

A Fair Chance for Idaho’s Youth: The Role of Strong Juvenile Defense

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When a young person enters the justice system, the goal is to keep people safe while helping that child develop appropriate behaviors and decision-making skills. Youth should take responsibility for harm, but they also need guidance and support during this critical stage of life. A strong juvenile defense system helps courts respond in ways that protect communities and improve outcomes for kids and families.

A Strong Juvenile Defense System Reduces Confinement and Improves Outcomes

Most justice-involved youth in Idaho face serious challenges before they ever reach court. Over 90 percent of youth in Idaho’s custody have a mental health or substance use concern.¹ Without strong defense, these needs are often missed, and youth may be placed in confinement without receiving effective treatment.

Juvenile defense helps courts choose responses that fit a child’s needs. Appropriate interventions and treatment are often more effective than punitive confinement alone, particularly during a child’s formative years.

Strong Defense Supports Rehabilitation and Long-Term Success

The juvenile years are a key window for rehabilitation. Strong juvenile defense helps connect youth and families to counseling, mental health care, substance use treatment, and educational services that support long-term success.¹

When the system fails to intervene effectively, the consequences can last into adulthood. A 2023 review of national research finds that youth who are incarcerated are less than half as likely to graduate from high school as comparable youth who were never incarcerated.³ Without support for education, health, and stability, youth are more likely to struggle later in life.

Effective Juvenile Defense Makes Families and Communities Safer

When youth do not receive effective support early, harm often continues. In Idaho, 56 percent of justice-involved youth are charged with a new crime within three years of release, and nearly one in four later enters adult state correctional supervision.¹

Connecting youth to appropriate services reduces repeat offenses and prevents future harm. In Canyon County, targeted improvements to defense and diversion helped reduce juvenile recidivism from 34 percent in 2022 to 28 percent in 2023.²

A strong juvenile defense system helps courts hold youth accountable in ways that work. It supports rehabilitation, strengthens families, and improves public safety across Idaho.

References

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