

### Justice Reform

#### **Promise over punishment**

Moving Ohio toward a more effective, humane youth rehabilitation system

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Children and young adults are in a critical developmental phase that helps shape the rest of their lives. That's 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 three decades, the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS) 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 such as a reduction in juvenile crime have contributed to the decrease.

Nevertheless, the bulk of the DYS budget 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**

The number of youth in prisons operated by DYS dropped from more than 2,500 in 1992 to 530 in 2019. 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. This change represents a 55% decrease in the number of incarcerated Ohio youth over the past three decades.

Despite the decreasing reliance on incarceration, Ohio policymakers have continued to allocate significant funding to large youth prisons, which amounts to an annual cost of nearly \$200,000 per youth. The 15.5-month average stay in Ohio youth prisons costs more than \$258,000 per youth. Closures have allowed DYS to upgrade remaining prisons to meet standards, and also to return some funds to the general revenue fund.



## Recommendations

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.

In the end, the budgetary choices made so far focus on punishment, even in a global pandemic, rather than ensuring every child has access to the supports they, their families and communities need. While the work to expand alternatives to incarceration must continue, a key component to the transformation of how Ohio supports our youth 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 safe, healthy housing and neighborhoods; quality education; healthcare that covers physical and mental health needs and trauma treatment; healthy food; and employment that pays a living wage. That's how we can 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.