Youth Criminally Tried and Incarcerated as Adults

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I. Summary and Introduction

1. Each year approximately 200,000 youth are prosecuted as adults in criminal court, and on any given day, thousands are incarcerated in adult jails and prisons. By far, the vast majority of the youth who are criminalized and incarcerated in adult facilities are racial and ethnic minorities. Youth sent to adult jails and prisons are subjected to multiple additional human rights violations. They are at high risk of physical and sexual assault. They are deprived of age-appropriate programming, education, and medical and mental health care. Because prisons are not set up to meet the needs of youth, youth in prison are disproportionately punished through disciplinary actions and solitary confinement.

II. Legal Framework

2. In violation of the U.S.’s human rights obligations, state criminal laws permit, and in some cases require, that youth, defined as individuals under 18, be subjected to adult criminal prosecution and penalties. Youth are incarcerated in the adult criminal system not only for serious or violent crimes but also for misdemeanors. Indeed, New York data from 2010 indicates that 49% of the incarcerated youth population had originally been arrested for a misdemeanor.

3. Youth wind up in the adult criminal system through a few different legal mechanisms. Youth who normally would be under juvenile court jurisdiction can be moved to adult criminal court, in many states, at the discretion of the prosecutor. For example, in Florida, where state law allows prosecutors to charge any 16-17 year-old accused of any felony and any 14-15 year-old accused of with specific felonies as an adult, 98% of youth transfers are decided by prosecutors, with no judicial review. Some states mandate that certain youth be automatically charged as adults. In New York, all 16 and 17 year-olds are excluded from juvenile jurisdiction for any crime, and are tried, jailed, and imprisoned as adults, while youth as young as 13 may be charged as adults for certain crimes. Michigan combines mandatory exclusion with prosecutorial discretion. It requires that all 17 year-olds automatically be tried as adults, and youth aged 14-16 may be “waived” through prosecutorial discretion into adult court. Additionally, youth of any age may be tried as adults through Michigan’s “designated proceedings” process. Youth as young as 14 may be given life sentences with no possibility for parole. Further, in Michigan youth are precluded from being tried as juveniles if ever they were tried as an adult, though no conviction resulted.

4. At the conclusion of the November 2010 UPR of the United States, several member states’ recommended that the US end sentences of life without parole for juveniles, and one state recommended enacting legislation to ensure that imprisonment is only used as a last resort when sentencing all juvenile offenders. The US rejected these recommendations. The US has taken some positive steps with regard to its treatment of youth in the context of the criminal system. Supreme Court decisions in 2010 and 2012 limited application of the sentence of life without the possibility of parole for juveniles. However, judges still have the option of applying these sentences in certain cases. In 2012 the Department of Justice (DOJ) published national standards under the Prison Rape Elimination Act addressing sexual violence in four types of facilities. The PREA “Youthful Inmate Standard” provides that any person under the age of 18 must be housed separately from adult inmates in prisons, jails, and lockups. Despite this
constructive step, the standards are not mandatory and many states do not follow PREA standards.\textsuperscript{16}

**III. Review of US Compliance With International Human Rights Obligations**

**A. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment**

*Mental, emotional, and physical harm*

5. Incarceration in adult facilities places tremendous stress on youth and fails to provide adequate mental health services and programming. As a result, youth in adult facilities are eight times more likely to commit suicide.\textsuperscript{17} Additionally, youth in adult facilities are twice as likely to be physically harmed by staff.\textsuperscript{18} Particularly troubling is the use of electro-shock devices, also known as Tasers. In Michigan, ten out of 38 youth in adult prisons surveyed in Michigan by the ACLU Michigan Juvenile Life Without Parole Initiative (JLWOPI) and the International Women’s Human Rights Clinic (IWHR) indicated that they had been tasered, and 31 of them witnessed the tasering of other youth.

*Sexual Violence*

6. Youth also suffer sexual violence, often repeatedly, in adult facilities. The Department of Justice (DOJ) has recognized the increased risk of sexual violence faced by children in adult facilities.\textsuperscript{19} Recent reports from the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics also reflect that youth under 18 are at great risk of sexual violence.\textsuperscript{20} More than a third (38\%) of children in adult prisons in Michigan responding to a survey JLWOPI and IWHR reported that they had been sexually assaulted while incarcerated (12\% by staff, 35\% by other prisoners and 9\% by staff and other prisoners). In follow up interviews, youth reported being infected with sexually transmitted diseases as a result of sexual assaults, but were often denied testing, medical care, or forced to pay the cost for their examination and treatment.

*Solitary Confinement*

7. Despite international law prohibitions on placing youth in solitary confinement, youth in adult facilities are more likely to be placed in isolation.\textsuperscript{21} In New York City Jails, 23\% of youth under the age of 19 are placed in solitary confinement at any given moment.\textsuperscript{22} Solitary confinement can have long-term serious impacts on youth during a crucial time in their emotional and cognitive development. According to a recent report, youth in solitary in U.S. prisons reported physical harm,\textsuperscript{23} self-harm (including cutting themselves and suicide attempts),\textsuperscript{24} hallucinations,\textsuperscript{25} and anxiety.\textsuperscript{26} The continued practice in the US of holding people, including juveniles, in prolonged solitary confinement is of continuing concern to the UN Human Rights Committee, which recommended in recent Concluding Observations to the US that it abolish the practice for persons under the age of 18.\textsuperscript{27}

*Rikers Island, New York*
8. A federal report documenting conditions for youth in jails on New York’s Rikers Island states that adolescents are at constant risk of physical harm and live in incessant fear as they are subject to pervasive violence and unnecessary excessive use of force by Department of Corrections staff.\textsuperscript{28} Even youth suffering from mental health impairments, which result in limited impulse control, are subjected to such unwarranted treatment.\textsuperscript{29} Further, when youth suffer serious injuries such as “broken jaws, broken orbital bones, broken noses, long bone fractures, and lacerations requiring stitches” resulting from officers’ use of force, DOC neglects to provide them prompt medical care.\textsuperscript{30} Youth also suffer frequent punitive segregation amounting to solitary confinement on Rikers Island.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{B. Racial and Ethnic Minorities Disproportionately Impacted}

9. By far, the vast majority of the youth who are criminalized and incarcerated in adult facilities are racial and ethnic minorities. Indeed, while there are troubling racial disparities throughout the U.S. prison system, the disparities are the most extreme among the youngest prisoners. In recent Concluding Observations directed to the US, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination criticized the “the disproportionate rate at which youth from racial and ethnic minorities are arrested in schools and are referred to the criminal justice system, prosecuted as adults, incarcerated in adult prisons, and sentenced to life imprisonment without parole.”\textsuperscript{32}

10. Black youth are more than twice as likely to be arrested as white youth.\textsuperscript{33} After arrest, they stand a much greater chance of being tried as adults. A 2007 study found that African-Americans constituted 83\% of youth cases filed in adult courts.\textsuperscript{34} The federal government does not provide a racial breakdown of the estimated 1,300 youth under 18 held in adult prisons, but available data shows that racial disparities are the most extreme among the youngest prisoners. Overall, the imprisonment rate of black males is 6 times that of white males, but among 18-19 year olds, black males are more than 9 times as likely to be in prison than white males the same age.\textsuperscript{35} In 2002, nearly three out of four youth admitted to adult state prison were youth of color.\textsuperscript{36} State statistics highlight the disparities. In Florida, Black boys are transferred to the adult system at twice the rate at which they are received in the juvenile system, while White boys are transferred at slightly below the rate at which they are received in the juvenile system.\textsuperscript{37} In New York, of the 136 youth held in adult prisons on December 31, 2012, 65\% (89) were Black, though only 17.5\% of the state’s general population is Black; 24\% (32) were Hispanic, also disproportionate to their numbers in the general population; and 9\% (12) were white, despite representing 57.2\% of the general state population.\textsuperscript{38} Youth of color also are much more likely to receive the most extreme sentences. For example, in Michigan, 73.4\% of the individuals serving life without parole sentences for offenses committed as youth are people of color.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{C. Right to Family, Education, Housing, and Employment}

11. Particularly when it comes to youth of color, states too often resort to criminalization and detention, including imprisonment in adult facilities,\textsuperscript{40} instead of supporting alternatives to harmful criminal system approaches, and meaningfully addressing inadequate school funding and a lack of social services to ensure healthy community outcomes.\textsuperscript{41} Youth in adult prisons are deprived of age-appropriate programming, education, and medical and mental health care. Because prisons are not set up to meet the needs of youth, youth in prison are disproportionately
punished through disciplinary actions and solitary confinement.\textsuperscript{42} In solitary, denial of these important educational and developmental resources is even more severe. Youth are provided little to no physical activity, are not given age- and developmentally-appropriate nutrition, are denied contact with family members, are prevented from continuing educational pursuits, and are denied rehabilitative programming as mandated by international law.\textsuperscript{43} Once released from prison, youth face a much higher re-arrest rate than youth processed in the juvenile justice system\textsuperscript{44} and their convictions often impede access to employment, housing, and education.\textsuperscript{45}

IV. Recommendations

The United States should:

- 12. Adopt measures to ensure that all youth in conflict with the law are not subjected to adult criminal procedures that fail to take into account their age and cognitive development and the desirability of promoting rehabilitation.
- Create meaningful incentives and penalties to ensure that states comply with the Prison Rape Elimination Act and enforce PREA's audit requirements.
- Currently most states do not collect or report data on youth prosecuted in the adult criminal justice system. The U.S. should require that states track the frequency and mechanisms by which youth are tried in the adult criminal justice system and develop nationwide statistical data on youth in the adult system that is disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation.
- Ensure that juveniles are not transferred to adult courts, are separated from adults during pretrial detention and after sentencing, and are not held in adult jails or prisons.
- Enact legislation to ensure that imprisonment is used only as a last resort when sentencing all juvenile offenders, and provide comprehensive services to criminal system-involved youth.

Endnotes

\textsuperscript{1} Patrick Griffin, Sean Addie, Benjamin Adams, and Kathy Firestine, \textit{Trying Juveniles as Adults: An Analysis of State Transfer Laws and Reporting}, U.S. DEP’T OF JUSTICE, OFFICE OF JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION NATIONAL REPORT SERIES, BULLETIN, 20-1 (Sept. 2011). This figure combines the estimated number of youth transferred from juvenile to adult criminal court and the estimated number of youth prosecuted as adults in states that exclude 16 and 17 year olds from juvenile court jurisdiction. The conservative estimate of youth who are tried as adults in states that try all 16 and 17 year olds is 175,000. \textit{Id.} at 21. There were 14,000 reported transfers of youth into the adult system in 2007, but most states do not track or report the data. \textit{Id.} at 20.

3 HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, BRANDED FOR LIFE 4 (2014), available at http://www.hrw.org/node/124345/section/5; MICHELLE WEEMHOFF & KRISTIN STALEY, MICHIGAN COUNCIL ON CRIME & DELINQUENCY, YOUTH BEHIND BARS 11 (2014) (“In 2012, 59 percent of youth who were waived or designated as adults were Black or African American, even though Black youth only make up 18 percent of the youth population statewide.”); U.S. Census Bureau (2010), Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristic of New York, retrieved from: http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_DP_DPDP1; Criminal Justice Case Processing of 16-17 Year Olds, Prepared by New York Division of Criminal Justice Services, Office of Justice Research and Performance, January 4, 2013, p. 3 and Table 6a, available at: http://www.cardozo.yu.edu/sites/default/files/Criminal%20Justice%20Case%20Processing%20of%2016-17%20Year%20Olds.pdf.

4 77 Fed. Register 119 (June 20, 2012), p. 37128 (noting that state prison inmates under 18 were more than 8 times more likely to have a substantiated incident of sexual abuse than the average inmate) available at http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-06-20/pdf/2012-12427.pdf.

5 American Civil Liberties Union & Human Rights Watch, Growing Up Locked Down: Youth In Solitary Confinement in Jails and Prisons Across the United States, 63-65, 68 (October 2012). Solitary confinement has devastating psychological effects on youth, including an increased risk of suicide. Id. at 23-24.


8 N.Y. Penal Law § 30.00(1) (McKinney 2013).

9 MICHELLE WEEMHOFF & KRISTIN STALEY, MICHIGAN COUNCIL ON CRIME & DELINQUENCY, YOUTH BEHIND BARS 5 (2014).


17 AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION JUVENILE JUSTICE CENTER, MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE (1997).

18 M. Forst et al. Youth in Prisons and Training Schools, JUVENILE & FAMILY COURT, vol. 4 (1989) (finding that youth were twice as likely to be physically harmed by staff).


20 From 2009-2011 youth under 18 were .4 percent of substantiated incidents of violence in prison (2009-2011) and .267% of the population in 2011 (1790 of 671,551), making them 1.5 times as likely to be a victim of sexual abuse; [cite to the 2013 report] See DOJ Supplemental Statement on PREA regs, 75 Fed. Register, 37106-01, 37128, stating that youth are 8 times as likely to have substantiated instance because youth were 1.5% of the substantiated incidents (2005-2008) and .2% of the population. Recent BJS reports show youth are at greater risk of sexual victimization than adults in prisons (4.5%-youth, 4% adults) and jails (4.7%-youth, 3.2% adults).


23 28 C.F.R. 115.14(b)
confinement has devastating psychological effects on youth, including an increased risk of suicide.

Sentencing Project, Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Juvenile Justice System, p. 2; Neelum Aruya
Rates by Offense, Sex, and Race. Available:

In 2011, the arrest rate for black youth was 8380.5 per 100,000 blacks 10-17. The arrest rate for white youth was 3786.7 per 100,000 whites aged 10-17. National Center for Juvenile Justice (February 25, 2014). Juvenile Arrest Rates by Offense, Sex, and Race. Available: http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/excel/JAR_2011.xls. See Sentencing Project, Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Juvenile Justice System, p. 2.

While comprising only 27.2% of children received by the juvenile justice system, Black youth account for 51.4 percent of all transfers to the adult system. White boys make up 28 percent of children received by the juvenile justice system, but account for only 24.4% of transfers to the adult system. HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, BRANDED FOR LIFE 4 (2014), available at http://www.hrw.org/node/124345/section25.


3. Out of 364 individuals serving juvenile life without parole sentences as of June 17, 2014, 256 are black, 8 are Hispanic, 2 are Asian, 1 is Native American and 97 are white. MDOC data as of June 17, 2014 analyzed by ACLU Michigan/JLWOP Initiative.


American Civil Liberties Union & Human Rights Watch, Growing Up Locked Down: Youth in Solitary Confinement in Jails and Prisons Across the United States, 63-65, 68 (2012). Solitary confinement has devastating psychological effects on youth, including an increased risk of suicide. Id. at 23-24..
43 Id. at 23, 37, 39, 47.
45 LEGAL ACTION CENTER, AFTER PRISON: ROADBLOCKS TO REENTRY A REPORT ON BARRIERS FACEING PEOPLE WITH CRIMINAL RECORDS 18 (2004).