

# We are proof incarcerated young people need care, not control | Opinion

Updated Feb 08, 2021; Posted Feb 08, 2021



**By Rodney Gardner and William Bentley**

Today, roughly 1500 youth in Pennsylvania woke up inside carceral settings. They'll spend their day looking at bars, bricks, and walls, wondering what life will look like; worrying about how they'll avoid violence; knowing that they'll have to deal with racism and harassment.

We know their fear and uncertainty, and we understand all the challenges they face inside, and then outside.

As formerly incarcerated young people, we know that adults with power are thinking about our futures, too. In October 2020, the [Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force](#), a group made up of lawmakers, judges, nonprofit leaders, and other stakeholders, heard testimony on the issue of youth incarceration in Pennsylvania.

They heard from directly impacted youth like us, about the importance of investing in structures rooted in care, not control; from community members about the way that the system continues to swallow their kids; from organizations like the [Youth Art & Self-empowerment Project \(YASP\)](#), [Village of Arts & Humanities](#), [Juvenile Law Center \(JLC\)](#) and [Youth Sentencing & Reentry Project \(YSRP\)](#); from educators about the importance of considering alternatives to incarceration.

The Task Force will spend the beginning of 2021 developing a set of recommendations for how to change Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system. These statutory, budgetary, and administrative recommendations will guide state lawmakers and other leaders.

The Task Force recommendations hold a lot of weight and in order to make decisions on behalf of Pennsylvania's youth, the Task Force must listen to the young people who feel the impact and consequences of this system every single day. Data is one side of the story; we are the other.

Young people need opportunities to learn from our mistakes - that is part of how we all grow up. Kids of all backgrounds and races engage in risky behavior at the same rates; but for Black and Brown youth, taking them from their families and locking them up is often the first response.

Why don't we get a second chance? Why is incarceration the first choice?

Our stories show a pattern of harm by a system that promises justice while doing the exact opposite. We became involved with the justice system as youth and were both charged as adults. One of us almost immediately faced violence by others in the system, as well as racism and homophobia by prison guards and staff.

The other had a bail set at \$520,000, which is higher than it would be for an adult with the same charge. We were traumatized day after day through all types of violence and it was torture, not rehabilitation.

Youth who remain locked up now also face the devastating impact of COVID 19.

We refuse to sit by and let the system hurt more young people like us. We are turning our experiences and pain into action by demanding our leaders take steps immediately to end youth incarceration in Pennsylvania and protect the most vulnerable population-- young people. Task Force members have to understand that incarceration does change young people, but not for the better.

Second chances almost never happen in our neighborhoods, but the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Reform Task Force can change that. We can do better in Philadelphia and beyond. If we started investing in our youth, our schools, after-school programs, programs run for our communities by our communities, we would only get closer to the world we know youth deserve.

We have to imagine and build a world without youth incarceration. We can do this.

Over the past year, we saw more and more people look closely at the flaws of the legal system but there isn't enough focus on the specific problem of youth incarceration. We can't let more kids go through the same system that traumatized us and threatens to traumatize [50,000 more youth every day](#). That is not justice; it doesn't fix anything, it hasn't. Instead, we need restorative justice models in our communities, especially to avoid the ripple effect of separating families.

If our leaders don't do anything to move towards a better world and alternatives to incarceration, our communities will only continue to suffer. We are lucky to have survived the criminal legal system, and we are proof that young people need [Care, Not Control](#).

This is our experience. This is the truth.

***Rodney Gardner and William Bentley, are #CareNotControl campaign youth leaders.***