

# STEP

# 1.

**Do Your Research:  
Asking Key Questions**

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TIME TO COMPLETE: 1-3 MONTHS

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Before beginning your campaign, you will want to gather information about your state’s youth prisons, and the individuals and groups who could help (or hurt) your efforts to close them. You will want to collect information about youth incarcerated in your state, as well as information about specific prison facilities, as outlined in the *Youth Prison Information Checklist* in this Toolkit. (See page 16)

Your state’s *juvenile justice agency* is a good place to start when gathering data on youth incarceration. For other possible sources of state-level data, visit [www.youthfirstinitiative.org](http://www.youthfirstinitiative.org). In addition to online resources and state or national organizations, the most important sources of information are the **impacted youth and families in your community**, as well as advocates and stakeholders who may already be working to address these or similar issues. Conversations with these individuals can help you find out what is happening in your state, as well as identify potential partners for your campaign. Use the *Stakeholder Information Gathering Worksheet* as a guide for what to ask about during these early conversations.

"If you're involved in a campaign—make sure that it's bottom up and not top down. Campaigns need to be rooted in the communities that are most affected by youth prison and system abuse. My fear is that campaigns that are top down won't be successful in the long term because they can't actually get to the real root of these problems." —Derrick Johnson, in *Breaking Down the Walls*

In addition to individual or group conversations, you may wish to develop and circulate a survey to get the most input possible.

All of the information gathering described here and later in this guide is an ongoing process. You may not be able to answer some of the questions posed, and that may highlight a need or a problem (e.g., government entities might not be collecting important information, or you may not have yet connected with the right people to get the information you need). Just asking the questions will inform your campaign, help you develop relationships with the right stakeholders, and lead you towards an effective campaign strategy.

**Once you have gathered all of the information outlined in the *Youth Prison Information Checklist* and *Stakeholder Information Gathering Worksheet*, you can decide whether it makes sense to start your own campaign, work with an existing campaign, or pursue other strategies.**

*Here is a list of factors to consider in making the decision to launch a campaign—or not:*

- Have you confirmed that there are no existing campaigns working on this?
- Do you have a core group of people who are interested and ready to take action?
- Are there any existing conditions that you can leverage (e.g., a lawsuit over facility conditions, a budget crisis that could support a call to cut wasteful spending, a legislative champion or supportive governor or justice agency director)?
- Do you have the capacity to run and manage a campaign, or can you build that capacity (e.g., would an existing organization lend some staff and/or resources to get you started)?

## Researching Existing Community-based Services

While you are gathering information on youth prisons in your state, you also should try to map out what alternatives exist in your state to better meet the needs of youth and families (e.g., mentoring, family mediation/crisis intervention, substance use treatment). This will allow you to address any concerns about what will happen to youth when prisons are closed, and it can identify gaps that you may want to address when you push for funding realignment (e.g., spending money on behavioral health services rather than incarceration). If little information exists, this can prove to be a time-consuming exercise that may also *require a significant investment of resources*. Trying to assess that possible need early so that you can build it into your planning, if necessary, is an important consideration.



# Youth Prison Information Checklist

The following is a list of data points and other information you should gather to inform your campaign to close youth prisons in your state.

- ☐ **Total number of youth incarcerated in the state:**
- ☐ **Characteristics of incarcerated youth (race, ethnicity, gender, age); disparities in incarceration rates:**
- ☐ **Daily or annual cost to lock up youth:**
- ☐ **Recidivism rate (e.g., how many youth end up back in the system after release) for incarcerated youth and for youth who are involved with the justice system but not incarcerated:**

- ☐ **Number and locations of youth prisons:**
- ☐ **Design capacity and operating capacity of each facility:<sup>(1)</sup>**
- ☐ **Any prison-like features (e.g., locked rooms, cells, or units; razor wire fences):<sup>(\*)</sup>**
- ☐ **Use of correctional staff and approaches similar to those used in adult prisons (e.g., restraints and solitary confinement and/or military style regimen and uniforms):<sup>(\*)</sup>**

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1.)Number of youth in each facility, most commonly referred to as the average daily population (ADP). More than 30 beds is generally considered a large facility, as discussed further below.

\*) Criteria that the Youth First Initiative considers in determining whether a facility is a youth prison. If at least 3 of these factors are present, YF will generally consider the facility to be a youth prison.



- ☐ Number of staff at each facility:

☐ Union(s) representing staff at each facility:

☐ Which 2-3 cities send the most youth to these facilities?

☐ Distance from youths' homes and/or geographic isolation<sup>(\*)</sup> (e.g., how accessible they are by public transportation, and how long it takes to get there by public transportation and by car.):
- ☐ Reported or documented instances of abuse, violence, and neglect (e.g., press reports, federal or state investigations, lawsuits):<sup>(\*)</sup>

☐ Any other public information about the conditions at any of the facilities (e.g., government, research, or advocacy reports):

☐ Level or lack of family contact, involvement, engagement:<sup>(\*)</sup>

☐ Types of programming offered:

☐ Information on the towns where the facilities are located and whether the facilities are among the largest employers for those towns:

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Editable versions of all worksheets/checklists in this guide available at [www.youthfirstinitiative.org](http://www.youthfirstinitiative.org)

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# Stakeholder Information

## Gathering Worksheet

The following is a list of questions to ask impacted youth and families, advocates, and other stakeholders to inform your campaign to close youth prisons in your state.

☐ Do you know of any efforts already underway to close youth prisons? Are there any other campaigns related to juvenile justice, e.g., to reduce incarceration, end the school-to-prison pipeline? Are there any existing commissions / task forces / oversight bodies looking at this issue?

☐ What concerns do you or others in your community have about the current juvenile justice system, particularly about youth incarceration? [Or, for systems stakeholders: How do you think the current system is working and where do you see a need for change?]

☐ Who/what are the best sources of information about your state’s juvenile justice system, its youth prisons, and non-secure alternatives?

☐ What does the public in your state think about the issue? Will your campaign be able to get public support for your goals? How much education is needed? What has TV/newspaper coverage of this issue looked like?

☐ How much funding is currently devoted by the state to alternatives to incarceration? Which government body decides where the funding for alternatives to incarceration go?

☐ Who would be best positioned to support this work? Which individuals or organizations have an interest in reform, and the dedication or power to help bring change about? How effective/powerful are these potential allies? Are there any potential concerns about them, or areas where they may need more support/education? Are there new or unlikely allies that you should be reaching out to?



☐ Who will fight this and why? What type of relationships/political power do they have?

☐ Are there any good/promising local practices, such as a highly effective alternative to incarceration, that could be highlighted or spread?

☐ What is the political landscape for change? Is there an election coming up where there might be an opportunity to push this issue? Is there an existing lawsuit or investigation of the youth prison? Has the youth prison been covered a lot in press reports over conditions of confinement? Is there a budget crisis that might prompt a need to cut the funding for the youth prisons? How supportive is your state leadership (governor, attorney general, house and senate)? Where is your state in its budget cycle/process (biennial budget or annual)? Are there clear legislative champions? Who currently leads the legislative committee with jurisdiction? What do you know about leaders of key agencies (corrections, health and human services)?

Timelines and timing for your campaign

The following chart will give you a sense of the timing for the Steps described in this Toolkit. A typical campaign will take about 6 months to get off the ground, and in some cases your campaign may take up to a year to go from an idea to a fully launched campaign.

