

# CAN WE ELIMINATE THE YOUTH PRISON?



REIMAGINE JUSTICE

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The short answer is yes, we can eliminate the youth prison. In many places, we have already started. Reform-minded system actors and community-led advocates closed  $\frac{1}{3}$  of youth facilities from 2002 to 2012 and decreased the number of youth incarcerated by 60% since 2000. These reductions occurred while youth crime simultaneously plummeted.

## How is this possible?

A mix of factors led to the decline. First, a political climate extremely hostile to kids became friendlier to reform. As crime decreased, fewer youth were incarcerated, driving up incarceration costs per child. As these costs skyrocketed, budget-strapped officials looked for more productive ways to respond to youth crime. This, along with a twenty year decline in youth crime, allowed elected officials breathing room to consider alternatives.

Second, sophisticated advocates, youth, and families successfully organized to demand youth decarceration. Groups like the Youth First Initiative have worked to close enough facilities for states to reach a "tipping point" after which jurisdictions do not primarily respond to youth crime with incarceration.

And third, evidence-based practices implemented in lieu of incarceration have been shown to reduce recidivism. Practices such as Multisystemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy have undergone randomized controlled trials and have proven effective—a level of rigorous study that has not typically been applied to adult carceral practices.

## WHERE DO REFORM EFFORTS GO FROM HERE?

### 1. Finish the job.

Politicians must deny the urge to use prisons as employment programs. Resistance to prison closures is strongest in rural areas, where careers in correctional enforcement are framed as economic necessities. Maintaining jobs cannot justify the high costs of facilities that house so few youth, who are largely from distant urban communities. Instead, we must implement policies that support both incarceration reduction and economic growth, such as tax credits in communities with facility closures.

### 2. Capture and redeploy resources.

Repurpose youth facilities into structures like community centers and recreational facilities. Youth justice systems have historically partnered with non-profit organizations to provide "rehabilitative" programming to youth people—these efforts should be expanded and fortified, so that most of the money provided for youth incarceration goes toward rehabilitation as opposed to institutionalization.

### 3. Really invest in communities.

Divest funds from law enforcement and correctional facilities and divert government dollars to community-led programming. Instead of relying on the catch-all, back-end mechanism of incarceration to solve societal wrongdoing, prevent the wrongdoing proactively. Transfer power and resources to communities who are already providing social supports through initiatives like credible messenger programs and kinship reentry.



Supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation



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