

The ACLU of Illinois, the Children and Family Justice Center (CFJC) at the Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, the Illinois Justice Project, and the John Howard Association of Illinois issued the following statement in response to Gov. J.B. Pritzker's announcement regarding the transformation of the state's youth prisons to smaller, regional residential centers:

We commend Gov. Pritzker, Lt. Gov. Stratton and IDJJ Director Mueller on this important reform of the juvenile justice system in Illinois. They recognize that a prison cell is the last place a young person should be forced to live.

Prisons punish and keep youth in captivity, but they make rehabilitation less likely, cause trauma and make it far more difficult for young people to be successful when they return to our communities. In short, youth prisons are a detriment to public safety.

Over the last two decades, the Illinois juvenile justice system gradually moved away from one that was strictly punitive with prisons warehousing more than 2,100 teenagers into one that today imprisons just over 100 youth. While the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice has worked to abandon the punitive practices used by adult prisons, the youth prisons today remain just that - prisons.

As our communities struggle with violence, our strategies and spending have to be more effective, and the transformation of the juvenile system is another positive step in that direction.

We commend Gov. Pritzker's commitment to increase investment in community-based wraparound support, intervention services, and reentry programs for justice-involved youth. By investing more in the communities most impacted by disinvestment, racism, and violence, we will demonstrate our love of all of our children.

We look forward to working with the Pritzker-Stratton administration on the development of this next important downsizing of the youth prison system. Our goal remains a juvenile system without prisons but with a robust offering of rehabilitative services and opportunities for youth in their home communities.

The following is a statement by Julie L. Biehl, Director of the CFJC:

Racial disparities are widespread in the nation's adult and juvenile legal systems, and that, unfortunately, includes Illinois. White youth are the minority and Black youth are the majority in Illinois prisons today. Blacks are less than 15 percent of the state's population but more than 70 percent of the youth prison population. This racial injustice is an emergency.

Our goal must be an end to the imprisonment of all children. No children of any race should be in prison cells surrounded by barbed wire and unable to visit their families. Illinois has come a long way in the reform of the juvenile justice, but more is left to be done.