

Thank you, Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Finance sub-committee on Public Safety for your time and thoughtful consideration. My name is TaKasha Smith, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Juvenile Justice Coalition. I am proud to fight for every child's right to be protected and cared for before, during, and after they interact with the justice system. Our families, our communities, and our state need our children to be successful. We need them to thrive, learn, grow, and mature into adults who will be well, healthy, and ready to take on what life throws their way. Youth incarceration, in the traditional sense, is a hindrance, not a precursor, to that growth.

Issue: Youth Incarceration

“Since I was 11 I’ve been involved with the system. It has put more traumatizing effects on my life than recovering effects. This system only breaks down our mind and worsens us...when I found out how much money Ohio spends per teenager on locking us up, it made me want to cry.” —Davion, incarcerated in Ohio, age 22

Juvenile incarceration is a high-cost policy with a low return on investment. Each year, Ohio spends an average of \$293,722 per year to incarcerate one child. This money can and should be invested more effectively. This amount has increased significantly in recent years. In 2018 the per diem average cost per child was \$534.96 compared to 2022's \$804.72- an increase of 34%. Incarceration inflicts bodily harm on youth, is rife with racial disparities, restricts opportunities for youth to become well-educated and financially stable, and does not improve recidivism rates. Upstream investment in Ohio's children will prevent their involvement in the juvenile justice system. In the meantime, the state should shift spending away from youth confinement and towards local and community alternatives with robust data collection that ensures programs treat the root causes of issues that lead to justice involvement.

Policy

After closing five youth prisons between 2007-2019, Ohio's Department of Youth Services now operates three, called Juvenile Correctional Facilities (JCFs), along with eleven Community Corrections Facilities (CCFs) and three alternative placement facilities. In FY22 there was a daily average of 431 youth held in JCFs, 180 in CCFs, 52 in alternative placements and 215 on parole, not including the youth in additional county-run facilities across Ohio which are not administered by DYS. Over the past 15 years, Ohio has reduced its youth prison population as the state has shifted to prioritizing more successful investments and decreased its reliance on punishment. However, DYS still spends millions more on youth prisons than it does on its most effective diversion programs, including Targeted RECLAIM, Competitive RECLAIM, and the Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) initiative.

Challenge

Ohio's incarcerated youth have been subject to excessive use of force and the highest rate of sexual victimization in the nation. Most youth in DYS care require mental health treatment, but confinement often exacerbates mental health issues and is associated with worse overall health outcomes later in life. Youth incarceration does not reduce recidivism, in fact it can increase recidivism compared to more humane approaches. Incarcerated youth, 48% of whom require special education, receive poor education, face overwhelming challenges in transferring educational credit and are therefore less likely to return to schooling outside and less likely to graduate high school or go to college. They are also more likely to experience a reduction in wages and work, all hindering their ability to pursue stable employment. These collateral consequences impact Black youth disproportionately, who currently make up 66% of incarcerated youth in

DYS and alternative facilities despite only being 14% of Ohio's youth population—a culmination of the racially biased treatment that they receive at each level of the justice system.

Opportunity

Youth incarceration has declined across the country since the mid-2000s, and Ohio has been a national leader in the trend. Unfortunately, although the number of incarcerated youths has dropped, funding has not been diverted from incarceration at the same rate. This creates an opportunity for Ohio to take the rational step of more effectively funding our children and our futures. Around the country, there are alternative models of youth justice that are adaptable to local contexts in Ohio – these models are focused on developing partnerships and continuums with community members, community organizations and non-profits, which are more cost-effective and better positioned to serve justice-involved youth, particularly Black youth and youth of color. Along with shifting towards a community-engaged and led approach, we can move funds to our existing alternative programs. Youth served by BHJJ programs have seen improvements in trauma symptoms, substance abuse, and school performance, and those served by Targeted RECLAIM have been less likely to reoffend. Between 2017 and 2019, 81% of youth in the state's juvenile diversion program successfully completed the program and 79% of youth reduced their contact with police while in treatment. These initiatives still serve high-need children while costing a fraction of the cost of incarceration in an Ohio youth prison and could therefore serve more youth who are currently being subjected to confinement. Incarcerated children often have persistent unmet needs: poverty, racism, substance abuse or addiction, mental health challenges, homelessness, and various other environmental and social risk factors. Many of these are also multi-system youth. One straightforward solution across the country has been justice reinvestment, which reduces unnecessary incarceration and intentionally invests the savings into services and systems that treat the risk factors which negatively impact our youth—getting at the root of the issue by diverting youth away from juvenile court involvement and incarceration.

Support Child Well-Being: Budget

Ohio's current spending priorities do not effectively serve justice-involved youth. To prevent children's further involvement in juvenile court, Ohio should pursue the following evidence-based recommendations:

- Focus on upstream investment in systems and programs that particularly reach low-income children and families who are criminalized and under-invested in (disproportionately Black Ohioans). Mechanisms to increase community safety long-term include adequate healthcare, high-quality education, stable employment and income, safe and affordable housing, and food assistance. These are the conditions that children need to grow into successful and productive members of society.
- Reduce reliance on youth confinement, which ultimately doesn't increase community safety, and use the savings to expand alternative programs. We should expand demonstrably positive efforts within DYS's Targeted RECLAIM, Competitive RECLAIM, and Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice initiative, as well as adapt and adopt effective models from across the country. Funding should be flexible to foster partnerships and continuums with community members, community organizations and non-profits.
- Alternatives to incarceration should be accompanied by robust data collection, evaluation, and oversight to ensure state dollars are being spent justly and effectively on trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches rather than on the harsh or traumatizing conditions of juvenile confinement.