



SOUTHERN  
COALITION  
for SOCIAL JUSTICE

# INVEST IN OUR CHILDREN INVEST IN OUR YOUTH

ENDING YOUTH CRIMINALIZATION IN NORTH CAROLINA

## REPORT SUMMARY

Throughout America's history, youth of color have been traumatized by racial violence and dehumanized by a society that often views their presence as a threat to public safety. These same young people are at constant risk of state-sanctioned violence from discriminatory law enforcement, which criminalizes age-appropriate behaviors and suppresses their freedom of movement.

Disparities for Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth exist at almost every stage of the juvenile criminal legal process in North Carolina, and the disparities are most stark for Black youth. These disparities are not due to higher rates of misbehavior, but are driven by intentional policy choices and structural factors.

**This report highlights the harms and alternatives to youth criminalization in North Carolina.** Using historical records and perspectives, we define youth criminalization as a centuries-old legal system predicated on targeting people of color of all ages and excluding children of color from protective narratives and structures. **Personal experiences and quantitative data tell a contemporary story of ongoing racial injustice, compounded by the lack of support systems for those with disabilities and those living in poverty.**

- **In 2020, Black children represented approximately 23% of the overall youth population in North Carolina, but represented 56% of all juvenile complaints.** White children represented approximately 52% of the youth population in the state, but only 28% of all juvenile complaints.

- **Black youth represented 67% of youth in North Carolina placed in short- and long-term confinement in 2020,** while white youth represented only 18% of short-term (detention center) admissions and 23% of long-term (youth development center) commitments.<sup>1</sup>

**Many youth enter the state's juvenile criminal legal system for minor offenses and age-appropriate behaviors exhibited during school hours.** In fact, school policing and school-based referrals to the North Carolina juvenile criminal legal system remain primary drivers of youth criminalization.

- National data show that Black students are the most overdisciplined demographic compared to white students, and Black girls are overdisciplined at even higher rates than Black boys compared to white youth.<sup>2</sup>
- During the school year 2019-2020, Black students in North Carolina represented

49% of all school-based complaints, despite representing only 25% of statewide student enrollment; white students represented 35% of all school-based “complaints” despite representing 46% of statewide enrollment.<sup>3</sup>

- At the district level, Black children were overrepresented in complaints in 82% of the districts (94 districts out of 115).<sup>4</sup>

**The criminalization of youth cost NC over \$170 million in 2020, paid for by an inequitable state tax system in which people with less income and wealth pay a greater share in taxes.**<sup>5</sup> Our report follows a divest/invest framework, which brings attention to the choices that resource a misguided and racist system, and **we call for a reinvestment in community-led alternatives that support and nourish youth of color and their communities.**

- Over the last six years, total state appropriations to North Carolina’s juvenile criminal legal system have steadily increased by approximately 37.5%.<sup>6</sup>
- In 2020, North Carolina spent over \$170 million disciplining, policing, and

incarcerating our state’s youth. Of the total \$174 million, our state spent almost \$50 million on court services and close to \$40 million to detain and incarcerate youth.<sup>7</sup>

**For the cost of incarcerating one youth for one year (\$155,734), North Carolina could cover one year of in-state university tuition and fees for 23 students.**<sup>8</sup>

The short- and long-term impacts of contact with the criminal punishment system are well documented and extend much beyond the fiscal cost. **By realigning public spending with community priorities and investing in youth supports, preventative resources and community-led alternatives to youth criminalization, we can prioritize and support the healthy development of our community’s young people.** Examples of existing community-led initiatives and a menu of common-sense public policies can lead us to an alternative that transforms justice at the community level, supports holistic youth wellness, and promotes positive youth development with a strength-based approach grounded in dignity and respect.

<sup>1</sup>Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau and North Carolina Department of Public Safety (2021), Juvenile Justice 2020 Annual Report.

<sup>2</sup>Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality (2020). Data Snapshot: 2017-2018, National Data on School Discipline by Race and Gender citing U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights.

<sup>3</sup>Youth Justice Project (2020). Racial Equity Report Card 2018-2019. Southern Coalition for Social Justice.

<sup>4</sup>Southern Coalition for Social Justice analysis, 2019 Racial Equity Report Card data sources.

<sup>5</sup>See Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (2018). Who pays? A distributional analysis of the tax systems in all 50 states.

<sup>6</sup>North Carolina Office of State Budget Management. (2020).

<sup>7</sup>North Carolina Department of Public Safety (2021), Juvenile Justice 2020 Annual Report.

<sup>8</sup>North Carolina Department of Public Safety (2020) and University of North Carolina. (2021) – the average cost of tuition and fees in 2021-2022 across 16 state schools is approximately \$6,552.