

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Opinion

## End youth incarceration now | Opinion

As someone who was incarcerated as a child, I can tell you from experience that youth prisons don't solve our problems – they create more.



Briannah Stoves is a leader for Care, Not Control, a coalition of young people and youth advocates working to end youth incarceration.

Naomieh Joven

---

by Briannah Stoves, For The Inquirer

Updated Mar 4, 2022

---

If I had not served prison time as a child, I know my life would have been far different. I didn't imagine this path for myself, but growing up with the challenges my community faced — poverty, food insecurity, and housing instability — the odds were stacked against me.

When I was incarcerated, I had no control over what could happen to me. I saw prison staff — the very people sworn to protect us — abuse their power and encourage violent

behavior. I witnessed things a child should never see, such as youth put into restraints and dangerously harmed. The cages didn't keep us safe — they made us even more vulnerable to violence and abuse.

My childhood was taken away from me, and that's a reality I live with every day.

Here in Philadelphia and across the country, many elected officials and civic leaders have been weaponizing the “rising youth crime” [narrative](#) to advocate for more youth prisons. This is a mistake.

These crime narratives are dangerous, as they don't paint the full picture of the issues truly impacting young people. These stories aim to justify bringing back archaic, failed, and racist “tough on crime” policies, and ignore what are often the root causes of youth incarceration — poverty, hunger, and housing instability. Unfortunately, the pandemic has only exacerbated these issues.

As someone who was incarcerated as a child, I can tell you from experience that youth prisons don't solve our problems — they create more. In my time behind bars, I became more aggressive because the environment encouraged it. It changed the way I perceive everything around me, and I still live with that today.

Youth incarceration doesn't just impact you while behind bars — it stays with you forever. Incarceration affects your ability to find jobs and complete your education and leaves you with unimaginable trauma. While system leaders claim that youth facilities are rehabilitative, in my experience, that could not be further from the truth.

Rehabilitation, at its core, is supposed to be rooted in care, rooted in coming out better than you went in. Youth incarceration isn't rooted in care — it perpetuates a generational cycle of trauma and economic instability. And this impacts Black youth — and Black communities — the most. In Pennsylvania, Black youth are [more than five times](#) more likely than white youth to be incarcerated.

I don't feel as if anyone cared for me while I was behind bars, nor was my reentry to society a priority. I wasn't set up for success — if anything, I was set up to fail and return as an adult to the same system that stole my childhood. I needed resources and support in my own community — well-funded schools, mental health, and community engagement programs. Instead I was sent away and placed behind bars. I came out a different person, and not for the better.

It's statistically [proven](#) that youth prisons are ineffective at reducing recidivism, as 70% to 80% of youth are rearrested within a few years. Additionally, Pennsylvania [spends](#) \$211,000 to incarcerate a child, compared with the \$16,000 we spend on average to educate a child — resources we could use to fund community-based supports such as diversion programs.

Pennsylvania has a long history of [abuse and mistreatment](#) of incarcerated youth. While many in positions of power claim these instances are isolated, young people across Pennsylvania remain behind bars in unacceptable conditions, subjected to abuse every single day.

In 2019, after several instances of abuse in youth prisons, the [Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force](#) was assembled. Gov. Tom Wolf tasked them with making [recommendations](#) to reform Pennsylvania's youth justice system. Unfortunately, many of the task force recommendations do not go far enough in protecting youth, and do not provide the transformational change for which youth and advocates have called for for years.

I am a youth leader with the [Care, Not Control](#) campaign, fighting to ensure that no more young people have to experience the trauma that I have. To make this a reality, we need legislators to take bold, immediate action by adopting our [demands](#), including ending the carceral state for youth in Pennsylvania and divesting from youth incarceration and reinvesting in communities.

My life was changed because of the time I spent behind bars as a child, and not for the better. Ending the cycle of trauma and abuse of youth incarceration starts with investing in our children, not the jails that house them.

*Briannah Stoves is a leader for Care, Not Control, a coalition of young people and youth advocates working to end youth incarceration.*

Published March 4, 2022



Briannah Stoves, For The Inquirer

---