



A NCYL POLICY UPDATE

YOUTH JUSTICE IN **THE UNITED STATES**

Rollbacks & The Fight For Reform

AUGUST 2025

In 2017, the United States celebrated a historic achievement: **it had cut youth incarceration by more than half** over the previous decade.

Between 2000-2022, progress continued, with the country seeing a 75% decline in youth incarceration as government bodies across the country realized that youth development reaped more rewards than punishment, both in terms of safety, as well as transforming the lives of youth involved in the justice system. Community-based programs, restorative justice practices, and trauma-informed care were becoming the new standard in juvenile justice.

Today, that progress is imperiled. Across red and blue states alike, we are seeing a troubling trend as policymakers are reversing course, from building new juvenile detention centers to expanding bed capacity, and even reverting to prosecuting children as adults. The claimed impetus for these rollbacks is “public safety,” even as youth crime remains near historic lows.

The Cruelty of Juvenile Detention Centers: A Systemic Crisis

There is no doubt that placing youth into juvenile detention centers rather than in community-based programs focused on youth development is both cruel and short-sighted.

In [Michigan](#), a new lawsuit was filed in May alleging “horrific sexual abuse and torture at the hands of various staff members” at juvenile detention centers. In [Illinois](#), “nearly 800 survivors of childhood sexual abuse have filed lawsuits against the state...pointing to a longstanding institutional failure to protect children.” In [Colorado](#), an investigation revealed that “allegations of excessive force were made once every 2.7 days over the course of a year” in its youth detention facilities. In [Oregon](#), a series of lawsuits have “painted a picture of [pervasive sexual abuse of youth](#) placed in the state’s juvenile justice system.” In [North Carolina](#), teenagers are allegedly locked in isolation for 23 or 24 hours. In California, youth facilities in [Los Angeles](#) have been plagued by allegations of rape and sexual abuse, with the county paying out a record-setting [\\$4 billion to victims](#).

As one of the plaintiffs detailed in a federal case alleging torture at one of these youth facilities, “*Sometimes it makes me scream in my cell.*”

The United States’ detention centers, by their nature, are harmful and facilitate conditions for such rampant abuse.

SO WHY ARE STATES
INSISTING ON SENDING
MORE CHILDREN TO THEM?



A Dangerous Backslide

What we do know from decades of data is that detention is not the answer. Evidence shows that community-based alternatives (CBAs) are far more effective at promoting public safety and supporting youth development. Incarceration, on the other hand, unquestionably increases trauma, disrupts education and employment, and often leads to worse long-term outcomes, not just for incarcerated youth, but for their families and communities as well.

As [The Marshall Project](#) points out, [staffing vacancies](#), which are more than 70% in some systems, are making the situation worse and often endangering the very youth these systems are meant to house and protect. The detention officers that are on duty, as headlines remind us, often fail and even harm the youth in their care. In [Kentucky](#), an April 2025 investigation revealed a closet “fight club” cheered on by officials tasked with caring for youth, while in [California](#), an indictment alleges that Los Angeles youth detention officers staged “gladiator fights” between children.

Resurgence of punitive policy not only threatens young lives but also deepens [stark racial disparities](#): nationally, in 2023, Black youth were more than six times as likely to be held in detention compared to their white peers — the largest disparity on record.

A SNAPSHOT OF STATE ROLLBACKS

Across the country, states are undoing hard-won progress on youth justice reform.

MARYLAND:

“In 2023, the Child Victims Act, which removed the statute of limitations and allowed victims to receive up to \$890,000 per occurrence of abuse, was made a law. Since then, 4,500 victims have filed claims, potentially putting the state on the hook for billions of dollars.” The state is now clawing back the law and seeking to limit the amount of damages paid out to child sexual abuse victims.

LOUISIANA:

After a federal judge found that holding children in the adult Angola prison “seriously and irreparably harmed” them, the state simply transferred youth to Jackson Parish Jail, another adult facility, where “children at the jail have said that they’ve been held in solitary confinement, sprayed with mace, shot with pepper balls, and denied educational and therapeutic services.” Pending legislation would codify such transfers whenever “capacity constraints” are claimed, cementing harmful adult-jail practices into law.

TENNESSEE:

In January 2024, Tennessee enacted a new “[blended sentencing](#)” law, allowing for the possibility of transferring more youth to the adult criminal justice system, with fewer checks than the existing process. It also mandates longer juvenile system sentences, potentially keeping young people in the system until they turn 19.

FLORIDA:

CS/CS/SB 1344 resurrects punitive responses to “status offenses” like truancy, curfew violations, and “ungovernable” behavior (acts that would not be crimes if committed by adults).

Against this grim landscape of rollbacks, there are glimmers of hope for progress. Some states are charting a different course.

Illinois submitted a federal plan to downsize Cook County's 500-bed Juvenile Temporary Detention Center and replace it with multiple "centers of care" rooted in community-based treatment. In California, the state shuttered its state-run youth prison system and established an Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) — the nation's first state-level, health-focused youth justice agency. While this agency still faces several challenges, its establishment has the potential to rightfully move the entire youth justice system under the category of health and development, rather than incarceration and punishment. In Colorado, the state recently invested \$10 million in community-based pre-arrest deflection programs, the result of years of advocacy uplifting the fact that young people's outcomes improve greatly when they're provided with support and opportunities, rather than being made to endure the trauma of incarceration and system involvement.



NCYL's blueprint for reinvigorating reforms

NCYL and its partners are advancing a bold vision grounded in the transformation of the country's approach to youth justice.

We are fighting to:

- Replace punishment, incapacitation, and surveillance with health and positive youth development as the system's guiding goals.
- Center directly impacted youth and communities throughout the reform process.
- Hold the system accountable for achieving positive youth outcomes, not for simply collecting and maintaining recidivism metrics and data.
- Invest and redirect funds to local communities to support youth health and development outside of the system and outside of carceral facilities.
- Partner with education- and health-based systems and community leaders to develop effective strategies and approaches to promoting community health and safety.
- Ensure proper implementation of recently passed legislation aimed at 1) reducing the number of youth in the juvenile and criminal legal systems and 2) resourcing communities, educators and youth development professionals to better serve youth.

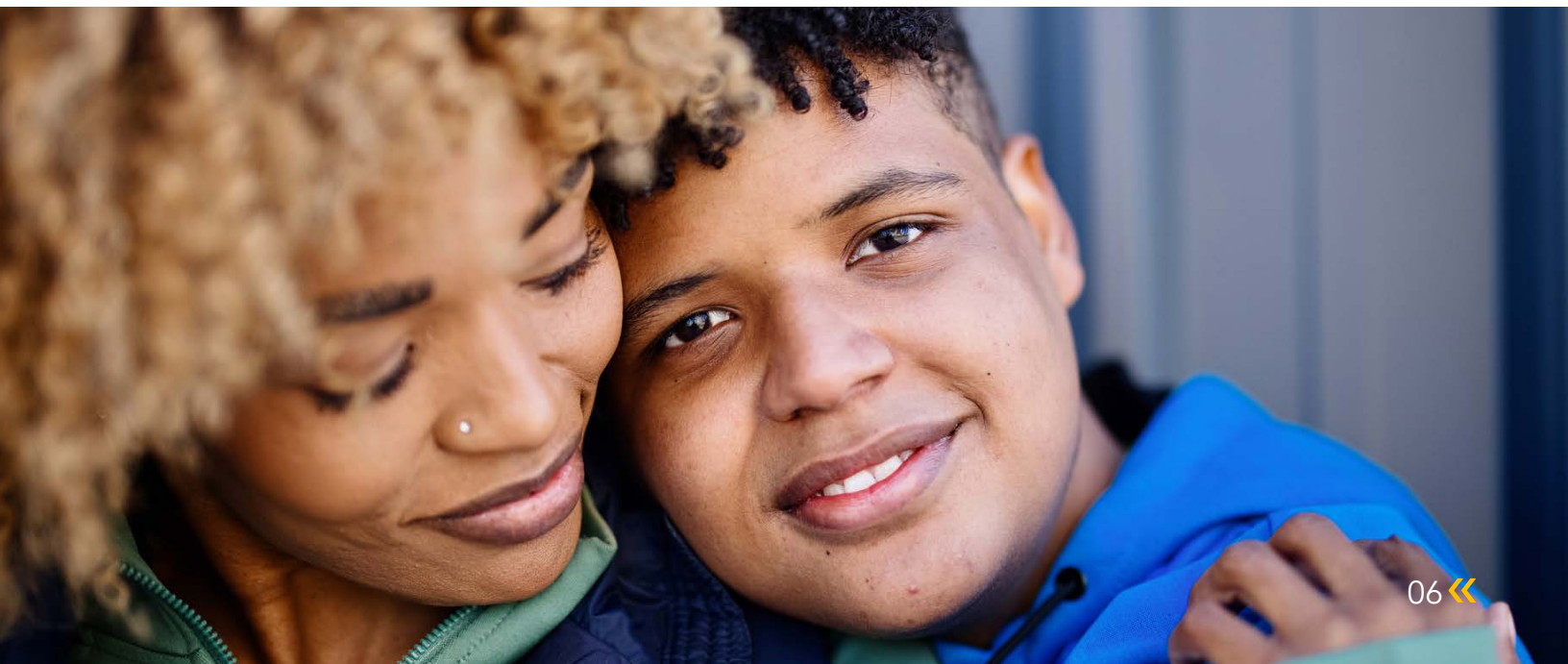
We know NCYL's approach can ultimately transform the youth justice system, and the lives of the youth it is supposed to serve. For example, after we successfully advocated in California for deeper state-level investment in community-based organizations (CBOs), we were able to launch a [pilot](#) program in Santa Clara County that provided girls and young women with additional community support and services instead of sending them to youth jails. The result was a 58% drop in the detention of girls countywide. Following NCYL's model, advocates can push for state-level budget reallocations and counties can find alternative and innovative solutions to meet the needs of youth outside of carceral settings.

A Call to Action

Now is the time to defend the gains made for children and youth, and to continue to envision a brighter future for all youth.

Especially now, every stakeholder has a role to play:

- **Policymakers** must reject the myth and fear-mongering regarding dramatic increases in youth crime and instead ground their policy choices in fact, not fiction. The fact is indisputable that increased juvenile detention has not and cannot be the way forward. It is costly, not just in terms of taxpayer dollars but in terms of the future of youth who should be on a path toward healthy development and support rather than imprisonment and isolation.
- **Advocates & community leaders** should track rollbacks, which are likely to intensify in the years ahead. Accountability is key. By exposing facility conditions and the real cost of incarceration, community organizations and leaders can collectively turn the narrative. Organizations also have a key role to play in elevating best practices and amplifying the youth voices that are too often silenced in policy debates.
- **Media outlets** must vigorously investigate and report on conditions at youth detention centers, as well as the special interests involved in policy rollbacks.
- **Philanthropy** can fuel rapid-response litigation and community-driven advocacy, and seed model programs that are proven to chart new, better ways forward. These include NCYL's Colorado LEAF (Lived Experience Advocacy Fellowship) program, which offers a paid leadership development and policy advocacy curriculum for youth directly impacted by Colorado's justice systems.





NCYL is a national nonprofit that puts children — especially those pushed to society's margins — at the center of every fight for justice. For more than 50 years we have partnered with young people, families, and communities in efforts to dismantle inequity, racism, and discrimination wherever they appear.

By centering young people's needs and experiences, we can create a comprehensive response to rollbacks that serves all interests, safeguards public safety, advances racial equity, and builds communities where **every child can thrive.**

*Every right defended.
Every voice heard.*

[YOUTHLAW.ORG](https://youthlaw.org)