



Realignment Without Accountability

Community Findings on Conditions Inside California's Juvenile Halls, Camps, and SYTFs

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Center on Juvenile
and Criminal Justice





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Executive Summary

Once again, the state is failing our young people. We put counties in charge of juvenile justice, gave them hundreds of millions of dollars, but failed to invest in a basic system of accountability. Now we see the disturbing result of allowing probation departments to police themselves. Our town halls are doing what no multi-million dollar government agency has: gathering critical information about conditions in youth facilities from those working on the ground.

Grecia Resendez, Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice

There is an urgent lack of services and safety in many of California's 88 juvenile halls, camps, and ranches. This report draws on conversations with hundreds of young people, community members, attorneys, and advocates who have attended one of our 14 statewide town halls focused on conditions inside California's juvenile facilities. Together, these stakeholders expose systemic failures in the justice system and point to concrete strategies for supporting youth before, during, and after incarceration.

In 2023, during the final months before California closed its notorious youth prisons and shifted all juvenile justice responsibilities to the counties, the California Alliance for Youth and Community Justice (CAYCJ) and the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (CJCJ) began convening partners to discuss how local agencies were managing the transition. Over the course of more than three years, 14 large-scale meetings, and numerous smaller discussions with those who have firsthand knowledge of the facilities, several concerning themes emerged.



JUVENILE FACILITIES ROUTINELY PUT YOUTHS' HEALTH, SAFETY, AND WELL-BEING AT RISK:

- Facilities subject youth to long periods of isolation and lock-downs with limited outdoor time.
- Staff vacancies have heightened safety risks in the facilities while forcing cuts to youth programming and recreation.
- The current grievance system is disjointed and leaves many youth fearful of speaking out.

FACILITIES ARE FAILING TO PROVIDE YOUTH WITH THE SERVICES, EDUCATION, AND TRANSITION SUPPORT THEY NEED:

- Programming is inadequate, with many youth spending their days in cells or watching TV.
- Probation has imposed new barriers to entering the facilities, making it difficult for community-based organizations to serve and support youth.
- Probation is failing to prepare youth for a smooth transition home, putting them at risk of returning to the system as a youth or an adult.

Town hall participants generated hundreds of ideas for safeguarding and supporting young people in juvenile facilities, ranging from stronger local partnerships to sweeping legal reform. We have synthesized these into a set of bold, actionable recommendations:

TOWN HALL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Hold facilities accountable by strengthening and better coordinating systems for monitoring conditions.
- Increase access to youth facilities for family members, oversight bodies, and community-based service providers.
- Allow community organizations to fill existing gaps in facility programming and reentry planning.
- Give family, community, and directly impacted young people a meaningful voice in decision-making and oversight.
- Align the minimum standards for youth facilities with best practices and current research on youth development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice co-hosts its town halls with the California Alliance for Youth and Community Justice (CAYCJ). Founded in 2012, CAYCJ is the nation's largest network of youth justice organizations. It brings together 45 community-based organizations from across California, harnessing the power of collective action to enact policy change, boost local activism, and offer direct support and healing to young people. CAYCJ and its members helped to shape and pass SB 823, the legislation that closed the state youth prison system (the Division of Juvenile Justice), bringing hundreds of young Californians closer to home. Now CAYCJ members are committed to keeping incarcerated youth safe and cared for—both in locked facilities and in our communities.

The following CAYCJ member organizations have contributed significantly to the effort to monitor local facilities and host statewide town halls:

- California Youth Defender Center
- Fresh Lifelines for Youth
- The W. Haywood Burns Institute
- The Young Women's Freedom Center
- Youth Law Center

Introduction

In our county, young people are spending some of the most important years of their lives locked up with far too little meaningful programming or investment in their futures. This is especially true for youth in the Secure Youth Treatment Facility, where probation's primary objective appears to be keeping them incarcerated through their baseline terms rather than preparing them to succeed when they return home. Every day without education, skill-building, healing, or a real reentry plan is time taken from these young people that they cannot get back.

Participant from a community-based organization

In 2023, after more than a century of abuse within its youth prison system, California took the historic step of closing all of its state-run institutions, known for decades as the California Youth Authority (CYA) and later as the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). DJJ's closure brought an end to the sexual violence, staff abuse, and culture of fear that was present since its inception (CJCJ, 2016; 2019; 2020; 2020a; 2021).

However, DJJ's closure ushered in a new era of harm. Now, California's 58 counties are entrusted with operating the entire juvenile justice apparatus, from community supervision to years-long confinement. While this shift has allowed many youth to stay in smaller facilities closer to home, it has complicated the work of monitoring youths' safety and well-being across a sprawling system.¹ Because of the inherent ineffectiveness of housing youth in congregate, prison-like facilities, numerous county facilities are experiencing the same kinds of violence and abuse that once plagued the state institutions (CJCJ, 2023; Macallair, 2015).

¹ CJCJ, state lawmakers, and numerous other advocacy groups would routinely tour and inspect the DJJ institutions. In its later years, this required just two trips: one to Stockton and another to Ventura. Providing a similar level of monitoring to SYTFs would require months of travel up and down the state. Data collection, which was critical to supplementing in-person inspections, has also proved more difficult under the new system. While DJJ published monthly data on a wide range of facility metrics, including violence rates, use of force, lock-downs, and family visits (CJCJ, 2026), county facilities offer little more than a breakdown of their populations (BSCC, 2026).

A patchwork of agencies oversees these local systems, but each has a limited scope and even more limited enforcement power. The resulting gaps in accountability have allowed abusive local systems to operate unchecked, putting thousands of young people in harm's way.²

Alarmed by the lack of robust oversight, our organization and dozens of others resolved to fill the gaps. We began meeting, sharing strategies, and collecting data. This report is the culmination of more than three years of fact-finding, centered around 14 statewide town hall meetings. Out of this unofficial movement to monitor and safeguard youth, two major themes have emerged: 1) Juvenile facilities routinely put youths' health, safety, and well-being at risk, and 2) Counties are failing to provide youth with the services, education, and transitional support they need.

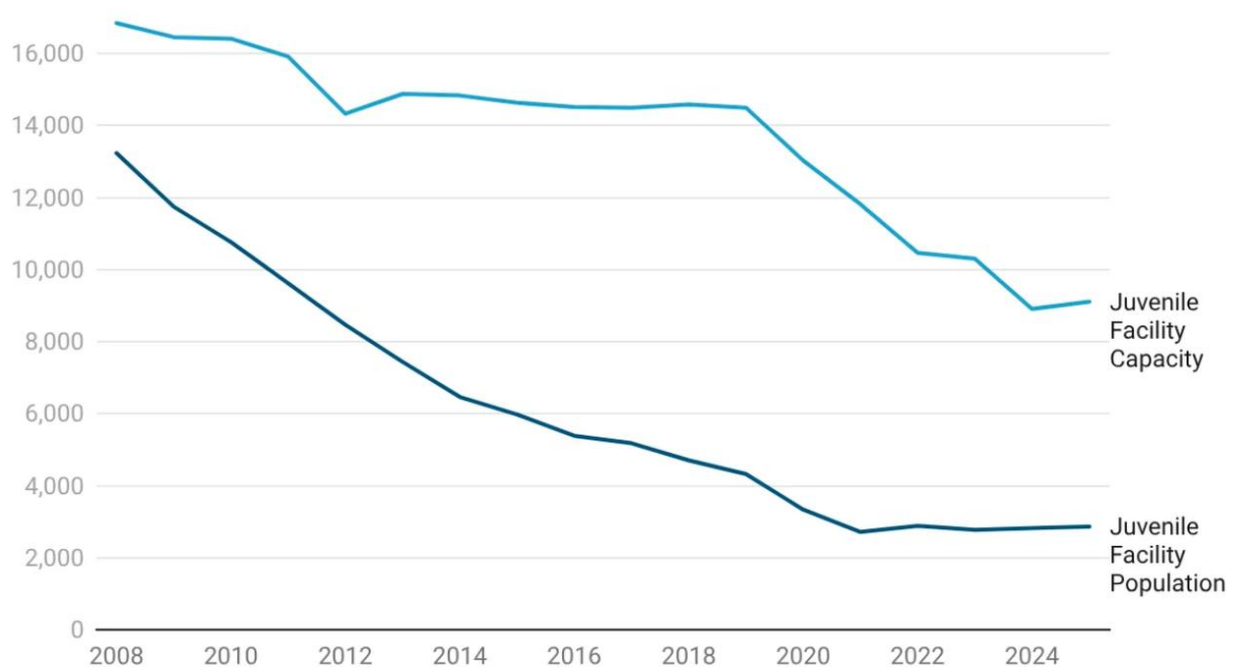
² A prime example is Los Angeles County. In 2021, the BSCC took the historic step of finding two Los Angeles juvenile halls “unsuitable for the confinement of minors” (BSCC, 2021). Now, more than five years later, LA continues to flout state minimum standards (BSCC, 2026a). The county is now embroiled in lawsuits, including a one that culminated in a \$4 billion settlement for sexual abuse in LA juvenile halls, and it remains under threat of receivership or legal action by the Attorney General (DOJ, 2025; Ellis, 2026). Although BSCC’s unsuitability findings brought critical attention to conditions, they have failed to deliver safety for youth.



Background

California's juvenile justice system, whose history of confining youth and keeping them in deplorable conditions dates to the 19th century, has undergone massive changes in recent years. Beginning in the early 2000s, youth arrest rates began plummeting statewide, driving down the number of youth on probation and the number in locked facilities. This resulted in many youth facilities, built for the incarceration rates of the 1990s and 2000s, operating at a fraction of their capacity (Figure 1). Maintaining this sprawling, mostly empty system proved costly. In FY 2019-20, DJJ was spending more than \$300,000 per youth annually—all while fostering violence, retaining abusive staff, and providing inadequate care and services (DOF, 2026).³

Figure 1. Incarcerated youth population vs. juvenile facility capacity, 2008-2025



Source: BSCC, 2026; CJCJ, 2026.

³ This trend continues in local facilities today. Several county juvenile halls, including Marin, San Mateo, and Santa Clara's, now cost over a million dollars per youth annually (BSCC, 2026; CSO, 2026).



This combination of soaring costs, declining populations, and an onslaught of scandals prompted Governor Newsom, in May 2020, to announce plans to close DJJ. In September 2020, he signed Senate Bill 823 (SB 823, 2020), which outlined a strategy for shuttering all three state-run DJJ institutions and transitioning youth to county systems. Less than three years later, in mid-2023, DJJ closed and counties assumed full responsibility for administering juvenile justice.

To support this transition, state lawmakers allocated hundreds of millions in funding to counties. These funds were intended for the development of high-security, treatment-oriented spaces, termed Secure Youth Treatment Facilities (SYTFs), which serve youth who would previously have been committed to the state system. While legislators may have envisioned small, homelike camps or ranches devoted to high-needs youth, counties invariably placed all SYTFs in existing juvenile halls. For the most part, juvenile halls are stark, jail-like, and designed for short-term detention. For youth facing years in confinement, the juvenile hall environment can be particularly distressing, leaving them with new trauma and stunting their progress towards rehabilitation.

Youth in SYTFs are part of a larger system. Roughly, 1,500 non-SYTF youth are currently detained in juvenile halls and 600 more in low-security camps and ranches (BSCC, 2026).⁴ These are youth who, because they were adjudicated for lesser offenses or are awaiting court processes, would have been detained locally even before DJJ's closure. Yet conditions for non-SYTF youth have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic and DJJ's closure. They are now experiencing more complex social dynamics, short staffing across living units, and the frustration of navigating shared resources.

⁴ As of March, 2026, the most recent data available, SYTFs across California housed roughly 660 youth out of a total of 2,700 in detention (BSCC, 2026).

Whether youth experience incarceration as a few nights in juvenile hall or years in an SYTF, they are entitled to safety, caring adults, and having their basic needs met. Yet facilities across the state are falling short. Who is holding juvenile facilities accountable?

A collection of state and local bodies are tasked with overseeing California's new youth detention system. No single agency has sole authority over local facilities nor unfettered investigative and disciplinary powers.

The primary oversight body is currently the Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC), a state board that, among other responsibilities, administers most of the state's criminal and juvenile justice grant programs, monitors all county jails, and develops minimum standards for jails and juvenile facilities. While BSCC's juvenile facility oversight has become more vigorous in recent years, including its decision to declare several of Los Angeles County's juvenile facilities "unsuitable," the Board remains hamstrung by its limited enforcement powers and probation-friendly leadership.

Another state agency, the Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR), was created amid DJJ's closure to guide local juvenile justice policy and ensure youth safety under the new system. Although OYCR is considerably smaller than the BSCC, it has played an outsized role in oversight. Currently, its responsibilities include raising awareness about youths' rights, writing in-depth reports on areas of concern (e.g., visitation), and receiving and responding to complaints through its Ombudsperson Division.

In addition to these two state-level bodies, each county has its own state-mandated monitoring entity, referred to as either a Juvenile Justice Commission (JJC) or Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission (JJDP). These commissions are meant to maintain active, diverse memberships and an energetic monitoring presence in county juvenile facilities. They are tasked with inspecting juvenile facilities at least once per year and issuing reports on their condition (WIC § 229). Unfortunately, JJCs in many counties serve as a rubber stamp, simply accepting probation department claims that facilities are safe and well-functioning. Though many individual JJC members are dedicated and well-meaning, most never receive formal training on inspecting a facility and uncovering mistreatment.

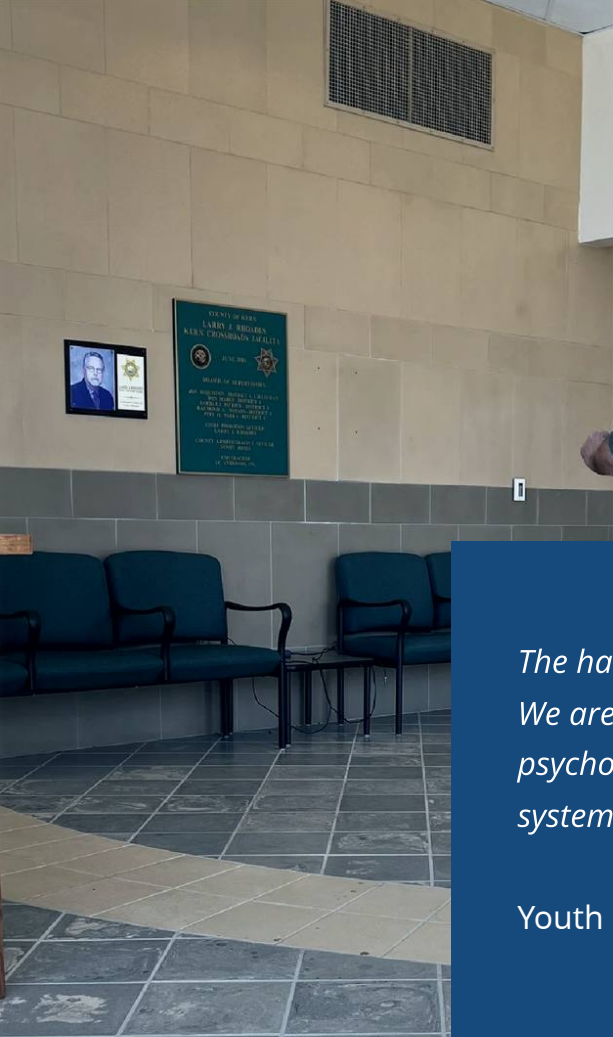
Before DJJ’s closure, BSCC had offered perfunctory guidance to JJC’s, but, since the creation of OYCR, there has been confusion over which agency is responsible for developing these materials and disseminating them to JJC’s. As a result, many commissions fail to hold their local facilities accountable.

Unfortunately, the harms seen in LA are present, to varying degrees, in counties throughout the state. Yet most instances of abuse and mistreatment remain hidden behind staff codes of silence, youth’s reasonable fear of retribution, and a haphazard approach to monitoring that fails to keep youth safe. Through our town halls and independent monitoring work, we hope to shed light on the true conditions facing youth in detention.

Table 1. California’s juvenile justice facilities at a glance

Number of juvenile halls*	50
Number of camps and ranches	38
Number of Secure Youth Treatment Facilities**	51
Number of youth incarcerated in juvenile halls (ADP March 2026)	1,490
Number of youth incarcerated in camps or ranches (ADP March 2026)	584
Number of youth incarcerated in camps or ranches (ADP March 2026)	659

Source: BSCC, 2026. *Includes two Special Purpose Juvenile Halls, which hold youth for fewer than 96 hours. **SYTFs are not standalone facilities. Most occupy space within an existing juvenile hall.



Our Town Halls

The hall is focused on punishment. It's more punitive, and it's more cold. We are still developing children. I think that really messes you up psychologically and prepares you for a life of being in and out of the system.

Youth participant

Our first town hall took place in March 2023. Since then, we have hosted virtual gatherings every few months, with as many as 80 participants attending each convening. Although we share synthesized notes from these meetings with a wider audience, we prioritize safety and anonymity in the meetings themselves by inviting only direct supporters of youth, not those affiliated with law enforcement agencies, including probation departments. This ensures that participants can speak freely about what they have observed in juvenile facilities without fear of retaliation. Over more than three years and 14 halls, we have welcomed hundreds of community members, formerly incarcerated youth, family members, attorneys, and advocates.

Town hall participants joined us from 25 of California's counties, representing nearly 90% of California's population. Figure 2 provides a summary of the geographies represented in these discussions, which covered some of the state's most and least populous locales, stretching from as far north as Humboldt County to as far south as Imperial County. All of the major regions were represented in our town halls, including the Bay Area, Central Coast, Central Valley, Inland Empire, Southern California, and Northern California.

Figure 2. Counties represented in our town halls



The town halls typically include a presentation from youth justice experts intended to spur discussion and action. For example, a town hall in 2023 featured a presentation on the Youth Bill of Rights (OYCR, 2016) and the new office of the ombudsperson; one in 2024 explained upcoming legislation and how it would affect youth in juvenile facilities; and a session in 2025 discussed the unique challenges facing young women and gender expansive youth in juvenile halls.

After each presentation, participants join a small group to discuss: 1) current conditions in juvenile facilities, and 2) strategies for improving those conditions. During these small-group discussions, participants take notes in a shared document. Groups typically share key findings in a brief presentation to the full group at the end of the meeting.

The findings and recommendations laid out in this report are drawn largely from these small-group notes and large-group presentations. With youth and participant safety in mind, we have omitted any information that could be used to identify a young person, their family members, or a youth-serving organization with ties to youth facilities.

Findings

Facilities are routinely putting youths' health, safety, and well-being at risk.

Isolation

Youth in juvenile facilities are subjected to long periods of isolation in their cells and offered little time outdoors. Town hall participants consistently raise concerns about youth spending most of their day alone in a cell. In some counties, out-of-room time is treated as a privilege that youth must earn, including facilities where youth are sent to their cells after dinner unless staff deems them eligible for evening leisure time. Youths' cells are typically small, concrete, and sparse. In some facilities, staff impose strict restrictions on the personal items and reading material youth may have in their cells. As a result, youth spend many waking hours locked in rooms with little to do.

Isolation violates youths' rights and runs counter to best practices. Research and best practices consistently show that young people require substantial time outdoors where they can exercise, play, see the sunshine, and get fresh air (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). Several recent studies found that time in nature improved youths' mood, attention, and self-esteem (Moll et al., 2002; Patchen et al., 2024). Another large-scale study found that youth who experience social isolation have higher rates of depression, more suicide attempts, and lower self-esteem (Hall-Lande et al., 2007). A recent study also found that isolation, even for brief periods, heightens youths' threat responses, which can increase anxiety and other mental health issues in the long term (Towner et al., 2024).

Staff Vacancies

In many facilities, these lengthy periods of isolation are the result of staff vacancies. When staff do not report to work or staff positions go unfilled, facilities are unable to monitor youth or ensure their safety. Town hall participants shared that facilities rely more on isolation when staffing numbers are low. Vacancies also prompt cuts to vital programs, including education and recreation, which require a more robust staff presence. Staff vacancies are a well-documented concern in many California juvenile facilities (Ellis, 2024; Henry, 2025; Lartey, 2026; Rinker, 2023). The issue emerged during the COVID-19

The SYTF was supposed to help us rebuild our lives, but instead it left us sitting around doing nothing. The funding that was meant for youth development never reached us, no real programs, no mental health support, not even basic hygiene without restrictions. It felt like the system cared more about paying staff than preparing us to return to our communities.

Youth participant

pandemic, but continues today. Los Angeles County leaders have cited staffing challenges as a factor in their current juvenile facility crisis (Sharp, 2024). In San Diego County, staff vacancies are a factor in the major safety and civil rights violations that prompted an investigation by the Attorney General (Gallegos, 2025). Despite a shortage of probation officers, town hall participants shared that many facilities have barred community-based service providers from entering their facilities to provide much-needed adult supervision and programming.

Research shows that adequate staffing is critical to the safety and well-being of both youth and staff in juvenile facilities (National PREA Resource Center, 2013; 2017; 2020; 2026). Insufficient staffing is linked to more frequent violence, increased staff burnout, and negative outcomes for youth, including higher rates of recidivism and reduced treatment progress (Youth Law Center, 2012).

Family Separation & Visitation

Incarcerated youth are routinely denied access to their family members. Town hall participants shared stories of probation staff who turned away family members arriving for a visit with their child, sometimes after traveling for hours to reach the facility. Staff in some facilities bar family members from visitation simply because they are wearing the wrong colored shirt, have numerous piercings, wear shorts instead of pants on a hot day, or arrive near the end of a visiting period. For some youth and families, these denials feel arbitrary or even biased. When applied fairly, many facilities' visiting policies still feel overly prescriptive. It can be difficult for loved ones to adhere to a long list of requirements, especially as they contend with long bus or car rides and limited visiting hours.

Denying youth access to their loved ones has a profound negative impact on their well-being. Research has shown that family visiting in a juvenile justice facility is associated with improved mental health, fewer behavioral write-ups, and improved academic performance (Monahan et al., 2011; Vera Institute of Justice, 2013; Young et al., 2019). A youth's long-term outcomes are vastly improved when families are present and ready to offer support. Placing undue restrictions on visiting strains these important relationships and leaves youth feeling disconnected when they return home.

Town hall participants also shared that, in some counties, youth are prohibited from hugging or touching their loved ones at any point during a visit. Participants explain that these restrictions are excruciating for both youth and their family members. Physical touch is an important way for young people to feel connection and comfort (Field, 2002). In these counties, youth may go months or years without this show of support, leaving youth lonely and undermining their mental health (Loudenback, 2026).⁵

Silenced youth

Despite the health and safety risks youth face during their incarceration, many are reluctant to speak out. The current grievance system is disjointed and discouraging. In some counties, youth are unsure about how to lodge a complaint. In others, they explain that the phone used to place calls to the Ombudsperson is located next to the guard station, or in shared spaces where others can hear, which discourages them from making a grievance call. Others tell us that staff are privy to youths' internal grievances and find ways to retaliate against them for filing a complaint. Moreover, even when youth are successful in submitting a complaint, they often receive no resolution. Without appropriate remedies or support, youth are left discouraged by the process and feeling as if their concerns do not matter.

Grievance processes that do not ensure full confidentiality put youth at risk. This includes the risk of direct staff retaliation, as well as the risk of problems going unreported. Best practices, instead, recommend that facility leaders ensure that staff do not retaliate against youth for submitting grievances and that all youth can file grievances confidentially (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

⁵ The HUGS Act (AB 1646, 2026), which was signed into law in September 2026 will be critical in addressing this issue. It requires juvenile facilities to allow contact visits between youth and their loved ones.

Counties are failing to provide youth with the services, education, healing, and transition support they need

Abysmal programming

Town hall participants report that youth spend much of their time in cells or in common areas watching television. They have little access to programming, physical activity, education, or rehabilitative services. This failure to provide structured support and activity runs counter to the intent and promise of the youth justice system (WIC § 202). Rather than helping youth prepare for their release, facilities are stalling youths' development, leaving them less equipped to navigate the outside world.

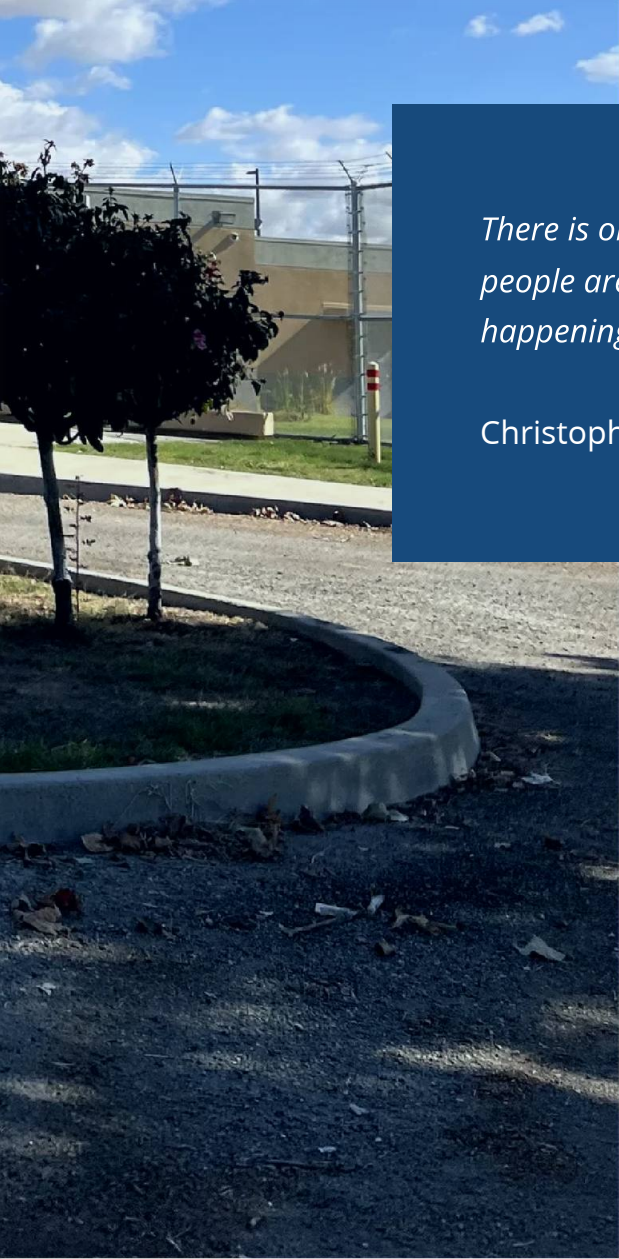
While idle time is harmful to anyone, it is particularly damaging to adolescents who are in a critical stage of social and emotional development. When young people are not engaged in programming, positive social activities, or education, their mental health suffers, they see increased risk of recidivism, and they are less likely to find a job or educational opportunity after release (Dmitrieva et al., 2012).

Town hall participants shared that programming shortages are most acute for girls and gender expansive youth, particularly those in SYTFs. The population of girls and gender expansive youth in these facilities tends to be small, sometimes just one or two in a facility, so their programming needs are often overlooked. Instead, these youth spend significant time in their living unit or cells.

Educational failures

Educational programming in most California juvenile facilities is inadequate. Town hall participants shared that facility high schools rely heavily on worksheets, frequently cancel class, and run uncommonly short school days. In some facilities, probation staff are placed in the





There is obvious tension between the [educational] rights that our young people are entitled to under the color and letter of the law and what is actually happening on the ground.

Christopher Middleton, Staff Attorney at the Youth Law Center

in the classroom and used to mete out discipline, which harms youths' connection with school and prevents them from focusing on classwork.

These challenges are exacerbated for youth with disabilities who often have the highest needs for services and support, and suffer most when those services are withheld (NCLD, 2023; Lambie & Randell, 2013; The Sentencing Project, 2023). Town hall participants explain that some facilities are ignoring youths' Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) and failing to provide the accommodations youth need to access school materials and engage in learning alongside their peers (Márquez Rosales, 2024).

With the closure of DJJ, a larger share of youth in juvenile facilities are over 18. This has required counties to expand their vocational and college offerings, but many are falling short by not prioritizing or investing in these courses. For example, town hall participants explain that computers and iPads, which are vital to participating in community college classes and completing assignments, are routinely withheld from students as a form of group punishment.

Community excluded

Probation leadership and staff are barring many community leaders and programs from entering juvenile facilities and providing programming. Town hall participants have shared that some probation staff are subjecting community-based program staff to months-long vetting processes or outright denying them without an explanation. In some counties, probation allows organizations in, but places strict limits

on the materials they may use, making it difficult for them to follow a curriculum. Town hall participants theorized that probation staff are excluding community leaders out of concern that outsiders might raise the alarm about conditions in youth facilities.

Best practices indicate that community involvement is a critical element in supporting youth during incarceration and after release (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). Without access to positive community leaders and other adults who can speak to the challenges of navigating life after reentry, youth are left without credible and supportive role models during their incarceration. Research shows that this kind of mentorship reduces recidivism and improves youths' outcomes after their release (Dubois, 2024).

Failed reentry

Town hall participants tell us that youth who have spent long periods of time incarcerated feel unprepared for their transition home. Youth leave the facilities without having received the educational and rehabilitative programming they need for the next stage of their lives. Moreover, they describe feeling like outsiders in their own community. Many are left without a clear reentry plan, frayed family relationships, and limited knowledge of the community-based organizations that can help them get back on their feet. In particular, community-based organizations express frustration with having to wait until youth are released to build rapport. The widespread restrictions on community organizations' access to facilities postpone important trust-building with youth and create challenges for youth seeking support in the difficult first months after release.

Best practices dictate that reentry planning should begin when youth enter a facility and continue through their release (Council of State Governments, 2015; OJJDP, 2017). This planning should closely involve family members who will be the primary source of support when youth return home (Council of State Governments, 2015; Performance Based Standards, 2019). Many county facilities are neglecting these crucial steps, leaving youth unprepared and unconnected when they are released. This puts them at higher risk of recidivism and, in some cases, ensures that they will return to the justice system as adults.

Recommendations

They used to have family visits where we could see them in person, not separated by glass or anything. Families used to be able to bring food to us, too. They don't allow that anymore. There needs to be more of a focus on family connection and healing in general.

Youth participant

In each of our 14 town halls, we devoted time to problem-solving, planning, and dreaming out loud. Participants reflected on the challenges youth were facing in their own county's juvenile facility and in facilities across the state, then discussed potential remedies and real solutions already in place in some counties. These solutions, which ranged from major reform ideas to proven local advocacy strategies, generally sought to either 1) improve conditions for incarcerated youth or 2) reduce the number of youth who are incarcerated. We reviewed dozens of pages of solutions and distilled them down into the following five bold recommendations.

1. Strengthen and better coordinate the system for monitoring facilities.

The state must unify inspections, standards-setting, and enforcement within a single independent agency, ideally the Office of Youth and Community Restoration, fully separate from probation. This body must have authority to act against counties that violate state standards, including closing facilities that fail to ensure youth safety, and monitors must have unfettered access for unannounced inspections and grievance follow-up.

2. Increase access to youth facilities for family members, oversight bodies, and community-based service providers.

Facilities must retrain staff and revise policies that place undue restrictions on family and

community contact. State lawmakers should codify the rights of families and community organizations to connect with and support incarcerated youth, including a requirement that facilities offer contact visits.

3. Allow the community to fill the gaps that exist in programming and reentry.

Across California, community-based organizations have shown willingness to support youth through mentorship, healing circles, and other programming. Facilities must welcome these leaders and expand their role, as they are critical partners in supporting youth and addressing staffing shortages.

4. Give family, community, and directly impacted young people a meaningful voice in decision-making and oversight.

For too long, those invested in preserving the state's broken detention system have dominated juvenile justice decision-making. It is time for outside experts to set the course. Counties and the state must expand opportunities for impacted youth and families to serve on Juvenile Justice Commissions, Juvenile Justice Coordinating Councils, Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commissions, Board of State and Community Corrections committees, and other local juvenile justice bodies.

5. Align the minimum standards for youth facilities with best practices and current research in youth development.

This must include prohibiting pepper spray, which has been shown to cause lasting physical and mental health harm. Secure Youth Treatment Facilities, which house youth for years at a time, should be governed by separate regulations prioritizing robust programming, job training, education, adequate food, and facilities suited to an older youth population.

SYTF needs to provide more opportunities for youth who struggle with behavioral problems. Don't put them in situations where they can't develop professional skills or access the rehabilitative services they need. By taking away programming and opportunities as a means of corrective action, you miss opportunities to address the problems and then send them back into the community without the skills they need to succeed. Punishment shouldn't be the revocation of critical services.

Youth participant



Conclusion

All these youth are going to come home. Do you want them to come out all resentful and angry and not having learned anything? Or do you want them to come back healed and in a better mind space with a better skill set?

Youth participant

Three years ago, California took an extraordinary step: it closed DJJ, ending a brutal chapter in the state's history. Yet in transitioning to an entirely county-based system, California failed to heed the lessons of DJJ's downfall—namely, that large, congregate facilities are inherently at odds with rehabilitation. Instead, counties scrambled to build "mini DJJs" within their own oversized juvenile halls. The results were immediately clear: youth felt isolated, fearful, and disconnected from their communities, all while being denied the treatment, care, and education they desperately need.

It is crucial that we get this right. The rest of the country is watching California's experiment in deinstitutionalization, and the future of other youth prison closures rests on our success. Decades of experience have shown that state-run institutions, no matter how many safeguards are put in place, will always fail—yet California's replacement system is far from a success. The state has simply traded one dangerous, ineffective approach for another. California must act now to ensure all incarcerated youth are kept safe, cared for, and given the support they need. At minimum, this means strengthening facility oversight, expanding family access, bridging the divide between facilities and community leaders, giving directly impacted people a voice in decision-making, and setting high standards for how youth are treated during incarceration.

Our work holding counties accountable has just begun. As we enter our fourth year of monitoring, CJCJ, CAYCJ, and our many partners commit to serving as unofficial watchdogs of the state's juvenile facilities. In this moment of historic transition, we will keep collecting data, meeting with community members and families, and uplifting the voices and struggles of youth.

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Some SYTF-track youth in our juvenile halls are waiting years to be sentenced. It's imperative that we ensure their access to meaningful rehabilitative services starts when their incarceration begins...While improvements have been made, it took too long to get where we are now, and there is still a glaring difference between what is offered to these youth and what is offered at SYTF.

Participant from a community-based organization

