

Juvenile Justice Blog

"For these are all our children. We will all profit by, or pay for, whatever they become." James Baldwin

Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice

Posted on September 11, 2012 by tbirckhe



A [first-of-its-kind report released](#) this past Monday, September 10, 2012, details how the juvenile justice system does more to feed the nation's vast prison system than to deter or redirect young people from system involvement, and it demonstrates the incredible damage the system causes to families and communities.

The following is from [the press release](#):

Based on over 1,000 surveys with parents and family members of incarcerated youth, *Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice* was released by **Justice for Families** and the **DataCenter** to reveal the inside story, as well as to promote simple, proven solutions.

"The juvenile justice system is rife with misconceptions and stereotypes about youth and their families," said Grace Bauer, Co-Director of Justice for Families, whose son was sent to a juvenile correction facility at age 14. "Whether we are trying to do what's best for our own child or fight for systemic reform, we as the families of these young people have been blamed, ignored, and cut out of the process. The time is now to fix this broken system."

Over two million children are arrested in the U.S. every year, and the numbers continue to rise, despite the decreasing incidence of true criminal offenses. In focus groups and surveys conducted for the report, families described how the rapid growth of the prison system, zero-tolerance policies, and aggressive police tactics, coupled with the decline of social services and public education, have wreaked havoc on predominantly low-income communities of color.

"Families must go to tremendous lengths to support their children who are incarcerated, including missing work and trying to find childcare for siblings," said Liane Rozzell, Founder and Executive Director of Families & Allies of Virginia's Youth. "If the goal is to create opportunities for growth and development for youth, instead of merely punishing them, we would have a radically different justice system that valued parental involvement."

According to the report, some of the critical concerns parents have include:

- **Risks to the health and well-being of incarcerated youth:** Three out of four survey participants reported facing serious impediments to visiting their children, and over half said that it was difficult to contact staff at the facility to get information about their child's progress and/or safety. These statistics are especially alarming given the abuse, isolation, violence, and mistreatment common in youth prisons across the country.

• **Situations that create and deepen economic instability:** More than half of family members who took part in the Justice for Families survey reported that their households live on less than \$25,000 per year. One in three families said they have had to choose between paying for basic necessities like food, and making court-related payments.

• **Discrimination:** Families of incarcerated youth are demonized, marginalized, and assumed to be apathetic or even part of the problem. More than 1 in 3 family members surveyed felt that they or their loved one had directly experienced discrimination in the justice system. After release, children returning from even short-term placements can face difficulties returning to school, finding employment, securing a place to live, or getting necessary medications, to name just a few basic needs.

To reverse this downward spiral, the authors point to a vast research base showing how families are critical to the success of system-involved youth. Studies show effective youth justice programs include treatment with family or in a home-like setting, and treatment built around youth and family strengths.

The report recommends several specific solutions including:

• **Making sure families have meaningful participation in decisions that impact the future of their children.** For example, Connecticut’s Case Review Team (CRT) conferences include family members, probation staff, school personnel, social workers, and the young people themselves to explore alternatives for supervising and safely caring for the young person at home or in the community. In the first two years of employing this process, 72 percent of participating youth avoided out-of-home placement and a substantial share avoided any subsequent contact with the justice system.

• **Supporting positive youth development** - These programs are more effective and less costly in addressing problems that led to youth contact with the courts and in developing the skills youth need to succeed. Examples of successful programs include rigorous career and vocation training programs such as YouthBuild, which serves many court-involved youth by joining academic education with hands-on construction skills training.

• **Investing in communities, not youth prisons.** Research confirms that the provision of basic human needs and social services such as education, employment, affordable housing, and drug treatment are positively associated with increased public safety.

“We know that engaging, involving and supporting families are essential strategies if we truly want court-involved youth to succeed, but the current system neither reflects nor embraces that truth,” said Bart Lubow, Director of the Juvenile Justice Strategy Group at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “As a matter of public safety, justice, and simple common sense, we should re-engineer juvenile justice so that families are at the center of the work.”

You may download the report for free [here](#).

Spread Juvenile Justice, Share!

 + MORE

 Tweet 1

 0

 Share

 Print