

# ***BROKEN BRIDGES***

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**How Juvenile Placements Cut Off Youth from  
Communities and Successful Futures**



**Juveniles  
for Justice**  
a project of Juvenile Law Center

**Juvenile  
Law Center**

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## How Juvenile Placements Cut Off Youth from Communities and Successful Futures

**A publication of Juveniles for Justice & Juvenile Law Center. Youth advocates in Juveniles for Justice created this publication during the 2017-2018 youth advocacy program year, in collaboration with Juvenile Law Center staff.**

**Juveniles for Justice, Class of 2017-2018:** Alex, Anahi, Ange, Bree, Don, Hid, Jaheem, Lilly, Nigee, Qilah

**Youth Advocacy Team:** Cathy Moffa, MSS, MLSP; Marcía Hopkins, MSW; Raina Satija, MSS

**Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity and opportunity for youth in the foster care and justice systems.**

Founded in 1975, Juvenile Law Center is the first non-profit, public interest law firm for children in the country. We fight for youth through litigation, appellate advocacy and submission of *amicus* (friend-of-the-court) briefs, policy reform, public education, training, consulting, and strategic communications. Widely published and internationally recognized as leaders in the field, Juvenile Law Center has substantially shaped the development of law and policy on behalf of youth. We strive to ensure that laws, policies, and practices affecting youth advance racial and economic equity and are rooted in research, consistent with children's unique developmental characteristics, and reflective of international human rights values. For more information about Juvenile Law Center's work, visit [www.jlc.org](http://www.jlc.org).

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# PREFACE

At Juvenile Law Center, we believe in the power of youth voice. We believe that individuals most affected by institutions can make effective change when they have a seat at the table to offer solutions.

The members of Juveniles for Justice who are featured in this book have exhibited immense vulnerability by sharing their experiences and offering solutions for a better system to facilitate growth and end harmful practices.

Their stories do not represent the experiences of all youth in facilities or all formerly incarcerated people. This book is just a glimpse into what happens to incarcerated youth.

The goal of this book is to give youth space to share their truths and highlight youth-developed recommendations for a better, more supportive system. As you read these stories, we hope you see the youth as they are: children with dreams, hopes, and aspirations.

They are so much more than their involvement in the juvenile justice system and have so much to offer the world. We hope you are all inspired by their stories and work!

## Our Hopes for Our Readers

- **For youth who have faced similar experiences**, we hope this empowers you to share your truth. There are people out there who want to help you.
- **For lawyers, social workers, advocates, and activists**, you do wonderful work. We hope you continue the fight, even when it gets tough, and do not falter when youth struggle to share their truths with you.
- **For agency stakeholders, facility staff, and policymakers**, we hope you hear these stories and understand that our system is harming youth instead of protecting and rehabilitating them. We want to work together as a community to ensure this doesn't continue and to find more alternatives to support youth and keep them from ever entering the prison system.
- **For the public**, we hope you listen to these stories and are inspired to learn more.

Cathy Moffa, MSS, MLSP  
Youth Advocacy Program Manager

Marcía Hopkins, MSW  
Youth Advocacy Program Manager

*A mistake is a season. It comes and goes.*  
– Nigee



# SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to offer thanks to the Defender Association of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia City Council, with a special shout out to Philadelphia Councilmember Helen Gym for hearing our stories and believing that they matter and should be heard.

We also thank the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS) and Mural Arts Philadelphia, with special thanks to artist and advocate Mark Strandquist for working with us and helping us create the photo art included in this book, which mirrors who we are and what we've experienced.

Thanks to Juvenile Law Center staff for constantly working alongside us to uplift our stories and create projects to help better the system for ALL youth. We hope you all enjoy this book.



# WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK?

This is a guide for stakeholders to understand the experiences of young people in placement facilities. This publication is one piece of Juveniles for Justice's 2017-2018 project which seeks to address harsh, harmful practices the youth advocates experienced in these facilities.

Visit our website to learn more about their project and policy advocacy work on this important issue: [www.jlc.org/youth-advocacy](http://www.jlc.org/youth-advocacy).

This book contains narratives of the youth advocates' experiences in placement, their recommendations for change, and sample questions for advocates and courts to use to gather information about young people's experiences in facilities.

# WHO ARE WE?

We are Juveniles for Justice (J4J)—youth who have been involved in the juvenile justice system and are working to improve it. We have experienced a lot by just being in the system.

This year, we elected to address the often harsh, harmful practices we experienced in placement to create better policies and practices in facilities. In this book, you will find a snapshot of the many challenges that we faced while in placement facilities in Pennsylvania.

We are sharing our stories with the hope that people listen and understand that being in placement hurt us and the things we experienced will forever affect us. We hope that by sharing our stories, we not only uplift our experiences but also advocate for other youth experiencing what we faced.

Thank you for listening.

# Juveniles for Justice

## CLASS OF 2017-2018

**LILLY** I am a sophomore in high school. I love to shop, dance, be with my family and have fun.



I have many plans for the future, including attending college for criminal justice, joining the S.W.A.T. team, and becoming a lawyer and an advocate for foster youth.

Before going to placement, I used to play basketball, but when I came home I wasn't allowed to go back to my old school and had to do school online. This meant I couldn't do activities anymore. When I was on probation, I couldn't hang out with my friends or go shopping at the mall.

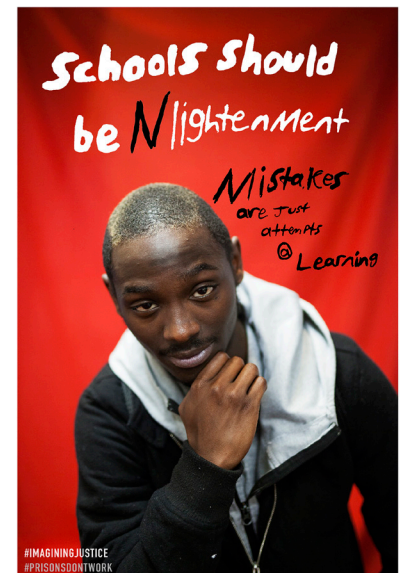
This year I started working as a Youth Advocate at Juvenile Law Center. I am also part of the DHS Achieving Independence Center, and I am getting support from my case manager and parents to stay active and seek out new hobbies.



**ANAHI** I have been involved in Juveniles for Justice for three years. I enjoy reading books about different people's cases and writing poetry. I enjoy quality time with my family and going to different places together, like amusement parks. Currently, I intern at Mighty Writers. I just graduated high school, and I plan to attend college and eventually become a politician. I am interested in continuing youth advocacy work and getting support from my mentors and my foster parent.



**NIGEE** This is my third year in Juveniles for Justice. I have a lot of talents: I sing, do poetry, and run track. I am looking forward to going to college and having a career helping children and adults who are experiencing life difficulties. My family and friends help me realize these goals. When I was sent to an adult prison, I picked up new hobbies like spiritual readings. When I came home, I wanted to join the track team; however they said I was too late to join. Luckily, I didn't have to stop going to the programs I was in before prison.



**ANGE** I have been involved in Juveniles for Justice for two years. I enjoy cooking and am hoping to become a chef and have my own house and car in the future. I also like to spend time with my family. I was involved in track and field before placement, however I don't do them anymore. I would like to get more involved in kickboxing.

**HID** I am an artist, athlete, and father. I love playing sports and video games. Currently, I am involved in the Evening Reporting Center, and this is my first year as a Youth Advocate. I am interested in cyber security and the military. I really enjoy playing basketball.

Before placement, I was playing basketball and football, but when I got out, I couldn't go back to my old school and couldn't play. It was kind of nice that while in placement I got to play basketball on the court, but there wasn't a team.



**JAHEEM** This is my second year in Juveniles for Justice. I wanted to be part of the program to improve how kids



are treated in this system. I hope that in five years, I have a job as an EMT and have my own house and car. I like to cook, spend time with my family and my daughter, and go shopping with my friends. When I came home from placement, I found a community football team and joined it to keep myself busy. With the support of my brother, I signed up for Job

Corps and am excited to be starting on the path toward my career.

**QILAH** I am so excited to have been part of Juveniles for Justice for the first time this year. I have gotten to learn about advocacy and what I can do to help. I would really like to use my DHS experiences to become a youth mentor/counselor and mentor other youth who may be



going down the same path I was. Currently, I work at PowerCorps PHL.

Before I was in placement, I used to enjoy cheerleading and doing makeup, but I could not continue when I was sent to placement. While in placement, I started playing cards—speed, spades, and black jack. I would play staff and other youth for snacks and

other things. Now that I'm home, I want to be more involved in civic engagement with other youth in the child welfare and/or the juvenile justice systems. To achieve my goals, I am getting a lot of support from my case worker and the Achieving Independence Center.



**BREE** I have been involved with Juveniles for Justice for two years. I like to write poems, dance, crochet, and play spades. I am an artist, and my art has been featured in several Juveniles for Justice projects. I am currently in school for cosmetology. I would also like to take up forensic science because I am interested in how crime scenes are solved.




**ALEX** I am a second-year Youth Advocate. I am also an actor and have directed a student-created play about being a teenager in Philadelphia.

I have a daughter named Adrianna, whom I love to spend time with and make laugh. I have a goal of getting my own apartment and a job to provide for my family.

Before placement, I played volleyball. I learned how to crotchet in placement and still do it. I also enjoy acting and am currently working on a play.

**DON** I am a first-year Youth Advocate and have enjoyed having an opportunity to make a change. I play basketball and draw very well. I also like video games, pizza, Sprite, and know how to do a back flip. I like spending time with my family, watching movies. I was playing basketball before I went to placement. When I came home I couldn't continue to play basketball for my school. I couldn't pick up new hobbies because I was so busy with probation, house arrest, and restricted service. I am playing baseball for my school now. In the future, I see myself owning a business, and my goal is to go back to school to get a master's degree.



A person wearing a shiny, crinkled, metallic-looking jacket is walking on a bridge. The bridge has a metal railing and is set against a background of trees and a cloudy sky. The person is wearing white sneakers and dark pants. The overall tone is somber and reflective.

# HOW JUVENILE PLACEMENTS SEPARATE YOUTH FROM COMMUNITIES AND SUCCESSFUL FUTURES

The United States incarcerates youth at more than double the rate of any other country in the world. On any given day, almost 50,000 young people are locked up in juvenile facilities across the country.

Although overall juvenile incarceration rates have been falling, Black youth are still over five times more likely than their white peers to be detained or committed to an institution.

We know these institutions—many of which are over 100 years old—are part of a punitive corrections-oriented approach that does not work for youth.

Research shows that institutional settings harm young people developmentally, psychologically, and—far too often—physically. Yet our country continues to rely on this outdated model as the backbone of its juvenile justice system.

We must commit to fixing this broken system and ensure that all young people have a chance for a bright future.



# SEPARATION FROM FAMILY

A sense of “connectedness”—to family, community, peers, and supportive adults—is essential for adolescents and young adults. This is a time when youth are naturally developing relationships and forming their own identity. Strong relationships and community connections help keep young people engaged, supported, and on track. Incarceration disrupts these connections to family, peers, and community—isolating youth in harsh environments, hindering their natural growth, and leaving young people without a support network when they return to their community.

## Our Experiences



**BREE** When I was placed in the facility, I was told that I could not get a home pass because I was only going to be there for a month. I was upset and hurt, both mentally and emotionally.

Being in a facility is a lot. A month is a long time to go without seeing my parents, siblings, and family members.



**NIGEE** I wasn't aware that I would be going to prison and was being tried in the adult court. I found out the same day of my first court hearing and was in an adult prison for three months. I also found out that you do not receive home passes when you're sent to adult court, so my family could only visit me once in a while. It made me angry that I couldn't see them more often. Thankfully, my case was sent back to juvenile court, and I was happy to go home.

*“A month is a long time to go without seeing my parents, siblings, and family members.”*



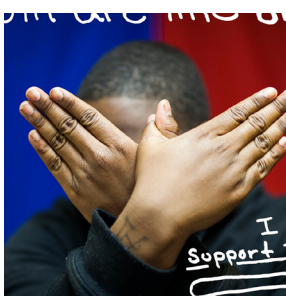
**ANAHI** When I was first going to placement, I didn't actually know when I was being placed. I did not know where or how long I would be there, either. I was not allowed home passes when I was there for about three months. I lost contact with my adoptive parents while I was in placement and couldn't return home with them. I also stopped talking to my friends and other people in my life because I couldn't keep in touch when I was there.



**JAHEEM** Getting support from my family helped me move forward after being in placement. I was on house arrest, so I couldn't hang out with my friends anymore. Being on house arrest meant I had a lot of things to attend, like having to meet with my advocate. When I came home, having to go to my child advocate helped me get out of the house and stay out of trouble.



**ALEX** On my way to court, right before I got there, my worker told me I was not going home. They did not tell me how long I was staying. I was 14; I didn't know anything. I was happy, but sad at the same time. At the facility, I got day passes, and the facility staff dropped me off and picked me up to go back home. I cried a lot because I missed my brothers and sister and their kids. I only had three friends, and I still talked to them. They knew everything that was going on. After this experience, I don't trust people. I'm quick to fight over anything, and I'm very impatient.



**HID** The judge let me know that I would be in placement for several months. I did not believe the length of time I was given was reasonable because I did not participate in the activity I was being sent to placement for. My family came to visit while I was in placement, and it made me feel bad that they had to visit me in there. After coming home, I am glad that my relationship continues to get stronger with my family and some of my friends. I needed that.

*“I was glad that my relationship continues to get stronger with my family and some of my friends. I needed that.”*

**LILLY** They told me that for my first placement I would be staying for a month. In my second placement, they never told me how long I was staying. After they diagnosed me with depression, I was put on a medication dosage that was too high for me. I then had breathing problems and panic attacks. I ran away from Child First because I missed my parents and family. I didn't get home passes because I ran away and was on lock down for 30 days. I didn't see my parents at all, and it made me feel alone. I felt like I didn't have anybody that loved me around. Not feeling that love and being away from home is the worst feeling—I can't describe it.



This experience changed me. I was quiet and didn't want to be around anybody else. I was too scared to open up and talk. I didn't think anyone would believe me, and I didn't think anything would be done if I did speak up. I have trust issues with adults now. One positive thing I was glad about when I came home was that I was getting all the love that I was missing from my family for all those months I was away.

**QILAH** Part of my experiences going in and out of the juvenile justice and child welfare systems were related to truancy and for violating my probation by being late to school. What should have happened in my story is that someone should have asked me why I was always late to school or why I felt I had to violate my probation. Instead, no one asked me, and I was sent away.



When I was being taken to a placement facility I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye to my family—not my little brother or sister. I had to leave my school. Then, when I first arrived, I could not see my family or receive any home passes until after 30 days, when the judge approved them. I missed my family and my younger siblings a lot.

After coming home from placement, my family still sometimes treats me as if I did something wrong and like I'm different—like I'm a criminal. Going away impacted my life so much: my family, not being able to finish school on time, no longer having the same friends, and now being in both systems.

*“I lost contact with my adoptive parents while I was in placement and couldn't return home with them.”*



# STRIP SEARCHES

Although definitions vary, the term “strip search” generally refers to a search that requires a person to remove clothing to permit visual inspection of the person’s breasts, buttocks, or genitalia.

**Highly invasive for anyone, strip searches are particularly traumatic for adolescents and young adults, who tend to be more self-conscious about their bodies and may even experience the search as a form of sexual abuse.** This risk is heightened for youth in the juvenile justice system, the majority of whom have histories of exposure to traumatic events.

Yet youth in juvenile facilities are routinely strip searched, often in situations where no one has reason to believe they are hiding anything. For instance, youth may be strip searched upon admission, after visits with family or their attorneys, when placed in solitary, or when transported to or from the facility. As the stories below show, these searches are dehumanizing, degrading, and humiliating—they can cause real, lasting damage to youth the system is supposed to help.

## Our Experiences



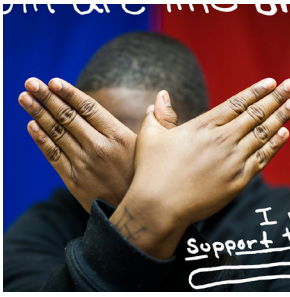
**BREE** When I was processed through admissions at the detention center, the staff had to take off my clothes and started patting me down, touching me, and making me feel uncomfortable. I felt violated, like I wasn’t even a human being anymore.



**DON** I was stripped searched in the placement facility. It felt weird being stripped in front of another man; it also felt a little strange. I don’t think youth should be strip searched unless in they’re in a really bad predicament.



**JAHEEM** I got strip searched when I first got locked up, and then again every time I had visits. After I had a visit with my family, I was strip searched. It felt weird because I was around other youth and staff.



**HID** When I first entered the placement facility, I refused to be strip searched, and they called a code. They pulled me into another room with five or six guards, and a few of them held me while one guard forcibly searched me. This happened more than once because I refused every time. There were also pat downs after visitation.



**ANGE** Strip searches happened when I first entered and when I came back from a home pass. I wasn't with other youth when I got strip searched, just staff, but I still I felt a little uncomfortable because I didn't know them like that.



**NIGEE** After visitation, all the youth would be strip searched at the same time, and it was very uncomfortable.



**LILLY** I didn't like being strip searched at all. I didn't want anyone to see me naked, and it was very uncomfortable.



**ANAHI** When I first came to the detention center, I was strip searched. They made us do squats in front of a female guard. We were taken in the back, away from everyone else. The guard didn't touch me when I squatted, but they would make us squat with our pants off, and it kind of make me feel uncomfortable. Then, when I was sent to a placement facility, they did a strip search after every visit with my family, and they would pat us down every time we would go off grounds and come back. They would shake out our bras and touch around our waist and make us take our shoes off. For higher security places, they don't need to do this when there is already heightened supervision of the youth.

*“They pulled me into another room with five or six guards, and a few of them held me while one guard forcibly searched me.”*

# PHYSICAL RESTRAINTS

The act of being physically restrained is an extremely common experience for youth in juvenile facilities. Restraints take many different forms, including mechanical restraints – such as handcuffs and shackles – and manual restraints where staff physically restrict a youth’s movement, sometimes for long periods of time.

Almost by definition, restraints are physically harmful to youth, and they can easily escalate to dangerous or abusive situations. Current standards in the field of juvenile corrections recommend significant limits on using restraints because of the risk of harm to youth and staff, calling instead for developmentally appropriate de-escalation techniques.

Yet as the stories below show, youth continue to routinely experience harsh and sometimes violent uses of physical restraints, often in response to incidents that reflect typical adolescent behavior and could have been de-escalated in other ways.

## Our Experiences

**LILLY** If I acted out, the staff at the placement facility put my hands behind my back and threw me on the floor. A staff burned my skin with a flat iron so badly, my judge moved me to another floor. When she burned me, I yelled at her because it hurt so bad, and I was placed in a small room by myself for yelling.



Another time, I had gotten body slammed for yelling at a staff person and was put into a room for about a day but because I had refused to go into the room, they didn’t let me eat. I had eaten breakfast before 9:00 am, and I wasn’t given any food until after 3:30 pm. I also felt that even if the staff didn’t like you, they could do what they wanted. Staff fought girls, and male staff restrained female youth, which didn’t feel right to me.

*“For higher security places, they don’t need to do this when there is already heightened supervision of the youth.”*





**DON** In placement, I witnessed youth getting physically restrained if staff believed they looked like they were about to fight another youth. It also happened sometimes when youth talked back to the staff.



**ANGE** In placement, youth can get restrained for getting into trouble—like when people fought, both would get restrained. One girl got arrested for fighting staff. They argued first, and then the girl got restrained. The staff person also tried to hit the girl back. For fighting, everyone had to stand in the middle of an empty room and do an apology and analyze what we did wrong. If you moved while talking, you would get restrained. I've seen people get restrained the whole time at the juvenile placement facility I was in, one person a day would be restrained. I've also seen youth in shackles.



**ANAHI** I saw some people get restrained for fighting, and if the child would keep moving, the staff would slam them on the wall or floor. Usually, staff would hold people back for fighting, but sometimes the staff would also get physical with the youth if they weren't cooperating.

**HID** I was in one placement facility for two to three months. I witnessed youth being restrained even for talking back and refusing to do something. When staff yelled and argued with you, they decided they were finished arguing and suddenly they get physical and then they will call "code black" or "code blue" and would jump on the youth. It wasn't common, but it happened when a staff person had a problem with one of the youth.



Staff felt like they had to respond excessively to any behavior they felt was wrong. If one person didn't do something like cleaning up, the unit got locked down for a week or more. Everyone had to be in their room and could only come out to eat and shower, and then it was lights off. After

this, once everyone came out they would be upset, angry, raged and ready to fight.

# PHYSICAL ABUSE

As numerous studies have documented, maltreatment and abuse are commonplace in large, institutional youth placements. For instance, one national survey of facility staff members showed that, over a three-year period, there were approximately 13,000 allegations of abuse in juvenile facilities around the country. Other studies have documented evidence of widespread maltreatment in at least 29 states.

The abuse youth experience includes violent assaults by staff and youth, sexual victimization, and systemic maltreatment. These experiences cannot be written off as the product of individual bad actors—they pervade our juvenile justice system and have persisted despite many efforts at reform. The abuses described below, and similar experiences of countless young people around the country, highlight how our correctional model is inherently flawed and must be fundamentally changed to support, not harm, young people.

## Our Experiences

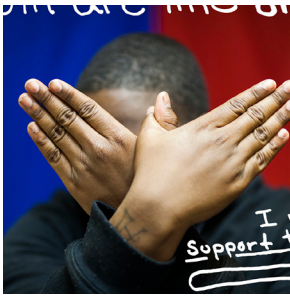
**LILLY** At my lockdown placement, I saw that youth could yell, not listen and sometimes fight each other because some staff would let them fight. There were times staff physically fought with youth, too. I had also heard about someone being pepper sprayed in response to telling a staff person “no.”



When a staff member intentionally burned me with a flat iron while she was straightening my hair, I was in a lot of pain and asked to see the nurse, but she wasn't there because she was only part-time. I never got to see a doctor until I went to court four or five days later. By that time, it was all scarred. When my judge saw what happened, she moved me to a different floor. I was really upset I had to stay at the same facility all because the other placement where I was supposed to go didn't have a bed available yet.

*“No kid should be beaten up by staff at the facility, especially not for refusing to do class work that’s not on our level.”*

**HID** When I was at my first juvenile placement facility, a lot of people were physically injured by staff. I had gotten a busted lip and broken ribs from a guard, so my social worker took me to the hospital and I was removed from this facility.



One time, I was on social media during school hours and when they caught me, they tapped me on my shoulder and told me to step out of class. As soon as I stepped out of the room, one guard held me, and another punched me, then they made me go back to class.

I never told anyone at the facility because the staff who punched me would bribe me and other youth with snacks to not tell the CFO, or when it happened to me, they told me to not tell when I went to court.

If people really knew what I faced behind those walls, they would understand how horrible it was for me. No kid should be beaten up by staff at the facility, especially not for refusing to do class work that's not on our level. If this happened in regular school, teachers could be arrested and fired.

**QILAH** In a holding facility, I had been having a hard time sleeping and was having menstrual cramps, so I did not feel up to eating breakfast. I was tired, and I refused to go to breakfast.



When I refused, the staff grabbed and twisted me up out of the bed. Because it was hurting, I resisted. When I did, the staff woman swung me around and punched me. When I defended myself, the staff facilitator who was nearby and saw what was happening, threw her walkie-talkie at my head. After this happened, I tried reporting what happened between me and both the staff but there was no disciplinary action for the staff's behavior. Instead, I lost all my phone time with my family and was put in solitary for one day. One of the biggest parts of this experience that hurts

was that I was punished for what happened to me and they took away my phone time, and it meant that I could not talk to my family.



# SOLITARY CONFINEMENT & EXTENDED ISOLATION

Neurological research and sociological studies have confirmed what common sense tells us: that solitary confinement has devastating, long-term effects on young people. The practice exacerbates mental health problems, disrupts normal adolescent development, and undermines the rehabilitative goals of the juvenile justice system. It has also been found unconstitutional by numerous courts.

Yet solitary confinement—also known as “isolation,” “room confinement,” “disciplinary detention,” or other euphemisms—remains common in juvenile facilities around the country.

In a national survey of juvenile defenders conducted by Juvenile Law Center, more than two-thirds of respondents reported that they have clients who spent time in solitary. The conditions these young people experience are often appalling; youth in solitary may spend 22-23 hours a day in cells by themselves, sometimes without basic necessities such as mattresses, sheets, showers, eating utensils, and mental health treatment.

Exposure to these conditions not only harms young people—it is also counterproductive. Facilities and jurisdictions that have reduced reliance on solitary confinement have seen corresponding decreases in rates of violence.

## Our Experiences



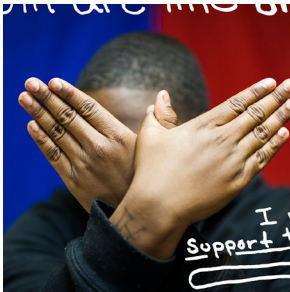
**QILAH** While I was in placement, often the whole group would get punished for behavior of one person. One time, I was placed in solitary confinement for one day for defending myself when a staff person threw a walkie talkie in my face. Another time at a holding facility, I was put in solitary for about 3-4 days. When I was in solitary, there was only a metal chair in the room and a table nailed to the floor. A person brought me food throughout the day and brought me a pen and paper for me to write to my family.

*“It shouldn’t be that if one youth acts out in a facility, we are all punished.”*



**ANGE** In general, you can't talk to anyone or look at anyone (in a silly way) or you would get in trouble. I was placed in isolation rooms for being considered a "threat" because I moved too quickly while talking to staff.

**HID** I was in solitary for one week once, and the room was cushion—a sponge-like substance. They put me there because someone in the cafeteria was looking at me and I felt threatened. They thought that we both might get into a fight because we were staring at each other, so we were both put into solitary.



They only checked on me when it was time for meals, and they brought my class work to me, otherwise there was nothing for me to do and no one for me to interact with. I slept, looked at the wall, worked out in the room, and I ate—that's it, for a whole week.

At first, I didn't think it would affect me, but after being in the room with nothing to do for even a few minutes it started to bother me. It made me feel weak because there was nothing I could do to get out. There was only really me, the walls, and the floor.



**JAHEEM** At the detention center, if there was a fight everyone would be on lock down for some hours or a full day. It depended on the situation, like if a youth was in a unit fight, we would all be on lock down for 24 hours. We also would not be able to see our families if a lockdown happened. This was upsetting because it felt as if we were all being punished for someone else's behavior. This was also frustrating because if I had court the same day the lockdown happened, my court date got pushed back, sometimes almost a month. It shouldn't be that if one youth acts out in a facility, we are all punished even when we did not cause any trouble.

*“When I was placed in solitary for three days, there was only a metal chair in the room and a table nailed to the floor.”*

# EDUCATION

Youth in juvenile facilities face countless barriers to educational success. Placement in a facility usually requires a youth to change schools, and the educational programs provided in facilities typically lack the academic rigor of community-based schools. Youth may be assigned to the wrong grade, given coursework below grade level, or simply placed in front of a computer and expected to teach themselves. Although a large percentage of youth in the juvenile justice system are eligible for special education, many facilities fail to provide mandated services.

When they are discharged from facilities, youth often struggle to transition back to community schools. Many find that they are unable to transfer the credits they earned or that all their courses are counted as elective hours. **Unsurprisingly, these barriers lead to abysmal educational outcomes: a majority of youth do not return to school after release from custody, and only 1% of justice-involved youth graduate from college.**

These outcomes are particularly tragic given that many youth enter the justice system due to school-related issues, such as truancy or school-based offenses. Rather than help youth meet their educational goals, system involvement sets them further behind.

## Our Experiences

**ANAHI** I was assigned worksheets when I was in one placement facility. The work was too easy for me and not on my grade level. They had different teachers every day who came to teach us at different times. In another facility, the school work was the same—too easy and only one teacher who actually taught.



When I was released, I was not able to go back to my regular school and ended up going to an alternative school. My credits were not transferred, and I had to start from scratch.

This experience impacted my education because I didn't get the right grade work in the placement facility. It made it harder for me to learn when I got back to a regular school and pushed me back.

*“My credits were not transferred, and I had to start from scratch.”*

*“I would get in trouble for doing normal teen things, like playing around.”*

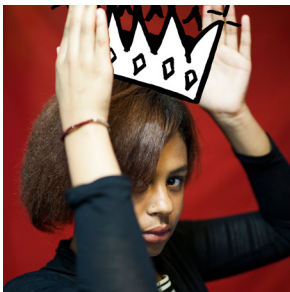


**ANGE** Worksheets and reading assignments were too easy in the placement facility. During my time there, I was taught with worksheets and books. While I thought the teachers were good, they didn't teach as much, and it was not the appropriate grade level. It was also really strict—I couldn't fool around or get in trouble. When I got in trouble, I was separated from the other students. If I got into trouble, they would give me a warning, pull me out of school, and I



would have to explain what I did wrong and what I was going to do to fix it. If I wasn't good in this "interview," I had to sit in a room by myself. When I was being goofy in class, the teacher got mad and told me to get out. I had to work separately in an empty room but the next day I could go back to class.

When I got home, my credits transferred from the facility to my neighborhood school. This was great, so I went to a neighborhood school first and returned to my grade level, but I didn't do well. I couldn't keep up with the pace of the work because I hadn't learned the things the other kids learned from my previous school, so I had to leave my neighborhood school to attend an alternative school. This experience at the alternative school affected me a lot because I was used to "normal" school and having more freedom. When you attend alternative school, it's so different, you can't carry anything—no pens, pencils, it's not like regular school at all. I believe if I didn't have this experience at the alternative school, I would probably have graduated on-time.

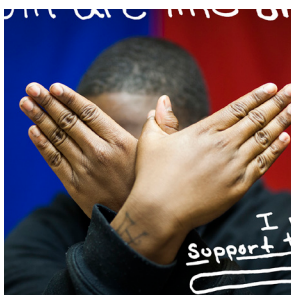


**LILLY** After coming back home, I tried to go back to the charter school I had attended for two years before going to the placement facility, but they wouldn't let me back in. My only option was to do a cyber program. I didn't learn anything while I was in placement and to this day I'm still having trouble in school. I ended up having to take eighth grade classes that I should have already known, like pre-algebra.



**NIGEE** In the adult facility, the worksheets I had were on my level, and all the assignments were both hard and easy. We had a teacher who came in and gave us work. She talked to us and helped us with worksheets and reading assignments. I'm glad I had her help and got the work I needed while I was there. This made it easier when I came home, and I was able to go to the school I used to attend. All my credits transferred from the adult facility back to my community high school.

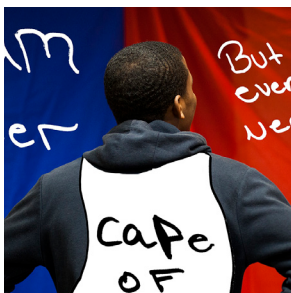
*"It messed my education up. Going to school was hard too because I didn't go for so long and when I did go it was only for 3-4 weeks."*



**HID** It seemed like they only gave us work to keep us busy from doing anything. The work really didn't teach me anything. In the facility, I had access to a teacher and computer. But I wasn't really interested in the school work because they kept giving me work that wasn't at my grade level. One time I got ten punches by a guard for not doing the school work. When I came back home, I had to be homeschooled because no school in the Philadelphia School District would accept me back. My credits from the placement facility didn't transfer when I tried to go to a regular school outside of Philly, so I had to be homeschooled to start 12th grade on time.



**ALEX** We had teachers and two body guards in every class. The teachers didn't interact with us they just gave the papers and sat at the desk on their phones. I had to repeat grades when I left the facility because I didn't get the proper work, which made it harder for me because I didn't know the things that I should've known. I could've finished school this year (2018). I feel like I wasted my time for three years. When I came home even though I was not able to go to my neighborhood school, I could go to a school in Philly designed for youth with experience in foster care. I think it's the best school I have ever been in.



**DON** Once, I was told I had to leave the class because they thought I wasn't going to be safe and was arguing. I was sent to my room for half the day, and I had to make my work up another day.

*“We had a teacher who came in and gave us work. She talked to us and helped us with worksheets and reading assignments.”*

*“I was not able to go to my neighborhood school, but CB is the best school I have ever been in.”*

# CLOSING

We have shared our stories to shed light on the harm we experienced and to identify solutions to the challenges that many of us faced.

We are encouraging our community members, stakeholders, and local agencies to prevent youth from going into facilities and make sure they get services while staying with their families and communities. If youth must go into placement, their safety and well-being should be prioritized.

## Why Is This Important?

All young people deserve the opportunity to grow up in safe environments that promote development. Going to placement, even for a short time, is an interruption to young people's ability to grow within their own community. It interrupts their family life, education, and development.

Being in placement often changes young people in a way that isn't rehabilitative even though one of the primary goals of the juvenile justice system is to rehabilitate youth. To help address the challenges youth face in placement facilities, we developed a set of recommendations designed to guide courts, facilities, and advocates in their efforts to reform the juvenile justice system.

We believe children should have and deserve opportunities to stay in or close to their communities, or if they are in the juvenile justice system, that it is supportive, safe and rehabilitative. We must accomplish these goals to ensure children are given a second chance.



## Recommendation 1: Keep Youth in Their Communities

1. Provide community-based resources to youth and families to help keep kids out of the system.
2. Invest in more diversion programs to keep youth out of placement.
3. In the rare instances when placement is deemed necessary, place youth in facilities within their communities or close to their homes. This includes:
  - a. Ensuring that all placements are safe and supportive, and
  - b. Training staff on up-to-date trauma-informed practices

## Recommendation 2: Connect Youth to their Families while in Placement

1. Never punish youth by denying them access to visits or phone calls with their families.
2. Give guardians contact information of staff who can provide information about the youth and their adjustment to the facility and make arrangements to communicate (e.g. accommodating language barriers).
3. Involve family members in education, behavioral management strategies, and medical and mental health service decisions about their child at the facility.

## Recommendation 3: Improve Oversight, Accountability, and Reporting of Abuse

1. Designate a point person to follow-up with youth about reports of abuse and unsafe conditions.
2. Require responses to youth reports of abuse or unsafe conditions within 24-48 hours.
3. Train facility staff on how to look for and report abuse. Provide a safe way for staff to report concerns about abuse.
4. Hold staff accountable when reports are not made, particularly if youth are sexually or physically abused.

5. Ensure youth and their families fully understand and are able to access the facility's grievance procedure by:
  - a. Thoroughly orienting youth to the grievance procedure when they first enter a facility;
  - b. Using language that youth and the family can understand;
  - c. Providing direct information of who to contact about grievances at the facility;
  - d. Following up after incidents to ask if a youth wants to file a grievance or report abuse; and
  - e. Supporting youth in completing documentation and contacting the appropriate person.

## Recommendation 4: Develop Alternatives to Physical Restraints

1. Thoroughly train staff on alternatives to physical restraints, including de-escalation techniques and other restorative justice practices. These trainings should be a requirement for all staff upon starting and should be continuously offered.
2. Require staff to exhaust all other de-escalation tactics before resorting to physical restraints.
3. Prohibit staff from restraining youth unless staff have been properly trained on the purpose and appropriate use of physical restraints and the use of the least harmful restraint tactics.

## Recommendation 5: Use Restorative Techniques to Help Youth with Behavior Management

1. Instead of relying on solitary confinement for behavior management, offer individualized programming, including positive behavior support, to address behavior concerns.
2. Train all staff on the use of less restrictive alternatives, including de-escalation.
3. Ensure solitary confinement is never used for punishment, discipline, or convenience.
4. Never isolate youth for more than a three-hour period for any reason, and release youth from isolation as soon as they have regained self-control. If a youth requires further support after a three-hour "cool down" period, seek other positive, individualized interventions to address the youth's needs.

## Recommendation 7: Provide Quality Education to Youth in and Returning from Placement

1. Allow youth to attend school in their communities or in the community where a facility is located, rather than inside an institutional juvenile justice placement.
2. Make sure youth have the information and power to make decisions about their own education and future.
3. Require on-grounds schools at juvenile facilities to have the same, if not better, standards and resources as community schools in terms of curriculum, supplies, work, discipline, and meeting youths' individualized needs.
4. Provide appropriate school work that is based in the youth's grade, age, development, special education, language, and any other needs.
5. Have appropriate, positive and affirming responses to classroom misbehavior. Denial of education should not be used as punishment.
6. Provide youth with supports and opportunities to get post-secondary credit while in placement, prepare for post-secondary when they leave placement, and participate in career pathways programs that prepare youth for living wage employment.
7. Have meaningful reentry planning, led by youth and supported by invested adults.
8. Provide a plan for the youth's transition out of placement that includes a plan to transfer school credits, and make sure the youth ends up in the appropriate school and classes, to avoid gaps in education.

## Recommendation 7: Eliminate Strip Searches

1. Prohibit all strip searches unless there is probable cause that a youth is hiding dangerous contraband that could not be discovered in a less intrusive search.
2. Train staff on graduated response techniques before any search that requires contact with a youth's body.
3. Ensure searches are not conducted in a degrading or humiliating manner. For instance, youth should not be searched in front of other youth and should not be asked to strip in front of staff.



# APPENDIX

## Sample Standard Questions for Lawyers and Advocates to Ask Youth

As youth in placement, we didn't know that lawyers and advocates had a limited time with us. We didn't know it was important to tell them everything that was happening in placement. We were scared about retribution, did not think we would be believed, and did not know what could or would be done.

In addition, sometimes, we didn't feel we could trust our lawyers because we didn't know them well enough to tell. However, regardless of time constraints, we believe lawyers and advocates should always attempt to ask youth questions. This is important to ensure that we feel safe and our mental and emotional health is well while we are in facilities and when we come home.

To help youth to share their stories, we developed a set of questions that we feel are the most important to ask young people in placement. We know some of these are hard questions for youth to respond to, so the more rapport advocates develop with young clients, the more likely youth will disclose difficult information. We believe building rapport and trust with us and continuously asking some of these questions each time you see us will help us open up. Building trust is key to helping us to disclose information and to ensuring we are safe in facilities.

We hope our recommendations and these sample questions will help to one day eliminate the harm youth face in facilities.

## **SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUTH IN INSTITUTIONAL PLACEMENTS**

1. How are you? Do you feel mentally and physically safe?
2. How many meals are you eating a day?
3. Do you feel you are being mistreated by any staff?
4. Have you talked to your family or seen them? When was the last time?
5. Have you ever been forced to do something you didn't want to do?
6. What school subjects are you learning? Do you feel you're learning the right work?
7. Have you ever been held in a room by yourself for a few hours or more? How long?
8. What other services here have been offered to you, for example therapy?

## **ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO ASK YOUTH.**

1. What happens in the facility when a youth is in trouble?
2. How do you feel you're being treated?
3. Have you, or do you feel threatened by anyone?
4. Were you ever on lockdown? Do you know why? For how long?
5. How do staff handle conflicts they may have with youth? How do staff handle conflicts that arise between two or more youth?
6. Where are you currently being housed? What is your room like?
7. What did you expect when you entered?
8. How do you feel like you're being treated in placement compared to the other youth in the facility?
9. Do you know who to talk to if you have a complaint or something bad happens?
10. Do you have questions about your next court hearing or when you are scheduled to return home?

*We separated our top 8 questions we feel youth should always be asked.*

*These questions should be reviewed for wording to ensure questions are not leading and adhere to attorney client standards.*

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