



BEHIND THE CONCRETE WALLS

Uncovering Conditions
in Texas' Five Youth Prisons

BEHIND THE CONCRETE WALLS

Uncovering Conditions in Texas' Five Youth Prisons

Authors

Brett M. Merfish, J.D., M.P.P., *Director, Youth Justice Project* – Texas Appleseed

Martin A. Martinez, M.P.Aff., *Senior Policy Analyst, Youth Justice Project* – Texas Appleseed

Jessi Stafford, M.G.P.S., *Senior Research Analyst* – Texas Appleseed

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to Amnesty Freelen, whose advocacy for youth and families involved in the juvenile justice system is inspirational and impactful, as well as parents and youth who had the courage to share their stories and experiences. Lastly, we would like to thank the Research Team at Texas Appleseed for the time and effort they contributed to this report.

Texas Appleseed

1609 Shoal Creek Blvd., Suite 201

Austin, TX 78701

www.texasappleseed.org

August 2026



ABOUT TEXAS APPLESEED

As one of the most trusted resources for data-driven policy analysis and solutions, Texas Appleseed advocates at the state and local level for fair, just, and equitable laws. Our work has shaped hundreds of laws and positively affected millions of Texans by breaking down barriers through transformative policy solutions. Visit www.TexasAppleseed.org for more information.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

METHODOLOGY..... 2

OVERVIEW OF TJJD YOUTH POPULATION 3

STAFFING SHORTAGE, HIGH TURNOVER, AND THE WAITLIST 6

MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF YOUTH IN TJJD REMAIN HIGH
AND UNMET 13

VIOLENCE IN THE FACILITIES AND YOUTH IN DISTRESS..... 17

 Use of Force..... 17

 Assaults..... 19

 Lack of Programming 21

CONCLUSION 23

INTRODUCTION

The Texas Juvenile Justice Department's (TJJD) five state secure facilities are plagued by persistent understaffing and consistently high staff turnover, which contribute to unsafe conditions and ineffective service delivery. While the agency continues to try to correct the culture within the facilities and improve outcomes, it continually falls short because of these systemic staffing issues, leaving youth in poor conditions and without the rehabilitation they need. In 2024, a report from the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) documented unconstitutional conditions within all five state secure facilities. DOJ's report was the result of a multi-year investigation that found TJJD facilities exposed youth to unconstitutional harm through excessive force, isolation, abuse, and inadequate mental health care. It further concluded that TJJD failed to meet federal requirements for special education and discriminated against youth with disabilities by denying necessary accommodations, prolonging their confinement, and limiting access to education.¹

This report by Texas Appleseed documents that many of the problems DOJ identified persist and continue to cultivate an unsafe environment for youth and staff. Publicly available data and firsthand accounts gathered by Appleseed from youth, parents, and former secure facility staff support the conclusion that the conditions DOJ identified remain largely unchanged. The data shows persistent violence, which is evident through the increased use of physical and chemical restraints, and a significant number of youth in distress, demonstrated by the rise of suicide assessments. Qualitative firsthand accounts corroborate these quantitative findings.²

¹ U.S. Department of Justice, *Investigation of the Texas Juvenile Justice Department* at 30 (Aug. 2024), available at https://www.justice.gov/d9/2024-07/2024_tjjd_findings_report.pdf

² All of the firsthand accounts and quotations in this report are derived from interviews with parents and youth who were in TJJD facilities at some point during 2025 or 2026.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a comprehensive review of publicly available data, original research, and firsthand accounts. Texas Appleseed submitted multiple public information requests to TJJD between September 2025 and April 2026, seeking data on staffing levels, use of force, assaults, mental health services, programming restrictions, and other facility conditions. The quantitative data presented in this report is derived from TJJD's responses to these requests, as well as from agency testimony before the Texas Legislature and publicly available reports.

In addition to quantitative data, Texas Appleseed conducted interviews with youth who were formerly confined in TJJD state secure facilities, parents or guardians of current or former TJJD youth, and former TJJD staff members. These interviews were conducted between late summer 2025 and spring 2026 and provide qualitative context for the data presented throughout this report.

OVERVIEW OF TJJD YOUTH POPULATION

There are two measures of TJJD's population: the average daily population (ADP) and the number of yearly commitments. We present data obtained from the TJJD Admissions Profile for total commitments, but had to send a public information request to TJJD to obtain the ADP and the age of youth at commitment. These are presented by calendar year (CY).

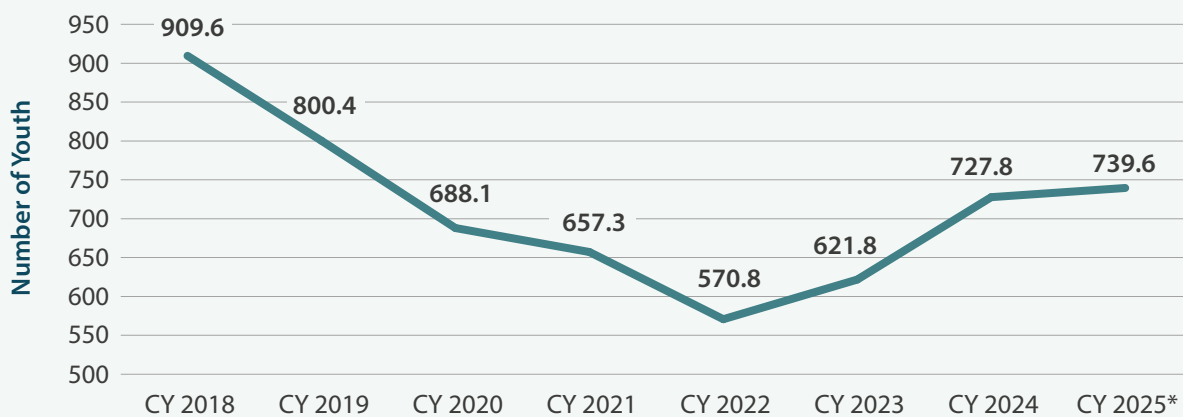
The ADP decreased from CY 2018 to CY 2022, before beginning to steadily increase from 2022 to 2025, but the ADP remains below what it was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. **While the TJJD population has increased since 2020, it is still lower than pre-pandemic levels.**

Table 1. Average Daily Population by TJJD Facility (CY 2018 – 2025)

Facility	CY 2018	CY 2019	CY 2020	CY 2021	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025*
Evins	106.0	122.7	109.5	89.6	110.1	151.3	160.3	169.4
Gainesville	196.6	121.9	109.8	118.3	109.1	124.2	163.7	163.4
Giddings	214.3	220.6	172.7	121.5	94.6	95.7	119.4	127.1
Mart	226.5	197.5	187.2	210.3	194.2	178.2	205.9	194.1
Ron Jackson	166.2	137.7	108.9	117.6	62.8	72.4	78.5	85.6
Total	909.6	800.4	688.1	657.3	570.8	621.8	727.8	739.6

*CY 2025 is January 1 – August 31, 2025

Figure 1. Average Daily Population by TJJD Facility (CY 2018 – 2025)



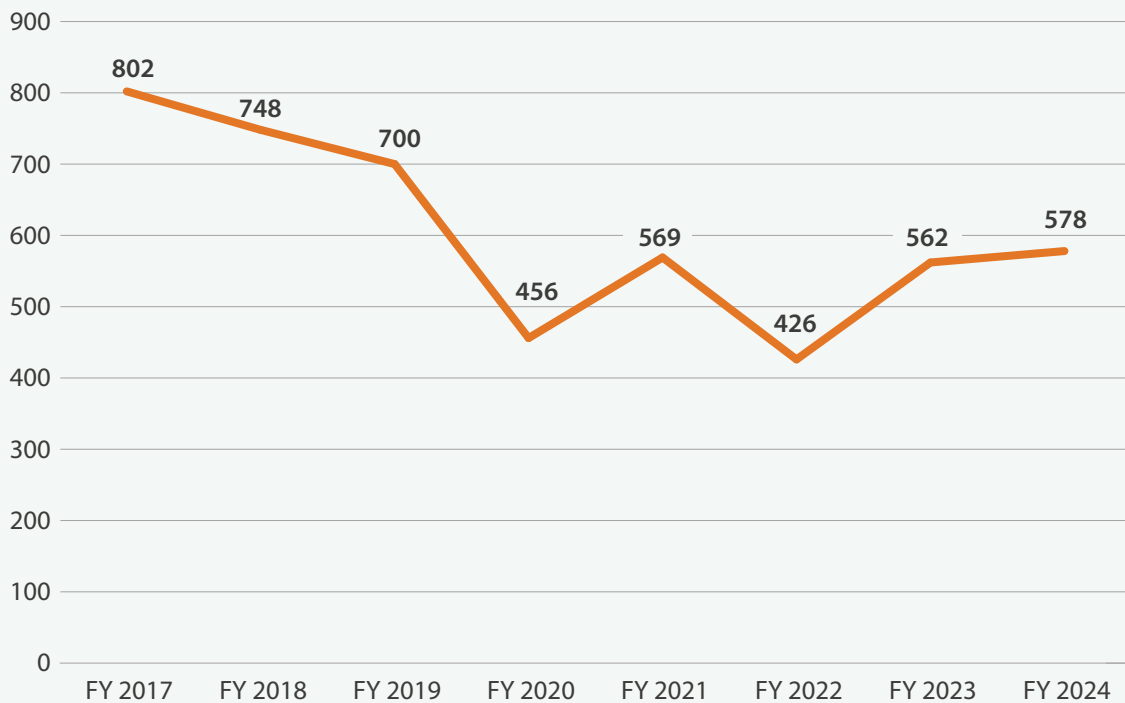
*CY 2025 is January 1 – August 31, 2025

Similarly, there was a drop in commitments during the COVID-19 pandemic, but commitments have started to increase again. However, the number of youth committed has not reached pre-pandemic levels. The table and figure below demonstrate this overall trend of fewer youths being committed compared to before the pandemic.

Table 2. Number of Commitments to TJJD's Secure Facilities (FY 2017 – FY 2024)³

	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Commitments	802	748	700	456	569	426	562	578

Figure 2. Number of Commitments to TJJD's Secure Facilities (FY 2017 – 2024)



³ Texas Juvenile Justice Department, *Commitments & Admissions Data, TJJD Admission Profile FY13 - 25*, available at <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/documents/>

From the beginning of CY 2022 through August 31, 2025, 16-year-olds made up the largest percentage of youth committed to TJJD, representing 33% of all commitments. Seventeen-year-olds closely followed at 31% and 15-year-olds at 17%. There were eight youth aged 12 and under committed to TJJD from the beginning of 2022 until the end of 2024.

Table 3. Number of Youth by Age at Commitment to TJJD (CY 2022 – 2025)

Age	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025*	Total	% CY 2022 - August 31, 2025
10	0	0	1	0	1	0%
11	0	0	0	0	0	0%
12	4	2	1	0	7	0%
13	10	11	13	8	42	2%
14	30	40	32	32	134	7%
15	70	96	105	74	345	17%
16	153	211	165	127	656	33%
17	149	184	155	121	609	31%
18	49	59	50	27	185	9%
Total	465	603	522	389	1,979	100%

*CY 2025 is January 1 – August 31, 2025

Around two-thirds of youths committed, or 67%, have an indeterminate sentence. The table below shows the proportion of indeterminate and determinate sentences from 2022 to 2025.

Table 4. Sentence Type Breakdown by Indeterminate and Determinate (CY 2022 – 2025)

Year	Indeterminate	Determinate	% Indeterminate	% Determinate
CY 2022	315	150	68%	32%
CY 2023	397	206	66%	34%
CY 2024	352	170	67%	33%
CY 2025*	267	122	69%	31%
Average (CY 2022 - 2024)	355	175	67%	33%

*CY 2025 is January 1 – August 2025, and is excluded from the average.

STAFFING SHORTAGE, HIGH TURNOVER, AND THE WAITLIST

Even though the TJJD population remains lower than in pre-pandemic years, staffing remains a persistent issue. TJJD aims to have one juvenile correctional officer (JCO) for every eight youth, though the TJJD General Administrative Policy (GAP) requires one staff for every 12 youth committed to the facility.⁴ The federal Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards require a ratio of one JCO for every eight youth during waking hours.^{5,6}

A former employee of TJJD said that every morning, the facility would evaluate which staff were present and then decide what programming they could provide, based on staffing levels.⁷ If there were not enough staff present for adequate supervision, then youth would be more restricted in their programming and movements.

TJJD's consistent struggle to retain staff has likely contributed to its staffing crisis.⁸ Most recently, the agency surveyed direct service staff and found that they work even with little rest or while feeling sick,⁹ which can impact not only the delivery of rehabilitative services but also the safety of youth and staff in the facilities. During the November 2025 board meeting, TJJD's Executive Director reported to the board ongoing struggles with staffing and tries to only have her facilities operate at up to 150% over-capacity relative to available staff.

These staffing issues are evident in the high vacancy and turnover rates of TJJD's frontline staff. From fiscal year (FY) 2019 – 2025, turnover rates for juvenile correctional officers (JCOs) have increased for each facility, and vacancy rates have increased for all facilities except Evins. However, despite the agency touting Evins as a “perfectly staffed” facility,¹⁰ Evins' turnover rates for JCOs remain high.

⁴ General Administrative Policy Manual (GAP) 380.9955, available at <https://www2.tjjd.texas.gov/policies/gap/380/99/gap3809955.pdf>

⁵ Under the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), for secure juvenile facilities, the minimum staffing levels are 1 resident to 8 staff during resident waking hours and 1 resident to 16 staff during resident sleeping hours. See 28 C.F.R. § 115.313(c).

⁶ TJJD Rider 35 Report, Annual HR Management Report, FY 2026 at 20 (Oct. 2025), available at https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/TJJD-triedHR-Management-Plan-Report_Oct2025.pdf

⁷ Interview with former employee of TJJD (May 2026).

⁸ Texas Juvenile Justice Department, *Shandra Carter Addressing the TJJD Board* (November 2025), meeting video and materials are available at <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/about-the-tjjd/governing-board/>

⁹ During the May 2026 Board meeting, TJJD reported findings from a staff survey that found that nearly half of the respondents have reported coming into work while sick and, on average, secure facility staff sleep 6.3 hours per night during the work week. Additionally, staffing shortages were found to be the most commonly reported stressor for direct care staff. Texas Juvenile Justice Department, *Shandra Carter Addressing the TJJD Board* (May 2026), meeting video and materials are available at <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/about-the-tjjd/governing-board/>

¹⁰ During the May 5, 2026, Senate Criminal Justice interim hearing, Shandra Carter, Executive Director of TJJD, noted that the Evins facility is “always perfectly staffed” and they cannot squeeze in one more kid there. Texas Senate, *TJJD Addressing the Criminal Justice Committee* (May 2026), the video recording of the hearing is available at <https://senate.texas.gov/av-archive.php>

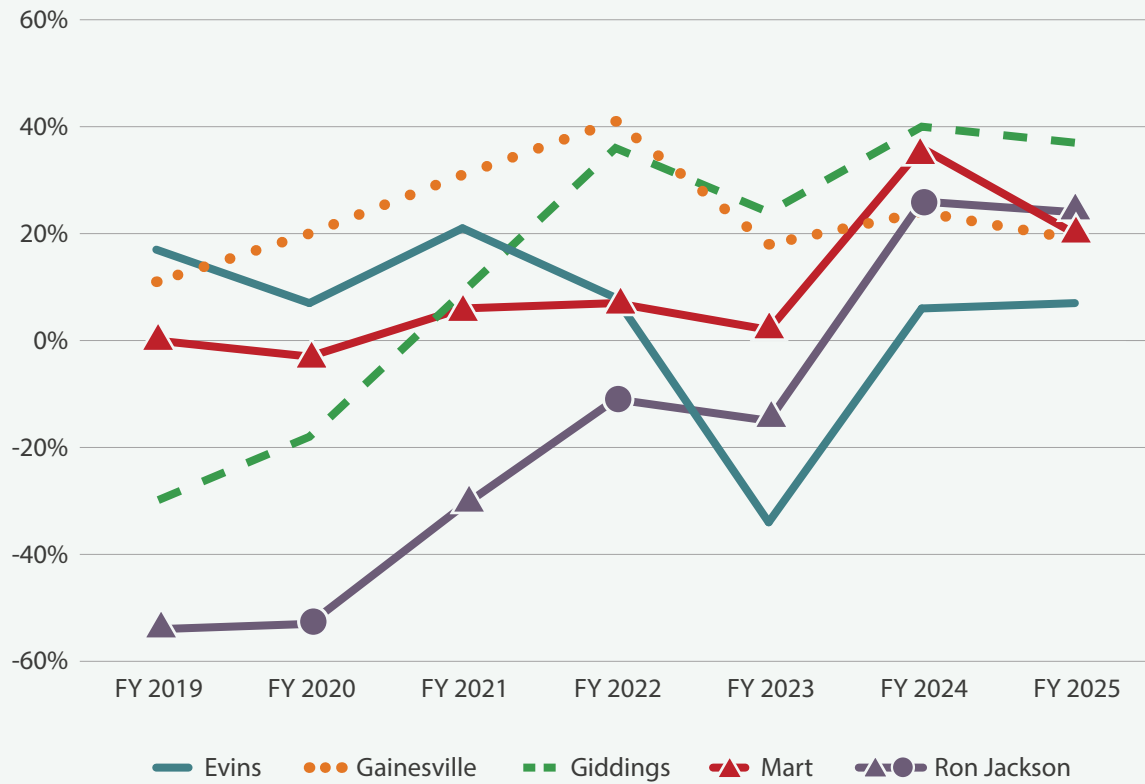
Table 5. JCO Turnover Rate (FY 2019 – 2025)

FY	Evins	Gainesville	Giddings	Mart	Ron Jackson
FY 19	51%	70%	44%	42%	50%
FY 20	81%	71%	62%	85%	80%
FY 21	119%	66%	81%	81%	81%
FY 22	76%	97%	99%	81%	71%
FY 23	76%	97%	99%	81%	79%
FY 24	63%	114%	76%	76%	96%
FY 25	62%	106%	88%	62%	87%

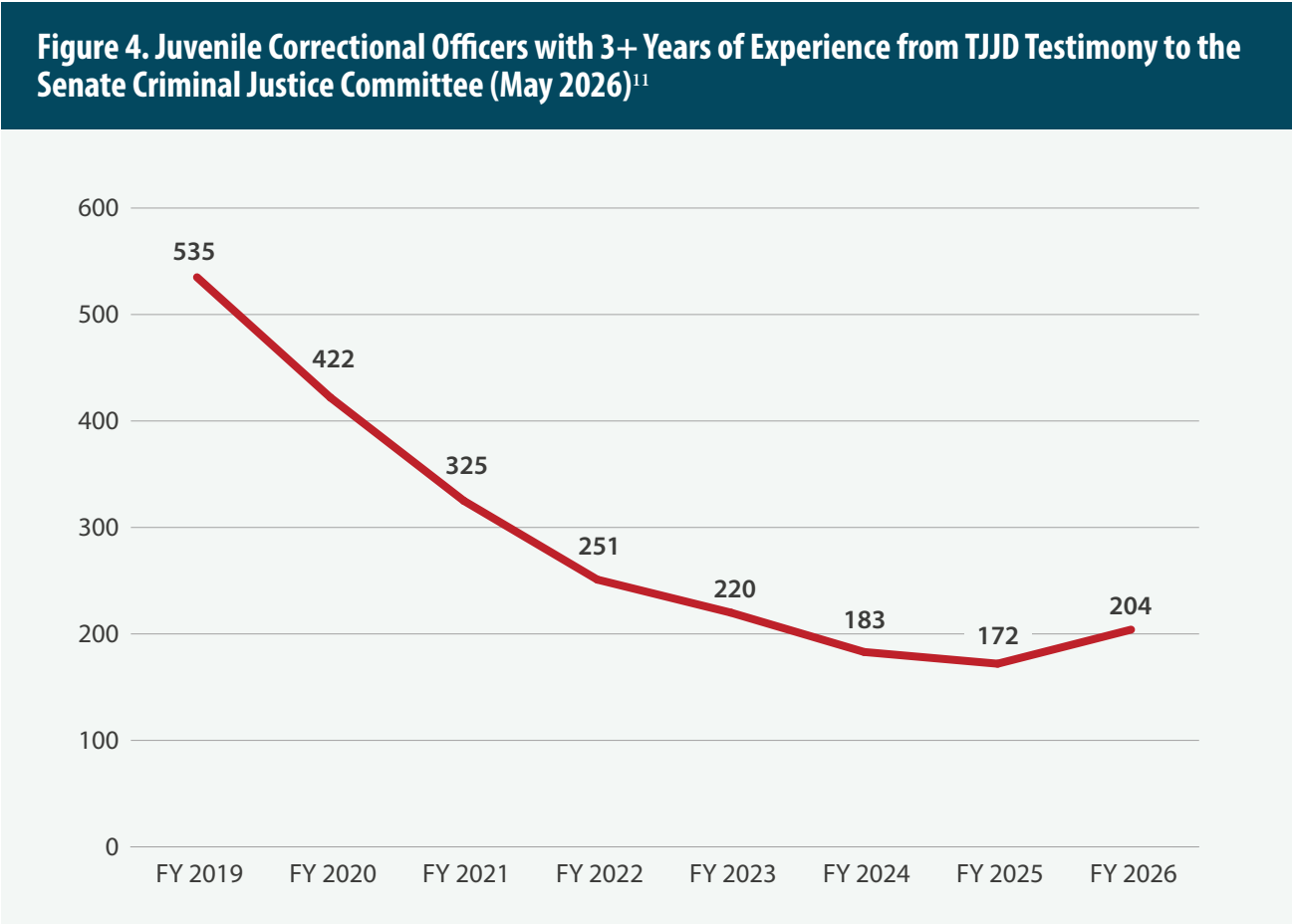
Table 6. JCO Vacancy Rate (FY 2019 – 2025)

FY	Evins	Gainesville	Giddings	Mart	Ron Jackson
FY 19	17%	11%	-30%	0%	-54%
FY 20	7%	20%	-18%	-3%	-53%
FY 21	21%	31%	9%	6%	-31%
FY 22	8%	41%	36%	7%	-11%
FY 23	-34%	18%	24%	2%	-15%
FY 24	6%	24%	40%	36%	26%
FY 25	7%	19%	37%	20%	24%

Figure 3. Juvenile Correctional Officer Vacancy Rates from TJJD Testimony to Senate Criminal Justice Committee (May 2026)



Additionally, the number of juvenile correction officers with more than three years of experience has declined significantly. The graph below was presented by TJJD at an interim hearing in May 2026.



The lack of veteran staff impacts the quality and delivery of services,¹² as well as the safety of staff and youth. The constant churn caused by high staff turnover means that the facilities lack experienced, highly qualified staff who get to know the youth in their care, undermining the agency’s ability to provide consistent programming and a rehabilitative environment.

Texas Appleseed also examined turnover rates by job category. **In FY 2025, TJJD reported a turnover rate of 69% for JCOs, 30% for case managers, 14% for mental health providers, and 18% for education staff.**

¹¹ Texas Appleseed recreated this figure for formatting purposes based on data presented by TJJD at the Texas Senate Criminal Justice Committee hearing in May 2026.

¹² Shandra Carter, Executive Director of the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, testifying to the Texas Senate Interim Hearing on juvenile sentencing on May 5, 2026. The hearing is available at <https://senate.texas.gov/av-archive.php>

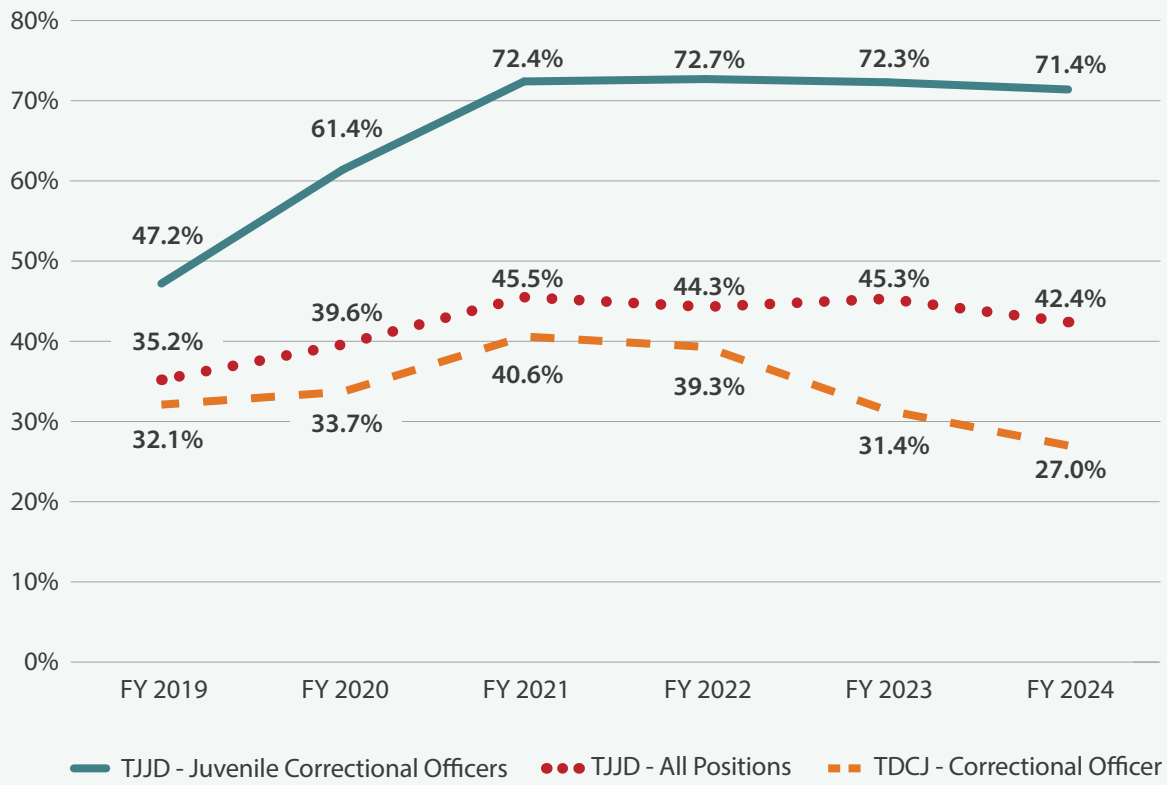
Table 7. Staff Vacancy Rates Broken Out by Job Category and Secure Facility

Job Category	Facility	FY 2025
JCO	Evins	57%
	Gainesville	89%
	Giddings	80%
	Mart	57%
	Ron Jackson	76%
	All Facilities	69%
Case Manager	Evins	11%
	Gainesville	69%
	Giddings	20%
	Mart	18%
	Ron Jackson	33%
	All Facilities	30%
Mental Health Provider	Evins	16%
	Gainesville	5%
	Giddings	0%
	Mart	24%
	Ron Jackson	26%
	All Facilities	14%
Education	Evins	6%
	Gainesville	19%
	Giddings	31%
	Mart	24%
	Ron Jackson	4%
	All Facilities	18%

TJJD's turnover rates are the highest of any Texas state agency.¹³ They are indicative of problems within the facilities that endure, despite salary increases or other attempts by the Legislature to increase staffing.

¹³ State Auditor, *An Annual Report on Classified Employee Turnover for Fiscal Year 2025*, available at <https://sao.texas.gov/Reports/Main/26-703.pdf>

Figure 5: State Auditor's Office Employee Turnover Report (FY 2019 – 2024)¹⁴



Because of these staffing issues, TJJD is not prepared to take custody of youth committed to its care immediately as it has done in the past and leaves youth at county facilities on a waitlist until they are transferred. Youth on this waitlist often stay at the county for up to six months waiting to be transferred to TJJD, with girls waiting longer than boys.¹⁶ The agency noted that it does not have enough staff to absorb the entire waitlist, and even if it did, it would need more funding to pay for them.¹⁷

“
He was on lockdown almost the whole time, they were understaffed the whole time. He was not able to call and barely able to shower.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Texas Appleseed recreated this figure for formatting purposes but kept all data points the same as the graph from the Legislative Budget Board, Juvenile Justice Department, Summary of Budget Recommendations - Senate (2025), available at https://www.lbb.texas.gov/Documents/SFC_Summary_Recs/89R/Agency_644.pdf

¹⁵ Interview with parent whose child was committed to TJJD during an interview with Texas Appleseed staff from early 2026.

¹⁶ Shandra Carter, Executive Director of the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, at TJJD board meeting in February 2026.

¹⁷ *Id.*

Whether they receive services or treatment during the waiting period varies depending on the county detention center's capabilities, but when those services and treatment are unavailable, this time can lead to worse outcomes for youth. Research has found that detention facilities exacerbate youth's mental health issues due to the poor delivery of services because many of them are strained from overcrowding.¹⁸ This can mirror conditions at some smaller county facilities that are struggling to manage their operations while also caring for kids who are stuck on the waitlist. In early 2026, the waitlist had around 120 youth.¹⁹ The waitlist was created in 2022, and although the number of youth on the waitlist has fluctuated, there have never been fewer than 70 youth.²⁰ TJJD reports working to reduce the waitlist, but there is no concrete plan to eliminate it any time soon. As of May 5, 2026, there were 100 youth on the waitlist.²¹

The waitlist is also an operational and financial burden on counties, which are tasked with serving youth on the waitlist but receive no additional funding for them. Some counties may have bed space but may not be able to provide treatment. Other counties have typically held beds in their pre-adjudication facilities for smaller counties that lack a detention facility; however, now many are forced to use those beds for youth on the waitlist.

“

I was on the waitlist for six months, she was just waiting . . . but they were treated better on the waitlist than in TJJD.”²²

¹⁸ Holman B, & Ziedenberg J., *The dangers of detention: The impact of incarcerating youth in detention and other secure facilities*. Justice Policy Institute. (2006), available at http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/06-11_rep_dangersofdetention_jj.pdf

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ Noah Wright, Data Scientist with TJJD at TJJD board meeting in February 2026.

²¹ Shandra Carter, Executive Director of the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, testifying to the Texas Senate Interim Hearing on juvenile sentencing on May 5, 2026.

²² Texas Appleseed interview with a parent whose child was on the TJJD waitlist from early 2026.

MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF YOUTH IN TJJD REMAIN HIGH AND UNMET

Many youth admitted to TJJD struggle with high mental health needs; the agency notes that **the number of youth admitted with moderate or high mental health treatment needs increased from FY 2013 to 2023 by 130%.**²³ Ninety-one percent of admissions in FY 2023 presented a need for mental health treatment at intake.²⁴ As DOJ noted in its 2024 report on the state secure facilities, “[t]rauma is one of the most common causes of mental health issues for children in the juvenile justice system.”²⁵

According to TJJD, most children in its secure facilities have experienced trauma; the agency documented that about 52% of youth in its secure facilities had four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).²⁶ ACEs include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical or emotional neglect, witnessing violence, instability due to household members being in jail or prison, having a family member attempt or die by suicide, and substance abuse problems within their household.²⁷ TJJD reports that “[w]hen broken down, about 50% of our boys have four or more ACEs, and 87% of our girls have four or more, with 47% of girls having seven or more.”²⁸

These staggering numbers reflect the high needs and extensive trauma histories of youth in TJJD’s care. Ensuring they are in a therapeutic environment that promotes their rehabilitation and necessitates mental health treatment is paramount for these youth.

There is currently no means for members of the public or advocacy groups to determine the level and quality of mental health services youth are receiving. TJJD says it does not produce any data or reports showing the frequency with which children receive mental health treatment, the type of treatment they receive, or the type of clinicians who provide treatment. This lack of transparency undermines accountability.

²³ TJJD, *TJJD Rider 41 Report: State Facility Overview* at 8 (Aug. 2024), available at <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/TJJD-Rider-41-Report.pdf>

²⁴ *Id.* at 13.

²⁵ U.S. Department of Justice, *Investigation of the Texas Juvenile Justice Department* at 30 (Aug. 2024), available at https://www.justice.gov/d9/2024-07/2024_tjjd_findings_report.pdf

²⁶ TJJD Website, *Youth Demographics*, available at <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/state-programs/youth-demographics/> (accessed May 2026).

²⁷ Centers for Disease Control, *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)* (Mar. 2, 2026), available at <https://www.cdc.gov/aces/about/index.html> (accessed May 2026).

²⁸ TJJD Website, *Youth Demographics*, available at <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/state-programs/youth-demographics/> (accessed May 2026).

The only updated data on mental health Texas Appleseed has been able to obtain concerns (1) the number of suicide assessments and (2) referrals to security or isolation for danger to self/suicide. This data speaks to the high, unmet mental health needs of youth in the state’s facilities — needs that are exacerbated by TJJD’s ongoing staffing shortages and safety crisis.

“

It is a lot to handle. A lot of people break from that.”

Referrals to security for danger to self/suicide steadily decreased from 417 in CY 2018 to 65 in CY 2023. There was an increase from CY 2023 to CY 2024, and nearly as many from January to August in 2025 as in all of CY 2024.

Table 8. Total Referrals to Security for Danger to Self/Suicide (CY 2018 – 2025)

Facility	CY 2018	CY 2019	CY 2020	CY 2021	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025*
Evins	38	37	61	74	18	21	19	16
Gainesville	68	29	31	26	34	8	14	9
Giddings	28	22	73	121	29	15	20	38
Mart	187	103	44	18	8	12	14	21
Ron Jackson	96	80	55	60	9	9	28	8
Total	417	271	264	299	98	65	95	92

*CY 2025 is January 1 – August 31, 2025.

The total number of suicide risk assessments conducted for youth in TJJD facilities dropped from 9,556 in CY 2022 to 8,082 in CY 2023, but then increased to 10,346 in CY 2024 and 14,081 in CY 2025.

Table 9. Count of Suicide Risk Assessments (CY 2022 – 2025)

Facility	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025
Evins	2,257	1,708	2,024	1,681
Gainesville	1,062	1,107	1,657	1,996
Giddings	2,504	1,445	1,658	2,213
Mart	2,061	2,597	3,297	6,122
Ron Jackson	1,672	1,225	1,710	2,069
Total	9,556	8,082	10,346	14,081

Texas Appleseed also obtained data regarding youth prescribed psychotropic medications. For CY 2022 and CY 2023, TJJD provided us with the total number of unique facility youth and the total number receiving psychotropic medications; we calculated the percentage. In CY 2024, TJJD initially provided data in the same way before noting they had made an error. We were told they could only provide us with the “meds by month.” We calculated averages of the percentage of youth for each month. In CY 2025, TJJD simply provided us with the total percentage of youth receiving psychotropic medication. With those caveats, there was a slight decrease at Evins and Giddings, a slight increase at Gainesville, and a stark increase at Mart and Ron Jackson from CY 2022 to CY 2025. However, compared to CY 2024, all facilities reported an increase in CY 2025 in the percentage of youth prescribed psychotropic medications.

“
As a parent, it was hard.
I know in those places
that it plays on your mind.
Anything you go through in
there. I cannot imagine a kid
having to go through that.”

Table 10. The Percentage of Youth Prescribed Psychotropic Medication in Each Facility (CY 2022 – 2025)

Facility	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025*
Evins	66%	69%	51%	61%
Gainesville	75%	75%	63%	76%
Giddings	72%	75%	61%	69%
Mart	64%	68%	64%	82%
Ron Jackson	63%	65%	66%	89%

**CY 2025 is January 1 – August 31, 2025.*

These numbers together reveal the ongoing mental health struggle of youth in facilities — a struggle that appears to be worsening. For children who have had four ACEs, the chances of a suicide attempt are 2,400% higher than a child with no ACEs; at seven ACEs, those chances increase to a staggering 5,100% higher.²⁹

It is clear from DOJ’s investigation that youth in TJJD were not receiving the level of mental health care services required by the Constitution, and Texas Appleseed is concerned those conditions continue to exist. TJJD has struggled to provide services by licensed counselors for years and has relied on a significant number of its mental health staff who are still earning their licenses or are under the supervision of a licensed counselor.

Table 11: Percentage of Unlicensed Mental Health Providers (CY 2024 – 2025)

Facility	CY 2024 (Monthly Average)	CY 2025* (Monthly Average)
Evins	33.3%	35.6%
Gainesville	22.8%	30.9%
Giddings	36.3%	32.8%
Mart	26.1%	26.3%
Ron Jackson	25.0%	27.4%
Total	28.7%	30.8%

**CY 2025 reported staff counts are through September 2025.*

TJJD has failed to deliver basic mental health care needed to rehabilitate youth. This inability is partly due to a lack of fully licensed mental health professionals; however, the agency has been reluctant to employ telehealth throughout its state secure facilities or other strategies that can and should be utilized to help address the shortage of licensed counselors.³⁰ Texas Appleseed believes that until mental health provider vacancies are consistently filled with licensed professionals, or telehealth is used to provide counseling sessions from licensed providers during staff shortages,³¹ youth will continue to receive substandard mental health care.

²⁹ Texas Juvenile Justice Department, *Youth Demographics* (2026), available at <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/state-programs/youth-demographics/>

³⁰ At times, telehealth is used by TJJD for psychiatry.

³¹ TJJD states that it has a partnership established with the University of Texas Medical Branch to provide psychiatry sessions to youth who need psychotropic medication via telehealth. However, the agency does not indicate that it employs telehealth to provide counseling or psychological treatment when licensed mental health providers are in short supply. Although Texas Appleseed would prefer that youth receive counseling sessions from a licensed mental health provider in-person, employing telehealth to ensure that counseling sessions are continually delivered by experienced providers is better than the youth receiving inconsistent mental health treatment from unlicensed providers. More information on TJJD’s mental health treatment is available at <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/building-better-mental-health-systems-through-partnership/>

VIOLENCE IN THE FACILITIES AND YOUTH IN DISTRESS

In addition to the distress evident in the rise of suicide assessments and referrals to security for danger to self, **the state secure facilities have seen increases in the rate of the use of force and staff-on-youth assaults.** This data indicates a lack of order and safety within the facilities, which anecdotal data from youth with experience within the facilities confirms.

Use of Force

Youth in TJJD facilities are subject to unnecessary and excessive use of force, a practice that is counterproductive to rehabilitation. The GAP Manual allows appropriate use of force at TJJD facilities when “youth behavior threatens safety and order,” but it is meant to be used as a “last resort.”³² TJJD defines “use of force” as “physical measures used to direct, compel, or restrain bodily movement of a noncompliant youth.” In the state secure facilities, the use of force policy allows the following methods: mechanical restraints,³³ manual restraints, oleoresin capicum (OC) spray, physical escort, and planned team restraint.³⁴

In its 2024 report, DOJ found that TJJD staff routinely used excessive chemical and physical force — including deploying pepper spray at close range and employing dangerous restraint techniques — often without first attempting de-escalation and in situations that do not justify such force. DOJ observed that these practices inflict unnecessary pain, are disproportionate to any legitimate governmental objective, and therefore constitute unconstitutional conditions of confinement.³⁵

“

In August 2022, a Mart staff member pepper sprayed Isabella while escorting her to the Regulation & Safety Unit (RSU) in handcuffs. Staff made no attempt to engage with her verbally before spraying her.”³⁶

³² See TJJD Website, GAP Manual 380.9723, available at <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/gap3809723.pdf>

³³ *Id.* Mechanical restraints include handcuffs and ankle cuffs.

³⁴ 37 TAC §380.9723.

³⁵ U.S. Department of Justice, Investigation of the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (August 2024), available at https://www.justice.gov/d9/2024-07/2024_tjjd_findings_report.pdf at 11-17 (citing *Hudson v. McMillian*, 503 U.S. 1, 5 (1992) and *Kingsley v. Hendrickson*, 576 U.S. 389, 396–98 (2015)).

³⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Investigation of the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (August 2024), available at https://www.justice.gov/d9/2024-07/2024_tjjd_findings_report.pdf

New data obtained by Texas Appleseed demonstrates use of force in TJJD facilities remains routine. The new data shows that, although the number of individual youth subjected to use of force appears to have decreased in CY 2024 and 2025, the total number of use of force incidents has risen sharply.³⁷ This disparity indicates that force is being applied repeatedly to the same youth — suggesting that a smaller subset of youth is experiencing use of force more frequently. This pattern is evident in both mechanical restraints and OC spray, the latter of which was raised in interviews with youth and their parents. Repeated use of force signals that other interventions are not working, whether that be because of staff inexperience, lack of appropriate treatment, including mental health treatment, or a combination of these and other factors.

“

They would spray the kids all the time. A lot of spraying.”³⁸

Table 12. Total Number of Youth Subject to Use of Force (CY 2022 – 2025)

Facility	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025
Evins	564	2,023	300	402
Gainesville	479	749	225	203
Giddings	685	714	131	160
Mart	754	1,013	282	332
Ron Jackson	593	704	299	282
Total	3,075	5,203	1,237	1,379

Table 13. Total Number of Instances of Use of Force (CY 2022 – 2025)³⁹

Facility	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025
Evins	601	2,308	4,319	3,776
Gainesville	527	810	2,650	2,881
Giddings	802	813	1,139	1,344
Mart	810	1,114	1,641	2,545
Ron Jackson	699	787	2,249	2,202
Total	3,439	5,832	11,998	12,748

³⁷ This significant increase is apparent even with data for CY 2025 only going through the end of August 2025.

³⁸ Interview with a youth who was in the facilities in 2025.

³⁹ Texas Appleseed asked TJJD about the stark increase in instances of Use of Force in CY 2024 and 2025. Their response was that double-counting could occur if more than one type of force was used during an encounter with a youth. Texas Appleseed views multiple types of force being used at the same time as excessive and detrimental to youth.

A national survey by the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA) observed that facilities that use pepper spray tend to be systems that adopt an overall more punitive and adult-correctional approach.⁴⁰ Texas is in a small minority of states that allow juvenile correctional officers to carry OC spray on their person in the facility; 35 states have banned pepper spray in juvenile facilities entirely.⁴¹

The harmful nature of OC spray makes it contrary to the rehabilitative goals of the juvenile justice system. In fact, the CJCA brief found that an overreliance of restraints, including OC spray, damages the relationship between youth and staff, which is a key feature to cultivate a safe, rehabilitative environment.⁴² The new data obtained by Texas Appleseed confirms that there continue to be significant use of force concerns within TJJD facilities, and there has not been a reduction even given DOJ’s findings.

Assaults

Beyond the use of force by staff, the overall level of violence within TJJD facilities — including assaults among youth and between youth and staff — further illustrates the unsafe conditions that persist in these facilities. Youth-on-staff assaults decreased from CY 2022 to CY 2023 before increasing in CY 2024. Youth-on-youth assaults increased from CY 2022 to CY 2023 before decreasing in CY 2024. However, staff-on-youth assaults, which is physical abuse, steadily increased each year from CY 2022 to 2024.

The table below demonstrates this abuse with data on staff-on-youth assaults. There were 56 staff-on-youth assaults from January 1 – August 31, 2025, which is greater than the number of assaults for all of CY 2022, nearly equal to the total number of assaults for CY 2023, and approaching the total number of assaults for the whole of CY 2024.

Table 14. Staff-on-Youth Assaults (CY 2022 – 2025)

Facility	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025*
Evins	7	15	19	13
Gainesville	12	9	10	10
Giddings	7	9	3	3
Mart	6	20	29	18
Ron Jackson	5	5	5	12
Total	37	58	66	56

*CY 2025 is January 1 – August 31, 2025.

⁴⁰ Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators, *Issue Brief on Pepper Spray in Juvenile Facilities* (May 2011), available at https://cjjja.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/CJCA.Issue_Brief_OC Spray-2.pdf

⁴¹ The Appeal, *Pepper Spray is Toxic, Experts Say. So Why Is It Being Used on Children* (Sep. 2019), available at <https://theappeal.org/pepper-spray-is-toxic-experts-say-so-why-is-it-being-used-on-children/>.

⁴² Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators, *Issue Brief on Pepper Spray in Juvenile Facilities* (May 2011), available at https://cjjja.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/CJCA.Issue_Brief_OC Spray-2.pdf

Table 15. Youth-on-Staff Assaults (CY 2022 – 2025)

Facility	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025*
Evins	596	519	413	192
Gainesville	171	191	453	245
Giddings	280	246	233	144
Mart	236	328	466	180
Ron Jackson	194	151	416	107
Total	1,477	1,435	1,981	868

*CY 2025 is January 1 – August 31, 2025.

Table 16. Youth-on-Youth Assaults (CY 2022 – 2025)

Facility	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025*
Evins	424	712	546	215
Gainesville	270	224	204	100
Giddings	168	252	163	76
Mart	541	467	495	179
Ron Jackson	163	222	242	108
Total	1,566	1,877	1,650	678

*CY 2025 is January 1 – August 31, 2025.

The prevalence of violence, demonstrated through the various types of assaults and their alarming frequency, signals a broken system that has not made meaningful progress to remedy many of the issues DOJ identified in 2024. Children and teenagers lack the rational decision-making skills that most adults develop with time,⁴³ and the youth in TJJD are especially vulnerable to making impulsive decisions due to their trauma or intellectual needs.⁴⁴ The facilities and their staff are not meeting youth's behavioral health needs; instead, staff resort to using force and are doing so with certain youth more frequently. At the same time, the increase in staff-on-youth assaults, which is physical abuse and represents a fundamental failure of institutional accountability, is deeply troubling.

⁴³ American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, *Facts for Families Guide, Teen Brain: Behavior, Problem Solving, and Decision Making* (September 2017), available at https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/The-Teen-Brain-Behavior-Problem-Solving-and-Decision-Making-095.aspx

⁴⁴ Shin S.H., McDonald S.E., Conley D., *Profiles of adverse childhood experiences and impulsivity*. Published in Child Abuse Neglect Volume 85, (November 2018), available at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6214760/>

Lack of Programming

The provision of programming represents another area of significant concern based on the new data. TJJD assures that it is committed to providing youth with daily programming that combines education, group and individual therapy, some specialized therapies and Dialectical Behavior Therapy-based skills training in order for youth to progress toward release.⁴⁵

Unfortunately, understaffing and high turnover problems contribute to a lack of programming. Firsthand reports from former TJJD youth identified the frequent lack of programming in facilities. And these statements are from the parents of two youth who were in the facilities at some point during 2025 and 2026:

“
The majority of the time she was in a pod on a unit with 8 other troubled teenage girls with very little activity and stimulation.”

“
He was locked in a cell by himself for hours, talking through the walls and he would rap until late at night until he got tired.”

“
Every day for weeks at a time, she would say they did not have school. Half the time they were there.”

“
Any infractions he gets, they postpone his treatment.”

Educational programming is frequently restricted, partly due to inadequate staffing levels. The following table presents the number of scheduled school days subject to programming restrictions, with the percentage of days with programming restrictions in parentheses.

⁴⁵ TJJD, *The Texas Model* (last visited May 14, 2026), available at <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/state-programs/texas-model/>

As the data demonstrate, the number of restricted days increased in both CY 2024 and 2025, even though the 2025 figures represent only a partial year. For 2025, the only facility that had not exceeded its prior-year restrictions as of August was Mart. In these instances, the youth are often receiving worksheets in their cells without meaningful instruction.⁴⁶ This “solution” ensures the agency does not have to report that the school day is cancelled; staff will deliver worksheets to youth in RSU as well.

Table 17. Number and Percent of Scheduled School Days with Programming Restrictions (CY 2022 – 2025)

Facility	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024	CY 2025*
Evins	2 (1%)	27 (13%)	81 (40%)	102 (100%)
Gainesville	6 (3%)	10 (5%)	39 (19%)	49 (50%)
Giddings	9 (4%)	11 (5%)	17 (8%)	29 (29%)
Mart	4 (2%)	2 (1%)	17 (8%)	11 (11%)
Ron Jackson	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)	38 (19%)	35 (36%)

*CY 2025 is January 1 – August 31, 2025.

The restriction of programming on scheduled school days has multiple adverse effects. It prevents youth from completing required programming, and it also leaves youth idle, creating opportunities for behavioral issues as well as confining them to their cells. As of May 2026, TJJD acknowledged that youth in its facilities are seven grade levels behind in their reading and math skills. Given that research has found that simply detaining youth leads to a significant decline in their graduation rates compared to their peers,⁴⁷ TJJD’s disrupted programming will likely exacerbate this disparity.

⁴⁶ Interview with former employee of TJJD (May 2026).

⁴⁷ A comparative study out of Michigan found that when youth were simply detained before their adjudication hearing it led to a 31% decrease in the likelihood that they would graduate high school. This is in line with other studies that have found negative educational outcomes for justice-involved youth. Baron, J.B., et al., *Pretrial Juvenile Detention*. National Bureau of Economic Research (2022), available at https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w29861/w29861.pdf

CONCLUSION

It has been two years since DOJ released its findings about TJJD's state secure facilities, and many of the same constitutionally deficient conditions it identified persist. The juvenile justice system was created because of a recognition that youth are different from adults and that, in addition to public safety, their rehabilitation is a primary goal of the system. However, rehabilitation can only happen when youth are in a safe and stable environment. The data in this report, as well as the qualitative data gained through Texas Appleseed's interviews with children and parents, provide insight into ongoing problems within TJJD, reflecting many of the same problems identified years ago.

The young Texans committed to TJJD's care have complex behavioral health challenges and needs. But when a child is entrusted to the state's care, the state is responsible for meeting these needs. TJJD is tasked with rehabilitating the youth committed to its care; instead, constitutionally deficient conditions in its facilities are exacerbating their behavioral challenges and making them worse rather than better.⁴⁸

Given the persistent, unrelenting staffing crisis in the facilities, the best way for Texas to address these problems is to move away from the use of large facilities to house children committed to TJJD's care. Texas should reduce, rather than increase, the number of youth committed to TJJD instead of continuing to pump money into a failed system.

⁴⁸ Council of State Governments Justice Center, *Closer to Home: An Analysis of the State and Local Impact of the Texas Juvenile Justice Reforms* (January 2015), available at <https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/texas-jj-reform-closer-to-home.pdf>



www.TexasAppleseed.org