

# Georgia's Process for Children in Need of Services

AN ISSUE BRIEF

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Georgia's Children in Need of Services (CHINS) process requires study to improve its effectiveness in serving at-risk youth and their families.

This brief summarizes the key findings from a recent convening of CHINS coordinators and partners, focusing on recommendations and next steps for enhancing the CHINS system across the state.

## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The CHINS process in Georgia addresses the needs of children requiring services due to issues such as truancy, running away, or other status offenses.

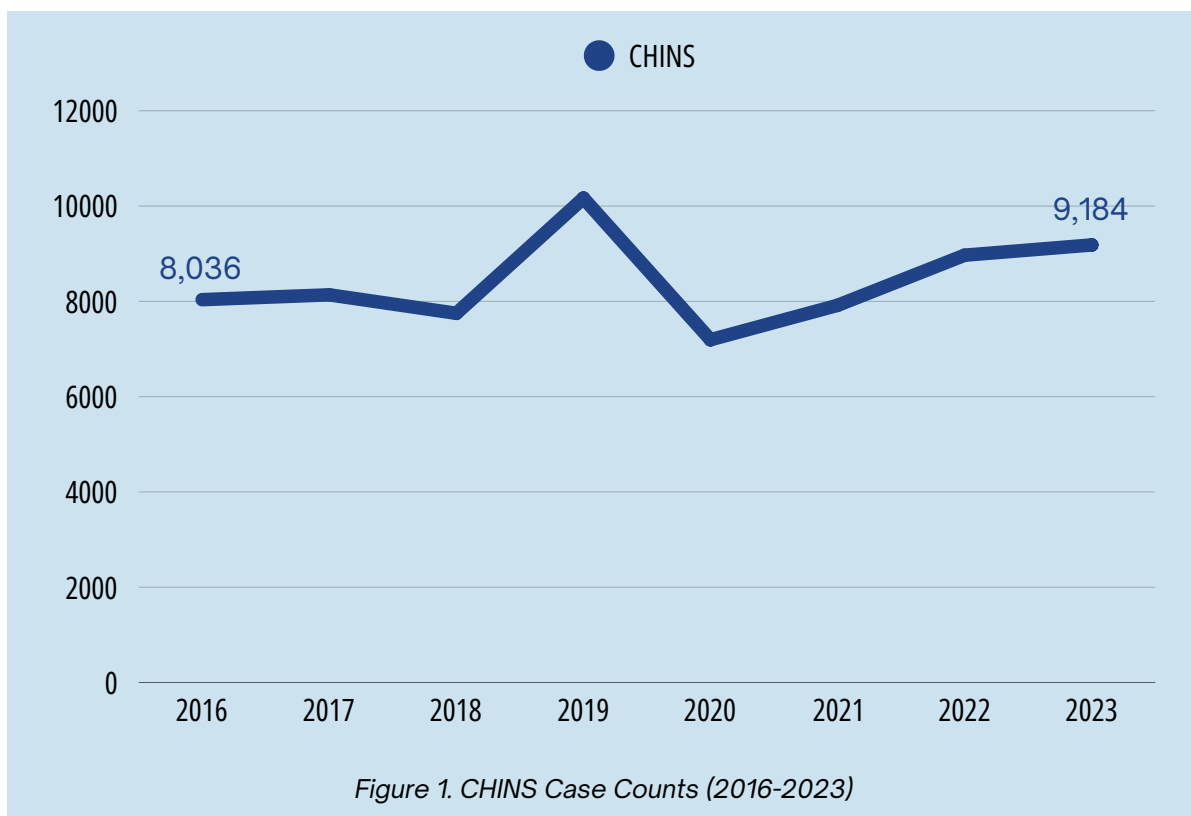
Voices for Georgia's Children staff conducted a CHINS Literature Scan and interviews with juvenile justice system partners to develop a framework for discussion. Once this was completed, a statewide convening was held in coordination with the Georgia Council of Juvenile Court Judges on August 15, 2024, at Middle Georgia State University, bringing together 39 Local CHINS Coordinators and 11 statewide support staff to discuss key aspects of the CHINS process and develop strategies for improvement.

# KEY FINDINGS

Since 2016, there have been more than 67,000 CHINS cases filed across the state. While the total number of Juvenile Court case filings decreased by about 3% between 2016 and 2023, the number of CHINS cases increased by 14%.<sup>1</sup>

The CHINS case option for Juvenile Courts was added to the code in 2013 as part of juvenile justice reform when the juvenile code was completely revised for the first time in more than 40 years.

Since the process was instituted in 2014, there have not been any specific reforms in this area, and Juvenile Courts have been left to provide their own direction with these cases without developed standards. This presents both challenges and opportunities for the CHINS process in Georgia.



<sup>1</sup> Georgia Administrative Office of the Courts. Data request (Received October 2024).

# What is a CHINS?

According to OCGA §15-11-2(11)(A) and (B), a CHINS youth is “A child adjudicated to be in need of care, guidance, counseling, structure, supervision, treatment, or rehabilitation and who is adjudicated” for:

- Truancy;
- Running away;
- Being ungovernable;
- Curfew violations;
- Hanging out in bars;
- Being on probation for being ungovernable;
- Guilt of a child-only offense (e.g., possession of alcohol, underage driving); and
- Delinquency, but not in need of treatment or rehabilitation.

One of the most significant challenges identified for CHINS policy is limited resources. County governments grapple with insufficient funding, which hampers their access to services. There is also a shortage of qualified professionals like counselors and case managers, who are crucial to these programs. The availability of community-based resources and programs needed to support CHINS cases also varies depending on location. Data collection on CHINS cases also poses a challenge since uniform data has historically not been collected.

Another challenge with CHINS is that the system itself is overburdened. Juvenile Court staff and case managers face high caseloads,

complicating the timely processing of CHINS cases due to the sheer volume of referrals in some jurisdictions. Further, unlike the delinquency and dependency case processes, CHINS does not have a standardized assessment instrument to help identify needs and risk factors. Because of this, courts can struggle to provide personalized care to each child.

Our examination revealed significant variations in CHINS implementation across counties and identified several areas for improvement, including resource allocation, standardized assessment, early intervention, community-based alternatives, family engagement, trauma-informed care, and evidence-based practices.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the convening discussions and analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the CHINS process in Georgia:

## 1 DEVELOP A STANDARDIZED CHINS PROTOCOL SAMPLE FOR JUVENILE COURTS TO USE IN THEIR CREATION OF LOCAL POLICIES AND PROGRAMS.

- Create a statewide protocol similar to the existing truancy protocol
- Increase consistency in CHINS assessment and intervention across all counties while;
- Including flexibility to address local needs and resources

## 2 ENHANCE RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND FUNDING.

- Explore new funding streams, including grants and public-private partnerships
- Develop resource-sharing strategies among different agencies; i.e. what funds are available for family preservation services, what are the criteria?
- Address the specific needs of rural counties with limited resources

## 3 IMPLEMENT EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS.

- Develop screening tools for schools to identify at-risk youth early
- Establish collaborative models between schools, community organizations, and the juvenile justice/child welfare system
- Create accessible and affordable prevention programs for families

## 4 IMPROVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT.

- Address barriers such as transportation issues and lack of understanding about court involvement
- Implement improved communication strategies, such as monthly virtual meetings with schools
- Enhance competency in family engagement strategies

## 5 EXPAND COMMUNITY-BASED ALTERNATIVES.

- Increase the availability of diversion programs across all counties
- Develop partnerships with community organizations to provide comprehensive services
- Establish methods to measure the effectiveness of these alternatives

## 6 PROMOTE EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES.

- Expand the use of proven interventions such as MST, FFT, and Strengthening Families programs
- Address implementation challenges, particularly related to funding
- Improve data collection and analysis methods to inform decision-making

## 7 ENHANCE TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE.

- Provide comprehensive training on trauma assessments for all CHINS professionals
- Integrate trauma-informed practices throughout the CHINS process
- Develop resources for ongoing professional development in trauma-informed care

# NEXT STEPS

To implement these recommendations and improve the CHINS process in Georgia, the following next steps are proposed:

01

## Establish a CHINS Improvement Task Force

- Form a dedicated group of partners to oversee the implementation of improvements
- Include representatives from juvenile courts, schools, community organizations, and statewide agencies (CJCJ, DJJ, DFCS, CJCC DCH, Resilient Georgia, Family Connection)
- Task the group with developing detailed action plans for each recommendation

02

## Develop a Standardized Assessment Tool

- Research and select an appropriate assessment tool (e.g., CANS - Child and Adolescent Needs & Strengths)
- Pilot the tool in select counties and gather feedback
- Develop a plan for statewide implementation and training

03

## Create a Comprehensive Training Program

- Design training modules covering trauma-informed care, competency, and evidence-based practices
- Implement a train-the-trainer model to ensure widespread dissemination of knowledge
- Establish ongoing professional development opportunities for CHINS coordinators and partners

04

## Enhance Data Collection and Analysis

- Develop a standardized data collection system for all CHINS cases across the state
- Establish key performance indicators to measure the effectiveness of interventions
- Create regular reporting mechanisms to inform ongoing improvements

05

### Engage in Legislative Assessment and Action

- Identify necessary legislative changes to support CHINS improvements
- Collaborate with policymakers to draft and introduce relevant legislation
- Mobilize partners to advocate for these changes

06

### Expand Community Partnerships

- Identify potential community partners in each county
- Develop a framework for collaboration between CHINS coordinators and community organizations
- Create a resource directory of available services for CHINS youth and families

07

### Implement a Public Awareness Campaign

- Develop materials to educate the public about the CHINS process and available resources
- Engage with media outlets to share success stories and highlight the importance of early intervention
- Create targeted outreach strategies for at-risk communities

08

### Secure Additional Funding

- Research and apply for relevant grants at the state and federal levels
- Explore public-private partnership opportunities
- Develop a strategy for more equitable resource allocation across counties

By focusing on these recommendations and the next steps, Georgia can significantly enhance its CHINS process, ensuring more effective support for all high-needs youth and their families across the state.





**Thank you for taking the time to read this brief. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our findings further, please don't hesitate to reach out to us.**

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## **Contact**

 75 Marietta Street NW, Atlanta, GA 30303

 404-521-0311

 [georgiavoices.org](http://georgiavoices.org)