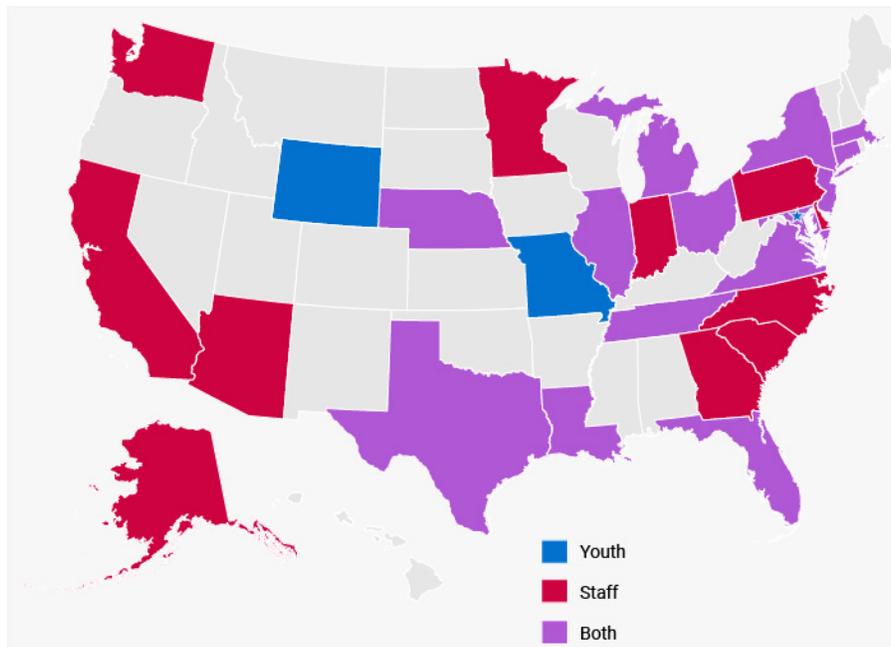




INCARCERATED CHILDREN DURING THE PANDEMIC



COVID-19 Diagnoses in Juvenile Facilities: 119 youth, 259 staff as of April 24.

Source: The Sentencing Project

A Louisiana mother [worries](#) about her son, who is being incarcerated 23 hours a day with seven others in a dorm room at a facility where coronavirus mitigation measures have eliminated all education and vocational preparation.

An incarcerated 14-year-old in Maryland is “pacing and praying” since learning a staff member at his facility had been infected by COVID-19.

And in Los Angeles, incarcerated youth are still being required to shower in groups as large as seven and sleep in closely spaced beds, despite concerns that such measures can hasten the spread of the coronavirus.

Juvenile detention and incarceration can serve a variety of legitimate purposes; exposing children to a deadly pandemic is not one of them. As most Americans retreat to their homes to reduce the odds of contacting coronavirus, many of the nation’s 45,000 incarcerated juveniles are continuing to live in crowded conditions conducive to the spread of the disease.

Youth justice advocates are fighting back. Led by the Youth First Initiative, a campaign to end youth incarceration, activists in more than 30 states have sent letters to governors and other officials about youth incarcerated during the pandemic. Signers include National Education Policy Center partner, the Southern Poverty Law Center. A #FreeOurYouth campaign student day of action is planned for May 7th.

The Initiative and the campaign are calling for:

- Releasing all youths who are not a substantial safety risk to others. (More than 70% of incarcerated juveniles are not serving time for violent crimes.)
- Removing all youth with coronavirus symptoms or chronic illnesses such as diabetes that put them at greater risk of suffering severe illness with the disease.
- Focusing on keeping youth out of the prison system.

“The current situation inside of youth prisons around the country is making it clear that we need to invest in and strengthen the safety support nets for youth and families in the community,” says Hernán Carvente-Martinez, National Youth Partnership Strategist for the Youth First Initiative.

All programming, educational activities, recreation, and anything that might be helpful to young people in facilities has been completely halted and/or disrupted as a result of this crisis. More importantly, the number of young people who are testing positive continues to increase as infected staff regularly come in and out of facilities as they come in for work. Prior to this pandemic, it was clear that prisons were not adequate places to offer support to youth and families. And all this crisis has highlighted is the need for society to rethink the ways in which we support young people, so that there is no need to put them in a prison that might one day become a death trap. Our youth need love, support, and opportunity, and all of that should be provided in the community, not in a prison.

Some states have already taken one or more of the recommended actions. For instance, Connecticut is reducing the population of the state’s two detention centers. Colorado has been releasing youth early. Four California juvenile facilities are now closed to new intakes. Maryland recently announced the release of 200 youths for health reasons. And Georgia’s Department of Juvenile Justice is releasing nearly 100 youth to limit exposure to the virus.

However, thousands of children remain in unsafe situations that expose them—and the employees who work at their facilities—to heightened risk of infection.

So far, [more than 100 youth](#) have been infected, according to the [Sentencing Project](#), a non-profit organization that advocates for alternatives to incarceration and in support of sentencing policy reforms, with particular attention to unjust racial disparities and practices. Due to such racial disparities in policing and sentencing, young people of color are disproportionately at risk of infection in youth prisons. For example, black youth are about five times more likely than whites to be committed or detained to juvenile facilities, in part due to a “school to prison” pipeline created by discipline disparities in public schools.

“Systemic violence and disparate school discipline policies hinder equitable, just, and safe schooling,” write NEPC Fellows [Janelle Scott](#) and [Tina Trujillo](#) of UC Berkeley, [Michele S. Moses](#) of CU Boulder, and [Kara S. Finnigan](#) of the University of Rochester, along with Darrell D. Jackson of the University of Wyoming College of Law in a [policy brief](#).

They also restrict access to social opportunities and civil liberties. Research demonstrates that Black and Latinx students experience police violence and school discipline unequally. Punitive educational and criminal justice policies disproportionately affect students, families, and communities of color, as well as the teachers and schools that serve them.

For more information on the #FreeOurYouth campaign, go to: <https://www.nokidsinprison.org/freeouryouth/>

NEPC Resources on Equity and Social Justice

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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