



WHAT JUSTICE REQUIRES:
CLOSING YOUTH PRISONS



THE CENTER FOR
PUBLIC JUSTICE



About the Center for Public Justice

The Center for Public Justice (CPJ) is an independent, non-partisan, Christian organization devoted to civic education and policy development. We equip citizens and public officials to respond to God's call to pursue justice for all.

About Shared Justice

Shared Justice, an initiative of CPJ, is an online publication and community for Christian 20 and 30 somethings interested in the intersection of faith, politics, and justice. The defining feature of Shared Justice is the voice of college students and young professionals who shape the conversation – discovering together what it means to share justice.

With Thanks

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About the Authors



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Foreword

This report is one of three by *Shared Justice*, an online publication and community for Christian 20- and 30-somethings run by the Center for Public Justice. The reports' authors are Christian college students and young professionals inviting their peers to join them in the pursuit of justice.

The issues covered in these reports are often hidden in our own backyard: the vast racial and socioeconomic disparities in a juvenile justice system that locks up youth in adult-like prisons, the impossible decision that low-income families face when they have a child but their employers don't offer paid family leave, and the devastating impact of payday loans on families and children.


However, these reports were not written to simply make us aware of an injustice. Awareness of injustice is an invitation from God to love others more fully. But responding to God's good invitation -- taking seriously our responsibilities as citizens -- likely means something about our lives will change.

More than ever, we need Christian 20- and 30-somethings committed to the Biblical call to *do* justice, not just to learn about injustice. We need a generation of Christians committed to a vision of public justice in their communities.

Public justice is achieved when the institutions that contribute to human flourishing each make their fullest contribution. These are families, religious communities, businesses, and schools, among others. When government and citizens commit to pursuing public justice, each of these different institutions is better able to fulfill their right roles and responsibilities. Society flourishes when each sphere is in harmony with the others.

Each of the policy reports in the series offers tangible steps for action in your local community and state. We pray that you will take steps to pursue justice for your neighbors who may be afflicted by one of these injustices.

God calls us all to pursue justice together. The question is, will you join us?



Stephanie Summers
CEO, The Center for Public Justice

Executive Summary

Where were you when you were 13? What were you doing when you were 16? For 24,000 children in America right now, the answer is simple: serving time in prison.

A youth prison is typically an isolated, locked facility with 100+ beds that has many of the same features as an adult prison: razor wire, cellblocks, armed guards, and solitary confinement. While the number of incarcerated children in the U.S. has dropped in the last decade as states opt for restorative community-based alternatives to incarceration, approximately 80 youth prisons remain, holding 24,000 children between the ages of 13-18.

When taking a closer look at *who* these children and youth are, we discover disturbing evidence of significant racial and socioeconomic disparities. Low-income children of color are significantly more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers for the exact same crime. The majority of youth who are locked up are behind bars for nonviolent offenses such as delinquency (violation of parole, probation, etc.) and status offenses (actions that are not law violations for adults). Further, youth prisons fail to prepare youth to return to their communities as productive members of society. Nearly three out of four youth are rearrested within three years of release.

As Christians, we know that every person is created in the image of God. However, youth prisons degrade dignity and they physically, socially, and spiritually isolate children and youth from their families and communities.

What then does *true* justice look like for juvenile offenders?

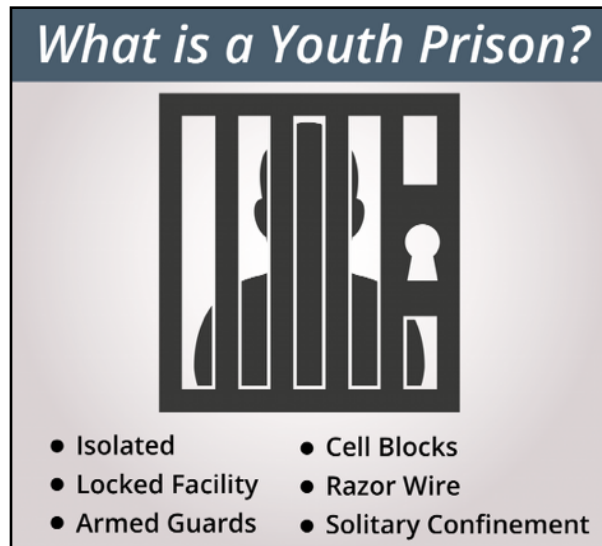
Approaching the question of youth prisons from a public justice framework, we recognize that the full flourishing of society only happens when institutions such as families, churches, government, and communities all function in right relationship to each other. The longstanding, solely retributive approach to juvenile offenders that focuses on separation from community should be replaced with restorative models that focus on keeping youth connected to support systems such as family and communities and whenever possible, out of locked facilities.

Youth prisons are not restorative, they perpetuate racial and socio-economic inequalities, and they fail to uphold public justice. A system that warehouses children created in the image of God is not right or just. As Christians, we need to consider the purpose of punishment and the importance of rehabilitation. Youth prisons must be closed. The lives and futures of many young people depend on it.

DISCOVER

Reverend Tejado Hanchell is a prison chaplain in North Carolina. In his work with both incarcerated adults and youth over the past seven years, Reverend Hanchell has seen firsthand how the criminal justice system functions, both in the lives of individuals and as a system overall.

He describes the current paradigm of incarceration as “warehousing in a system that is not designed for rehabilitation, but rather contributes to further inequities.” This is the sobering reality for not only incarcerated adults, but for a shocking number of youth as well.



Approximately 50,800 youth, ages 12 to 18, are confined in correctional facilities or other residential programs on the order of a juvenile court.ⁱ These facilities range from group homes to residential treatment centers to wilderness camps designed to modify behavior through rigorous physical activity and mental strain. However, a large share of these confined youth are incarcerated in large, geographically isolated

youth prisons. Over 24,000 youth are warehoused in roughly 80 youth prisons today.ⁱⁱ

While the general public may assume that the vast majority of these youth are violent offenders, the reality is that more than half of youth offenders are behind bars for nonviolent crimes. This includes drug offenses, probation violation, and status offenses (conduct that wouldn't be a crime if committed by an adult).ⁱⁱⁱ

Is a system that warehouses people, particularly children created in the image of God, right and just? As citizens, we need to think about the purposes for punishment and the importance of rehabilitation for society. For Christians, especially, our faith compels us to consider these questions. Surely a Gospel that proclaims freedom for the prisoner, justice for the oppressed, and care for society's most vulnerable must have something to say about how our juvenile justice system operates.

Different from various county-run detention facilities, youth prisons are operated by states and function more like adult prisons. A youth prison is typically an isolated, locked facility with 100+ beds that has many of the same features of an adult prison: razor wire, cellblocks, armed guards, and solitary confinement. Control and punishment are the priority, not rehabilitation. Forty states still rely on youth prisons as the final, catch-all step in the juvenile justice system.^{iv}

But are these types of facilities able to foster the kind of rehabilitation and growth necessary for juvenile offenders? Rev. Hanchell's answer is a resounding “no,” and he is not alone in his assessment. In 1973, the National Advisory

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Commission on Criminal Justice Standards recommended that “existing institutions for juveniles should be closed.”^v The Commission advised this based on the conclusion that,

the prison, the reformatory, and the jail have achieved only a shocking record of failure. There is overwhelming evidence that these institutions create crime rather than prevent it.^{vi}

Over 40 years later, the facts of their assessment are still true, and yet youth prisons remain open.

Youth prisons are unjust for three key reasons: they are not restorative for offenders, they reflect and perpetuate societal inequalities, and they fail to serve public interests.

Youth Prisons Are Not Restorative for Juvenile Offenders

The end goal of any justice system should be, as the name suggests, justice. If the aim is to reduce crime and return a person back to a flourishing place in society, then the entire process of justice will be restorative. If we rightly recognize crime “as more than breaking the law” but also causing “harm to people, relationships, and the community,”^{vii} then engaging in restorative justice will aim to bring entire persons back into right relationship with themselves, with others, and with God. Models of justice that do not uphold the inherent worth of every person as created in the image of God demand our attention.

The current model that relies on youth prisons does not aim at restoration; rather, it is typically

highly punitive at the cost of rehabilitation. Even further, the current model doesn’t take into consideration the developmental needs of juvenile offenders. The prefrontal cortex, the area in the brain that controls decision-making, does not fully mature in most adults until age 25.^{vii}

More than half of youth offenders are behind bars for nonviolent crimes.

Decision-making skills, understanding of consequences, and emotional management skills are still being formed in young people. There is a reason we discipline children and youth differently from adults—except when we don’t. Every part of a juvenile’s incarceration happens during the vital time of cognitive development, with effects not just in the moment, but also on brain development into the future.

One of the most blatant ways that some youth prisons fail to acknowledge the stages of cognitive development for juvenile offenders is through the use of solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is often the easiest way for youth prison wardens to control inmates, yet it is one of the most dehumanizing elements of youth prisons. It isolates youth who have already been separated from family and community to a solitary cell for 22 to 24 hours a day.

There are rare situations where solitary confinement might be necessary for the immediate safety of youth or staff, but the regular, extended use of solitary confinement only exacerbates problems for juvenile offenders and violates their God-given dignity.

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Solitary confinement denies the truth that the offenders are created in God's image and not made to live in isolation, but rather called to restoration through community.

These problems are only compounded when mental health problems are factored into the equation. The Annie E. Casey Foundation notes in their report *No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration* that,

On average, the research finds that about two-thirds of youth confined in juvenile facilities suffer from one or more diagnosable mental health conditions, which is several times the rate of youth in the general population. About one of every five youth in custody has a mental health disturbance that significantly impairs their capacity.^{ix}



Of course, many youth *enter* youth prisons with these mental health problems. But rather than focus public resources on providing mental health care, the juvenile justice system, especially youth prisons, has become the default way these issues are addressed. Incarceration – rather than treatment – has too often been the response because it is simpler in the short run to lock someone up. However,

this system has proven disastrously ineffective at addressing both public concerns and individual needs.

In addition, youth prisons are rife with violence, including high rates of physical and sexual abuse. The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) conducted a nationally representative survey of confined youth and found that 12 percent of the youth had been sexually abused, either by staff or another inmate, while in prison. In addition, 42 percent said they were somewhat or very afraid of being physically attacked, and 45 percent said that staff use force against youth when they don't need to.^x

Rather than a safe space to grow, learn, and prepare to reenter society, these horrid conditions tragically produce youth who are developmentally stunted and disconnected from their communities.

Youth Prisons Reflect and Perpetuate Societal Inequalities

Although significant progress has been made, systemic inequality and discrimination still exist in the juvenile justice system, particularly related to race. Youth from low-income communities of color comprise a very high proportion of the youth prison population. According to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency,

Disparities are immediately evident at the earliest stages of the system....The disparities then progressively increase as youth move deeper into the system.^{xi}

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *No Place for Kids* report further explains that,

At virtually every stage of the juvenile justice process, youth of color – Latinos and African Americans, particularly – receive harsher treatment than their white counterparts, even when they enter the justice system with identical charges and offending histories. Compared with white juveniles, African-American youth are: more likely to be formally charged (and less likely to have their cases dismissed or diverted from court), far more likely to be detained pending trial, and more likely to be committed to a residential facility (and less likely to receive a probation sentence) ... Piled one on top of the other, the ultimate impact of these serial disparities is an enormous cumulative disadvantage for youth of color.^{xii}

The use of youth prisons and the treatment of juvenile offenders as image bearers of God are projects fundamentally opposed to each other.

Low-income youth face additional barriers to equal treatment and opportunity under law. One such area is in criminal defense. A 2009 study of juvenile indigent defense – public defenders for juveniles who can't afford private defense – found that,

the juvenile indigent defense systems that were designed to ensure that the right to counsel applies equally to youth, regardless

of income, have consistently failed low-income youth and youth of color.

Juvenile indigent defenders typically carry extremely heavy caseloads with meager pay, often at the expense of low-income youth. Because of this, low-income youth are more likely to “face significantly harsher treatment in the justice system than youth who have access to private counsel.”^{xiii}

If your skin is not white or you are poor, you are more likely to end up in a youth prison. This is not justice.

According to an Annie E. Casey report,

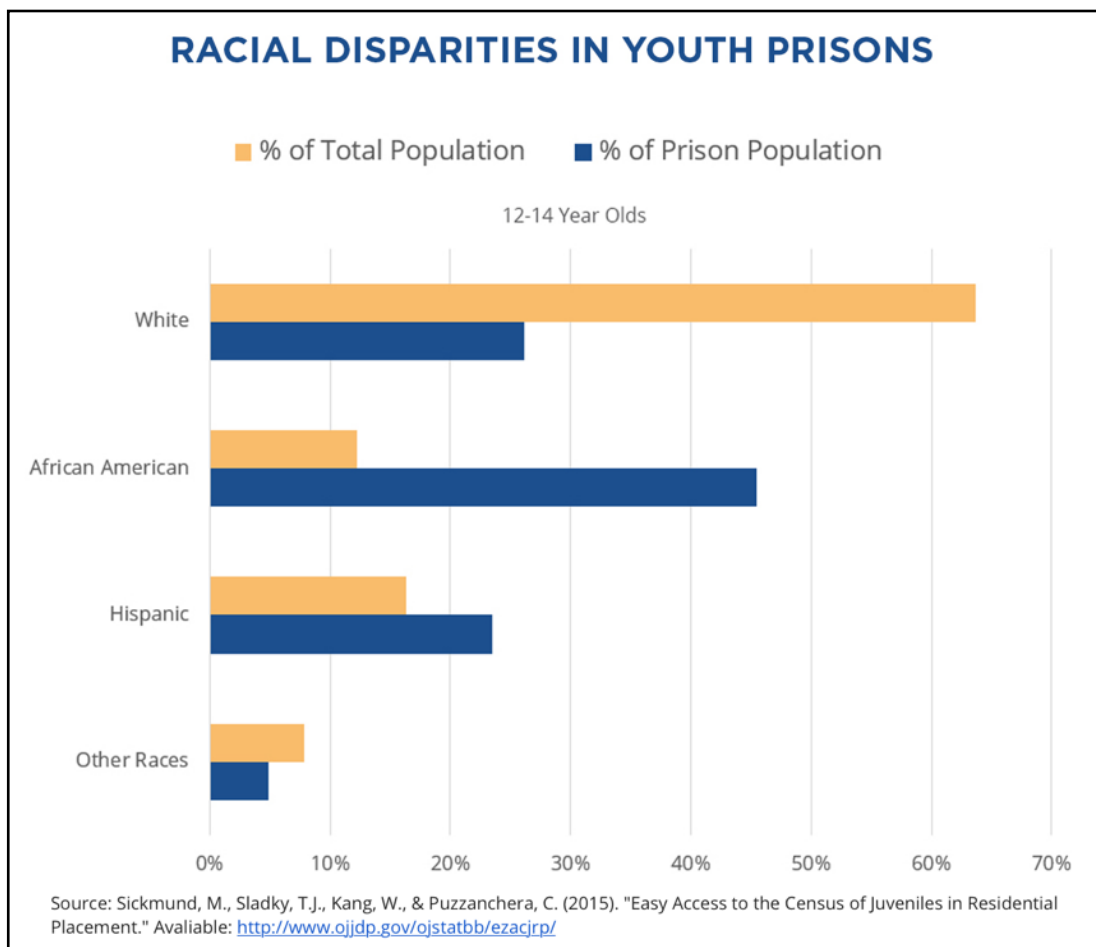
Having representation by a private attorney significantly improves a youth's chances of being acquitted or having the cases returned to juvenile court if they were originally prosecuted as adults. White youth are twice as likely as African American youth to be able to retain private counsel.^{xiv}

Too many low-income youth of color face barriers and setbacks from their first point of contact with the justice system. Put simply, all other things being equal, if your skin is not white or you are poor, you are more likely to end up in a youth prison. This is not justice.

Youth Prisons Fail to Serve the Public Good

Having worked inside the system, Rev. Hanchell sees American culture as part of the problem, saying, “We tend to lock away our

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problems and compartmentalize as Westerners.” The numbers seem to reflect this assessment. In the U.S., we lock up youth at five times the rate of any other country.^{xv} Our reliance on incarceration, though, comes not only at the detriment of those we lock up, but at the detriment of public interest.

Youth prisons fail to achieve one of their primary tasks – to discourage criminal offenses in the first place. While there is no data that shows comprehensive national averages, the data on recidivism – youth having further contact with the justice system – shows that confinement does little to steer juvenile offenders away from the system, and in some

cases even increases the likelihood of future offenses.

Between 70 and 80 percent of youth released from confinement are rearrested within three years.^{xvi} Studies in multiple states have found that youth who are incarcerated despite being deemed at low and moderate risk for committing a new offense are more likely to reoffend. In Ohio, for example, the recidivism rate for incarcerated youth was five times higher than for youth in community-based programs.^{xvii}

Not only do youth prisons have significantly higher rates of recidivism, but they are also

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drastically more expensive than alternative models. States spend an average of \$66,000 to \$88,000 to incarcerate each young person for nine to twelve months. Coupled with the long-term economic impact of the increased rate of future incarceration and projected loss to the economy, it is much more expensive to incarcerate juvenile offenders, especially in the large institutional settings of youth prisons.^{xviii}

Community-based alternatives result in lower recidivism rates and more positive outcomes for youth.

Youth prisons are not restorative, they perpetuate inequality, and they fail to serve the public good. Public justice, God's good purpose for our political community, includes the upholding of public order, but it also includes a high view of human dignity. Youth prisons degrade human dignity, severely curtail opportunities for restoration, and perpetuate socioeconomic and racial inequality. Public justice requires they be closed. Therefore, all citizens committed to public justice, and especially Christians, must work to close these youth prisons so they become a footnote in history, not the future for many.

FRAME

Humans, created in the image of God, are called to live in right relationship to their Creator and their fellow creation. They are bestowed with dignity and are deserving of respect and honor. Youth prisons not only violate this dignity, but presume that youth are beyond rehabilitation and restoration. The use of youth prisons and the treatment of juvenile offenders as image bearers of God are projects

fundamentally opposed to each other. Youth prisons must be closed.

The Violation of God-given Dignity

What then does justice look like for juvenile offenders?

Approaching the question of youth prisons from a public justice framework, we recognize that the full flourishing of society only happens when institutions such as families, churches, government, and communities all function in relationship. The longstanding punitive approach to juvenile offenders that focuses on separation from community should be replaced with restorative models that focus on keeping youth connected to support systems such as family and communities and whenever possible, out of locked facilities.

Community-based alternatives are widely considered to be among the most effective models to hold youth accountable for their crimes in a just, humane, and restorative way. Community-based alternatives can vary from community to community, but are all designed to keep youth out of locked facilities and instead to keep them in their own neighborhoods.

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, after a youth is convicted of a crime, alternatives to confinement can be imposed by police officers, court staff, judges, or prosecutors.^{xix} The intervention level of a community-based alternative also varies.

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For more serious or repeat youth offenders, Multisystemic Therapy (MST) is a common alternative. MST is,

an intensive family- and community-based treatment program that focuses on addressing all environmental systems that impact chronic and violent juvenile offenders -- their homes and families, schools and teachers, neighborhoods and friends.

A therapist visits the youth's home and other places the youth is involved and is available 24/7 to the family.^{xx} MST has been proven to reduce recidivism rates 25 to 70 percent.^{xxi}

For less serious offenders, youth may receive in-home services, while others may be required to attend daily or weekly reporting centers. However, the emphasis in all alternatives is on the youth remaining in their community and close to family.

The Need for Restorative Alternatives

Youth prisons are state-run, and thus require initial action at the state legislature to make the shift from youth prisons to community-based alternatives. Over the last two decades, California, for example, has intentionally re-directed the management of juvenile offenders from the state to counties. California law states that,

only juveniles adjudicated for a serious, violent, or sex offense can be sent to state facilities by the juvenile courts. As a result, 99 percent of juvenile offenders are housed or supervised by counties.^{xxii}

In Ohio, a similar shift towards community-based alternatives has seen positive results. For example, in 1988, Lucas County, Ohio, sent over 300 youth to state-run youth prisons. By 2014, that number was 17.^{xxiii} Similar successes in Texas,^{xxiv} New Jersey^{xxv} and Alabama^{xxvi} provide evidence that community-based alternatives result in lower recidivism rates and more positive outcomes for youth.

The state of Missouri has been lauded for successfully overhauling their juvenile justice system towards a community-based, rehabilitative approach. The Annie E. Casey Foundation uses "The Missouri Model" as an exemplary model for other states to follow. Their 2010 report, "The Missouri Model," describes six core characteristics that define what has made Missouri's system so successful.

1. Small and Non-Prison-like Facilities, Close to Home
2. Individual Care Within a Group Treatment Model
3. Safety Through Relationships and Supervision, Not Correctional Coercion
4. Building Skills for Success
5. Families as Partners
6. Focus on Aftercare ("the period in which young people reenter the community and resume their normal lives following a period of confinement.")

In principle and practice, these defining characteristics are counter to the one-size-fits-all warehousing approach that youth prisons utilize. Each characteristic centers not only on the youth but also the community, recognizing that the flourishing of one is bound to the flourishing of the other.

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Not only are rehabilitative, community-based models less expensive than models that rely on incarceration, but they also increase public safety. “The Missouri Model” and similar approaches have been shown time and again to dramatically lower recidivism rates among juvenile offenders.^{xxvii} Rehabilitative approaches do a much better job at connecting juvenile offenders to the services they need in order to become contributing members of society rather than simply hardening them for a lifetime of incarceration. Preventing cycles of offense and incarceration is key to public safety and flourishing in communities. Over the last 15 years, the number of youth in juvenile facilities has been cut in half.^{xxviii} Yet there is still much work to be done.

The Injustice of Racial Inequalities

Even in the most successful models, racial injustice still plagues the juvenile justice system. Looking again at Missouri, a 2015 report by the Department of Justice investigating the St. Louis County Family Court found that the juvenile justice system discriminated against black children. Black youth were significantly more likely to be held in custody before their hearing, more likely to be sentenced to state custody for committing the equivalent of a probation violation, and more likely to be sentenced to the custody of the Division of Youth Services (the equivalent of an adult being sent to prison) after their case was final, even controlling for age, gender, the severity of the offense, and other risk factors.^{xxix}

While this report looked exclusively at St. Louis County, the problems are mirrored in statistics statewide and also reflect national data that, again, black youth are treated more harshly in

the juvenile justice system.^{xxx} Nationally, black youth are five times more likely to be confined than their white peers (Latino and Native American youth are between two and three times more likely to be confined) and, to reiterate, according to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, “the disparities then progressively increase as youth move deeper into the system.”^{xxxi}

Youth prisons violate justice and need to be closed.

By using Missouri as a case study and acknowledging the deep history of racial injustice that still plagues our country, it is obvious that closing youth prisons is not a silver bullet to expunge racial injustice from the juvenile justice system. However, closing youth prisons is an important step in moving in this direction.

We tend to treat youth from the most vulnerable communities the worst, which does not foster long-term flourishing in our communities. Because of the current disparities, closing youth prisons will most positively impact these communities. However, these positive impacts will not happen overnight. Embracing an approach to juvenile justice that respects and empowers the image-bearing capacities of youth offenders will require more of our society and of us as citizens. To help restore juvenile offenders, to embrace the biblical call to do justice, and to create truly flourishing communities, the government, families, communities, churches, and other institutions will need to work together to create systems that derive from these principles.

ENGAGE

Both Scripture and Christian witness throughout history remind us of our calling to both remember and serve the prisoner. We have an opportunity to remember the prisoner, to remember forgotten youth in our nation, and to combat systemic injustice by closing youth prisons.

Knowledge that this injustice exists is only the first step, it must spur us to some kind of action. The body of Christ must show love in both word and deed to the children currently warehoused in the juvenile justice system. The Church's witness to the Gospel is incomplete if it is not joining the conversation that is already happening surrounding closing youth prisons and joining ministries that are already serving in these spaces.



Like any injustice, multiple dimensions need to be addressed. While government (and citizens who must hold it accountable) has the direct responsibility to uphold public justice in this area, institutions such as churches, non-profits and businesses must also work to fulfill their unique roles and responsibilities to support principles of public justice that right the injustice of youth prisons.

The Responsibility of Government and Christian Citizens

Even though individuals, churches, and nonprofits can advocate, raise awareness, and support youth who are locked up, only government can take action to close these facilities. Because these prisons are operated at the state level, states must take responsibility for reimagining their juvenile justice system and closing youth prisons.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation recommends that we,

build a youth corrections system for tomorrow that is rooted in best practice research. Not only do state and local justice systems have to offer a balanced mix of treatment and supervision programs, but they must also calibrate their systems to ensure that each individual youth is directed to the treatments, sanctions, and services best suited to his or her unique needs or circumstances.^{xxxiii}

Especially with examples like “The Missouri Model” to look to, this goal is not only necessary, but attainable. Taking into account fiscal, humanitarian, and public safety concerns, state governments should take up this process with urgency.

Citizens with a concern for public justice should join advocacy efforts towards these ends. It's important to first research the specific policies in place in your state. As a next step, consider writing, calling, or visiting your state lawmakers and other key decision makers to talk about youth prisons in your state. While legislative reform is of utmost importance,

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various stakeholders -- prosecutors, juvenile indigent defenders, law enforcement, for example-- must share a common view that youth are best served in their communities, not in locked facilities.

We as citizens have the ability to shape public opinion and to increase awareness about why youth thrive best in their community. Meet with various stakeholders involved to learn their perspectives and approach, talk about closing youth prisons on social media, and join with local organizations working towards juvenile justice reform in your state.



Even though the work of closing youth prisons must happen on a state level, the federal government has an important role as well. In 1974, Congress enacted the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP), providing important safeguards for juvenile offenders, setting national standards for juvenile justice systems, and providing funding for community-based alternatives. JJDP ensures vital safeguards for juvenile offenders and support for community-based alternatives.^{xxxiii}

Christian citizens must use the opportunity and responsibility we have in a democratic society to call government to its right responsibility to

uphold public justice. This positive political action is an example of exercising our voices in the public square on behalf of marginalized youth offenders and reminds government of its high calling to uphold the dignity of all citizens.

The Responsibility of the Church

The Church must do the work of walking alongside youth offenders and their families. With a message of repentance, grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, the Church can provide youth with community and relationship. The Church needs to be committed to praying for youth who are incarcerated and for their families. We should pray for our legislators and those who work in the system as they seek to do justice. We should ask God to work in the lives of these youth but also in our own hearts, exposing prejudices and teaching us empathy.

But as an African proverb tells us, “When you pray, move your feet.” One of the best ways to seriously engage the issue of youth incarceration is through the ministry of presence. Commitment to consistent involvement in the lives of currently and formerly incarcerated youth is required in order for the community-based rehabilitative approaches we are advocating for to materialize.

In many cases, juvenile offenders are some of the most vulnerable youth in our country. Churches are in a unique position to provide a community of support to those entangled in the juvenile justice system. Churches must be involved in the work of justice in these issues.

The Responsibility of Non-profits and Businesses

Non-profit organizations have a vital role to play. There are organizations that focus advocacy efforts explicitly on closing youth prisons. The Youth First Initiative has launched a campaign to close youth prisons and offers resources on state-by-state campaigns.^{xxxiv}

Beyond advocacy organizations, there is a great need for non-profits and community organizations to develop community-based alternatives to youth incarceration. Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. (YAP) is national organization “exclusively committed to the provision of community-based alternatives...” Depending on the needs of the youth, YAP has a wraparound model that provides “intensive, individualized, holistic care” for youth and their family. YAP also uses an Advocate Model which pairs a youth with an adult from their own community who is available 24/7, meets with the youth regularly, and helps youth and their families meet obligations to judges, probation officers, case managers and other referring entities, thus avoiding further penetration into the system.^{xxxv}

Businesses can contribute by providing employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated youth and supporting community-based alternatives. Instead of treating contact with the justice system as an automatic disqualification for employment, many businesses have the opportunity to extend a second chance to youth in need of a job. Work provides a new sense of purpose, place, and responsibility. The importance of appropriate employment for youth offenders coming out

of the system cannot be overstated. Businesses also have the opportunity to voice their support for pro-community rehabilitative programming.

Closing youth prisons will require responses from each of these institutions to provide meaningful alternatives. Only in recognizing the unique role that each plays in the flourishing of communities will the goal of restorative justice be realized.

CONCLUSION

Youth prisons violate justice and need to be closed. They are not restorative for offenders. They act as warehouses for juvenile offenders and are ineffective places of rehabilitation. They reflect and perpetuate racial and socio-economic inequalities in our country. They do not fulfill the purpose of rehabilitation and restoration to community. They do not uphold public justice.

Models of juvenile justice like “The Missouri Model,” which offer community-based, rehabilitative approaches, uphold public justice and honor the dignity of those involved. People created in the image of God are not meant to be “stored” in warehouses. Government’s right role in upholding public justice and citizens’ role in calling government to the vision of public justice means we must address the injustice of youth prisons.

Political issues often seem overwhelming. It can feel like we are a piece of driftwood floating at the whim of the waves. There are so many injustices in the world, how can we ever make a difference? Doing justice as citizens and making a difference in the political arena can become an abstraction when we think in these gigantic terms.

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However, we are not helpless against the injustice of youth prisons. We are able to join with others who are already doing this good work, and it is our calling as Christian citizens to shape our public policies so they better reflect God's vision of flourishing for all people. In addition, as God calls us uniquely to His work, through our churches and families,

or through our businesses and nonprofit organizations, we may find a role in caring for juvenile offenders.

Youth prisons must be closed. They simply do not have a place in a justice system committed to true justice.

**For more information and additional resources,
visit www.sharedjustice.org/youthprisons**

Endnotes

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