

Juvenile Prison: \$5 Billion for Child Abuse

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[War Is a Crime](#)

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Every juvenile prison must be immediately closed and all of its prisoners freed.

Oh. Oh. Oh! That sounds too drastic and simplistic and *revolutionary*.

We talk about being reformist or revolutionary as if it were a personality choice. Yet we also talk about being scientific, about being reality-based. Unlike reactionary climate-denying racist creationists we claim, most of us, to recognize such phenomena as climate change and to act on them (leave aside for the moment whether we're really acting appropriately on that one).

The science has long been crystal clear: juvenile prisons are worse than nothing. They increase rather than reducing crime. In our failure to abolish them, we — and not the children we torture — are the seemingly hopeless recidivists.

We spend in the United States \$88,000 on average per year to lock a child up, compared to \$10,652 to educate a child. We have over 66,000 children locked up, 87% of them boys, and our police arrest 2 million juveniles each year.

A recent longitudinal study of 35,000 young offenders found that those who are locked up are over twice as likely to be locked up as adults compared to those who committed similar offenses and came from similar backgrounds but were given an alternative penalty or were just not arrested. In some states over 80% of those locked up as kids will be convicted of later crimes. Studies have found that, more than family difficulties or gang membership or any other factor, the best predictor of criminality is whether someone has been imprisoned in what amount to factories for crime.

Well, but then, isn't the best predictor the initial commission of a crime that led to the initial incarceration? Actually, no. Eighty to 90% of teenagers in the United States commit illegal acts that could land them behind bars. Most of those put behind bars are put there for minor, nonviolent offenses. A third of all teenagers have even committed a somewhat serious crime, but most are never arrested, much less imprisoned. Almost all grow out of it.

If the minority of young people whose lives are ruined by prison were selected randomly, we might be a bit more likely to do something about it. Anyone who is a parent and finds out what happens in juvenile prisons must be highly unlikely to tolerate their continued existence unless convinced that only other people's children will be locked up. And in fact, it is highly disproportionately kids from poor neighborhoods and with darker skin who get locked up. A non-white child is far more likely to be arrested for the same act than a white child, far more likely to be charged and detained, far more likely to be sentenced to prison, and far more likely to be given a longer sentence.

In fact, the idea that sub-human monsters, of whatever race, must be made to suffer and must be kept away from the rest of us, is the leading candidate as a major explanation of the continuation of juvenile imprisonment. If the goal were preventing crime, the prisons are worse than nothing. We've tried alternatives within the prison system, and found that reforms help but can only go so far. We've tried alternatives outside of the prison system, and found them far superior in results. We've even seen states shut down lots of juvenile prisons, primarily because of the financial cost, and seen the benefits in cost savings, in the lives of young people, and in reduced crime rates. But other states don't follow suit, and the states making the cuts need only see a rise in revenue to begin rebuilding the torture palaces.

The lessons are of course obtainable from abroad as well. The U.S. locks kids up at a higher rate than any other nation. The next closest is South Africa, which locks up children at one-fifth the rate of the U.S. While the United States slowly, reluctantly, begins to stop throwing away packaging, it remains intent on throwing away people. For many who accept disproven ways of thinking, setting those 66,000 children free would make us less safe, just as cutting the military or disbanding it would endanger us all. These are powerful myths, but the evidence overwhelmingly disproves them. If our rural communities went back to farming food instead of prisoners, we would all be better off.

Much of what is routinely done to tens of thousands of youths in the United States would be illegal if done to prisoners of war. Torture in these houses of "correction" is the norm, not the exception. Isolation is the central abuse, combined with food deprivation, assault, rape, temperature extremes, deprivation of medical care, deprivation of education, sadistic exercises in humiliation, forced nudity, stress positions, piling on, attacks by dogs, and of course indefinite detention without criminal conviction. These practices have been transferred to international prisoners after becoming routine for U.S. prisoners, including juveniles. And, while much of the abuse comes from other prisoners, most of it is committed by guards — or, excuse me, "correctional officers."

This disastrous system seems in dire need of reform, and the idea that it can be reformed is quite tempting. Children's bodies are dug up behind an institution in Florida. A judge in Pennsylvania gets caught taking bribes to send more kids to hell. A sexual assault scandal in Texas gets big enough to make the news. Kids hog-tied and left outside in freezing weather in Arkansas create some waves. But the scandals are everywhere. A review found only 8 states where there was not conclusive evidence of system-wide mistreatment. And the scandals have been there for a century and a half. The reforms have been needed and been worked on since day one. They are not what's needed. Children need love and companionship, safety and trust, respect and encouragement. They are even worse equipped to survive imprisonment than adults. Locked up kids commit suicide at a far higher rate than others, nearly rivaling that of war veterans. These facts are continually reconfirmed by new science, but they and the failure of juvenile prisons have been known practically since the invention of juvenile prisons.

Solitary confinement greatly increases suicide rates, and yet is used as a punishment for the offense of being suicidal. This is not a nifty contradiction to be examined in a master's thesis. Rather, it is part of a process that fundamentally destroys our young people, a process which we pretend improves them.

Or do we? Polls suggest that we, the public, in fact understand the madness of government

child-abuse currently engaged in to the tune of \$5 billion. The public prefers rehabilitation and treatment and is willing to pay *higher* taxes for those approaches, even though they actually cost less. We test this, prove it, and then don't act on it — or at least our government doesn't act on it. Oregon tried an experiment in Deschutes County, giving the county the money it would have taken to lock kids up and requiring the county to pay the bill for any kid that did end up locked up. The county spent the money on prevention, neighborhood programs, community services. In a year, the number of children sent into the fortresses of misery and horror dropped by 72%.

Everything I've just claimed, and much more, is documented in a new book by Nell Bernstein called *Burning Down the House: The End of Juvenile Prison*. This book includes numerous personal stories, countless examples, endless studies, and all the evidence anyone claiming to base policy on reality would need to become a "radical" when it comes to the malfunctioning of juvenile prisons. Bernstein looks at the worst and the best of the institutions. The best remains far from good enough. The best remains worse than nothing at all. Improving the mass abuse of children is not pragmatic; it's immoral. It's like being in favor of the war on Libya because the war on Iraq was worse; doing so requires averting one's eyes from the state Libya is in.

Burning Down the House should be taught in our schools. Maybe free young people would find the power to speak up on behalf of their imprisoned fellows, if they knew. Maybe parents, if sufficiently intent on discarding both sadism and racism, would act if they heard it from their children.

There is a hurdle to be overcome, however, higher than the false belief that injustice only happens to those who deserve it, or the corruption of our misrepresentative government by profiteers, or the cooption of the corporate media by the government. The hurdle is this: everything that's wrong with prisons for children is also wrong with prisons for adults. If we stop thinking about imprisoned children the way that we must think in order to allow their imprisonment, we'll be in danger of ceasing to think about imprisoned adults the way we must to allow their imprisonment. Are we willing to risk that danger? I certainly hope so.

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