Youth Detention and Incarceration Facilities in the United States (2010 to February 2023): Mapping Closure Intents and Implementation

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See also Helmcamp, p. 1190.

Objectives. To characterize youth detention and incarceration facility closure attempts in the United States from January 2010 to February 2023 and inform ongoing attempts for facility closure.

Methods. We conducted a landscape analysis of youth facilities with stated intent to close during our study period. For each facility, we coded for jurisdiction (state vs local), year of attempt, stated reasons for closure, outcome of the facility (closed, remained open, or other), facility size, and what happened to youths after the facility closed.

Results. We identified a total of 118 facilities in 33 states that had committed to closure in our study period. The most cited reasons for the intention to close were cost (69% of facilities), declining numbers (46%), operational and facilities issues (36%), reform (33%), and conditions of confinement and abuse (30%). Sixty-two percent of identified facilities closed (n = 73).

Conclusions. Most facilities that had announced closures did close. For facilities that closed, the most commonly cited reasons were cost and decreasing numbers. Reform as a reason was more common in facilities that remained open than closed. (*Am J Public Health*. 2025;115(8):1299–1307. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2025.308118)

The extensive detention and incarceration of youths in the United States sets it apart from most other countries, raising serious questions of morality and efficacy. With more than 240 000 youths confined in 2019, the United States has 3 times higher confinement rates than South America and 11 times higher confinement rates than Western Europe.[1] Youth behavior does not explain this disparity. Even when countries have similar rates of self-reported youth behavior like theft and assault, the US rates of incarceration are notably higher.[2,3] The American emphasis on incarceration, rooted in a racist history of slavery and discriminatory criminal legal policies and practices against Black people, makes it an extreme outlier.[4] Moreover, pretrial and preconviction detention is common in the United States—such that 60% of youths incarcerated in the United States are detained before and during the adjudication process.[5] This is the case even though fewer than one third of youths are detained for or convicted of serious violent offenses.[2] Despite the success of both pre- and postsentencing diversion programs in reducing subsequent criminal legal system involvement compared with detention and incarceration,[6,7] youth detention has continued to be used for the majority of youths adjudicated in the United States.

Youth detention and incarceration remain harmful,[2,8] ineffective,[7] and expensive,[9] and disproportionately impact youths of color.[2,10] Even a short period in detention carries serious health impacts, such as depression and self-harm, that can affect youths into adulthood.[11,12] Because of substandard educational offerings in confinement, youths in detention face additional challenges reintegrating back into schools after release, with

negative impacts on education and jobs through adulthood.[2,13] Youth detention is ineffective because it fails to address the root causes of why a young person may engage in criminalized behavior in the first place and does not reduce risk of future arrests, reconvictions, or return to detention.[2] Stays in detention, including pretrial, are associated with increased risk of arrest in the following year, even after adjusting for prior cases, severity of charges, age at first offense, race, and sex.[14] Community-based alternatives are more cost-effective than youth detention.[9] The average cost of incarcerating a single youth is $214 620 per year.[15] For that cost, most states could cover tuition for nearly 20 students to a public, 4-year university.[16]

A pragmatic need to support the ongoing strategic planning process for the detention center closure in King County, Washington, was the impetus for this study. Despite growing efforts to close youth detention facilities and replace them with community-based alternatives, there have been few academic efforts examining efforts to close these facilities across the United States. By investigating previous closure attempts, we sought to identify patterns in closure, reasons for attempting closure, and whether the facilities closed, remained open, or were reopened or replaced. We aimed to describe the national landscape of youth detention and incarceration closures to identify common reasons cited in successful closures and to inform closure strategies nationally. In doing so, we address a major gap in the research on closure attempts.

METHODS

We began this effort by conducting a scoping review of evaluations of closure attempts for youth detention and incarceration centers from January 2010 to February 2023. We performed searches of PubMed, Web of Science, SSRN, EMBASE, CINAHL, and EBSCO for studies that conducted evaluations of detention and incarceration center closures in the United States. Given the relatively unsteady field, we used broad search terms including "youth prison," "juvenile detention center," "closure," closing," and "closed." The literature search resulted in 681 articles, of which 4 studies met eligibility criteria: 2 reports, 1 case study, and 1 master's thesis. See Appendix A (available as a supplement to the online version of this article at https://ajph.org) for the scoping review details.

Assessment of State and County Closure Attempts

As our next step, and to understand the scope of attempted youth detention closures in the United States, we began identifying facilities that met our eligibility criteria using existing lists of closed facilities compiled by advocacy and research groups working to close youth incarceration facilities.[17–20]

We then initiated a snowball sampling method using existing news articles and government reports to identify additional jurisdictions that had committed to closing their facilities. For this study, we did not differentiate between detention (the temporary holding of an individual, before trial or before sentencing) or incarceration (long-term confinement after sentencing), as our focus remained on facility closure and not the length of time or legal reason for individuals' confinement.[11] We identified nearly half of the additional facilities using this snowball sampling method, largely with facilities that were closed in the same state or county where other facilities were closed. Additional closures were identified through a scoping review of news articles in the EBSCO database using broad search terms including "juvenile jail"; "juvenile detention"; "juvenile incarceration"; "youth jail"; "youth prison"; "youth incarceration"; "youth detention"; "youth correctional facilities"; "juvenile correctional facilities" AND "closure"; "closing"; "closed"; or "close" to ensure we identified all relevant articles. In total, 252 news articles were screened to identify closures to include in the landscape assessment. We identified 21 additional facilities via the scoping review.

For each facility identified, we coded for jurisdiction, the name of the facility, the year of closure (if applicable), the stated reasons for the facility's intent to close (allowing multiple stated reasons for each facility), the outcome of the facility (i.e., closed, remained open, or reopened/replaced/other [hereafter "other"]), documented barriers if the facility did not close, capacity size of the facility, what happened to youths after the facility closed, and what happened to staff after the facility closed. To count as a facility closure, the facility must have shut down completely, rather than having been modified or temporarily closed. In a few cases, when the current status of the facility was unclear, we attempted to call jurisdictions directly but were not able to confirm current facility status (n = 4). We included these facilities in the analysis. See Appendix B (available as a supplement to the online version of this article at https://ajph.org) for the full data compiled in the landscape analysis.

Statistical Analysis

We used descriptive statistics to describe detention facility size and stated initial reason for closure attempt by closure

process outcome—(1) closed, (2) remained open, or (3) other, including facilities that reopened or privatized, were replaced, merged, or renovated—by local and state facilities. As some closure process outcomes were rare, we subsequently combined "reopened," "replaced," "privatized," and "other" categories so that the remainder of analyses compared 3 process outcomes (closed, remained open, other). Some facilities cited multiple reasons for their stated intent to close. When comparing the distribution of stated reasons for closure by outcome (closed, remained open, other), we weighted each facility's reasons for closure by the total number of reasons cited for that facility. For example, if a facility had 4 stated reasons to close, each reason was weighted at 0.25. Using stacked bar charts, we examined weighted reasons for stated intent to close by closure attempt outcome (closed, remained open, other) for state and local facilities separately. We plotted the frequency of completed closure outcome (closed, remained open, or other) by year for state and local facilities separately. Finally, we mapped state-level variation in which states had stated intention and which states completed closures both or neither during the study period. As a sensitivity analysis, we additionally stratified our results by state versus local facilities to identify any important differences between these 2 systems.

RESULTS

We identified a total of 118 facilities that had committed to closure between January 2010 and February 2023 in the United States (Table 1). Approximately half (54%) of the facilities were found through snowball sampling, 24% through the rapid scoping review, and 22% through existing resources. Most facilities were state facilities (n = 81; 69%), while about a third were local facilities (n = 37; 31%).

Commitment to Closure

During the study period, 33 states (65%) had at least 1 facility with a stated intent to close (Figure 1). Of the 118 facilities that had committed to close, the most commonly cited reasons for the intention to close were cost (cited for 69% of facilities), declining numbers (46%), operational and facilities issues (36%), reform (33%), and conditions of confinement and abuse (30%; Figure 2). Most facilities (72%) cited multiple reasons for closure (mean = 2.1 reasons; range = 1–4; Table 1).

Closure Outcome

End result of closure intention. By February 2023, 73 facilities identified in this study had closed (62%). Among the closed facilities, nearly half (42%) were large capacity (> 100 youths) and almost one third (33%) were medium capacity (21–100 youths). During the study period, 30 states (91%) closed at least 1 facility (Table 1). The year with the most facility closures was 2011 (19 facilities closed, with 1 that later reopened), followed by 2013 (10 facilities closed, with 1 that later reopened), and then 2020 (9 facilities closed; Appendix B).

Reason for closure by end result of closure intention. Weighted reasons for closure varied by whether a facility was closed, remained open, or had another outcome (e.g., reopened, replaced, merged). Among facilities that closed, cost was cited most frequently (45%), followed by declining numbers (25%). Among facilities that remained open, reform was cited slightly more than cost (32% vs 27%, respectively). For facilities that had another outcome, the most common reasons were operational and facility issues (32%), followed by cost (20%) and conditions of confinement and abuse (18%; Figure 2).

Differences by state and local facilities. State facilities that closed were most often large capacity (55% with > 100 youths), while local facilities that closed were most often smaller and medium-sized (36% with < 20 youths, 32% with 21–100 youths). Both state and local facilities cited cost and declining numbers as the primary reasons (73% and 40% vs 60% and 60%, respectively) and had similar rates of closure (63% of state and 59% of local facilities; Table 1).

When facilities remained open, reform was cited more often than when facilities closed. For state facilities, reform tied with cost as primary reasons for attempted closure (29% weighted), while for local facilities that remained open, reform was the primary reason for attempted closure (38% weighted; Appendix C, available as a supplement to the online version of this article at https://ajph.org).

Commitment to facility closure and successful closures of state and local facilities differed by geography and time. Thirteen states committed to closing both local and state facilities. For states that committed to close only local or only state facilities, more states made commitments to close state facilities than local facilities (15 vs 3, respectively). Over the study period, 2011 was the year with the highest number of state facilities that closed (n = 15), while 2020 had the most local facilities that closed (n = 6; Appendix B).

TABLE 1— Facility Landscape Analysis Results: United States, January 2010–February 2023

	Closed, No. (%)	Remained Open, No. (%)	Other, No. (%)	Total, No. (%)
State facilities				
No. (%)	51 (63.0)	17 (21.0)	13 (16.1)	81 (100.0)
Capacity category[a]				
1: ≤ 20 youths	5 (9.8)	1 (5.9)	1 (7.7)	7 (8.6)
2: 21–100 youths	17 (33.3)	11 (64.7)	8 (61.5)	36 (44.4)
3: > 100 youths	28 (54.9)	5 (29.4)	3 (23.1)	36 (44.4)
Unknown	1 (2.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (7.7)	2 (2.5)
Stated reason for closure (categories)[b]				
Cost	41 (80.4)	11 (64.7)	7 (53.9)	59 (72.8)
Reform	13 (25.5)	11 (64.7)	5 (38.5)	29 (35.8)
Declining numbers	22 (43.1)	7 (41.2)	3 (23.1)	32 (39.5)
Conditions of confinement and abuse	15 (29.4)	5 (29.4)	5 (38.5)	25 (30.9)
Operational and facility issues	14 (27.5)	5 (29.4)	8 (61.5)	27 (33.3)
Local facilities[c]				
No. (%)	22 (59.5)	7 (18.9)	8 (21.6)	37 (100.0)
Capacity[a]				
1: ≤ 20 youths	8 (36.4)	0 (0.0)	1 (12.5)	9 (24.3)
2: 21–100 youths	7 (31.8)	2 (28.6)	6 (75.0)	15 (40.5)
3: > 100 youths	3 (13.6)	5 (71.4)	1 (12.5)	9 (24.3)
Unknown	4 (18.2)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (10.8)
Stated reason for closure (categories)[b]				
Cost	14 (63.6)	4 (57.1)	4 (50.0)	22 (59.5)
Reform	4 (18.2)	6 (85.7)	0 (0.0)	10 (27.1)
Declining numbers	15 (68.2)	3 (42.9)	4 (50.0)	22 (59.5)
Conditions of confinement and abuse	3 (13.6)	1 (14.3)	6 (75.0)	10 (27.1)
Operational and facilities issues	7 (31.8)	3 (42.9)	5 (62.5)	15 (40.5)

[a]The column proportions for capacity of facilities were calculated using the total number of data available.
[b]These categories for closure are non–mutually exclusive categories.
[c]Local facilities means facilities operated by counties and cities. Out of the 37 local facilities, 2 were city facilities.

See Appendix C for more details on the differences between state and local facilities.

DISCUSSION

A few important patterns emerged from our analysis. Between 2010 and 2023 and across 33 states, 81 state and 37 local facilities stated an intention to close. Ultimately, 63% of state facilities and 59% of local facilities closed. Approximately one fifth of facilities stayed open despite a stated intent to close. Some other facilities with a stated intention to close were closed initially but were replaced, reopened, privatized, or merged (13 state, 8 local). Large facilities with more than 100 youths made up the majority (55%) of closed state facilities, mirroring broader trends of the movement away from large facilities to smaller facilities.[21] Most of the completed closures at the state level took place in 2011, while most of the completed closures at the local level took place between 2015 and 2020. Although some advocates for continued youth confinement argue that secure detention is needed to deter youth crime, these closures occurred during a 74% overall decline in youth crime rates between 2010 and 2020.[22,23]

Despite the evidence that reform efforts have led to changes within the youth criminal legal system, our data show that reform was cited less often for facilities that closed than for facilities that remained open.[24] When weighted, the public factors that seem to drive decision-making in closed state and

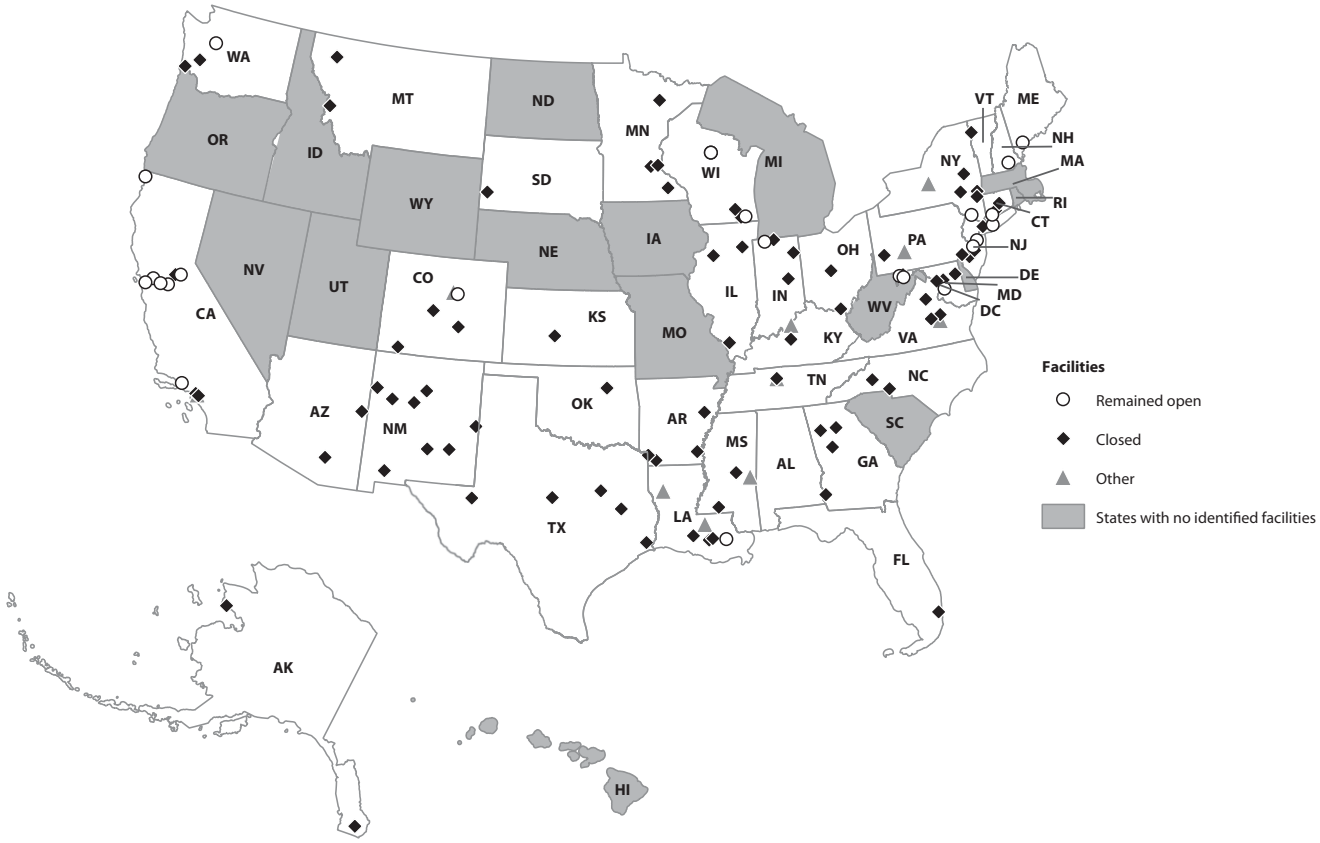


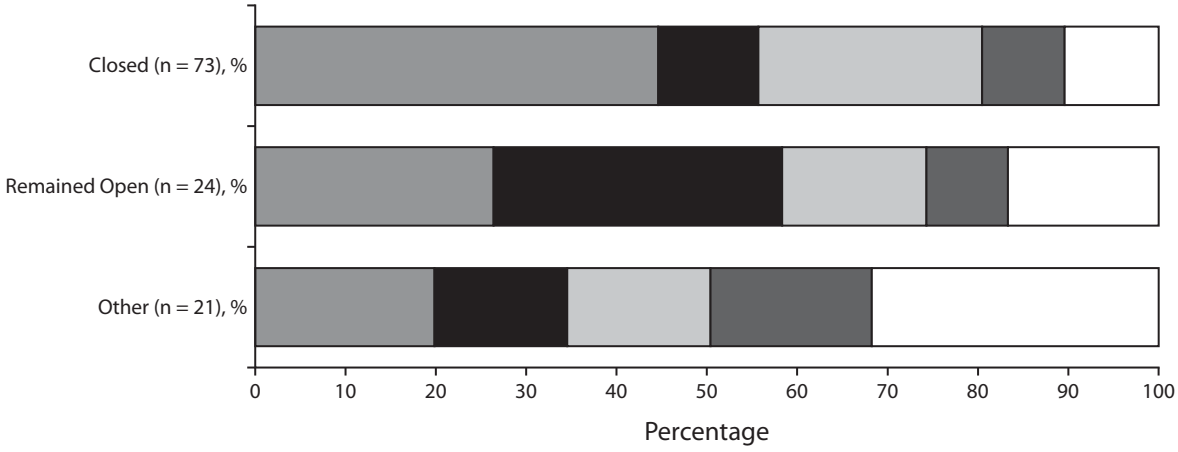
FIGURE 1— US States by Facility Outcome: January 2010–February 2023

Note. Please see Appendix B (available as a supplement to the online version of this article at https://ajph.org) for more information on the facilities included in this figure.

local facilities tended to be cost and decreasing numbers. Facilities that remained open more often cited reform as a reason for intent to close than facilities that closed. It is possible that focusing on reform by itself, without other accompanying reasons, may bring about additional political obstacles to closure despite evidence that incarceration is unnecessary and ineffective. This may be particularly true in the current political environment with its increasing focus on the criminalization of behavior as well as targeted efforts to quash reforms addressing racial inequities.

It is reasonable to assume that broader societal and economic trends likely influence closures of youth carceral facilities—both intended and completed. The high number of completed closures of state facilities (n = 16) in 2011, with a majority being large facilities (> 100 youths), was likely related to the economic recession that took place in the United States in the late aughts. Faced with budget constraints, states had difficulty justifying the high cost of youth incarceration as the incarcerated population decreased.[25] In contrast, a relatively high number of local facilities closed between 2015 and 2020. Decades of efforts by local jurisdictions, supported in part by national programming such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, led to significant reductions in the number of youths incarcerated before adjudication in local facilities.[24] Like states in the Great Recession, local jurisdictions faced the challenge of continuing to justify high costs of incarceration with lower numbers of youths in detention, made possible by those reform efforts. The COVID-19 pandemic also led to an initial dramatic drop in youths held in detention—nearly 30%—as jurisdictions reduced confinement to help slow the spread of the virus, although that trend soon reversed as the numbers of youths in detention rose throughout 2021 and 2022 without political will to maintain those gains.[26]

Despite overall reductions in the number of youths in detention and incarceration, youths detained remain disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and Latinx.[27] In 2019, Black youths



	Closed (n = 73), %	Remained Open (n = 24), %	Other (n = 21), %
Cost	44.6	26.4	19.8
Reform	11.1	31.9	14.7
Declining numbers	24.8	16.0	15.9
Conditions of confinement/abuse	9.1	9.0	17.9
Operational issues/facility issues	10.4	16.7	31.7

FIGURE 2— Facility Outcome by Weighted Stated Reasons for Closure: United States, January 2010–February 2023

were 41% of youths in state and local facilities, despite being only 15% of the total youth population. Meanwhile, non-Hispanic White youths made up 33% of detained youth, despite representing 52% of the total youth population.[28] White youths are more likely to shoplift and engage in violent behavior than Black youths, yet Black youths are more likely to be arrested and charged.[29] When Black and Indigenous youths are arrested or come in contact with the juvenile legal system, they are significantly less likely to be offered diversion programs[30] and are nearly 5 times more likely to be detained than White youths in the same position.[10] The racialized approach to criminalizing youths of color is evident throughout society and at every stage of the criminal legal process: school disciplinary policies, including in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, whether police confront a youth, and whether a youth is arrested, charged, taken into custody, or detained.[27,28]

Facility closures by themselves do not address this disproportionality because they do not address the underlying needs of youths and their families. Instead, additional system transformations rooted in solutions from impacted youths and communities and fundamentally different approaches are needed to improve youth experiences and outcomes. There were 8 facility closures that reportedly released some youths to community programming or to their families, in addition to transporting some youths to other facilities. In the rest of the facilities that closed, the youths were exclusively transported to other facilities (89%). The unintended negative effects of sending youths to nearby facilities when facilities close are especially pronounced when local detention centers close and arrested youths are sent to other counties for pretrial detention. In New Mexico, where 8 facilities successfully closed during our study period, the remaining local detention centers strained to fill the need—resulting in youths being sent to facilities around the state. As a result, some youths are now held in detention centers more than 120 miles away from their home counties.[31]

Moving youths from their communities, especially to facilities located far away, disrupts key connections with family and legal support, exacerbates feelings of loneliness and disconnection, requires time-intensive and costly transportation to and from court, and hinders successful reintegration of those youths back into their communities.[31] This echoes the practice of separating youths of color from their families used in both American chattel slavery and Native American boarding schools.[32] In contrast, keeping youths in the

community with appropriate supports can maintain critical connections with their families and help address their underlying needs.[33] To achieve this, system transformation efforts could include credible messenger mentoring models, wraparound supports for youths and families, and restorative justice interventions.[33]

Limitations

This study should be considered in light of its limitations. One of the larger limitations of our analysis is data completeness. Because no comprehensive list of facility closures was available, we sought to minimize this limitation by supplementing our landscape analysis methods, including gray literature review, snowball sampling, and advocacy reports that compiled lists of facilities. This approach allowed us to identify 98% of long-term secure state facilities but only 20% of local detention facilities.[21] However, as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention aggregates closure data, we were unable to use their data to identify specific closed facilities to ensure data completeness. We assume that the missing local facilities we do not have in this study do not differ substantially from the facilities we include. Despite the high degree of missingness for local facilities, the high proportion of identified state-level facilities and agreement between local and state findings increases our confidence in our findings. Another large limitation of our analysis is that it only captures the stated reasons for intent to close facilities. It does not identify any additional underlying reasons that may have played a role or those that were not made public. Discerning any reasons for closure beyond what was publicly stated exceeds the scope of this analysis.

Public Health Implications

A national movement to end youth incarceration and detention has been gaining momentum. Advocacy organizations, such as the Youth First Justice Collaborative, launched state and local campaigns in 15 jurisdictions to close youth detention and incarceration facilities. Several local jurisdictions, including King County; San Francisco, California; and Contra Costa, California, have committed to closing their youth detention facilities and replacing them with community-based alternatives. These efforts seek to redress the harm of youth detention and incarceration, especially the disproportionately negative consequences for youths of color. It is important that these commitments to closure persist to counter an emerging wave of "tough-on-crime" policies for youths in particular.[34]

This study illuminates pathways for future research to explore facility closures. Such research should investigate the impact of specific drivers supporting completed closures of youth facilities, including the combination of stated reasons to appeal to different audiences. Notably, we only found 1 paper in our scoping review that explores the strategies used by activists to close a youth detention center.[35] As more jurisdictions rethink their approach to juvenile justice, research should examine the particulars of budgeting and processes for actually closing facilities and expanding community alternatives. Supplementing reform arguments for facility closure with cost and reducing numbers may provide broader support.

Finally, our study extends the existing research landscape of youth incarceration and highlights potential opportunities for collaboration between advocacy and academia. Most of the academic articles within the youth legal system field that we found in our scoping review focus on reform efforts, rather than on decarceration and abolition. While emerging research has focused on the impacts of individual diversion programs and evaluations of specific programming, scholarship in this domain is not fully grappling with the complexities of actually closing youth incarceration facilities. This work is fundamentally rooted in the complexities of engaging critical audiences—including local and state governmental leaders—to reimagine the current system of incarceration and envision alternatives that support youths and their families, center impacted youths and harmed parties, and foster youth healing, accountability, and true community safety. In our experience, public will and broad community support are also essential to ensure politicians stay committed to closures and fund the robust alternatives needed to better support youths. Interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration will be needed to promote facility closures with corresponding system transformation efforts for meaningful and sustained reductions in youth detention and incarceration. AJPH

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PUBLICATION INFORMATION

Full Citation: Johnson EJ, Pluckebaum H, Martin KD, et al. Youth detention and incarceration facilities in the United States (2010 to February 2023): mapping closure intents and implementation. *Am J Public Health*. 2025;115(8):1299–1307.

Acceptance Date: March 11, 2025.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2025.308118

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E. J. Johnson compiled the landscape analysis, conducted data analysis, and wrote and revised the article. H. Pluckebaum contributed to the project's conceptual design, conducted the scoping review, and wrote scoping review findings. K. D. Martin contributed to the conceptual design of the project, provided feedback on initial findings, and provided feedback on article drafts. B. Danielson, B. Majercin, and S. A. Capestany contributed to the project's conceptual design and provided feedback on article drafts. V. H. Lyons contributed to the conceptual design of the project, provided feedback on initial findings, wrote and revised the article, and supervised the project. All authors approved the submitted version and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Emma Gause at Boston University School of Public Health for her creation of the geospatial map of the facility outcomes in the United States.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflicts of interest.

HUMAN PARTICIPANT PROTECTION

This study was exempt from institutional review board review as it did not include any individual data or protected health information.

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