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The Alternatives to Youth in Prison

According to the FBI crime clock, there are about four crimes that occur every minute in the United States¹. This shocking statistic clearly displays that dealing with crime is a huge priority for the government. However, the way political officials maneuver this issue is far from effective especially when it comes to dealing with juvenile crime. In Pennsylvania, today's youth are locked up for small crimes and their sentences are often disproportionate². Some instances teens are put in jail for crimes that adults would not have been imprisoned for called status offenses³. In this case, quantity is not quality as the large amount of incorrect youth incarceration has increased crime rates, increased the chances of re-entry into jail amongst these youths and has negatively affected the community as a whole⁴. Fortunately, there is a solution to this clear flaw in the statewide juvenile justice system. Providing alternative methods of youth rehabilitation for those who have committed minor misdemeanors instead of simply putting teens behind bars will lower crime rate, lower the amount of youth in jail, and will prevent youth from entering the system again later on⁵.

Superpredator Theory Debunked

The idea of keeping youth in prison for minor crimes and longer sentences dates back to 1996 when the term "Superpredator" was introduced to law officials⁶. "Superpredator" was a term coined for troubled youth which claimed that teens are getting increasingly violent and therefore should be locked up for minor offenses⁷. This idea was introduced by John Dilulio, a then-Princeton political science professor, at the White House when he was invited to talk about juvenile crime in America over dinner. Dilulio ended up dehumanizing teens by claiming, "they will do what comes "naturally": murder, rape, rob, assault, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, and get high"⁸. He made it seem like the only option to change the fate of these kids was to put them behind bars for any offense to protect society from their malicious ways. As a result of these unnecessary and prolonged prison sentences, the youths' behavior worsened and made it tougher for them to reintegrate back into society and instead led them back to jail⁹. These sentences that were handed out in the "superpredator" era has therefore affected the youth negatively and it exposes the holes in the prevailing idea of locking youth up for minor crimes. Ultimately, the wrongful sentencing created a self-fulfilling prophecy for the troubled teens. In the end, the "superpredator" philosophy was later debunked by many psychologists and criminologists as a false fear¹⁰. However, the current juvenile detention system is still dealing with the underlying effects of the stigma that locking up youth for minor crimes will prevent future bad behavior. And although it is not due to the same exact "superpredator" phenomena introduced in 1995, the core principle remained the same.

Current Prison Status For Youths

In the current juvenile justice system, there are more than 70 million children under the age of 18 that are incarcerated. This is more than 25% of the U.S. population and unfortunately, this number is predicted to increase. Researchers have determined that if we do not change the system, the number of teens in jail will exceed 80 million by 2020¹¹. In Pennsylvania alone in

the past year, there was a 7% increase in the number of youth that were sentenced to jail time. One of the reasons for these large numbers and the increase in inmates in the Pennsylvania prison system is that the state views troubled children as an effect of poor parenting and something that should be dealt with very severely early on¹². This attitude has caused those who commit relatively minor crimes to be sentenced to harsher punishments because the state believes that in doing so, it can curb the bad behavior before it gets worse. A study conducted by Brown University has backed up this claim in a research finding in which they found that 70% of the youth in prison are serving time for non-violent offenses; most of which can be dealt with in other ways¹³. In Pennsylvania, the majority of youth in the juvenile detention system have committed low-level misdemeanors such as truancy, trespassing, theft and shoplifting but they are sentenced to disproportionate punishments¹⁴. Although the state thinks this disproportionate sentencing is the best way to go about dealing with youth crime, it actually has very adverse consequences.

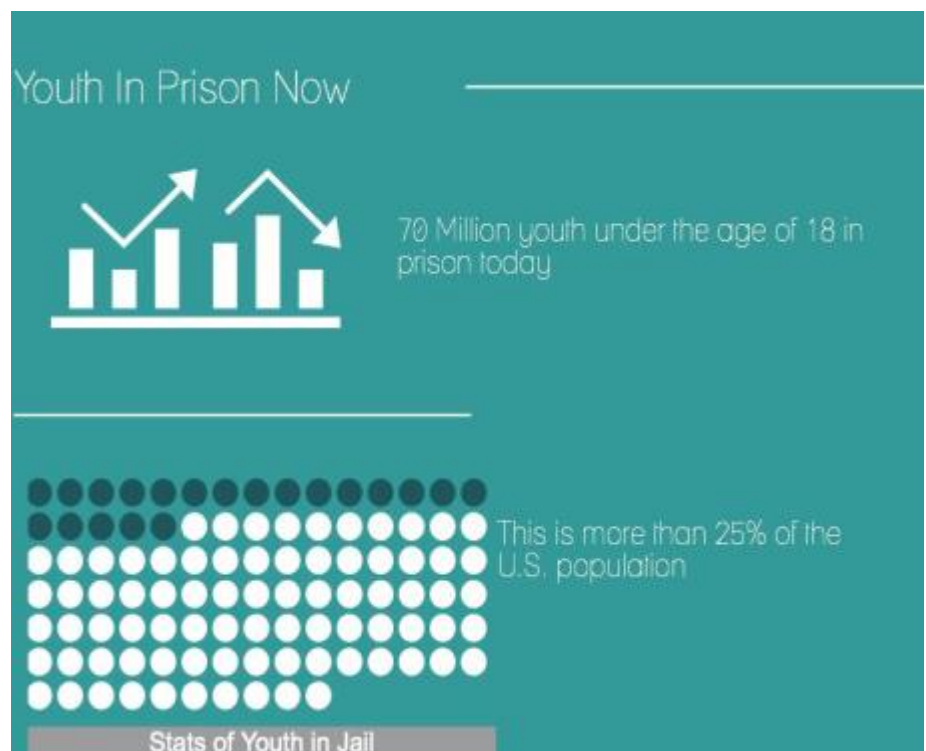
Issues with The Current System

1. Prevents youth from "aging out"

As a result of this mass imprisonment of youth who commit fairly minimal crimes, evidence shows that this enables the same group to commit crimes later on in their lives. One study conducted found that those who ended up in the juvenile detention system were 37 times more likely to be arrested again as adults than those who showed similar behavior but were not arrested¹⁵. Research findings revealed that those that are incarcerated for petty crimes are less likely to grow out of their delinquent behavior because it curbs their maturation¹⁶. Criminologists coin this as "aging out" of undesirable behavior through experience and environmental feedback. Researchers in Carnegie Mellon have found that juveniles learn and grow out of poor behavior through families, school, and work; all of which they will abandon if they are incarcerated. Detaining youth for low level crimes can interrupt or slow down this "aging out" which in turn results in a longer period of bad behavior and risks them returning to jail¹⁷. This "aging out" applies to all races and ethnicities as it is a natural process the teenage mind goes through as it matures¹⁸.

2. Puts influential kids in contact with bad behavior

Similarly, a weak point in the justice system in Pennsylvania is not only that it prevents teens from growing out of bad behavior, but it also puts these highly influential kids in contact with teens who have perpetrated more serious crimes. Psychologists and behavioral scientists



warn about the effects of the type of relationship that can form between the two groups. There is no other place in the country where so many violent and dangerous youths are put together like a prison ¹⁹Minors who have not committed as serious offenses are enticed by increasingly violent crimes when they converse with their peers inside the correctional facility.

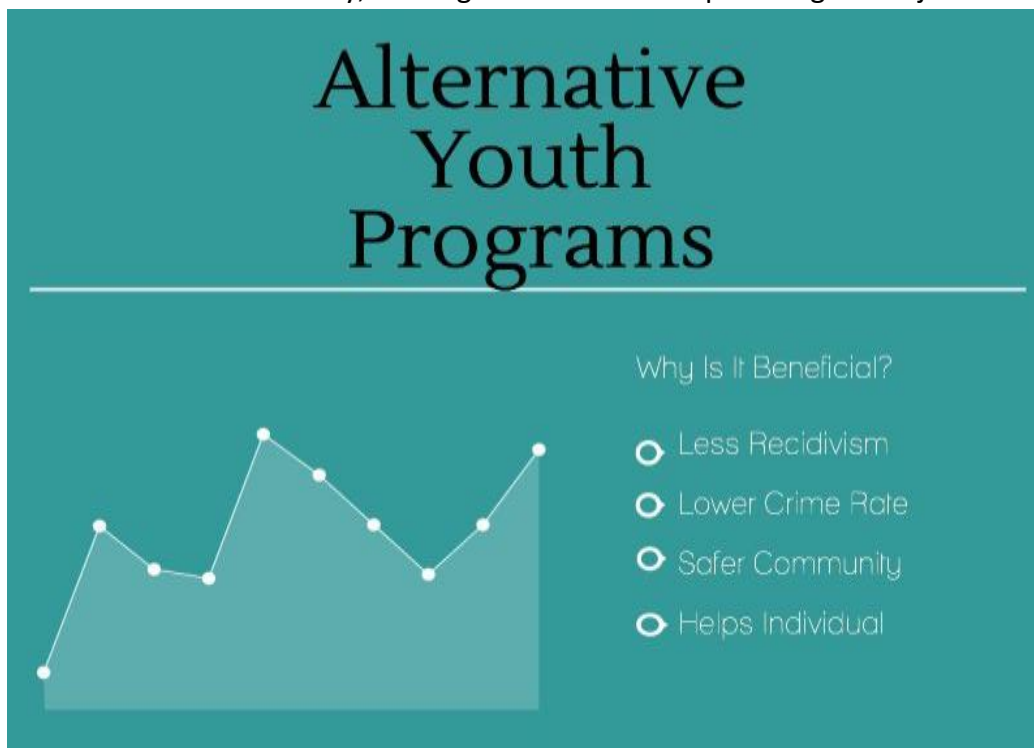
Unfortunately, this leads them into the culture of gang violence and the use or distribution of illicit drugs both of which are known to increase the chances of re-entry into prison ²⁰. Instead of diverting youth away from such behavior, the system is doing the exact opposite and is allowing the serious offenders to glamorize the risky lifestyle. In turn, young people who have committed minor delinquencies have a better understanding and connection of how to carry out more lethal and dangerous crimes in their future.

3. *Obstructs their education*

Additionally, youth incarceration for insignificant crimes greatly obstructs the education of minors. The more time spent in prison means the less time spent in school learning important tools to use later on in life. The stunt in educational development ultimately and undoubtedly will force them to turn to crime as well in the future. This phenomenon is dubbed the “school-to-prison pipeline” by criminal psychologists. Once they are released, the teens are 39 per cent less-likely to finish high-school²¹. Instead of pushing these adolescences away from the behavior that caused these negligible crimes, the system is preventing their education and putting them in contact with violent people. Not only will the lack of education create a void in important technical skills needed to survive in the outside world, but it also stunts their mental growth²². Young people in jail will not learn the major life lessons taught in schools which will inadvertently force them into a life of hard crime.

The Alternative

Cumulatively, the negative effects of imprisoning minor juvenile offenders as mentioned



above are not only detrimental to the community, but also to the individual. The issues mentioned and the risks of youth reentering the detention system are due to the amount of youth imprisonment that does not need to happen. What Pennsylvania can do to prevent the cycle of entering the system, getting released and

reentering the system, is create programs that actually rehabilitate youth and reintegrate them back into society²³. These programs will include community based organizations, mentorship programs, home detention options and day treatments in place of mere sentences behind bars. There has to be a system to implement that does not involve those who committed minor offenses to go straight to jail without any other options. Those who commit very serious crimes such as murder, armed robbery and assault will still be put behind bars for public safety. The only difference is that youth perpetrators who have committed relatively lesser crimes such as petty theft, truancy, public intoxication, or in other words low-level misdemeanors, can turn to an alternative form of rehabilitation to avoid the negative aspects that come with incarceration. A murderer should be treated like a murderer while someone who commits a small crime, such as truancy, should be treated to a lesser degree.

Effects of these Programs

Alternative programs provide a place for youth reformation while also avoiding the negative characteristics of jail time. Teens can learn many vital lessons in community based organizations such as the importance of civic duty. Mentorship establishes a significant relationship with another strong individual which can enforce good principles and morals into impressionable minors. Home detention offers punishment while also preventing contact with bad influences and allowing familial experiences to change the individual's perception of the world. Day treatments allow for the conduct of psychological treatments to change the mindset of youths.

1. Counties in the U.S.

Alternative programs to jail time have already been conducted in some counties around the nation for Pennsylvania to observe the benefits. Cook County, Illinois has created mandatory community based events which also permits the kid to stay home as he or she is attending said events. The events serve as a foundation for the youth to learn about good behavior and its benefits while also allowing a familial relationship to exist. Using this approach Cook County has also saved two million dollars annually. Likewise, Multnomah County, Oregon enforced a home detention system, shelter care, and a day reporting center in place of prison for youth with very minimal offenses. This decreased the amount of people in detention centers while also saving the county money. Santa Cruz County, California placed low risk offenders in community based organizations which resulted in a decrease in juvenile felony offenses and misdemeanor arrests by 48 and 43 percent respectfully²⁴. In addition, Bernalillo County, New Mexico has implemented alternative public school, community custody programs and day treatments for rehabilitation. Including these efforts, Bernalillo County has also implemented a mentor program from troubled youths which has reduced its detention population by 44 percent. Bernalillo County and Santa Cruz County have also saved money for their respective institutions²⁵.

2. Larger Scale: Norway

On a much larger scale, Norway shows very strong evidence of the alternative rehabilitation system working more effectively than regular jail sentence punishment. Norway puts youth in alternative learning facilities and programs which allow them to give back to the community and learn from experience. This process goes so far as to allowing adult offenders to go about the same type of treatment. Those who undergo this type of treatment are

significantly less likely to reenter the system in the future²⁶. Research done by the Department of Economics, University of Bergen has found that there is a 27 per cent lower risk for people to reenter prison if they were given more lenient punishments such as community service or probation. Another statistic from the same research shows that for criminals who had not been employed prior to the conviction, there was a 60% decline in criminal activity. In addition to this, Norway has only 20% of recidivism among youth who have committed minor crimes and were involved in punishments outside of prisons²⁷.

What This Means for the Individual

If the alternative programs were implemented to youth who have committed minor crimes in Pennsylvania, the community as a whole would greatly benefit as well as the individual. Not only would taxpayers save money, but the former troubled kids would have the opportunity to give back to society. The resources going to a wasteful and flawed system would be put towards a better cause in which the community would gain civic and active members of society²⁸. Keeping teens who are not of a clear public threat in a prison cell will ultimately cause them to increase the crime rate once they are released²⁹. Giving the same teens a second chance through alternative rehabilitation will therefore reduce the overall crime rate and enable a better life for someone. Having a proactive member of society is much better than locking someone away for a misdemeanor and having him or her contribute to the overall crime of a community. The behavior exhibited by such perpetrators are common for youth from that background and environment so it would not be fair to group them with counterparts who have committed extreme crimes uncommon to that demographic³⁰. Instead of throwing the teens away, the alternative programs will turn them into active agents of the state. The reformed youth could then make something out of their lives instead of wasting away behind bars.

What This Means for Pennsylvania

In each of the cases described above, Pennsylvania lawmakers have a clear cut view of how alternative programs have helped the community as well as the individual. These individual counties across the nation have saved the government money each time and decreased the amount of youth reentering the system. In fact, participants in these programs were about 26% less likely to be re-arrested later on as adults³¹. Despite this encouraging pattern, states like Pennsylvania continues to devote the



bulk of its juvenile justice budgets to facility placement and correctional institutions in spite of the high costs and upsetting results³². Research has shown that every dollar spent on these alternative programs translates to 13 dollars in cost savings³³. If Pennsylvania created programs that involved a mentoring program, community based activities and home detention, the state will ultimately reap the benefits. The programs will save the government money and it then can use the resources elsewhere to benefit the state all while successfully rehabilitating youth. By truly addressing the cause and the root of the undesirable behavior through such programs, the state will see an immediate turn-around.

Bottom Line

Essentially, having alternate youth programs for troubled teens in place of prison is the most beneficial policy to enact in Pennsylvania. Through statistics and research, the current system has shown time and again to be severely flawed and ineffective. The existing judicial system put in place, which imprisons youth for misdemeanors and non-violent crimes, has inadvertently caused the same youth to return to the system that was meant to change them. Simply putting youth offenders who have committed low-level felonies in jail affects their maturation, stunts their education and puts them in contact with the real criminals. All three factors combined push these kids into a life of crime. Therefore, instead of keeping the current system Pennsylvania must change its approach on dealing with minor youth offenders in order to better the state. The best way to go about this change is to enforce community based programs, mentorship pairing, day treatments and home detention options. All of which have been implemented in counties around the U.S. and in Norway and have not only been successful in keeping youth out of trouble but have also saved a lot of money. With the evidence presented above, it is clear the best course of action, in terms of juvenile detention reform, for the state's youth and community is to place these young offenders who have committed minor misdemeanors in alternative programs rather than jail.

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- ¹² [http://www.pccd.pa.gov/Juvenile-Justice/Pages/Pennsylvania-Youth-Survey-\(PAYS\).aspx](http://www.pccd.pa.gov/Juvenile-Justice/Pages/Pennsylvania-Youth-Survey-(PAYS).aspx)
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