

Promising models for reforming Juvenile Justice Systems

Written by Marian Wright Edelman

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Nationally, one in three Black boys and one in six Latino boys born in 2001 are at risk of going to prison during their lifetimes. Although boys are more than five times as likely to be incarcerated as girls, the number of girls in the juvenile justice system is significant and growing. This shamefully high incarceration rate of Black youths is endangering our children at younger and younger ages and poses a huge threat to our nation's future.

America's cradle to prison pipeline is putting thousands of young people on a trajectory that leads to marginalized lives, imprisonment, and often premature death. The Children's Defense Fund's Cradle to Prison Pipeline® Crusade is committed to dismantling the pipeline, however long it takes. First, we must prevent children from entering the pipeline. Then we must help children already trapped in the pipeline find a way out rather than locking them into a lifelong spiral of arrest and incarceration.

September 7th marks the 35th anniversary of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP), bipartisan legislation based on a broad consensus that youths and families involved with the juvenile and criminal courts should be protected by federal standards for care and custody while ensuring community safety is upheld. The JJDP has significantly contributed to reductions in juvenile crime and delinquency. Reauthorizing this important legislation this year will help to protect children from the dangers of adult jails, improve safety for children in custody, and increase fairness by requiring states to take steps to reduce racial and ethnic disparities. As Congress gears up for reauthorization, this is a good time to look at several promising approaches across the country that are changing the juvenile justice paradigm from punishment and incarceration as a first resort to prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation that put children onto a path to productive adulthood.

The state of Missouri used a rehabilitative and therapeutic approach to overhaul its juvenile justice system that has been hailed as a national model for juvenile justice reform. The philosophy behind Missouri's program is to treat youths as potentially productive members of society instead of lost causes in a prison cage. The results are clear. Missouri's juvenile recidivism rate has only eight percent of those incarcerated coming back into juvenile custody and eight percent going into Missouri's prisons. It is one of the best success stories in the country.

A number of other states are working to improve their response to children and youths who have been adjudicated and placed in detention using effective models that can be replicated elsewhere. The Models for Change initiative is working in four core states—Illinois, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and Washington—and 12 partner states to create improved state and local system reforms that can be adapted and shared. The initiative was established in response to the push in the mid-1990s to treat young offenders as adults. The reforms are based on several key principles including fundamental fairness; addressing the developmental differences between youths and adults; paying attention to individual strengths and needs and youth potential; and stressing responsibility and safety.

The Models for Change initiative is intervening in critical areas including establishing community-based alternatives to detention; "right sizing," or ensuring that consequences for youths in trouble are individualized and developmentally appropriate; improving collaboration

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among mental health, substance abuse, child welfare, juvenile justice and education professionals; addressing racial and ethnic fairness in juvenile justice systems; and highlighting the need for aftercare and a process to connect youths returning from residential placement with follow-up services.

Another promising example is the Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative (JDAI) being replicated in 100 jurisdictions in 24 states and the District of Columbia. It focuses on the juvenile detention component of the juvenile justice system and the fact that youths are often unnecessarily or inappropriately detained at great expense with long-lasting negative consequences for both public safety and youth development. Its strategies include using new or enhanced alternatives to detention; developing objective decision-making tools; paying special attention to youths waiting in detention because of probation violations, writs and warrants, or pending placement; and timely case processing. It also focuses on reducing racial disparities and improving conditions in confinement.

And the results are impressive. The Santa Cruz County, California, JDAI developed an objective screening process to detain only high-risk offenders, engaged families in assessment and intervention, created culturally responsive alternatives, and established community-based detention for low- and medium-risk youths and wrap around services that could be delivered in the community at day treatment sites. They sharply reduced both their detention population and juvenile crime and saved the county millions of dollars by avoiding the construction and staffing of a new detention facility while reducing the juvenile hall population from an average of 50 youths per day in 1996 to 20 in 2008. Juvenile felony arrests are down 36 percent and misdemeanor arrests dropped 43 percent between 1996 and 2006.

These examples show that the pipeline to prison is not an act of God or inevitable but a series of choices that can be changed with strong leadership and a focus on meeting child and youth needs. Initiatives like these help to ensure that a stay in the pipeline isn't forever. We need to build on these and other successful examples in states and communities so that children in other parts of the country trapped in the prison pipeline are able to escape and reach successful adulthood.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose new book is *The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation*, is president of the Children's Defense Fund. For more information about the Children's Defense Fund, go to <http://www.childrensdefense.org/>