



Colorado Juvenile Justice Systems

By Jerard Brown

This issue brief summarizes how Colorado's justice system handles juveniles found guilty of a crime, covering problem-solving courts, detention and commitment, juvenile facilities, support services, and the Youthful Offender System.

Juvenile Problem Solving Courts

Problem-solving courts in Colorado use a non-adversarial approach, emphasizing treatment, outcomes, and collaboration. Types include:

- juvenile drug courts for substance abuse;
- youth and family treatment courts for high-risk youth; and,
- specialty courts, such as Denver's REST program for youth with trauma and behavioral health needs.

Referrals

A juvenile can be referred to a problem-solving court by a district attorney, or a judicial or probation officer. Eligibility is generally determined during the early stages of the justice process, often before or after entering a plea, or at the point of probation revocation.

Treatment and Support

Participants typically are youth at higher risk of reoffending or with significant substance use

or behavioral health needs. They receive a clinical assessment to identify risks and guide treatment planning, and are supported through family or caregiver involvement, regular court appearances, and access to services such as therapy, social, and educational programs, parenting classes, medication support, job preparation, mentoring, housing assistance, and relapse prevention.

Detention and Commitment

Juveniles placed in detention or commitment are placed in the Division of Youth Services (DYS) within the Department of Human Services (DHS).

Detention

Detention is the temporary, secure custody of a minor accused of a crime, usually while awaiting a court hearing or placement. After screening and assessment, most youth are placed in non-secure, community-based programs such as day reporting, electronic monitoring, or enhanced supervision, while those at higher risk may be held in a secure juvenile detention centers run by DHS. All youth in detention or community programs receive a hearing before a magistrate within 48 hours, which determines whether a youth will return home under supervision and treatment or remain in secure detention.

Colorado Juvenile Justice Systems

Commitment

Juvenile commitment is a court-ordered disposition for youth found guilty of a delinquent act, transferring their custody from parents to a state juvenile justice or corrections department. District courts commit juveniles to DYS through mandatory or non-mandatory sentences. Mandatory sentences impose legally required penalties, often with minimum time served for certain offenses or repeat offenders, removing judicial discretion. Non-mandatory sentences give judges flexibility to consider individual circumstances, rehabilitative needs, and alternatives such as probation.

Within the first 30 days of commitment, DYS completes a comprehensive assessment for each youth. A multi-disciplinary team then evaluates the youth and family's needs, determines the appropriate placement and treatment plan, and outlines possible future transition options.

Juvenile Correctional Facilities

The DYS operates 12 secure youth centers across the state for the highest-risk youth, as well as three multipurpose centers that serve as both detention and treatment facilities. It also contracts with private providers for community-based options, including staff-secure programs, residential child care centers, group homes, and licensed foster homes, which serve as both treatment and transition placements from more secure settings.

Educational Programs

Youth in detention facilities receive general and special education services through on-site, year-round programs managed by local school districts or DYS, focusing on core academics, special education, and GED preparation. Teachers are licensed through the Colorado Department of Education, ensuring credit transfer to future placements.

Transition Services

The DYS provides transition services to help youth move from secure or residential placements back to their home communities. These services, delivered by staff and contracted programs, may include help obtaining documentation, family therapy, mentoring, cognitive behavioral groups, substance abuse relapse prevention, supervision, job training and placement, independent living support, direct assistance, and educational support.

Parole

Each youth leaving DYS must complete six months of mandatory parole, with some cases eligible for up to a fifteen-month extension. The Colorado Juvenile Parole Board independently reviews cases, sets parole conditions, and may modify, suspend, or revoke parole, while DYS provides supervision through regional parole officers who tailor parole plans to each youth's risk and needs.

Colorado Juvenile Justice Systems

Youthful Offender System

The Youthful Offender System (YOS), part of the Colorado Department of Corrections, was established in 1993 for juveniles tried and convicted as adults. It typically serves youth aged 14–19 at the time of the offense (and sentenced before turning 21) who have committed class 3 or 4 violent felonies, with sentences of two to seven years. Located in Pueblo, YOS is a secure, rehabilitation focused alternative to traditional adult prison, offering educational and vocational training.