



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

\$600,000.

Imagine how an annual investment of \$600,000 could change a kid's life.

New Jersey invests this amount annually to incarcerate each kid in its failed youth justice system in which a Black youth is 18 times more likely to be incarcerated than a white youth – the worst racial disparity in America, even though Black and white youth commit most offenses at similar rates.

Over the past decade, New Jersey has invested over half a billion dollars in a broken youth incarceration system designed to lock up Black and Latina/o kids.

That is enough money to provide free in-state tuition at Rutgers University for nearly 40,000 students or to increase New Jersey's support for violence intervention programs thirty-fold.

This outrageous expenditure is spent on youth prisons that are at record low population levels but are staffed as if at full capacity. Youth prisons that do not rehabilitate the kids that are locked up, do not increase public safety and separate our young people from their families. A youth prison system that causes tremendous financial strain on families who must pay for outstanding legal fees, travel costs to and from prison and commissary costs – all while losing out on income and companionship from their youth.

But the costs of youth incarceration are not just financial. Youth prisons also subject youth to abuse, negatively impact youth mental health, generate recidivism and cause youth to miss opportunities that could positively impact their futures.

Drawing upon the stories of those impacted by youth incarceration, *\$600k to Damage Our Kids Forever: A Youth Incarceration Disaster* presents the costs that youth incarceration impose on individual youth, their families and the state – and argues that there is a better way which includes taking the following actions:

1. The Murphy administration should announce a timeline for closing New Jersey's three youth prisons.
2. New Jersey should codify youth justice transformation into law by reintroducing and passing the New Jersey Youth Justice Transformation Act.
3. New Jersey should successfully implement the Restorative and Transformative Justice for Youths and Communities Pilot Program and expand it statewide.
4. New Jersey should prevent youth prosecuted as adults from being issued fines and fees, must eliminate outstanding fines and fees in their cases and eliminate outstanding public defender fees for youth.

More than a century and a half ago, Frederick Douglass famously argued, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

Douglass's words echo today across New Jersey with eerie precision.

It is past time to invest in building up our kids, not in prisons for them.