Policies & Positions: Youth Justice Transformation

The Institute believes that there are no throwaway kids and that kids should be treated like kids, not criminals. In New Jersey and around the country, that opportunity is largely denied to many youth of color.

New Jersey has the widest racial disparity in the nation when it comes to locking up Black and white kids – 21 to 1 – even though they commit most offenses at similar rates. The state invests $54 million/year to incarcerate its children, spending only $16 million on community programming to provide youth with the support they need to stay out of the system.

The Institute’s goal is to transform New Jersey’s punitive system into a new justice model centered on restorative and transformative justice practices, a comprehensive array of services, care coordination and community accountability so that our kids can live healthier lives. See njisj.org/after_youth_prisons for our vision.

Specifically, we call on New Jersey to take the following actions:

- Develop a comprehensive action plan for addressing the state’s harmful youth incarceration racial disparities;
- Close the state’s youth prisons (Jamesburg, Hayes, and JMSF) and not build any more;
- Create a youth justice transformation lockbox to fund of $100 million for effective community-based programs;
- Conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the state’s non-prison youth facilities to determine whether any can be closed or used to house young people transitioning from, or who would otherwise be sent to youth prisons;
- Support enhanced reentry wraparound services and restorative justice practices;
- Only as a last resort – and after comprehensive research and review that meaningfully incorporates community input, including on locations – repurpose or renovate existing structures to develop youth rehabilitation centers, if needed, that follow best practices (e.g., therapeutic, rehabilitative, child-centered, family focused, and filled with public workers trained in rehabilitative practices and trauma-informed care) and are located in the communities most impacted by youth incarceration.

You can learn more about our 150 Years is Enough campaign to transform youth justice at njisj.org/150_years_is_enough