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National Justice Organizations Call for Closure of Youth Prisons

Today three national organizations that are leaders in criminal justice – Fair and Just Prosecution, Justice Policy Institute and Youth Correctional Leaders for Justice – called for the closing of youth prisons in the United States.

Fair and Just Prosecution (FJP), a network of elected prosecutors across the nation, and Youth Correctional Leaders for Justice (YCLJ), a coalition of current and former chiefs of youth prisons, issued a [joint statement](#) signed by over 30 elected prosecutors and over 40 current and former youth correctional administrators, unequivocally stating: “As professionals charged with promoting the public’s safety and wellbeing, rehabilitating young people and seeking justice, the time has come for us to speak out and oppose the continued operation of these facilities.”

This call to action aligns with The Justice Policy Institute (JPI)’s release today of [Sticker Shock 2020: The Cost of Youth Incarceration](#). In the study, JPI found that 40 states and Washington D.C. spend an average of \$214,620 annually per incarcerated youth, with some states spending more than \$500,000 per year. This amounts to a 44% increase in average costs since JPI issued its first *Sticker Shock* report in 2014. Yet the return on investment for individuals and communities has been anything but beneficial.

“The cost of running these facilities is huge, but it does not compare to the long-term costs to young people, their families, victims and taxpayers. This is a poor investment and we must do better,” said **Marc Schindler, executive director of Justice Policy Institute and a member of YCLJ**.

The US has made strides against its reliance on youth incarceration, which peaked in the 1990s. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of youth confined in juvenile justice facilities declined 62%. Yet, the US still incarcerates more people under 18 than any other country, with the bulk of that burden falling on youth of color. Further, research consistently shows that youth incarceration is associated with poor outcomes, including repeated offending, lower lifetime earnings and poorer health. Risk of sexual and physical assault as well as neglect are all high in these facilities.

“We have witnessed first-hand that these facilities cannot be reformed to an acceptable standard. The model is flawed. It hurts kids – often throughout their entire lives – and actually increases the chances that they’ll break the law again,” said **Vincent Schiraldi, co-chair of YCLJ, former director of youth corrections in Washington, D.C., and co-director of the Columbia University Justice Lab**.

In the context of COVID-19, poor conditions of confinement and exposure to illness have become the norm for too many youth who are incarcerated. Reports on the use of solitary confinement have increased

significantly. To prevent infections, young people are also being denied visitation rights, access to learning opportunities and behavioral health interventions that help young people cope with trauma.

“With this statement, more than 70 people who have run youth prisons and people who have sent kids to them are saying, ‘No more,’” said **FJP executive director and former federal prosecutor Miriam Krinsky**. “Our collective experience tells us that these facilities do damage: they hurt rather than heal kids – primarily youth of color – and simply increase the chances that young people will return to the community at greater risk and less able to pursue productive adult pathways. One cannot help but wonder whether these facilities would still be open if the majority of faces behind their bars were white.”

Around the country, jurisdictions have already reduced youth incarceration and found that decreases in youth crime follow the reform.

“For a long time, many believed that youth incarceration was the unpleasant price that we must pay for public safety. That’s just false,” said **Gladys Carrión, co-chair of YCLJ and former commissioner of the New York City Administration for Children’s Services and New York State’s Office of Children’s Family Services**. “When New York City stopped sending its youth to patently unacceptable prisons, the city’s youth crime rate, which was already decreasing, fell with greater speed. Simply put, there was no public safety downside to treating court-involved children in a way that shows we value their futures.”

A full copy of the FJP/YCLJ statement including the full list of signators, is available [here](#). For a full copy of *Sticker Shock*, visit: <https://bit.ly/2P7oE5W>.

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[Fair and Just Prosecution](#) brings together newly elected local prosecutors as part of a network of leaders committed to promoting a justice system grounded in fairness, equity, compassion and fiscal responsibility.

[Justice Policy Institute](#) is a national nonprofit organization that changes the conversation around justice reform and advances policies that promote well-being and justice for all people and communities.

[Youth Correctional Leaders for Justice](#) unites current and former youth correctional administrators to build a national movement, one that aims to shift systems away from the use of punitive sanctions and incarceration and focus instead on a more youth-, family- and community-oriented vision of youth justice. YCLJ is a project of the Columbia Justice Lab.