



WHAT STATE LEADERS CAN DO

- Sharply reduce incarceration rates and reinvest in community-based programs to support youth
- Reform school discipline policies and practices to avoid steering students into the juvenile justice system
- Improve the conditions of confinement for youth who receive out-of-home placements

Fund community alternatives instead of locking up youth.

Across New Jersey, a strong consensus has emerged: it's time to embrace a fundamentally different juvenile justice system. While young offenders should be held accountable for their actions, the goal is to return them to their communities equipped with the skills they need to stay out of trouble and mature into productive adults.

For decades, the answer to juvenile misbehavior was punishment and referral to the criminal justice system, often at alarming rates for minor offenses. That began to change in 2004, when New Jersey embarked on an effort to reduce the number of youth unnecessarily or inappropriately placed in county detention centers, while protecting public safety and ensuring youth appear for court dates. Known as the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), this national project, led by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is also aimed at redirecting resources to fund more effective methods of preventing juvenile crime and improving the conditions of detention facilities for youth who must have this level of supervision.

New Jersey's successful implementation of JDAI reduced the average daily detention population by more than 60 percent and resulted in the closure of eight county detention centers without risk to public safety, making New Jersey a national model.

However, more needs to be done. Too many New Jersey youth continue to go into facilities, rather than receive more effective treatment in their communities. And although the total number of locked-up youth has declined dramatically, the Garden State still ranks third in the nation for the highest disparity rate between white youth and youth of color committed to detention.

Juveniles in Detention Facilities by Race – New Jersey

	2015	
	#	%
Caucasian	275	10
African American	1,875	67
Hispanic	598	21
Other	45	2

Source: N.J. Juvenile Justice Commission. Statewide data reflects only those counties participating in the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative.

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Advocates for Children of New Jersey worked with other advocates on bipartisan legislation (S2003/A4299) that was signed into law by Governor Chris Christie in August 2015. The law limits the use of solitary confinement in juvenile facilities, revamps state law governing transfer of juveniles to adult criminal court and requires due process before a juvenile can be transferred to an adult facility. This much-needed bill was just the first step in a broad range of reforms that will rethink what New Jersey's juvenile justice system looks like.

Research has shown the harmful effects of putting youth behind bars. Locking kids up does nothing to improve public safety and permanently hurts young people's social and psychological growth and development. Rehabilitation and prevention yield far better results: diverting youth from the juvenile justice system, decreasing recidivism rates and ensuring that those currently in the system have an opportunity to reunite with their families, re-enter their communities and develop into productive adults.

As a member of Youth Justice New Jersey, a coalition aimed at improving outcomes for youth in the juvenile justice system, we urge the next governor and lawmakers to make juvenile justice reform a priority.

What can state leaders do?

- **Invest in alternatives to incarceration:** New Jersey can make changes that will reduce incarceration rates without risk to public safety. Savings in costs from facility closures should be reinvested into community-based rehabilitative, prevention, diversion, and intervention programs which will decrease recidivism rates and give youth a real opportunity to reunite with their families, re-enter their communities and develop into productive adults.
- **Improve conditions of confinement and preparing for reentry:** Youth who receive out-of-home placements should be protected from harmful practices such as solitary confinement. They should have access to their families, quality medical and mental health treatment, appropriate educational services and rehabilitative and transition services.
- **Disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline:** School policies and practices need to be changed. Educators need to be trained to effectively approach conflict resolution and disciplinary issues, thus reducing the inappropriate reliance on law enforcement to address disciplinary concerns.
- **Eliminate the racial injustice** imbedded in school disciplinary practices and in every point of contact with the juvenile justice system.

For more information regarding the Youth Justice New Jersey Coalition, visit www.youthjusticenj.org.

Giving Every Child A Chance

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