

YOUTH PRISON WATCH

NO KIDS IN PRISON

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STATE OF YOUTH PRISONS

As young people suffer continued trauma and harm from incarceration, lawmakers across the country are proposing hundreds of millions of dollars for new youth prisons. Architects, designers and juvenile justice departments keep saying the same thing: “These new facilities are going to be healing! ‘Trauma-informed’! They won’t even feel like a prison! We promise we’ll even have services for youth! Just trust us.”

James Kilgore, a former political prisoner, calls this type of argument for new cages ‘carceral humanism.’ Let’s break that down. ‘Carceral’ is talking about the entire system that keeps prisons open and running. When you add ‘humanism,’ it’s talking about how these prisons will offer services like mental health and education all inside ‘nicer’ prisons. Cages that ‘barely feel like cages.’ It sounds nice, right? But these promises for nicer cages are mostly made by people with no power or will to actually deliver on them. And the youth actually locked inside these cages are rarely involved.

New youth prisons are not the solution. How will a new prison fix the ongoing understaffing that keeps youth locked in their cells all day? How will it stop the violence and abuse they face from guards? Why must youth be locked up to access services like mental health, counseling and education? Why aren’t these services available in our communities? A new prison still removes youth from their support systems, families and loved ones. This sets them on a path to experience higher rates of both incarceration and violence as they grow up. The average cost to incarcerate a youth is over \$200,000 a year¹. What could our communities do with that money instead?

We haven’t even talked about how much it costs to build new youth facilities. Right now, dozens are being built or expanded across the country at huge costs. For example, Tennessee² plans to build three new youth prisons at a combined estimated cost of \$616 million³. Louisiana’s Governor is pushing for over 260 new youth prison and detention center beds at a cost of \$93.6 million⁴ with the explicit purpose of making room for more youth to serve time behind bars. California⁵, Colorado⁷, Wisconsin⁸, Ohio⁹, Washington¹⁰ and other states are planning for new cages to lock our youth in for generations to come.

So we’ve got one question for you: What are we going to do about it?

Black August – created by jailed movement leaders in 1979 to remember fallen comrades like Black Panther Party member George Jackson – is an opportunity to reflect on and study the contributions of Black revolutionaries and political prisoners.

This special inaugural edition of Youth Prison Watch is presented in honor of and solidarity with the countless Black revolutionaries and political prisoners who have come before us, whose unwavering commitment to freedom fuels our collective fight for abolition in every generation.

YOUTH FIGHT BACK!

While politicians, prosecutors and private companies push for more youth prisons and incarceration, young people and their allies are fighting back and winning! According to the Sentencing Project, between 2000 and 2022 the number of youth locked up decreased by 75%¹¹! Arrest rates for youth dropped over 80% since their peak in 1996! All thanks to the work of countless people organizing at local and state levels.

This decline is a major victory, but not all communities have benefited equally. In 2023, Black and Indigenous youth faced the highest racial disparities in youth incarceration ever¹². Black youth were nearly six times more likely than white youth to be imprisoned. Indigenous youth were almost four times as likely, and Latino youth faced a 25% higher likelihood of incarceration. These disparities reveal youth incarceration for what it is: a tool of a racist system targeting Black people and trapping our communities in cycles of incarceration. This is why we must fight. No one is free until all our youth are free!

Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution. Formerly incarcerated youth are organizing for a future without youth incarceration and are seeking justice for all those harmed by youth prisons. This year in Los Angeles, California, more than 6,800 people incarcerated as youth sued and won \$4 billion for systemic sexual abuse they experienced in youth facilities throughout LA¹³. Last year in Austin, Texas officials tried to sneak through a \$300 million ‘trauma-informed’ youth prison without any input from youth or the community¹⁴. The people mobilized over 50 formerly incarcerated youth, family members

and allies to speak out against the new build. Not one person spoke in favor of the new ‘trauma-informed’ prison, instead identifying the prison itself as the source of their trauma. Together, they convinced the county to kill the project! In Pennsylvania, the Delaware County Juvenile Detention Center, known for its psychological, sexual, and physical abuse against youth, was initially shut down by the District Attorney following an investigation into horrendous abuse allegations¹⁵. Years of grassroots organizing and activism have since staved off its rebuild¹⁶, ensuring it remains closed and preventing further harm.

At the end of 2022, Louisiana started locking up 80 youth, almost all young Black boys, on the former death row block of Louisiana State Penitentiary¹⁷. LSP started as one of the largest slave plantations in the country and is better known by its original plantation name Angola, named after the country of Angola where many of the enslaved people forced to work the plantation were kidnapped from. Angola was turned from a slave plantation into a prison where incarcerated people are still forced to pick cotton to this day. Locking up youth in Angola shows the true intentions of this racist system. It has never been about rehabilitating or healing our youth. It’s always been about locking youth and adults in a system that dehumanizes and controls them from cradle to grave. And still we fight back. Just over a year later, young organizers and their allies were able to pressure the state of Louisiana to remove youth from incarceration at Angola, a former plantation for enslaved Africans and one of the most notoriously inhumane adult prisons in the U.S.

NOW WHAT

History has shown us that when we fight, we win! And young people have been leading the fight for generations. We want you to reach out to your friends, your family and people in your community and ask them: What could we do with millions of dollars every year that would actually help young people instead of locking them in a cage? What does our community need to thrive? How can we fight for it together?



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www.nokidsinprison.org

NO KIDS IN PRISON

MANIFESTO

Today in the United States, the kids are not okay.

More than 34,000 young people¹⁸ are locked up inside facilities every year where they experience violence instead of justice, neglect instead of care and stagnation instead of growth. They are isolated from family, loved ones and community to the tune of more than \$200,000 taxpayer dollars per child. That’s 1250% more than we spend on average to educate a child, which is around \$16,000.

Youth and communities thrive when society prioritizes keeping families and support networks together.

Our nation’s entire system of youth incarceration is predicated on the disruption and deconstruction of the family unit — the most integral and fundamental institution of a society. Our youth prisons are globally recognized as the most inhumane in the world, with widespread physical, sexual and emotional abuse. The research is clear¹⁹: Youth prisons don’t do what they’re supposed to do, and they don’t make our communities safer. They’re an unjust, ineffective money pit siphoning tax dollars from the public that could be better invested in solutions centered around the strengths of our families and communities. **Would you invest millions of dollars in a system with such a poor track record?**

Public safety is possible, and at a much better price point. When young people make mistakes and cause harm, society should respond by providing them the chance to repair the damage they have caused while also healing the community and their own trauma. We want to see resources reallocated to the places where young people live. Instead of being removed from their communities, our babies need access to resources to thrive: people who care about them, the chance to learn in well-funded schools with high-quality learning opportunities, and access to spaces and activities that allow them to explore, grow and develop their gifts (i.e. sports, arts, trades and business). With the right support and opportunities, **every kid is capable of change regardless of their mistakes.**

Despite this fact, we continue to see our government and states double down, calling for more punitive measures, more facilities to cage kids and more taxpayer dollars to fund a failed operation. Lawmakers want to be ‘tough on crime,’ while detention facilities consistently report staffing shortages, extended use of isolation and lockdowns, lack of education and other programming, and rampant violence and escape attempts.

The solution isn’t ‘better’ youth prisons – the problem is youth prisons in the first place. Our vision is of a world with #NoKidsInPrison. That means no young people are put in carceral settings, including jails or prisons (juvenile and adult), detention centers, and private and state-run placements.



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