Transforming Juvenile Justice Through Strategic Financing

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Introduction

Juvenile justice systems in the United States—responsible for addressing legal violations by youth under a certain age (typically age 18)—operate under a variety of complex financial structures that reflect an interplay of federal, state, and local policies. These systems rely on diverse funding sources, each playing a critical role in supporting operations, programs, and services. While state and local funding form the backbone of financial support to juvenile justice systems,[i] additional funding sources—such as federal funding, fines and fees, and philanthropic contributions—also play a role. However, there is limited information available regarding juvenile justice financing,[ii] particularly information synthesized across states and localities. As a result, variations in financing among juvenile justice systems are not well understood, limiting opportunities to examine how different structures support (or limit) communities' juvenile justice objectives—for example, reducing recidivism, expanding community-based alternatives to incarceration, and increasing access to rehabilitative services. This lack of clarity hinders opportunities to strategize and allocate resources effectively, improve program quality, and achieve safe communities.

As juvenile justice systems face myriad challenges in addressing both the growing needs of youth and public safety concerns,[iii] jurisdictions need innovative financial strategies to improve resource allocation and address critical gaps in service provision. Finding the right strategies requires a thoughtful process to financing that balances three public policy goals: crime reduction, child development and well-being, and cost reduction—the Three C's. Increasing crime rates often fuel public demand for arrest and incarceration, but traditional approaches to promoting public safety are expensive and often disregard the developmental needs of children and youth.[iv,v,vi] The financial costs of sustaining these punitive systems can be staggering, with the United States spending billions of dollars annually on juvenile detention and incarceration, often with minimal improvements in public safety or youth outcomes. For example, it was estimated that the average cost of incarcerating a young person was $214,620 per year in 2020,[vii] while alternatives such as community-based programs are often more cost-effective and have yielded positive outcomes, including reduced recidivism rates and improved youth well-being.[v,viii] Achieving a balanced approach that minimizes crime, supports children, and optimizes costs requires a stronger understanding of juvenile justice financing and the use of innovative approaches that leverage financing structures to rethink resource allocation.

To enhance understanding of juvenile justice system financing, the Annie E. Casey Foundation funded Child Trends to conduct a mixed-methods study of juvenile justice systems' financing arrangements across specific states and localities. After summarizing our methodology, this brief highlights select findings from our study to provide foundational knowledge of juvenile justice system financing while showcasing the complexities involved. Then, we share recent innovations in juvenile justice financing wherein jurisdictions reallocated resources to prioritize community-based alternatives and reduced costs. Finally, we propose a roadmap for strategic juvenile justice financing that emphasizes a multi-step process that involves deliberate planning, stakeholder collaboration, and ongoing evaluation. By integrating these steps, states and local jurisdictions and policymakers can begin to create financing strategies that are attentive to allocating resources in a way that promotes public safety, supports youth development, and reduces costs.

Methods

Child Trends leveraged its 13 years of experience conducting the Child Welfare Financing Survey to develop a juvenile justice financing survey. This survey of seven states and 11 localities—administered from January 2022 to April 2023 and covering state fiscal year 2019—was developed in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and an advisory panel to collect data on various topics, including details about how juvenile justice systems are administered, expenditures for services and programs, savings and reinvestment practices, and contextual information about the administration of the juvenile justice system. Throughout this process, we worked closely with respondents to identify and address missing data and discrepancies, ensuring that we collected accurate and reliable information and held meetings to gain further insights on topics such as decision-making processes for funding allocations and the advantages and challenges associated with different funding streams. We list the state and local agencies that participated in this study below and include our definitions for different funding sources.

Table 1. States and localities included in the study sample

State	State Agencies	Local Agencies
California	No state-level participation	• Riverside County Probation Department
Kansas	Kansas Department of Corrections	• No local-level participation
New Mexico	New Mexico Children, Youth & Families Department	• Bernalillo County Youth Services Center • Lea County Detention Center • San Juan County Juvenile Services Center
Ohio	Ohio Department of Youth Services	• Ashtabula County Court of Common Pleas – Juvenile/Probation Divisions • Franklin County Court of Common Pleas – Domestic Relations Division and Juvenile Branch
Texas	Texas Juvenile Justice Department	• Dallas County Juvenile Department • Harris County Juvenile Probation Department • Waller County Juvenile Probation
Virginia	Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice	• No local-level participation
Washington	No state-level participation	• King County Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention, Juvenile Division & King County Superior Court, Juvenile Services • Whatcom County Superior Court

Our survey protocols investigated the following five potential funding sources: state funding, local funding, federal funding, fines and fees, and foundation funding. We provide a brief overview of each source type on the next page.

- **State funding**: States allocate financial resources to support the operations and programs of their juvenile justice systems. State priorities and legislation shape budget allocations, which are typically funded through a combination of taxes and fees.
- **Local funding**: Counties and other local governmental entities may allocate a portion of their budgets for juvenile justice services. These funds, derived from local taxes and other revenue sources, are frequently distributed across various local services and programs.
- **Federal funding**: The federal government supports state and local juvenile justice services through grants and other federal funding. Funding mechanisms under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) provide state, Tribal, and local juvenile justice systems with resources to develop and implement programs and evidence-based practices. These may include specialized funding programs and discretionary grants targeted at emerging challenges in juvenile justice.
- **Fines and fees**: Local juvenile justice systems may impose monetary penalties (i.e., detention and court fees, probation fees, restitution, and fines for specific offenses) on youth and their families to fund operations. Although fines and fees support the costs of the system, this approach has been criticized in recent years for exacerbating challenges to families' financial stability and increasing the likelihood of deeper justice system involvement when youth and families cannot pay.[ix]
- **Foundation funding**: Philanthropic foundations with a focus on juvenile justice provide grants and short-term support to government agencies and community-based organizations. These funds support innovative programs, research, technical assistance, and evidence-based practices aimed at system transformation and improvements.

Findings: Financing of Juvenile Justice Services

State variations in funding structures

Juvenile justice system financing cannot be understood without basic knowledge of how systems are structured, as the administrative and financial structures of these systems vary by state. Since there is not a uniform juvenile justice system within the United States,[x] juvenile justice services can be administered and financed at different levels (i.e., states, localities, or a combination of both) and by different government branches (e.g., judicial branch, executive branch, or a joint function of both). The financial model of each system—or the framework through which funding is sourced, allocated, and managed—is unique, shaped by policy priorities, administrative structures, and collaborative agreements within each jurisdiction.[xi] The availability and allocation of resources to juvenile justice often reflect broader social, political, and economic contexts, leading to considerable variability in how justice systems are financed and the services and support they make available to youth and their families.

Table 2 shows notable variation in financing of juvenile justice services across and within five states. For example, in New Mexico, the state executive branch agency largely oversees and administers funding for diversion, probation, reentry, and commitment, while detention services are fully financed at the local jurisdiction level. In contrast, in Texas, local probation departments oversee and (mostly) fund diversion, probation, and detention services, while commitment and reentry services are mostly financed at the state level with supplemental funding financed at the local jurisdiction level.

Table 2. Financing of juvenile justice services, by state

State	Diversion	Community Supervision[a]	Reentry	Detention	Commitment
Ohio	Mostly local	Mostly local	Fully state	Fully local	Mostly state
Kansas	Mostly state	Mostly state	Fully state	Mostly local	Fully state
New Mexico	Mostly state	Fully state	Fully state	Fully local	Fully state
Texas	Mostly local	Mostly local	Mostly state	Fully local	Fully state
Virginia	Fully state	Fully state	Fully state	Mostly local	Fully state

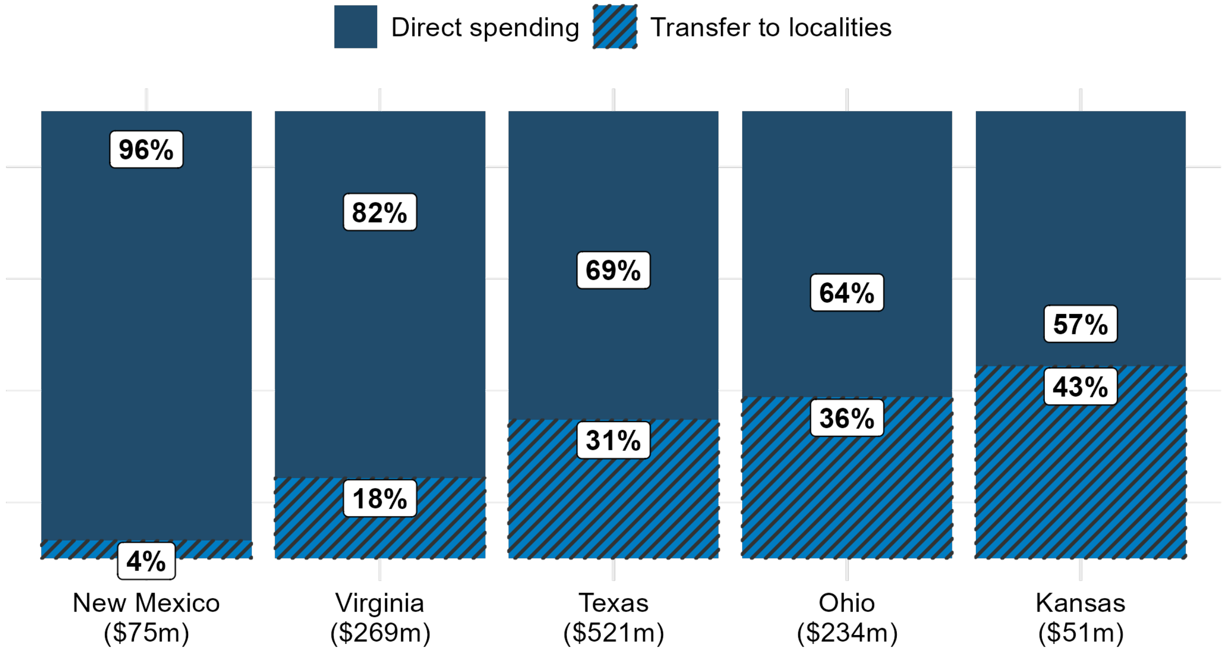
Source: Child Trends analysis of state agency self-reported Juvenile Justice Financing Survey data for SFY 2019.
[a] Community supervision includes two categories: probation and other residential placements. Probation is a court-ordered period of community supervision, typically allowing youth to live at home, during which they must comply with specific conditions as an alternative to detention or incarceration. Other residential placements include all court-ordered out-of-home care in residential facilities (non-detention and non-commitment) where youth are placed as a condition of probation.

As yet another example, Virginia's juvenile justice services are structured such that all services except detention are fully funded and administered by the state. Juvenile detention centers, however, are primarily funded and operated at the local level. While the state certifies detention centers and provides partial funding, it has limited control over their day-to-day operations. This decentralized structure may create challenges for aligning detention practices with broader state priorities and reform efforts. For instance, the underutilization of detention centers has sparked debates about resource allocation, as some facilities remain operational despite declining detention rates.[xii]

Due to variation in both the size of each state's youth population and the level of government that administers different juvenile justice services, there is considerable variation in expenditures across states. Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of each state's total juvenile justice expenditures that is spent directly by the state versus transferred by the state to localities. States like New Mexico and Virginia allocate the majority of their resources to direct state-level spending on juvenile justice services, while others, including Ohio and Texas, are administered largely at the local level. These dynamics underscore the importance of understanding the financial structure of each system, as the distribution of funds impacts how services are delivered and who is accountable for outcomes. Strategic financial planning can help ensure that resources, whether centralized or decentralized, are allocated in ways that align with state or local-level goals regarding positive outcomes for youth rehabilitation and community safety.

In addition to transferring funds to local governments, two states (New Mexico and Kansas) transfer funding to Tribal governments to provide juvenile justice services and activities. However, the amount of funding transferred to Tribal governments during the survey period was minimal (around $10,000 and $5,000, respectively).

Figure 1. Percent of state-level juvenile justice expenditures in SFY19, direct vs. transfer to localities



Source: Child Trends analysis of state agency self-reported Juvenile Justice Financing Survey data for SFY 2019. Under each state's name appears a figure for overall expenditures, reported in million (m) of dollars, for juvenile justice services and activities that occurred in SFY 2019.

Challenges with existing funding structures

As part of our study, our conversations with state and local juvenile justice system leaders highlighted challenges with various budget structures and funding streams. System leaders, particularly at the local level, expressed frustration over the lack of flexibility and discretion their jurisdiction has over the use of their funds. A commonly cited example is the inability to shift funds from probation programming to support diversion programming. Certain programs are funded specifically for probation-involved youth, and those same services cannot be extended to youth in diversion programs, even when such services could benefit both populations. On the other hand, designated funding serves important policy goals, such as ensuring that resources are allocated to priority populations—including youth with higher risk of offending who require intensive interventions—and preventing systems from directing funds disproportionately toward lower-risk groups. This inflexibility can create barriers to addressing broader system needs. Strict limitations for state and local funding often leave systems with little flexibility to tailor their services to the needs and changing contexts of the youth and families in their jurisdictions. This issue stems from the fact that funds for different juvenile justice services often originate from separate parts of state and/or county budgets, each with its own usage restrictions and requirements. This tension highlights the need for a balanced approach: maintaining targeted funding for critical priorities and allowing some flexibility to adapt to local needs and emerging challenges.

Local juvenile justice jurisdictions vary widely in their reliance on federal, state, and local funding. For example, Riverside County, California depends primarily on state funding, while Whatcom County, Washington, relies mostly on local sources. When jurisdictions depend heavily on a single funding stream, they are vulnerable to fluctuations caused by political and administrative shifts. Leaders in our study stated that changes in political leadership can lead to abrupt shifts in policy and funding, complicating their efforts to adopt and sustain transformation efforts.

In addition, system leaders shared challenges in carrying over unspent funds (such as savings from reduced use of incarceration) into future fiscal years. These funds were returned to the state or county rather than invested in another, under-resourced part of the system. Some jurisdictions expressed concern that underspending their budgets could result in their jurisdiction receiving less funding the following year. These challenges underscore the need to diversify funding strategies, ensuring that available resources are effectively utilized to address critical gaps in services. Exploring innovative approaches to juvenile justice financing may offer a pathway to overcoming these challenges, thereby helping jurisdictions implement programs and policies that address the needs of their youth.

Innovations in Juvenile Justice Financing

Understanding diverse financing structures across jurisdictions provides valuable insights into underutilized funding streams and informs strategies that state and local policymakers and system administrators need to consider for their own juvenile justice systems. Below, we share innovative examples from our partners that illustrate how strategic financing can drive systemic change. By learning from these initiatives, jurisdictions can reimagine their financing strategies to better serve youth, families, and communities.

Virginia: As part of Virginia's Department of Juvenile Justice Transformation Plan, the state reinvested savings from the closure of two state-run juvenile correctional centers to fund its Virginia Regional Service Coordination (RSC) Model, a robust, statewide continuum of alternative placements and (in particular) evidence-based services for youth involved in Virginia's juvenile justice system.[xiii] The Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice contracted two service coordination organizations to serve as regional service coordinators to support the department's continuum of services by managing centralized referrals, service coordination, quality assurance, and reporting. The RSC coordinators are also responsible for conducting ongoing analyses of service gaps and monitoring service delivery through quality assurance reviews. The RSC model not only supports consistent delivery of evidence-based programs, such as Functional Family Therapy and Multi-Systemic Therapy, but also aims to match services to youth's needs based on their assessed risk levels. By reinvesting funds to a statewide continuum of services, Virginia's strategic financing process demonstrates that when youth are referred to and complete community-based programs, these services reduce the likelihood of rearrest and reconviction.[xiv] This shift prioritized children by funding more cost-effective community alternatives and programs that directly benefit youth and families, while reducing reliance on underused, expensive facilities.

Kansas: Kansas' Senate Bill 367, passed in 2016, brought significant reforms to the state's juvenile justice system.[xv] The bill aimed to reduce reliance on out-of-home placements, prioritize community-based interventions, and focus intensive responses on high-risk youth. For example, Kansas' new policy prohibited the use of incarceration for less serious offenses, which eventually led to the closure of two correctional facilities. For youth who were incarcerated, probation terms could be shortened through earned discharge credits. State funds saved via reduced reliance on correctional facilities were redirected to evidence-based community programs, training, and interventions. In 2017, the Juvenile Justice Improvement Fund established through SB 367 captured cost savings to fund evidence-based practices for youth supervised in the community.[xvi] More recently, beginning in 2024, the Juvenile Alternatives to Detention Fund finances facilities or programs that provide alternatives to the detention of youth in local jails.[xvii] Altogether, these reforms led to notable improvements, including a 31 percent reduction in youth placed in juvenile correctional facilities and nearly $30 million in savings reinvested into community-based solutions in the first two years.[xviii]

Ohio: Ohio's RECLAIM initiative represents an early and influential example of strategic juvenile justice financing.[xix] Launched in 1993 and redesigned in SFY 2005, RECLAIM is a funding initiative to encourage juvenile courts to use community-based alternatives to divert youth from Ohio's state-run Department of

Youth Services (DYS) facilities. Each court is given a number of "credits" based on its average number of youth adjudicated for felony offenses, and deductions are made for DYS and community corrections bed usage in prior years (one credit reduced per bed placement in a DYS facility and two-thirds credit reduced for each bed day used in community corrections during the previous year). This formula determines the court's allocation of RECLAIM funds. RECLAIM strengthened local capacity to develop and implement community-based alternatives to incarceration, reduced reliance on incarceration, and decreased the likelihood of repeated arrest and incarceration.[xx,xxi] Furthermore, Ohio also offers performance-driven grant programs to juvenile courts (Competitive RECLAIM) and additional funds to selected participating courts to promote the use of evidence-based programs (Targeted RECLAIM).

A Roadmap for Strategic Juvenile Justice Financing

Strategic financing is a multi-step process that has the potential to foster change within juvenile justice systems by empowering jurisdictions to explore funding streams that facilitate alternative and innovative funding approaches. A strategic financing process can help systems foster innovation through deliberate planning, stakeholder collaboration, and ongoing evaluation. The following proposed steps outline a high-level framework for jurisdictions to develop and implement financing strategies that align with their unique needs and goals.

Step	Description
1 **Engage in initial planning and goal setting.**	The foundations of strategic juvenile justice financing include clearly defined desired outcomes and indicators, identified target populations, and determination of the programs and resources necessary to achieve these outcomes. • Engage diverse stakeholders—including youth, families, community representatives, service providers, and policymakers—to ensure that the plan reflects the priorities and experiences of those involved in the system. • Develop a collaboration and partnership plan to align stakeholders around shared goals, thereby fostering accountability and collective ownership of the process. • Establish clear benchmarks and a shared vision to guide all subsequent steps.
2 **Refine plan in partnership with stakeholder groups using data.**	Use data as a foundation for informed decision making and to guide coordination efforts. • Leverage data to refine goals and target populations. • Map the infrastructure and operational costs associated with proposed programs and services to ensure financial feasibility. This process may include a "fiscal map" of how different juvenile justice services are administered and financed.[xxii] • Foster collaboration between cross-agency teams to align budgetary priorities with evidence-based practices and strategic goals. • Conduct a thorough review of existing financial and administrative structures, emphasizing the need for a holistic view of juvenile justice financing. Given that youth have multiple and varied needs, systems

Step	Description
	must rely on multiple (and varied) funding streams and partnerships with other government agencies (such as child welfare, education, and behavioral health systems) to offer a wide array of interventions for youth and families across the continuum of care. • Consider the critical question: "How do you fill the gap between current funding and needed funding?"[xxiii] Identify required changes in funding mechanisms and outline strategies for implementation, including necessary policy revisions, budget appropriations, grant opportunities, and engagement with potential investors. This can guide the development of targeted strategies for aligning resources with the needs of the system.
3 **Develop an advocacy and communications strategy.**	A strong advocacy and communication strategy is critical to building support for juvenile justice financing reforms. • Develop tailored communication plans targeting legislators, elected officials, and other influential stakeholders to gain their endorsement in strategic financing initiatives. • Create compelling communication tools—such as policy briefs, infographics, and success stories—and strategies to raise understanding and support for funding innovative and sustainable juvenile justice programs and services.
4 **Ensure a continuous quality improvement plan.**	Sustainable financing requires ongoing evaluation and continuous quality improvement practices aligned to the goals designed in Step 1. This final phase ensures that the systems remain adaptable and effective over time. • Use performance metrics to evaluate program outcomes, identify cost-saving opportunities, and reallocate resources to where they are most impactful. • Incorporate data analytics tools in the strategic planning framework to enhance decision making and streamline budget monitoring processes. • Continuously explore innovative financing models and strategies to maximize resource utilization and improve outcomes for youth and communities.

Conclusion

This brief has highlighted the importance of understanding juvenile justice financing, emphasized some of the challenges inherent to having fragmented funding streams, and offered ways for jurisdictions to engage in strategic financing processes. Juvenile justice systems in the United States operate within a complex web of funding structures that reflect diverse priorities and administrative arrangements across states and localities. Each state's (and often, each locality's) unique policies, collaborative agreements, funding sources, and juvenile justice system administrative structures determine the ways in which agencies operate and the various services and programs they make available to youth. Our study's findings reveal notable variation in both the financing and expenditures of juvenile justice services across and within the five states, impacting how services are delivered and how funding is allocated between state and local levels. Conversations with state and local juvenile justice system leaders highlight several challenges with budget structures and funding streams, including limited flexibility and discretion in spending, shifts in funding due to changes in political leadership, and difficulties carrying over unspent funds.

To address these challenges, the brief has presented a proposed roadmap for strategic juvenile justice financing. Engaging in strategic financing requires intentional planning, diverse stakeholder involvement, an advocacy and communication strategy, and continuous quality improvement plan. Strategic financing approaches that address the Three C's—crime, children, and cost—can be a mechanism to contribute to the safety and well-being of children and youth within the justice system. To build a complete snapshot of juvenile justice financing, jurisdictions must document their fiscal challenges and prioritize gathering and analyzing robust data on funding sources, expenditures, and outcomes. This process is critical for aligning resources with priorities and ensuring accountability. Through innovative strategies, collaboration, and deliberate planning, state and local leaders can create more sustainable and effective juvenile justice systems that balance fiscal responsibility with the developmental needs of young people.

Acknowledgments

Juvenile Justice Financing Study

This strategic brief is part of a broader initiative funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation to enhance understanding of juvenile justice system financing. By examining system structures, funding processes, and expenditures, this project aims to empower advocates, policymakers, and system administrators to drive meaningful change.

Key project deliverables include:

- **A strategic brief** that offers a high-level overview of juvenile justice financing and a roadmap for crafting transformative strategies tailored to unique state and local system contexts
- **Factsheets** that provide comprehensive insights into the financing of select jurisdictions, highlighting funding streams, the appropriation process, and expenditure patterns

Together, these resources lay the groundwork for initiating and sustaining juvenile justice system transformations while encouraging innovative, data-driven financial strategies.

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Please note that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

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