

STATEMENT ON ENDING YOUTH PRISONS

In recent decades, the number of youth in America who are locked up has dropped by half nationally, with double-digit declines in all but a handful of states. These trends reflect a combination of factors, including historically low crime rates, policymakers and administrators pushing for reforms, and sophisticated advocacy efforts. Yet, despite this progress, the United States still has the highest youth incarceration rate in the world, with approximately 50,000 youth in custody. The burden of this mass incarceration falls disproportionately on youth of color, who comprise the vast majority of youth in facilities. Inside many of these archaic, distant prisons, youth face trying conditions, where punishment and control are the norm and abuse is common. Unsurprisingly, the experiences of young people in these places can impede their success upon release, with many struggling in school, facing challenges in securing employment, and finding themselves in a revolving door of justice system involvement. Meanwhile, these negative outcomes come at an extraordinarily high cost, with states spending billions of dollars to maintain and operate youth prisons.

As current and former leaders of youth justice agencies around the country, we believe that the time has come to close down youth prisons, once and for all. Our collective experience “on the inside” has shown us that separating youth from their families and communities and emphasizing punishment and retribution harms young people and their communities. We oppose juvenile justice systems which employ these punitive practices and create harmful cultures for youth, families, and staff. For youth of color, this approach perpetuates the country’s enduring history of racial inequality and oppression, often magnifying the cumulative disadvantages experienced by youth in communities of color, where poverty, crime, and violence affect far too many people. In many instances, youth justice systems – and especially correctional facilities – have become the default for addressing youth whose needs would be more effectively served in other systems, including education, child welfare, and behavioral health.

Fortunately, there is a better way. Research shows that helping youth grow and develop within the context of their own families and communities is vital to their long-term success. Leaders in states and localities nationwide have taken this research to heart, shuttering youth prisons in favor of new, community-based approaches. The results have been transformative, leading to both fewer youth in prisons and better long-term outcomes for those who do require care.

Building on these ideas, we envision a new future focused on creating “pipelines of possibility,” alongside youth, families, communities, advocates, and leaders in other systems. This vision centers around safely providing all youth with access to the support and guidance they need to become thriving, productive adults, within their own homes and communities.

Our call for closing youth prisons does not mean that we believe no youth should ever be placed out of their homes. In those cases where public safety absolutely requires that youth are in out-of-home care, we believe that this should only be for the minimum time necessary to address this risk – in a warm, nurturing environment close to home, with well-trained staff, that treats all children the way we would want our own children to be treated.

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To that end, the following core values should form the basis of working with young people in the justice system:

OPPORTUNITY

All young people matter – including those who have run afoul of the law – and should be treated with love, dignity, and respect. To achieve real and lasting change, we must help them achieve their full potential and become successful, productive citizens, with the power to contribute to society in meaningful ways.

UNDERSTANDING

We must recognize and acknowledge that many youth and staff within our systems have experienced trauma, which can have long-lasting impact on their actions. Simultaneously, systems must guide and support both staff and youth through a healing process and help them internalize new skills and approaches for engaging with one another.

EQUITY

All youth should have access to the opportunities, networks, resources, and support they need to survive and thrive, based on where they are currently situated and where they see themselves in the future. To do this effectively, we must provide all youth with impartial and just treatment, with a concerted focus on eliminating the many biases that exist in systems, which have been shaped by racism, sexism, and the country's history of oppression.

YOUTH-, FAMILY-, AND COMMUNITY-DRIVEN

Youth, families, and communities are experts on what solutions they need to heal and thrive, and must meaningfully participate in decisions and debates that directly impact their well-being. Youth behavior should be viewed in the context of a young person's development, needs, and unique situation.

SAFETY

All youth should have the ability to be their authentic selves without risk of increased physical or emotional harm, and communities should have the resources to be safe places for their residents.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Fair and just systems can and should recognize a young person's humanity, providing a calibrated response to ensure public safety that simultaneously helps young people repair harm and not repeat harmful behaviors. To that end, youth should acknowledge personal responsibility for their actions and appreciate the impact those actions have had on others. Meanwhile, youth justice systems must recognize and validate victims, and be restorative. These systems should also recognize that most court-involved young people are themselves survivors of crime. Given the tremendous power that youth justice systems have to deprive young people of their liberty, it is crucial that we remain vigilant in tracking and sharing how their outcomes adhere to these values.