



The Dangers of Detention: the Possible Consequences of Housing Status Offenders in Jail

It is a common perception in the juvenile justice system that placing a status offender in detention is a last resort that, while perhaps not ideal, does not necessarily carry negative consequences for the child and therefore should be made available to jurisdictions as an option. However, research over the last few years has demonstrated that the detention of a child may actually carry dangerous consequences, and negatively impact their future life opportunities. As such, jurisdictions around the country have recognized that detention should only be used when the youth poses a threat to public safety, and have modified their juvenile justice systems accordingly. The dangers of detention include:

Detaining a youth can actually increase their chance of recidivating upon release, or having future contact and penetrating deeper into the juvenile justice system.

A Justice Policy Institute Study found that “the experience of incarceration is the *most significant factor* in increasing the odds of recidivism” for a child. In other words, the greatest predictor as to whether a child would come into future contact with the juvenile justice system was whether they had been in detention in the past. This predictor can be attributed to a number of factors. For one, congregating delinquent youth together negatively affects their behavior and increases their chances of re-offending. Researchers call this process “peer deviancy training”, and report significantly higher levels of substance abuse, school difficulties, delinquency, violence and adjustment difficulties in adulthood for those treated in a peer group setting. In addition, detention itself can pull youth deeper into the juvenile and criminal justice system, as studies demonstrate that “detained youth are more likely to be referred to court, see their case progress through the system to adjudication and disposition, have a formal disposition filed against them, and receive a more serious disposition” than peers who are in community based programming with similar offenses.

Detention puts youth at greater risk of depression and self-harm, and in particular may exacerbate existing mental health issues of juveniles.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reports that 11,000 youth engage in more than 17,000 acts of suicidal behavior in the juvenile justice system

annually. In addition, at least a third of detention centers are overcrowded, breeding an “environment of chaos and violence for young people.” Many detention centers lack effective mental health services and rely on practices such as confinement and isolation, which increases depression and self-harm.

Detention reduces a child’s chances at academic success and future employment, negatively impacting future life opportunities even upon release.

By interrupting a youth’s education, detention can reduce the chance that a youth will successfully complete school upon release. A Department of Education study showed that 43 percent of incarcerated youth receiving remedial education services in detention did not return to school after release, and another 16 percent enrolled in school but dropped out after only five months. Research also shows that youth who spend time in secure custody are less likely to complete high school, avoid re-arrest, find employment, and form stable families. They are also more likely to abuse drug and alcohol. These negative future indicators are a result of both the fact that detention “may actually interrupt and delay the normal pattern of ‘aging out’ since detention disrupts their natural engagement with families, school and work” and that it actually removes youth from treatment opportunities, school and community ties and supports that would help facilitate a successful transition into adulthood.

Detention is expensive.

In addition to its social costs, detention is also expensive. The cost of building, financing, and operating a single detention bed costs the public between \$1.25 and \$1.5 million over a twenty year period of time. In New York City, one day in detention (\$385) costs 15 times what it does to send a youth to a detention alternative. (\$25) Such a ratio is not uncommon throughout the United States.

Information taken from: *The Dangers of Detention: The Impact of Incarcerating Youth in Detention and Other Secure Facilities*, Barry Holman and Jason Ziedenberg

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http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/06-11_REP_DangersOfDetention_JJ.pdf