

Unlocking the Future: Detention Reform in the Juvenile Justice System

Coalition for Juvenile Justice 2003 Annual Report



Unlocking the Future demonstrates with strong evidence that juvenile court jurisdictions throughout the United States needlessly sweep into locked detention many young people with mental health, substance abuse and family problems—most of whom are 15 years or younger, nonviolent, and disproportionately youth of color. The report recognizes that detention is a useful and necessary tool of the juvenile court when used for offenders who may be dangerous to others, at high risk of committing new crimes or who may flee a court hearing. However, this tool is widely misused. According to CJJ, on any given day, more than 27,000 American children and teens reside in secure detention facilities, some of whom will be acquitted or released. The CJJ report shows that contrary to popular belief, the majority of detained youth are not the older, violent offenders that the public assumes need to be under lock and key. It also highlights positive reforms made by a few notable jurisdictions, including cities in California, Idaho, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon and rural North Dakota.

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Report Overview

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Excerpt from *Unlocking the Future*:

The detention experience can produce long-term ramifications for both youth and the communities to which they will eventually return. Being locked up can aggravate existing mental health and substance abuse problems or create new ones, sending youth back into society with increased degrees of anger, depression and frustration. The notion that putting youth into secure detention is the best way of ensuring public safety is not only misleading, it can backfire. A stint behind locked doors can expose a non-violent young person to delinquents with serious criminal track records, leaving the youth more prone to criminal behavior than before the system intervened.

For all these reasons, there has been a growing detention reform movement around the country. Many jurisdictions are examining the basic purposes of detention, shifting philosophies and implementing a range of systemic reforms and alternative programs that benefit youth and communities, while keeping costs low and enhancing public safety.

For example, when Cook County (Illinois) initiated a series of system reforms, the number of youth in

secure detention decreased significantly with no subsequent rise in the juvenile crime rate. Reforms in Multnomah County (Oregon) made dramatic inroads to reducing the disproportionate number of minority youth in confinement. In King County (Washington) taxpayers are saving between \$3.9-\$5.4 million a year, while safely reducing the number of youth held in secure detention.

Earl Dunlap, executive director of the National Juvenile Detention Association, predicts that with both the juvenile crime rate and the economy down, the time is ripe for change. "Leaders in juvenile justice and political leadership are finally beginning to discover that the costs continue to rise for secure detention and, in many cases, there is little return on the investment. There is a strong case for the development of less costly alternatives and for re-thinking detention as a *process* as opposed to a *place*."

To Build or To Reform: One County's Decision

Several years ago, King County, population 1.7 million, decided that its 160-bed juvenile detention facility needed serious attention. The number of youth being admitted and their lengths of stay were rising substantially. As a result, the building was often bursting at the seams, a situation that greatly impacted every aspect of institutional life, from sleeping arrangements to meals, schooling, recreation and the safety of both youth and staff.

Since the early 1990s, the county, with Seattle as its urban core, has mirrored a national pattern. There had been a decrease in both the violent and overall juvenile crime rates,ⁱ yet the county's detention population was steadily growing. This growth exaggerated the already disproportionate number of minority youth being held in the detention facility. Youth of color represent about 58 percent of the secure detention population, while comprising approximately 30 percent of the general population.ⁱⁱ

King County's initial approach to its detention problems was a familiar one—putting the blame on a too-small facility. In response, community leaders developed expansion plans to build an 80-bed addition at an estimated cost of \$11 million.ⁱⁱⁱ However, they soon began questioning the rush to expand and instead examined how the county's detention practices contributed to the high number of youth being held behind bars.

"We asked ourselves, 'In this era of economic belt-tightening, at a time when the juvenile crime rate has been falling, is detaining more youth really in the best interests of community safety and the taxpayers?'" explains Michael Gedeon, project coordinator of the county's Juvenile Justice Operational Master Plan.

King County eventually shelved plans for a larger facility and has been implementing systemic reforms and putting less costly community-based programs into place, saving taxpayers \$3.9-\$5.4 million a year.^{iv} Without jeopardizing public safety, the county has watched its detention rate decline by more than 30 percent,^v maintaining only 41 beds per 100,000 youth, while other jurisdictions require much more.^{vi} The county has also taken steps to begin addressing the over-representation of youth of color by enlisting community involvement and supporting culturally relevant training and tools.

Says King County executive Ron Sims of his county's decision not to expand: "We reached a critical point in 1998. Do we accept the projection for a new juvenile detention facility as our inevitable future? Or do we reform our practices and provide effective programs to minimize the need for secure beds? While much work remains, our county has taken major steps towards shaping a new future."

ⁱ Whit Griffinger, "National Trends, Local Consequences: The Expansion of Juvenile Detention Facilities." www.youthlaw.org/juevhall.PDF. (Oakland, CA: Sept.-Oct. 2001).

ⁱⁱ Personal communication with Michael Gedeon.

ⁱⁱⁱ Whit Griffinger, "National Trends, Local Consequences: The Expansion of Juvenile Detention Facilities." www.youthlaw.org/juevhall.PDF (Oakland, CA: Sept.-Oct. 2001).

^{iv} Richard Mendel, "Less Cost, More Safety." (Washington DC: American Youth Policy Forum. 2001).

^v County studies cited in personal communication with Michael Gedeon and Ron Sims.

^{vi} Center on Juvenile Crime and Criminal Justice [CJCJ], A Preliminary Analysis of Detention Expansion in Alameda County www.cjcj.org/pubs/comparision/comparision.html (San Francisco, CA: CJCJ, January 2003).

Unlocking the Future was supported by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. For more information on CJJ's work in detention reform, please contact Eve Munson at 202-467-0864, ext. 109, or munson@juvjustice.org. For more information on the Casey Foundation's work in the area of detention reform, go to: <http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/jdai>
