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Shaping Justice for the Future

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Columbia University Justice Lab Case Study Finds
Keeping Children Out of Youth Prisons and Placing Them Close to Home
Improves Outcomes -- and Increases Public Safety

Nation's Largest City No Longer Placing Youth in State Youth Prisons

Justice Lab Leveraging Close to Home Findings to
Join Campaign to Close Juvenile Jails Nationwide

MILWAUKEE, WI. - The Columbia University Justice Lab today released a case study which found that New York City's transformation from an institution-based to a community-based juvenile justice system has improved outcomes for children -- and made neighborhoods safer.

After closing many of the state's youth prisons, the success of New York's transformation is due to the successful implementation of a 2012 "Close to Home" law that **removed all New York City children from state youth prisons**, placing most in community-based, non-residential programs while living at home or into small group and/or secure homes. The report is entitled ***Moving Beyond Youth Prisons: Lessons from New York City's Implementation of Close to Home.***

New York City now sends no youth from Family Court to state-run youth prisons. Only a dozen are now housed in small, locked facilities within or near the city.

Moving Beyond Youth Prisons goes further than a traditional academic case study: it lays out how New York transformed its youth justice system over the last decade -- from communications and advocacy strategies, to leveraging crises, to, hardest of all: culture change -- and suggests how states can learn from New York's missteps and successes.

"Bringing troubled youths back to their communities and schools - and closing down the failing facilities that were located far away from their families - has helped them get their lives on track, while also saving taxpayers money," said Mike Bloomberg. He proposed the Close to Home law when he was New York City's mayor.

“Our Close to Home program allowed New York City to dramatically reduce the confinement of juveniles,” he continued. “This report helps demonstrate how much more progress we can make across the country.”

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said, “Kids deserve to be treated as kids, and that means keeping them close to home, near family and community support networks that help put them back on a pathway toward a productive future. We look forward to driving these reforms even further and we hope our work and this study inspire other cities to follow in our footsteps.”

Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers said, “I am encouraged by the findings of the Columbia Justice Lab case study of Close to Home in New York. It demonstrates that we are going in the right direction in Wisconsin by working to get kids out of Lincoln Hills and get them closer to home as soon as we safely and responsibly can. We look forward to reviewing and discussing the case study findings.”

Case study co-author Vincent Schiraldi said, “Institutional change is hard -- but not impossible.” He is a senior research scientist at the Columbia School of Social Work, co-Director of the Columbia Justice Lab and former Commissioner of New York City Probation.

“It’s taken a long time and a lot of people to transform a system where children were regularly abused and a child was killed, to one where the nation’s largest city no longer uses state youth prisons.” he said. “Now it’s time to share the lessons we learned in New York with communities across the nation.”

Elizabeth Glazer, director of the New York City Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, said, “Across the country, a young person's contact with the system too often initiates a lifelong pattern of arrest and incarceration. This important report recounts how New York City charted a new path, grounded in the principle that children must be treated like children, which means guarding and facilitating links to loved ones. We hope it is useful to other jurisdictions who are similarly seeking a way to help young people towards a better future.

Schiraldi and co-author Vidhya Ananthkrishnan (U-nun-tha-krish-nan) presented their findings to Wisconsin-based advocates and state and county officials, at a community meeting, at the Wisconsin Black Historical Society, in Milwaukee, on Feb. 27th.

They also discussed the potential implications of their findings on the movement led by local advocates and local officials to close the state’s sole remaining youth prisons: Lincoln Hills School for Boys and Copper Lake School for Girls.

Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake have been the subject of both state and federal investigations for prisoner abuse and child neglect and multiple lawsuits. They are now under a consent decree for allegations of abuse of youth in their custody and has been slated for closure by former Governor Scott Walker in 2018.

Sharlen Moore, co-founder of Youth Justice Milwaukee, which organized the presentation, said, “Community-centered approaches worked in New York and they can work in Milwaukee, too. Fear

should not drive our decision-making and prevent us from creating positive environments where youth can heal and thrive.”

“We must begin by treating young people and their families with dignity and respect,” she continued. “The best way to help them is not another prison with bars and locked doors. With the right support systems, young people can repair harm they’ve caused and gain the confidence to envision a positive future for themselves and their community.”

The ACLU of Wisconsin, along with the Juvenile Law Center, sued the Wisconsin Department of Corrections over the use of solitary confinement, pepper spray, strip searches and restraints on children at the state's juvenile correctional facility, also attended the presentation.

Sean Wilson, ACLU of Wisconsin Smart Justice Statewide Organizer, said, “Keeping our kids four hours away from their family and community at Lincoln Hills only exacerbates the trauma many of them are dealing with

“Family structure, community and peer support are key factors in the rehabilitation of our young people,” he continued. “Bringing them closer to home will ensure that they remain connected to these structures that will contribute to their positive reintegration back into society. ”

Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele said, "Milwaukee County has been working to reform our youth justice system to one focused on restorative justice and reconnecting youth with their families, schools and communities. This approach, known as Project Rise, aligns with New York’s Close to Home model, which aims to reduce recidivism rates, pave positive futures for our young people, and create safer healthier neighborhoods.”

Milwaukee County Administrator Mark Mertens said, “We cannot continue to send our children to a prison 250 miles from Milwaukee, only to have them come back home more traumatized and angry. Our youth deserve better, and our community deserves a better return on their investment.”

“We look forward to tailoring the findings of *Moving Beyond Youth Prisons* to support our work here in Wisconsin to close Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake and provide our children the services they need close to home and their families,” he continued.

In the mid-1990s, approximately 3,800 New York City youth were annually convicted in Family Court in New York and sentenced to serve time at one of nearly three dozen large, state or privately-run youth prisons, far from home, in Upstate New York. Most of the children were poor, and black or Latino.

This system was both inefficient and ineffective. The year before Close to Home was implemented, the cost per child serving time in a state-run facility had reached a high of \$250,000-a-year. Meanwhile, a study found, 71 percent of the boys who served time in New York State’s youth prisons were reincarcerated again by the time they were 28 years old.

As of 2016, New York City sent no children determined by juvenile courts to require an out-of-home placement to state youth prisons. This month, Feb. 2019, only 107 youth were in out-of-home placements in New York City and only 12 of those were in locked facilities.

The Justice Lab case study found that the Close to Home initiative, which was proposed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, passed with bi-partisan support by the New York State Legislature, and signed into law by Governor Andrew Cuomo, in March, 2012, brought numerous changes to support young people.

Three-quarters of the children who served time in the state's juvenile jails were diagnosed with substance or alcohol abuse problems; half received mental health diagnoses; half had serious health problems; and a third suffered from developmental delays. The state prisons consistently failed to treat these diagnoses.

Close to Home for the first time provides all children involved in the criminal justice system with the therapeutic, health, and developmental services they require and are legally entitled to receive, primarily in non-residential settings.

“Instead of being sent to distant and often brutal youth prisons, New York City's youth now remain connected to their families, schools, and communities,” said case study co-author Ananthakrishnan. “In so doing, the aim was to help youth more easily transition back into their lives after prison, with the goal of becoming successful, productive adults.”

The Justice Lab also found Close to Home coincided with a significant increase in public safety in the city -- especially in contrast with the rest of New York State, which is not covered by the law.

- The decline in juvenile arrests in New York City doubled after Close to Home was enacted: from 24 percent to 52 percent.
- This decline in juvenile arrests was 28.5 percent higher in New York City than the rest of the state: 52.3 percent in the city versus 40.7 percent.
- Juvenile placements dropped 2.4 times more in New York City than in the rest of the state: 68 percent versus 20 percent.

“These outcomes challenge the contention that drove so much juvenile justice policymaking over the last several decades - that we needed to lock up more children in order to achieve public safety,” stated the study's primary author, Marsha Weissman. “New York City abandoned state youth prisons in favor of a system keeping most kids home, all but eliminating the use of locked custody for its delinquent youth, and they are still experiencing dramatic declines in arrests of youth.”

Close to Home's residential facilities are managed by the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) under a contract with seven non-profit organizations. Community supervision is done by the city's Probation Department (DOP). Both ACS and DOP contract for programs that serve as alternatives to placement.

Marsha Weissman, Ph.D., was founder and executive director of the Center for Community Alternatives. She is now an adjunct lecturer at Syracuse University. Weissman spent 30 years working to promote reintegrative justice and reduce incarceration.

Vidhya Ananthakrishnan (U-nun-tha-krish-nun) is the Justice Lab's Director of Youth Justice Project, which focuses on ending youth prisons and reimagining a new community-centered approach to serving youth. Previously, she spent a decade at the Vera Institute of Justice, where she planned, managed, and oversaw an array of projects to keep youth out of the justice system.

Vincent Schiraldi, MSW, is a Senior Research Scientist at the Columbia School of Social Work and co-Director of the Columbia University's Justice Lab. Previously, he was Commissioner of the New York City Department of Probation and Director of Washington, DC's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services.

The Columbia University Justice Lab (@CUJusticeLab; <https://justicelab.columbia.edu>) combines original research, policy development, and community engagement to advance criminal justice reform. Justice depends on peaceful and healthy communities that help all their members to flourish in a climate of fairness and respect. The Lab works for community-centered justice where incarceration is no longer used as a solution to problems that are rooted in poverty and racial inequality.

Columbia University is one of the world's most important centers of research and at the same time a distinctive and distinguished learning environment for undergraduates and graduate students in many scholarly and professional fields. It expects all areas of the University to advance knowledge and learning at the highest level and to convey the products of its efforts to the world.