Empty Cells are Missed Opportunities to Repurpose America's Surplus Juvenile Detention Facilities

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Across the United States, hundreds of juvenile facilities have closed as youth confinement has fallen, while many remaining institutions operate well below capacity. They are a physical legacy of an obsolete policy era—buildings constructed or expanded amid expectations of sustained growth in youth confinement. Today, unused and underused facilities drain public budgets and deteriorate while communities around them go without housing, health care, and opportunity. A growing number of states and localities have shown that these sites can be put to far better use. What is missing is a national framework to help them do it.

There Is a Documented Surplus of Juvenile Facilities

In the 1990s, federal policy and a wave of public fear encouraged expansion of correctional capacity. The 1994 Crime Act authorized major grants for construction and expansion of correctional facilities, while the influential but later-discredited "superpredator" theory predicted a coming generation of violent youth. States and localities built or enlarged juvenile facilities in anticipation. The prediction failed. Youth arrests peaked in 1995 and have since declined by more than 75 percent. The institutions, however, remained.

The scale of the resulting overcapacity is visible in federal data. The number of young people held in juvenile residential placement on a typical census day fell from roughly 108,800 in 2000 to about 29,300 in 2023—a decline of approximately 73 percent. The federal government's facility census tells the same story. In 2000, 257 facilities across 41 states were operating above rated capacity; by 2018, only 11 facilities in 9 states were. In less than two decades, a system defined by overcrowding became one characterized largely by unused capacity.

California illustrates the pattern in concentrated form. Recent Board of State and Community Corrections facility data show that juvenile halls statewide operate at roughly 30 percent of rated capacity, based on a comparison of reported average daily population with rated capacity. Counties nevertheless continue to pay for minimum staffing, perimeter security, medical coverage, and building maintenance on facilities sized for far more young people than they actually hold. Fixed costs do not fall proportionately as populations decline, and in some jurisdictions the annual cost per confined youth reaches several hundred thousand dollars.

The Cost of Leaving Facilities Empty

An empty facility is not a neutral asset. The Urban Institute documented the Apache County, Arizona, juvenile detention center, which cost approximately $1.2 million a year to operate while holding an average of only one to two youth per day. When facilities are left vacant and in limbo, maintenance costs continue and the properties can contribute to public-safety, public-health, and property-value problems. The relevant choice is not between spending and saving. It is between paying for emptiness and investing in reuse.

Converting Unused Facilities Is Already Being Done—in Red States and Blue

Communities across the political spectrum have already converted former juvenile facilities into community assets. In Apache County, Arizona, a juvenile detention center became the LOFT Legacy Teen Center. In Beaumont, Texas, the former Al Price State Juvenile Correctional Facility became the Dream Center of Southeast Texas, a recovery and social-services campus. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, the former Washtenaw County juvenile detention site is being redeveloped as Veridian at County Farm, a mixed-income housing community. In Fulton County, New York, the former Tryon Residential Center was redeveloped as Tryon Technology Park. In the Bronx, the former Spofford detention center is being transformed into hundreds of affordable homes together with childcare, cultural arts, wellness, commercial, and industrial space. Los Angeles County has also advanced plans to repurpose the former Challenger Memorial Youth Center as a campus providing housing, education, career training, mental-health services, and other supports for transition-age youth.

These projects span rural and urban communities and red and blue states alike. A related example is found in Wagram, North Carolina, where the nonprofit GrowingChange is transforming a closed adult correctional site into a youth-led farm, education center, and community space—further evidence of the broader appetite for adaptive reuse, even where the original facility was not a juvenile detention center.

Yet these projects were completed without a dedicated federal conversion program. Each community had to navigate financing, zoning, environmental remediation, community engagement, and design through a largely improvised process. Conversion therefore remains slow, costly, and rare relative to the scale of the surplus—not because it cannot work, but because there is no shared infrastructure to support it.

Policymakers Can Help Replicate These Successes

A modest federal framework would turn isolated successes into a replicable national practice. Three steps would make the difference:

First, create a dedicated conversion grant program. Seed funding administered by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention would help states, counties, and tribes meet the up-front costs of conversion—remediation, removal of security infrastructure, planning, and code compliance—that local budgets often cannot absorb alone.

Second, publish national guidance and provide technical assistance. Model financing structures, zoning and licensing guidance, design standards for adaptive reuse, and case studies would let communities build on proven approaches rather than starting from zero each time.

Third, inventory the surplus. Building on the existing federal facility census, a regular mapping of rated capacity against actual population would identify genuinely surplus facilities and quantify the public resources tied up in them. Such a measure should target verified excess capacity rather than impose closures, since localized shortages may still arise from longer stays, facility conditions, or staffing constraints.

This agenda asks the federal government to help unwind a costly overbuild encouraged by public policy and convert stranded public assets into facilities that serve young people and communities at a fraction of the cost of new construction. The proof that conversion works already exists in communities across the country. What remains is to build the framework that lets the rest of the nation follow.