



## Community-Based Treatment More Effective, Less Expensive than Incarceration for Youth Offenders

In order to ensure that Florida's youth become productive members of local communities, state policymakers must move away from an approach to juvenile justice that relies heavily on incarceration, and instead embrace a system that prioritizes community-based treatment and care. This would allow the state to close youth corrections facilities and improve outcomes for affected youth while utilizing resources for more effective community-based alternatives.

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### Youth Incarceration Does Little in the Way of Rehabilitation and Improving Public Safety

Research has shown that committing every youth offender to prison runs counter to the dual goals of making Florida safer and rehabilitating offenders to become productive and contributing members of the community. Youth imprisonment is ineffective and has produced a range of negative outcomes for affected youth, communities and taxpayers.<sup>1</sup> In Florida, less than 9 percent of the 363,000 youth arrested between 2007 and 2012 were serious and violent offenders. Additionally, research reveals that 63 percent of youth in prison are incarcerated for drug use, disorderly conduct, probation violations, property crimes and status offenses (e.g. running away).<sup>2</sup>

#### *Youth incarceration is expensive for taxpayers*

In fiscal year 2014, Florida spent \$82.5 million to run its 24 state and county youth detention facilities.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the direct costs of incarceration, taxpayers continue to pay more in the long run. National research indicates that youth incarceration is associated with reduced job prospects, higher recidivism and suicide rates and increased mental health issues. Instead of aging out of the system and becoming economically self-sufficient, these youths exact a huge long-term economic cost to the state and society — \$8 billion to \$21 billion per year — due to lost future earnings, government tax revenue and higher spending on public assistance programs such as Medicaid and Medicare.<sup>4</sup>

Evidence-based treatment models such as Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care, which has been identified as appropriate for high-risk youth with chronic antisocial behavior, emotional

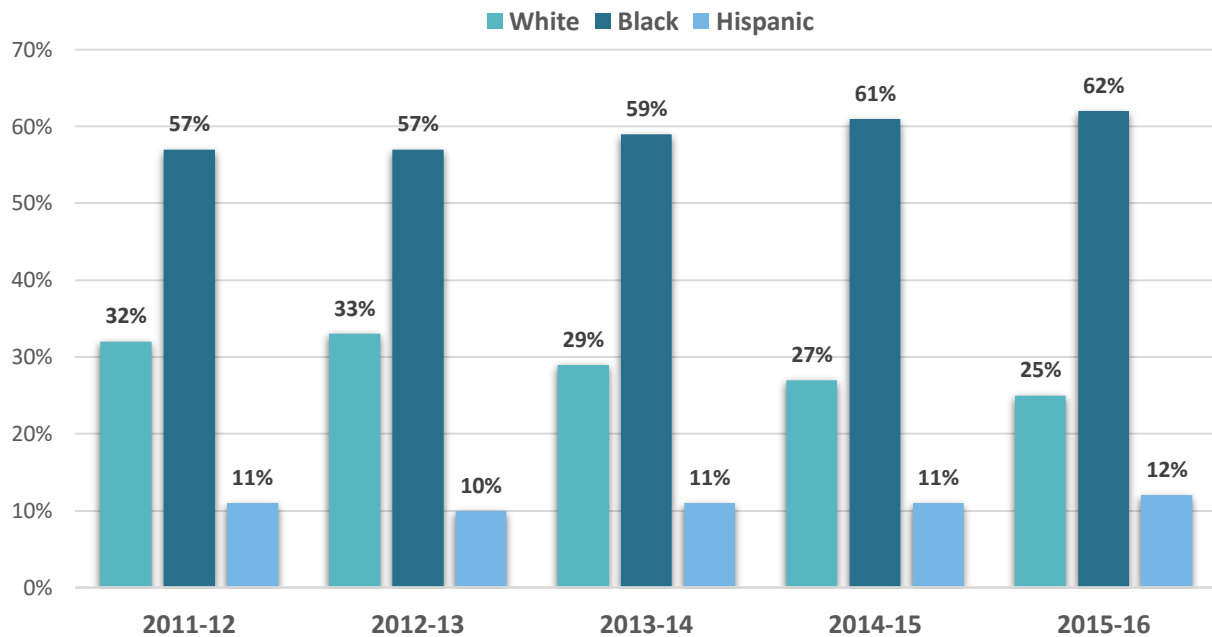
disturbance and delinquency, costs \$7,000 more than standard group home placement, but saves an estimated \$96,000 in lower costs to victims and the criminal justice system, a return of \$14 for every extra dollar spent on treatment. At a community-based treatment program in Ohio that costs \$8,539 per placement (compared with \$36,571 for placement in a community corrections facility), those completing treatment had outcomes equal to or greater than those from corrections facilities.

Florida's Redirection Program, a community-based, family-centered alternative to residential juvenile justice commitment, reduced recidivism rates while saving \$51.2 million from 2006 to 2010.<sup>6</sup>

*Youth incarceration and other out-of-home placements disproportionately affect youth of color*

Data from the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice<sup>7</sup> reveal that Black youth are overrepresented in the state's juvenile justice system: they are almost twice as likely as white youth to be incarcerated, and that number continues to grow. In contrast, the share of white youth incarcerated in the state's juvenile system shows a modest decline, while the share of Hispanic youth remains the same over the last five years.

**Disproportionate Representation of Black Youth in Florida's Juvenile Justice System Continues to Grow**  
(Share of Youth Sent to Residential Commitments, Percent by Race)



Source: Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

FPI: [fpi.institute](http://fpi.institute)

Economic inequality between Black youth and white youth is one of the major reasons behind this disproportionate representation of Black youth in the juvenile justice system. Youth who grow up in families or communities with limited resources are at a higher risk of offending than those who are raised in more privileged communities.<sup>8</sup> Individuals of color, particularly Black people, are more likely than their white counterparts to live in economically disadvantaged communities—marked by poverty, disorder, residential segregation and neighborhood disadvantages— which contributes to delinquency, crime and violence.<sup>9</sup>

The link between justice-involved youth and upbringings in high poverty-stricken neighborhoods illuminates the major problem with intergenerational poverty. Incarceration changes the adult opportunities available to youth, with a significant impact on many youths in minority communities for whom a criminal record early in life may result in a lifetime of low-wage, dead end jobs.

#### *The risk of reoffending (recidivism rate) is high for incarcerated youth*

On average, 70 to 80 percent of incarcerated youth are rearrested within three years, often committing worse crimes.<sup>10</sup> In Florida, 37 to 67 percent of the youth will be rearrested within a year for committing a new misdemeanor or felony crime.<sup>11</sup> One of the major reasons that incarcerating youth in state prisons results in high recidivism rates is that these facilities are often far from the youth's home.<sup>12</sup> This means these youth are separated from their families, community support and job training opportunities that are important for future success. The cost of travel and lodging is a financial burden for families that would add to--what is in many cases--already staggering economic needs.

#### *Youth prison facilities are unlikely to promote healthy development*

In addition to the employment challenges articulated earlier, youth prison facilities' reliance on confinement and control offers scant support for healthy development such as prosocial peer group models, opportunities for academic success and activities that contribute to productive critical thinking and decision-making.<sup>13</sup> Youth facilities commonly are replete with maltreatment and abuses that exacerbate youth trauma and risk of re-offense, without rehabilitation and preparation for life within a community. Moreover, a recent report reveals evidence of Florida incidents of violations of the constitutional rights of incarcerated youth, as well as recurring and systemic abuse and maltreatment since 2000.<sup>14</sup>

### Community-Based Treatment Is an Effective Alternative for Justice-Involved Youth

Alternative community programs are more effective than youth prison facilities in rehabilitating certain youth who come in conflict with the law.<sup>15</sup> Community-based treatment and care programs are more likely to reduce the possibility of recidivism. They would improve youths well-being more than institutionalized settings because they are better equipped to address the

unique needs of each client. Research shows that more than 80 percent of youth in alternative incarceration programs remain arrest free, and 90 percent remain home after completing their programs. Moreover, these results cost a fraction of the cost of youth incarceration.<sup>16</sup>

Adequately-resourced community treatment programs can effectively rehabilitate and root out the cause of youth violence by providing an array of assistance for both the youth and their families, including medical and mental health services and the assistance in developing social and employability skills.<sup>17</sup> The programs are better suited to meet the developmental needs of the youth than the punitive nature of secure detention facilities.<sup>18</sup>

A community-based approach to youth justice is also cost effective. Compared to a \$400-per-day cost or more for incarceration, community-based treatment and care services cost as little as \$75 per day.<sup>19</sup> The best place to effectively hold young people accountable while providing a range of opportunities for successful transition to adult life is within their community.<sup>20</sup>

### Florida Should Consider Closing Youth Prison Facilities

Closing youth prison facilities and institutions would enable the state to save taxpayer money and reinvest those savings into alternative-based, effective and rigorous community-based programs. Construction of small, near-home facilities might be warranted for the very few youths whose violence necessitates detention because of a clear danger to public safety.<sup>21</sup> This approach would significantly help the state to address the rapid developmental needs of the youth without compromising public safety.

Florida has made some progress in decreasing both the number of youth who are arrested — 97,237 in FY 2011-12 to 69,749 in FY 2015-16, a 28 percent decrease — and the number who are ultimately subject to residential commitment — 3,653 in FY 2011-12 to 2,738 in FY 2015-16, a 25 percent decrease — according to the latest Delinquency Profile report from the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.<sup>22</sup> A combination of factors have contributed to the overall decline, including the budget crisis, introduction of new programs and innovative practice reforms.<sup>23</sup> This shift offers a good opportunity for the state to adopt financially sensible, racially equitable and developmentally appropriate youth treatment and care options while maximizing public safety. Research by the state's Department of Juvenile Justice also underscores that community-based treatment is a better approach to rehabilitating low-risk youth, reducing recidivism rates and ensuring public safety.<sup>24</sup>

Florida still lags behind national trends in taking practical steps toward reducing its youth incarceration rate. Implementing a continuum of care in community-based settings that could better treat and rehabilitate youth offenders would make communities safer while ensuring budget savings and better use of taxpayer money. States such as Georgia, Kentucky, California, Ohio and Texas have enacted legislation that would significantly reduce youth incarceration in favor of a community-based treatment option, providing funds to strengthen such alternative programs. In taking these steps, Georgia and Kentucky expect budget savings of \$85 million and \$24 million, respectively, over a five-year period.

Sending children to prison is not an inevitability nor should it be a knee jerk option, it is a matter of policy choice. Thus, it is time to move away from the state's over-reliance on youth incarceration as a rehabilitation and public safety strategy. Florida policymakers should look to community-based treatment and care approaches, which are effective and better able to treat most of the state's low-level, non-serious youth offenders who are in prison. Doing so also ensures sustainable public safety, while simultaneously addressing the racial disparities pervasive in the youth prison system, and those youths who are disproportionately impacted by it.<sup>25</sup>

The state should expand the use of proven evidence-based programs such as Florida's Redirection Program, which has resulted in positive outcomes for both youth offenders and taxpayers. The first step in this process is reducing the youth prison population and closing unnecessary youth prison facilities.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Mendel, Richard A. 2011. [\*No Place for Kids: The Case For Reducing Juvenile Incarceration\*](#). The Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- <sup>2</sup> McCarthy, Patrick et al. 2016. [\*The Future of Youth Justice: A Community-Based Alternative to the Youth Prison Model\*](#). p. 16. Harvard Kennedy School program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management, and National Institute of Justice.
- <sup>3</sup> Fosler, Dixie. [\*Detention Services \(FY 2014-15\)\*](#). Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. p. 5
- <sup>4</sup> Justice Policy Institute. 2014. [\*Sticker Shock: Calculating the Full Price Tag for Youth Incarceration\*](#). p 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Supra at 1, p. 21
- <sup>6</sup> Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA).2010. [\*Redirection Saves \\$51.2 Million and Continues to Reduce Recidivism\*](#). Report No.10-38
- <sup>7</sup> Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. [\*Delinquency Profile FY 2015-16, Statewide-All Offences, Intake-Arrests-Race/Ethnicity Split\*](#)
- <sup>8</sup> National Center for Juvenile Justice. 2014. [\*Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2014 National Report\*](#). p.7, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
- <sup>9</sup> Bonnie, Richard J. et al. 2012. [\*Reforming Juvenile justice: A Developmental Approach\*](#). p.224 National Research Council
- <sup>10</sup> Supra at 2, p. 13
- <sup>11</sup> Supra at 1, p. 10
- <sup>12</sup> Goren, Laura and Michael Cassidy. 2015. [\*Smarter Choices for Virginia's Youth and Future\*](#). The Commonwealth Institute. p. 2.
- <sup>13</sup> Supra at 2, p. 4
- <sup>14</sup> Mendel, Richard A. 2015. [\*Maltreatment of Youth in U.S Juvenile Corrections Facilities: An Update\*](#). p. 3, Annie E. Casey Foundation
- <sup>15</sup> Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. 2013. [\*Residential Length-of-Stay and Recidivism Performance\*](#)
- <sup>16</sup> Supra at 2, p. 7
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid
- <sup>18</sup> Supra note at 9, p. 1
- <sup>19</sup> National Juvenile Justice Network. 2011. [\*Bringing Youth Home: A National Movement to Increase Public Safety, Rehabilitate Youth and Save Money\*](#).
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid
- <sup>21</sup> Supra note at 2
- <sup>22</sup> Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. [\*Delinquency Profile FY 2015-16, Statewide Intake-Arrests\*](#)
- <sup>23</sup> Supra note at 19. p.3
- <sup>24</sup> Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. 2013. [\*Appropriate Use of Secure Detention\*](#) and [\*"High Needs" Youth, Myths Vs Facts\*](#)
- <sup>25</sup> Mendel, Richard A. 2014. [\*Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative Progress Report, 2014\*](#). p. 3, Annie E. Casey Foundation