

Youth Justice Milwaukee: Calls for transformation of the Wisconsin youth justice system as the state acknowledges it will not meet the July 2021 deadline to close Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake prisons

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MILWAUKEE—Youth Justice Milwaukee reiterated its demand for the closure of Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake youth prisons, as they are abusive, dangerous facilities that are incapable of rehabilitating young people. The coalition first called for closure in 2016—two years before Act 185 passed.

In 2018, Act 185 sought to close Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake by creating county and state-operated secure facilities and expanding the Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center, which collectively *increased* the number of secure placements beyond the number needed. Today, that disparity is even greater as the population at the two prisons continues to decline.

At the same time, conditions in these two facilities are worsening, even under a court-ordered consent decree. The most recent monitoring report conducted in December of 2020 cited “significant concerns” with the provision of education and lack of engagement with youth, which the monitor stated is “obviously impacting other outcome measures such as the use of restraints and isolation, increased fights, assaults and other behavior incidents that have long-term impacts on issues such as the overall facility climate, safety, and length of stay.”[i]

The state has eliminated the use of pepper spray to impose control over and incapacitate youth, an abusive practice that should never have been used in the first place.

Youth Justice Milwaukee urges Governor Evers, Secretary Carr, and the state legislature in the strongest terms to act now to transform our state's youth justice system by focusing on healing trauma and supporting youth and families as they address the needs that contributed to their involvement in the criminal legal system.

This transformation should eliminate correctional settings as placements for youth; limit out of home placements to only short-term stabilization and respite needs; scale up sustainable resources for prevention, including mentoring, employment opportunities, healthy recreation, enrichment, and wellness; and support counties' efforts to create a continuum of high-quality community-based services for youth and families. These investments will cost considerably less than the current outdated, oversized system that results in a two-thirds re-offense rate and has cost taxpayers many millions of dollars in lawsuits for injuries and wrongful deaths.

A new path forward in Wisconsin must also include a comprehensive revision of Chapter 938, the Juvenile Justice Code. This punitive legislative framework was put into place during the 1990s when there was an apocryphal criminalization of Black children as "superpredators". This code and related statutes allow children as young as age 10 to be charged and convicted as adults and has resulted in Wisconsin having among the worst racial disparities in the country: Black children in Wisconsin are 16.2 times more likely to be incarcerated than White children^[ii].

The people of Wisconsin should not have to wait any longer for action to protect our children and make our communities safer.

Youth Justice Milwaukee encourages members of the public to attend and offer comments at the upcoming meeting of the Governor's Juvenile Justice Commission on **Tuesday, February 9, 2021**, at which the DOC will make a presentation about these two prisons. For more information, [click here](#).

For details on Youth Justice Milwaukee's recommended alternatives to sending youth to Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake Juvenile Prisons, [click here](#).