

The Correctional Association of New York

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Questions and Answers:

How Can New York City Save Money and Improve its Juvenile Justice System?

CLOSE THE SPOFFORD YOUTH JAIL AND INVEST IN ALTERNATIVES TO DETENTION

Q. *What is the Spofford Juvenile Center?*

A. Spofford (aka Bridges) Juvenile Center is a secure detention center located in the Hunts Point neighborhood in the Bronx. The Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) operates Spofford as an intake facility for juveniles (youth aged 15 and younger) who are awaiting trial or who are awaiting placement in a long-term detention facility.

Q. *Why should the city shut down Spofford?*

A. The city has a long-standing commitment to permanently close this notorious youth jail. The jail has a history of poor conditions and brutality against children. In 1998, the city opened two new youth detention facilities with the claim that they would replace Spofford. However, the city reneged on this promise and decided instead to renovate Spofford and rename it "Bridges". Despite capital improvements at the facility, the building still does not provide appropriate space for educational programs and other needed services for young people. In addition, Spofford's remote location makes it difficult for family members to visit their children confined at the facility.

Q. *If the city shut down Spofford, where would the youth currently held there be placed?*

A. Because the city's detention population has declined significantly in recent years, all of the city's three secure facilities are operating below capacity. The city could consolidate its detention population in DJJ's two other secure centers – Crossroads in Brooklyn and Horizons in the Bronx.

Q. *How much money would the city save if it shut down Spofford?*

A. The city would save an estimated \$14 million annually from closing the facility. In FY2002, DJJ spent over \$11 million in personnel costs and roughly \$3 million in other costs to operate Spofford. Shutting the jail would generate significant savings for the city, which faces a huge deficit in the upcoming fiscal year. In addition the city would save an additional \$7.2 million in capital costs by canceling a planned renovation of the facility.

Q. *How much does secure detention cost per child?*

A. It cost \$358 a day -- or about \$131,000 a year -- to detain a young person in a DJJ secure facility. In contrast, the city's Alternative to Detention (ATD) program operated by the Department of Probation costs about \$44 a day.

Q. *Will closing Spofford jeopardize public safety?*

A. No. Youth are often inappropriately and unnecessarily detained in DJJ secure facilities. In fact, the huge increase in the juvenile detention population in the 1990s was driven by the incarceration of youth charged with low-level, non-violent offenses including misdemeanors and probation violations. Alleged juvenile offenders (youth charged with the most serious violent crimes, including murder, arson and robbery) comprise only 10% of the youth admitted to secure detention.

Other cities, such as Chicago and Portland, have significantly reduced their juvenile detention populations – by creating more alternatives to detention programs and successfully addressing the disproportionate confinement of youth of color – and simultaneously reduced the rate of juvenile crime.

Q. *What if the juvenile detention population starts to increase again in the future?*

A. Research in New York City and nationally has shown that youth are often sent to secure detention because of the lack of community-based options. In order to ensure that the city's youth detention population does not increase in the future, policymakers must create more community-based alternative to detention programs that will address the supervision needs of pre-adjudicated youth.

Q. *What are the racial and class backgrounds of youth jailed at Spofford?*

A. The city's detention policies reflect a stark social imbalance in our city. While African Americans and Latinos make up less than two-thirds of the city's youth population, they comprise 95% of the young people confined at Spofford and the city's other two youth jails. In addition, youth in detention come from the city's poorest neighborhoods. Youth from fifteen neighborhoods (South Jamaica, Bedford Stuyvesant, Harlem, Soundview, Morris Heights, East New York, East Harlem, Brownsville, St. George, Tremont, Bedford Park, South Bronx, University Heights, Morningside Heights and Crown Heights) account for 54% of all admissions to secure detention.

Q. *What are some of the social factors that lead youth to be jailed at Spofford?*

A. Youth confined in Spofford and the city's other detention centers often have troubled family histories and high rates of school failure. Sometimes the court will remand a child to Spofford to prevent him or her from returning to a chaotic family situation or because the child has a history of truancy.

Q. *Are there community-based programs that could address the challenges facing youth in the juvenile justice system?*

A. Yes. The Department of Probation, in partnership with the Department of Education, operates the Alternative to Detention (ATD) Program which provides community-based supervision and educational services for youth awaiting trial in Family Court. Over 90% of youth in the ATD program successfully complete the program – remaining arrest free and attending their court hearings. Unfortunately ATD has a limited number of program slots and is currently filled to capacity at its three sites. The ATD program must be improved and expanded so that more youth may be diverted from secure detention. In addition, the city must create new alternative programs that provide community-based supervision and supports to court-involved youth and their families.