STATE OF ARKANSAS
House of Representatives

Arkansas House Newsletter

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Juvenile Justice Reform

The Senate Committee on Children and Youth and the House Committee on Aging, Children & Youth, and Legislative Affairs convened on Wednesday to examine issues affecting Arkansas children and families, with much of the discussion focused on how Act 189 of 2019 is reshaping the state's juvenile justice system.

For years, Arkansas experienced high levels of youth incarceration, often without consistently aligning young people with the services they needed. Act 189 marked a significant shift. The law requires courts statewide to use a single validated risk assessment system for commitment decisions and mandates structured diversion agreements based on assessment tools. It also clarifies when a juvenile may be committed to the Division of Youth Services and strengthens coordination, data sharing, and reinvestment efforts. The reforms took full effect in July 2020.

At the heart of Act 189 is the principle that juvenile justice cannot follow a one-size-fits-all model. Courts must now rely on validated assessments to guide decisions rather than defaulting to detention. When a youth is adjudicated delinquent, court personnel complete a SAVRY violence risk assessment that examines the

youth’s history and current circumstances. The results help judges determine whether placement in DYS custody or a less restrictive community-based alternative is most appropriate.

The data presented to lawmakers show measurable changes since these reforms took hold. Since 2020, delinquency cases have declined by 55 percent, reflecting fewer young people entering the formal court system. Commitments to the Division of Youth Services are down 24 percent. At the same time, use of the Ohio Youth Assessment System, a tool designed to divert appropriate cases out of court and into services, has increased by 836 percent. These trends point to a system that is relying more heavily on evidence-based decision-making and less on incarceration as a default response.

As committee members heard on Wednesday, Act 189 has not simply adjusted procedures. It has transformed the philosophy of juvenile justice in Arkansas, reinforcing the idea that the goal is to help young people become productive, successful members of society rather than to punish them without a path forward.