

In March 2022, Albany's Zero Youth Detention Task Force issued a report and recommendations towards the goal of reducing youth detention in Albany. The task force was chaired by Dr. Alice Green, Executive Director of the Center for Law and Justice, and largely made up of four (4) working groups: the Public Health Concerns for Youth and Families Working Group; the Community Service and Education Working Group; the Current State of Juvenile Detention System Working Group; and the Racial and Ethnic Disparities Working Group.

This group was convened in 2019 by County Executive Daniel McCoy, whose mandate stated that:

“Every child in this County deserves the opportunity to reach his or her full potential and to achieve their dreams. Zero Youth Detention will be dedicated to the mission of helping them realize those dreams by helping ensure interaction with the juvenile detention system is avoided.”

The hard work of the task force members produced sound findings and actionable and necessary recommendations to achieve the goal of zero youth detention. After much delay and no publicity, the report finally appeared on Albany County's website sometime in 2024. Despite the county's claims to have initiated some reforms, youth arrests and detentions have increased, funding remains largely unspent, and the support services for youth are nearly non-existent. The current system takes a harmful and ineffective approach to youth justice that focuses on criminalization rather than public health, leading youth on a path to nowhere.

The Center for Law and Justice believes that Albany County must follow through on its mandate to prioritize and implement important reforms now, especially in light of the recent audit by the New York State Comptroller.¹ We can and we should move to a system based on a public health perspective and toward our shared goal of zero youth detention. This is the basis for the Center's Zero Youth Detention Project.

A summary of the findings and recommendations is below.

Zero Youth Detention Task Force Report Summary

“Today, incarcerating youth is a racist, ineffective and prohibitively expensive practice.”

- Significant disparities exist in juvenile detention rates between racial and ethnic groups. This sad reality is also true of Albany County; according to annual data from 2020, of the 82 juveniles from the County that were detained, 80% were Black, 9% were Hispanic, and 11% were White.²

¹<https://www.osc.ny.gov/press/releases/2024/04/dinapoli-audit-growing-number-youth-juvenile-justice-centers-risk-due-staff-shortages>

² Albany Juvenile Justice Detention Stat Sheet, reported by New York State Office of Children and Family Services. Accessible online here: <https://ocfs.ny.gov/reports/detention/stats/counties/Albany-Detention-Stats-2020-Year.pdf>

- Research shows that contact with the juvenile legal system can have lasting negative impacts on children, and does not reduce future crime or promote public safety. Children's contact with the juvenile legal system increases the chances that they will someday return to the system by more than 50% and increases the risk that they will drop out of school, not be able to find employment.³

The cost of incarcerating youth is astronomical. In 2020, New York taxpayers spent nearly \$900,000 for a single young person's confinement in a limited-secure facility, a 53% increase in cost since 2014. That is a *daily cost* of approximately \$2,450, with OCFS data reporting each individual County's share being \$640.⁴

Youth incarceration should be approached through public health rather than criminalization.

A public health approach suggests that violence is not symptomatic of "bad people" but, rather, is a negative health outcome resulting from exposure to numerous risk factors. This type of approach focuses on prevention through addressing the known factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of violence and providing treatment and support rather than punishment. It is resilience-based, building on the strengths of families and communities. Applied to juvenile detention, a public health approach focuses on the well-being of youth, families, and communities to drive changes to services, systems, and root causes.⁵

Specific recommendations include

Create a County-wide Multi-Service Center ("MSC") that will connect juveniles and families to available support and human services.

Transfer all County programming related to juvenile detention under the care of Public Health.

Create a County position to take charge of ZYD initiatives.

³ *Futures Denied: Why California Should Not Prosecute 14- and 15-year-olds as Adults*, Human Rights Watch and the W. Haywood Burns Institute, p.1 (2018): Accessible online here:

<https://www.burnsinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Futures-Denied.pdf>

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<https://www.nysenate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/jamaal-t-bailey/bailey-hevesi-announce-signing-law-a4982-s4051-raising-lower>.

⁴ Justice Policy Institute. (2020). *Sticker Shock 2020: The Cost of Youth Incarceration*. Accessible online here: https://www.njcn.org/uploads/digital-library/Sticker_Shock_2020.pdf

Office of Children and Family Services, Administrative Directive, January 17, 2020. Accessible online here: http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/policies/external/ocfs_2020/ADM/20-OCFS-ADM-02.pdf.

⁵ Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice. Healing hurt people. Accessible online here:

<https://drexel.edu/cnvsj/healing-hurt-people/overview/>.

Objectives and strategies

Objective 1: Lead with racial equity

Identify and eliminate the deep racial disparities in the juvenile legal system and resolve to promote equity through a new approach to juvenile justice.

Objective 2: Prevent youth from entering the juvenile legal system by focusing upstream and on systems to have the greatest impact.

Invest in community-based prevention strategies that uplift youth.

Objective 3: Divert youth from further law enforcement, formal legal processes, and secure detention, and into community-based options

Divert youth from law enforcement arrest, referral, case filing and adjudication.

Objective 4: Support youth and families to reduce recurrence of legal system involvement and increase healthy outcomes.

Re-engage youth from detention into community.

Objective 5: Align and optimize connections between systems to increase effectiveness.

Expand data collection and analyses to build transparency and support future policies and programs.