"Only about one-quarter of incarcerated juveniles nationwide committed a violent offense" (Liss et. al. 12). If only a quarter of the kids that are placed in juvenile facilities have committed a violent offense, that means that the remaining kids only enacted minor crimes like theft, skipping school, or running away from home. For these petty crimes, kids are thrown into unfamiliar facilities that have been in existence since the 19th century. Each detention facility is different in its own way depending on factors of the state, employees, and inmates. Some may have to take drastic measures, while others act towards improvement. Since 1899, juvenile detention facilities have been filled with abuse and neglect; however, in recent years, these places have taken a turn in the opposite direction (Cannon and Beiser).

Unfortunately, abuse has been a common issue inside of juvenile incarceration facilities. Some states do not have rules against abuse towards these misunderstood teens, and what happens behind closed doors is not really under any control of authorities. An example of this is, "at Hickey School in Baltimore...there are nearly three assaults a day according to a recent state report" (Cannon and Beiser). This type of activity may be explained by the shortage of guards. For example, "a guard-to-inmate ratio of 1 officer to 10 to 12 juveniles is normal...Walnut Grove found the guard-to-inmate ratio to be 1 to 60" (Burnett). Due to this kind of shortage in a Mississippi facility, one of the only options to keep up with staffing is to pluck guards right from adult prisons and place them in an atmosphere with young adults. Some of these guards are simply not used to treating people of younger ages and as a result, are said to take actions that may not necessarily be best fit for youth. All over the United States, kids are being mistreated in the facilities where they are supposed to be receiving help and care. Abuse is not the only issue these places have though.

Another issue in juvenile detention centers is neglect. Multiple factors contribute to this problem, but these simple components do not make it okay. In their article, journalists Angie Cannon and Vince Beiser provide the heartbreaking story of a young victim of intentional neglect:"In Florida, a 211-page reports issued in March faulted employees at the Miami-Dade Regional Juvenile Detention Center for failing to act as a 17-year old begged for help but slowly died of a ruptured appendix over two days in June 2003." A young man died just because the officers would not give him a second glance. Understaffing is also a major factor of neglect. Parole officer Adam Rodriguez addressed this issue with, "In Texas, each probation officer is supposed to have between 40 and 60 kids...At one point I had 96" (Liss et. al. 99). One officer trying to handle 96 cases makes it near to impossible to work one-on-one with each kid and make sure they are improving. Sadly, more kids are also given to one officer because more laws have been created that support the arrest of children for minor offenses such as running away from home. Although there are still trouble-filled facilities, the government system has started to fix the two major issues; abuse and neglect.

Laws made by the federal and state governments have been a beneficial step in the right direction for an improvement in juvenile justice systems. One worry is that when kids are placed in these facilities with other crime levels, they will absorb the poor information given by their peers. Pam Jones, detention director at King County Juvenile Facility, said, "There are certain classifications a youth has to meet in order to be accepted in. They do not
appear at the facility immediately following their arrest. The first thing the child will do is appear in front of a judge in order to be classified into a certain area of the facility.” Laws have also been made to protect the inmates from mistreatment. With these new actions taken by lawmakers, the facilities will evolve from one with harsh conditions to one that centralizes itself on help for the many youths it takes care of.

Mental illness is one of the major issues that detained youth are experiencing around the country. In the article “Kids Are Not Adults,” Sarah Alice Brown provides the fact, “Between 65 percent and 70 percent of the 2 million young people arrested each year in the United States have some type of mental health disorder.”

Due to the country’s population increase, this statistic has most likely increased with the number of kids incarcerated by every year that passes. Mental illnesses cannot just be wiped away; these illnesses will continue to linger and pester their victim. In the past, most mental illness sufferers were just placed in the facilities with the rest of the juveniles, because of limited knowledge of mental health disorders. As a result they received no unique care. Arresting kids with mental illnesses and just throwing them into a facility is like locking them in a closet, never to get help or interaction with the real world. Recently though, good samaritans have realized that this is not an effective way to deal with these issues. A number of juvenile detention centers have transformed into rehabilitation facilities, focusing on providing specific help and care for those who may be suffering with mental illnesses, just like the King County Facility. Instead of being locked up, youth with mental illnesses are receiving help and care from professionals.

Professional counseling and family rehabilitation can go hand-in-hand. A juvenile is like an onion, there are many layers to them and their struggles. In order to get to the core of the issue, each layer needs to be peeled off one by one. Lately, detention facilities have realized that in order for kids to fix their behavior and improve, they need some kind of guidance. Counselors are brought in to provide this assistance. “We have specialists from the University of Washington on call 12 hours a day, 7 days a week,” stated Pam Jones, “We have psychiatrists that provide some of the best services around.” Help like this is spreading to more and more facilities around the country that have a desire for the rehabilitation of pre-adults. Family counseling also plays a major role in the lives of young detainees. Some of these issues are; parents do not have the time to raise their child while juggling multiple jobs, even some parents have spent some time in jail or prison, etc. Facilities have found a new way to fix the issues at home: “They include families in the treatments...multi-systematic therapy teaches parents how to effectively handle the high risk ‘acting out’ behaviors of teenagers” (Brown). With this help, parents have an example of what they need to be doing with their children at home. Professionals are giving parents fresh and helpful ideas on how to accurately control their child, contributing to the possible improvement of today’s youth.

As of 2012, only a select number of states had adopted laws to protect the juveniles within detention facilities (Brown). These states have made progress that eliminated the issues of abuse and neglect their facilities may have endured. Aside from the government, various groups and projects have been formed that seek to reform all juvenile systems. An example of this is the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI). JDAI focuses on, “better conditions of confinement...more programs and remediation, fewer health and safety risks, and...less-stressed, better-trained staff” (Liss et. al. 129). Implementation of systems like these is a step towards total reform of our juvenile justice system. Imagine the outcome if every state took initiative and used reform acts such as JDAI.

Works Cited


Jones, Pam. Personal interview. 14 October 2014.
