

# Construction of Youth Correctional Facilities

*no new construction!*

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**PLAN.**

Eastern State Penitentiary

# NO KIDS IN PRISON

Communities across the country are advocating for the closure of youth correctional facilities and for resources saved from these closures to be redirected into community-based services, supports, and opportunities for youth. As these communities work towards eliminating out-of-home confinement for youth altogether, some are considering an interim step -- creating smaller or newer, short-term, secure care facilities for the very few youth who pose a serious risk to public safety.

This can raise the question of whether jurisdictions should build new youth correctional facilities or instead repurpose existing residential care placements or other buildings in communities. As an organization that supports community campaigns to reduce incarceration in many jurisdictions, we offer some guidance to campaigns and to policymakers on why constructing new youth correctional facilities is the wrong choice for youth, their communities, and the larger public. In brief, the reasons for opposing new construction are both practical and strategic: ultimately, pouring resources into constructing new facilities, even facilities that are small and community-based, undermines longer-term decarceration efforts and other system improvements, diverts from investments in community-driven approaches, and is an inefficient use of valuable resources.



# Opposing New Construction of Youth Correctional Facilities

As states achieve lower rates of incarceration while still expending valuable resources on aging correctional facilities, communities across the country oppose youth correctional facility construction for three key reasons:

## 1.) New Construction of Youth Correctional Facilities *Is an Inefficient Use of Valuable Resources*

**Using existing structures is more efficient:** Policymakers should look to repurpose existing residential programs and spaces already in communities, such as closed schools, vacant homes, or unused community centers, for use in the youth justice system instead of building new facilities to incarcerate youth. As use of congregate care in the child welfare system declines,<sup>1</sup> policymakers should consider former foster care group homes and residential treatment facilities as possible spaces that could be repurposed into more youth-appropriate settings for youth justice placements.

Youth justice systems that want to turn existing, older properties into “state-of-the-art” placements for youth have many models to follow from the world of architecture. “Adaptive reuse,” the process of repurposing buildings that have outlived their original purposes for different uses or functions while at the same time retaining their historic features<sup>3</sup> is already happening across the country (and is sometimes called property rehabilitation, turnaround, or historic redevelopment). Repurposing old buildings—particularly those that are vacant—reduces the need for construction of new buildings and the consumption of land, energy, materials, and financial resources that they require.

### Missouri Division of Youth Services: Hogan Street



The Hogan Street Regional Youth Center (RYC) is a secure care facility located in downtown St. Louis, Missouri and was previously a school for a former Catholic Church. The facility’s physical plant is a single building within a fenced secure area and an outdoor recreation area. From the outside, no one can tell it is a youth correctional facility as it naturally fits into the surrounding residential area.<sup>2</sup>

1.) See, e.g., National Conference of State Legislatures. *Family First Prevention Services Act* (January 2020). <https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/family-first-prevention-services-act-ffpsa.aspx>. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau. *A National Look at the Use of Congregate Care in Child Welfare* (May 2015).

2.) *The Missouri Model: Reinventing the Practice of Rehabilitating Youthful Offenders*. Annie E. Casey Foundation, <https://www.aecf.org/resources/the-missouri-model/>



## 2.) **New Construction of Youth Correctional Facilities** *Diverts From Investments in Community-Driven Approaches*

**New construction diverts limited resources and attention from needed long-term investment in youth in impacted communities and communities of color:** New construction doesn't invest in the communities most impacted by incarceration. Instead, youth correctional facility construction projects often involve substantial multi-million dollar investments in suburban and rural areas that create jobs for people who are not from impacted communities. As a result, the state allocates resources towards incarcerating young people rather than investing in youth and families in their communities. Constructing a new facility draws a disproportionate amount of the time and attention state decisionmakers give to youth justice issues, taking the focus away from the discussion about, and action around, alternatives and serving youth in their communities.

**New construction can drain resources in the localities that house the facility:** Apart from the initial funds spent to build the facility, new construction of youth correctional facilities can actually disadvantage the communities that house them, not just the communities that lose their youth to facilities. New facilities are often placed in remote or rural areas, communities that may already be suffering from a shortage of qualified nurses, counselors, and other health professionals.<sup>4</sup> Given that these types of professionals are needed in youth correctional facilities as well, communities that are near the location of a new youth facility may face either a shortage of professionals available to the community (if pay and benefits are better in the correctional facility), or a youth correctional facility that is unsafe (if it is not able to staff appropriately). Even when new youth correctional facilities are built in cities, they may inappropriately use local resources--for example by using limited land when there is a shortage of affordable housing or using funds that could otherwise help address an affordable housing crisis.<sup>5</sup>

**New construction conflicts with what directly impacted communities know they need to be successful:** When communities impacted by youth incarceration are included in conversations about the best use of reinvestment dollars saved from facility closures, they do not ask for new facilities, but for investments directly into their communities. Across the country, campaign leaders have held visioning sessions in their communities to distill what directly impacted youth need to be successful at home. In Virginia, New Jersey, Kansas,

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3.) *Giving Old Buildings New Life Through Adaptive Reuse*  
<http://www.archinode.com/lcaadapt.html>; <https://www.thoughtco.com/adaptive-reuse-repurposing-old-buildings-178242>;  
*Smart Growth and Preservation of Existing and Historic Buildings*  
<https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/smart-growth-and-preservation-existing-and-historic-buildings#1>

4.) California Critical Access Hospital Network, *Hospitals and their relationships to prisons*.  
<https://www.ccahn.org/prisons>

5.) Urban Institute, *Transforming Closed Youth Prisons: Repurposing Facilities to Meet Community Needs*,  
[https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/98628/transforming\\_closed\\_youth\\_prisons.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/98628/transforming_closed_youth_prisons.pdf) (2018).

and other jurisdictions, the recommendations from youth<sup>6</sup> include investing money saved from closure of youth prisons in:

- *Economic opportunity and changing the economic structure for communities of color.*
- *Opportunities for young people in communities to access recreation and sports programs, safe spaces, needed information, and opportunities to address stress and engage in activities that build resilience and help overcome trauma.*
- *Meeting the basic needs of youth, transportation, and eliminating “food deserts.”<sup>7</sup>*
- *Job programs that offer youth skill-building opportunities.*

**New construction often comes with hidden costs:** States that have decided to build new correctional facilities have found that beyond the costs expected to purchase land and construct a building, they may have to pay for environmental remediation, costs to bring sewer or water lines out to the property, and transportation for families to visit youth and for youth to travel to court or services. Additionally, new construction also worsens climate change and degrades environmental sustainability.<sup>8</sup> The more remote the location chosen, the higher these costs may be. For locations that are less remote and more desirable, there are also opportunity costs because the state loses the income it could have made from selling or renting the property, or using it for a better purpose.

### **3.) New Construction of Youth Correctional Facilities Undermines Longer-Term Youth Justice System Improvement**

**New construction expands mass incarceration:** New construction expands the footprint of mass incarceration, creating more spaces to incarcerate youth than are actually needed.<sup>9</sup> Once these beds exist, there will always be pressure to fill them. Policymakers should focus on downsizing, not expanding.

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6.) <https://www.nokidsinprison.org/solutions/what-youth-want>; <https://www.njisj.org/after-youth-prisons>

7.) U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service.  
*Access to Affordable, Nutritious Food Is Limited in “Food Deserts.”* (March 2010).  
<https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2010/march/access-to-affordable-nutritious-food-is-limited-in-food-deserts/>

8.) The American Institute of Architects (AIA) believes that before states contemplate new construction of buildings, they should first consider repurposing existing buildings as new building construction increases greenhouse emissions and contributes to climate change more than rehabilitating existing buildings. *Renovate, retrofit, reuse: Uncovering the hidden value in America’s existing building stock.* The American Institute of Architects  
[http://content.aia.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/RES19\\_227853\\_Retrofitting\\_Existing\\_Buildings\\_Report\\_Guide\\_V3.pdf](http://content.aia.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/RES19_227853_Retrofitting_Existing_Buildings_Report_Guide_V3.pdf)

9.) See, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/dec/23/seattle-youth-detention-opening-new-facility>  
and <https://www.seattle.gov/council/meet-the-council/bruce-harrell/no-new-youth-jail>

**New construction leads to over-building that will be difficult to downsize in the future:** When a state or jurisdiction builds a new youth facility, juvenile justice system leaders are likely to build more capacity than what is really needed. Trying to project future growth/need is a faulty science which often results in over sized facilities.<sup>10</sup> It is very hard to get rid of a new youth facility once a state or locality builds it due to fixed operating and staffing costs. Policymakers and administrators who have devoted a substantial investment in time and money to design, finance, and build a new facility are likely to feel committed to keeping the facility open and utilized.

**New facilities can isolate youth from home communities:** In many cases, new construction is not actually close to home or connected to community supports. For example, the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission has proposed constructing a Southern New Jersey regional facility in Winslow Township, nearly 30 miles outside of Camden with few public transportation options, where the majority of Southern New Jersey youth in custody come from.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice proposed building a facility in several rural Hampton Roads communities such as Chesapeake and Windsor, rather than locating small facilities within the communities where the majority of Hampton Roads youth in custody come from, such as Norfolk and Newport News.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, a newly constructed facility is less likely to be integrated into or blend into the community where it is located.

### Washington, DC: New Beginnings Youth Development Center



The District of Columbia originally built its youth correctional facility, New Beginnings, for 60 youth in 2009.<sup>11</sup> A decade later, the facility holds, on average, 15 youth committed from the youth justice system.<sup>12</sup> Even though this facility is essentially no longer needed, there is no political will to close it. Additionally, New Beginnings is located approximately 20 miles outside of the District of Columbia with shuttle service made available to parents by the system.

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10.) The Crime and Justice Institute, *Local Justice Reinvestment: The Challenge of Jail Population Projection*, [https://www.crj.org/assets/2017/07/16 The Challenge of Jail Population Projection.pdf](https://www.crj.org/assets/2017/07/16%20The%20Challenge%20of%20Jail%20Population%20Projection.pdf) (March 2016).

11.) <https://dyrs.dc.gov/page/dyrs-agency-history>

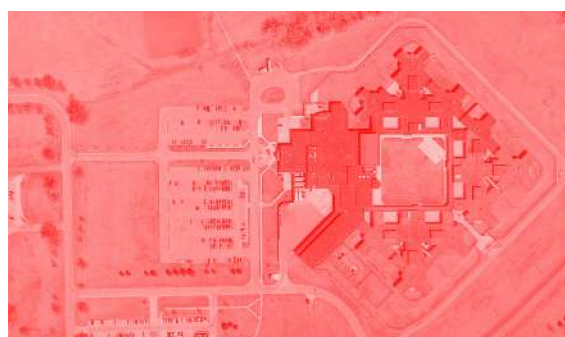
12.) <https://dccouncil.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/dyrs.pdf>

13.) <https://www.nj.com/essex/2019/04/everybody-is-ticked-off-keep-new-youth-prison-out-of-our-burgeoning-neighborhood-city-says.html>

14.) [http://www.cityofchesapeake.net/Assets/documents/departments/public\\_works/active\\_projects\\_spotlights/JJJC+Paper.pdf](http://www.cityofchesapeake.net/Assets/documents/departments/public_works/active_projects_spotlights/JJJC+Paper.pdf)

**New facilities can prevent youth from gaining real-world experiences and instead subject them to prison-like environments:** New youth facilities are often built without consideration for what real life looks like —built as ‘all inclusive’ spaces that use high-security features to contain youth and isolate them from the outside world. This controlled setting makes it easier for staff, but not for youth, as it doesn’t facilitate positive interactions or strong relationships between youth and their peers and others in the community —relationships that will actually help youth to develop and thrive. On the contrary, newly-built secure care facilities are more likely to have prison-like features, despite best intentions. When system leaders design and build facilities from the ground up, it is easier to emphasize correctional features, such as central control stations, in-cell toilets, concrete beds, razor wire fencing, thick concrete walls, and security hardware.

When envisioning an effective model for secure care as an interim step towards ultimately ending youth incarceration, what matters most is the philosophy and culture of the environment where youth are confined. Research shows that for youth to thrive, they need caring relationships with adults.<sup>16</sup> Every aspect of secure care facilities — location, staffing, etc. — should seek to help promote and strengthen positive relationships and connections: including supportive connections among youth, between youth and staff, and between youth and their families and communities. Most importantly, facilities can promote safety and security — for youth, staff and the larger community — when they emphasize staff supervision based on positively engaging youth rather than controlling and containing youth within barbed-wire perimeter fences, steel doors and cinder block walls.



**“In under-resourced communities, the disproportionate investment in infrastructure for our punitive justice system illustrates how the built environment embodies many of our society’s gross inequities.”**

Deanna Van Buren, Architect,  
co-founder of the Oakland-based nonprofit  
firm Designing Justice/Designing Spaces

15.) [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/close\\_to\\_home/cth\\_Plan\\_final.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/close_to_home/cth_Plan_final.pdf)

16.) National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015). *Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper No. 13*. Retrieved from [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)





## **“State of the Art” Is More Than a Building**

Proponents of new construction may argue that a new building would be “state-of-the-art,” and therefore less prison-like and more appropriate for youth. However, big new buildings aren’t what makes a youth justice system “state of the art.” In fact, it’s quite the opposite, as youth justice experts agree that smaller, more home-like settings (structures which already exist in every community, but may not yet be used by youth justice systems) are best for youth. Guided by the latest research on adolescent development and on what best serves youth’s needs, youth justice system leaders can find ways to use these existing home-like spaces to deliver services to youth, rather than creating oversized new spaces that still imprison young people.

It is important that both the physical environment as well as the management of secure care facilities reflect the values of healing and integrating youth, instead of punishing and isolating them. The Residential Care Principles in the Close to Home Plan from New York City provide an example of a model that reflect these values:<sup>15</sup>

- **Envision secure care as part of a larger community-based continuum of care.**
- **Manage facilities using age-appropriate practices, as they have a greater likelihood of achieving positive outcomes.**
- **Provide comprehensive case management to support young people’s successful adjustment to residential care and reintegration to the community.**
- **Engage families and include them in the treatment process**
- **Start planning aftercare as soon as youth enter the facility**
- **Locate facilities in the communities where young people and their families live.**
- **Use time spent in residential care to pursue educational objectives, and ensure that youth are able to build upon their educational gains when they return to the community.**
- **Engage and involve local communities to provide programming and to build strong community ties.**
- **Focus on ensuring safety through common objectives for youth, staff and local communities**
- **Ensure that staff and programming are culturally responsive.**
- **Measure outcomes on a regular basis, and use data to inform program changes.**

# Conclusion

With youth crime rates at historic lows and many youth prisons significantly below operating capacity, now is the time to re-envision our youth justice system to be one based on adolescent research, one that does not overuse incarceration at the expense of youth and communities. If communities embrace the idea of secure care options as an interim step towards ultimately ending the incarceration of youth, it must be small, home-like, close to home and on properties that offer the right amount of services for the shortest amount of time. Historical juvenile justice “reform” has taught us that building new “state-of-the-art” facilities on campus-like properties wastes dollars, is often far from home for youth, and still produces poor results once youth return to their communities. The missing link has always been family and communities therefore, we believe that creating small, home-like spaces within youth’s own communities will result in better outcomes for public safety, youth, and communities.



If youth prisons were closed, tens of millions of dollars could be freed up for community-based, non-residential alternatives to youth incarceration, and other youth-serving programs. In October 2016, the National Institutes of Justice, in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Harvard Kennedy School, published ‘The Future of Youth Justice: A Community-Based Alternative to the Youth Prison Model’, which rejects the harmful, ineffective, and excessively expensive youth prison model in favor of investment in community-based alternatives that work.<sup>17</sup>

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17.) Harvard Kennedy School Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management and National Institute of Justice, *The Future of Youth Justice: A Community-Based Alternative to the Youth Prison Model*, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250142.pdf> (2016)

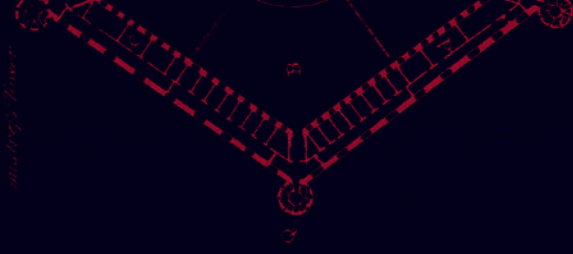
# Acknowledgments

The Youth First Initiative is a national campaign to end youth incarceration and invest in community-based supports, services and opportunities for youth. Youth First seeks to achieve a tipping point in ending youth incarceration and shifting resources towards investments in youth in their communities. The initiative is fiscally sponsored by the New Venture Fund, a 501 (c) 3 charity.



[www.nokidsinprison.org](http://www.nokidsinprison.org)

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- Prisoners' Union
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