



**OHIO
CHILDREN'S
BUDGET**
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ISSUE BRIEF

ISSUE: Youth Prisons

Each year Ohio spends nearly \$100 million incarcerating about 500 youth up to age 21 at the cost of \$195,260 per youth per year (equal to eight years undergrad education at The Ohio State University). Nearly 50% of children in youth prisons return to a youth or adult prison within three years. Black children are disproportionately represented, making up 56% of incarcerated youth but only 18% of Ohio's youth population. Ohio has built a variety of more effective, less expensive community-based programs that serve as safe alternative options to youth prisons and should be expanded.

Policy

In May 1992, Ohio's youth prison population topped 2,500. Today Ohio's Department of Youth Services' (DYS) three youth prisons hold about 500 male youth, while around 30 female youth are held in smaller facilities. Youth also are held in 12 community correctional facilities and over 35 juvenile detention facilities, meaning Ohio has 50 facilities to lock up court-involved youth.

Ohio's youth prison population reduction came after over-crowded youth prisons with prevalent violence led the state to prioritize investments in community-based alternatives to incarceration programs to serve youth locally. Today Ohio invests about \$60 million in five programs: Youth Services, RECLAIM, Targeted RECLAIM, Behavioral Health and Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) initiative, and Competitive RECLAIM; the last three programs require investments to be evidence- or outcome-based.

Challenges

Although Ohio has reduced its youth prison population, data shows these numbers can continue to be reduced. Many youth in youth prisons - 56% boys and 100% of girls - struggle with mental health issues that may be treated more effectively in community settings. Black youth make up 56% of the youth prison population, despite research showing that Black and White youth commit offenses at similar rates. Reoffending data shows that within three years nearly half of youth are reincarcerated in a DYS or adult prison. Conditions in youth prisons are often inhumane; solitary confinement is utilized and youth are subject to harm - including physical and sexual assault - from both youth and staff.



Opportunities

Nationally, states are moving away from youth prisons and towards expanding, creating, and investing in community-based alternatives. Research has shown that the vast majority of youth – including youth who are at high-risk to reoffend – can be safely served in their communities with significantly less cost and better outcomes if matched with the right programming.

Thankfully, Ohio is ahead of the curve and has developed strong community-based alternatives to incarceration that have proven, positive outcomes for youth. For example, Ohio's BHJJ initiative funds evidence-based and –informed programs including high fidelity wraparound services, family-based therapies, and trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy. Youth served by the BHJJ initiative are less likely to reoffend and get new charges, have less trauma symptoms and substance abuse, and have better grades and fewer suspensions and expulsions. These positive outcomes were achieved for an average cost of \$5,000 per youth – saving the state \$177,132 per youth. These results are incredibly significant considering many of these youth faced complex challenges. BHJJ youth averaged 2 significant mental health diagnoses; the majority were at moderate- and high-risk to reoffend, and lived in poverty, in households with annual incomes of less than \$20,000. Targeted RECLAIM programs also have shown success in reducing reoffending.

Support Child Well-Being: Recommendations

Invest in Community Programs, Not Youth Prisons

Ohio currently is using funds ineffectively and causing harm by maintaining and expanding youth prisons. To effectively invest in Ohio children who become involved in the juvenile courts, Ohio should:

- Increase funding for and expand proven, effective, Ohio-grown community-based alternatives to incarceration for children, including Targeted RECLAIM, BHJJ, and Competitive RECLAIM.
- Stop funding upgrades to existing DYS facilities, including a plan to rebuild an entire facility at a cost of \$6 million for every 24 beds, and consider closing at least one DYS youth prison.
- Invest all savings achieved through youth prison population reductions back into community-based alternatives to incarceration and prevention programs to support youth succeeding and staying out of, or not penetrating deeper into, the court system (i.e. education and behavioral health access and workforce development) instead of allowing this funding to be returned to the General Revenue Fund.
- Ensure adequate coordinated funding at the state and local level for agencies that can help address the underlying causes of juvenile court involvement – i.e. access to substance abuse and mental health treatment, finding solutions to housing instability, and offering education and training opportunities.

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