

Over the past year, a number of different advocates, policy-makers, practitioners, funders and directly impacted individuals and families have attempted to flesh out what a more effective approach might look like to serving 18-24 year olds who are currently under the custody of the adult justice system. Groups as diverse as the U.S. Justice Department, to leading academic institutions to nonprofit advocacy organizations have sought to advance better approaches to serve young adults because they believe it will enhance public safety, improve the lives of justice involved individuals and reduce the use of incarceration for the hundreds of thousands of 18-24-year-olds in America's prisons and jails. *Roughly 1 in 5 people incarcerated in America's prison and jails are between the ages of 18 and 24 – about half of whom are young people of color.*

The topic is critical to criminal justice reform efforts because young adults are overrepresented in the justice system, including the nation's prisons and jails. The data show that while 18 to 24-year-olds are only 9.9 percent of the United States population, they are:

- 12 percent of the prison population;
- 21 percent of prison admissions;
- 26 percent of the probation population;
- 28 percent of arrests and people in jail; and
- 40 percent of robbery and homicide arrests.

Young adults also experience crime at twice the rate of any other age group.

Young adults of color are disproportionately impacted by the way the justice system currently approaches their behavior: Among a sampling of eight cities and counties, young adults were 8.4 percent of the population, but were 25 percent of the jail population in these communities, 72 percent of whom were young adults of color. In these eight communities, taxpayers spend \$163 a day to jail someone (upwards of \$58,000 per year). In sharp contrast to the costs of jailing a young adult, a community-based approach to meeting the needs of young adults will cost less than what taxpayers spend to jail 18-24-year-olds.

To help advance thinking around this policy question, the Justice Policy Institute (JPI) convened close to four dozen people from ten states in two structured focus groups on the East and West Coast to discuss the opportunities, and the challenges in developing a better approach to meeting the needs of justice

involved 18-24 year olds. A diverse spectrum of people that included law enforcement, juvenile and adult corrections leaders, academics, community-based organizations that serve young adults, and people who identify as formerly incarcerated young people had an opportunity to engage in a robust dialogue with each other.

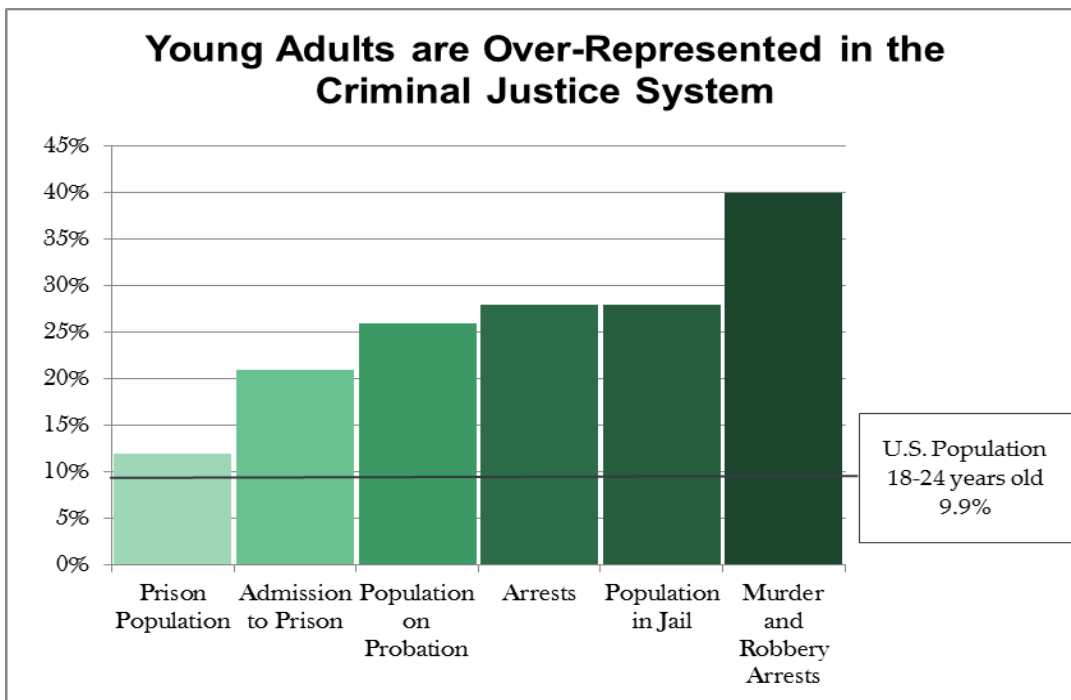
These convenings did not seek to find unanimity: reasonable people that represent different branches of the justice reform constituency can (and should) bring different perspectives around issues as complex as crime, race, incarceration and how billions of dollars in public resources should be spent. That said, there were themes that emerged from the dialogue that participants identified as key in shaping a more effective policy approaches for young adults in the justice system.

The themes that emerged from the convenings include:

- 1) **The justice reform field should seize the opportunity to improve the approach to young adults:** The impact of the adolescent development research, legal arguments and emerging political opportunities may offer an opportunity to advance policy changes that can reduce incarceration and promote the kind of positive outcomes that have lagged in the adult justice arena for young adults. The data show that there are an estimated 400,000 18-to-24-year-olds in prison and jails, that young adults are overrepresented at various stages of the justice system, and young adults of color are disproportionately impacted by the justice system.
- 2) **An improved approach to young adults should be community-based, collaborative and draw on the strengths of young adults.** Nearly everyone that joined the dialogue offered that, the best way to reduce 18-24 year-old's justice system involvement should involve community-based approaches, largely outside the formal justice system. The approach that was offered was one that is developmentally appropriate, individually tailored, and seeks to reduce someone's justice system involvement – all philosophical goals of the juvenile justice system. An approach to increased system and interagency collaboration to leverage a wiser investment of resources to ensure that young adults get the schooling, housing, job training and health care they need was prioritized. Efforts to reduce the impact of police contact also need to be part of a revamped approach to young adults. There was a call for an approach to young adults that empowers neighborhoods, strengthens communities, and builds on the strengths of young adults. Participants also said a revamped approach to serve young adults should seek to resolve behavior through strategies that rely more on procedural justice, public health, restorative justice and trauma informed services.
- 3) **The field needs tools and reforms to law, policy and practice to develop a more effective approach to young adults:** Participants identified changes to law, policy and practice that need to happen so that they can successfully develop a new approach. Key changes in practice include: shifting community supervision practices, integrating families, matching young adults with peer navigators, and a commitment to sharing data and information on processes. Law

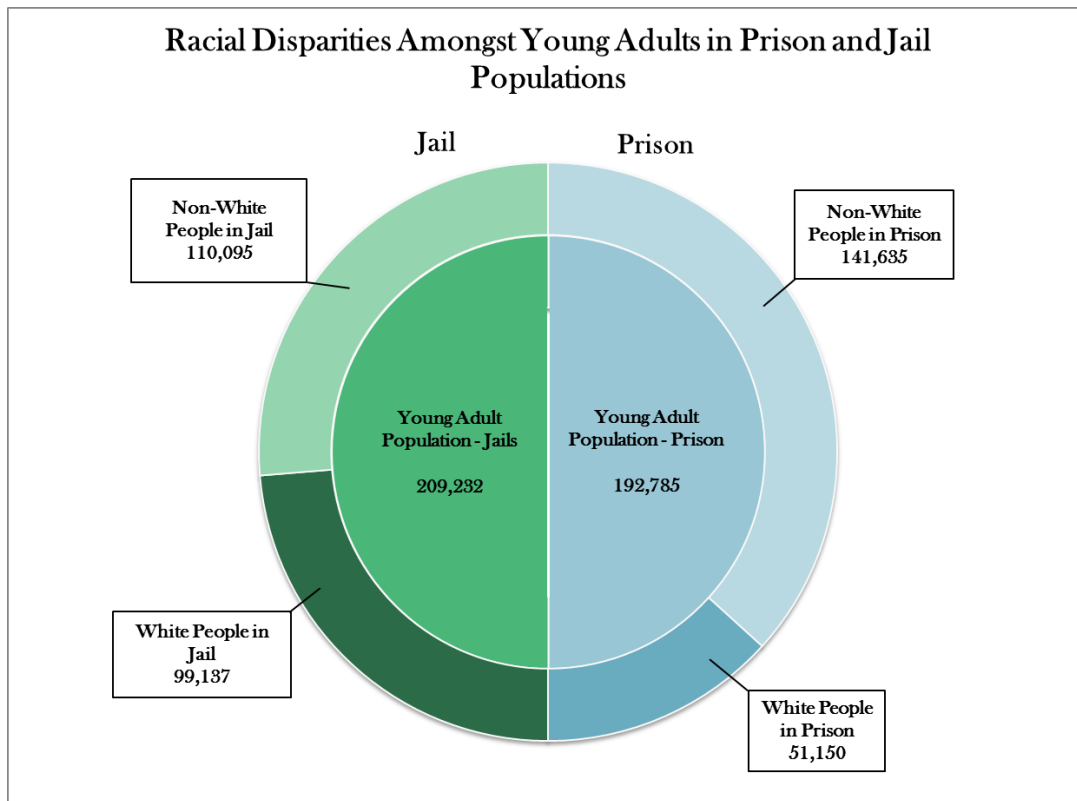
changes would need to target barriers to changing practice. The need to develop messaging tools on the best ways to talk about a new approach to young adults was identified, as were a need for more research on what works with this population, opportunities to share information on approaches, and strategies to reinvest public resources in community approaches.

Like any new attempt to improve an approach, participants offered that there may be pitfalls or unintended consequences that have to be navigated if different approaches in working with 18-24 year-olds are going to successfully reduce the use of incarceration and enhance public safety: It was offered that there is a need to keep an eye on avoiding net-widening; keeping the focus on the community and not on new facilities or resourcing a whole new system; and making sure older role models can remain involved in young adults lives. It was offered that there needs to be an intentional focus on addressing the needs of young adult women, and avoiding an approach that inadvertently affects strategies to reduce justice involvement of people older than 24. These “cautionary notes” are offered as well so that as change agents fashion new approaches to young adults they can be as successful as possible in reducing incarceration, enhancing public safety and promoting better outcomes.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division (2015); Federal Bureau of Investigation (2013); Bureau of Justice Statistics - Characteristics of Adults on Probation (1997), Prisoners in 2012 (2013), Prisoners in 2013 (2014); The Council of State Governments - Justice Center, Reducing recidivism and improving other outcomes for young adults in the juvenile and adult criminal justice system (2015).

Note: Jail figure from Bureau of Justice Statistics Profile of Jail Inmates, 2002; Murder arrests also include non-negligent manslaughter



Source: Prisoners in 2013 (2014); Jail Inmates at Midyear 2014 (2015). Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Methodology: Utilized data of young adult populations from Profile of Jail Inmates, 2002 and applied it to the data from the Jail Inmates at Midyear 2014 (2015)

About the methodology of *Improving Approaches to Serving Young Adults in the Justice System*

This summary largely reports out the broad themes and findings that came from two roundtable discussions JPI organized with four dozen people on both coasts discuss improved approaches to meeting the needs of young adults. The focus group included people from 10 states, and included law enforcement, corrections officials, district attorneys, public defenders, leaders of community-based organizations and people who identified as formerly incarcerated young adults. This brief augments the themes and findings with data and information provided by the participants and obtained from other sources following the roundtable.

For the purposes of this paper, “young adults” refers to 18 to 24-year-olds currently under custody of the adult justice system. While important work remains to be done on behalf of young adults waived into the criminal justice system as youth or who are in the juvenile justice system beyond their 18th birthday, JPI sought to catalyze a discussion specifically on approaches for young adults in the criminal justice system.