

Assessments of Access to Counsel and Quality of Representation in Juvenile Delinquency Court

In 1995, the National Juvenile Defender Center (NJDC) along with the American Bar Association and other key partners conducted its first national assessment of access to counsel and quality of representation in juvenile court. This groundbreaking assessment resulted in NJDC publishing *A Call for Justice: An Assessment of Access to Counsel and Quality of Representation in Delinquency Proceedings*. *A Call for Justice* revealed that juvenile indigent defense systems across the country are really not systems but are disordered, under-funded, disenfranchised hybrids of public defenders, appointed counsel, contract attorneys and the occasional law school clinical program or nonprofit law center.

Since *A Call for Justice*, NJDC has completed assessments in 21 states: Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia.

Though each state's juvenile justice system is a unique blend of challenges and successes, some problems are common to all or most of the states where assessments have been conducted. Assessments have consistently found extremely high rates of waiver of counsel, late appointment of counsel and crippling caseloads that far exceed American Bar Association standards. In addition, assessments have uncovered that many jurisdictions experience a lack of basic resources including computers, law libraries, training and inadequate compensation that hinders recruitment and retention and creates confusion around the role of defense counsel.

Juvenile court assessments can also highlight promising approaches and innovative practices within the state and offer recommendations to improve weak areas. Assessments have led to significant changes in juvenile court culture as well as reforms in the areas of access to counsel, training, and supervision of juvenile cases and parity for juvenile. State legislatures have passed new laws in the wake of assessments that ensure early access to counsel and support for indigent juvenile defense, state courts have enacted new rules regarding waiver of counsel, and juvenile defense systems have created dedicated positions of leadership such as juvenile chiefs.

Stakeholders and advocates have used NJDC assessments as foundations for institutional reform, increased funding and countless innovative projects. Assessments can provide a starting place that demonstrates where and how reform is needed or by bringing attention to the plight of juvenile defense when states are considering reforming their adult indigent defense system.

NJDC assessments have transformed the very way in which reform is pursued and given stakeholders and advocates new energy and ideas for local reform initiatives.

More information on NJDC's assessments can be found on the [NJDC website](http://www.njdc.info) or by contacting NJDC at inquiries@njdc.info, 202-452-0010.