

Juvenile Trends

Caseload Highlights

April 2024

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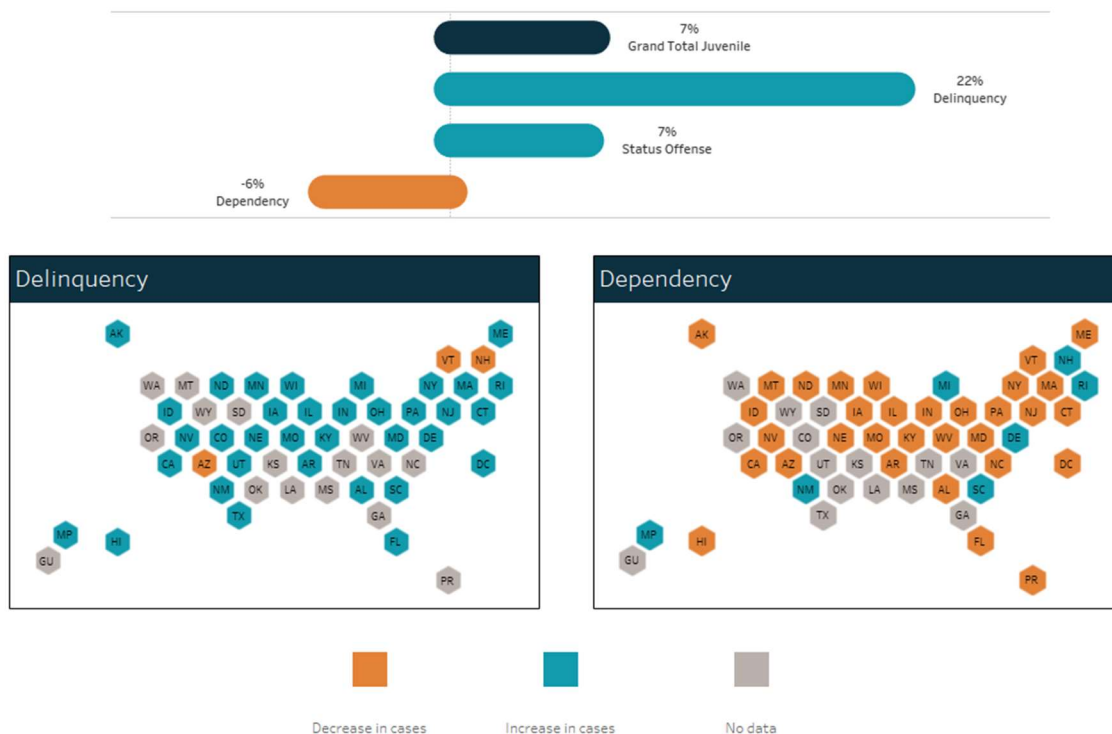


The shifting landscape of incoming juvenile cases has unveiled unexpected trends emerging in 2022. Based on data gathered from 42 states, the increase in delinquency cases and decrease in incoming dependency cases raises questions about potential drivers, including post-pandemic changes in court practices, the effect of the Families First Act, and changes in state laws. These findings highlight the complexities and nuances of the juvenile court system which serves both youth at risk due to abuse or neglect as well as youth who have been accused of committing delinquent acts.

In 2022, state courts reported 667,515 incoming juvenile cases (including both delinquency and dependency), a 7% increase from 648,901 in 2021. This overall increase can be attributed to an increase in delinquency and status offense cases. A more detailed trend is shown in Figure 1. Courts experienced a 22% increase in delinquency cases, a 7% increase in status offense cases, and a 6% decrease in dependency cases from 2021-2022. Although state-to-state variation is common, increases in delinquency cases and decreases in dependency cases were widespread.

Figure 1:

Percent change in incoming cases for select juvenile case types, 2021 - 2022

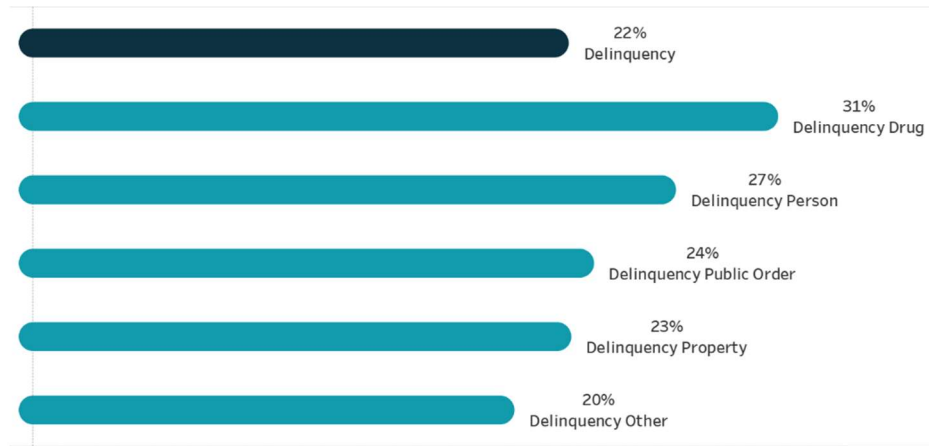


Delinquency

A further refinement of the delinquency category shows that all delinquency case types increased in 2022 (Figure 2). The largest increase was seen in drug cases, at 31%, which are defined in the [State Court Guide to Statistical Reporting](#) as “cases alleging the illegal possession, sale, use, or manufacture of drugs by a juvenile.” Person cases, defined as “cases alleging murder/manslaughter, sexual assault (including rape and sexual battery), robbery, and/or assault by a juvenile”, had the next largest increase at 27%.

Figure 2:

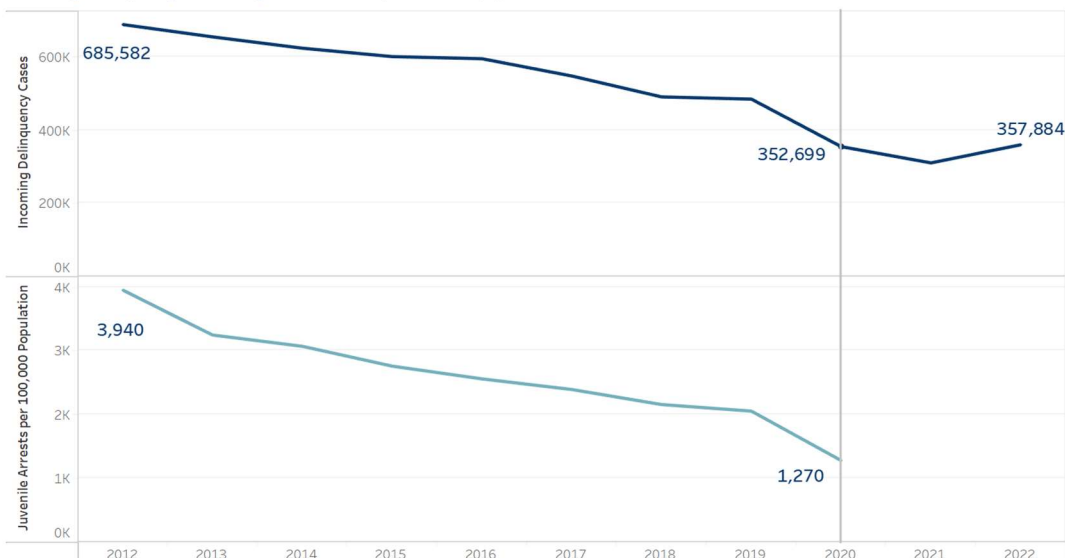
Increasing percent change in incoming delinquency case types, 2021-2022



While incoming delinquency cases increased from 2021-2022 for the first time in 10 years, incoming cases are still 25% below pre-pandemic levels. To illustrate, the total number of incoming delinquency cases in 2012 was 685,582 and in 2022 was 357,884. There was a steady, gradual decrease in delinquency cases between 2012 and 2021 (Figure 3).

Figure 3:

Decreasing trends in juvenile arrests potential impact on decreasing incoming delinquency cases
Incoming delinquency cases and juvenile arrests per 100,000 population, 2012-2022

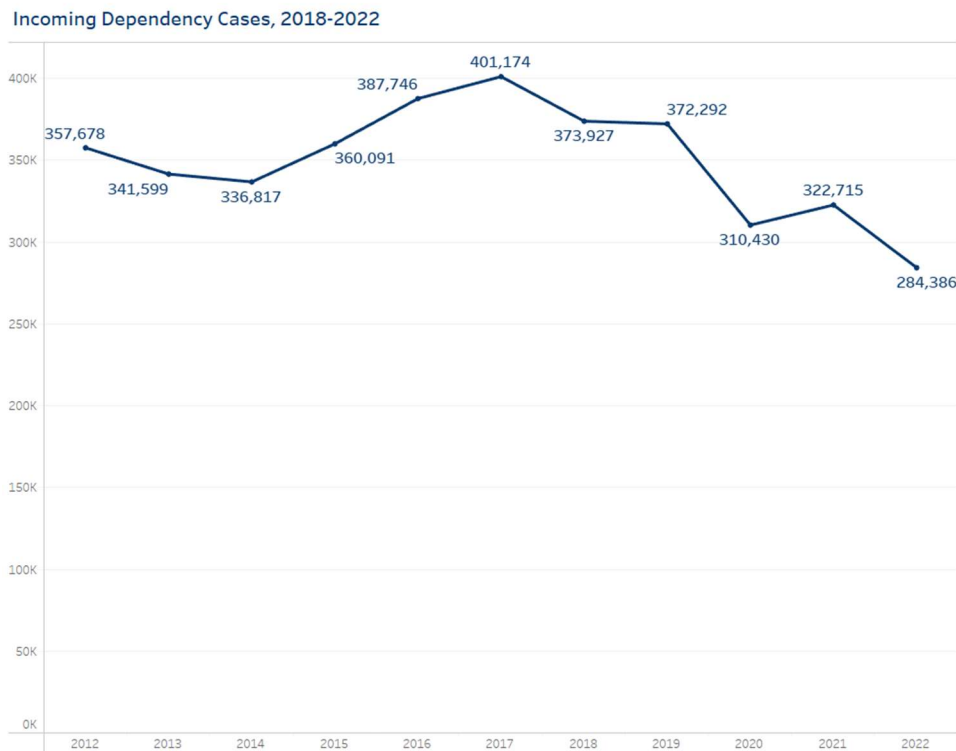


There are numerous factors contributing to the multi-year decrease in delinquency cases. Some of these factors may include increasing diversion opportunities and increasing attention to behavioral health instead of criminality. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) reports a similar multi-year decrease in juvenile arrest rates, as seen in Figure 3. While the arrest data available is only reported through 2020, decreasing trends in arrests are consistent with the decrease in incoming court cases.

Dependency

In contrast to the gradual decline of delinquency cases over the last 10 years, incoming dependency cases have fluctuated over time. After peaking in 2017 at 401,174, incoming dependency cases gradually decreased to 284,386 cases in 2022.

Figure 4:

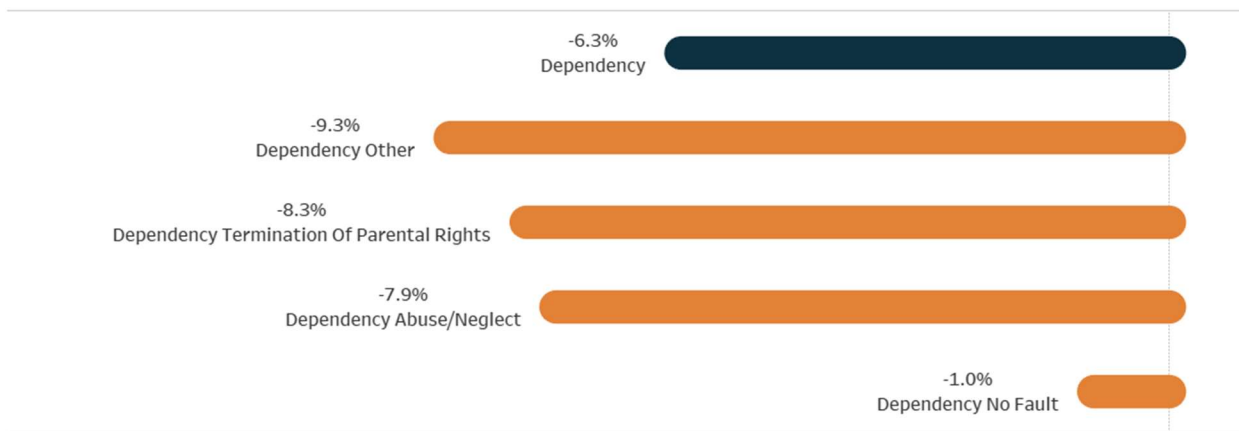


With children largely returning to in-person learning after the pandemic, increased contact with mandated reporters was a suspected explanation for part of the increase in cases from 2020 to 2021. However, this trend did not continue in 2022, as courts experienced a decrease of over 38,000 dependency filings. Implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) under the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 may have contributed to decreases in incoming dependency cases. The FFPSA aims to keep children who are candidates for foster care with their parents or relatives, making court action unnecessary in many cases.

Courts experienced a 6% decrease in incoming dependency cases from 2021 to 2022 (Figure 5). Abuse/neglect cases, a subset of dependency cases, represent the initial court filing when maltreatment of a child by a caregiver is alleged. Incoming abuse/neglect cases were down 8%. Termination of Parental Rights petitions are filed when the state requests a severing of the parent-child relationship, usually after a year or more of attempts to reunify the family following the initial abuse/neglect petition. These cases decreased by 8%. The smallest decrease was in dependency no fault cases, which are cases alleging one or more of the grounds for dependency without specifically faulting the parent(s) or guardian. These are far less common. Dependency Other cases are dependency cases for which more specific information is not reported.

Figure 5:

Decreasing percent change in incoming dependency case types, 2021-2022



These unexpected changes in court filings underscore the importance of monitoring the needs of youth as well as supporting ongoing efforts to protect vulnerable youth in our society and to enhance public safety. It is critical for policymakers and stakeholders to monitor these developments and investigate their implications for youth and their communities.

The Court Statistics Project is the only source for comparable annual state court caseload data, with court data published at www.courtstatistics.org. For more information about court data, please see our website at www.courtstatistics.org/court-statistics/interactive-caseload-data-displays/csp-stat. NCSC is available to provide training or assistance! Contact CSP Staff at csp@ncsc.org for more information.