

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/creating-a-place-for-kids>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Many states have dramatically reduced the number of youth in juvenile facilities over the past decade. In light of the evidence of abuse and maltreatment at some institutions, pending lawsuits, exorbitant costs, high recidivism rates, and the disproportionate representation of youth of color in many facilities, some states have moved away from a reliance on incarceration for young people who commit delinquent acts. However, the United States still ranks first among the world's developed nations in its rate of incarceration, adult and juvenile. As the Casey report, [No Place for Kids](#), underscores, a lot more work needs to be done to build and sustain alternative responses to delinquent youth.

Historically, policymakers viewed juvenile incarceration as an effective deterrent to violent juvenile crime, but emerging research indicates that recidivism rates are high. In fact, the average rate of rearrest within three years of being released from a juvenile correctional facility has been estimated to be as high as 75 percent. Moreover, a large number of youth in these facilities pose only minimal risks to public safety and may be more effectively served in the community. Youth often arrive at facilities with unmet needs such as substance use, mental illness, and educational deficits that played a role in their delinquent involvement. Because juvenile correctional facilities are often ill-equipped to address these needs, young people complete their time and reenter the community struggling with the same issues that led them into trouble in the first place. Well-designed alternative to incarceration programs are cost-effective and can be successful in reducing recidivism while producing positive outcomes for youth.

In New York State, these issues have received a tremendous amount of attention. This has, in part, been driven by [the recommendations of a statewide task force](#) that called for reducing juvenile corrections, reinvesting resources in cost-effective community alternatives, and reducing racial inequities across the system. Within the past few years, New York State's Office of Children of Family Services (OCFS), the agency responsible for juvenile corrections, has been working to implement these recommendations and has made great strides. OCFS has downsized or closed more than a dozen facilities and has been redesigning others to be more treatment-oriented and humane.

At the same time, New York City has created a Dispositional Reform Committee led by the Department of Probation and staffed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. [Vera also is involved in this effort](#) and has been providing research support and data analysis in partnership with Casey. The committee's charge is to expand a localized community-based continuum of care for youth in the juvenile justice system. Using structured decision-making based on objective criteria, the goal is to limit institutional placement to those youth who pose a risk to public safety.

Do you see policy changes in the way your state or locality is approaching juvenile justice? Post a comment below to share your perspectives on how to respond to this national dilemma.

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