

GEORGIA CRIMINAL JUSTICE DATA LANDSCAPE INSIGHTS

**THE FRONT PORCH: A CASE STUDY
ON CHATHAM COUNTY JUVENILE
COURT'S RESOURCE CENTER**



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Introduction

Diversion programs for youth involved in the United States juvenile justice system aim to keep youth from further involvement with the justice system by connecting them to services and supports.¹ While the structure, requirements, and service components of diversion programs vary widely across the nation, efforts can be most useful when youth are able to access services in the communities in which they live.² In Georgia, a multi-agency resource center named The Front Porch was established as a part of Chatham County’s Community Risk Reduction program. The center provides services to at-risk youth where they live.³

The Front Porch

The Front Porch is a community-based risk reduction program that aims to help children and families by offering community resources and diversion.⁴ Based in Savannah, Georgia, The Front Porch assists youth under the age of 18 and their families who are at risk of court involvement for delinquency^a or dependency^b as well as those likely to be found by the court to be Children in Need of Services (CHINS).⁵ (For more information on CHINS, see the CHINS section in the full *Georgia Criminal Justice Data Landscape Insights* report.) Participation with The Front Porch is voluntary, and youth who are referred are assessed to identify needs, behaviors, or situations that might need intervention. The Front Porch follows these guiding principles:

- Community-based
- Inclusive
- Intentionally equitable
- Continuously developing staff
- See youth and family as partners
- Use approaches that are developmentally appropriate and strengths-based
- Individualized
- Research-based, data-driven, and believe in continuous evaluation
- Collaborative

^a O.C.G.A. § 15-11-2 defines a delinquent act as “an act committed by a child designated a crime by the laws of this state, or by the laws of another state if the act occurred in that state, under federal laws, or by local ordinance, and the act is not an offense applicable only to a child or a juvenile traffic offense.”

^b O.C.G.A. § 15-11-2 defines a dependent child as “a child who: A) Has been abused or neglected and is in need of the protection of the court; B) Has been placed for care or adoption in violation of law; or C) Is without his or her parent, guardian, or legal custodian.”



THE FRONT PORCH VISION

We envision a Chatham County where every young person and family is met by their community and institutions with trust and compassion. Where they are emotionally and physically safe and where they have easy access to responsive resources they need to heal and thrive. So that they develop the radical hope and power needed to navigate and overcome inequitable systems with knowledge, guidance, and support.

Referrals can be made by law enforcement, school employees, or social service agencies, and the initiative also takes self-referrals. When a referral is made, the consenting youth and family are assessed for needs. Participation is voluntary. A case manager refers the family to additional agencies. The case manager follows up with the family and service providers and establishes a case plan that is followed for 90 days. Families continue receiving services if they are needed. Case plans include options like individual and/or family counseling; activities for the family; mental health services; educational support; housing; job assistance; and food and clothing resources.

The Front Porch also provides onsite resources and services, including the Katrina Woodley Clothing Closet, the Evans and Middleton Technology Access Closet, the Shelter from the Rain Diaper Bank, prosocial activities, animal therapy, monthly family-friendly lunch and learns, and the People of Action Caring for Kids (P.A.C.K.) Food and Hygiene Pantry.

EVOLUTION OF THE FRONT PORCH

The Front Porch began when former Chatham County juvenile court judges Leroy Burke III and Lisa Colbert, along with the current presiding juvenile judge Thomas Cole, saw a need for early intervention and community support for the increasing number of low-risk youth coming into contact with the juvenile court. In 2015, the judges explored diversion approaches in other states. A multi-agency resource center in Lake Charles, Louisiana, inspired them to assemble a team and collaborate with Georgetown University to develop their own center.

The Front Porch was established in late 2018 as a partnership between 11 agencies: the Chatham County Juvenile Court, Chatham County, the City of Savannah, the District Attorney of Chatham County, the Savannah Chatham County Public School System, the Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council, the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services, the Gateway Community Service Board, the Coastal Georgia Indicators Coalition, St.

Joseph’s/Candler, and The Mediation Center of the Coastal Empire, Inc. An oversight group consisting of representatives from each agency as well as additional community stakeholders provides direction for the continued growth of The Front Porch.

The Front Porch began accepting referrals on October 1, 2018, and by the end of that year, it had served 64 youth. By the end of 2019, the Front Porch had served 319 youth, a nearly five-fold increase. In 2020, The Front Porch experienced a decrease in referrals due to the COVID-19 pandemic as referral agencies and service providers shifted their operations. As a result, The Front Porch conducted various outreach efforts to re-engage the community, including presentations to law enforcement, school social workers, and other community stakeholders. Representatives from The Front Porch also participated in back-to-school events and conducted outreach with parents. Additionally, in 2020, The Front Porch became a member and “founding partner” of the National Assessment Center Association, an organization created to improve national-level coordination, best practice sharing, networking, and advocacy among assessment centers.⁶ Following these efforts, The Front Porch began to see referrals pick back up.

In 2021, a total of 437 youth were referred to The Front Porch (Figure 1). Of those, 245 received an assessment of needs from The Front Porch, and 234 accepted an individual/family service plan. Additionally, in 2021, The Front Porch made 215 referrals to mental health providers and 116 referrals to prosocial activities,^c with 165 youth following up with at least one referral. Finally, 112 youth completed the program within 90 days in 2021.

Figure 1. Key Front Porch Outcomes, 2021

Total Youth Referred	437
Received Assessments	245
Accepted Service Plan	234
Mental Health Referrals	215
Prosocial Activity Referrals	116
Followed-Up with Referral	165
Completed Program within 90 Days	112

Source: The Front Porch quarterly reports

^c Prosocial behaviors and activities are those that involve building social skills and interactions with children of a similar age.

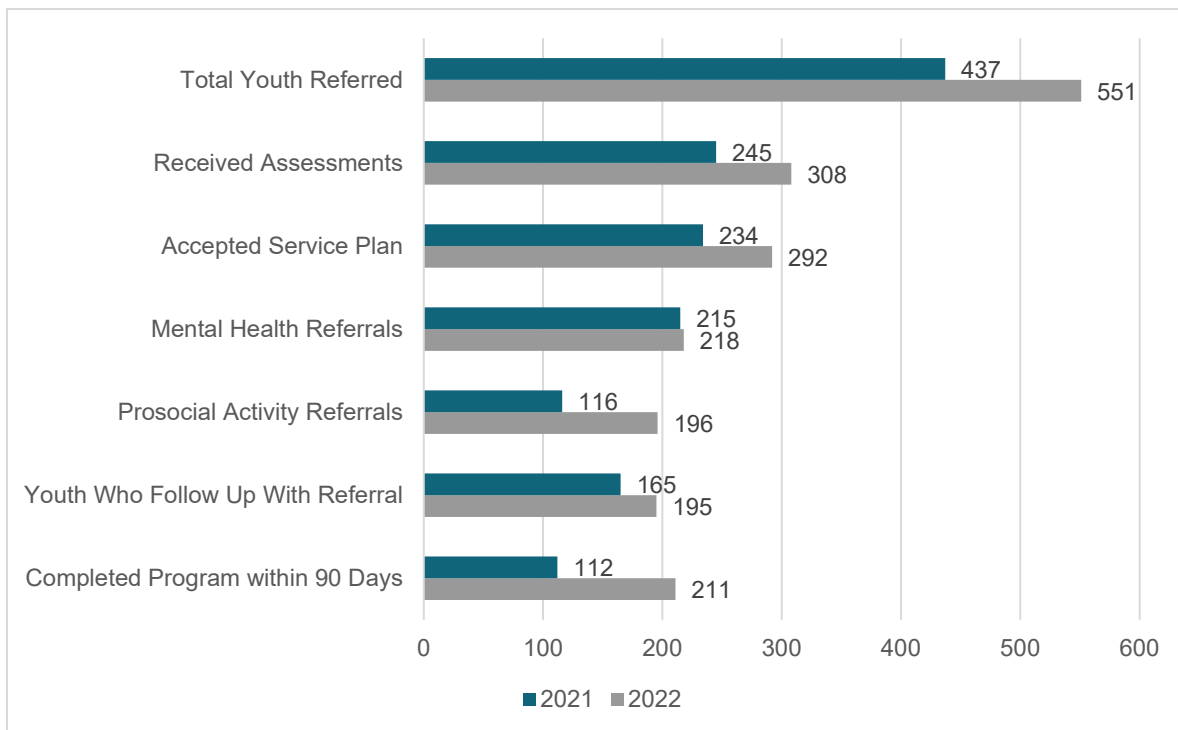
By the end of 2021, The Front Porch celebrated three years of providing services to the community. During its first three years, the program served more than 700 families in Chatham County.

Continuing to Grow

In 2022, 307 families were served through assessments, referrals, service linkages, and case management.⁷ A total of 55 computer tablets were secured for the Technology Access Closet; 200 families were given new school uniforms and/or school supplies; and over 1,000 socks were collected for families in need.

In 2022, a total of 551 unduplicated youth were referred to The Front Porch, a 26% increase over 2021 (Figure 2). The Front Porch also saw increases in 2022 for each of the other outcomes, including youth receiving assessments (25.7% increase), youth who accepted a service plan (24.8% increase), number of mental health referrals (1.4% increase) and prosocial activity referrals (68.9% increase), number of youth who followed up with at least one referral (18.2% increase), and number of youth who completed the program within 90 days (88.4% increase).

Figure 2. Front Porch Outcomes, 2021–2022

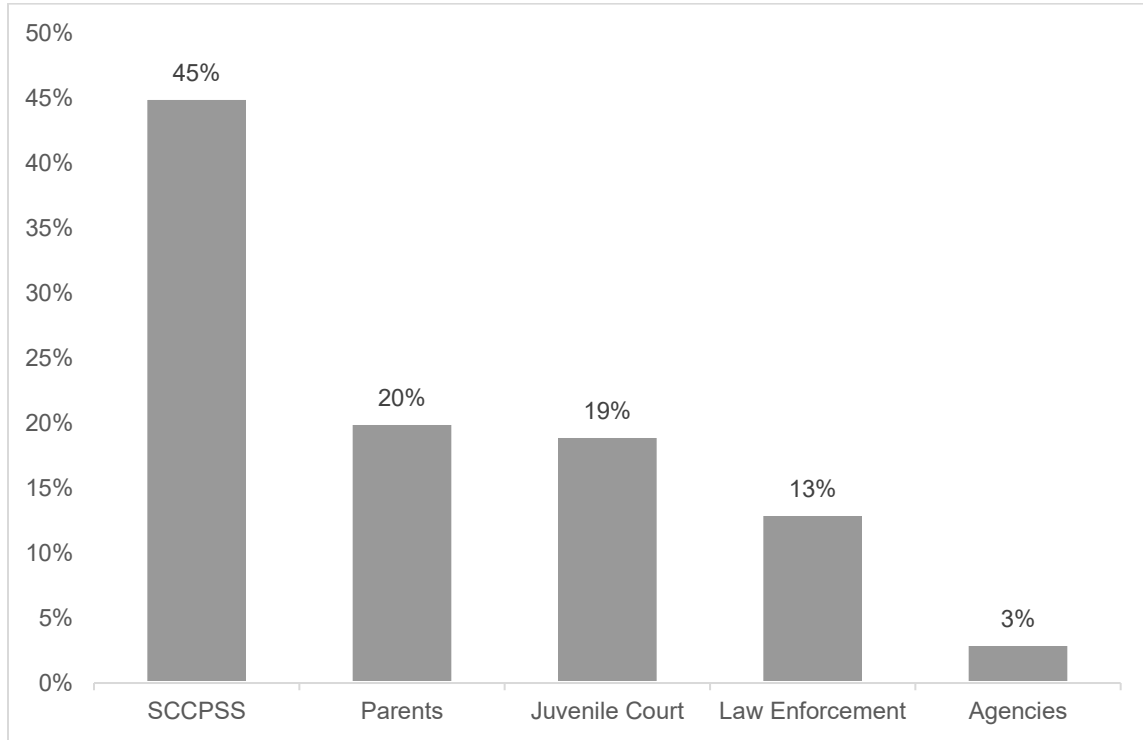


Source: The Front Porch Quarterly Reports



During 2022, The Front Porch received nearly half of its referrals from the public school system (Figure 3). Around one-fifth of referrals came from parents, while another 19% were from the juvenile court. Finally, 13% of referrals came from law enforcement officers, and 3% from other agencies.

Figure 3. The Front Porch Referral Source, 2021–2022

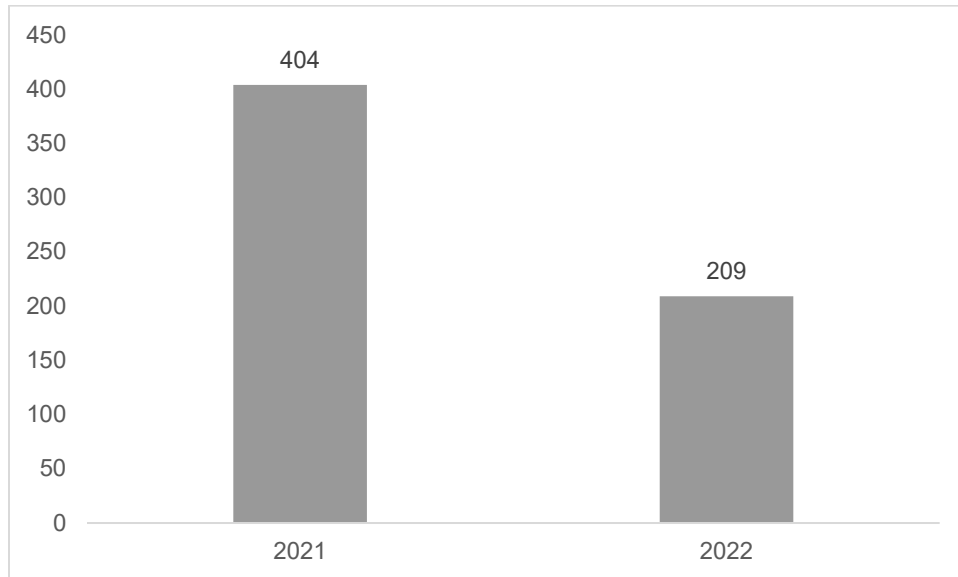


Note: SCCPSS means Savannah-Chatham County Public School System.

Source: The Front Porch 2022 Annual Report

For law enforcement, in 2021, officers spent 404 hours processing youth in the juvenile justice system (Figure 4). In 2022, officers only spent 209 hours processing youth, a 48.3% decrease. Note that this reduction could be the result of multiple factors, but The Front Porch monitors law enforcement hours processing juveniles as a metric of interest in its quarterly reports.

Figure 4. Number of Hours Spent by Law Enforcement Processing Juveniles, 2021–2022



Note: Hours spent by law enforcement were calculated based on the time it generally takes to process a youth in the system. It takes approximately four hours to process a youth in the juvenile system.

Source: The Front Porch Quarterly Reports

In a 2022 survey of youth and caregivers, **93%** of youth said they felt that The Front Porch staff listened to their concerns, and **95%** of caregivers said they felt that The Front Porch involved them in making decisions about what happens next. Additionally, **92%** of caregivers indicated they felt this visit had a positive impact on their child and their family as a whole.



Interviews with The Front Porch Case Managers and Founders

The Institute of Government research team conducted four interviews for this case study: two with case managers to gain insights into The Front Porch’s practices, evolution, and future growth, and two with founding members of the organization to learn more about the origins and growth of The Front Porch. Case managers were asked how long they had been with The Front Porch, how they became interested and involved with the organization, what a typical day on the job looks like, and how they see The Front Porch continuing to evolve (see Appendix A for the interview guide). The founders were asked what need they saw in the community, what the process establishing The Front Porch looked like, and strengths and challenges facing The Front Porch.

CASE MANAGERS

Both case managers had been with The Front Porch since it opened in October 2018, serving as the lead case managers. Both came from Chatham County Juvenile Court and had educational backgrounds in criminal justice. One had worked with the juvenile court since graduating from college. The other had started with the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), then worked as probation officer with the Department of Corrections before transitioning to the juvenile court. While they were at the Chatham County Juvenile Court, a diversion committee was created, with which both case managers were involved. Both joined The Front Porch when it was established.

As the lead case managers, they work on an interdisciplinary team at The Front Porch that includes two probation officers, a DFCS worker, and a school social worker. The case managers reported that, during a normal day on the job, they respond to referrals, conduct assessments, supervise, and follow-up with service providers and family clients to ensure they are connected with the service plans put in place. Case managers mentioned that the majority of referrals come from the public school system, but they also receive referrals from the juvenile court, local law enforcement agencies, and from parent calls.

One case manager said the number of assessments varies day-to-day, ranging from one assessment to more than three assessments in a single day. The assessment process involves going through intake, gaining consent, and conducting an assessment with the parent(s) and child. One case manager emphasized coordination efforts, saying there are “lots of phone calls if there are any issues or concerns.” Additionally, according to the case managers, days can vary as there are many different outreach opportunities related to the various services offered, such as the Clothing Closet and monthly family lunch and learns.

“[I enjoy] being a support to parents who don’t really know what to do, who to call, or what resources are available. Some [families] come in and are frustrated or tired, so being able to give them some solace that they are doing the right thing and that there is something we can hopefully help them with.”

When asked about what they enjoy the most about being a case manager, both respondents talked about the value in helping families in the community while keeping at-risk youth from further involvement with the juvenile justice system. One case manager said, “[I enjoy] helping the families get connected to services they aren’t aware are out there ... it’s nice to keep them out of getting involved with the court.” The other stated, “[I enjoy] being a support to parents who don’t really know what to do, who to call, or what resources are

available. Some [families] come in and are frustrated or tired, so being able to give them some solace that they are doing the right thing and that there is something we can hopefully help them with.”

Both case managers mentioned they have received many positive responses and enjoy seeing the success stories from The Front Porch. One case manager described their primary role as a “problem solver...I think that’s something about me that I generally gravitate towards. Help people with their problems or give them some guidance.”

The two case managers also spoke about challenges they and The Front Porch face, including client motivation, existing service limitations such as waiting times, and large caseloads. One case manager noted that it is challenging “when you really want to help, but they [clients] don’t buy into it or if they just ‘go through the motions.’ If they put the effort in, then there can be a real improvement.” The other added, “[The caseload] can be overwhelming at times if you have a lot of cases. We want to be able to give them the best services we can.”

Despite these challenges, the case managers emphasized the tremendous growth and unique characteristics of The Front Porch. They both spoke about the increase in referrals, which they attributed to the extensive outreach efforts. One case manager said that The Front Porch has really “found its footing in the community,” with greater community awareness of the organization and strong community investment in its success.

One case manager said The Front Porch is unique in that, “We try to identify specific needs and try to approach those needs strategically.” For example, the case manager described a time when parents were frequently asking about opportunities for summer programming for their children. In response, a team at The Front Porch hosted a summer camp fair during an evening barbeque. Representatives from 17 different camps in the community provided information to



parents. The case manager added that the monthly lunch and learns feature guest speakers who address needs often brought up by parents, providing a “community-engaged approach to respond to parents’ needs.” The other case manager spoke about the interdisciplinary team at the multi-agency resource center, stating, “A lot of agencies are located in one building that can give insight ... we can work together as a team, and that makes us unique.”

Finally, both case managers said they hoped the staff size would increase in the future and the organization would continue to receive ample exposure in the community. One case manager lauded the strength of current leadership as The Front Porch continues to garner community support and consensus among its many partners.

FOUNDERS

The research team also interviewed two of the founders of The Front Porch: a superior court judge in Chatham County and an executive director of Coastal Georgia Indicators Coalition. Both founders discussed the high proportion of police contact with youth in the county as a catalyst for establishing The Front Porch. During early stakeholder meetings, judicial leaders convened “problem-solving workgroups” to assess current strengths and weaknesses. During these early meetings, stakeholders from different areas of the community noticed that they were seeing the same youth, but there were few options for youth diversion at the time.

One founder said that during early stakeholder meetings, they collected and presented data, developed goals, and explored multi-agency resource centers, particularly ones in Las Vegas and in Louisiana. Many presentations were made across the community to bring more “people to the table,” and significant efforts were made to foster community buy-in. The idea was to convey that “there were limitations with the previous procedures in place, and we did not have to wait until they [youth] get in trouble before providing the services they need. [They] didn’t need to already be system-involved to get in the door.”

One founding member emphasized that during this process “we had to get all the players together and understand where the opportunities were.” This founder added, “The group we gathered was so committed to seeing it through. People stayed at the table ... high commitment and high engagement goes hand-in-hand.” The founder also noted that support and help from a national foundation and the police chief during this process were critical to the initiative’s success. One founding member stressed that it was imperative to “get the audience with people who needed to be there...[we] needed to get the decision makers.”

When asked about what they enjoyed the most about the process of establishing The Front Porch, one founding member said finding “a longer-term solution that wasn’t only reactive.” The other member stated, “What gets me up in the morning ... when there’s an opportunity to

make a change in the system.” However, they both noted challenges for the initiative, including finding sustainable funding, particularly because The Front Porch is a county program that requires diverse funding streams, much like a nonprofit. Thus, “it’s a real challenge ... it’s not a special project or program, it’s just as vital as the [juvenile] court.” Other challenges included political disagreements, the need for consensus building among a diverse group of stakeholders, and securing the involvement of the appropriate decision-makers.

The founding members also discussed the growth of The Front Porch, particularly the expansion of operating hours, staff, partners, and referral sources. Both members discussed the growth of community involvement as a tremendous strength for The Front Porch. One also noted that increased awareness of The Front Porch has been beneficial, saying, “It’s morphing into a place where self-referrals happen—a place where kids can be comfortable coming here on their own.” They later added, “[The] community is changing, so we always need to be out there and get creative to get people in and take the facility to where they are.” Adaptability was also cited as a strength, with one founding member stating, “[The Front Porch is] very agile in being able to change direction while holding true to the mission of the organization.”

As for future growth, both members talked about finding ways to be competitive for different funding sources. Additionally, both highlighted building a closer relationship with public health partners for “warm handoffs for close-by services,” expanding hours of operation, and using data-driven approaches to outreach and education.

Conclusion

The Front Porch has grown substantially since opening in late 2018. As a multi-agency resource center that has served more than 1,000 families in Chatham County, The Front Porch continues to offer a community-engaged approach to youth diversion. The Front Porch offers various onsite services, including access to clothing, technology, food, diapers, and hygiene products. Case managers work with youth and their families to locate and provide services for a range of needs, including counseling, prosocial activities, mental health, educational support, housing, and job assistance.

For other communities looking to draw upon the successes of The Front Porch, interviews suggest it is essential to foster community investment from various stakeholders, including key decision-makers, and to establish a committed, interdisciplinary network with extensive outreach efforts. Just as leaders in Chatham County drew upon examples of multi-agency resource centers for diversion in other parts of the country, The Front Porch can serve as an example for replication in other communities seeking alternatives to court system involvement.

Appendix A. Interview Guide for Case Managers

- How long have you worked with The Front Porch?
- What is your background? (i.e., education, professional)
- Have you held other positions with The Front Porch?
- How did you become interested in working for The Front Porch?
- How did you originally hear about The Front Porch?
- What does a normal day on the job look like for you?
- What do you enjoy the most about your current position?
- What do you enjoy the least about your current position?
- What do you see as your primary role as a case manager?
- What is the biggest challenge facing case managers?
- How much have you seen The Front Porch evolve since you've been a part of the organization?
- What makes The Front Porch unique compared to other organizations doing similar work?
- How do you see The Front Porch changing/evolving in the future?
- What strengths do you see for The Front Porch to continue to grow/evolve?
- What are some challenges to future growth?
- Is there anything else that I have not mentioned that you would like to share? (About The Front Porch or your current role)



Appendix B. Interview Guide for Founding Members

- What is your current title and occupation?
- What is your background? (i.e., education, professional)
- What inspired you to get involved in establishing The Front Porch? What need did you see in the community?
- What has your involvement looked like with The Front Porch? What about your current involvement?
- What did the process look like for establishing The Front Porch?
- What did you enjoy the most about this process and where The Front Porch is today?
- What did you enjoy the least about the process?
- What do you see is your primary role as a founding member of The Front Porch?
- What is the biggest challenge facing The Front Porch?
- How much have you seen The Front Porch evolve since you've been involved?
- What makes The Front Porch unique compared to other organizations doing similar work?
- How do you see The Front Porch changing/evolving in the future?
- What strengths do you see for The Front Porch to continue to grow/evolve?
- What are some challenges to future growth?
- Is there anything else that I have not mentioned that you would like to share? (About The Front Porch or your current role)



Endnotes

¹ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, US Department of Justice. n.d. "Diversion programs." Retrieved from ojjdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/mpg-iguides/topics/diversion-programs/index.html

² Schlesinger, T. 2018. Decriminalizing racialized youth through juvenile diversion. *The Future of Children*, 28(1), 59–82.

³ O.C.G.A. § 15-11-38.

⁴ The Front Porch. 2023. Retrieved from frontporchchatham.org/

⁵ The Front Porch. 2023. "About us." Retrieved from frontporchchatham.org/home/about

⁶ The Front Porch. n.d. Quarterly reports. Retrieved from Chatham County Juvenile Court.

⁷ The Front Porch. n.d. "Annual report 2022." Retrieved from canva.com/design/DAFXZFuIEiM/DDRRfqvYiFPihszb8jCjdO/view?utm_content=DAFXZFuIEiM&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=publishsharelink

