

# Report: Striving for Equity in Utah's Juvenile Justice System

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**Written by: Anna Thomas**

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**While racial and ethnic disparities in the system have always been part of the reform conversation, equitable treatment and representation of all children (regardless of race and/or ethnicity) was not an explicit goal. So, four years later, how has our juvenile justice system improved with regard to equity?**

**The more pointed question is, has our system improved *at all* when it comes to the equitable treatment of children of color?**

**Voices for Utah Children is proud to announce the release of our new report, [“Striving for Equity in Utah’s Juvenile Justice System,”](#) an update to a [collaborative 2017 report](#) on racial and ethnic disparities in Utah’s juvenile justice system.**

Co-authored by policy analysts Ciriac Alvarez Valle and Anna Thomas, “Striving for Equity” shows that while enormous strides have been made in the past four years toward improving Utah’s juvenile justice system, equitable treatment of youth of color remains elusive. While the system overall has shrunk in size - youth arrests, referrals and petitions to court and admissions to locked to detention are all on the decline - youth who identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) comprise a growing portion of the court-involved population.

**In our writing of this report, we were unsurprised to learn the following: when efforts to achieve equity are not intentional and direct, equitable outcomes remain elusive.**

While Utah’s juvenile justice system has decreased in size, overall, disparities between different racial/ethnic groups mostly have gotten worse. For example:

- In 2015, white children made up about 75% of the school-aged youth population in Utah, and only 58% of petitions to juvenile court. In 2019, white children were 74.2% of the general population, and only 51.8% of petitions to juvenile court.
- In 2015, Black children made up slightly more than 1% of the school-aged youth population in Utah - but 5% of all petitions to juvenile court. In 2019, Black children were still close to just 1% of the general population...but made

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up 6.9% of all petitions to juvenile court.

- In 2019, children of color made up *the majority of youth in both locked detention and secure care facilities* in Utah. In four years, non-white children grew from 43% of locked detention admissions to nearly 51%, and from a disappointing 54% of the secure care population to a staggering 61.2%.

The report - which uses 2019 data from the Administrative Office of the Courts, the Division of Juvenile Justice Services, the Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice and the Bureau of Crime Statistics - also explore state progress on recommendations made in the 2017 report, and makes new recommendations for policymakers and community members to pursue in 2020.

Utah deserves plenty of accolades for juvenile justice system improvements so far; making equity a more explicit goal in the state's system reform efforts could position Utah's juvenile justice system as the best in the nation.

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