

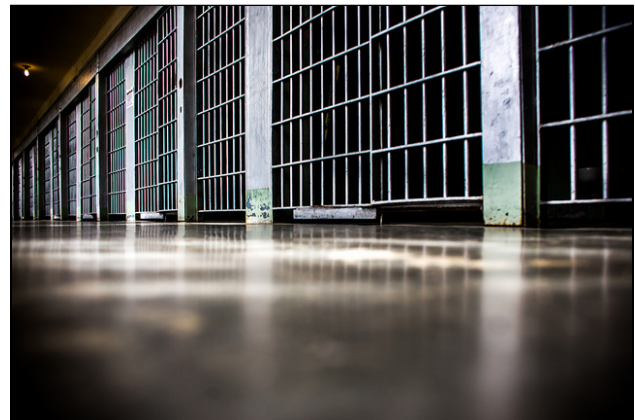
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# Prison Is a Poor Deterrent, and a Dangerous Punishment

By Daniel Okonkwo  
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*There's no denying that the adolescent brain is significantly different than the adult brain, but should judges take this into consideration when sentencing juvenile offenders? In this opinion piece, Daniel Okonkwo, the executive director of D.C. Lawyers for Youth, discusses the juvenile justice system and how he thinks young offenders should be sentenced.*

- [1] Youth should be treated differently from adults. Research on adolescent brain development does not provide an excuse for culpability,<sup>1</sup> but it shows that youth are amenable<sup>2</sup> to treatment in ways that adults are not. Additionally, given what we know about the development of the adolescent brain, how it processes risks and rewards, deterrence through the threat of incarceration is likewise ineffective at controlling the behavior of youth. Therefore, prison is never an effective punishment for youth.



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Prisons cannot provide the rigorous rehabilitation that the juvenile justice system affords youth.

Prisons generally do not require that correctional officers receive appropriate training to deal with youth populations, nor do they offer training on the social, emotional or psychological needs of young people. Further, the consequences of using prison as punishment for youth include higher rates of recidivism,<sup>3</sup> further increases in societal harm, and repeated expenses from paying for offenders to continue cycling through the justice system.

It is also dangerous to assert that a young person sent to prison will become a lifelong criminal. However, there are certainly lifelong consequences to being incarcerated rather than treated in the juvenile justice system. The survival skills that youth (and adults, for that matter) learn in prison — self-preservation at all costs, using violence to resolve conflicts and legitimizing domination and retaliation — are the polar opposite of the skills necessary to survive in society on the outside. Prison does not teach those skills that youth need to be functioning members of society, like how to resolve conflict without violence, how to get what you want through hard work rather than just taking it and how to work with others.

1. **Culpability (noun):** responsibility for a fault or wrong
2. **Amenable (adjective):** open and responsive to suggestion; easily persuaded or controlled
3. the tendency for a criminal to commit a crime again

The juvenile justice system was created to treat young offenders, who have an increased capacity to change, in a system that provides proper rehabilitative services that can transform youth into productive members of society. This purpose is precluded<sup>4</sup> when youth are housed in prisons, where they face more danger, a higher risk of re-offending and less chance for success after they are released.

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4. to make impossible