Latino Youth in the Juvenile Justice System

Latino youth ages 10–17 are a rapidly growing group in the United States. In 2000 they composed 15.4% of all youth ages 10–17. By 2008 they composed 19.4% of such youth, numbering 6.4 million. As the number of Latino youth grows, they are likely to increasingly face challenges in the juvenile justice system. Latino youth already have significant need:

- Arrest data on Hispanic youth are not collected nationwide. However, in California in 2008, Hispanic youth composed 52.9% of all youth arrested. The majority (55.6%) were arrested for misdemeanors; just 6.7% were arrested for violent felony offenses.¹

- Many Latino youth are unnecessarily detained before trial. Of youth detained, more than 70% are charged with nonviolent offenses and nearly 30% are charged with technical violations of probation, parole, or court orders.²

- Overall, approximately 18,000 Latino youth are held in jail or other forms of incarceration on any given day in the United States.³

- Latino youth are 40% more likely to be waived to adult court than White youth and are admitted to adult jails at 1.4 times the rate of White youth.⁴ One-fourth (24%) of incarcerated Latino youth are held in an adult prison or jail, where they face high risks of suicide and sexual abuse, significant educational disconnection, and a high likelihood of recidivism.⁵

- Latino youth face ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system. Compared to White youth charged with similar offenses, Latinos are 4% more likely to be petitioned, 16% more likely to be adjudicated delinquent, 28% more likely to be detained, and 41% more likely to receive out-of-home placement.⁶

- Some Hispanic youth face language barriers that can negatively impact the treatment they receive in the juvenile justice system. In 2008, 17% of Latino children ages 5–17 did not speak English very well, and 23% of Latinos under age 18 lived in a household where no one ages 14 or older spoke English very well.⁷

- Experts agree that Latino youth strongly benefit from culturally competent services in the juvenile justice system, and anecdotal evidence suggests that culturally competent community-based prevention and alternative to detention services benefit Latino youth.⁸

- Across the country youth are pushed from schools into the juvenile justice system, in large part as a result of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies.⁹ Latino youth had a 6.8% suspension rate in 2006—nearly seven percentage points lower than Black youth, but two percentage points higher than Whites.¹⁰


4 Neelum Arya et al., *America’s Invisible Children*, 41, 53.

5 José Saavedra, *Just the Facts*.


7 Ibid., 34–35.


9 Neelum Arya et al., *America’s Invisible Children*, 53–57, 63–69.
