A brief overview of Michigan's juvenile justice system
In this guide, you will find a brief overview of Michigan’s juvenile justice system and its structure. By exploring this guide, you’ll take the first step toward becoming a more informed youth justice advocate.
Youth are developmentally different than adults and should be treated as such.

Public safety is the priority when making any decisions, but it is balanced with the youth's best interest.

Youth do not receive “time” but are provided with court-ordered rehabilitation.

Treatment should include age-appropriate services, such as:
- Substance abuse and mental health treatment;
- Wraparound services;
- Intensive case management; and
- Residential Treatment Programs.
The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) states:

*The Michigan Juvenile Justice system will focus on building safer Michigan communities and assisting youth to become healthy and productive citizens through proactive delinquency prevention, efficient law enforcement, effective rehabilitative treatment, statewide data collection and data sharing, and comprehensive community reintegration and support services.*
What does the structure of Michigan’s juvenile justice system look like?
Michigan has a “decentralized” system:

- Juvenile court services and programming are managed at the county level. The Michigan Family Court, Juvenile Division, or federally recognized tribal courts handle juvenile cases.
- Each juvenile court has different approaches to treatment, use of diversion and residential placement, and more. This causes youth and their families to come into contact with the system in inconsistent ways, with the varied application of practices leading to significant differences in treatment - also known as “justice by geography.”
Youth come into contact with multiple decision-makers within the juvenile justice system.

- While the juvenile justice system is not identical to the adult criminal legal system, attorneys, court administrators, judges, and prosecutors all play an essential role in the juvenile system. The decisions made by judges and prosecutors have an influence on the outcomes of youth and their families, including their overall experience in the justice system.
What might a youth's path within the juvenile justice system look like?
• **Referral and Delinquency Petition:**
  ○ Youth may become systems involved through various channels, such as law enforcement, schools, or social services. A delinquency petition is filed following the referral, initiating the formal legal process.

• **Possible Outcomes After Referral and Delinquency Petition:** After the referral and delinquency petition, the youth may experience one of the following outcomes:
  ○ Released on a warning: In some cases, the youth may receive a notification, and no further action is taken.
  ○ Diversion: Diversion programs are designed to steer youth away from the traditional court process. Instead of being formally charged with an offense, the child may participate in community-based programs or services to address the underlying issues that led to their behavior.

• **Judicial Processing:** If the case proceeds to judicial processing, the youth will be formally charged with the offense, and the court will handle the legal proceedings.
Possible Outcomes After Judicial Processing:
Following the judicial processing, the youth may experience one of the following outcomes:

- **Dismissal**
- **Post-Arrest Diversion:** After the arrest, the youth may still be considered for diversion programs to address their behavior and avoid further involvement in the formal juvenile justice system.
- **Community-Based Probation/Supervision:** Instead of being detained, the court may place the youth on probation or under community-based supervision, where they have specific conditions to follow and may receive counseling or other support services.
- **Detention:** Sometimes, the court may decide to detain the youth. Detention may be used as a temporary out-of-home placement before formal charges are filed, or the young person may remain in detention while awaiting placement in a long-term residential facility.
The graphic below highlights the possible continuum a young person may experience. It’s important to note that the youth's path in the juvenile justice system can vary widely from county to county and local authorities.
While not exhaustive, this brief overview lends insights into how youth and families come into contact with the juvenile justice system in Michigan. To learn more, we encourage you to explore the resources below:

- Michigan Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform
- Michigan Committee on Juvenile Justice
- State Court Administrative Office

Read through MCYJ’s published reports here or learn more about our legislative priorities here.