

Commentary

'These Are Our Children'

New models are transforming juvenile justice.

by Liane Gay Rozzell

When young people commit offenses, adults must respond—but too often our response to troubled youth, in the form of local and state juvenile justice systems, does much more harm than good.

One big problem: About 200,000 youth are prosecuted as adults each year, most for nonviolent offenses. Some of them are kids like Jay, a 14-year-old who was held in an adult jail to await trial. Too young to be admitted to the jail's GED course, Jay spent 15 months locked up without any education or programs. After he was finally found not guilty, his grandmother struggled to get him into a school where he could make up for lost time and heal from the trauma of being jailed with adults.

Children who spend time in adult prisons and jails are at much higher risk for assault, abuse, and suicide. They don't get the services they need, and they are more likely to re-offend—sooner, more often, and more violently—than youth who stay in the juvenile system.

We are also wrong to spend so much money and effort incarcerating young people in juvenile prisons or “training schools”—again, often for nonviolent offenses. My son was one of them. He was not a danger to the public, but was sent to a youth prison, where he was beaten by gang members and subjected to abuse and harassment by guards. Facilities like that one, which costs state taxpayers more than \$102,000 per child per year, are abysmal failures, with high recidivism rates. Imprisoning kids to “teach them a lesson” is an almost sure-fire way of teaching them how to be more criminal.

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOL systems have also contributed to the problem by adopting punitive “zero tolerance” policies and relying on police officers to enforce discipline, helping to create a “school to prison pipeline” for an increasing number of students, especially poor youth and youth of color. Schools are no safer, but students are being arrested for acts that used to be resolved by a trip to the principal's office, after-school detention, or suspension.

We have also come to rely on the juvenile justice system to deal with youth whose primary issues are mental illness, substance abuse, and trauma. Up to 70 percent of youth in the system suffer from mental health disorders.

Finally, huge racial and ethnic disparities characterize the juvenile justice system: Although minorities make up one-third of U.S. youth, they are almost two-thirds of those who are locked up. Youth of color are treated more harshly than white youth in all parts of the system.

How should we respond to delinquent young people? By using the growing body of cost-effective, evidence-based programs that give youth a fair chance to change, to heal, to take responsibility for their actions, and to develop into positive, productive adults.

Proven, smarter, saner, and safer alternatives to the failed punishment-oriented model include community-based prevention and intervention programs built on a Positive Youth Development model (which builds on a youth's strengths rather than focusing solely on deficiencies); wraparound

social services; and family-focused therapeutic interventions.

The juvenile justice reform movement is making progress. Communities all over the country are safely reducing their reliance on locked facilities. Some have begun to reduce racial disparities in their juvenile justice systems, using tools such as screenings that cut bias in detention admission decisions. For nonviolent youth, day and evening reporting centers provide a place where they can be supervised and gain skills before their court hearings.

Some communities are turning to restorative justice practices—including peer juries, peacemaking circles, and family group conferencing—to create better outcomes for victims, offenders, and the community. Schools that adopt Positive Behavior Support, which systematically reinforces and rewards good behavior, are creating peaceful learning environments—and boosting achievement.

A stronger Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, currently before Congress, would drastically reduce the number of youth who are locked in detention for truancy or being runaways, push states to keep children out of adult jails, and require states to do more to reduce ethnic disparities. Legislators are also considering the Youth PROMISE Act, which would fund effective, community-chosen approaches to preventing and curbing delinquency.

We will only succeed when we stop demonizing and discarding troubled youth. These are our children. For our sake and theirs, we must take responsibility for how we respond to them.

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