



Fund our future

Use ARPA to support youth, keep them out of prison

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Children and young adults are in a critical developmental phase that shapes the rest of their lives. We all have a stake in their future success. COVID-19 compounded the challenges faced by young people who are living in poverty or experience racial or gender discrimination. Many are taking on increased responsibilities in the home, while trying to learn how to navigate their lives. Trauma and mental health crises among children and young adults are on the rise. It's important that young people get back on track when they have been convicted of a crime. They may get into trouble because of a disruption to their family life, or mental or emotional health problems. Years of research show that incarcerating youth only compounds these issues. State and local policymakers can use funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to help struggling young people get the help they need and build strong foundations to set up themselves and their families for success, no matter what they look like, how much money they make or where they live.

Over the past three decades, Ohio policymakers have significantly [reduced the state's youth prison population](#). The state closed several youth prisons and implemented community-based alternatives that keep young people closer to home and provide more treatment and support. External factors, like falling crime rates, have also contributed to the decrease. Nevertheless, the bulk of the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS) budget goes to its remaining three state youth prisons, 12 independently operated community corrections facilities (CCFs), and other programming related to incarceration. Even in a global pandemic, state policymakers chose to focus primarily on punishment, rather than true community safety that requires funding and policies that would ensure every child has the stability and security they, their families and communities need, such as stable housing and access to a quality education. Similarly, crisis and trauma interventions have shown to be real deterrents to deviant behavior among youth. ARPA funding can and should be used to create and expand [community violence](#)

[interventions](#) and mentorship programs — such as [Big Brother, Big Sister](#) — that connect youth to caring adult role models to build confidence and provide support. State and local leaders can also use ARPA to fund [drug-free programs, education and training programs, and age-appropriate workforce pathway](#) programs that connect youth to employment and keep them out of prison. Research shows that youth prisons are incredibly [harmful](#) to young people and society in general. Ohio has made progress in reducing the number of young people it incarcerates. State leaders must use ARPA to fund the programs that young people need to get back on track, and further reduce the number of incarcerated youths.

ARPA will provide Ohio with [\\$5.4 billion](#) for state and local governments. Some cities and counties have already laid out plans to support youth. Cuyahoga County, for example, [plans](#) to use some ARPA funds to create Ohio's first Youth Diversion Program, similar to the one for adults that is already in place, as an effort to reduce the number of youth who fall victim to the criminal justice system.



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Policy Recommendations

Policymakers should use ARPA funds to:

- **Increase funding for community-based alternatives.** Many youth are sent to Ohio's prisons not because it is the best option, but because courts are not connected to a fully funded, well-resourced continuum of programs. To resolve this disparity, policymakers must direct funding to expand [alternatives to incarceration](#) and make sure these programs have the resources to meet the needs of the youth they serve. These alternatives must be operated transparently, with clear criteria and public accountability to ensure the safety of both youth and staff, as well as program effectiveness.
- **Increase funding for RECLAIM.** RECLAIM is a funding initiative that “encourages juvenile courts to develop or purchase a range of community-based” alternatives to incarceration. Outcomes at Ohio CCFs and DYS prisons found that youth served through [RECLAIM](#) reoffended at lower rates except for those at the very highest risk to commit new crimes. This research showed no major disparities along race, gender, or type of offense committed.
- **Fund programming and further development of the Behavioral Health/Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) Initiative.** This [Ohio program](#) diverts justice-involved youth between the ages 10 and 18 who have mental health or substance abuse issues. Rather than incarceration, youth receive local behavioral health treatment. Seventy-four percent of the youth in the program were considered moderate- or high-risk to reoffend and about a third had both mental health and substance abuse diagnoses. Since 2015, fewer than 4% of youth enrolled in BHJJ and subsequently tracked were later committed to a DYS facility. Over the course of BHJJ involvement, youth showed improved educational outcomes, reduced trauma symptoms, decreased substance use, and were at lower risk for out-of-home placement.
- **Provide stable income and employment.** When young people are employed and have stable incomes, they can help support their families and connect with their communities. To ensure these opportunities, Ohio must increase its minimum wage, support workers' individual and collective rights, and make [Ohio's Earned Income Tax Credit](#) (EITC) refundable.
- **Provide support for youth, families, and communities.** Many youth, families, and communities who come into contact with Ohio's juvenile courts are overwhelmed with the daily challenges of meeting their basic needs. To ensure every Ohio child and young adult has a chance at success, every community must be well-resourced and supported so they — as a community — can identify how to address their needs. Policymakers must direct public resources to meet [individual and community needs](#) such as child care, Medicaid, food assistance, rent and utility bill assistance, and safe and efficient public transit.
- **Create alternatives to harsh and exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools.** It's important for all students to experience schools as safe, supportive places where they connect with trusted adults and learn academic, social-emotional and trade skills that prepare them for success in life. Some youth may need support to become ready to learn. Some may be subject to punitive discipline, including restraints, seclusion, and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, which have long-term negative social and economic consequences. Black students and students experiencing poverty bear the brunt of these policies: Black students are only 17% of Ohio's total school enrollment but receive 46% of out-of-school disciplinary actions; students from financially disadvantaged homes are 50% of total enrollment, but receive 83% of out-of-school disciplinary actions. These harsh disciplinary sanctions foster the [school-to-prison pipeline](#), which funnels youth out of schools into the juvenile justice system.

While Ohio has made progress in reducing the number of youth it incarcerates, state leaders must do more to shrink its prison footprint in a way that ensures all children, young adults and their families have what they need to thrive, regardless of race, gender identity, or ZIP code. Funds from ARPA can help state and local leaders reimagine Ohio's juvenile justice system to be more humane and effective.

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