



# Research Brief

## Milwaukee County Juvenile Recidivism – Metrics and Trends

One year ago, the Public Policy Forum released a report examining the substantial decline in Milwaukee County’s adult and juvenile detention populations.<sup>1</sup> Entitled “*Milwaukee County Detainee Populations at Historic Lows: Why is it happening and what does it mean,*” the report not only documented the scope of the decline and its fiscal impacts, but also urged county law enforcement officials and policymakers to consider whether justice system policies that may have contributed to the decline were effective and should be sustained.

As a follow-up to last year’s publication, this report provides a closer examination of the juvenile justice system in Milwaukee County and how well it has performed in reducing recidivism for juvenile offenders. The report was funded by Milwaukee County’s Delinquency and Court Services Division (DCSD), which asked the Forum to lend an outside perspective by reviewing its current approach to measuring juvenile recidivism and findings, and invited recommendations for improving its data collection and evaluation processes and capacity.

Recidivism is defined in many different ways by justice system officials, but is broadly viewed as the commitment of a subsequent offense by an offender already known to have committed a previous offense. Recidivism rates typically refer to the percentage of offenders who recommit a new offense within a distinct period of time after interaction with the justice system.

While recidivism metrics have value when analyzed over a period of years and can serve as a measure of progress among a specific population of offenders, they tell us little about the relative success of a program without a benchmark comparison. Unfortunately, because there are substantial variations in how juvenile justice systems define the parameters of their recidivism metrics from state to state or county to county, a concrete national benchmark does not exist.

This report explores the way in which DCSD measures recidivism and finds that overall recidivism among Milwaukee County’s juvenile offenders has not changed over the past several years. Progress has been made among the multiple repeat offenders, however, with a reduction in the percentage of juvenile offenders who commit more than one repeat offense after their initial referral. These findings are consistent with periodic, internal reports made by DCSD.

In addition, we offer an alternative recidivism measure that may help DCSD better monitor the impacts of its programmatic and operational changes over the short term. Given the resources dedicated by the many players in the juvenile justice system process – police officers, district attorneys, public defenders, judges, detention personnel and probation workers – a better understanding of how delinquent youth in Milwaukee County are progressing following their interaction with the system is essential. Such an understanding not only will help identify the most productive areas deserving further investment, but also those areas in need of improvement, and those areas in which justice system leaders might get the “best bang for the buck” in their efforts to enhance public safety in a cost-effective manner.

<sup>1</sup> The report can be accessed at <http://www.publicpolicyforum.org/pdfs/MilwaukeeCountyDetentionBrief.pdf>.

## Overview of Milwaukee County’s Juvenile Justice System

The juvenile justice system consists of many players, from the police department to the district attorney, children’s court, state corrections, and DCSD. Each plays a role in the way a particular juvenile will experience the justice system.

Incidents of youth delinquency are first reported to or identified by police departments across Milwaukee County and are then referred to DCSD for appropriate follow-up. (The majority of delinquent referrals come from the Milwaukee Police Department, which accounts for roughly 60% of new referrals in Milwaukee County annually.) At intake, as depicted in **Figure 1**, DCSD staff evaluate each case, develop options, and make a recommendation to the district attorney. Depending on the details, DCSD may recommend closing the case, offering deferred prosecution, or having the case be petitioned for processing through the Milwaukee County children’s court.

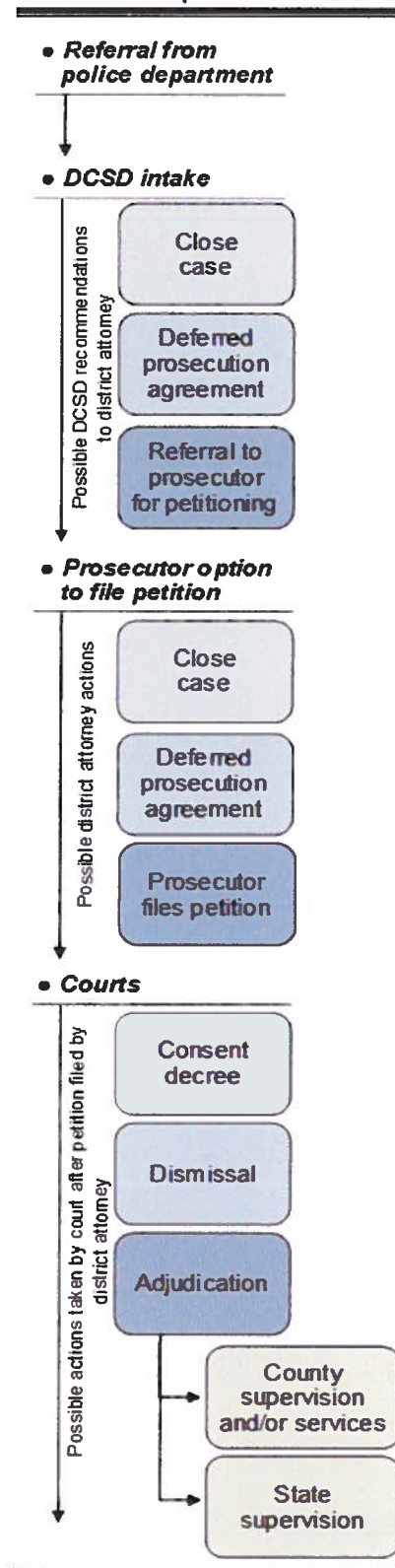
Regardless of DCSD’s recommendation, the district attorney’s office makes the final call on how a case should move forward. Using information gathered by DCSD – as well as further evaluation of case specifics and available evidence – the district attorney determines whether the case should be closed, deferred, or petitioned and brought in front of a judge.

Under a deferred prosecution agreement, youth avoid charges and further involvement in the juvenile court system by committing to stay out of trouble and to participate in certain rehabilitative services or programs for nine to 12 months. Most youth given this option are first-time offenders who take part in Milwaukee County’s First Time Juvenile Offender Program, a program that typically entails education, academic support, alcohol/substance abuse counseling, anger management, community service, mentoring and regular monitoring for roughly six months. This program served 275 youth in 2010 with an average entry age of 14.3 years.

Once a case has been petitioned to the court, it may be dismissed, adjudicated, or the youth may agree to a consent decree and partake in services.<sup>2</sup> Youth entering into consent decrees may have their charges dropped if they successfully complete the agreed-upon requirements with no further action by the courts. If a youth fails to comply with agreed-upon parameters, on the other hand, then agreements can be revoked at any time.

If a case is adjudicated, a finding of delinquency places the youth under either county probation (DCSD) or state supervision (Department of Corrections (DOC)).

**Figure 1: Adjudication process**



<sup>2</sup>Some dismissed cases may be returned to DCSD and given a diversion alternative.

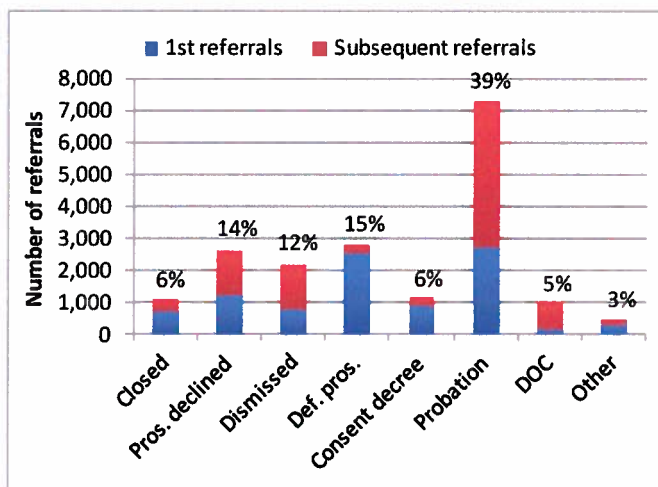
DCSD serves youth who are under its supervision both pending and following adjudication. The division runs a 120-bed custodial facility, which

### PROCESS OUTCOMES AND INITIAL DISPOSITIONS

**Figure 2** provides insight into the initial disposition of referrals to Milwaukee County's juvenile justice system. Dispositional outcomes depend on an array of factors, ranging from the severity of offense, to the youth's delinquency history, to processing and dispositional decisions made by key officials.

**Figure 2** shows the referral history of every youth in the system who reached 17 years between 2006 and 2010 (this is the age at which an individual is considered an adult and moves beyond the purview of the juvenile court system). Approximately 26% of all referrals are declined for petitioning by the district attorney or dismissed by a court. Probation is the most frequent disposition – 39% of all first and subsequent referrals within the sample – and deferred prosecution is second at 15%. (The data also show this option rarely is used for repeat offenders.) Dispositions involving consent decrees or placement at a juvenile correctional institution are the least frequent, with the former seldom offered to re-offenders and the latter rarely given to first-time offenders.

**Figure 2: Initial dispositional breakdown of all referrals\***



\*Dispositions may change during the course of an order (i.e. shift from an initial probation placement to DOC) for various reasons unassociated with a new offense, such as non-compliance with the original conditions of supervision.

Source: Drawn from data provided by Milwaukee County Delinquency and Court Services Division

Note: Depending on the number of referrals incurred by a youth, one distinct youth may appear within multiple categories.

Figure represents all first referrals of aged-out cohort (N=9,106 referrals) and subsequent referrals (N=9,366 re-referrals).

serves largely as a temporary holding place for a juvenile as his or her case proceeds through court. Conversely, once adjudicated delinquent, probationers assigned to DCSD are largely served in the community, within an array of community programs that serve various rehabilitative needs. DCSD's detention center serves youth who have already been adjudicated only as a temporary sanction for non-compliance within one of the community programs.

**Table 1** (on the following page) provides a list of DCSD programs offered to both pre-adjudicated and post-adjudicated youth, as well as data on 2010 service levels. While programs vary in intensity, several provide a substantial level of monitoring and support. The most utilized and intensive program used by DCSD is the Wraparound Milwaukee Program (administered by Milwaukee County's Behavioral Health Division), which serves about one-third of youth under DCSD supervision for an average of roughly 16 months. Wraparound provides a comprehensive set of more than 70 service options to help youth with serious behavioral and mental health issues steer clear of further involvement in criminal behavior.

For those youth placed under state supervision (the most restrictive option), the county contracts with DOC, which in turn charges a daily rate for each youth. DOC typically places delinquent youth committed for serious offenses in one of its juvenile correctional institutions.<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of those offenders have a felony offense and typically remain under state custody for a one-year order, which may be extended. Such youth undergo a 21-day assessment at the outset of their sentence, engage in educational services, and also may receive substance abuse, mental health, cognitive intervention and/or sex offender treatment. Dispositions typically include a period of community supervision beyond time spent in an institutional facility for after-care to help the offender successfully transition back into the community.

<sup>3</sup>Delinquent youth who are committed to state correctional institutions generally are those who, according to the DOC Juvenile Corrections website, have "committed an offense punishable by a sentence of 6 months or longer if committed by an adult and found by the court to present a substantial risk to the community requiring placement in a secure facility."



**Table 1: List of DCSD programs and 2010 service levels\***

	Population served in 2010	Average service duration	Average entry age
<b>Diversion and Pre-Adjudication</b>			
First Time Juvenile Offender Program	275	195 days	14.3
In-Home Monitoring Program	776	47 days	15.3
Shelter Care Program	738	32 days	15.4
<b>Post-Adjudication</b>			
Sex Offender Treatment Program	47	223 days	15.1
Alternative School Program (Day Treatment)	169	224 days	16.1
Targeted Monitoring Program (Firearm Offenders)	108	344 days	16.0
Targeted Monitoring Program (Serious Chronic Offenders)	104	276 days	16.0
A True Aftercare Program	109	511 days	15.4
Group Home and Foster Care	99	139 days	16.1
Wraparound Milwaukee Program	721	478 days	15.1
FOCUS Program	76	345 days	16.0
Probation Services Network (major services listed below):			
Anger Management	67	13 hours	
Academic Support/Tutoring	50	25 hours	
AODA Assessment	240	2.5 hours	
AODA Individual Counseling	130	8 hours	
AODA Group Counseling	30	17.2 hours	
Clinical Counseling	139	10.5 hours	
Mentoring	43	8.7 hours	
County Detention	2,817	10 days	
State Juvenile Correctional Institutions	153	1 year	

\* These figures display duplicated headcounts (i.e. youth served by the program more than once are counted multiple times). For the most part, however, youth go through programs once and are only counted as such.

Source: Milwaukee County's Delinquency and Court Services Division

From a financial perspective, the cost of services cited in **Table 1** can vary depending on whether the placement is in the community and the intensity of services provided. For example, the First Time Juvenile Offender Program (a less intensive program) averages an annual county contribution of \$2,000 per youth served, with Targeted Monitoring at \$6,000, and Wraparound (the most intensive program) at \$12,000. One year of state supervision at one of the juvenile correctional institutions, meanwhile, costs the county more than \$100,000.

## Milwaukee County Juvenile Recidivism

As mentioned previously, recidivism is a common measurement in justice system evaluations but can take on multiple definitions. Generally, recidivism refers to the occurrence of an offense by an individual already known to have committed a previous offense. There are many ways to define a recidivistic event, however, with the most common being re-arrest (re-referral), subsequent petition to court, re-adjudication, or re-incarceration.

By defining a recidivistic event using “front-end” occurrences, such as arrest or referral, officials can track the history of all youth who come into contact with the system, including those not found to have committed a delinquent act or those who are not prosecuted because of insufficient evidence. “Back-end” events, such as re-adjudication or re-incarceration, are preferred by some experts, however, as these are more likely indicators of guilt. Also, the amount of time allowed to elapse after the initial offense under particular recidivism definitions can differ, from as short as a few months to as long as a lifetime.

Even within Milwaukee County, there is not a

consensus definition, with various programs using different recidivism metrics. Additional consideration is merited to determine the recidivism definition that would be most useful to DCSD in assessing and demonstrating system performance.

### *Program-specific evaluations*

DCSD has used several program-specific evaluations performed by itself or others to monitor progress in reducing recidivism. These evaluations often are conducted as a reporting requirement for various funding sources, though they also have been conducted as a means of internal evaluation and have been used occasionally to inform key stakeholders about program success.

We find that these evaluations vary in the approach in which recidivism is measured, and that there are important differences in the comparison groups used to evaluate the relative success of particular programs in reducing recidivism. For example, in some cases, recidivism is measured as re-offense *while enrolled* in a program, whereas other evaluations use re-offense

after discharge from a program. Definitions of recidivistic events also vary, with recidivism meaning either re-referral or re-commitment and often, but not always, limited to juvenile events (prior to age 17). Time allowed for follow-up observation also fluctuates, causing further ambiguity in interpreting recidivism rates.

It is also important to note that comparability of recidivism rates between various programs will naturally suffer because of differences in the types of youth for which each program is geared and the levels of monitoring they receive. For example, it would stand to reason that programs serving low-risk offenders may have lower recidivism rates than those serving high-risk offenders, and that heavily monitored youth may have less opportunity to recidivate. Consequently, a lower rate of recidivism for one program when compared to another may not mean that program is more effective. Also, because many youth shift from one placement to another during their tenure in the juvenile justice system, it is difficult to draw conclusions about one program's success without acknowledging the impacts of others.

In order to address these problems and to ensure that DCSD has appropriate metrics with which to gauge its performance and convey its success to policymakers, the division may wish to consider investing in a more comprehensive, collective database. An enhanced data collection system could sort through dispositional or service differences between youth that exist prior to entering a program, differences in the services provided within a program (youth in Wraparound, for example, can receive vastly different services), and variations in dispositions/services following program completion. Currently, DCSD's central database does not include comprehensive information regarding which major services are provided to each youth, with such details only available in individual case files or separate databases that are often developed for case-processing and not necessarily for the purpose of program evaluation.

DCSD has attempted to consolidate data depositories in the past, but those efforts have been constrained by technological and financial resource limitations.

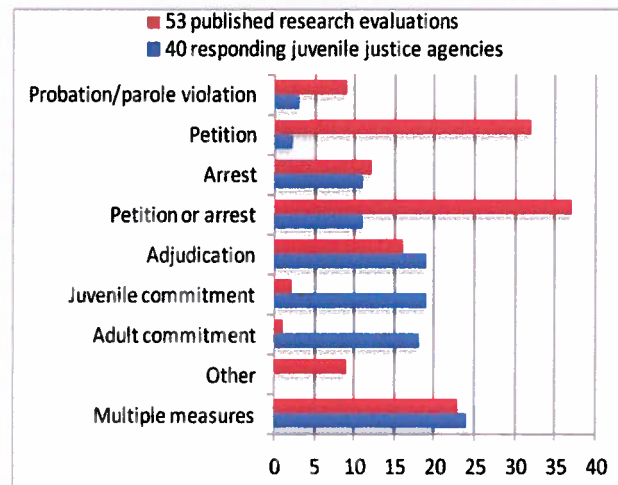
Recently, however, several large data-sharing efforts have been initiated within Milwaukee County's justice system that may prove helpful to DCSD in improving its recidivism analyses. The county's Community Justice Council, for example, has created a new strategic initiative that has begun to pull justice system players together in order to establish a

### JUVENILE RECIDIVISM NATIONALLY

While there is no official juvenile recidivism rate reported for the nation, the national Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, in partnership with the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA), has attempted to develop a uniform recidivism measure. This workgroup determined that, if consistently and uniformly applied, a standard recidivism measure could allow for unambiguous outcome comparisons across programs, systems and states.

The workgroup tallied various definitions used to determine a "recidivistic" event through a survey of state and metropolitan area juvenile correctional agencies, along with a review of several published program evaluations. **Figure 3** displays the resulting count within the various definitions used.

**Figure 3: Methods of defining recidivism**



Source: CJCA Yearbook 2009

Most agencies and published evaluations utilize more than one measure of recidivism. Juvenile correctional agencies most often define recidivism by occurrence of a subsequent adjudication and/or juvenile commitment (48% of the 40 respondents), while 28% use re-arrest. Published program evaluations, on the other hand, more commonly use re-petition or re-arrest (70%). The elapsed time under study also differs, with juvenile correctional agencies averaging a follow-up period of 2.2 years and 45% following a juvenile's experience into the adult system. Published program evaluations include a follow-up period of 2.6 years.

commonly agreed-upon recidivism measure. Efforts include synthesizing data from all areas to best assess overall system performance.

A more nascent initiative, the Integrated Data Evaluation and Action System (IDEAS) for Children initiative, shows significant promise as well. Individuals from multiple educational, social service and justice agencies in Milwaukee County are considering the benefits and barriers involved with merging their participant data into one depository. The goal of the IDEAS initiative is to help agencies better evaluate programs and, in turn, more effectively allocate resources to those programs that work. Additionally, within Wraparound’s recidivism study, there is mention that “Wraparound Milwaukee is working toward institutionalizing a sustainable model for recidivism data collection that makes use of technology, follows consistent guidelines, maintains clear definitions and methodology, and most importantly establishes an across-agency communication system for data collection.”<sup>4</sup>

***DCSD’s broader recidivism measures***

In order to describe the overall success rates of youth moving through the juvenile justice system, DCSD looks to recidivism trends seen within cohorts of youth that recently have “aged out” of the system by turning 17 years of age. The benefit of using aged-out data is that it offers a look back at how youth fared during their entire time under the purview of the juvenile justice system. As will be explained, however, certain limitations exist in defining recidivism under this approach. In this section, we examine one sample of youth to gain a broader

perspective on the volume and characteristics of youth served by the county’s juvenile justice system, and then explore the use of these data in evaluating recidivism.

Sample definition and offender characteristics

As the Forum discussed in its June 2011 report on Milwaukee County’s detention population, adult and juvenile crime rates have fallen over the last several years, both in Milwaukee and nationally. Of most significance to the county’s juvenile justice system, the number of delinquent youth referred to the system annually has declined by 36% over the last several years, dropping from 2,654 in 2006 to 1,694 in 2010.<sup>5</sup> As seen in **Table 2**, the number of youth that age out of the juvenile system each year shows a smaller but similarly declining trend, which is a residual effect of earlier years of diminishing referrals. Within the 2006-2010 timeframe, a total of 9,106 delinquent youth turned 17 years of age, and thus no longer fell under the purview of the juvenile system.

As noted above, DCSD uses the sample of youth who age out of the system annually as the basis for its internal analyses of recidivism. Consequently, the five annual cohorts of youth that aged out between 2006 and 2010, as shown in the top row of **Table 2**, serve as our sample for this analysis. These 9,106 youth account for 18,472 referrals collectively, or roughly two referrals per youth. The full sample is approximately 77% male and 80% minority. **Figure 4** (on the following page) shows the year of first delinquent referral for each of the five cohorts. The chart indicates that most youth enter the system in the three to four years prior to turning 17 years of age.

**Table 2: Sample of youth aging out of the juvenile justice system, 2006-2010, as compared to new referrals**

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Total	Change
Youth aging out of juvenile system	2,005	1,972	1,867	1,745	1,517	9,106	-24%
Referrals annually	3,544	3,382	3,121	2,491	2,171	14,709	-39%
Distinct youth referred annually	2,654	2,615	2,401	1,880	1,694	11,224	-36%

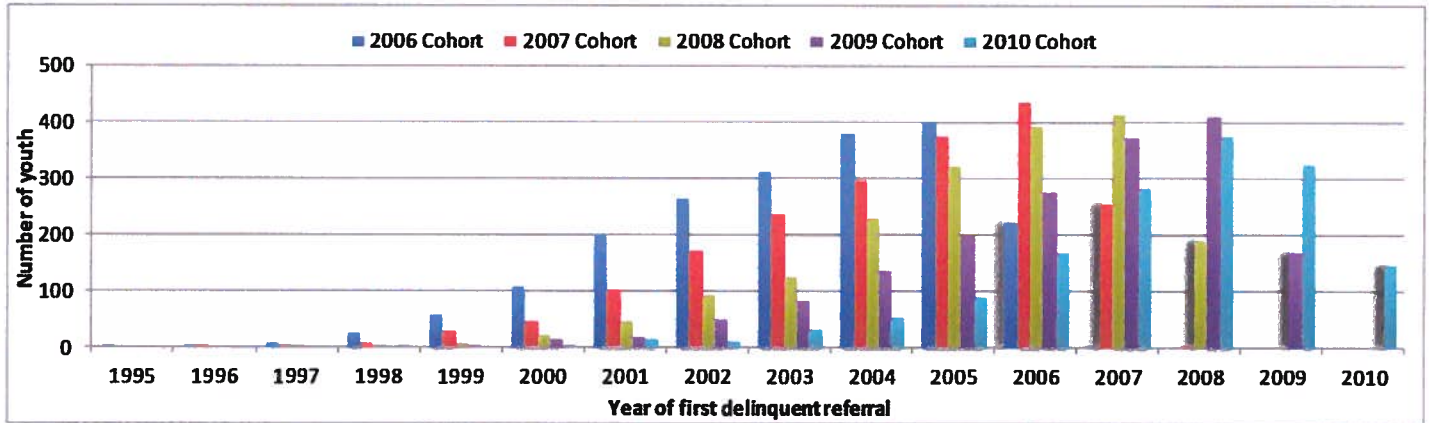
Source: Milwaukee County Delinquency and Court Services Division

<sup>4</sup>Goldfarb, P. (2011). Juvenile Justice Recidivism of Youth Enrolled in Wraparound. October 2009 – February 2011 [Ongoing study]. Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.

<sup>5</sup>This report focuses on police referrals for delinquency (criminal offenses), not other referrals for status offenses (runaways, school absences, etc.) for juveniles in need of protection or services (JIPS). JIPS make up roughly 5% of all new referrals annually.



**Figure 4: Sample by year of first referral**

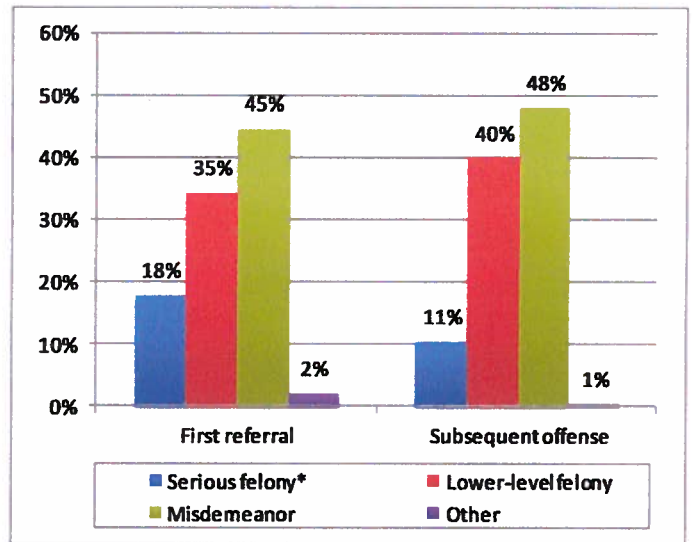


Source: Drawn from data provided by Milwaukee County Delinquency and Court Services Division  
Note: Figure represents all first referrals of aged-out cohort (N=9,106 referrals).

The median age of first referral for the entire sample is 14.7 years, which means that the median time spent under the auspices of the juvenile justice system following first referral is approximately 2.3 years.

Figures 5 and 6 provide information about the severity of offenses among our sample at the point of police referral.<sup>6</sup> Felonies make up 52% of all referrals, and comprise a similar percentage of both first and subsequent offenses. As dispositions become more restrictive, felonies have greater representation, making up 38% of deferred prosecution agreements, 51% of consent decrees, 61% of probation referrals, and 76% of all referrals that result in state supervision by the DOC. Among our sample, youth who commit felonies are much more likely to be adjudicated and

**Figure 5: Severity of referral offense**



\*A serious felony has a classification of A, B or C.

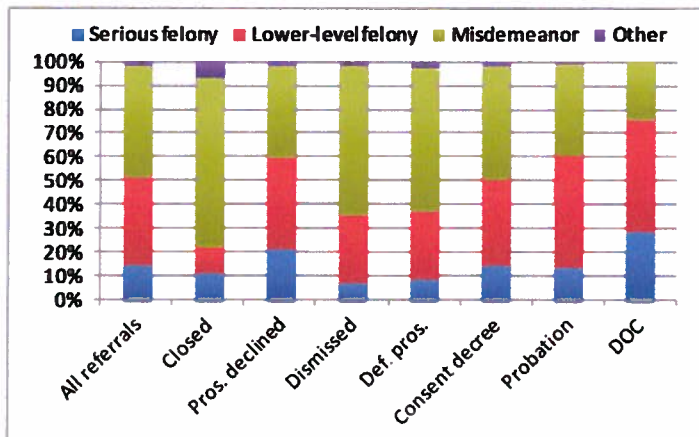
Source: Drawn from data provided by Milwaukee County Delinquency and Court Services Division

Note: Figures represent all first referrals of aged-out cohort (N=9,106 referrals) and subsequent referrals (N=9,366 re-referrals).

placed under supervision than misdemeanor offenders, and less likely to have their cases closed, dismissed or given deferred prosecution.

The typical juvenile in our sample, therefore, spent at least two years under the purview of the juvenile justice system following his or her first referral and was originally referred for an offense that was about equally likely to be a felony as a misdemeanor. These characteristics should be kept in mind if the recidivism rates calculated under either method discussed below are compared with rates representing subgroups of youth or specific justice or treatment programs.

**Figure 6: Severity of referral offense by disposition**



Source: Drawn from data provided by Milwaukee County Delinquency and Court Services Division

Note: Figures represent all first referrals of aged-out cohort (N=9,106 referrals) and subsequent referrals (N=9,366 re-referrals).

<sup>6</sup>It is important to note that the charge seen at arrest/referral may differ from the charge given at petition and/or adjudication.

**Table 3: DCSD “look-back” measure – Frequency of re-referral for youth aging out in 2006 through 2010**

	All years	Year aging out of juvenile system				
		2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Youth with no additional delinquent referral after first referral	58.6%	58.3%	59.1%	58.2%	58.8%	58.8%
Recidivating youth (juveniles with one or more subsequent referrals)	41.4%	41.7%	40.9%	41.8%	41.2%	41.2%
Multiple repeat offenders (2 or more subsequent referrals) as a % of recidivating youth	56.5%	58.3%	57.8%	59.0%	54.8%	51.4%
Chronic offenders (4 or more subsequent referrals) % of all subsequent referrals	8.5%	9.1%	9.0%	8.1%	8.2%	7.7%
	48.0%	50.2%	50.2%	45.3%	47.7%	45.5%

Source: Drawn from data provided by Milwaukee County Delinquency and Court Services Division  
Note: Figure represents recidivism of aged-out cohort (9,106 youth with a total of 18,472 referrals).

**DCSD’s “look-back” measure of recidivism**

DCSD monitors three primary recidivism statistics in its aged-out sample: overall recidivism, changes in the percentage of multiple repeat offenders, and chronic offenders. DCSD defines recidivism as any subsequent referral to the juvenile system between first referral and the age of 17.

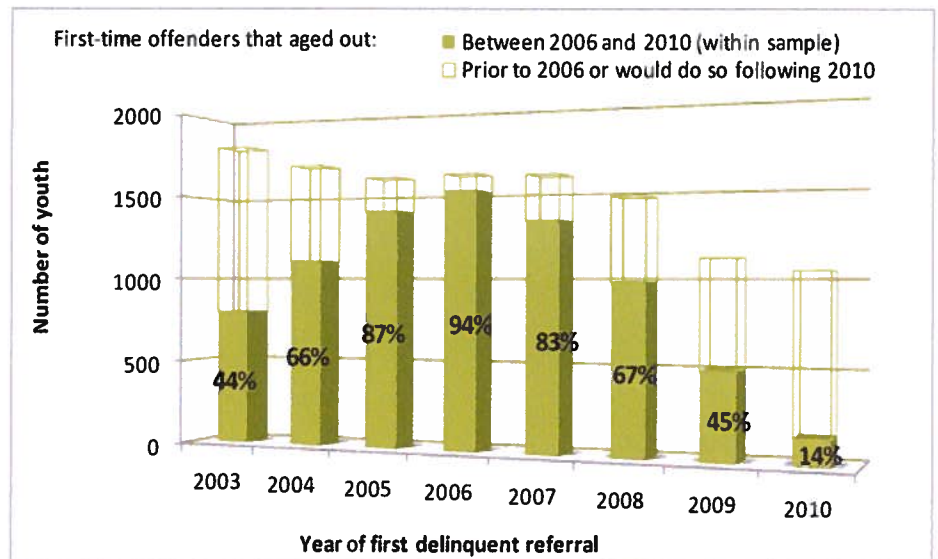
When this definition is applied to our sample of youth who aged out from 2006 through 2010, it is essentially a look back on their time in the juvenile justice system — a count of the number of youth who offended more than once during that time. **Table 3** reveals that this “look-back” recidivism rate is roughly 41% for each cohort in our sample. The proportion of offenders who re-offend more than once (multiple repeat offenders) declines as a

percentage of all recidivating youth, from 58.3% in the 2006 cohort to 51.4% in the 2010 cohort. The table also shows a relatively small percentage of chronic offenders, defined as youth with more than four subsequent referrals between first referral and age 17. These few chronic offenders can represent up to half of the subsequent referrals in their cohort. The percentage of chronic offenders diminishes in each successive cohort, from 9.1% among the cohort that aged out in 2006 to 7.7% in the 2010 cohort. The declines in both multiple repeat offenders and chronic offenders suggest growing system success in curbing the number of recidivistic events.

The use of aged-out data to look back on recidivism is limited, however, in that youth aging out of the system in a given year entered the system in different years. Thus, the elapsed time under observation varies.

Another limitation is illustrated in **Figure 7**, which shows all youth who were referred to the system between 2003 and 2010 by the year in which they were *first referred*. The data are further broken down to show the percentage of youth in each year who are not included in the aged-out sample. For example, in 2006, there were a total of 1,607 first-time offenders, of whom 1,508 (94%) aged out between 2006 and 2010. This is the most representative year, however, with prior years and later years having smaller proportions of first-time offenders represented in the sample.

**Figure 7: Total first-time offenders by referral year**



Source: Drawn from data provided by Milwaukee County DCSD  
Note: Figure represents all first referrals within each year, with a total of 11,903 first referrals represented. Of those first referrals, 65%, or 7,761 youth, are part of the aged-out cohort.



### Alternative measure

**Table 4** presents an alternative measure focused on a sub-sample of the youth who aged out of the system between 2006 and 2010. Those youth represent nearly all 14.5 to 15-year-old *first-time offenders* new to the system from 2004 to 2008. This measure uses the year of first referral to establish the cohorts rather than the year in which each youth turned 17 and aged out of the system. By doing so, it controls for the elapsed time under observation, which is limited in this case to no more than 2.5 years.

Thus, this approach does not simply count the number of youth who offended more than once during their time in the system, but instead looks forward subsequent to a youth's first offense to determine whether additional offenses occurred during the next 2 to 2.5 years. This allows for better understanding of any improvements made year after year as the system alters its programming or changes other elements of its decision-making. **Table 4** shows that of the 883 youth in this sample, who collectively incurred 1,843 referrals, the average 2- to 2.5-year recidivism rate was 46.9%, which is about six points higher than the 41% referenced in **Table 3**.<sup>7</sup> In addition, we see more consistency in

the number of multiple repeat offenders from year to year, and chronic offenders make up a smaller percentage of referred youth (4.9%) using this measure.<sup>8</sup>

As previously discussed, because it is difficult to make comparisons across juvenile justice systems and programs given variations in recidivism metrics, recidivism rates are more often tracked over time as an indicator of relative progress. Using the alternative approach shown in **Table 4**, we see that the rate of recidivism of 14.5 to 15-year-olds first referred in 2004 was 47.1%. The rate increased to a high of 49.4% for those first referred in 2005, but then declined substantially for those first referred in 2007 and 2008. This may be an indicator of progress, though two years of improvement do not signify a trend, and the recidivism percentage did increase from 2007 to 2008. It is enough of a positive change, however, that DCSD may wish to analyze whether the differences might be attributable to significant policy or programmatic changes. It is also important to note that while year-to-year fluctuations may result from system changes and improvements, outside environmental factors, such as a fluctuating economy, also may impact performance.

**Table 4: Alternative measure – Frequency of re-referral for all 14.5 to 15-year-olds first referred between 2003 and 2008**

	14.5 to 15-year-olds	Year first referred to juvenile system				
		2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Juveniles	883	189	178	199	182	135
Referrals	1,843	400	402	461	338	242
Youth with no additional delinquent referral after first referral	53.1%	52.9%	50.6%	51.8%	56.6%	54.1%
Recidivating youth (juveniles with one or more subsequent referrals)	46.9%	47.1%	49.4%	48.2%	43.4%	45.9%
Multiple repeat offenders (2 or more subsequent referrals) as a % of recidivating youth	51.0%	50.6%	50.0%	49.0%	54.4%	51.6%
Chronic offenders (4 or more subsequent referrals) % of all subsequent referrals	4.9%	4.2%	6.2%	4.5%	3.3%	5.9%
	55%	57.3%	55.8%	56.1%	46.2%	42.1%

Source: Drawn from data provided by Milwaukee County Delinquency and Court Services Division

Note: Table reflects recidivism of 14.5 to 15-year-old cohort of 883 youth with a total of 1,843 referrals.

<sup>7</sup> Recidivism rates depicted in **Table 4** illustrate the experience of one specific age group that makes up a portion of DCSD referrals. If the analysis was expanded to include all age groups, then recidivism rates could change. For example, incorporating younger youth for a follow-up period of 2 to 2.5 years may produce higher recidivism rates, as studies have found that younger youth have a greater tendency to recidivate.

<sup>8</sup> Further analysis also found recidivism differences between races. Using the alternative recidivism measure, recidivism rates for black youth (49%) are higher than both white (42%) and Hispanic youth (43%).

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## Conclusion

Recidivism is an appropriate metric with which to assess performance of juvenile justice systems with regard to the successful rehabilitation of young offenders, as reflected by efforts to develop a standardized metric to understand juvenile recidivism nationwide and across systems. In recognition of that fact, DCSD has intensified efforts to improve its measurement of recidivism in order to better analyze, improve and disseminate its performance to justice system leaders and elected officials. This report is a continuation of that effort and offers the following insights:

- Youth in Milwaukee County's juvenile justice system often shift from different types of dispositional placements and programs during their time in the system, thus limiting the ability to attribute success or failure to individual programs. Consequently, it may be helpful for DCSD to pursue a more comprehensive data collection approach in which programs, service levels and re-offense patterns are collected and tracked centrally, as opposed to by individual program.
- While DCSD spends considerable time and resources to collect and synthesize data on juvenile referrals, its current method of measuring recidivism — looking back at cohorts of youth that age out of the juvenile justice system each year — is not an effective approach for assessing the impacts of year-to-year system changes. We suggest consideration of an alternative approach observing a uniform time period after first offense. Whether using that or a different alternative, DCSD would benefit from a more refined methodology for measuring the success of its programs and services in decreasing recidivism on an annual basis.
- Using DCSD's recidivism methodology, we find no significant changes in recidivism over five cohorts of youth aging out of the juvenile justice system between 2006 and 2010. We do observe a reduction in the percentage of multiple-repeat and chronic offenders, however, which is a positive outcome.
- Under our alternative methodology for measuring recidivism, we find lower rates of recidivism for youth first referred in 2007 and 2008 than in the prior three years. Although two years of improved outcomes do not guarantee a new trend, this positive improvement begs further research into whether changes made in policy or programs during that time could be the cause.
- Under either measure of recidivism, we find a small group of chronic offenders accounts for a substantial percentage of repeat offenses. For example, we find that 6% of the 14.5 to 15-year-old first offenders in 2008 incurred 42% of all repeat offenses over the subsequent 2 to 2.5 years. One study in Orange County, California, found that a small percentage (8%) of first-time offenders were arrested repeatedly and were responsible for 55% of repeat cases. Given this finding, Milwaukee County appears to fit a trend seen nationally, and increased attention to programs and strategies aimed at chronic offenders may be warranted.
- Juvenile justice officials should carefully contemplate whether performance assessment goals would best be achieved in the future by using re-referrals as the sole basis for defining a recidivistic event, as opposed to additionally looking at the point at which there is an admission or finding of delinquency. Because there may be significant policy implications associated with this decision, it may be appropriate for DCSD to engage other justice system officials and/or the Community Justice Council in these deliberations.

The measurement of recidivism among juvenile offenders will continue to be of great importance as a means of communicating the effectiveness of various programs and dispositional options in the juvenile justice system. Milwaukee County's Delinquency and Court Services Division takes its charge to measure recidivism seriously and is committed to improvement. Continued progress in data collection methodologies and standardization across programs will be critical as a means of helping the division articulate system performance and improve the spectrum of services it provides to county youth.