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Blaming Young People Will Not Solve the Challenges We Face in the Wake of the Pandemic

On behalf of the Act 4 Juvenile Justice Coalition, a network of more than 200 national organizations focused on improving federal policy related to the youth legal system, we are writing to address the current conversation surrounding public safety in our nation and its impacts on youth, families, and communities at large.

We are deeply troubled by the growing narrative that paints our young people as “violent offenders.” These accusations were not true in the 1990s when they first reared their ugly head, and they are not true now. Much to the contrary, data shows that youth crime has decreased steadily over the past two decades, and that the policies and alternatives to incarceration that have been implemented are effective in helping our country and its young people. This troubling and misleading narrative, however, took center stage today during a hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

What we know about our young people, and how we can best serve them has not changed. As Vaughn Bryant of Metropolitan Family Services stated during his testimony, “The root causes of crime are well documented and researched. Crime is primarily the outcome of multiple adverse social, economic, cultural, and family

conditions. Just as the root causes of crime are multi-layered, so must be the systems we build to address it.”

The one thing that has changed though is the onset of a global pandemic and the burden that it has placed on young people, families, and communities nationwide. This challenge has resulted in increased mental health crises, suicides, overdoses, car accidents, and a myriad of other negative outcomes for young people and families. Despite the fact these other challenges may not grab as many headlines, we owe it to our young people to look at this issue holistically, and not just based on which pieces have more shock value. The issue at play is one of public health.

Over the span of two years, both the government and public have had to address a vast array of challenging issues ranging from financial distress, to political divide, to public safety. These challenges were compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has greatly impacted, and continues to impact, the health and safety of our nation, including our children. This has led to mass-shutdowns, virtual schooling, and calls to reduce the number of youth incarcerated to stem the spread of the virus. Now, entering our third year of this historic public health crisis, tremendous harm has been done to communities, families, and children.

Despite the resiliency of our youth during this extraordinary time, the current narrative blames young people and casts them as a threat. As of 2019, youth arrests and incarceration were at nearly the lowest levels seen in 50 years,¹ yet the current media narrative depicts youth in a way that is not only harmful to their futures, but is factually inaccurate and racialized. Taking into account upticks in violence in many communities, violent crime rates are still dramatically lower than where they stood in the 1990s.² Between 1994 and 2019, violent crime arrest rates declined for all age groups, with the greatest declines seen among youth. Among young people ages 15-17 specifically, rates decreased an average of 73%.³

Approximately three decades ago, when this data set was first being collected, the country launched an inaccurate, racialized, and profoundly damaging narrative, which led to an abysmal failure of policy responses focused exclusively on punishment. Since

then, a variety of stakeholders have collaborated to find alternative bipartisan solutions rooted in evidence-based practices that have proven to be extremely effective.

Framing the conversation solely in terms of violent crime overlooks the many negative outcomes that vulnerable populations, including children, have experienced over the past two years. Reframing the conversation and policy practices with the goal of supporting families, keeping children connected to positive adults in their communities, and focusing on healing and rehabilitation is more accurate and one that would garner support from a diverse array of groups, including families, community leaders, law enforcement, public health workers, advocates, and youth leaders themselves.

Federal involvement and investment is essential in efforts to protect youth, prevent delinquency, and promote safe communities. The reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJJPA) at the end of the 115th Congress,⁴ aligned research, adolescent development, and evidence-based practices that have been adopted in jurisdictions across the country and have led to better outcomes for both children and public safety.

We call on federal and local leaders to do better for our young people, our families, and our communities. The time is now to invest in and continue to support our young people and their families.

1 Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (n.d.). *Juvenile Arrest Rate Trends*. Working for Youth Justice and Safety. Retrieved March 1, 2022, from https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/JAR_Display.asp?ID=qa05200&selOffenses=1.

2 Justice, N. C. for J. (n.d.). *Age-specific Arrest Rate Trends*. Working for Youth Justice and Safety. Retrieved March 1, 2022, from <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/qa05301.asp?qaDate=2019>.

3 *Id.*

4 Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2017, H.R. 1809, 115th Cong. (1st Sess. 2017).