

# ISSUE BRIEF

## **Strip Search Procedures and Outcomes in the Division of Youth Services: Persistent use of strip searches reveal little contraband and lack effective oversight.**

Five female youths residing at a Division of Youth Services' (DYS) youth center were required to remove their state-issued uniform and undergo a search of their unclothed bodies. The only documented justification for these searches was a tip staff received that one of the youths was charging what appeared to be a vape pen on the classroom computer.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the youths underwent a strip search, also known as a Full Search.<sup>2</sup> During these searches, youth are required to remove all their clothing in front of at least one adult staff member. Staff will view all parts of the youth's nude body and may require the youth to manipulate parts of their body to improve the staff's view.

Each of the five female youths underwent such searches. None of those searches yielded a vape pen or any other contraband.<sup>3</sup>

Six months later, at a different DYS youth center, a 14-year-old was observed potentially putting something in his pants. Staff documented this observation as justification for conducting a strip search on the youth. When he refused, the youth was placed in a room by himself until he agreed to the search. More than 10 hours later, the youth complied and removed all his clothing in front of staff. Nothing was found.<sup>4</sup>

That same month, staff at a DYS youth center suspected a youth had drug paraphernalia on his person. The youth reported that he underwent three strip searches that same day. During the second search, the youth said four adult staff members participated in the search.<sup>5</sup> The youth would later say he felt "sexually harassed" during the searches.

No contraband was found during the searches.

The ability to locate and remove contraband from DYS youth centers is vital to ensure the safety and well-being of the more than 2,000 youth who reside in – and the staff who work in – these facilities across Colorado. The introduction of contraband can – and has – had life altering impacts for some of the youth residing in the youth centers.<sup>6</sup> The CPO is acutely aware that searches are one of few methods DYS staff have to locate and remove dangerous contraband, such as illegal substances and weapons.<sup>7</sup> Locating suspected contraband is one of the most frequent reasons staff document to justify conducting strip searches on youth, who may be anywhere between the ages of 10 to 21. However, finding contraband during a strip search is rarely the outcome of these searches.

## BACKGROUND

The Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) started monitoring the use of Full Searches at DYS youth centers during 2023 and has continued this work to present day. During this time, the CPO has received multiple cases concerning youth residing in DYS youth centers who underwent Full Searches. The CPO's review of those cases found that these invasive searches are often done in a manner non-compliant with DYS' own policies. However, the CPO was not the only entity in the state concerned about how DYS staff perform Full Searches. During March 2024, simultaneous to the CPO's early work on this issue, DYS implemented changes to its search policy. These changes were made with the intention of adding safeguards and specific documentation requirements for when a youth could be strip searched. However, in reviewing search logs completed after the policies were changed, the CPO found the revised policies were still not being followed. Searches were still not being consistently authorized or documented per DYS policy.

In total, the CPO reviewed 1,009 strip searches conducted by DYS staff. That review showed that, on average, these invasive searches result in the identification of contraband approximately 10% of the time. Additionally, the CPO's review of those 1,009 searches found that staff conducting the searches violated DYS policy 1,006 times. These violations include a lack of documented approvals from youth center administrators, only one staff member conducting the search when two are required to be present and unclear documentation of the reason for the search and the results. In some instances, multiple violations occurred in a single search.

Additionally, the CPO's review of these revised policies revealed that there is still no effective oversight to ensure these searches were completed or documented properly. Because of this, the CPO remains concerned that there is a lack of oversight regarding how these searches are conducted – including a lack of reviews as to whether the searches were justified and if the search was the appropriate method to address the concern. Research has shown that, even when a strip search is performed as intended and in line with all policies and procedures, youth may still experience depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, shame and guilt.<sup>8</sup> These impacts can increase when youth have been victims of abuse, which is disproportionately the case for youth involved in the juvenile delinquency system.<sup>9</sup>

In the sections that follow, the CPO presents its findings from its review of DYS' use of Full Searches. Given the invasive nature of these searches, and their likelihood to have negative impacts on the youth, and the low rate in which these searches actually produce suspected contraband, the CPO is recommending additional oversight and transparency regarding how searches are performed and the results they yield.

<sup>1</sup> Trails Incident ID: 2220624

<sup>2</sup> DYS Policy S-9-13(J): A full search is a search by sight only after youth remove their clothes and/or gown. Employees shall not physically touch the youth during the full search.

<sup>3</sup> Contraband is any item or article in the possession of a youth or found in the youth center, that has not been officially issued, purchased or approved. This includes items that can be used as a weapon or for the purposes of escape, bodily harm, or presents a safety and/or security concern in the youth center, residential contract program or child placement agency.

<sup>4</sup> Trails Incident ID: 2232396

<sup>5</sup> CPO Case 2025-9569

<sup>6</sup> Sam Tabachnik, "Teen in Greeley youth detention center died from fentanyl overdose," The Denver Post, January 28, 2025, <https://www.denverpost.com/2025/01/28/platte-valley-youth-services-center-overdose-death-autopsy-report/>

<sup>7</sup> Sam Tabachnik, "How conditions inside Golden's now-empty juvenile detention facility reached a breaking point," The Denver Post, September 26, 2025, <https://www.denverpost.com/2025/09/26/lookout-mountain-youth-detention-violence-assaults/>

<sup>8</sup> Riya Saha Shah and Jessica Rachel Feerman, "Strip-Searching Children Is State-Imposed Trauma," Human Rights Magazine, The American Bar Association, 10/12/2021, <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/resources/human-rights/archive/strip-searching-children-state-imposed-trauma/>

<sup>9</sup> Carly B Dierkhising, Susan J Ko, Briana Woods-Jaeger, Ernestine C Briggs, Robert Lee, Robert S Pynoos. Trauma histories among justice-involved youth: findings from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. European Journal of Psychotraumatology. July 16, 2013, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3714673/pdf/EJPT-4-20274.pdf>

## Division of Youth Services Search Policy Overview

During Fiscal Year 2023-24, more than 2,000 youth in Colorado, ages 10 to 21, were detained in one of 15 DYS youth centers.<sup>10</sup> These youth entered the youth center pending the outcome of juvenile criminal charges, or were living there after being adjudicated, or convicted, of a crime, similar to adults who are sentenced to jail or prison.<sup>11</sup> The crimes the youth were accused of, or were found to have committed, varied in severity levels from theft to homicide.

While the mission of the DYS is *“To protect, restore and improve public safety by utilizing a continuum of care that provides effective supervision, promotes accountability to victims and communities, and helps youth lead constructive lives through positive youth development,”* there are still similarities with adult correctional facilities.<sup>12</sup> One example of this includes the requirement that youth submit to having staff complete a full search of their unclothed body, also known as a strip search. If staff have reasonable suspicion that a youth has a prohibited object, also known as contraband, a strip search may be authorized.<sup>13</sup> Examples of contraband include illegal substances, cellphones and weapons.

The DYS policies allow youth center staff to search youth for specific reasons, and there are varying levels of searches.<sup>14</sup> A Pat Search does not require a youth to undress and involves staff searching the youth by sight and touch, using the back of the staff’s hand when searching around the youth’s private areas. In a Personal Search, the youth removes their clothing but is provided a gown to wear while their clothing is fully searched. The most intensive search process is a Full Search, which requires the youth to remove all of their clothing while their bodies are searched thoroughly by sight.

All youth receive a Full Search upon their admission to the youth center. Youth are also searched after in-person visits with family or supports, as well as when returning to the youth center after an appointment or court hearing off of the youth center property. Arguably, the most subjective reason for staff to complete a Full Search is for reasonable suspicion that a youth may have contraband. This suspicion can arise from staff overhearing youth discussing contraband, seeing youth with potential contraband, as well as the smell of contraband, such as marijuana.<sup>15</sup>

The DYS policy outlines the specific procedures staff must follow in conducting the Full Search, as well as requirements for how the search must be documented in the youth center’s handwritten DYS search log. The DYS search logs should contain information regarding each search, including when it was conducted, which DYS staff approved and completed the search, the purpose of the search and whether contraband was found.

## DYS 2024 Search Policy Revisions

Until the policy update implemented by DYS during March 2024, the DYS search log entry was potentially the only documentation that a search occurred. Should any required information be missing, or if a youth reported a concern regarding the search process, there would be no additional documentation of what led to the search, how it was performed or the outcome.

<sup>10</sup> During the CPO’s review, several DYS youth centers have been closed, opened or reopened. The CPO’s review of search logs included: Aspire Youth Services Center, Betty K. Marler Youth Services Center, Clear Creek/Summit Assessment Center, Gilliam Youth Services Center, Golden Peak Youth Services Center, Grand Mesa Youth Services Center, Marvin W. Foote Youth Services Center, Phoenix Youth Services Center, Platte Valley Youth Services Center, Prairie Vista Youth Services Center, Pueblo Youth Services Center, Rocky Mountain Youth Services Center, Spring Creek Youth Services Center, Summit Youth Services Center, Willow Point Youth Services Center and Zebulon Pike Youth Services Center.

<sup>11</sup> DYS Annual Report, FY 23-24, published January 6, 2025

<sup>12</sup> Mission statement from the DYS website, <https://cdhs.colorado.gov/dys>

<sup>13</sup> Per DYS Policy S-9-13, effective 7/1/25, “Reasonable suspicion exists when the facts known to the employee, taken together with rational inferences from those facts, create a reasonable and articulable suspicion of criminal activity which justifies the intrusion into an individual youth’s privacy. Some examples of reasonable suspicion include overhearing the youth discussing concealed drugs or weapons, or the smell of marijuana near the youth. Reasonable suspicion must be tied clearly to an individual youth, rather than a group of youth.”

<sup>14</sup> DYS Policy S-9-13

<sup>15</sup> DYS Policy S-9-13(J)(3)

The revisions to the Full Search portion of the policy included clarity regarding what reasonable suspicion entails, that youth shall not be touched during the process and required additional documentation of the search including why it was conducted and the outcome. These policy revisions took important steps in improving the documentation of the Full Search process, and when warranted, limiting a youth's exposure to this invasive and potentially trauma-inducing type of search.

However, the CPO remains concerned that there are no additional accountability standards in place to monitor for adherence to these policies. Youth in DYS youth centers have likely experienced multiple traumas during their lives, and a search that requires them to remove all their clothing in front of adults can add to that trauma or trigger other trauma responses. Knowing that psychological damage to youth is likely, even when strip searches are performed exactly as intended, it is even more alarming to consider the consequences when the strip searches are not being carried out per policy and are not finding the targeted dangerous items.

## CPO ANALYSIS

The CPO first began reviewing DYS Full Searches during August 2023, after it received a complaint from a youth residing at a DYS youth center.<sup>16</sup> The youth reported that he was being targeted by staff and falsely accused of breaking the rules.<sup>17</sup> The youth elaborated, stating that staff required him to undergo a Full Search at least weekly, whenever there was talk of contraband in the youth center. However, the youth reported that no contraband was found on him, or other youth who were being searched. In response to the complaint received by the youth, the CPO initially reviewed relevant Trails documentation, including Incident Reports, case notes and the search logs for the DYS youth center where the individual youth was located.<sup>18</sup> Based on those search logs, the CPO observed multiple potential violations of DYS policy, including missing documentation as to whether an administrator approved the search, and which staff performed the search.

Due to the number of issues identified in the youth's case, the CPO became concerned about the DYS' search protocol statewide and requested the search logs for all DYS youth centers from August 1, 2023, through October 31, 2023.

The review of these logs focused only on Full Searches performed for reasonable suspicion due to that search type being specific to the youth's complaint. It is also the search type that is most subjectively performed. The review of all DYS youth center search logs found that 441 searches for reasonable suspicion were completed during that time period, and there were 305 violations of DYS policy. According to the CPO's review of Full Searches performed during the three-month period in 2023, contraband was found, on average, in only 9% of these searches. Additionally, the CPO was concerned that the observed documentation issues were a symptom of a larger systemic issue and were potentially impacting how the searches were completed and how youth experience them.

Shortly after the CPO completed its review of the 2023 search logs, the DYS implemented its revised search policy during March 2024. As stated above, the changes contained in the new policy addressed some of the concerns identified in the CPO's statewide review. However, the CPO continued to monitor search logs from DYS youth centers to determine if the revised policies were improving compliance with DYS search policy and the rate at which the invasive searches resulted in contraband.

<sup>16</sup> Youth in DYS youth centers have phone access to the CPO, and there are posters throughout each youth center detailing the CPO's purpose and contact information. When youth contact the CPO, they are offered a virtual meeting to discuss their concerns confidentially. The CPO then conducts a review with the goal of resolving the youth's concern and providing additional education and support regarding how the youth can continue to advocate for themselves.

<sup>17</sup> CPO Case 2023-7641

<sup>18</sup> Trails is Colorado's comprehensive child welfare and DYS electronic information system. DYS Policy requires Incident Reports be entered into Trails.

The CPO's review of those logs found:

- During June, July and August 2024, there were 284 Full Searches for reasonable suspicion – 157 fewer searches compared to the number of Full Searches done during August, September, October 2023. Even with the decreased number of searches, the CPO still identified 327 policy violations. Contraband was found, on average, 6% of the time.
- During January, February and March 2025, staff at DYS youth centers conducted 284 Full Searches, with an average contraband identification rate of 16%. The CPO identified 374 policy violations in how these searches were carried out. This may show an improvement in contraband detection, but the number of potential policy violations in carrying out these searches remained a concern.

Ultimately, it appeared that the policy changes enacted during March 2024 did not lead to better adherence to policy.

### Need for Additional Oversight

In total, the CPO's review of the DYS search logs found that, while the total number of Full Searches for reasonable suspicion may have initially decreased, the number of policy violations remained steady at 300 or more during each three-month period reviewed. While searches can serve an important function, the seriousness and intrusiveness of this process deserves the utmost adherence to policy and procedure.

The revised DYS search policy does not outline what measures are in place to internally monitor that these searches are not only taking place as required, but also in the most trauma-responsive manner possible. The Quality Assurance Youth Services (QAYS) is a unit within the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) Administrative Solutions. Their purpose is to support the DYS in providing a high level of services to all of the youth and families they serve.<sup>19</sup> Through regular reviews and collaboration, QAYS states that their goal is to provide feedback and support to the DYS youth centers. One of the ways they do this is through an annual compliance review report for each DYS youth center.

The CPO reviewed the QAYS Annual Compliance Review Reports for all youth centers. The CPO observed that while there are standards that address the youth centers' adherence to some search policies, these standards appear to focus on Full Searches at the time of admission to the youth center and after face-to-face visits. Documentation of Full Searches completed for reasonable suspicion do not appear to be reviewed in the QAYS Annual Compliance Review Reports.

Due to the volume of policy violations identified in the reviewed DYS search logs, and the impact on youth, the CPO believes that the youth centers' adherence to Full Search policy and procedures requires more oversight through the QAYS process.

## NATIONAL POLICY RESEARCH

The CPO researched policies for youth centers across the country and found that at least 28 other states address the use of Full Searches in their regulations or statutes.<sup>20</sup> In many cases, these policies are similar to those in Colorado. For example, in at least 20 states, policy requires that staff completing the search be the same gender as the youth being searched. Only five states were identified that prohibit staff from touching the youth during the search, which is also the requirement in Colorado.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Quality Assurance Youth Services (QAYS) Operational Procedures Manual, June 2023

<sup>20</sup> This research was conducted in April 2025. It included searches of state statutes and regulations, but did not include state agency documents, individual facility policies or other related resources.

<sup>21</sup> DYS Policy S-9-13(J)

In at least 23 states, regulations or statutes clarify the legal standard – such as reasonable suspicion – that must exist to justify a Full Search. In Minnesota, this type of search is only allowed if there is a specific and immediate concern for contraband, and if an administrator or designee is aware of the situation and approves the Full Search.<sup>22</sup> These components also appear in Colorado’s DYS policies. However, Minnesota adds that a Full Search would only be allowed if other, less invasive search measures could not be used or did not assist in finding the contraband.<sup>23</sup>

When it comes to conducting these searches in the most trauma-responsive manner possible, Colorado appears to be in the minority of states whose regulations specifically describe how the process should respect the youth’s dignity and humanity. Colorado and Minnesota’s policies list the components that can make the search as trauma-responsive as possible. Some of these aspects include:

- Speaking respectfully to the youth and using their name.
- Talking the youth through the search and explaining each step as it occurs.
- Having only trained staff lead the search process.
- Coordinating with a behavioral health specialist if the youth refuses a part of the search process, or if the youth has questions.

While this is an important aspect to memorialize in policy, it is even more important that youth *experience* the search as trauma-responsive despite the uncomfortable and potentially triggering process.

In an effort to eliminate the need for strip searches, there are adult and juvenile facilities who are starting to use body scanning machines, similar to those used at some airports. The County Board of Supervisors in Fresno, California,<sup>24</sup> recently approved the purchase of three body scanners for their Juvenile Justice Campus that will be used when youth enter the facility and when they return after going to court or on an approved pass.<sup>25</sup> In a study conducted by the Department of Corrections in Washington State, it was found that while body scanners could not totally replace strip searches, it was a useful tool in greatly reducing the number of strip searches conducted as well as the staff’s time in conducting the searches.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the study found that the body scanners increased the ability to detect contraband, especially when it was hidden in a person’s body. The study credits the scanners for potentially saving lives by finding well-hidden and dangerous narcotics before they could be introduced into the facility.

Another potential benefit of body scanning technology is that it would potentially require fewer staff than the two currently required by policy to do a strip search and may eliminate the requirement for that staff to be the same gender as the person being searched.

<sup>22</sup> Minn. Stat. Ann. § 241.0215.

<sup>23</sup> Minn. Stat. Ann. § 241.0215.

<sup>24</sup> Fresno County Board of Supervisors Meeting Agenda for May 20, 2025, <https://fresnocounty.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=7396694&GUID=E21C9336-160B-4E18-97E6-372A088AF014&Options=&Search=>

<sup>25</sup> Summary of Fresno County Board of Supervisors discussion and approval of the purchase of three body scanners for juvenile justice campus, <https://citizenportal.ai/articles/3411280/Fresno-County/California/Fresno-County-approves-purchase-of-three-body-scanners-for-juvenile-justice-campus> (Full recording of discussion available [HERE](#).)

<sup>26</sup> Washington State Department of Corrections Report on Body Scanner Pilot to the Legislature. December 2019, [https://app.leg.wa.gov/ReportsToTheLegislature/Home/GetPDF?fileName=2019%20Legislative%20Report%20-%20Body%20Scanner%20Pilot%20-%20ESSB%206032\\_00fd3ade-dc5b-4c78-aebc-d16c9a989dee.pdf](https://app.leg.wa.gov/ReportsToTheLegislature/Home/GetPDF?fileName=2019%20Legislative%20Report%20-%20Body%20Scanner%20Pilot%20-%20ESSB%206032_00fd3ade-dc5b-4c78-aebc-d16c9a989dee.pdf)



## CPO RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the CPO's review of nine months of DYS search log entries, and more than 1,000 Full Searches, as well as research regarding the equivalent search processes in other states, the CPO is recommending the following to address potential gaps in the DYS Full Search policies with the goal of improving the youths' experience of this process in addition to the efficacy and ability to detect contraband.

The CPO recommends QAYS:

1. Review all DYS youth center search logs, specifically regarding Full Searches conducted for reasonable suspicion, during each quarterly monitoring visit. The CPO recommends that the QAYS Compliance Review Report be revised to ensure that Full Searches for reasonable suspicion are reviewed for the following:
  - a. The number of Full Searches conducted for reasonable suspicion
  - b. Adherence to documentation requirements in the DYS search log and Trails
  - c. The number of times a Full Search for reasonable suspicion yields contraband
  - d. Results of youth interviews regarding their experience during searches
2. Be required to provide public data regarding the monitoring of safety within DYS youth centers, to include frequency and appropriateness of youth searches and data related to whether contraband was found as a direct result of searches.

The CPO recommends DYS:

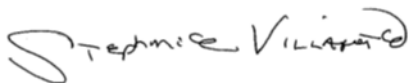
1. Develop electronic search logs to ensure clarity in each entry and potentially reduce errors and missing information.

## CONCLUSION

Full Searches for reasonable suspicion are sometimes needed to ensure the safety of the youth center, its staff and all youth. However, due to the invasive nature of the searches and the inherent trauma of the youth going through the process, strict policies should be followed to minimize negative impact to the youth and to maximize the detection of contraband. Without review of whether the policies are being followed, and correction when there is policy drift, it will not matter how strict or well-written the policies are. Should the above recommendations be implemented, the CPO believes that there will be greater transparency and accountability to ensure that youth are being searched appropriately, within policy, and in the most trauma-responsive manner possible.



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