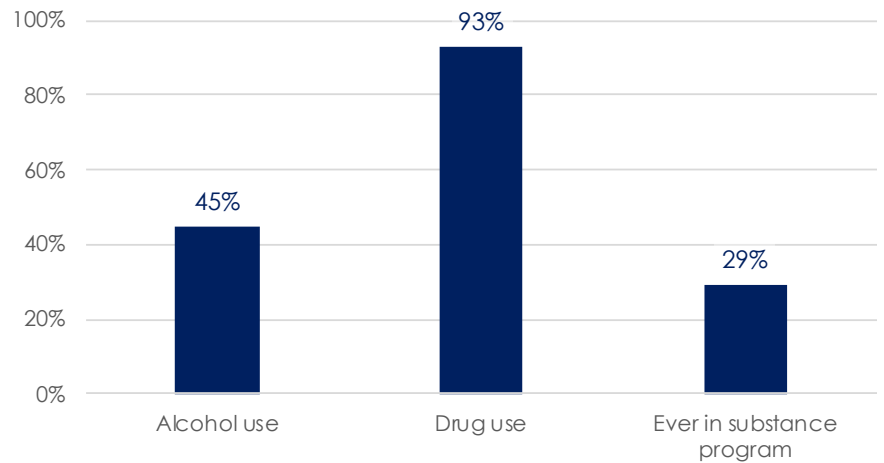
*Only January-June data for 2022

History of substance use pervasive in placed youths

Finally, Figure 12 explores substance use among placed youth and illustrates its pervasive use. As shown, 93% of youth have a history of drug use by the time of their placement. Alcohol use appears to be less common, although a significant portion of placed youth (45%) have a history of using it. These high rates of substance use, however, do not necessarily imply habitual or problematic use. Nevertheless, 31% of placed youths have been previously enrolled in a substance abuse program, highlighting that a relevant share of placed youths' substance use has required external intervention.

Figure 12: History of substance use among youths in residential placement

Placements starting between 2019 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

2.4 OTHER BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS

We now move past the histories of delinquent behavior and mental health and explore other background characteristics of youths. This varied group of background characteristics may relate to delinquent behavior itself, as well as the likelihood of further involvement with the system in the future. Moreover, these other characteristics speak to the needs of this group of youths, which residential programs aim at addressing. We focus here on only a subset of available characteristics, aiming at characterizing the general environment in which youths live.

School suspension, special education needs common among youths

Table 2 shows a selected group of background characteristics. As shown in Panel A, 43% of youths are understood to have special education needs, based on their prior education history. At the same time, virtually all placed youths (94%) have a history of school suspension or expulsion. These facts speak to the challenges both for the provision of education services for youths while in placement and for their successful return to schools after the conclusion of their placements.

TABLE 2: SELECTED BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUTHS IN RESIDENTIAL PLACEMENT

Placements starting between 2019 and 2022

PANEL A: EDUCATION

Special education needs	43%
Ever suspended or expelled	94%

PANEL B: RELATIONSHIPS

Has no positive adult relationships	53%
Gang involvement	28%

PANEL C: FAMILY PROBLEMS WITH:

Alcohol	5%
Drugs	7%
Health	11%
Mental health	5%
Employment	11%
Incarceration	45%

*Only January-June data for 2022

Positive adult relationships in short supply

Panel B of Table 2 illustrates the lack, among at least half of placed youths (54%), of positive adult relationships. These relationships, presumably, would be crucial to support the youths in any successful rehabilitation process. Furthermore, 28% of youths have a history of gang involvement, highlighting the pervasiveness of one of the most important sources of negative peers.

Justice system involvement extends to youths' families

Finally, Panel C of Table 2 explores the extent to which family members reportedly have any of a number of potential problems, which in turn may have a negative consequence on the youth. Although most don't report a history of family problems with alcohol or drugs (less than 10% for each), almost half of placed youths live with someone who has a history of incarceration.⁴

[4] Research has shown that exposure to family members involved in crime is associated with many negative outcomes for youths (see, for example, Finlay, Mueller-Smith, and Street, 2022), even if the removal of the family member via incarceration might be beneficial for the youths (Norris, Pecenco, and Weaver, 2021).

3 MAJOR SHIFTS: DRAMATIC INCREASE IN PROPORTION OF YOUTHS WITH HISTORY OF MULTIPLE, SERIOUS OFFENSES

The figures in Section 2 characterize the youths in residential placements and document the extent to which placement facilities and programs must confront and address multiple challenges. As shown, these challenges include histories of multiple and serious offenses, various mental health needs, substance use, and family problems.

However, as shown in Section 1, the system has gone through multiple changes, including changes in the number and characteristics of referrals, as well as the way in which the system stakeholders choose to handle youths' cases. These may have led to a shift in the characteristics of youths who go into residential placement. Thus, in this section, we document how these characteristics have evolved over recent years, highlighting those that have experienced the most dramatic changes.

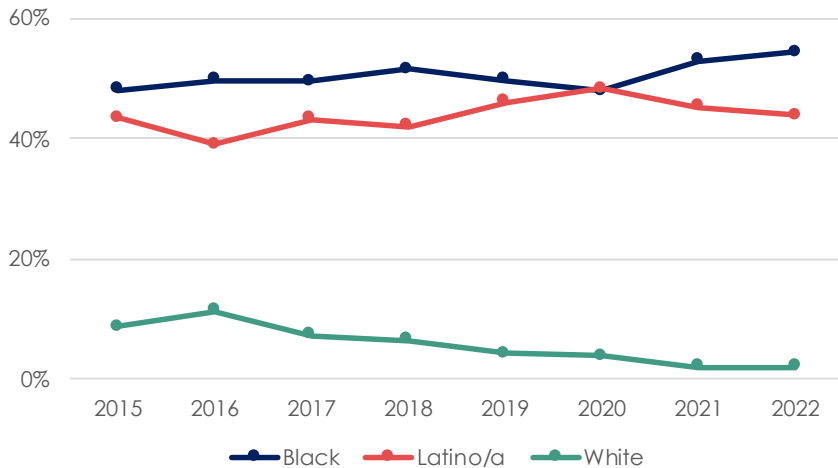
To present these changes, we follow a structure similar to the previous section. Most of the figures will display the same characteristics used in the previous section, calculating and presenting statistics by year.⁵ Due to differences in data availability, some figures will begin in 2015, while others will do so in 2017. All figures conclude in 2022. However, statistics for this year are calculated using data from January to June only.

[5] To make graphs easier to read, we have excluded some of the characteristics analyzed in Section 2.

3.1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Figure 13: Changes in racial composition

Placements starting between 2015 and 2022*



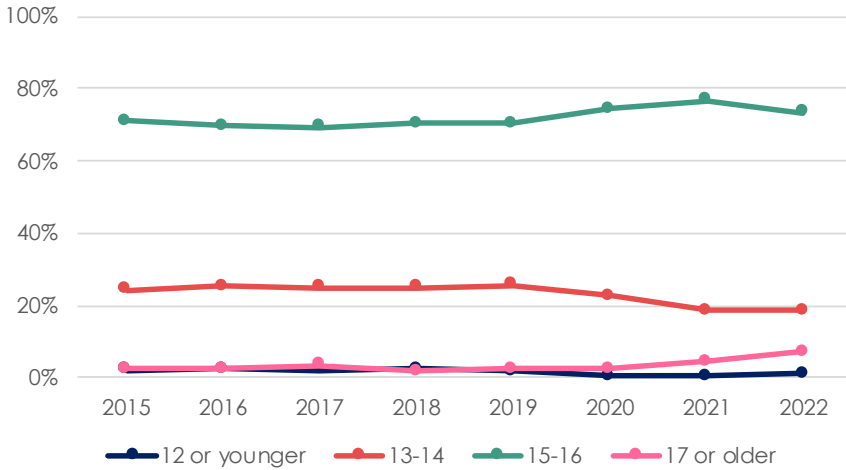
*Only January-June data for 2022

Racial disparities persist and may even be deepening

Figure 13 explores changes in the racial composition of placed youth. As shown, the composition has remained relatively unchanged, with the majority of placed youth being either Black or Latino(a). The share of white youths has declined over time. However, changes in definition of race in the data make it difficult to assess the extent of which this is only a matter of changes in how race has been recorded. Nevertheless, these changes have purportedly led to a more accurate definition of race. Under the recent categorization of race in the data, only around 2% of youths placed in 2021 and early 2022 were white. Thus, residential facilities are (or have become) a space populated almost exclusively by youths of color.

Figure 14: Changes in age of youths at time of referral

Placements starting between 2015 and 2022*



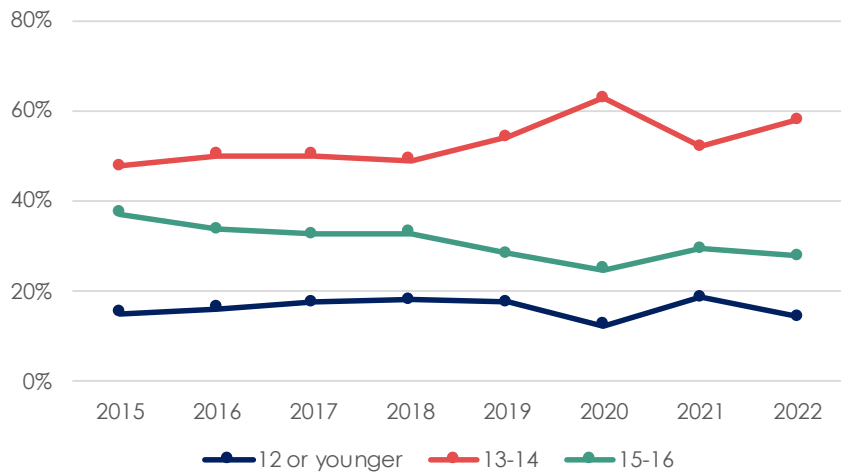
*Only January-June data for 2022

Youths slightly older, with wider gap between first involvement and placement

Recently, as shown in Figure 14, placed youths are slightly, but not substantially, older at the time of referral. At the same time, recently placed youths were slightly younger at the time of their first referral (Figure 15). For some youths, this potentially increases the time between their first involvement with the system and their placement. This may play a role in the changes in offense characteristics described in the next section, as it increases the time of exposure to the system.

Figure 15: Changes in age of youths at time of first referral

Placements starting between 2015 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

3.2 OFFENSE CHARACTERISTICS AND PRIOR JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

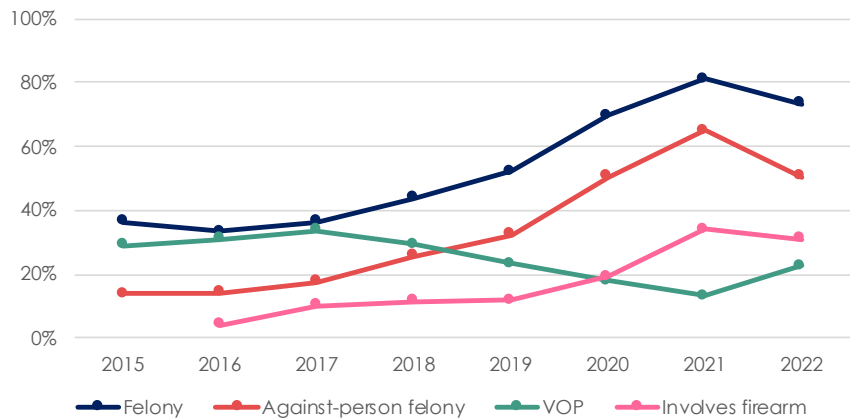
Figures 16-18 document the most dramatic change in this report. As these figures show, there have been substantial changes in offense characteristics and histories of prior involvement among placed youth. Although this pattern should be expected based on the facts presented in Section 1, the extent of these changes is noteworthy.

Share of felonies among placed youths doubles, reaching 82% in 2021

As Figure 16 shows, the share of placed youths with a felony in their current referral went from around 35% in 2015 to 82% in 2021. Data for 2022 suggest a reversal in this trend, although these statistics are only preliminary. Regardless, the share of youths with a felony in 2022 is more than twice the share in 2015. This change corresponds with a shift in the youths for whom placement is considered an appropriate option, limiting it to youths with more serious offenses and histories of offending. The extent of this change, however, illustrates the scale of the challenge for the system. As Figure 16 also shows, there is a similar increase

Figure 16: Changes in selected offense characteristics

Placements starting between 2015 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

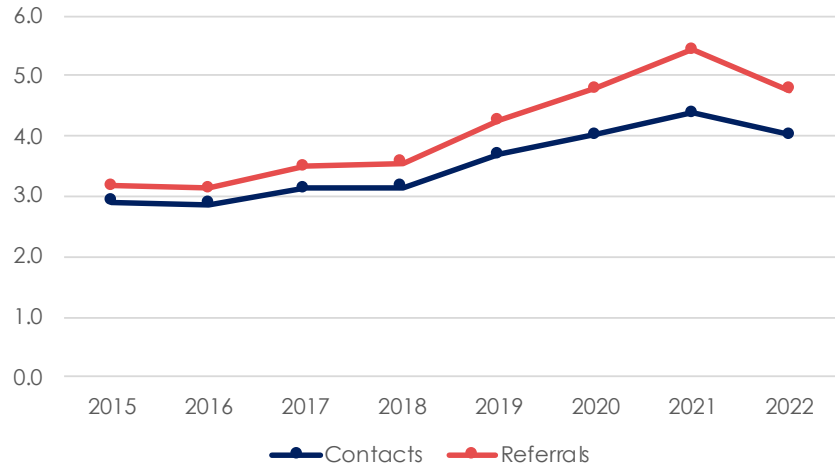
in the share of youths with an against-person felony and the share with offenses involving firearms. Moreover, it is clear that, although the increases started to occur around 2018, the pace of the change accelerated even more in most recent years.

Average number of prior, current referrals almost doubles

These changes are also reflected in measures of prior involvement, as shown in Figures 17 and 18. In 2015, youths in placements had, on average, 3 lifetime contacts or referrals at the time of placement. In 2021, the average number of referrals had increased to 5.4 referrals and the average number of contacts had increased to 4.4. As Figure 18 shows, these extensive histories of prior involvement include a large number of felonies. Although there is also an increase in the number of total contacts that involved a firearm, the increase is less pronounced than the one observed for felonies. On the other hand, there appears to be no change in the total number of VOP referrals. All of this underscores the changes in practices that reserve the deeper and more punitive parts of the system for youths with more complicated and serious histories of delinquency, as well as the challenges of dealing with and serving this changing population.

Figure 17: Changes in measures of historical justice involvement

Placements starting between 2015 and 2022*

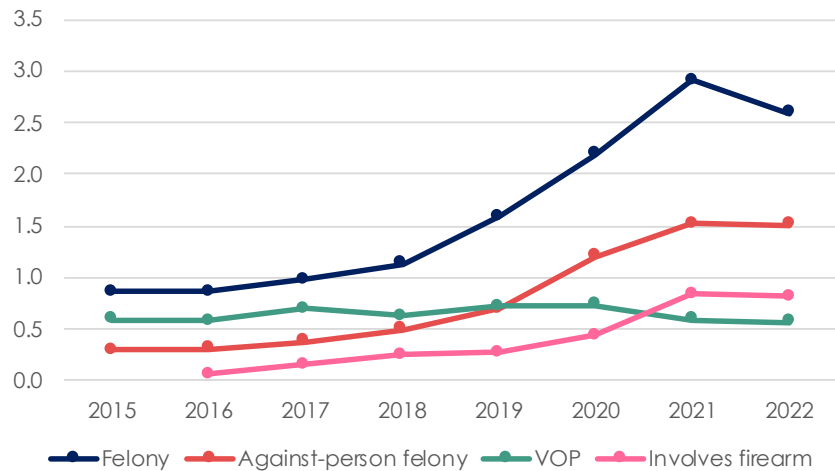


*Only January-June data for 2022

Figure 18: Changes in characteristics of historical justice involvement

Number of prior and current referrals with selected characteristics

Placements starting between 2015 and 2022*

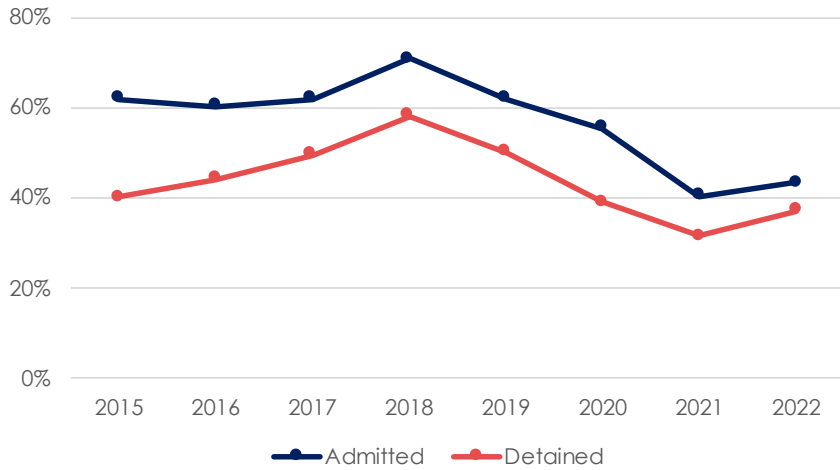


*Only January-June data for 2022

Figure 19: Changes in measures of pre-adjudicated detention

Percent admitted and detained

Placements starting between 2015 and 2022*

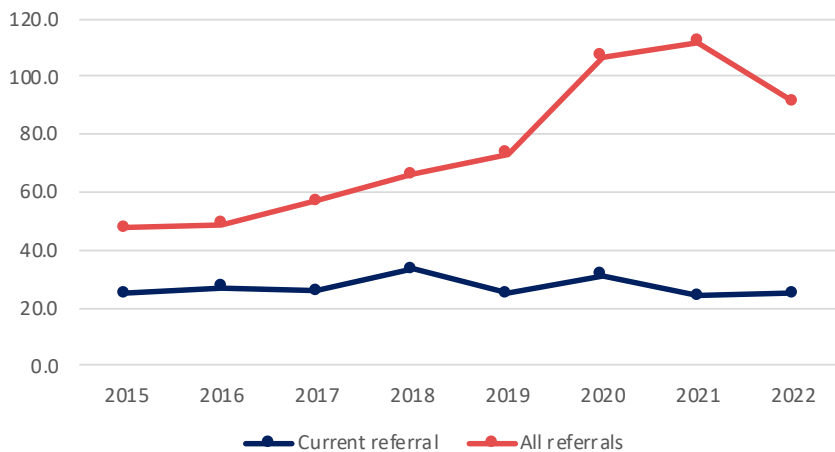


*Only January-June data for 2022

Figure 20: Changes in measures of pre-adjudicated detention

Days spent in detention in current and prior referrals

Placements starting between 2015 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

Increase in cumulative days detained likely driven by longer, complicated histories in justice system

Most placed youths have also spent time in pre-adjudicated detention. However, despite the changes presented in Figures 16-18, the average number of days on detention during the current referral has not changed over time. In fact, the fraction of youths either admitted to detention or formally detained has decreased in recent years (Figure 19). However, perhaps reflecting the fact that placed youths now have longer and more complicated histories, the total number of days in detention over all of their referrals has also dramatically increased, from around 50 to 110 (Figure 20). To the extent that pre-trial detention may have criminogenic effects, this may contribute to the challenges of handling and dealing with the kinds of youth in residential placements.

3.3 MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Slight uptick in prevalence of trauma while other indicators stable

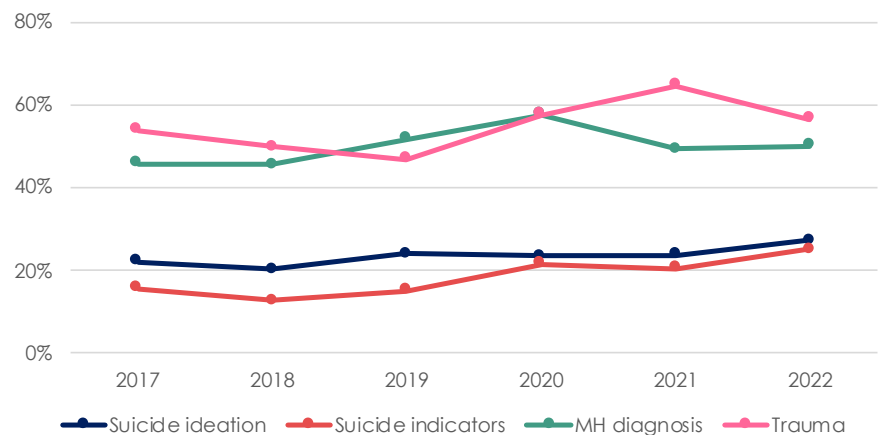
As described in Section 2, youths coming into placement carry high levels of mental health issues, including trauma, depression, and suicidal ideation. They also have histories of abuse and exposure to violence. Figure 21 shows that most of the mental health indicators remained relatively stable. However, there appears to be a relatively small, yet relevant, uptick in the share of youths with a history of trauma (64% of placed youths in 2021).

Since 2019, share of placed youths who are victims of physical abuse has doubled

Figure 22 explores a few of the indicators of abuse and exposure to violence. As the figure shows, recently placed youths are just as likely to be victims of sexual abuse and to witness violence than youths placed in prior years. However, the data show a large increase in the share of youths who have been victims of physical abuse. In 2022, nearly half of placed youths (48%) had been victims of physical abuse, as opposed to roughly one out of four in 2018 and 2019.

Figure 21: Changes in history of selected mental health issues

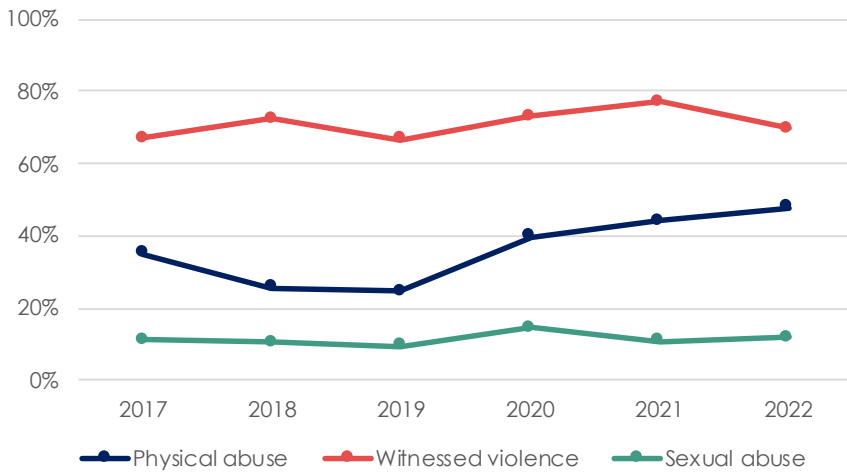
Placements starting between 2017 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

Figure 22: Changes in history of victimization and abuse

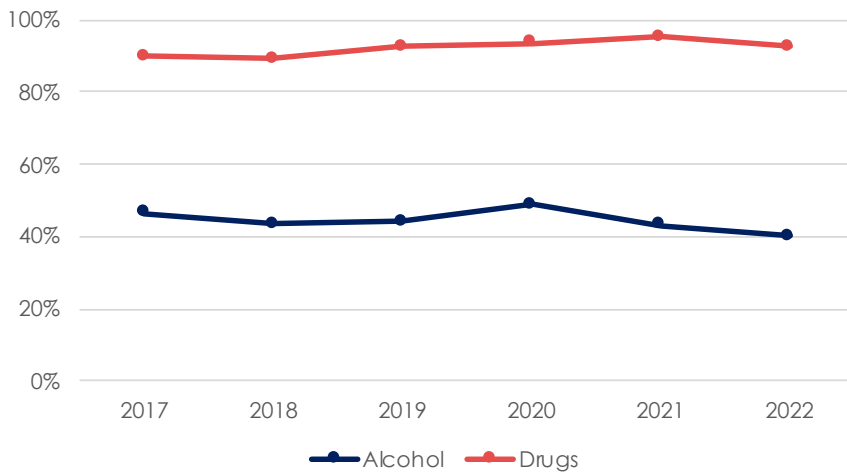
Placements starting between 2017 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

Figure 23: Changes in history of substance use

Placements starting between 2017 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

Substance use rates remain high

As described in Section 2, a history of substance use is common among placed youth.

The data do not show any changes in the propensity to consume either drugs or alcohol (Figure 23). Throughout the whole period, more than 90% of placed youths report having a history of drug use, while alcohol use rates hover around 45%.

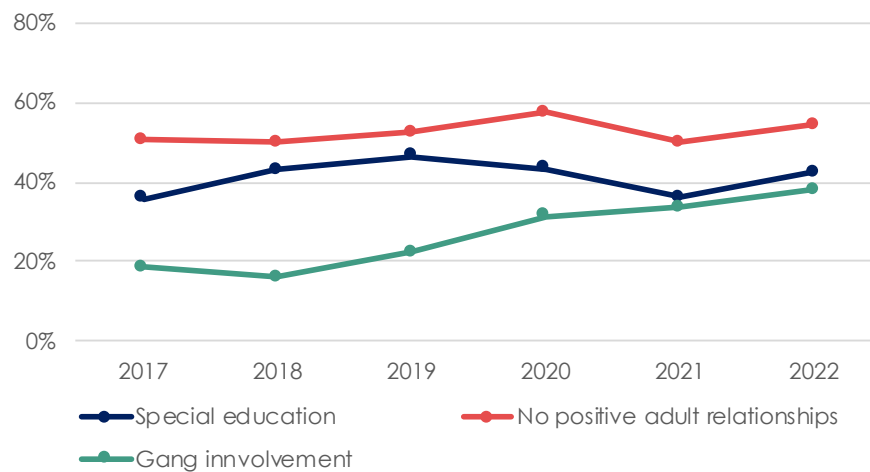
3.4 OTHER BACKGROUND

Gang involvement a more common experience

Consistent with the dramatic changes we observe for offenses and histories of involvement, there appears to be an increase in the prevalence of a history of gang involvement (Figure 24). Less than 20% of placed youths were identified to have a history of gang involvement in 2017 or 2018. In contrast, 38% of youths placed in 2022 had been involved with gangs prior to their placement.

Figure 24: Changes in selected background characteristics

Placements starting between 2017 and 2022*

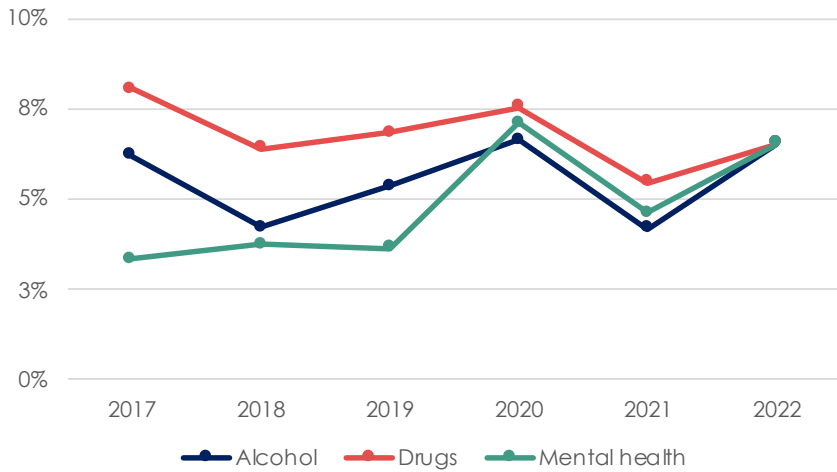


* Only January-June data for 2022

Figure 25: Changes in history of family problems

Substance use and mental health

Placements starting between 2017 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

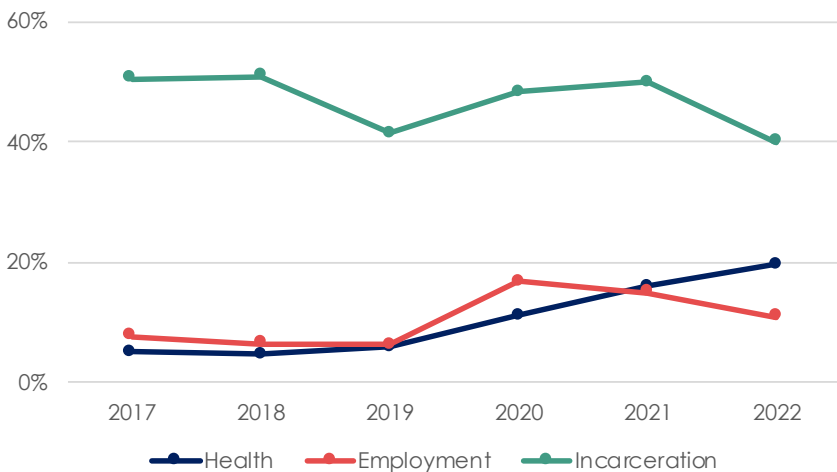
Other background characteristics largely unchanged

Most of the other background characteristics we analyzed seem to have remained relatively stable over the same period. Special education needs and our measure of positive adult relationships were virtually unchanged between 2017 and 2022 (Figure 24). Histories of family problems with mental health or substance abuse (Figure 25) were similarly at the same levels throughout the period, as were histories of family incarceration and problems with employment (Figure 26). The data show an increase in family health problems, particularly starting in 2020 (Figure 26). Although it is impossible to determine the cause with certainty from the available data, the increase coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 26: Changes in history of family problems

History of other family problems

Placements starting between 2017 and 2022*



*Only January-June data for 2022

3 CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Our detailed descriptive analysis shows that recently placed youth — most of whom are male, relatively older, and either Black or Latino(a) — have been involved with the system repeatedly and for several years. Typically, their histories include multiple felony offenses and considerable time in detention. Substance use, mental health issues, as well as experiences of abuse are common among them. Thus, from a rehabilitation standpoint, the challenges are significant and multi-faceted. Programs and services need to be tailored to address these needs. However, because many of these issues run so deep, the ability of the juvenile justice system to resolve them on its own is limited.

Placed youth have long, complex histories that are more likely to include:

- **Multiple serious offenses**
- **Considerable time in detention**
- **Experiences of physical abuse, trauma**

Many of the challenges implied by this characterization are not new. Our analysis of how the population of placed youth has changed over time reveals that recently placed youth share many of these characteristics with youth placed in prior years. However, there are a few important changes, some of which are substantial in scale. First, the data shows a large increase in the share of youths who have been victims of physical abuse, as well as smaller increase in the share of youths with a history of trauma. Second, the most dramatic changes we observe come from

youths' offenses and histories of prior involvement with the system. For instance, when we look at the number of total felony offenses — including prior and current contacts — for each youth, we find that average number of felonies tripled between 2015 and 2022. Thus, whereas residential placement facilities and programs historically handled a mixed group of youth in terms of the offenses they had been involved with, they now serve a group that is mostly composed of youth with histories of repeated serious offenses.

The number of total felony offenses — including prior and current contacts — tripled between 2015 and 2022.

Overall, the data in this report underscore the growing challenges of serving youth who have been placed under the custody of HCJPD. Pervasive mental health problems, serious histories of involvement with the system, and histories of victimization all pose immense and different challenges for juvenile probation officers, clinicians and therapists, facility managers, and decision-makers tasked with caring for and contributing to the rehabilitation of

youth in placements. Recent changes to programs in residential facilities operated by HCJPD aim at adapting to this reality. The QUEST program, for instance, was developed in response to the need and desire to provide better care for youths with histories of serious offenses. The revamped Youth Village facility has been designed following a therapeutic approach to address trauma among youth.

Research is already under way to evaluate the effectiveness of programs targeting traumatized youth with histories of serious offenses

One of several goals of programming at residential facilities is to prevent youth under their care from recidivating and remaining involved with either the juvenile or the adult criminal justice systems. Thus, a natural question is what all of these changes imply for recidivism rates. A priori, the observed changes are associated with higher likelihood of recidivism, through either their criminogenic effect

(e.g. trauma associated with a higher risk of delinquent behavior) or signaling properties (e.g. youth with more prior referrals have already shown they are likely to re-engage in delinquent behavior). It follows, then, that observed changes in recidivism rates across time may correspond, at least in part, to the observed changes in the composition of the population in residential facilities.

Future research is needed to explore the link between changes in youth characteristics, recidivism rates

All else equal, it would be expected that the observed changes in characteristics lead to higher recidivism rates. However, the extent to which this is true is an empirical question. At this point, it would be premature to conduct a formal statistical analysis that attempts to quantify how much these changes have contributed to changes in recidivism rates. Such an analysis would need to allow for 1) enough time to go by so that recently placed youth complete their placements and 2) enough time to go by after release to observe recidivism outcomes. Thus, we will revisit this question in a separate research project in the near future.

An even more important – and challenging – question is how the residential programs operated by HCJPD address these growing challenges and whether they are being effective. The Texas Policy Lab and HCJPD are collaborating in multiple research projects aimed at tracking the progress of youth as they participate in these programs, following them after their return to their homes and communities, and conducting a rigorous impact evaluation of these programs.

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