

# Rhode Island Juvenile Hearing Boards



## Senate Bill 2940 (Vargas)

### What are Juvenile Hearing Boards?

Rooted in restorative justice, juvenile hearing boards (JHBs) provide a community-based option that **diverts youth from formal court involvement**. Comprised of volunteer community members, JHBs permit the diversion of youth accused of lower-level offenses - including status offenses and misdemeanors. Youth who complete sanctions (such as community service, restitution, and counseling) are often able to avoid having a court record following this process.



### What is restorative justice?

Restorative justice practices offer a meaningful way to engage the youth offender, victim, and community in conversation and action to restore balance to the community. **These practices are well aligned with the ways in which young people learn from their mistakes.** Restorative justice provides an opportunity for the youth who committed the offense to take responsibility for their actions, understand the harm their actions may have caused, and empathize with the victim while making amends for their actions.

### How does this bill support youth?

**Senate Bill 2940** ensures that the JHBs have the support they need to be the effective alternative resource that they are, and ensures equity among referrals to the JHBs. This bill:

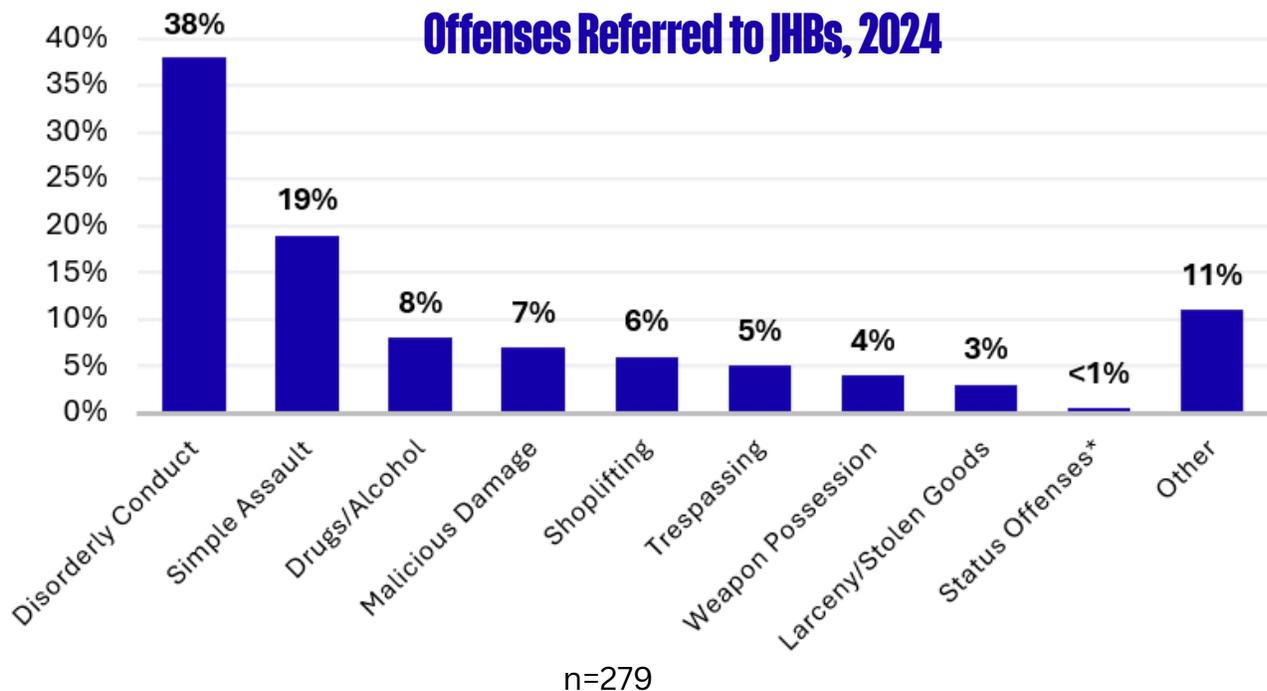
- **Automates referrals to the JHBs for first-time misdemeanor offenses.** This will set a standard for youth diversion that will increase equity among referrals to the JHBs.
- Re-establishes the role of a **state-wide JHB coordinator.**
- Requires annual **data reporting.**

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### What types of offenses are referred to JHBs?



Source: Rhode Island for Community and Justice, 2024. \*Status offenses are age-related acts that would not be punishable if the offender were an adult, such as truancy and disobedient conduct.

### Juvenile Hearing Boards are Effective

In 2024, there were 35 JHBs in Rhode Island, 25 of which were active. Four communities did not have a JHB (Little Compton, North Kingstown, Richmond, and South Kingstown). Research shows that diversion improves youth outcomes, including lowering recidivism rates. Still, youth of color are diverted at much lower rates than their white peers. In 2024, over half (53%) of youth referred to JHBs were white, 23% were Hispanic, and 23% were Black. Alternatives to formal justice involvement are more effective in preventing recidivism among youth, are more cost effective, and are often the more appropriate response to developmentally typical youth behavior that is often criminalized. **Senate Bill 2940 enables automatic referrals to JHBs for first-time misdemeanor offenses for youth in every municipality.**