

# The effectiveness of juvenile rehabilitation before brute punishment

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



Troves of empirical data present juvenile rehabilitation as a preferable alternative to juvenile incarceration. This observation is largely due to the psychological, societal, and economic impacts that confirm juvenile rehabilitation is more cost effective and beneficial than brute punishment (McCarthy, Schiraldi, & Shark, 2016). Utilizing juvenile rehabilitation is a potential solution to reducing crime and prison populations because rehabilitation stops young people from participating in destructive habits that can lead to them becoming career criminals. This approach is logical, utilitarian, and economic because it

- addresses the causes and effects that lead to prolonged criminal behavior;
- provides opportunities that help juveniles re-enter society in a state where they can succeed; and
- allows funds to be spent on programs that are cheaper than maintaining rising prison costs.

For these reasons, it is imperative that policymakers devote their resources to improving rehabilitative programs and helping juveniles before it is too late.

## **Impact**

### **Psychological**

Juveniles that begin offending at early ages are likely to engage in delinquent behavior into early adulthood, however, 40 to 60 percent of juveniles “age-out” naturally as they end adolescence (National Institute of Justice, n. d.). Researchers at Carnegie Mellon found that “incarcerating

juveniles may delay the normal process of ‘aging-out’ since detention disrupts natural engagements with family, friends, and school” (Holman & Ziedenberg). As confinement centers are reflective of adult style prisons in structure and practice, they lack the essentials that are required for healthy adolescent development (McCarthy, Schiraldi, & Shark, 2016).

Data from the Oregon Social Learning Center shows that grouping at-risk youths in confined spaces, such as detention centers, fosters “negative changes toward antisocial behavior, affiliation with antisocial peers, and identification with deviancy” (Holman & Ziedenberg). Detention centers are also considered a “dumping ground” for adolescents with mental illnesses. This is because “at least a third of detention centers are overcrowded, breeding an environment of violence and chaos for young people. Far from receiving effective treatment, young people with behavioral health problems simply get worse in detention, not better” (Holman & Ziedenberg). Aptly put, incarcerated adolescents cannot reasonably re-enter society without having first received any effective psychological care.

## **Societal**

In sociology and criminology there is a concept known as labelling theory, which asserts that individuals will behave in a way reflective of how society labels them (Crossman, 2018). Putting this concept into practice yields what the aforementioned data has presented: adolescents are likely to exhibit delinquent behavior because that is what society expects them to do. Incarceration poses a danger to these youths because it prolongs their

exposure and duration to negative settings, which can increase the chance of future incarcerations (Holman & Ziedenberg).

Public opinion is a tool used by lawmakers when formulating policy, largely because reforms are based off of popular demand (Nagin, Piquero, Scott, & Steinberg, 2013). As taxpayers are a major source of funding for public institutions, public opinion regarding juvenile delinquency is important when drafting legislation. Essentially, “policymakers that are concerned with public opinion should consider policies grounded in rehabilitation, and more lenient on punitive reforms in response to high-profile juvenile crimes” (Nagin, Piquero, Scott, & Steinberg, 2013). When one person in society loses, everyone else loses in some sense as well. This facet should be an impetus for implementing laws rooted in a utilitarian approach to addressing the juvenile justice system.

## **Economic**

In 2015, a report by the Justice Policy Institute reported 34 states spent roughly \$100,000 to incarcerate one juvenile (McCarthy, Schiraldi, & Shark, 2016). Because incarceration does not reduce recidivism, 70 to 80 percent of youth are rearrested within two to three years and the financial costs of confinement increase yearly (McCarthy, Schiraldi, & Shark, 2016). The National Research Council, a leading research organization, has concluded from a 2013 report that “well designed community programs are more likely to reduce recidivism and improve well-being than institutionalization” (McCarthy, Schiraldi, & Shark, 2016).

The Department of Education found 43 percent of juveniles receiving educational services while confined did not return to school after release, and 16 percent re-enrolled in school but dropped-out after five months (Holman & Ziedenberg). High school dropouts additionally face less employment opportunities and little to no income. The National Bureau of Economic Research states that incarcerating youth reduced work time over the next decade by 25 to 30 percent, while other researchers contend “incarceration could change an individual into a less stable employee” (Holman & Ziedenberg). As well, communities with high levels of incarceration face more negative economic effects as a whole than those with differing approaches to crime (Holman & Ziedenberg). As the financial benefits of intervention programs outweigh the costs, it is clear reforms should be made in the direction of this strategy (National Institute of Justice, n. d.).

## **Solutions**

As the last section highlighted, there are myriad reasons why juvenile rehabilitation is a preferable alternative to that of incarceration. The psychological, societal, and economic impacts of incarceration put communities in more jeopardy in the long-run than they do in preventing further instances of crime. Instead of governments funding these institutions, more attention and resources should be devoted to private and nonprofit organizations aimed at restoring, rather than destroying, young offenders. One example of an organization committed to this effort is the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. This group utilizes an approach

known as the Balanced and Restorative Justice Model which “urges communities to teach youth who commit crimes that their greatest obligations are to their victims over and above the state” (Get Legal, n. d.).

Additionally, this organization specializes in treatment that: address addiction and self-defeating behaviors, provide juveniles with vocational training programs, expose the negative impacts of gangs, and help juveniles appreciate and respect others that do not look or act like them (Get Legal, n. d.). This approach is just one of many that helps juveniles overcome their struggles and help them grow to be responsible adults. Governments can re-invest funds into these programs and organizations, and the returns in human capital and economic impact will be well worth the investment.