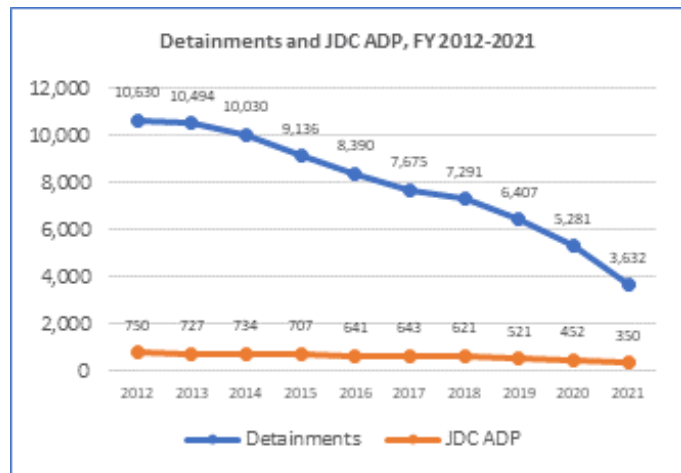


# Evaluating the Effectiveness and Efficiency of Virginia's Juvenile Detention Centers

## What is the problem?

Recent efforts have transformed the Commonwealth's juvenile justice system by reducing the use of state-operated juvenile correctional centers, and as a result of such efforts, there has been a substantial decline in the number of children admitted to or detained in juvenile detention centers in the Commonwealth. Currently, Virginia has more detention center beds than neighboring states. From 2012 to 2021, the number of juvenile detainments decreased by 65.8 percent, and the average daily population (ADP) decreased by 53.3 percent. However, the capacity and costs have not decreased during this time. Although the 24 JDCs are locally or regionally operated, the state pays for about one-third of JDC operation and maintenance costs and 100 percent of JDC education costs for juveniles detained in pre- and post-dispositional status. Total estimated state expenditures on JDCs, including education expenditures, were around \$74 million in FY20. For example, according to JLARC, the state spent \$25 million on education at JDCs, resulting in spending per student ranging from \$23,000 to \$88,000. Additionally, it appears that youth outcomes have not improved after moving some youth from the state correctional facility to community placement programs (CPPs), highly structured residential programs, which were part of the 2016 transformation effort to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the juvenile justice system.



## What is juvenile detention?

Juvenile detention is both a place and a status. Generally, juveniles are considered “detained” when they are held in a secure facility before disposition (i.e., while awaiting the result of their case). Some detention centers also serve youth post-disposition. More than half of U.S. states, including Virginia, allow for the “sentencing” of youth to local juvenile detention facilities (after disposition), rather than committing them to a state correctional facility. In Virginia, a judge can order a youth to a JDC as a disposition either with or without programming. In 2021, there were 3,632 detainments in Virginia: 3,212 were pre-disposition (85 percent), 473 were post-disposition without programs (12 percent), and 112 were post-disposition with programs (3 percent). Additionally, Virginia JDCs house some youth who have been adjudicated and committed to DJJ (i.e., part of the direct care population). The direct care youth placed in Virginia’s JDCs are generally in CPPs or detention reentry programs. Some JDCs also have direct care youth for admission and evaluation. Although youth in these direct care youth are housed in JDCs, they are counted in the direct care population and not in the detention population. In FY 2021, the direct care ADP in JDC facilities was 96 youth.

## Does Detention Differ by Location?

There are 24 JDCs in Virginia, located across the state. They vary substantially by the number of youths served and by the ADP. They also vary by how close they are to other JDCs. However, one thing is the same: none of the detention centers had an ADP even close to its certified capacity in 2021. Henrico was the closest to capacity at 50 percent (with an ADP of 10 and a capacity of 20). Eight of the facilities had ADPs of less than 20 percent of their capacity: Roanoke Valley (9 percent), Prince William (13 percent),

Northern Virginia (14 percent), Rappahannock (16 percent), Loudon (17 percent), Shenandoah Valley (17 percent), and Fairfax (17 percent).

## Recommendations from JLARC Report

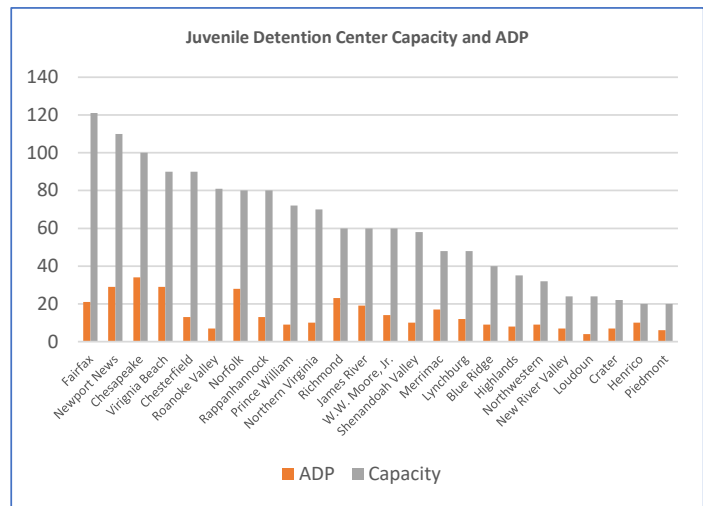
In November 2020, staff from the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) reviewed various aspects of Virginia’s juvenile justice system, including JDCs. They provided several policy options for reducing costs at the JDCs. In addition to suggestions on reducing education costs (discussed previously), they identified four policy options that the General Assembly could consider related to overall operational factors for reducing state costs.

1) Establish a two-tiered reimbursement rate in the Appropriation Act for the construction and operation of juvenile detention centers. Juvenile detention centers that are operated regionally could receive higher reimbursement rates than those operated by a single jurisdiction.

2) Include language in the Appropriation Act directing DJJ and the Virginia Department of Education to provide lower funding for juvenile detention centers that are consistently operating under a certain capacity, such as 50 percent, and are located within a certain distance, such as a 45–minute drive, of other facilities that are also operating under capacity.

3) Include language in the Appropriation Act directing DJJ to implement a process to identify specific juvenile detention centers that should be closed or consolidated to better align facility capacities with regional needs. DJJ could be directed to report to the General Assembly on the results of the process and specific facilities identified for closure or consolidation.

4) Include language in the Appropriation Act directing DJJ to evaluate the costs, benefits, and feasibility of transitioning JDCs to either specialize in (i) short-term detention or (ii) longer-term rehabilitative programming. The Virginia Department of Education could be required to develop a plan to align the educational programming to meet the different needs of youth in the two types of facilities.



## What Can We Do Now?

In 2021, the Commission on Youth adopted a recommendation to “establish an advisory committee to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of our current detention center system, evaluating the intersection of public safety and the rehabilitation of youth.” The study plan will include several steps including: evaluate data and information that has already been collected (e.g., any additional information from JLARC’s data collection that was not included in the report; the Moss Report the *Cost Benefit Analysis of the Use of Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention and Alternatives*); analyze the existing JLARC policy options; clarify research questions; develop data collection instruments (e.g., interview protocols and survey questions); conduct site visits, interviews, and surveys; map analyze current JDC locations; develop recommendations; present findings and recommendations to the Commission on Youth; receive public comment; and produce a final report.