

Choose community programs over youth prisons to punish juveniles

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(Photo: Mike Thompson, Detroit Free Press)

Sometimes Congress gets it right. This summer, the U.S. House Judiciary Committee and Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security held a hearing on juvenile justice reform. The hearing was a call to end the draconian practices of institutionalizing America's juvenile offenders. The committee's chairman, U.S Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-VA) stated in his opening remarks, "We can all agree that Juvenile offenders must be treated differently than adult offenders."

Unfortunately, the justice system is founded on long-term punishment and isolation. That may persuade adults but for youth, it does more harm than good. "Incarcerating youth isn't safe, isn't fair, and doesn't work," said expert witness and CEO of Youth First Initiative, Liz Ryan, "It isn't fair as it disproportionately impacts young people of color" and, "greatly increases the likelihood that youth will re-offend."

Rep. Karen Bass, D-Calif., added, "The system is for poor people. If two siblings in a youth home fight, they are sent to jail. When rich kids fight, they get sent to their room." She called the arrests, "state sponsored child abuse." When a teenager's brain is still developing, the last thing they need is to be abused in a cell.



Bob Weiner (Photo: Richard A. Bloom/Redux Pictures)

Rep. John Conyers, D-Detroit, now Dean of the House and the Democratic leader of the Judiciary Committee, stated, "Research says young peoples' brains continue to mature until their early to mid-twenties. Adolescent brains are different than adult brains. Children who commit crimes are more likely to reform and have a better chance at rehabilitation than adults." And yet most juvenile facilities are modeled after adult prisons.

More: [Juvenile justice, foster care changes signed into law \(/story/news/local/michigan/2016/06/25/juvenile-justice-foster-care-law/86390294/\)](#)

More: [High court's juvenile justice rulings not to be evaded \(/story/opinion/contributors/2016/07/15/high-courts-juvenile-justice-rulings-followed-not-evaded/87076808/\)](#)

What is working? Experimental programs rooted in cognitive behavioral therapy where children have access to mental health care, substance abuse counseling, job training, and education. Resources needed to build a healthy, successful life.



Christina McDowell (Photo: Courtesy of Christina McDowell)

Jim Saint Germain, founder of Preparing Leaders of Tomorrow, gave emotional testimony citing his own story. At a young age his family, Haitian immigrants, moved to a drug and crime ridden neighborhood in Brooklyn where he adapted a lifestyle of drug dealing to survive. What saved him was positive male mentors and rehabilitation. He said he was the "exception not the norm" – he made it out.

Most juveniles do not have access to these resources despite studies showing the states would actually save money if they did. It is also rare that a juvenile offender poses a legitimate threat to an average citizen.

Georgia are shifting funds from institutions to community services and are saving millions of tax dollars. If Georgia continues investing in community-based programs, the state will save \$85 million by the year 2018 while increasing public safety, says Vignati.

Criminal justice reform was making bipartisan headway with legislation by Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) and Corey Booker (D-N.J.). However, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, wants federal prosecutors to fight for the most severe punishments and mandatory sentencing, despite the data showing that "tough on crime" doesn't work.

The hearing made it clear: if the U.S. wants better public safety and a recovered generation of young people, it must dismantle youth prisons and invest in community programs.

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