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New Report Shows Hope for Youth Justice as States Advance Bipartisan Reforms

Hawaii Named National Leader; Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Wyoming Labeled Worst Human Rights Offenders

Washington, D.C. – A new report released today by *Human Rights for Kids* (HRFK) shows unprecedented progress in protecting the human rights of children in the justice system, with Hawaii emerging as the top state in the nation. The *2025 State Ratings Report on Human Rights Protections for Children in the U.S. Justice System* highlights how bipartisan coalitions are driving meaningful reforms across the country, signaling a new era of hope for children.

“This is not a time for despair - this is a time for hope,” said James Dold, CEO & Founder of Human Rights for Kids. “Lawmakers across the political spectrum are rejecting failed ‘tough on crime’ policies of the past and embracing bipartisan reforms rooted in compassion, accountability, and science. Together, we are proving that youth justice reform is not only possible, it is essential.”

Hawaii’s Leap Forward

Hawaii catapulted to the top of the rankings this year by passing sweeping reforms that:

- Ended mandatory minimum sentences for children,
- Banned the incarceration of children in adult jails and prisons, and
- Required judges to consider a child’s trauma history and life circumstances before sentencing.
- Established the minimum age of prosecution of 12 years old

State Sen. Michael Gabbard said, “These laws will ensure our keiki receive grace and the opportunity to heal from the trauma that often leads to their system-involvement.”

Bipartisan Momentum Nationwide

The report notes that 2025 was HRFK’s most successful year yet, with over 50 child-centered bills introduced across the country and 8 new laws enacted in states as politically diverse as Arkansas, Hawaii,

and Vermont. These reforms - ranging from ending the school-to-prison pipeline to recognizing exploited children as trafficking victims - show that youth justice remains an area of strong bipartisan agreement.

“Today’s report shows what’s possible when leaders follow the science of adolescent development and listen to kids and survivors,” said **Ana Zamora**, CEO and Founder at **The Just Trust**. “From Hawaii to Vermont and Arkansas, bipartisan coalitions are replacing punishment-first policies with approaches that promote healing, accountability, and public safety. The Just Trust is proud to support HRFK and partners proving that a smarter, more humane youth justice system is within reach.”

Areas for Urgent Improvement

While progress is being made, many states continue to fail children. This year’s “Worst Human Rights Offenders” include:

- **Alabama**
- **Georgia**
- **Mississippi**
- **Tennessee**
- **Wyoming**

These states scored the lowest in the nation, with laws that continue to expose children to adult prisons, solitary confinement, and harsh mandatory minimums —practices condemned under universally adopted human rights standards.

A Call to Action

HRFK urges policymakers in all states to follow the lead of reform champions and embrace trauma-informed, bipartisan approaches to justice. “Every child has the capacity for growth, change, and redemption,” said Dold. “It’s time for every state to rise to the occasion and ensure that no child is treated as if they are beyond hope.”

The full *2025 State Ratings Report* is available at www.humanrightsforkids.org.

About Human Rights for Kids

Human Rights for Kids is a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion and protection of the human rights of children. We use an integrated, multi-faceted approach which consists of research & public education, coalition building & grassroots mobilization, and policy advocacy & strategic litigation to advance critical human rights on behalf of children in the United States and around the world.