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US families fret at juvenile justice system in crisis

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WASHINGTON — Relatives of jailed young Americans called Tuesday for reform of a juvenile justice system they say fails to help young people and is biased against youth of color.

"More than two million children are arrested every year in the United States and the numbers continue to rise, despite the decreasing incidence of true criminal offenses," according to the study released by the Justice for Families program at the research organization DataCenter.

Structural problems have given rise to a crisis that requires wholesale change to achieve justice, it said.

"At every stage of the juvenile justice system, from schools, to arrest, to courts, to probation, to youth imprisonment, youth of color face unconscious bias on the part of the professionals in these systems. This unconscious bias, coupled with structural inequity, drives disproportionate numbers of youth of color into the system," the report reads.

The largest US ethnic and racial minorities are Hispanics and blacks, about 14 and 13 percent of the US population nationally.

Yet "more than half of the 685,000 individuals stopped by New York City police in 2011 were aged fourteen to twenty-four, and 87 percent were Black or Latino," the 56-page study noted.

As the juvenile detention system keeps growing, massive financial resources are needed for more facilities but reform programs appear to have little impact, the report found.

Fully 70-80 percent of youth released from youth prisons are rearrested in two to three years.

"Nearly 50,000 young people are separated from their families each night in what amount to youth prisons with deplorable conditions, dangerous environments, and a tragic lack of programs and services that might actually help children overcome problems and develop their skills," the report added.

"Most of the money spent on youth inside the justice system funds correctional confinement which costs states, on average, \$240.99 per day and consumes approximately \$5.7 billion per year nationwide," it said.

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Fully 70-80 percent of youth released from youth prisons are rearrested in two to three years (AFP/File, Tannen Maury)

Map

