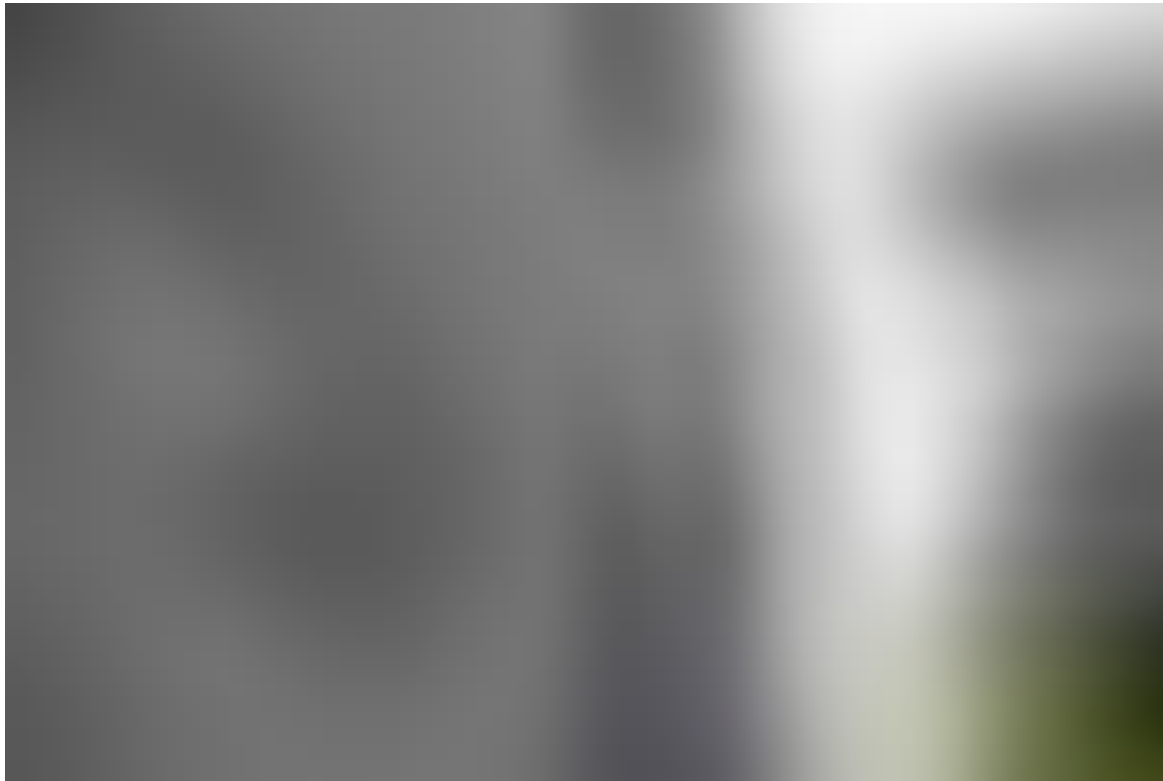




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Federal Government abandons mission to ensure children are "educated and healthy"



Our federal government quietly changed the mission of the executive agency responsible for juvenile justice policy, abandoning the vision that all our children should be "healthy and educated." The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) recently amended its website quietly, with this and other disturbing changes. This public-facing information is the gateway to federal policies on our juvenile justice system. These changes broadcast its shift in direction from the reforms that have cut the juvenile crime rate by 58% by OJJDP's own statistics back to the failed "get tough" policies that brought us mass incarceration.

OJJDP has also eliminated its pages on ending solitary confinement for children. This horrific practice was banned by President Obama, but most youth are in state juvenile justice systems, not the federal system. States need the guidance of the federal government that was previously provided by OJJDP. The image of children in solitary confinement in the United States of America is one that haunts me.

OJJDP eliminated its guidance on avoiding incarceration of girls, which is growing despite a steep decline in the crime rate. It also withdrew its guidance on “disproportionate minority impact,” a national disgrace that persists despite the drop in crime and incarceration. We should all care about these policy reversals and demand more of our federal government. The messages sent by our federal government to fifty state juvenile justice systems matter.

Juvenile Law Center has been advocating for rights, dignity, equity and opportunity for youth in the child welfare and justice systems for 43 years. As the nation’s first non-profit, public interest law firm, we have worked collaboratively with seven presidential administrations, three Democratic and four Republican. This current administration poses unique challenges to our work, but that only makes our advocacy more critical. We must fight against the rejection of evidence-based policies that have led to such a dramatic drop in crime. Certainly, “healthy and educated” children should not be up for partisan debate as a priority.

The children in our child welfare and justice systems rely upon all of us to protect them when they are in public care. They are in OUR care. We cannot let our children’s needs be lost amidst the cacophony of today’s politics. When our federal government does not consider it part of its mission to work toward ensuring all children are “healthy and educated,” we are all diminished.