



## *Overview*

# **Don't Abandon Us: Addressing Youth Crime and Trauma**

[Don't Abandon Us: Addressing Youth Crime and Trauma](#) highlights the lived experiences of two people who spent decades serving prison sentences assigned to them as children. In a moment of growing concerns about crime, this short film underscores the importance of effective public safety strategies that identify and address the early traumas that afflict so many young people who come into contact with the criminal legal system—especially those from underserved communities affected by the legacies of racism, economic exclusion, and over-policing.

Federal, state, and local officials seeking to hold young people accountable for unlawful behavior must continue to prioritize Trauma Informed Care (TIC) to address the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that are disproportionately common among youth who have contact with the criminal legal system.

Although national data are not yet available, in recent years many states and local jurisdictions have reported troubling increases in violent crime involving young people.

These increases buck a two-decades old trend that saw juvenile crime rates steadily decline as justice practitioners reduced the use of incarceration in favor of community-based safety strategies focused on the conditions that lead to unwanted behavior—supporting kids' access to stable housing and home environments, keeping them connected to school, and addressing their substance use and mental health challenges, for example.

Decades of research show Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)—early exposure to things like physical, sexual, and verbal abuse, family and

**Roszetta Timons spent more than half her life behind bars, the first time when she was only nine years old. When she was 17, Roszetta defended herself against a rapist. After he died, she spent the next 26 years in prison. Throughout her incarceration—even as a juvenile—she never received any trauma support.**

**Alonzo Turner-Bey had an uneventful childhood until the 1980s, when drugs and violence took over his neighborhood. Many of his friends lost their lives, and when his uncle was shot, Alonzo identified his body at the morgue. “I began doing...a downward spiral,” he recalls, “and then I started selling drugs.” Convicted for murder as a youth, Alonzo spent more than 31 years in adult institutions without receiving services to address his past trauma.**

street violence, and the loss of a parent to incarceration or drugs—correlate with increased risk of serious, persistent, and chronic criminal offending in adolescence and beyond.

Incarceration may temporarily incapacitate a youthful offender, but TIC and other trauma-informed responses can help young people toward a new life-long path. We must hold youthful offenders accountable for unacceptable behavior. But not at the cost of neglecting the traumas associated with their unwanted behaviors.

### Key Recommendations

The federal government (US Dept of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention) should develop standardized guidelines for trauma screenings and assessment to ensure all juvenile legal system agencies conduct appropriate screening and offer effective care

Federal, state, and local authorities must properly resource Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) and other trauma-focused responses that address the conditions that lead to unwanted behavior as they act to hold kids accountable.

Government, system stakeholders, and philanthropies should support public education about ACES and youth trauma to counteract calls for responses that cause more harm than healing.

### Key Research Findings

- In 2020, juvenile violent crime had declined by 78 percent from its peak in 1994. Upticks in youthful offending over the past two years are widespread and unlikely to correlate with local reforms.
- Up to 93% of children in the criminal legal system have experienced high levels of ACEs.
- For every ACE category that a youth experiences, research shows a 35% to 144% increased risk of violent behavior