

ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

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POLICY BRIEF

Justice for Island Youth

Reforming Juvenile Justice Policy for Pacific Island and Hawaii Communities — What the Evidence Supports

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth are overrepresented in Hawaii's Family Court proceedings at rates persisting for decades without meaningful policy response.**
- **The research literature consistently and strongly favors diversion, community-based supervision, and structured residential programs over detention for the majority of juvenile offenders. This finding is underimplemented in Hawaii juvenile justice practice.**
- **Geographic isolation means that detention occurs by default when the appropriate intervention is geographically inaccessible — a policy gap requiring specific investment remediation.**

Hawaii's juvenile justice system incarcerates Native Hawaiian youth at rates disproportionate to their population share by a factor that has persisted, substantially unchanged, for decades.¹ Pacific Islander youth — Micronesian, Samoan, and Tongan youth in particular — are represented in Hawaii Family Court proceedings at rates that mirror the mainland disparities that juvenile justice reform movements have documented in African American and Latino youth populations. The research literature on what produces these disparities, and what reduces them, is well-developed. The policy translation is not.

Policy Recommendations

1. Commission a comprehensive review of diversion decision-making in Hawaii's Family Court system to identify the specific decision points where Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth are less likely to receive diversion than similarly situated youth.[FN]
2. Fund development of culturally grounded juvenile intervention programs for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth developed in partnership with community organizations rather than adapted from mainland programs.
3. Establish geographic access to evidence-based juvenile intervention programs as a Hawaii juvenile justice policy priority — funding program development in communities currently served only by detention.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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