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Justice reform

Promise over punishment

Moving Ohio toward a more effective, humane youth rehabilitation system

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Introduction

Children and young adults are in a critical developmental phase that helps shape the rest of their lives. That is why it's important to help young people get back on track when they have been convicted of a crime. Something may have disrupted their family life, or they may have a mental or emotional health problem. Years of research show that incarcerating youth often compounds these issues.

Over the past two decades, Ohio has taken steps in the right direction by significantly reducing its youth prison population. It closed youth prisons and implemented community-based alternatives that keep youth closer to home and provide more opportunities for treatment and support. External factors have also contributed to the decrease.

Nevertheless, the bulk of the budget of the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS) funds operation of its remaining three state youth prisons, 12 independently operated community corrections facilities (CCFs), and other programming related to incarceration. In the end, these budgetary choices focus on the punishment of youth rather than support for youth in their communities that might save and heal lives, preventing the need for incarceration in the first place.

Youth incarceration in Ohio

Today DYS operates only three prisons compared to 11 in the early 1990s. It also operates or works with six alternative facilities and funds 12 regional CCFs. Like youth prisons, most CCFs are a form of secure, residential incarceration, but they are less restrictive and focus on treatment and specialized case management.

Other factors contributing to the decrease in Ohio's youth prison population include reductions in juvenile crime, class-action litigation, and a settlement agreement that helped accelerate efforts to expand community programs.¹

¹ Case Western Reserve University Schubert Center for Child Studies, Getting It Right: Realigning Juvenile Corrections in Ohio to Reinvest in What Works (2015). <https://bit.ly/3pQuW6e>.

As a result of a combination of these factors, the number of youth in prisons operated by DYS dropped from more than 2,500 in 1992² to 530 in 2019.³ The number of CCF admissions has grown since the early 1990s, when the first such facility opened, with CCFs serving a total of 577 youth in 2019.⁴ This change represents a 55% decrease in the number of incarcerated Ohio youth over the past three decades.

The number of youth in Ohio prisons and CCFs further decreased last year, with DYS reporting an average prison population of 463 for fiscal year 2020, which ended in June.⁵ In 2020, 313 youth were admitted to Ohio's 12 CCFs.⁶ The pandemic-related disruption of the pipeline of youth into the DYS system and CCFs likely contributed significantly to these decreases.

Despite the decreasing reliance on incarceration, Ohio policymakers have continued to allocate significant funding to large youth prisons, spending more than \$96 million on its three large facilities. That breaks down to an annual cost of nearly \$200,000 per youth, the equivalent of eight years undergraduate education at Ohio State University.⁷ The average stay in Ohio youth prisons is 15.5 months, which costs more than \$258,000 per youth.⁸ DYS also continues to upgrade its archaic, dangerous facilities, spending more than \$24.5 million since 2018 at two of its three prisons — Circleville and Indian River — in large part to comply with federal regulations under the Prison Rape Elimination Act.⁹ From 2005 to 2019, a period during which DYS closed five of its eight youth prisons, facility expenditures decreased only 14 percentage points, likely because of the need to make the remaining youth prisons safer.¹⁰ In 2009, however, the closure of two youth prisons resulted in savings and reallocation of \$24 million, much of which was returned to the state's general revenue fund rather than spent on better serving youth.¹¹ Finally, there are myriad additional costs associated with incarcerating youth in prisons, including re-entry and family visitation programs¹² and the money DYS paid to operate CCFs (\$23.4 million in 2019¹³), which remain a form of incarceration.

In the end, these budgetary choices focus on punishment, even in a global pandemic (see sidebar: “Youth prisons in a pandemic”), rather than ensuring every child has access to the supports they, their families and communities need. These include safe, healthy housing and neighborhoods; quality education; health care that covers

² Juvenile Justice Coalition, *Bring Youth Home: Building on Ohio's Deincarceration Leadership* (2016), p. 4.

³ Ohio Department of Youth Services Monthly Fact Sheets, FY2020 data, available at <https://bit.ly/3959bJb>. These numbers do not include youth incarcerated at CCFs.

⁴ Ohio Department of Youth Services, *Annual Report 2019*, page 7.

⁵ DYS Monthly Fact Sheets, <https://bit.ly/3959bJb>.

⁶ Information provided by DYS in response to a request by Policy Matters Ohio.

⁷ The Ohio State University, *Undergraduate Admissions: Basic Costs*, last accessed July 29, 2020. The annual cost for an Ohio resident for tuition and room and board is \$24,544 (tuition: \$11,528 and room and board: \$13,026).

⁸ Ohio Department of Youth Services, *DYS Monthly Fact Sheet* (July 2020), last accessed July 29, 2020. The annual cost is taken by adding the FY19 average per diem and marginal costs and multiplying that number by 12 [(\$521.64+\$25.65)x365=\$199,760.85].

⁹ From spreadsheets provided by Ohio Department of Youth Services, November 2020.

¹⁰ Matei, Andreea and Samantha Harvell, Urban Institute, *Data Snapshot of Youth Incarceration in Ohio*, page 7.

<https://urban.is/3qa6MUj>.

¹¹ CWRU Shubert Center, p. 4. <https://bit.ly/3pQuW6e>.

¹² Reentry staffing, for example, cost \$948,000 in FY2020 according to data provided by DYS in response to a request by Policy Matters Ohio.

¹³ According to the DYS 2019 Annual Report, the agency spent \$23.4 million on CCFs that year.

physical and mental health needs and trauma treatment; healthy food; and employment that pays a living wage.

Decreasing reliance on youth prisons cannot be seen as a simple solution or a panacea, however. While youth can be better served outside a prison setting and closer to their communities, challenges persist in alternative settings. These alternatives often deal with youth facing less adversity than those who are incarcerated, and their success often depends on the willingness of courts to utilize alternatives, the existence of providers, and enough funding and oversight to ensure safety and appropriate care. Private facilities tend to be less accountable to public oversight than public institutions like DYS, and this can have implications in terms of adequate staffing, pay and training. At the same time, any move to decarcerate cannot be understood to be simply a way to save money — first and foremost, it must be about saving and healing lives.

Further shrinking the footprint of Ohio’s youth prisons could help achieve these goals but would require state policy-makers to significantly realign resources and transform its approach. This report provides a hopeful, research-based vision for how Ohio policymakers can implement needed changes while maintaining public safety and holding youth accountable with care and creativity.

Youth prisons in a pandemic

In 2020, COVID-19 swept the country, especially affecting people held in youth and adult prisons. By had tested 680 youth in its system and reported 119 positive cases, with all three of its prisons under quarantine. A total of 144 staff had tested positive and one had died.*

With the lack of universal, ongoing testing, there likely have been many more cases, particularly given the facilities’ poor ventilation and congregate settings. Furthermore, many youth under quarantine have been held in solitary confinement. The physical and mental long-term effects of COVID-19 are unclear, they will likely compound the trauma young people impacted by the juvenile court system are being forced to live with.

In May 2020, Governor Mike DeWine implemented \$775 million in pandemic-related budget cuts, including \$6.2 million to DYS. Rather than cutting costs at the state’s youth prisons by releasing youth particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, the majority of these cuts – \$5.3 million – came from community-based programming. The DeWine administration made additional cuts to parole services (\$760,000) and administrative operations (\$65,000).†

*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Five Essentials for Healthy Adolescents, <https://bit.ly/3qKtIPS>.

†Department of Youth Services, COVID-19 Daily Statistics, January 11, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3i6PHYE>.

Community-based alternatives to youth prisons

Research shows that the best place for a youth is with their own family, relatives, or foster families instead of group settings or institutions.¹⁴ Lengthy out-of-home placements in secure or residential facilities often increase the likelihood that youth will commit another crime, according to meta-analysis by the Pew Charitable Trusts.¹⁵ Because these kinds of placements don't improve outcomes, researchers and advocates have made a strong case that youth should only be placed in youth prisons and other locked facilities under very narrow circumstances, for six months at most and only if the youth is at high risk for reoffending.¹⁶ If they are placed in residential facilities, they should be close to their communities in facilities that use research- and evidence-based restorative approaches, rather than places grounded in punitive or retributive culture. Only about 25% of youth in DYS prisons present a high risk of reoffending according the state assessment system,¹⁷ and slightly more than one-third are incarcerated with gun specifications,¹⁸ suggesting that there is still room in Ohio to move away from the current reliance on incarceration.

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 required financial and human capacity 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 and success.

A study of Ohio youth that compared outcomes of RECLAIM Ohio, a funding initiative that "encourages juvenile courts to develop or purchase a range of community-based" alternatives to incarceration,¹⁹ with 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.²⁰ This research matched youth based on gender, race, risk and offense type, suggesting that the differences are not the results of different youth being served.

Youth are also at high risk of physical and sexual assault while incarcerated. In fiscal year 2020, DYS reported 1,200 acts of violence and incidents covered by the Prison Rape Elimination Act in its three prisons, including fights, physical assaults, sexual

¹⁴ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Keeping Kids in Families: Trends in U.S. Foster Care Placements* (April 2019), p. 1.

¹⁵ The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Re-Examining Juvenile Incarceration: High cost, poor outcomes spark shift to alternatives* (2015), <https://bit.ly/2Ykn0hX>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Current Ohio Youth Assessment System Level for Youth by Facility, July 1, 2020, provided by DYS in response to information request by Policy Matters Ohio.

¹⁸ Information provided by DYS for fiscal year 2020 in response to request by Policy Matters.

¹⁹ See Ohio Department of Youth Services, RECLAIM. <https://bit.ly/3afTAHh>. RECLAIM stands for Reasoned and Equitable Community and Local Alternatives to the Incarceration of Minors.

²⁰ The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2Ykn0hX>.

assault and sexual harassment.²¹ Incarceration also perpetuates racism, with Black youth disproportionately represented in the DYS prison population. (See “Systemic racism and youth prisons,” below.)

With the stakes for Ohio’s youth so high, policymakers must pay attention to research showing that more than 85% of youth and even youth assessed as having the highest risk of reoffending can be served safely in their communities at lower cost and with better outcomes.²² Community-based alternatives have been a key part of Ohio’s efforts to reduce its youth prison population.

Targeted RECLAIM

This DYS funding initiative places youth who would otherwise be committed to a youth prison into model or evidence-based community programs.²³ Targeted RECLAIM is part of the larger RECLAIM initiative, but focuses on expanding the use of alternatives in a specific subset of county juvenile court systems.

Targeted RECLAIM has contributed to a reduction in youth prison admissions in participating counties by over 70%. The initial six counties participating in the program reduced their annual admission to DYS youth prisons from 989 youth in 2009 to just over 200 youth in 2019.²⁴ Youth in these programs are significantly less likely to reoffend compared to youth in youth prisons.²⁵ Targeted RECLAIM costs \$6.4 million

Systemic racism and youth prisons

The juvenile criminal legal system, like its adult counterpart, unfairly targets Black and brown youth.

Despite self-reporting data showing that Black and white youth commit offenses at similar rates, 63% of the youth in a DYS facility in July 2020 were Black* even though Black people make up only about 15 percent of Ohio youth.** Ohio judges are more likely to place white youth in community-based alternatives to prisons than Black youth. For example, the most recent BHJJ evaluation reported that 55% of the youth served by the program in fiscal years 2018 and 2019 were non-white, a substantially lower percentage than the non-white population of incarcerated youth in Ohio in July 2020, which was 73%.†

This disparity is more pronounced for youth incarcerated for gun-related offenses. Despite similar self-reporting rates of gun possession, 93% of youth incarcerated for weapons offenses are Black or brown.†† Ohio law allows judges discretion in sentencing youth found guilty of crimes that involve firearms under certain circumstances, such as when they are not the principal actor. In other cases that involve firearms, however, the law requires that judges impose additional sentences of at least one year, more than double the highest effective dose of confinement.‡

* DYS Youth By Facility, July 1, 2020, population snapshot provided by DYS in response to information request by Policy Matters Ohio.

** Kids Count Data Center, child population by race in Ohio, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2MQ0ISw>.

† Begun Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education at Case Western Reserve University’s Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, An Evaluation of the Behavioral Health/Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) Initiative: Executive Summary, August 2020. <https://bit.ly/2KETIaz>.

†† Justice Policy Institute, Smart, Safe, and Fair: Strategies to Prevent Youth Violence, Heal Victims of Crime, and Reduce Racial Inequality (2018), p. 8.

‡ HB 86 Juvenile Provisions Gun Specifications: Fact Sheet, <https://bit.ly/3c4pyJc>.

²¹ Information provided by the Department of Youth Services at the request of Policy Matters Ohio.

²² Shaena M. Fazal, Esq. and Youth Advocate Programs, *Safely Home* (June 2014), p. V. <https://bit.ly/35ESi6Y>.

²³ Ohio Department of Youth Services, *Targeted RECLAIM Results*, <https://bit.ly/2XXZbfy>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*



per year²⁶ and serves nearly 700 youth annually²⁷ — an average annual cost of nearly \$9,200 per youth.

Behavioral Health/Juvenile Justice Initiative (BHJJ)

This Ohio program diverts justice-involved youth aged 10-18 with mental health or substance abuse issues. Rather than being incarcerated, youth are put into local behavioral health treatment. The majority of the youth in the program (74%) were assessed as being at moderate or high risk to reoffend and about a third had both a mental health and substance abuse diagnosis.²⁸ Since 2015, fewer than 4% of youth enrolled in BHJJ and subsequently tracked were committed to a DYS facility at any time after their BHJJ enrollment, and 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. BHJJ's average length of stay is six months at an average cost of \$5,170 per youth, creating better outcomes with a significant savings compared to the average of \$96,000 it costs for a six-month stay in a youth prison.²⁹

Lucas County's continuum of programs

While research suggests that Ohio's existing programs are effective, they are not available in every community. That is why advocates recommend expanding work with local communities and organizations to build a more comprehensive "continuum of non-profits to provide a variety of services for justice-involved youth, including a majority investment in community-based programs."³⁰ In Lucas County, the court began a continuum of programs that provided meaningful one-on-one interventions for young people. This change led to "better outcomes, building trust ... and having the willingness to try new and creative approaches to meeting youth where they are."³¹ From 1998 to 2014, Lucas County reduced the number of youth committed to DYS prisons from 300 to 17 (a 94% decrease) and decreased those in its local detention facility, while safely managing youth at home.³²

Youth Advocacy Program (YAP)

YAP provides youth with culturally competent wraparound services through a credible advocate who "shares their language and who lives in the same neighborhood; or ... were once system-involved themselves, or have common familial histories."³³ Ninety percent of youth in YAP programs were stable in their community or lived in less restrictive settings by the end of the program and were not arrested while enrolled; over 80% of youth were not arrested again after their program

²⁶ Ohio Department of Youth Services, [RECLAIM: Targeted RECLAIM - Expansion](#), Table.

²⁷ University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute, [Keeping Kids Close to Home: Targeted RECLAIM 2014 & 2015 Outcome Evaluation](#), p. 19 (March 23, 2018). More recent data are not available.

²⁸ Begun Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education at Case Western Reserve University's Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, [An Evaluation of the Behavioral Health/Juvenile Justice \(BHJJ\) Initiative: Executive Summary](#), August 2020. <https://bit.ly/2KETIaz>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Safely Home, p. 19.

³¹ Safely Home, p. 13-14.

³² Safely Home, p. v.

³³ Safely Home, p. 33.

enrollment ended.³⁴ YAP costs are estimated to be approximately \$30,000 per year.³⁵

Credible Messenger

In Washington DC, the Credible Messenger Initiative matches youth with “a community-rooted, transformative mentor who shares similar life experiences.” These Credible Messengers “come from the same communities [as the youth they serve], were involved in the courts and have turned their lives around, demonstrate integrity and transformation, and are skilled and trained in mentoring young people.”³⁶

Providing support for youth 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 Ohio community should be well-resourced and supported so they — as a community — can address their community’s needs. Here are some areas that policymakers must address by fully directing public resources to meet individual and community needs.

Mental health and substance abuse treatment

Issue: In August 2019, 64% of males and 100% of females incarcerated in Ohio’s youth prisons were on the mental health caseload. A 2012 Ohio interagency report on mental health and juvenile justice acknowledged that the “juvenile justice system is not the optimal venue to deliver mental health treatment services,” but community-based services “are not working locally or do not exist.”³⁷ The vast majority of youth in the juvenile courts also experience trauma, both past and ongoing,³⁸ which can be compounded by system involvement.³⁹

Solution: Fully fund the structures that already exist in all Ohio counties. Evidence- and outcome-based programs focused on mental health needs, including family-based interventions, can be delivered through public entities designed to administer or oversee such programs, such as the Families and Children First Councils (FCFC)⁴⁰ or Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health (ADAMH) boards.⁴¹

³⁴ Youth Advocate Programs Inc., [Outcomes – Internal Measurement](#) (last accessed July 29, 2020).

³⁵ Public Safety Canada, [Building the Evidence – Evaluation Summaries: Youth Advocate Program](#) (2012), p. 5.

³⁶ Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, [Credible Messenger Initiative](#) (last accessed July 29, 2020).

³⁷ Ohio Interagency Task Force on Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, [Report and Recommendations](#) (September 2012), p. 2.

³⁸ Justice Policy Institute, [Healing Invisible Wounds: Why Investing in Trauma-Informed Care for Children Makes Sense](#) (July 7, 2010) [“while up to 34 percent of children in the United States have experienced at least one traumatic event, between 75 and 93 percent of youth entering the juvenile justice system annually in this country are estimated to have experienced some degree of trauma”], p. 1 and National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, [Trauma Among Youth in the Juvenile Justice System Report](#) (September 2016).

³⁹ Keeping Kids in Families, p. 1.

⁴⁰ For more information see <https://www.fcf.ohio.gov/>.

⁴¹ For more information see <https://mha.ohio.gov/Schools-and-Communities/ADAMH-Boards>.

Education

Issue: Many Ohio students do not 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 later in life. They may need support to become ready to learn. They 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.⁴² Black students and students living in 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.

Solution: Ohio lawmakers can make all public schools more positive environments for all students, by continuing to limit court referrals,⁴³ phasing out suspensions and expulsions, and reconsidering the presence of police officers in school.⁴⁴ The state should also continue and expand support for alternatives such as a \$2 million grant program for suspension and expulsion alternatives and the evidence-based Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports in all Ohio schools.⁴⁵ In the last biennial budget, Ohio lawmakers provided \$675 million for mental health counseling, wraparound services, mentoring, family engagement and supports, and trauma-informed care professional development.⁴⁶ While this was a step in the right direction, lawmakers must overhaul the states' inadequate and racist school funding system, so every school has the resources to hire full-time school nurses, social workers, mental health workers and others who address the critical needs of students and their families. These roles cannot be temporary add-ons funded at the whim of legislators every two years, but must be seen as essential support that is ongoing and stable.

Stable income and employment

Issue: The average household income for youth served by BHJJ was between \$15,000-\$19,999, at least 20% lower than the \$26,200 federal poverty guideline for a family of four in 2020.⁴⁷ Three-quarters of BHJJ households reported an annual household income of less than \$35,000, just above the poverty line.⁴⁸ Many Ohioans have to overcome barriers just to make ends meet, even those who have jobs. In fact, six of Ohio's 10 most common jobs pay so little that the median worker supporting a family of three cannot cover the cost of food without SNAP benefits. Half of these jobs pay less than \$24,000 at the median, and all but one pay less than \$35,000.

⁴² National Conference of State Legislatures, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/school-discipline.aspx>.

⁴³ Ohio Department of Education, [House Bill 410 Requirements](#) (December 2017).

⁴⁴ Studies show a police presence inside schools can lead to an increase in arrest rates for students, especially at the middle-school level, and lower graduation rates. See "Do police keep schools safe? Fuel the school-to-prison pipeline? Here's what the research says." Chalkbeat, June 23, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3620AWM>.

⁴⁵ Ohio Department of Education, [Using House Bill 318 Requirements to Create Caring Communities](#) (March 2019).

⁴⁶ Ohio Department of Education, [Student Wellness and Success Funds Guidance](#) (October 2019).

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines Used to Determine Financial Eligibility for Certain Federal Programs: HHS Poverty Guidelines for 2020](#) (last accessed July 30, 2020).

⁴⁸ [An Evaluation of the Behavioral Health/Juvenile Justice \(BHJJ\) Initiative: 2006-2017](#), p.32.



More than a million Ohioans work in these most common jobs, accounting for over a fifth of all employed Ohioans.⁴⁹

Solution: When young people are employed and have stable incomes, they can help support their families and make meaningful connections with their communities through work. 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.⁵⁰

Housing and Neighborhoods

Issue: Research shows that residents living in areas of concentrated poverty feel less safe, have lower quality housing with lead and mold hazards, are less able to access green space and healthy food, and are more likely to be exposed to air, water, and noise pollution. Lead exposure, in particular, has been shown to harm an individual's ability to succeed in school and increase the likelihood that they will enter the juvenile court system and be involved with the criminal legal system as adults.⁵¹

Solution: All Ohio families must have the opportunity to live in stable, secure, affordable homes. State lawmakers must restore cuts to local governments that have reduced their ability to respond to community-identified priorities in communities across the state and more fully support the Ohio Housing Trust Fund.⁵²

Family supports

Issue: Ohio's families must have the holistic supports they need to care for their children while breaking the cycle of toxic stress and poverty.

Solution: Programs that help support families and communities include subsidized child care, Medicaid, food assistance, rent and utility bill assistance, and safe, efficient public transit. Ohio lawmakers should increase the basic Ohio Works First cash grant in the 2022-23 budget by a minimum of \$100 a month, protect Medicaid expansion from barriers that cause people to lose coverage, exempt workers from SNAP work requirements in high unemployment or job shortage areas across the state, and significantly increase investments in public transit.⁵³

Conclusion

Children and young adults are in a critical developmental phase that helps shape the rest of their lives. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and based on input from leading national experts, giving every youth the best chance

⁴⁹ Shields, Michael, Policy Matters Ohio, "Working for less 2020," May 1, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3oxNwz6>.

⁵⁰ Stein, Ben, Policy Matters Ohio, "Strengthen state EITC to help lowest-paid workers," June 4, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2YffaGp>.

⁵¹ Case Western Reserve University, Mandel School of Applied Social Science, "Study of downstream effects of childhood lead poisoning reveals racial, economic disparities in adulthood," June 2020. <https://bit.ly/2Y8tslt>.

⁵² Policy Matters Ohio, "A budget for everyone, fiscal years 2022-23," January 14, 2021. <https://bit.ly/39UQgRE>.

⁵³ Ibid.

to succeed and become happy and healthy adults requires “positive connections with supportive people ... safe and secure places to live, learn, play ... and just ‘hang out’ ... opportunities to engage in communities as learners, leaders, team members, and workers” and services tailored for both the youth and their family.⁵⁴ Research and data — in Ohio and nationally — over the past decade show that youth prisons do not provide what young people need to thrive and can instead be incredibly harmful to youth individually and to society as a whole.

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 safety, transparency and accountability.

Much attention has rightly been focused on the juvenile justice system itself, with the goal of expanding alternatives to incarceration so that youth receive the care and healing they need. That work must continue. In the end, however, a key component will be stronger support for families and communities that can prevent youth from entering the criminal legal system in the first place. Ohio policymakers can take steps toward these long-term goals by properly funding support to make sure every Ohioan, no matter what they look like, how much money they make or where they live, can have a happy, healthy life.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Erin Davies, whose work and research set a foundation for the final report.

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Five Essentials for Healthy Adolescents, <https://bit.ly/3qKtIPS>.