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New Report: California's Youth Correctional Institutions Jeopardize Health Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

From overcrowding and unsanitary buildings to a lack of access to quality health care, these facilities are breeding grounds for infection.

CALIFORNIA – A new report from the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice looks at the dangers of life for youth in California's Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) facilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has ignited discussions on public health and the detrimental impacts of incarceration. However, leaders have largely overlooked youth who are housed in overcrowded, decaying, and unsanitary state-run institutions where they lack access to quality health care.

"Amid the rise of COVID-19, DJJ's patterns of neglect place youth, staff, and our communities at greater risk than ever before," says CJCJ Policy Analyst and **report co-author Maureen Washburn**. "We call on DJJ to immediately begin releasing young people from these dangerous facilities, starting with youth who are predisposed to complications from COVID-19." DJJ facilities, which are located in San Joaquin, Ventura, and Amador counties, lack effective medical care and house large numbers of youth together.



CJCJ Executive Director Daniel Macallair continues, "DJJ is already a dangerous system that crowds youth together. Conditions are unsanitary. Staff provide limited medical care. Youth are far from home and grappling with the trauma of incarceration. This threatens the well-being of every youth in the institution." These critical flaws in the state's outdated juvenile justice system have fueled calls for reform in decades past, and now require urgent action during this pandemic. Among the report's findings:

DJJ maintains dangerously large youth populations in unsanitary facilities, escalating the risk of infectious disease. DJJ's three correctional facilities violate modern standards that cap facility populations at 150 youth. California confines 270 youth at N.A. Chaderjian, 235 at Ventura, and 171 at O.H. Close youth correctional facilities. Unsanitary common

areas and the use of a long-debunked open dormitory layout in two DJJ facilities make these institutional environments ripe for transmission of the deadly virus.

Inadequate access to health care places youth at risk: “Youth at DJJ are three times more likely to be referred for outside medical treatment [than those in local juvenile facilities], which may reflect the severity of injuries and ailments youth experience at DJJ,” according to the report. “Youth who remain in DJJ’s own medical system experience long wait times, misdiagnosis, and frequent dismissal of serious symptoms.”

Isolation and long distances from home harm youth: Half of youth at DJJ are over 100 miles from their home communities, with limited opportunities to connect with loved ones. Youth are isolated an average of 13 hours alone in their room each day, according to data from October 2018 through September 2019.

“COVID-19 has shown the pitfalls of the state’s juvenile justice system,” says CJCJ Communications and Policy Analyst and **report co-author Renee Menart**. “California must reduce our reliance on these crowded and dangerous institutions and release young people before it is too late.” Despite DJJ’s failures, and youth populations at less than half of its capacity, the agency’s budget is slated to soar by \$100 million over the next two years, costing Californians \$290 million total or a record-setting \$336,000 per youth annually.

A youth advocate who was confined at DJJ makes it clear: “DJJ failed to meet my needs by not providing necessary and vital treatment.” Advocates across the nation are calling for the release of youth from lock-ups in light of the risks presented by COVID-19. This report expands on immediate calls to action by outlining strategies for lasting reform. This includes recommendations to reduce DJJ’s population, establish independent monitoring, invest in community-based programs, and ultimately close California’s dangerous DJJ facilities. Other findings include:

Youth experience frequent violence at DJJ: Approximately 31 youth for every hundred at DJJ experienced a violent incident, including sexual assaults and beatings, each month from October 2018 to September 2019.

Suicidal incidents among youth at DJJ have doubled since 2015: DJJ reported 421 instances of suicidality from September 2018 through August 2019, compared to 213 instances at the end of the Farrell lawsuit from September 2015 through August 2016.

Most youth that are sent to DJJ return to the justice system: DJJ’s failing approach to rehabilitation results in 76 percent of youth being rearrested, 50 percent reconvicted of a new offense, and 29 percent returned to DJJ or a state prison within three years of release.

About the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice: CJCJ is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is to reduce society’s reliance on incarceration as a solution to social problems. CJCJ provides direct services, technical assistance, and policy analysis. For more information about this topic or to schedule an interview, please contact CJCJ Communications at (415) 621-5661 x. 103 or cjcjmedia@cjca.org.