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ISSUE BRIEF

Issue: Youth Incarceration

“Since I was 11 I’ve been involved with the system. It has put more traumatizing effects on my life than recovering effects. This system only breaks down our mind and worsens us...when I found out how much money Ohio spends per teenager on locking us up, it made me want to cry.” —Davion, incarcerated in Ohio, age 22

Juvenile incarceration is a high-cost policy with a low return on investment. Each year, Ohio spends an average of \$185,303 per year to incarcerate one child—money that can and should be invested more effectively. Incarceration inflicts bodily harm on youth, is rife with racial disparities, restricts opportunities for youth to become well-educated and financially stable, and does not improve recidivism rates. Upstream investment in Ohio’s children will prevent their involvement in the juvenile justice system. In the meantime, the state should shift spending away from youth confinement and towards local and community alternatives with robust data collection that ensures programs treat the root causes of issues in children’s lives.

Policy

After closing five youth prisons between 2007-2019, Ohio’s Department of Youth Services now operates three, called juvenile correctional facilities (JCFs), along with twelve community corrections facilities (CCFs) and four alternative placement facilities. In FY19 there was a daily average of 457 youth held in JCFs, 219 in CCFs, 73 in alternative placements and 245 on parole, not including the youth in additional county-run facilities across Ohio which are not administered by DYS.

Over the past 15 years, Ohio has reduced its youth prison population as the state has shifted to prioritizing more successful investments and decreased its reliance on punishment. However, DYS still spends millions more on youth prisons that it does on its most effective diversion programs, including Targeted RECLAIM, Competitive RECLAIM, and the Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) initiative. Additionally, because alternatives and diversion programming vary widely in terms of programming type, quality, and effectiveness, some can mimic conditions of confinement⁵, which should be avoided.

Challenge

Ohio’s incarcerated youth have been subject to excessive use of force and the highest rate of sexual victimization in the nation. Most youth in DYS care require mental health treatment, but confinement cannot adequately treat—and can actually exacerbate—mental health issues and is also associated with worse overall health outcomes later in life, a crisis which will be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Youth incarceration does not reduce recidivism and can actually increase it compared to more humane approaches. Incarcerated youth receive poor education, are less likely to return to schooling outside, are less likely to graduate high school or go to college, and



experience a reduction in wages and work, all hindering their ability to pursue stable employment. These collateral consequences impact Black youth disproportionately, who make up 56% of incarcerated youth despite only being 16% of Ohio's youth population—a culmination of the racially biased treatment that they receive at each level of the justice system.

Opportunity

Youth incarceration has declined across the country since the mid-2000s and Ohio has been a national leader in the trend. Unfortunately, although the number of incarcerated youths has dropped, funding has not been diverted from incarceration at the same rate. This opens an opportunity for us to take this commonsense step. Around the country, there are alternative models of youth justice that are adaptable to local contexts in Ohio – these models are focused on developing partnerships and continuums with community members, community organizations and non-profits, which are more cost-effective and better positioned to serve justice-involved youth, particularly Black youth and youth of color.

Along with shifting towards a community-engaged and led approach, we can move funds to our existing alternative programs. Youth served by BHJJ programs have seen improvements in trauma symptoms, substance abuse, functioning, and school performance and those served by Targeted RECLAIM have been less likely to reoffend. These initiatives still serve high-need children while costing a fraction of the cost of incarceration in an Ohio youth prison and could therefore serve more youth who are currently being subjected to confinement.



Incarcerated children often have persistent unmet needs: poverty, racism, substance abuse or addiction, mental health challenges, homelessness, and various other environmental and social risk factors. Many of these are also multi-system youth. One straightforward solution across the country has been justice reinvestment, which reduces unnecessary incarceration and intentionally invests the savings into services and systems that treat the risk factors of a child's life—getting at the root by diverting youth away from juvenile court involvement to begin with.

Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendation

Ohio's current spending priorities do not effectively serve justice-involved youth. In order to prevent children's further involvement in juvenile court, Ohio should pursue the following evidence-based recommendations:

- **Focus on upstream investment** in systems and programs that particularly reach low-income children and families who are criminalized and under-invested in (disproportionately Black Ohioans). Mechanisms to increase community safety long-term include adequate healthcare, high-quality education, stable employment and income, safe and affordable housing, and food assistance—the conditions in which children need to grow up to succeed rather than end up in a confinement facility.
- **Reduce reliance on youth confinement and use the savings to expand alternative programs.** We should expand demonstrably positive efforts within DYS's Targeted RECLAIM, Competitive RECLAIM, and Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice initiative, as well as adapt and adopt effective models from across the country. Funding should be flexible to foster partnerships and continuums with community members, community organizations and non-profits.
- Alternatives to incarceration should be accompanied by robust **data collection, evaluation, and oversight** to ensure state dollars are being spent justly and effectively on **trauma-informed and healing-centered** approaches rather than on harsh or traumatizing conditions of confinement.

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