

The Devastating, Long-Lasting Costs of Juvenile Incarceration

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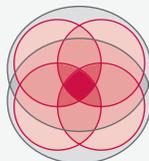
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Since the implementation of “tough on crime” laws in the 1980s and zero tolerance school discipline in the 1990s, juvenile incarceration rates in the U.S. have increased sharply.^{1,2} In 2008, the U.S. had the highest juvenile incarceration rate in the world, with 336 per 100,000 young people incarcerated.³ To give perspective, only 46.8 per 100,000 youth in the UK and only 24.9 per 100,000 youth in Australia were incarcerated in the same year.⁴ The disturbingly high rates of juvenile incarceration in the U.S. are in part due to the widespread use of zero tolerance school discipline policies and the normalization of arrests as a form of school discipline.

To address these structural failures, the U.S. Department of Education released school discipline guidelines in January 2014 that emphasize the need for alternatives to the harmful zero tolerance discipline policies. The guidelines recognize that the uneven application of zero tolerance policies directs youth—primarily Black and Latino youth—into juvenile detention centers for minor offenses. Increasingly policed schools and harsh discipline policies greatly accelerate the rate at which youth of color are incarcerated. Over the past 20 years, the presence of school resource officers¹ within public schools has increased 38 percent, further normalizing school-based arrests.⁵ Many low-resource schools in particular rely on school resource officers to be in charge of discipline, which can contribute to the escalation of minor offenses leading to arrests.

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The process of incarcerating students for minor, nonviolent offenses is known as the school-to-prison pipeline. Although 2010 data indicate that total number of juvenile incarcerations is poised to decline, the racial gap is widening.⁶ Across the country, disproportionate percentages of Black youth are caught in the school-to-prison pipeline. In 2010, 127 per 100,000 White youths were incarcerated, while a startling 605 per 100,000 Black youths were incarcerated.⁷ Looking at this sys-



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tematic incarceration broadly, this means that Black students are almost five times more likely to enter into the juvenile justice system than their White peers.⁸ Furthermore, this phenomenon is not isolated to Black youth. Latino and American Indian students also are two to three times more likely to be incarcerated than White students.⁹ Many of these arrests take place in schools, where over 70 percent of students involved in arrests or referrals to law enforcement are Black or Hispanic.¹⁰ The disproportionate effects of the school-to-prison pipeline on youth of color push students out of schools and into the juvenile justice system at a high cost. This systematic, mass incarceration has dual costs: financial and social.

Nationwide, it costs significantly more to incarcerate young people than it does to educate them. For a juvenile detention center sentence of 12 months, the cost is about \$88,000 per student.¹¹ In contrast, the average cost for a student to attend public school for a year is only \$10,259.¹² Surprisingly, tuition at Harvard University—currently \$59,950 per year—costs less than a stay in a juvenile detention facility for a year.¹³

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Given that it costs taxpayers an average of \$241 per day to incarcerate a youth in juvenile detention, less expensive alternatives merit consideration, such as restorative justice programs both within and outside of public schools. Not only would the students receive better treatment, but also taxpayers and state budgets would benefit from alternative programs. Prioritizing treatment and education over incarceration makes financial sense, yet staggering numbers of youth are locked up. Rather than investing in productive alternatives for students that are pushed out of school, many states stretch their budgets to keep them behind bars.

Incarceration is more expensive than education in many ways. Not only do states suffer the financial cost of running detention centers, but detained youth unwillingly trade education and opportunities for criminal records and emotional trauma. The social cost is not as easy to quantify as the financial cost, but it is just as significant. The majority of incarcerated youth have not committed serious offenses, but they are harshly punished. For example, a study conducted in 2007 reported that only 12 percent of the nearly 150,000 youth in detention centers had committed violent crimes.¹⁴ The unintended consequence of locking up youth for minor offenses is that their experiences in the juvenile justice system can actually encourage criminal behavior; one fourth of non-violent adult offenders are later convicted of a violent offense, showing the detrimental effects of involvement in the juvenile justice system.¹⁵

While it is clear that juvenile incarceration takes away opportunities from youth, there is another hidden cost—opportunity cost. Opportunity cost, or value lost from excluding youth from schools, is detrimental to society as a whole, because young people are blocked from achieving their full potential. Juvenile offenders leave the juvenile justice system with criminal records that can interfere with educational, professional, and housing opportunities. Sometimes it is difficult for youth offenders to acquire well-paying jobs in the formal economy, so some youth are faced with no choice but to participate in the informal or illegal economy. This challenging situation can sometimes lead to youth recidivism. To illustrate, about 70 to 80 percent of incarcerated youth are re-arrested within two to three years.¹⁶ Not only does the systematic criminalization of youth cheat those youth of opportunities, society is also unable to benefit from their potential contributions. Unfortunately, students who are pushed out of school are less likely to return and finish their education. Once a student is criminalized, it is tough to decriminalize themselves and return to school. The one-directional flow of the school-to-prison pipeline must be reversed to decrease re-

cidivism and benefit youth.

While the issues of unequal school discipline and juvenile incarceration are multifaceted and complex, one thing is clear: sentencing youth to juvenile detention centers for minor misbehaviors is ineffective, unsustainable, and damaging. Multiple reports have found that public safety does not decrease when fewer youth are incarcerated, so why do we continue to criminalize and incarcerate young people?¹⁷ Every day, 4,028 young people are pushed into the juvenile justice system—a broken system that often exposes youth to serious trauma.¹⁸ Not only are the detention centers ineffective, but detained youth also face increased risks of physical abuse, sexual assault, and suicide.¹⁹ Among Black youth offenders, 58 percent are sent to adult prisons, where they can face even greater risks of potential trauma.²⁰

We can do better for our country's youth. States need to invest in restorative justice and treatment options, rather than sinking copious amounts of money into dangerously inefficient detention centers. Public schools must begin enacting disciplinary change in the classroom to block the school-to-prison pipeline, and prevent later arrests. In conjunction, state and school policy changes can counter the damaging effects of the juvenile justice system and end the school-to-prison pipeline.

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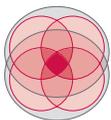
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