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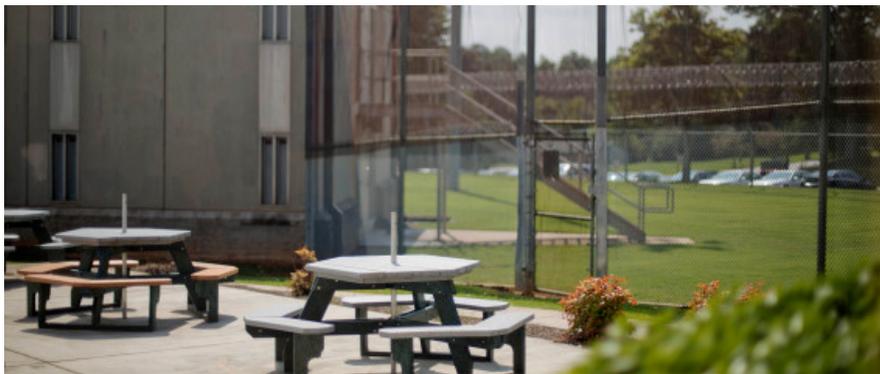
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President and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Youth Prisons Are Factories of Failure: Close Them Down

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I remember the first time I walked into a youth prison. I had just been asked to step in as the state's director of juvenile justice, and so I wanted to tour the juvenile facility. What I saw forever changed my impression of what happens to young people locked away and ultimately has led me to my position today: We need to close every youth prison in this country. Permanently. Every one of them.

As I [told a TEDx audience recently](#), after visiting that first facility back then, I knew the euphemisms were deceptively benign. We call these places youth development centers, training schools, reformatories and many other names that give the false impression that they are helping children. We avoid calling them what they are: prisons for kids.

What I saw on my visit were a hundred young people packed into an institution built for 40. There were bright lights, unrelenting noise, children handcuffed and shackled, correctional officers with mace on their belts and a long row of isolation rooms - solitary confinement - with the faces of young people peering out of each one.

The sense that violence could break out at any minute was palpable. Indeed, the [evidence shows that maltreatment and abuse are part and parcel of this failed model](#), almost impossible to avoid across the nation.

I had a terrible night's sleep that night. I kept thinking, *what if one of my own children was locked up in a place like that?*

At first I thought that I could fix it. I went around the state talking to many experts, trying to find the right programs and operational approaches. Along the way, I heard from people who said, "You know, Patrick, these are really dangerous kids. They're predators. Nothing works with them. If we don't lock them up, they will destroy our communities."

Then it hit me: We don't think and talk about these young people the way we talk about our own children. Most of the young people locked up in that facility were black and brown children. Our society has created ugly and dehumanizing stories about black and brown people for centuries, and those stories continue to this day in one form or another.

I began to realize that institutions like these are essentially monuments to the power of those ugly and dehumanizing stories. While I could push through some fundamental reforms, and make the institution less brutal, it would never become a place that helps young people turn their lives around. Quite the reverse: for more than 150 years, institutions like these have increased the odds that young people go on to more serious and persistent lawbreaking. In plain terms, we have built factories of failure all over this country.

The core design of these facilities conflicts with everything we know about adolescence, brain development and delinquency. They take young people away from their families, their schools and their communities and then cram them into harsh, punitive buildings with other deprived young people. We systematically take away their hope for their future, fill them with anger, shape their identity so they see themselves as hardened criminals and then we return them to their communities. Instead of facing up to the issues of poverty and trauma, we continue moving children through these pipelines that churn out one failed result after another.

It is time to close down these factories of failure. I believe it is long past time for us to recognize that what we are doing does not work. And it's costing us billions of dollars and wasting thousands of lives every year.

It's a reasonable question to ask how we can close every youth prison in the country. I know we can. This is how. First, we need to narrow the pipeline of children going into any facility. Despite recent reductions, the United States still locks up kids at a rate that's more than twice that of any other country. Many incarcerated kids are locked up for exactly the kinds of impulsive things that we all have done and our children have done, but don't make them a threat to public safety. Young people who are unlikely to re-offend - which includes the majority of kids arrested for first-time minor offenses - should be diverted from the juvenile justice system entirely.

Second, for kids with more serious problems, we need to improve the juvenile correctional system to greatly expand the kinds of community-based, family-centered treatment proven to work. Finally, young people who have proved to pose a serious and persistent risk to public safety should be placed in small secure facilities that will reduce recidivism with strong programming, connections with families and opportunities for educational, social and emotional development - not behind bars and barbed wire.

[The Annie E. Casey Foundation pledges to work with every state](#) willing to commit to those three steps: shrinking the pipeline, greatly expanding interventions that work and replacing their youth prisons with secure alternatives focused on positive youth development. We are ready to bring our quarter-century of experience of improving juvenile justice to partner with every state willing to take up this difficult but urgent work.

We should apply a simple test every time we look at a policy that affects children. I call it the "my child" test: would we want this for one of our own children? We know youth prisons fail that simple test. Of course, if one of our children were to get into serious trouble, we would do everything we could to help get him back on track. But we would also do everything within our power to make sure he didn't have to spend even a single day in one of these facilities.

If we would never want one of our own children to be sent to one of these youth prisons, I believe we have an ethical, moral and human obligation to close them down. We can't allow another 150 years of failure and abuse.

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