

King County Juvenile Justice: A Vision for Prevention, Intervention, and Transformation,  
not Incarceration  
by The No New Jim Crow Seattle Campaign

In August 2012, King County voters approved a \$210 million project to rebuild the Juvenile Justice Center at 12<sup>th</sup> and Alder in Seattle. The County's vision is for a healthier, more attractive, and more efficient facility for handling cases related to juvenile crime. The problem with this vision is that it is "inside the box." It doesn't question the necessity, the wisdom, or the humaneness of the current juvenile justice system in King County, and it doesn't fully consider the range of choices we have at this crucial juncture. If we're going to tear down the old structures at 12<sup>th</sup> and Alder, what could we build, as a community of multi-racial, multi-ethnic citizens and immigrants, that would take seriously our 21<sup>st</sup> century duty to dismantle institutionalized racism and classism? How can we take advantage of this crucial opportunity to transform our juvenile justice system into one that encourages youth and families not only to survive but to thrive? It is not too late to step back, dig deep, and understand all our options.

No New Jim Crow Seattle is committed to the dismantling of our racially disproportionate, punitive-based system of justice in favor of community-based transformative justice. We are encouraged by the fact that King County juvenile justice has implemented programs over the last 13 years that have greatly reduced the number of children and youth being incarcerated in the juvenile jail—from approximately 200/day in 2000 to approximately 50-60 now (see attachment 1), though racial disproportionality has increased. We know that if programs like the ones already helping youth in the King County criminal justice system are really to succeed in the long run, furthermore, we will need to create new structures to replace the old punitive ones. We will need a shared sense of purpose—within our schools, our healthcare centers, our economy, our churches and community centers—to fully transform our communities and society. Many examples of transformative justice programs already exist in America and around the world: from Cleveland High School in Seattle which is poised to adopt a transformative approach to student discipline, and transformative justice approaches being used in Clark County in Washington state, to the country of New Zealand whose entire juvenile justice program has been based on transformative justice principles and methods since 1989.<sup>1</sup>

After outlining two key principles of transformative justice—understanding root causes and resolving conflicts by conferences or circles—we will make six concrete recommendations.

One of the central principles of transformative justice is the necessity of understanding root causes. The problem is not just that individuals "make poor choices"; many youth and also adults don't know that they have choices. The problem is that the legal and judicial system and our society as a whole have made some poor choices as well. For example, the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.justice.govt.nz/courts/youth/about-the-youth-court/overview-of-principles-and-process> and <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/beyond-prisons/righting-wrongs-the-maori-way>

federal government's decision beginning in 1972 to declare a "war on drugs"—that is, to take the public health problem of substance abuse and addiction, then criminalize it, and then arm police departments with heavy-duty weaponry to combat it especially in communities falsely targeted as using and selling more drugs than others—was a choice that has had clearly destructive consequences for many people, especially people of color.<sup>2</sup>

If we are serious about addressing crime, let us address root causes. Many people in our society suffer from violence, neglect, malnutrition, and lack of meaningful education; they suffer from unemployment on the one hand and overwork/low wages on the other; they suffer from mental illness, substance abuse and addiction, alienation and isolation.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, No New Jim Crow Seattle calls for prevention, intervention, and transformation on many levels. One significant step would be to use a large portion of the \$210 million to ameliorate the root causes of social conflict with job training and job-creation programs, public housing and medical care, student aid and income support. If we eliminate the war on drugs, even more money will be freed for these programs. Ending the war on drugs would have two further beneficial results: alleviating some of the causes of social conflict and reducing the number of activities that are considered crime. Incarceration is expensive, furthermore: if we lower the juvenile jail census even more than we already have, we could divert those funds to trauma-informed, culturally appropriate mental health services and drug and alcohol treatment in all communities of King County. These are some of the ways we can address root causes. "If alcohol and drugs were the answer," as one of our members has said, "What was the question?"

A second crucial principle of transformative justice is conflict resolution for the purpose of repairing relationships—both individual and societal.<sup>4</sup> In transformative justice, the emphasis is not on what laws get broken and what the mandatory minimum sentences are, but on "harm" that has been done and how to repair the damaged relationships that result from that harm. The person who has done the harm and the person who has been harmed are brought together within a circle of support that can include teachers, counselors, ministers, family members, and friends. The people involved tell their stories and explain what they are experiencing in their lives, and the entire circle strives to gain an understanding of what larger circumstances led to the conflict or the harm. These reconciliation meetings may be called "family group conferences" or "peacemaking circles." The needs of the person who has been harmed are honored. The needs of the person who has done harm are understood. Root causes are explored and societal responsibilities are acknowledged. The face-to-face process of accountability that these meetings allow is a first step toward interpersonal, communal, and societal healing. And the course of action that the group decides (in New Zealand, the family group conference participants decide entirely by consensus) continues the process of healing.

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<sup>2</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), and Matthew Pillischer, dir., *Broken On All Sides* (2012).

<sup>3</sup> [http://gainscenter.samhsa.gov/topical\\_resources/trauma.asp](http://gainscenter.samhsa.gov/topical_resources/trauma.asp)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ikedacenter.org/thinkers-themes/themes/restorative-justice/intro-boyes-watson>

With these transformative principles in mind, the No New Jim Crow Seattle Campaign proposes the King County Executive, Council, and Juvenile Justice Administrators take the following six steps:

1. **Fact-Finding Mission:** King County Executive Constantine, Juvenile Justice Director Knutson, Seattle School Superintendent Banda, Sheriff Urquhart, Police Chief Pugel, and a team of concerned King County residents, including justice-involved youth and respected community leaders, need to go on a fact-finding mission to New Zealand and to other places where transformative justice is being practiced locally and nationally.
2. **Multiple locations for Juvenile Justice Centers that are Preventive, Interventionist, and Transformative:** King County establish not just one transformative justice youth center at 12<sup>th</sup> and Alder, but several centers throughout the County that will facilitate preventive, interventionist, and transformative processes such as meaningful literacy and GED programs, career awareness and training, and culturally appropriate mental health and drug and alcohol programs that encourage not only sobriety but self awareness; youth and their families need to discover who they are as opposed to who their environment has been telling them they are.
3. **Teachers, counselors, facilitators:** The teachers, counselors, and facilitators who participate in these transformative processes (listed in number 2) must be people the youth respect who can teach them real-life lessons; youth and their families must be brought to the table and have a strong voice in choosing who their teachers and counselors are.
4. **The incarceration of youth must end.** All juvenile jail cells/dorms should be destroyed and no new cells/dorms built.
5. **Build spaces for transformative justice family group conferences/ peacemaking circles:** Any new facilities that get built or otherwise established as juvenile justice centers throughout the County should have appropriate accommodations for family group conferences or peacemaking circles as well as for other programs such as those listed in number 2 above. Current funding for incarcerating youth and prosecuting them should be diverted to pay for these programs.
6. **Forums for greater community understanding of transformative justice:** Additionally, we propose that King County promote greater public understanding of transformative justice by organizing a forum featuring local, national, and international practitioners of transformative justice that would be an opportunity for judges, prosecutors, defenders, everyone involved in King County juvenile justice, and all concerned members of our diverse communities. These forums would be a place for people to discuss how we can move away from a racially disproportionate, punitive-based criminal justice system to a transformative justice-based society that supports and encourages every single person, family, and community. This forum should be held as soon as possible; people have been suffering long enough.

# Juvenile Justice Reform Timeline

