



HEALTHY • HOUSED • EDUCATED • SAFE

YouthAction Community Leadership Course Youth Justice in NYC

Citizens' Committee for Children's (CCC) YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC) is a youth advocacy training program for high school students from New York City's public and private schools. CCC is an independent child advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that every child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. Since 1999, YouthAction NYC has introduced aspiring young leaders to civic engagement and advocacy opportunities.

During this ten-week program, YCLC participants meet once a week after school to research and analyze youth issues, and to develop policy and budgetary recommendations to improve the lives of young people in New York City. This semester, the YCLC focused on the juvenile justice system. Students interviewed experts and advocates, conducted site visits to service providers, and heard from formerly incarcerated youth about their experiences. The following is a summary of the group's findings and recommendations.

Findings and Recommendations

Placement Facilities for Youth

Young people under the age of 18 who have been deemed a danger to the community by a Family Court judge may be placed in residential Close to Home facilities where they can receive schooling, counseling, and other services that will help them transition safely back into their communities. However, some adolescents who commit serious felonies may be tried in adult criminal court and sentenced to a state prison term. These youth may be sent to Adolescent Offender Facilities, which are operated by the Department of Corrections, the same department that oversees adult facilities, and do not provide the types of age-appropriate supports and services as Close to Home facilities.

- We **support** Close to Home detention and placement facilities and **recommend** that they receive additional resources for mental health, mentoring and aftercare services.
- We **recommend** that adolescent offenders be sentenced to secure facilities run by the Office of Children and Family Services instead of by the Department of Corrections, and that these facilities provide age-appropriate rehabilitative services and restorative justice practices.
- We **recommend** that government officials work with and educate their communities to provide welcoming supports for young people returning from placement and to be supportive of any new placement facilities being built in local neighborhoods.

Solitary Confinement

Because solitary confinement has severe negative effects on adolescent brain development and is detrimental to physical and mental health, New York State law does not allow youth under the age of 18 to be placed in solitary confinement. However, we learned that some adolescent offender facilities in New York do use separation units for disciplinary confinement for youth under 18. We believe this is equivalent to solitary confinement and is extremely dangerous and traumatizing. In addition, young adults 18 and over who are serving sentences in state prisons are not protected from the harms of solitary confinement, as prisons in New York allow for inmates to be isolated for up to 23 hours a day for months at a time.



HEALTHY • HOUSED • EDUCATED • SAFE

- We **recommend** that adolescent offender separation units no longer be used for disciplinary confinement and that no young person under the age of 18 endure any form of prolonged isolation.
- We **recommend** that inmates in local jails and state prisons should never be placed in solitary confinement for more than 15 days.

Youthful Offender Law

New York's Youthful Offender law allows youth under the age of 19 an opportunity to have their criminal record sealed and to be eligible for reduced prison sentences. This allows them to be able to more easily gain employment, housing, and to further their education because they will not have a lifelong criminal record. However, we know that a young person's brain is still developing well into their 20's, causing them to be impulsive and susceptible to peer pressure and also capable of great personal change.

- We **recommend** expanding the Youthful Offender law for young adults up to age 25.

Criminalizing Young Children

Children as young as 7 years old may be arrested and prosecuted as juvenile delinquents in Family Court. However, once a child has come into contact with law enforcement and/or the juvenile justice system there is a greater likelihood that they will re-offend, and that the offense will be more serious. Young children exhibiting troubling behavior should receive interventions that address possible trauma, learning disabilities, family dysfunction, and other socio-emotional issues and should not be exposed to justice system involvement.

- We **recommend** that New York State end the prosecution of children under 12 years old and strengthen social services, educational supports, and physical and mental health care for young children.

Bias and Inequity in the System

Black and Latino youth are overwhelmingly over-represented in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This is due to many factors, including the implicit bias of school personnel and police officers, the over policing of neighborhoods of color, and a social services system that is inadequate to meet the socio-emotional needs of children and families experiencing poverty.

- We **recommend** that schools in New York teach young people about their rights with respect to interactions with law enforcement and the court system.
- We **recommend** that New York City and State incorporate the voices and ideas of formerly incarcerated youth when creating and implementing changes to the justice system.
- We **recommend** the use of restorative justice practices in all New York schools to reduce school suspensions and arrests, which disproportionately impact young people of color and fuel the school-to-prison pipeline.