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## **Jail a Child, Get a Job: America Hates Kids Part I**

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Two judges in Western Pennsylvania, recently sentenced to seven years in prison for purposely inflating the sentences of juvenile offenders to benefit the income and profits of privately run "youth detention" centers, draw our attention to the over-riding economic impulse for the vast criminalization of American youth.

The judges got bribes of \$2.6 million. Thousands of teens were jailed for little or no reason. The young woman "offender" featured in the [New York Times story](#) about this debacle, for example, was 17, had two parents and the pleasant teen look often described as "perky." She had been sentenced to a juvenile center for 3 months for making fun of an assistant principal on MySpace. (One of the disgraced judges, ironically enough, had found her guilty of "harassment.").

Yet, with thousands of Pennsylvania kids being sentenced on such skimpy charges----teens routinely received jail-time even against the recommendations of local prosecutors---this scheme maintained itself for at least five years until finally ended by a serious investigation. Western Pennsylvania---coal country---is largely white and working class. The fact that even there, children aren't safe from runaway criminalization only underscores how commonplace it is in the criminal "justice" system to see children as a meal ticket---and the striking extent to which the resulting criminalization is accepted throughout the United States.

In fact, jailing young people specifically and clearly for the sole purpose of creating jobs for adults---usually adults linked to political organizations and their allied unions---is commonplace across much the nation. And, it doesn't matter whether the "facilities" youth "offenders" are sent to are privately or publicly run. Youth incarceration is a very well-studied field. Over and over, it has been shown that, for the nonviolent youth who constitute most of the young people in American jails, being sent to a "facility", as distinct from being assigned to counseling and supervision in their own community, is a terrible choice which launches even nonviolent youth toward repeated jailings.

In New York State, for instance, where most youth in the "criminal justice" system are black or Hispanic, it costs \$200,000 a year to keep kids in state facilities and 80% are re-arrested after getting out; it costs \$17,000 for community-based counseling and supervision, with only 35% of these youth being re-arrested.

However, jailing kids to keep selected adults in paychecks is now so much a part of American culture that even statistics like that can barely nudge change. Gladys Carrion, New York's current Commissioner of Families and Children Services, has made it her top mission in the year since she took office is to start closing New York's dismal youth facilities. Judges, indeed, are directing more and more young offenders to the community-based counseling that is their best chance. However, getting juvenile beds closed so that the state treasury, and youth programs, can benefit from the savings has proven difficult indeed. Currently, New York State, which is effectively bankrupt, is holding open hundreds of empty beds and keeping unused facilities fully staffed at a cost of \$14 million a year.

Proof that juvenile facilities, themselves, can both operate both more cheaply for the public purse and with better results for children fares as badly, or worse. In the two decades since Missouri reformed its juvenile detention system into the nation's most admired program, it has reduced its "re-incarceration" rate for the young in its system to a breathtaking low of 9%. The core of this system centers on forming the young inmates into 12-kid units, where they learn to be responsible for one another---for both the benefits of improved behavior and the consequences of bad behavior---on a level that gives them an entirely new social context. As [Marion Wright Edleman, head of the Children's Defense Fund](#), writes, the result is both rehabilitation and low costs. Much of the rehabilitation involves working through youth peer groups and does away with the mode of adults preaching down to them. The youth are taught leadership skills and how to facilitate group sessions. Staff members are trained to facilitate teams of 12 and are prepared to meet the needs of each youth,

making referrals to family therapy and substance abuse counseling generally unnecessary.

The Missouri Division of Youth Services also has created a seamless case management system so that once a youth is adjudicated, one case worker follows him and his family throughout his entire stay in the system facilitating the eventual reentry of the youth into his community. Significantly, this system comes with a considerable cost savings. The annual cost for detaining a youth in Missouri is less than half of what other states pay. This reform probably only blossomed and persevered because Missouri had one Director of Youth Services, Mark Steward, for 17 years; this gave him the needed time to insist and insist on reform until it was institutionalized---that is, until kids succeeding while they were jailed became the new norm.

But saying that Missouri has the nation's most admired youth offender program means--when you get down to it---almost nothing in the United States because there is no understood or promoted civic value in stopping the useless jailing of youth. Since 2005, Steward has headed a foundation-funded consulting service to help other states reform their juvenile services on the Missouri model. So far he is only working with the city of Washington, D.C., and 3 states which he feels are actually committed at the top levels---including the governorship---necessary to see this kind of reform succeed against internal opposition, especially from unions.

So, instead of spreading success, what we have, in the succinct definition of the Children's Defense Fund, is a "cradle to prison pipeline." This pipeline works at multiple levels to criminalize ordinary youthful hi-jinks and misbehavior (How was it a crime in the first place for a 17-year old to lampoon an assistant principal on MySpace?) and then assures that those declared to be young criminals on one flimsy charge after another actually do get jailed in a way that makes them into criminals.

What we finally see are startling incarceration rates. Overall, one in 31 Americans are in prison or under criminal justice "supervision" such as parole; 1 in 11 young black men between the ages of 20 and 34 are out-rightly imprisoned at any one time, and over their life, one of three will be.

It's striking that this relentless criminalization of youth, a phenomenon of the past twenty years, happened while the baby boomers---historically, the nation's freest, most drug using, and full of hi-jinks and protest generation---were actually the adults administering the United States. I don't have any real explanation for that, but I have often thought about the contrast: the generation in charge had the most fun and freedom of anybody while the most vulnerable young in their care---the poor, the minority, the parentless---ended up as the most literally shackled American young since slavery.

Maybe we were just too involved in our own causes---women's rights, gay rights, "choice"---and, of course, our vast consumerism, to undertake the hard, daily civic work of controlling bureaucracies which control others. With rare exception, prominently Marion Wright Edelman, even minority leaders have not made it a true cause to combat youth criminalization.

Now as the baby boomers (I'm one myself) head toward retirement, perhaps we'll finally have time to look at what we are leaving behind in the terrible sadness these children have been assigned for their portion of the United States. Or maybe the realization that spending so much to jail these youth interferes with paying for things we now need---like Social Security and Medicare---will cause us at last to see them as a cause for concern.

(This is the first part of a four-part series examining issues of great crisis for American youth. The next part, to appear next week, will be on American AIDS orphans.)

 

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