

FICTION



Media Sensationalism and the False Narrative of a Youth Crime Wave in Massachusetts

The news media, often steered by law enforcement public relations offices, prosecutors, and some politicians,¹ are driving a false narrative in Massachusetts² and nationwide³ that youth crime — especially violent crime — is on the rise. Indeed, this inaccurate narrative reflects how Americans view crime in the nation as a whole; a National Online Survey organized by the Center for American Progress reported that 32% of Americans characterize crime in the country as “an immediate crisis,” and 56% characterize crime as “a major problem, but not a crisis.”⁴

In stark contrast to the police/media *narrative*, this issue brief presents publicly available *data* to show that youth crime has declined significantly over the last 15 years in Massachusetts and has continued to decline over the last three years.

We acknowledge that youth crime exists, and that individual crimes create harm that must be addressed. Yet the reality is that youth crime has trended downward as the Commonwealth has adopted more age-appropriate and rehabilitative responses to youth behavior. We present this data out of a concern that the false narrative of rising youth crime could convince policymakers to turn their backs on a strategy that is working. Recent demands for harsher policing of youth are unfounded, and we will detail why youth should be treated in the context of the ongoing adolescent mental health crisis brought on by the trauma, isolation and anxiety experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic rather than through the same false frame that gave rise to the “superpredator” theory in the 1990s. These Massachusetts-based findings are in line with a national report published by the Sentencing Project.⁵

There have been important moves toward reducing police officers’ presence in schools in Boston⁶ and Worcester,⁷ policy changes in line with what research establishes to reduce youth arrests in schools and improve school climate.⁸ However, there have been some,

including some grassroots community groups, who call to restore police officers and implement other policies to “harden” schools. These calls for action echo the since discredited “superpredator” narrative popular during the 1990s in the United States, which advocated harsh penalties and driving adolescents into the juvenile and adult courts in many states.⁹

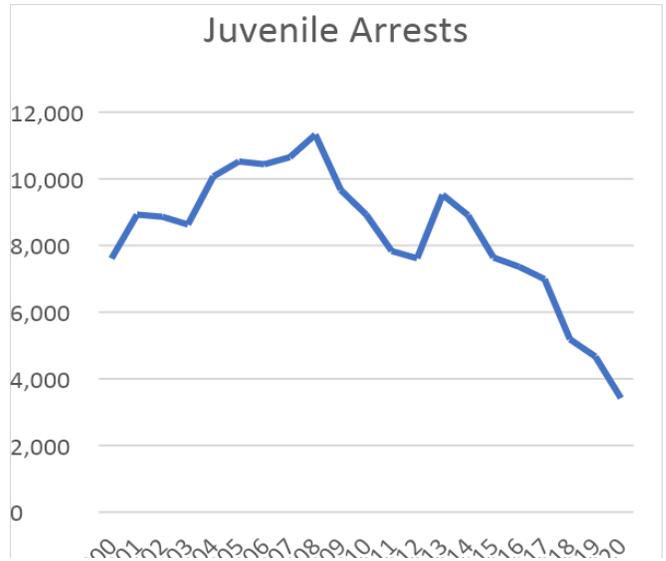


Crime and gun-carrying among Massachusetts youth has decreased since the early 2000's.

Since 2007, juvenile arrests have declined by more than 70%, and juvenile arrests as a percentage of total arrests have declined every year in Massachusetts, falling from 13.4% of all arrests in 2007 to 4.4% in 2020.¹⁰ Applications for complaint, the initial court filing for juvenile cases, have also fallen significantly, as has handgun carrying rates among adolescents.¹¹

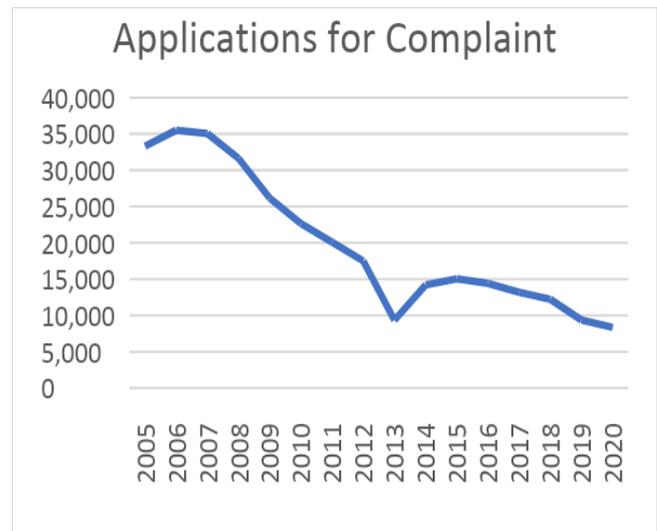
Data Point 1: Juvenile arrests in MA have fallen (2000-2020)¹²

Juvenile custodial arrests in Massachusetts peaked in 2008 at 11,326; in 2020, there were 3,420 juvenile arrests, a 70% decrease. Massachusetts raised the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to include 17-year-olds in 2012. There was a small uptick in juvenile arrests during 2013, as it was the first year during which the data include 17-year-olds. However, the downward trend continued during the following years, and reached a rate lower than 2012 by 2016. Preliminary data from 2021 reveals the continuation of the decrease in arrests for juveniles, with a 15% decrease between 2020 and 2021.



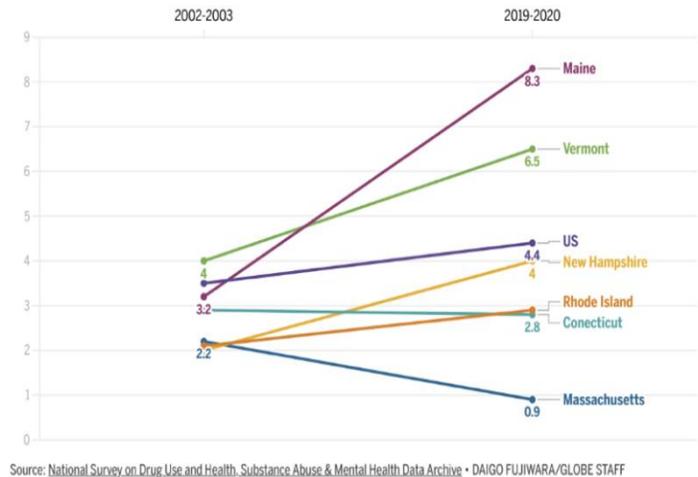
Data Point 2: Applications for complaint among juveniles in MA have fallen (2005-2020)¹³

Applications for complaint,¹⁴ the initial step in the formal juvenile court process in Massachusetts, peaked in 2006. Between 2004 and 2019, applications for complaint in the juvenile court dropped from 35,373 to 8,368 (77% decrease). The trial court changed the method of counting complaints in 2012, which may have contributed somewhat to the steeper decline between 2012 and 2013.



Data point 3: Fewer adolescents report carrying handguns in Massachusetts (2003-2020)¹⁵

Nearly 60% fewer adolescents in Massachusetts reported carrying handguns in 2020 than in 2002, despite increases in most other New England states and the overall United States' average. This self-report data is completely decoupled from the formal justice system and shows that risky behavior among youth has declined significantly.

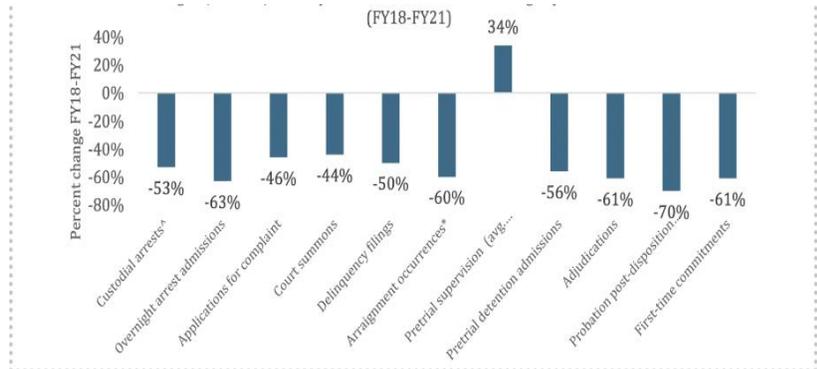


Crime among Massachusetts youth has continued to decline from 2018-2021

The decrease in crime among youth in Massachusetts has continued in the COVID-19 era. Between fiscal year 2018 (FY18) and fiscal year 2021 (FY21), there were decreases in the use of nearly every process point in the juvenile legal system, and this trend has persisted between fiscal year 2020 (FY20) and FY21.¹⁶

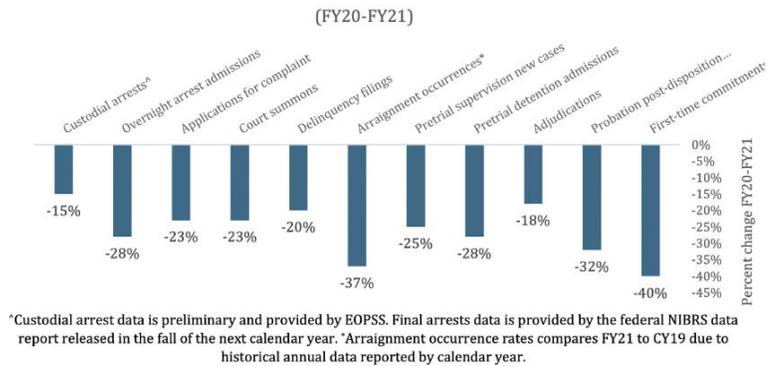
Data point 4: Percent change of all process points in the juvenile legal system, FY18-FY21¹⁷

Nearly all process points in the Massachusetts juvenile legal system decreased in use between FY18 and FY21.



Data point 5: Percent change of all process points in the juvenile legal system, FY20-FY21¹⁸

Every process point in the Massachusetts juvenile legal system decreased in use between FY20 and FY21.



Data point 6: MA juvenile arrests for violent crimes, 2019—2021¹⁹

Arrests among juveniles in Massachusetts decreased for nearly every violent offense between 2019 and 2021. Between 2019 and 2021, arrests decreased among juveniles in Massachusetts for nearly every violent offense.²⁰ The sharp decrease of arrests from 2019-2020 (and subsequent increase from 2020-2021) can likely be attributed to lockdowns and quarantines instituted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it should be acknowledged that the future impact of the pandemic is yet to be seen.²¹ However, as pre-COVID life began to return in 2021, arrests for violent crimes remained lower than such rates were in 2019.

	2019	2020	2021
Murder and Nonnegligent Manslaughter	1	1	3
Negligent Manslaughter	1	0	0
Kidnapping/Abduction	8	1	3
Rape	16	13	12
Sodomy	8	1	5
Sexual Assault With An Object	0	1	1
Fondling	23	19	7
Incest	3	0	2
Statutory Rape	18	18	14
Aggravated Assault	399	339	379
Simple Assault	1096	733	1001
Intimidation	157	79	124
Robbery	90	103	63
Motor Vehicle Theft	90	80	77
Totals	1910	1388	1701

We should recognize and respond to the youth mental-health crisis through community-based programs and services, not criminalization

While youth crime has decreased, a youth mental health crisis has emerged nationwide. The US Surgeon General recognized the crisis in an advisory, stating that “mental health challenges in children, adolescents, and young adults are real and widespread.”²² In Massachusetts, suicide is the second leading cause of death among people aged 10-24,²³ and a 2020 study found that Massachusetts youth “lack adequate access to school-based behavioral health staff.”²⁴ At the same time, teenagers nationwide had a “17.3% increase

in the use of anxiety medications from in the first two years of the pandemic, compared with a 9.3% increase between 2017 and 2019.”²⁵

Research has established that involvement in the juvenile legal system is not the answer to this problem. Recent research demonstrates that formally processing adolescents through the juvenile justice system after their first arrest for a mild-to-moderate crime is linked with an increased risk of reoffending.²⁶ Additionally, most youth will outgrow risky behavior without any legal system intervention.²⁷ Providing young people with adequate resources for assessment, support and services to address their underlying mental health, social, emotional and behavioral needs and navigate the challenges of this stage of development get to the true root of the issue, Driving them into the court system doesn't. Addressing the underlying causes of youth behavior at their root benefits both young people and communities, as it aids positive and healthy development of youth and reduces recidivism making communities safer.

Effective diversion programs can produce less crime and better outcomes for less money.²⁸ Research has found that youth who have participated in diversion programs are less likely to reoffend than youth who are formally processed through the juvenile court. One meta-analysis of 45 studies showed that diversion was more effective in reducing recidivism than traditional court processing.²⁹ Diversion programs lead youth to services, treatment, and opportunities for pro-social connections and activities in their communities, and the benefits for individuals and communities are significant. Researchers conducting cost-benefit analyses of six leading diversion program models found that every \$1 spent on diversion produced benefits of \$10.60 - \$25.60 for the community.³⁰

A “Positive Youth Development” approach is the most effective way to achieve better outcomes for young people and increased public safety

Positive youth development is “an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people’s strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths.”³¹ A positive youth development approach to youth justice is rooted in the effectiveness of focusing on youth’s strengths and assets to build resiliency rather than focusing exclusively on their weaknesses³². By directing resources to enhance those factors

– which include family support, increased school and community engagement, caring adults, positive peer groups and interventions that build self-esteem and future aspiration – would achieve better outcomes than simply relying on the legal system.

The Pathways to Desistance is a landmark study in the importance of the positive youth development framework, examining the factors driving young people engaged in serious offending to either desist from or persist in further offending. This longitudinal study revealed that approaches rooted in youth development are more successful at bringing about positive outcomes for young people. The study found that interventions that aid young people in meeting critical psychological, social and cognitive developmental milestones are directly tied to young people desisting from offending behavior, and that “participating adolescents moved from more frequent and varied crimes to committing crimes less often and of a less serious nature.”³³ Young people who stopped their anti-social behavior had significantly increased their psychosocial maturity than those who persisted in offending into their full adulthood. Specifically, young people who had diminished impulse control and diminished suppression of aggression were more likely to persist in offending.³⁴ In other words, interventions that help young people meet their developmental milestones (through connections to stable adults, education, employment, physical and mental health services and connections to community) will result in young people desisting from further offending.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Massachusetts Legislature should not increase the use of the juvenile legal system based on this false narrative of rising youth crime. Instead, data showing that crime among Massachusetts youth is decreasing should be recognized, and the legislature should work toward continuing that trend by providing increased funding for mental health services while continuing to scale down the utilization of the formal juvenile legal system.

Recommendation 2: The Massachusetts Legislature should raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction: CfJJ encourages Massachusetts lawmakers to pass legislation that would raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to include 18- to 20-year-olds. Since FY2014, after Massachusetts raised the age of juvenile court jurisdiction from 17 years of age to 18, juvenile crime has declined by 64%.³⁵ We expect that raising the age further would yield similar results. Moreover, raising the age would reduce recidivism rates among 18- to 20-year-olds; in Massachusetts, young people incarcerated in the adult correctional system

experience a 55% re-conviction rate³⁶, while those who spend time in Department of Youth Services facilities are reconvicted at a rate of only 25%.³⁷ This policy would improve youth outcomes as well as public safety through greatly decreased recidivism.

Recommendation 3: Individual municipalities should not use this false narrative to increase police budgets. Instead, municipalities should increase funding for desperately needed mental health and pro-social supports for youth and increase the likelihood of attaining voluntary engagement in these services by removing the threat of prosecution. Prosecution has collateral consequences that parents and youth may attempt to avoid by exercising their due process rights, so removing the threat of prosecution should lead to higher engagement.

Recommendation 4: The media should stop pushing the narrative that crime is rising among youth based solely on certain anecdotal perspectives rather than concrete data. Journalists have the power to influence public opinion through the stories they choose to report on and the information they rely on in developing those stories. By grounding stories in data and research rather than select bits of anecdotal evidence, they can head off misleading or false impressions of incidents before they take hold in the public discourse and – at times – lead to harmful policy. It is essential that members of the media put crimes in context of the overall landscape as established by available data and be wary of how sources can manipulate messages on crime to serve their own ends. Even though creating support and opportunities for young people is the best way to prevent juvenile crime, it may be more advantageous politically, especially during an election year, to call for more policing and harsher sentences. Furthermore, the programs that help young people are in direct competition with police, courts, and prisons for public funding. Only a leader of extraordinary integrity would argue for moving resources away from their own departments. The media must be aware of this potential manipulation and provide the true and complete narrative to the public.

Tips for Reporting on Youth Crime

CfJJ spoke to Colleen Shaddox, an award winning (National Newspaper Association and National Association of Science Writers) journalist and consultant to the National Campaign to Reform State Juvenile Justice Systems.



- First, **use data**. Don't say there have been a "rash" of incidents; say there have been four in six months.
- Second, **put incidents in context**. When covering youth crime, explain the big-picture downward trend.
- Third, **go beyond only using law enforcement sources**. Talk with young people themselves or people who work with and advocate for them.
- Fourth, **when a source says "lock 'em up!" put that in context**. There is an ocean of research that shows youth incarceration makes communities less – not more – safe.
- Fifth, **if you are doing a deep dive on youth crime, look at young people's lives**. How many youths have been pushed out of school in the community you are covering? What's the youth unemployment rate there? How do the number of parks, libraries, etc. compare with nearby communities? Crime prevention is not just law enforcement.
- Sixth, **ask police leadership tough questions to expose racialized policing practices**. One recent [list of questions](#) from the Executive Director of Civil Rights Corps includes: "Do you have any reason to believe that usage of illegal drugs is higher among Black people than White people in this city? Why do you focus your narcotics operations, undercover narcotics operations, and arrests on poor people and people of color almost exclusively?"
- Finally, **write about people, programs, and policies that have kept youth out of the juvenile legal system**, and ask them why they do the work they do.

¹ Maya Lau, *Police PR machine under scrutiny for inaccurate reporting, alleged pro-cop bias*, Los Angeles Times (August 30, 2020), <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-08-30/police-public-relations>

² Examples include: Arianna MacNeill, *Guns have been found in Boston schools. Here's how Mayor Wu responded*, Boston.com (June 14, 2022), <https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2022/06/14/guns-found-boston-schools-michelle-wu/>; Ivy Scott, *Violent attacks by groups of children draw attention to challenges with handling juvenile crime*, The Boston Globe (May 5, 2022), <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/05/05/metro/violent-attacks-by-groups-children-draw-attention-challenges-with-handling-juvenile-crime/>; Drew Karedes, *String of juvenile crimes raise questions about 2018 policy change*, Boston 25 News (May 8, 2022), <https://www.boston25news.com/news/local/string-juvenile-crimes-raise-questions-about-2018-policy-change/V7IBXOUFTFFIJNWUYO2LANW5BQ/>; Erin Tierman, *Attacks by Boston youth 'terrorizing unsuspecting citizens' continue downtown; police can't make arrests because many suspects 'too young,'* Masslive.com (May 3, 2022), <https://www.masslive.com/news/2022/05/attacks-by-boston-youth-terrorizing-unsuspecting-citizens-continue-downtown-police-cant-make-arrests-because-many-suspects-too-young.html>

³ Examples include: Peter Nickeas and Priya Krishnakumar, *'It's a disturbing trend.' Cities see large increases in carjackings during pandemic*, CNN (January 23, 2022), <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/23/us/carjackings-rise-major-cities-pandemic/index.html>; Stephanie Pagonis, *Kids committing more carjackings and violent crimes amid remote schooling, court slowdowns: experts*, Fox News (April 8, 2021), <https://www.foxnews.com/us/carjackings-crimes-juveniles-remote-schooling-court-slowdowns>; Campbell Robertson, *'I Honestly Believe It's a Game': Why Carjacking Is on the Rise Among Teens*, The New York Times (March 1, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/us/car-theft-teens-pandemic.html>; Dave Collins, *Police concerned about juvenile crime spike amid pandemic*, AP News (December 11, 2020), <https://apnews.com/article/connecticut-danbury-prisons-lawsuits-coronavirus-pandemic-2a1c3a83df1bcd2dd3c4fd43bad640bd>.

⁴ *National Online Survey*, Center for American Progress (2018), <https://americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/CAP-National-Online-Survey-Topline-Results-050118.pdf>.

⁵ Richard Mendel, *Data Reveals Violence Among Youth Under 18 Has Not Spiked in the Pandemic*, The Sentencing Project (June 14, 2022), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/data-reveals-violence-among-youth-under-18-has-not-spiked-in-the-pandemic/>.

⁶ Seth Daniel, *Boston School Police Quietly Phased Out from All BPS Schools*, The Boston Sun (July 15, 2021), <https://thebostonsun.com/2021/07/15/boston-school-police-quietly-phased-out-from-all-bps-schools/>.

⁷ Olivia Lemmon, *School Resource Officers will be removed from Worcester schools by Dec. 31, replaced with liaison officers*, Spectrum News 1 (December 13, 2021), <https://spectrumnews1.com/ma/worcester/news/2021/12/13/sro-slo-worcester-public-schools>.

⁸ *Fail: School Policing in Massachusetts*, Citizens for Juvenile Justice, <https://www.cfjj.org/s/SchoolSafetyPolicyReport.pdf>

⁹ *The Superpredator Myth, 25 years later*, Equal Justice Initiative (April 7, 2014), <https://eji.org/news/superpredator-myth-20-years-later/>.

¹⁰ Massachusetts Crime Statistics, <https://masscrime.chs.state.ma.us/tops/report/all-arrestee/massachusetts/2007>. Data comes from agencies who successfully submitted NIBRS data for each given year; between 2009 and 2021, 82% of agencies successfully submitted NIBRS data.

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- ¹¹ *Data Points: Current Trends*, Citizens for Juvenile Justice (Dec. 2013), <https://www.cfjj.org/s/Data-Points-2013.pdf>; Kay Lazar, *More kids report carrying handguns, with largest rise among white, wealthy, and rural teens, new study finds*, The Boston Globe (April 26, 2022), <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/04/26/metro/more-kids-report-carrying-handguns-with-largest-rise-among-white-wealthy-rural-teens-new-study-finds/>; Naoka Carey, *Prevalence of Adolescent Handgun Carriage: 2002-2019*, American Academy of Pediatrics (April 26, 2022), <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article-abstract/149/5/e2021054472/186863/Prevalence-of-Adolescent-Handgun-Carriage-2002>
- ¹² *Massachusetts Juvenile Justice System: 2021 Annual Report*, Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board (March 2022), <https://www.mass.gov/doc/jjpad-2021-annual-report/download>; Massachusetts State Police CrimeSolv Database.
- ¹³ CfJJ *supra* note 11
- ¹⁴ Applications for complaint provides a fuller accounting of suspected juvenile offending as it captures youth who are either arrested or summonsed to court without an arrest.
- ¹⁵ Lazar *supra* note 11
- ¹⁶ JJPAD *supra* note 12
- ¹⁷ JJPAD *supra* note 12.
- ¹⁸ JJPAD *supra* note 12.
- ¹⁹ Massachusetts Crime Statistics *supra* note 10
- ²⁰ Massachusetts Crime Statistics (2022), <https://www.mass.gov/crime-statistics>.
- ²¹ Kim Godfrey Lovett, *Data Snapshot – Responding to the Pandemic: Fewer Youths in Custody*, Performance-based Standards Learning Institute (Jun. 30, 2021), <https://pbstandards.org/blog/posts/2021/june/data-snapshot-responding-to-the-pandemic-fewer-youths-in-custody/>.
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- ²³ Jessica Brown, 'This is a matter of life and death;' Factors leading to youth mental health crisis, WCVB5 (May 4, 2022), <https://www.wcvb.com/article/warning-signs-youth-mental-health-crisis-massachusetts-general-hospital/39908874>.
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- ²⁸ *Less Crime for Less Money*, Citizens for Juvenile Justice (November 2016), https://www.cfjj.org/s/Diversion_White_Paper.pdf
- ²⁹ Massachusetts Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board, *Massachusetts Youth Diversion Program, Model Program Guide*, p. 10.
- ³⁰ Richard J. Bonnie, *Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach*, National Research Council of the National Academies (2013), <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/14685/chapter/1>.

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³² Coalition for Juvenile Justice, *Positive Youth Development*, <https://www.juvjustice.org/our-work/safety-opportunity-and-success-project/issue-areas/positive-youth-development>

³³ Edward P. Mulvey, Carol A. Schubert, and Alex Piquero, *Pathways to Desistance - Final Technical Report*, Office of Justice Programs (January 2014), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/244689.pdf>.

³⁴ Laurence Steinberg (2014) *Give Adolescents the Time and Skills to Mature, and Most Offenders Will Stop*. Chicago, IL: MacArthur Foundation." <https://www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu/documents/MacArthur%20Brief%20Give%20Adolescents%20Time.pdf>

³⁵ *Can the juvenile justice system handle more cases?* Citizens for Juvenile Justice <https://www.raisetheagema.org/court-capacity>

³⁶ *Justice Reinvestment in Massachusetts: Policy Framework*, Council of State Governments Justice Center (February 21, 2017), https://csjjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/FINAL_JC_Justice-Reinvestment-in-Massachusetts_3.21.17.pdf

³⁷ *Juvenile Recidivism Report for Youth Discharged During 2016*, Department of Youth Services (December 15, 2020), available at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/dys-2020-recidivism-report/download>