Center for Public Justice

JUVENILE JUSTICE POLICY IN CONGRESS:

Implications for Youth in D.C. and Beyond

OVERVIEW

In recent years, juvenile crime and justice involvement have steadily decreased through the effectiveness of evidence-based practices and diversion efforts implemented at the federal, state, and local levels. Juvenile justice reform focuses on ensuring accountability and public safety through a focus on rehabilitation and prevention, rather than solely punishment. Furthermore, it aims to reduce recidivism into the adult criminal system through diverting youth toward rehabilitation programs, child protective services, counseling, mentoring, and other interventions that do not require court involvement. However, youth crime remains a highly polarized issue in Washington, D.C., where crime rates, including violent crime, remain higher than other cities of similar sizes, and some have concerns that juvenile justice reforms are "soft on crime" or disregard accountability for youth who commit violent offenses.[1]

Because D.C. does not lie within any state jurisdiction, Congress has introduced federal legislation aimed at punitively increasing those consequences for youth involved in criminal offenses. While these bills only directly affect D.C. youth, their passage would likely set the tone for the kinds of reforms other states will also develop and enact, with many viewing these D.C bills as a signal from the federal government for future legislation in certain states.

Below are brief overviews of the current pending legislation in Congress that affects key juvenile justice issues. Some of these bills specifically target D.C. youth, while some apply to all criminal offenders in D.C., including youth, or all youth offenders in the country. The legislative priorities of these bills are reflective of a more punitive approach to juvenile justice that could potentially be replicated in other states throughout the country.

KEY BILLS AT A GLANCE

H.R.4922

D. C. Criminal Reforms to Immediately Make Everyone Safe Act of 2025 (D.C. CRIMES)

Aims to assert congressional authority over D.C. criminal law and implement specific changes to its justice system, primarily regarding youth offenders.

H.R.5140

D.C. Juvenile Sentencing Reform Act

Lowers the age to try juveniles as adults in D.C. for serious violent crimes from 16 to 14, as a means to enhance public safety.

H.R.5172

Strong Sentences for Safer D.C. Streets Act of 2025

Aims to increase mandatory minimum sentences for various crimes in D.C.

H.R.5242

To repeal the Second Chance Amendment Act of 2022 and the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act of 2016

Invalidates the changes made by these D.C. laws, which include provisions for automatic record expungement/sealing and opportunities for sentence reductions for certain youth offenders after serving a significant portion of their sentence.

S.2248

Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2025

Aims to modernize the existing law by strengthening protections for youth.

H.R.4922 D.C. Criminal Reforms to Immediately Make Everyone Safe Act of 2025 (D.C. CRIMES)[2]

WHAT THIS BILL DOES

- This bill lowers the definition of youth as it is currently defined in the Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA) of 1985 from 24 to under 18.
    - The Youth Rehabilitation Act provides alternative sentencing options for youth in D.C. for any crime other than murder or sexual abuse, and allows records to be "set aside" and sealed from public view upon the completion of a sentence. The YRA would still apply to those under 18, but this bill eliminates those ages 18-24 from consideration.
- Removes judicial discretion for youth in sentencing
    - Judicial discretion allowed judges to consider age (previously for those 24 years old and younger) as a factor in sentencing, exempting them from having to follow mandatory minimums. Eliminating judicial discretion will enforce mandatory sentencing minimums for all crimes regardless of the age of the offender, and nullify much of the YRA that would still apply to those under 18.
        - i.e. With age-based judicial discretion, a 15-year-old convicted of theft could receive an alternative or lighter sentence than an adult who committed the same offense. With this bill, they would both face the same required minimum charge.
- Requires the Attorney General of D.C. to establish a public website containing statistics on juvenile crime that is updated monthly.
- Challenges D.C. Home Rule
    - While not specifically targeted towards youth, the D.C. Crimes Act would make the D.C. Attorney General a presidentially-appointed position, instead of appointed by the mayor, and prevent the D.C. Council from enacting changes to existing criminal liability sentences that impact D.C. juvenile courts.
        - This limits the "home rule" ability of D.C. to create, enact, and enforce its own policies as states do, including those about juvenile offenses.

CURRENT STATUS – AS OF APRIL 2026

Passed house vote 240-179, received in the Senate

COUNTER STATISTIC

D.C. LAWS ARE ALREADY VERY PUNITIVE TOWARDS YOUTH

Pre-adjudication, D.C. youth are 50% more likely to be detained than youth nationally, and those convicted in the D.C. juvenile system have an incarceration rate almost five times as high as the national average.

H.R.5140 D.C. Juvenile Sentencing Reform Act[3]

WHAT THIS BILL DOES

- Lowers the age at which a minor may be tried as an adult for certain criminal offenses in the D.C. to 14 years of age.

- Currently in D.C., the U.S. Attorney's Office has the discretion to directly file charges in adult court against 16 and 17 year olds for serious violent crimes like murder, first-degree sexual abuse, first-degree burglary, armed robbery, or assault with the intent to commit any of these crimes. In certain circumstances, youth aged 15 and older can be transferred to adult court through a judicial waiver process for a broader range of felonies.

    - This bill would lower the minimum age to be tried as an adult in any of these cases to 14 years of age. Youth charged as adults are proven more likely to reoffend than those held in the juvenile system, and face a higher risk of sexual abuse, physical assault, and suicide while incarcerated.[4]

CURRENT STATUS – AS OF APRIL 2026

Current Status: Passed house vote 225-203, received in the Senate



COUNTER STATISTIC

Youth charged as adults are more likely to reoffend than youth processed in the juvenile courts (**34% more likely**). Youth in the adult system are more likely to commit future offenses and particularly more likely to commit the most violent offenses when compared with peers in the juvenile system.[12]



COUNTER STATISTIC

Racial Disparities in Adult Sentencing: Black youth are nine times more likely than their white counterparts to be given an adult prison sentence for the same offense. Likewise, Tribal youth are twice as likely, and Latino youth are 40% more likely than white youth to be prosecuted as adults.[14]

H.R.5172 Strong Sentences for Safer D.C. Streets Act of 2025[5]

WHAT THIS BILL DOES

- This bill mandates that all those charged with first-degree murder in D.C. be sentenced to life without parole. Currently, the mandatory minimum sentence is 30 years, and the maximum sentence is life without parole. This would mean that everyone convicted would automatically receive the maximum sentence, regardless of any factors such as age.
    - While not specifically targeting youth crime, this bill also repeals provisions that prohibit the sentencing of individuals under the age of 18 to life imprisonment without parole for first-degree murder, contradicting the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Miller v. Alabama,[6] which banned mandatory life-without-parole sentences for children.

CURRENT STATUS – AS OF APRIL 2026

Passed through the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform 26-19, placed on the Union Calendar #279



COUNTER STATISTIC

Evidence tells us that longer stays in confinement have no impact, or a negative impact, on future offending.[13]

H.R.5242 To repeal the Second Chance Amendment Act of 2022 and the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act of 2016[7]

WHAT THIS BILL DOES

- This bill would repeal the IRAA, which is a “second look” judicial sentence review policy that allows judges to review sentences after a person has served 15 years for an offense committed as a youth or emerging adult, through 24 years old.

- It would also repeal the Second Chance Amendment Act that created a system for sealing and expunging certain criminal records. This act applies to both juvenile and adult crimes in D.C..

CURRENT STATUS – AS OF APRIL 2026

Passed through the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform 24-20, placed on the Union Calendar #293.

S.2248 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2025[8]

WHAT THIS BILL DOES

- While not a part of the above package of D.C. crime bills, the reauthorization of the JJDPA is another pending legislative priority. The JJDPA applies to the whole country to create a federal standard of care and accountability for the juvenile justice system which otherwise varies greatly by state and county. It's based on a broad consensus that children, youth, and families involved with the juvenile and criminal courts should be guarded by federal standards for care and custody, while also upholding the interests of community safety and the prevention of victimization.
    - The JJDPA has provided a basis for positive, evidence-based reforms to be made throughout the country at both state and federal levels. It was originally established in 1974, and is up for reauthorization every 5 years, but after 2002 was not reauthorized until 2018, over 11 years overdue. Now, the 2018 authorization is expired. While it is pending reauthorization, it is funded through appropriations, leaving it continuously vulnerable to potential funding changes through shifting political priorities in Congress.

- The JJDPA has four core tenets:
    - Youth cannot be incarcerated for non-delinquent behaviors or status offenses.
        - These are offenses only because of the age of the offender, such as truancy, alcohol possession, or curfew violations. Status offenses should be addressed with community-based services in place of detention.

    - Youth may not be detained in adult jails and lockups;
        - This provision is designed to protect youth from psychological abuse, physical assault, and isolation. It has limited exceptions for times before or after a court hearing, in rural areas, or in unsafe travel conditions.

    - Sight and Sound Separation
        - Youth who, under rare exceptions, are housed in adult facilities must be separated from adults by sight and sound barriers. Youth cannot be housed next to adult cells, share dining halls, recreation areas, or any other common spaces with adults, or be placed in any circumstance that could expose them to threats or abuse from adult offenders.
        - While sight and sound separation seeks to protect youth, it has sometimes instead resulted in children being placed in solitary confinement to fulfill its requirements. This is not an acceptable alternative and creates its own lasting damage. In 2018, a bill passed to end the use of solitary confinement for youth offenders.

    - States must address racial and ethnic disparities within their youth legal system.
        - Research indicates that youth of color receive tougher sentences and are more likely to be incarcerated than white youth with the same offenses.[10] States are required to address these disparities at all stages of justice involvement.

CURRENT STATUS – AS OF APRIL 2026

Pending in Senate Judiciary Committee

ENDNOTES

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3. Congress.gov, "H.R.5140 - 119th Congress (2025-2026): To lower the age at which a minor may be tried as an adult for certain criminal offenses in the District of Columbia to 14 years of age," September 17, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/5140.
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Effects on Violence of Laws and Policies Facilitating the Transfer of Youth from the Juvenile to the Adult Justice System,” MMWR 2007; 56 (No. RR-9):1-16.
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14. Campaign for Youth Justice. 2016. “Key Facts: Youth in the Justice System,” p. 7. Washington, D.C.: Campaign for Youth Justice. http://cfyj.org/images/factsheets/KeyYouthCrimeFactsJune72016final.pdf