



Testimony Presented to the Council of the District of Columbia

The Committee on Human Services, Tommy Wells, Chair

September 23, 2010 by

Tracy Velázquez

Executive Director, the Justice Policy Institute

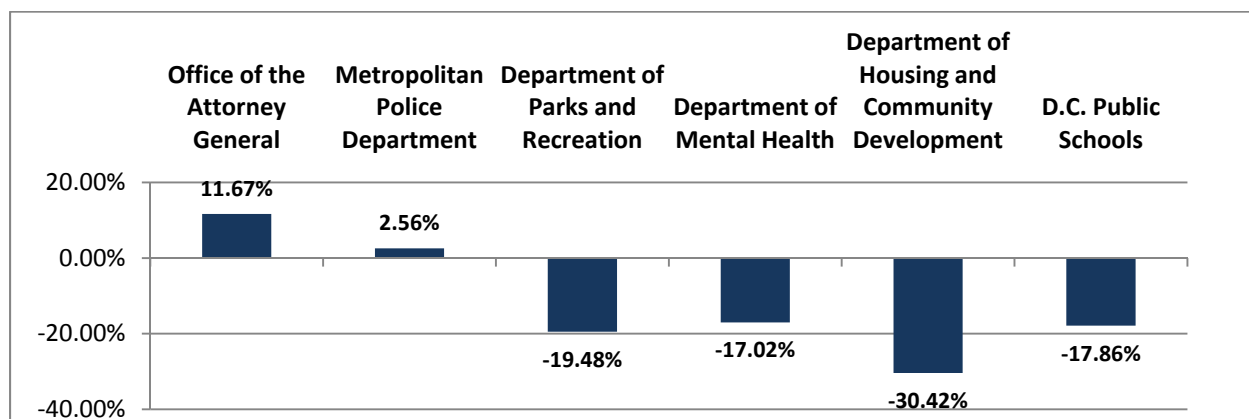
Thank you, Chairman Wells and members of the Committee. My name is Tracy Velázquez, and I am executive director of the Justice Policy Institute. JPI’s mission is to reduce reliance on incarceration as a response to social problems and improve community wellbeing. As we have a two-pronged mission, I also have two-pronged testimony: to encourage further reforms that promote alternatives to secure confinement and provide services to youth in the DYRS system; but also discuss how the District can improve public safety, community well-being and outcomes for youth by changes and investments outside of the juvenile justice system.

Earlier this month, JPI released our report, “Money Well Spent,” which uses the District as a case study in how to realign resources for better public safety, community and individual outcomes. Like many cities, D.C. has a high rate of poverty – about 1 in 5 residents and 30 percent of children live in poverty, and one resident in ten lives in extreme poverty – that is, 50 percent or less of the federal poverty level. Race and poverty cannot be disentangled here in D.C.: Black residents here are three times more likely than white residents to live in poverty.

Data & Indicators for D.C.’s Eight Wards	Ward 1	Ward 2	Ward 3	Ward 4	Ward 5	Ward 6	Ward 7	Ward 8	All D.C.
% People of Color 2000	75%	39%	20%	85%	92.6%	70%	98.8%	94.9%	72%
Median household income-1999	\$59,140	\$130,891	\$187,709	\$81,500	\$54,479	\$67,454	\$45,039	\$35,228	\$78,192
Violent Crime (per 1,000 pop.)-2007	17	13	1.7	12	17	16	16	22	14
People receiving food stamps-2009	8,168	3,160	331	10,217	16,407	13,396	24,370	31,570	13,452
Unemployment-2009	10.1%	5.8%	3.2%	9.6%	15.5%	11.5%	19.5%	28.3%	14.4%
People receiving TANF-2009	3,002	892	43	3,608	6284	4,042	11,212	16,053	5,642
Needed but did not receive treatment for drug use-averages 2004-2006	3.27%	3.03%	1.98%	2.22%	4.43%	2.82%	3.12%	4.23%	3.06%
% of schools with over half of students testing below proficient in math	60%	50%	0%	40%	71%	63%	91%	96%	65%
% of schools with over half of students testing below proficient in reading	70%	50%	0%	53%	77%	69%	91%	91%	69%
% graduated high school	68%	87%	96%	78%	72%	79%	71%	66%	78%
% graduated college	39%	64%	79%	33%	21%	44%	13%	8%	39%
% of committed DYRS youth population from Ward	7%	2%	1%	9%	15%	11%	23%	32%	100%

Black residents are also much more likely to wind up incarcerated – whereas Blacks represent 54 percent of the general population, they represent 89 percent of the D.C. corrections population; whites make up 2.2% of the corrections population, while comprising over 40% of the District’s general population. This disproportionality is mirrored at the juvenile justice level, where in 2009 96 percent of the department’s committed youth were African American. Over half of the committed youth were from Wards 7 and 8, which had the lowest median household incomes in the district.

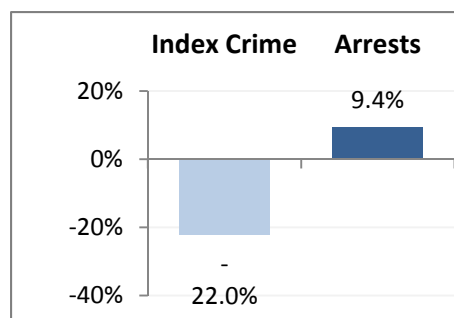
While poverty does not cause crime, people with low incomes and wealth are the most likely to end up in correctional facilities. This is for a host of reasons, including the targeting of specific neighborhoods for policing, insufficient financial resources to pay legal expenses and bail, and lack of access to programs and services that are shown to help reduce justice involvement. For youth, these include good schools, activities that promote positive youth development such as after-school and recreational programs, treatment, adequate and proper nutrition, and stable housing.



Funding for policing and processing of D.C. residents has increased while funding for positive social programs and services has decreased in the last 2 years. *Source: Justice Policy Institute, “A Capitol Concern: This Disproportionate Impact of the Justice System on Low-Income Communities in D.C.,” July 2010.*

Unfortunately, the budgets of these types of programs – more so than the budgets for policing or locking people up – have been cut. While funding for the Departments of Parks and Recreation, Mental Health and Housing and Community Development all have been cut, the funding for the Office of the Attorney General and the Metropolitan Police Department both rose. This is at a time when the District has continued to see crime rates fall; between 2001 and 2009, serious crimes fell by 22 percent in D.C.

Perhaps as a reflection of these budgetary considerations, arrests in the District have continued to increase. While youth arrests went down 1.8% the first six months of this year compared to the same time period last year, there was a large increase – 45.9% - in miscellaneous misdemeanor arrests (which are the largest single category for arrests).



Percent change in DC, 2001-2009

How does this relate to DYRS and what course they should chart moving forward?

Like many others here to speak on behalf of continuing the reforms that DYRS initiated several years ago, JPI wishes to commend the Council and District leaders for pursuing bold initiatives to improve the juvenile justice system. The model of a smaller, more rehabilitative facility is one that has been shown in several other states to have better outcomes than large, congregate care facilities. And limiting the use of secure facilities to those youth who are at highest risk of re-offending conserves public dollars for serving those few youth, who for a time, need to be in secure care. Research has shown that locking kids up has negative consequences both for the youth themselves, in terms of life outcomes, and for their communities in terms of re-offending. DYRS should continue to place youth in the least restrictive setting that preserves public safety, focusing on providing the services youth placed in the community need to succeed.

However, DYRS cannot improve public safety and outcomes for youth in the District in a vacuum. I urge you to take a number of steps going forward that will help DYRS be successful in their reform efforts, while enhancing the well-being of all parts of the city. Our recommendations include the following:

- Focus law enforcement efforts on the most serious offenses. When you flood a system with youth who are low-level misdemeanants, you reduce the ability of the system to be effective in serving those youth it was intended for.
- Increase services to meet the needs of youth and families not just once they enter the system, but before. Washington, D.C. has many fragile families for whom early intervention services will pay for themselves many times over. This includes health and mental health, early childhood education, nutrition, housing, and employment.
- Focus on those areas most in need. While Wards 5, 7 and 8 stand out as areas with the highest levels poverty – and the most number of justice-involved youth – there are neighborhoods in other Wards which also are pockets of concentrated poverty. The recent Promise Neighborhood grant awarded to the César Chávez Middle School is a start; the District should expand upon this model – regardless of federal funding dollars – to help the youth avoid the cycle of poverty that many have become caught up in.
- If a youth does end up getting involved in delinquent behavior, ensure that there are adequate services at each point in the system spectrum. Youth who are not a high risk to public safety but have a lot of service needs should not be sent to the most restrictive – and expensive – end because there are inadequate services in the community.
- Give kids more positive youth development activities. New facilities like the pool and recreation field in Deanwood are a great example. As youth who get in trouble tend to do so during out-of-school hours, constructive activities, including sports, the arts, and employment opportunities benefit youth and help reduce use of the juvenile justice system at the same time.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to come before you today. Please don't hesitate to call upon me or JPI in the future, we stand ready and will to help the District address serious issues such as this that impact both justice systems and the wellbeing of all communities.